

RISE OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN BANGLADESH AND ITS EFFECTS ON MIGRATION OF BANGLADESHI MINORITIES TO INDIA

RANJITH KUMAR K C

Assistant Professor of Political Science, Sri. C. Achutha Menon Government College, Thrissur, Kerala

Abstract

Migration of minority communities of Bangladesh to India, especially by the Hindus to India has been a regular phenomenon since the birth of that nation in 1971. The flow of minorities to India accentuated with the rise of Islam fundamentalism in Bangladesh after the assassination of its founder leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. This paper attempts to examine the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh and its effect on the migration of minority communities of Bangladesh to India.

Key Words

Islamisation, migration, Bangladesh, India

Introduction

The birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971 after a bitter and protracted struggle it waged against Pakistan disproved the Two-Nation Theory¹ on the basis of which Pakistan was created out of the partition of India in 1947. Bangladesh—formerly East Pakistan—got separated from West Pakistan, both Muslim majority, as the Bengali nationalism triumphed over nationalism based on religious identity. The Awami League that had led the independence struggle was a secular party and the constitution the Awami League government brought out proclaimed Bangladesh to be a secular, democratic society. But the successive rulers of Bangladesh failed to uphold the principle of secularism and the plural character of Bangladeshi society and politics. The numerous amendments that were passed from time to time altered the basic secular character of the constitution. Finally, the proclamation of Islam as the state religion in 1998 by the government made Bangladesh an Islamic state. The Islamisation policies followed by the governments in Bangladesh paved the way for the rise of fundamentalist Islam and its spread in the body politic of the country. All this created enormous fear and anxiety in the minds of minority communities in Bangladesh, especially the Hindus, who have migrated en masse to India.

Liberation War and the creation of Bangladesh

The independence and partition of India in 1947 led to the creation of two new states – India and Pakistan – where the Muslim majority East Bengal of undivided India became part of Pakistan as East Pakistan. Though linguistically and culturally different and also geographically separated by thousands of kilometers East and West Pakistan was united by a single major element-- Islam. But the bonds of similarity of religion weakened over time as East Pakistanis found little else in common between the people of both regions. Moreover, apart from the neglect of East Pakistan, the complete dominance of West Pakistan over East Pakistan in all aspects of the civil, political, and economic life of the people was greatly resented by the people of East Pakistan (Jahan, 2000). The movement for making Bangla the official language in the 1950s by East Pakistan and its denial by the authorities in West Pakistan led to widespread violence and protest which resulted in the death of many people.

The General Ayub Khan when he assumed power in 1958 tried to put down the rising Bengali nationalism with brute force. But the last straw was the refusal of the military leadership of Pakistan to hand over power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of East Pakistan based Awami League, even after securing an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections held in 1970. This led Mujibur Rahman to declare Independence and start a movement for the creation of a new state of Bangladesh. The Pakistani army and Islamist forces joined hands to crush the independence movement and a systematic pogrom was carried out on the East Pakistani people that resulted in the death of over three million people. Pakistani military and their supporters carried out gross human rights violations including raping women and killing innocent civilians. Over 10 million Bangladeshis fled to India fearing for their life. After a fierce battle that spread over nine months, which was aided greatly by India, finally led to the victory of East Pakistan over the military of West Pakistan and the creation of the independent nation of Bangladesh.

The first President of newly independent Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tried to build a nation based on modern democratic values of liberty, equality, and justice for all. He was also adamant that the new nation will be a secular country where there will be religious freedom for all and all religions treated equally by the state. To ensure this, in the new Constitution of Bangladesh, the word secularism was inserted and proclaimed Bangladesh to be a secular and democratic state. But at the same time, Mujib Rahman adopted a conciliatory attitude towards his opponents and Islamist forces that sided with the Pakistani military during the liberation war. This helped the Islamist forces to recoup and return to Bangladesh who had fled to Pakistan during the wake of the independence of Bangladesh. Islamist forces consist mainly of Imams, Ulama, madrasa teachers, and their students totalling over one million people. Islamist forces exert considerable influence on the governments that rule Bangladesh and also on the socio-political life of the people. They also receive generous funds from overseas, especially from the Gulf countries, notably from Saudi Arabia which promotes the more radical form of Islam.

