

Why Minorities in Bangladesh—but not India—should be Insecure¹
**Address to International Webinar on The Question of Human
Security of Minority Communities in India and Bangladesh**

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As some of you know, I have been fighting the ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Bangladesh for more than a decade and a half, spending about a fifth of all that time in South Asia and bringing the fight to Washington and elsewhere in the United States (US) and Europe. I know South Asia through its people: regardless of their faith, which area where they live, or whether that's in its large cities or remote villages. I start with this because people too often believe—mistakenly—that we Americans get all our information from the movies and TV, or if we're really good, from a Google search. But to understand an area and not be vulnerable to false allegations or politicized rants; you can't do it from Washington or London; and you cannot simply apply your western notions about South Asia to the peoples and cultures there. It doesn't mean you abandon your principles, but it does mean you know the context in which they make sense.

Today's topic is human security for minority communities, and we start with the insight that security does not come from international organizations, specific policies or leaders but from a nation's basic laws and structures that outlast any transitory issues or political incumbents. And in that regard, I have a

¹ Much data and information in this paper comes from extensive personal interviews and observations in South Asia over two decades, and informants often fear retaliation if they are identified; that is, my ability to secure honest responses from people of all political stripes and social strata depends on informants' confidence of confidentiality.

particular point of view; namely, that only democracy² has thus far provided that security, and as Winston Churchill told the House of Commons in the final stages of World War II, “no amount of rhetoric or voluminous discussion can possibly diminish the overwhelming importance of that point.”³ No dictatorship of the proletariat or popular support for state power grabs in the name of some, fill-in-the-blanks, greater cause can offer the same. Rather those things undermine security precisely because they accept the principle that every element of security can be subordinated to whatever demagogues, elected officials, or so-called social justice warriors define as more important. Even those who believe they are protecting minorities by defining their security in law are actually hurting them by enshrining their position as “the other.” I greatly prefer democracies that have mechanisms for self-correction and change built right into their DNA and whose laws are the same for everyone. And that’s why we struggle. You’re struggling with this in India, and we’re struggling with it here in the United States. But that means that we engage in self-evaluation and self-criticism. If you don’t, you have Bangladesh’s false refrain about it being a place of “communal harmony,” which means they have no thought of changing the terrible situation for Hindus there.

One of the most influential books I ever read was *Democracy and Society in Germany* by the late German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf⁴. Writing in 1965, when people were trying to figure out what caused Germany’s descent into madness between 1933 and 1945, he rejected the usual, superficial explanations and

² I use the term, democracy, as a generic so that it includes, for instance, Democratic Republics like the United States and Parliamentary Democracies like most nations of the British Commonwealth including Bangladesh and India; although the former’s democratic character has been severely compromised.

³ Longworth, Richard (Ed.). *Churchill By Himself: The Definitive Collection of Quotations*. (Rosetta Books: NY, 2013), page 100.

⁴ Dahrendorf, Ralf. *Society and Democracy in Germany*. (Doubleday & Company: NY, 1967)

instead sought answers in German historical and structural elements that paved Adolf Hitler's road to power. Dahrendorf took us beyond bi-polar thinking where one pole dismisses any ties linking the worst of Nazi Germany to elements of German society and history, refusing even to consider them and instead holds "a single man or event responsible for all that happened." The other pole alleges that what happened was inescapably in the nature of being German.⁵ Only if we get away from these two extremes can understand those historical and structural elements, and *objectively* assess why we should fear or not fear a repeat of the phenomenon and the best course of action. It's also necessary for us to answer the challenge posed by this webinar without the false prisms of bias and politics.

