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Events of 2015

Bangladesh, a predominantly ethnic Bengali and Sunni Muslim country, is increasingly divided by the struggle between moderation and exclusion – a situation that leaves its ethnic and religious minorities vulnerable, particularly during moments of political crisis. The ruling party, the secular Awami League, continues to face strong resistance from opposition parties Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, resulting in widespread street protests and a heavy-handed response from state security. Within this wider political conflict, however, is the battle for the cultural identity of the state. While Bangladesh's religious minorities, Dalits and indigenous peoples continue to be pushed to the margins, often violently, attacks against atheists and secularists are also increasing.

The year 2015 saw five people brutally hacked to death in separate incidents throughout the year. Avijit Roy, Oyasiqur Rhaman, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Neel and Faisal Arefin Dipan were all targeted for their books and blogs. Roy, Das and Neel, who were from the minority Hindu community but were either avowed secularists or atheists, had been on a 'hit list' targeting bloggers and writers believed to be atheists released by the extremist Ansarullah Bengali Team in 2013, a Bangladesh Islamist organization that has taken responsibility for many of these killings.

Many of the writers targeted had been outspoken in their support of the death penalty for those being tried under the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a domestic court set up to prosecute war crimes committed during the 1971 War of Independence, including charges of genocide, for atrocities against Hindu minority communities. The proceedings of the ICT, however, have been repeatedly criticized by observers for not reaching minimal international fair trial standards. On 18 November, the Bangladesh Supreme Court rejected the death sentence appeal petitions of Ali Ahsan Mohammed Mujahid of the Jamaat-e-Islami party and Salahuddin Qader Chowdhury of the BNP, both of whom were charged with genocide for their role in killing Hindus, among other charges. Both were subsequently hanged on 22 November, despite accusations that the trials were politically motivated and allegations of procedural misconduct, including arbitrary limiting of witnesses.

The public response to the hangings was polarized, with many major newspapers supporting the decision, while Jamaat-e-Islami called for a nationwide strike. These most recent rulings,

however, did not lead to widespread attacks on minorities, in contrast to the violence that had taken place after the execution of Jamaat-e-Islami leader Abdul Quader Mollah in 2013, when minority Hindus were physically attacked and properties destroyed. Similar outbreaks occurred following the ICT ruling in February 2013 against Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, when Hindu community leaders reported attacks on over 50 temples.

Hindus were not the only minorities targeted during 2015. Sectarian violence against Shi'a Muslims had been almost unheard of in Bangladesh, but on 24 October three bombs exploded during the Shi'a Ashura procession in Dhaka, killing one and injuring dozens. The procession had reportedly been conducted peacefully for four centuries until the attacks. Then on 26 November, gunmen entered a Shi'a mosque in the northern Bogra district, killing the mosque's *muezzin* and wounding three others. On 14 March 2016, a Shi'a preacher was also hacked to death in south-western Bangladesh by extremists. The militant group ISIS claimed responsibility for all three attacks, as well as the brutal murder of a Hindu priest on 21 February 2016 at a temple in Panchagar, although authorities have repeatedly denied the organization is operating in the country.

The government of Bangladesh has systematically eroded the right of its indigenous peoples to self-determination, particularly control over their ancestral lands, closely related to the realization of their collective cultural rights. The Constitution of Bangladesh, through an amendment in 2011, asserts that 'The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation', effectively creating an even more restrictive national identity that excludes the indigenous non-Bengali population. While the amendment also stated the importance of protecting the 'unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities', it disregarded calls to use the term 'indigenous peoples' or 'Adivasis'.

Indeed, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its October 2015 Concluding Observations, noted its general concern about 'the lack of recognition by the State party of indigenous identity of the Adivasi indigenous peoples'. This is reflected, for instance, in official educational policies. Although the 2010 National Education Policy asserts that children have the right to be instructed in their mother tongue language, in practice education is largely in Bengali, with little emphasis on indigenous history or culture, leaving many students struggling with language barriers. Despite some limited government efforts in recent years to support indigenous learning, the survival of many languages remains in the balance.

The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord identifies the area as tribal, guaranteeing rights to self-governance and recognizing the cultural rights of the region's indigenous communities, collectively known as *Jumma*. The accord remains largely unimplemented, however, and the proportion of the indigenous population in the area has steadily declined, from 97.5 per cent in 1947 to 51 per cent by 2014, due to in-migration by majority Bengalis. This has led to ongoing conflicts, landlessness and the erosion of cultural rights as indigenous traditions and identity are closely connected to the land. According to the Kapaeeng Foundation, an indigenous peoples' rights organization, approximately 5,216 acres of land in the CHT were appropriated during the year by authorities, local officials, private companies and Bengali settlers for plantations, forest reserves, tourist developments and other uses.

This has occurred against a backdrop of violence, intimidation and sexual assault. On 10 and 11 January 2015, for example, clashes between *Jumma* and Bengali communities broke out during the inauguration of a college in Rangamati, in the CHT, as *Jumma* student organizations began a protest calling for the implementation of the peace accord. Two houses belonging to indigenous people were burnt to the ground, dozens were injured and a curfew was imposed. The Kapaeeng Foundation documented continued harassment, arbitrary arrests and torture of indigenous community members, including the extra-judicial killing of at least 13 people. The Bangladesh

Adivasi Women Network (BAWN) has highlighted the increasing prevalence of sexual assault and murders against indigenous women, with rape reportedly used by some Bengali settlers to instil fear in the community and drive them off the land.

Tourism too poses an increasing threat to the rights of indigenous peoples. According to the CHT Accord, local indigenous communities must be consulted in development that affects them, yet *Jumma* activists continue to report cases of land grabbing to accommodate tourism developments. So too in south-central Bangladesh, coastal tourism development has been destroying the way of life of the indigenous Rakhine community in Kuakata. Land donated by the then prime minister in 1999 for community improvement purposes has been illegally confiscated to build a shopping complex in this resort town. Rakhine have found it increasingly difficult to maintain their distinct culture as their sacred waterways, cremation grounds and temple lands are reportedly under threat, damaged or occupied by new migrants to the area. Their Buddhist religious sites have also been destroyed and in some cases, ransacked: in 1906, there were 19 Buddhist temples in the area, but today there is only one left.

For Bangladesh's Dalit community, the year did not see any progress with the draft anti-untouchability law that was submitted to the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs in 2014. The draft intends to implement constitutional rights to non-discrimination for Bangladesh's estimated 5.5 million Dalits. While it had been accepted positively by the ministry, Dalit rights advocates say the government is stalling on enacting the legislation while Dalits continue to suffer from discrimination in access to essential services, particularly water and sanitation in urban housing.

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