A major irony is that the seeds of Islamisation were first sowed in the political field of the country by Mujibur Rahman himself who proclaimed secularism as the guiding principle of Bangladesh. He started leaning towards Islamisation when he realised that his government was losing popularity. Tardy work of his government in providing relief to the victims of the famine of 1974 and his inability to prevent corruption and reduce poverty and unemployment made him hugely unpopular. He introduced the study of Islam and Arabic in school curricula after it was withdrawn from the schools earlier. He also started using Islamic words and symbols more often in his speeches like “Allah”, “Inshaallah” and “Khuda Hafiz”. He often dropped the word “Joi Bangla” which he used to end his speeches and substituted it with “Khuda Hafiz”. Though Mujibur Rahman did not openly discriminate against religious minorities but he was soft on

dealing with Islamic fundamentalists and failed to bring to justice who had committed gross atrocities on the people of East Pakistan during the liberation war.

Islamisation Policies of Zia and Ershad

Islamisation of Bangladeshi society and politics attained momentum after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in a military coup in 1975. Henceforth, Bangladesh witnessed a steady uptick in the Islamisation process, which received political patronage from the military rulers that were in power as it suited them well. Governments deviated from the path of secularism enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh and took every effort to undermine the secular values and instead actively promoted Islam. General Ziaur Rahman after assuming power in 1977 was quick to delete Article 12 of the constitution which emphasised 'secularism through the elimination of communalism in all its forms, religious favouritism and discrimination and abuse of religion for political purpose' (Kamal, 1990). He also added the word "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim" (In the name of Almighty Allah) before the preamble. Another change he brought in 1977 was that Article 38 was revoked allowing political parties to be established based on religion and again a new clause was inserted in Article 25, stating "fraternal relationship with other Muslim states" based on Islamic solidarity. But all of these pale in comparison to what General Ershad did while coming to power in Bangladesh. In 1998 he made Islam the State Religion of Bangladesh thus announcing in no uncertain terms that all other religions in Bangladesh have a diminished status and importance in comparison to Islam (Ziring, 1992). Bangladesh also witnessed a spurt in the growth of Islamic political parties and also Islamic militant organisations during the military rule. Jama'at-i-Islami is an important player in Bangladeshi politics and its principal aim is to establish an Islamic State (Rozario, 2006). Many Islamic militant groups are active in Bangladesh like Jama'atul Mujahideen (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-ul-Islami (HUJ). The JMB is accused of having caused bomb blasts in Dinajpur and HUJ cadres have been caught fighting in Afghanistan along with other militant groups. Indian security forces have arrested members of terrorist groups operating from Bangladesh who planted bombs at the American Consulate in Kolkata in 1998.

Return of Democracy and Islamist political parties

Democracy returned to Bangladesh with the general elections in 1991 which saw the enthusiastic participation of all sections of Bangladeshi citizens. Khaleda Zia, leader of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and wife of late military ruler Zia Ur Rahman won the election and became the Prime Minister. During the rule of Khaleda Zia minorities in Bangladesh, especially the Hindus, felt increasingly insecure due to the open appeasement of Islamist forces by the Zia government. Violent incidents against Hindus became frequent and systematic human rights violations involving forced eviction, rape, attacks on religious properties, and forced conversions were reported. (Skinner, 2008). It was reported that about 200,000 Hindus were forced to move to safer places or migrate to India as a direct consequence of the post-election violence of 1991 (Ibid).

In the general elections of 1996 Awami League party got the required majority to form a government and its leader Sheikh Hasina became the prime minister of Bangladesh. Minority communities in Bangladesh were treated better under Hasina's rule even though she could not effectively prevent incidences of violence against minorities. Khaleda Zia returned to power defeating Awami League in 2001 by aligning with the former political opponents like the Jatiya party of Ershad and also the Islamic parties like Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and the Islami Oikya Jot in the 2001 general election. BNP, by aligning with Islamic parties and coming to power paved way for the increasing role of Islamic religious constituents in national politics.

Minority communities of Bangladesh, especially the Hindus felt increasingly insecure as they felt little protection either social or official. Not only that the victims of communal violence failed to get the justice but they were also even more harassed for seeking to get justice. All this created enormous fear and anxiety among the minority communities of Bangladesh. Historically, the Hindus from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh have moved to India whenever they have felt threatened by the mob or by the actions of the state.

Apart from the Islamisation of Bangladeshi society that contributed to the migration of minorities to India, certain laws passed by the state have also triggered the migration of minorities to India.