The problem is at least as bad today as when Dahrendorf wrote; in fact, I wrote a book about that to provide an alternative to such unscientific thinking about Islam; rejecting both polar positions: one that sees "all Muslims as open or closeted *jihadis*"; the other recoils "from any attempt to link Islam with the scourge of international terror."⁶ Here's another example. Many Americans claim that if President Donald Trump loses the next election, he'll refuse to leave office. Obviously, Trump inspires strong, emotional reactions, both positive and negative; but strong feelings do not make for good analysis. History is a more reliable guide. Former President Richard Nixon (1969-1974) inspired similarly strong emotions, and his detractors had the same fears as Nixon was scheduled to leave office in disgrace; but the reality is that there were structural barriers preventing that from happening. On the night of Nixon's resignation, his own Defense Secretary James Schlesinger worked with the Joint Chiefs of Staff⁷ to

⁵*Op. cit.*, page 25.

⁶ Benkin, Richard L. (Ed.). *What is Moderate Islam?* (Lexington Books: Landham, MD, 2017), page 1.

⁷ The heads of all US military branches.

monitor military movement and communication, and to make certain that no one undermined the rule of law in an attempt to keep Nixon in power. Richard Nixon was possibly the US President most addicted to his power, but there is no evidence that he even considered staging a coup. Yet, if we remain mired in emotion, bias, and the sounds of our own echo chamber today, we never learn from history and are left with nothing except how we “feel” about Donald Trump. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inspires strong positive and negative emotions. Let’s free ourselves from that as we look at the recent mass protests over India’s 2019 National Registry of Citizens/Citizenship Amendment Act (NRC/CAA).

Before we do, you need to know that as a human rights activist, *I like NRC/CAA.*⁸ I like it for a bunch of reasons, but the most important is that NRC/CAA is the first time the Indian government has—publicly and formally—recognized that Hindus face serious persecution in Bangladesh—something I have called “a quiet case of ethnic cleansing” because of the overall silence about atrocities that I’ve seen close up in Bangladesh. It doesn’t declare Bangladesh a “bad” place or impose sanctions for its crimes, but it does put the Bangladeshi government on notice that India will intervene to save lives. Many highly placed Bangladeshis have told me privately that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is waiting for a word from India before she takes minority persecution seriously in her country seriously. Could NRC/CAA be the first step?

Regardless of our opinions about NRC/CAA, we must acknowledge that Indian Muslims have a strong measure of security. Despite the fiction of an Indian

⁸ Benkin, Richard L. “Partition’s Human Rights Wreckage.” Online address to Netaji Subhash Mahavidyalaya. July 12, 2020. Retrieved from <https://richard-benkin.squarespace.com/>

Muslim community under siege and united against Modi, the fact is that with him at the top of the ticket, his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has garnered a greater share of the Muslim vote than it has with any other BJP standard bearer.⁹ Moreover, contrary to assumptions about a “Muslim vote bank,” the truth is that more Indian Muslims are voting first as Indians, understanding things the same way as Indians who are not Muslim. That’s a very powerful argument against screeds warning Muslims that so-called Hindu nationalists are trying to de-legitimize them. We are seeing that in India, economics and a person’s politics is a greater determinant of votes than his or her religion.

Supporting that stance is the fact that Modi’s first term as Prime Minister was free of significant anti-communal agitation as more Indians regardless of religion increasingly saw their well-being in the same context; particularly, with his development agenda and his prior success in Gujarat.¹⁰ Moreover, the NRC/CAA protests in his current term, actually confirm that Muslims can be secure as numerical minorities in democratic India. Why can we say that?

FIRST, Indian Muslims are not alone. The situation did not pit India’s Muslims and Hindus against one another. Sources uniformly report that the NRC/CAA demonstrations contained large numbers of Indian Hindus, some in leadership positions; and that observation did not vary by a source’s substantive position on the issue. The weeks-long protests saw perhaps the most Indian

⁹ “Muslim vote: How BJP trumped Congress.” *Economic Times*. March 27, 2019. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/muslim-vote-how-bjp-trumped-congress/articleshow/68592698.cms?from=mdr>; Debu C. “How did Muslims Vote?” MyIndia. May 26, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/politics/how-did-muslims-vote>

¹⁰ Benkin, Richard L. “The Left Demonizes India’s Modi while his Popularity Soars.” February 7, 2013. *American Thinker*. Retrieved from <http://www.interfaithstrength.com/ModiAT.htm> ; “Muslim Leaders Meet PM, Praise Development Focus.” April 13, 2016. *NDTV*. Retrieved from <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/muslim-delegation-meets-pm-modi-praises-his-welfare-schemes-1395245>

Muslims in the streets since the birth of the Republic, but they were not isolated. If anything, Indian Muslims saw their demonstrations to be in keeping with their Indian citizenship. There could be no greater expression of that than the events in Shaheen Bagh, the most impactful protest site, especially on Republic Day, January 26, 2020. Per actress Swara Bhasker, “Wherever you see, there’s a tricolour waving. Wherever you look, there is India written. India is in Shaheen Bagh’s heart.” And that is exactly what there was. The protesters recognized that no set of laws could make them outcasts in their own country; and that is the SECOND insight. As one local noted, “This is not a communal issue, but it is far bigger than that. We will not tolerate divisive politics....This is a sign of unity that everyone is willing to fight for one another.”¹¹ The multi-religious nature of the crowd in the streets for the rights of Muslims, the crowd’s strong and public displays of patriotism and celebration of the nation would be almost impossible sights in Pakistan or Bangladesh. No matter how much damage they believed the NRC/CAA would do to Indian Muslims, protestors still felt secure enough to engage in this form of civil disobedience.

THIRD, the NRC/CAA debate demonstrated the legal mechanisms built into the Indian nation and constitution. I was asked to provide an expert opinion on the matter when one of many suits came before India’s Supreme Court. Although, in the end, the Supreme Court ruled that it would not interfere with the law’s implementation—a ruling also based on the same constitution that allows public protest and enables their non-communal nature—the government has been slow and deliberate in its implementation. Given the problems with implementation in

¹¹ Gandhiok, Jasjeev. “Away from Rajpath, Shaheen Bagh ‘celebrates the Republic.’” January 27, 2020. *Times of India*. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/away-from-rajpath-shaheen-bagh-celebrates-the-republic/articleshow/73647291.cms>

only one state, Assam, I predict, there will be several iterations as it bumps up against different circumstances in different states while providing a safe haven for insecure religious minorities in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

This is a measure of security that Bangladeshi Hindus simply do not have. First, Bangladesh has an official state religion. India was established as a parliamentary democracy with no state religion and has fought hard to remain so. *Now that's a core principle because it has a reality in action, not only in sterile words as secularism does in Bangladesh.* You want their core principle? We get it from no less an authority than Muhammad Jinnah who told the Indian Muslim League, "Our Hindu friends fail to understand the real nature of Islam and Hinduism. They are not religious in the strict sense of the word, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders, and it is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality."¹² The very nature of Pakistan and its successor states today is rooted in the belief that Hindus and Muslims are incapable of having "a common nationality" and that a Muslim's first loyalty should be to the Muslim Ummah. Pakistan and Bangladesh formalized it by making Islam their official religion. There is no parallel with India.

Having removed secularism in the 1980s, Bangladesh restored it as a core principle, but with no corresponding change in its *unsecular* behavior. At the same time, it continued to uphold Islam as the state religion to the chagrin of its 18-20 million non-Muslims; most recently in 2016. My associate, Samendra Nath Goswami, a founder of the Bangladesh Minority Lawyers Association and the Bangladesh International Mediation Society, filed a case with Bangladesh's High

¹² Jinnah, Muhammad Ali. Presidential address by Muhammad Ali Jinnah to the Muslim League Lahore, March 1940. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan. Retrieved from http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt_jinnah_lahore_1940.html

Court challenging the legality of having an official state religion because it is in conflict with being secular. The court rejected the petition without addressing the challenge and upheld the official state religion on March 28, 2016; and that is where things still stand. The first word of the Bangladeshi constitution is *Bismillah*.¹³ India's constitution begins with "We, the people." Any nation with an official state religion *ipso facto* places religious minorities in a disadvantaged position. In 2006, I attended a hearing of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on the state of religious minorities in Bangladesh.