Vested Property Act and Migration of Hindus

Scholars like Barkat and Zaman (2000) have documented Acts like the Vested property Act and the Enemy property Act that greatly discriminated against the minorities of Bangladesh and showed how it resulted in the migration of Hindus to India. Pakistan enacted an ordinance called Defence of Pakistan Rules (DPR) during the wake of the Indo-Pak war of 1965, purportedly to defend the country. East Pakistan Government, issued an order called 'East Pakistan Enemy Property Administration and Disposal order' which came to be known as 'Enemy Property Act' under the provisions of the DPR. By this Act, India was to be treated as an enemy country and Pakistan declared all the assets of those who have moved to India as enemy property (Barkat., et al., 1997, pp.24-25). This Act empowered the government to take over the properties of people who have moved to India. The Act was discriminatory as it excluded Muslims from this Act and properties of those Muslims who had moved to India were not taken over by the government. Even after attaining independence, Bangladesh did not completely repeal this Act as it came out with another order replacing the DPR—vesting of Property and Assets Order, 1972 (VPA)—which was only a slight modification of the Enemy Property Act. By this Act, Bangladesh could continue the confiscation of properties of Hindus who have migrated to India.

In their study, Barkat and Zaman (2000), have shown that there was mass out-migration of Hindus from Bangladesh mainly to India as a direct consequence of the implementation of the Enemy Property Act and Vested Property Act. This mass out-migration of Hindus from Bangladesh is referred to by scholars as the 'missing Hindu population' of Bangladesh. After examining the census figures for the period 1961 to 1994 Barkat and Zaman have concluded that 5.3 million Hindus are missing from Bangladesh and this absence of Hindus can be accounted for only by assuming that they have migrated to India. They point out that the migration of Hindus to India has not been uniform over the years and it has varied according to the circumstance in Bangladesh that compel people to move. But on average, the study showed that the approximate size of the missing Hindu population was as high as 703 persons per day during 1964- 71; 573 persons per day during 1971-81; and 493 per day during 1981-91 (Barkat & Zaman, 2000, p.118).

Migration of Chakmas

Another minority community apart from the Hindus that migrated in large numbers to India due to state repression and religious persecution are the Chakmas of Southern Bangladesh. Chakmas live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the south-eastern portion of the Chittagong division that has a total geographical area of 5,138 square miles. The CHT area is inhabited by 13 distinct tribes which are ethnically different from the majority Bengali community of Bangladesh and form 1% of the population of Bangladesh, where Chakmas form the largest group. The migration of Chakmas to India is a result of two factors—environmental and political. Environmental factors came into play as Chakmas were displaced from their homeland in large numbers due to the displacement caused by the construction of a large hydroelectric dam named Kaptai, in the CHT area in the 1960s. A sizeable area of CHT was submerged due to

the dam and about 90,000 native people were displaced permanently and were never adequately rehabilitated(Mukherji, p.6).

Political reasons too played an important role in forcing Chakmas to move out of Bangladesh in large numbers. Historically, Chakmas had always enjoyed autonomous status under the Mughals, British India, and even under unified Pakistan until 1964. Trouble started when Pakistani authorities tried to dilute this autonomous status and as a deliberate policy tried to settle non-tribal Bengalis in the CHT areas in large numbers. The tribals constituted more than 98 % of the population in 1947 in the CHT and Bengalis less than 2%. But this scenario changed drastically over the years as the Bengali population rose to 11.6% in 1974, 43 % in 1981, and 48.5 % in 1991(Kabir,1998). The direct result of this changing population dynamics was the increase in the ethnic and religious conflict witnessed in the region. Chakmas practised Buddhism and the settlers were largely Muslim Bengalis from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. Bengali settlers received the active support of the military and the government agencies in their struggle against the ethnic tribal communities. Faced with severe state repression and religious animosities Chakma people were forced to leave their homeland and migrate in large numbers to the neighbouring states of India. Refugee camps were set up in the Indian states of Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram to accommodate the displaced Chakma refugees. The number of refugees from the CHT region swelled to over 86,000 at one point in Mizoram alone in the 1990s and a lot of them have made India their permanent home.

Conclusion

Islamic fundamentalism has been on the rise in Bangladesh since the death of its founder leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, often ably aided by the state. The long years of military rule that existed in the country only helped the Islamic forces to strengthen their influence over the social and political fabric of the nation. The return of Democracy in 1991 also did not bring any substantial changes in the situation as competitive electoral politics offered Islamic parties more space and acceptance. Democracy also led to the growth of more Islamic parties. Added to this was the spurt in the growth of fundamentalist and terrorist organisations that vitiated the communal situation in Bangladesh. These organisations also became a security threat to Bangladesh and also to the neighbouring countries as well. Minority communities in Bangladesh, especially the Hindus, on the other hand, not only faced religious discrimination from the part of the State but also often faced intimidation and violence perpetrated by Islamic forces. Minority communities felt little less sense of security when faced with the threat from Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh and have consequently migrated to India in large numbers.

Notes

1.Pakistan was created based on of the ‘Two Nation Theory’, where its leaders like Jinnah advocated that Muslims in undivided India constituted a ‘nation’ having a distinct identity based on their shared religion, history and culture as separate from Hindus of undivided India.

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