Throughout the proceedings, people routinely referred to Bangladesh as a "Muslim country," which is objectively correct. But when the audience was allowed to offer comments and ask questions, one Bangladeshi Hindu rose and took umbrage at that description, asking USCIRF if they could understand that "every time you hear that, you feel like an outsider in your own country." Other Bangladeshi Hindus in the audience strenuously expressed their agreement with that sentiment.¹⁴ It was a message I would hear again and again for years. Even with constitutional guarantees upholding minority rights, Bangladeshi Hindus have told me overwhelmingly that they are outcasts living in a land that enshrines their alienation. They also found the concept of guarantees ironic since their governments never enforce them; that if they were an attempt to guarantee anything, it was the government's own cover for persecuting non-Muslims. Unfortunately, that duplicitous stratagem has worked to keep Bangladeshi and

¹³ In the name of Allah.

¹⁴ Benkin, Richard L. *A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing: The Murder of Bangladesh's Hindus*. (Akshaya Prakashan: New Delhi, 2012), p. 100.

Pakistani persecution of non-Muslims either off the international radar or conveniently ignored.

SECOND, is the fact that Bangladeshi Hindus face a level of communal violence inconceivable for Indian Muslims. Jonathan Fox found that states with an official religion are just more repressive than others. They “engage in higher levels of political restrictions and repression against ethnic minorities,” including ethnoreligious minorities like Hindus in Bangladesh, even though they and their Muslim countrymen and women share a Bengali ethnicity.¹⁵ And in fact that is what Bangladeshi have faced consistently for decades. As an example, I scrutinized Bangladesh’s initial COVID lockdown period, March 26 through May 30. I’m very rigorous in validating allegations and eliminated many because they did not pass my own exacting vetting standards, and I am sure many of them happened. Still, I confirmed 85 separate anti-Hindu incidents during that 66 day period; an average of about one and one third multi-crime incidents a day. All of them targeted Hindus explicitly and were enabled by Bangladeshi police and government allowing them to occur with impunity. Had I encountered incidents in which the Bangladeshi police and authorities provided equal access to and protection of the law to the Hindu victims as provided to Muslims; those incidents would not have been included with the other 85; but I did not; which is a major conclusion of that study and this piece: Hindus do not enjoy the rule of law in Bangladesh, which makes their problem a systemic one that renders their lives insecure.

¹⁵ Fox, Jonathan. “State Religious Exclusivity and Human Rights.” *Political Studies*. Vol. 54, No. 12. January 2008. Pages 928-948.

Almost half the incidents involved criminal assault in addition to any other crimes committed during the incident. Vandalism (not including vandalism of *Mandirs*) was the next most frequent crime, appearing in about a third of the incidents, as did land grabbing and destruction or vandalism of Hindu temples. About a fifth also involved attacks by bands of armed miscreants against individual targets or entire communities. Other crimes against Hindus included: sexual assault, including gang rape; kidnapping including child abduction; theft or looting; forced conversion; and others. Hindus are victimized by these crimes every day because the criminals are confident that they can escape with their ill-gotten gain and never be prosecuted for their crimes. This is the lesson that all Bangladeshi governments teach their citizens.

THIRD, unlike Indian Muslims, Bangladeshi Hindus *are* isolated, not only by the social acceptability of the attacks on them. In 2013, the authoritative Pew Research Center (2013) undertook an exhaustive study of attitudes and beliefs among Muslims in 39 countries worldwide. In most cases, Bangladeshi Muslims were among the least tolerant, a strong indicator of why Hindus in those countries are justifiably insecure. For instance, more Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims want Sharia to be the official law of the nation than all but five of the nations surveyed; greater percentages than all nations in Europe and Central Asia, all but one sub-Saharan African country, and even more than all Middle Eastern political entities surveyed with the exception of Iraq and the Palestinian territories. They also had among the fewest respondents who believed religions other than Islam lead to heaven; and 69 percent agree that conversion is a religious duty (forcible conversion is a serious problem there). Bangladeshi Muslims were among the least likely to have friends who are not Muslim; *only*

*three percent; but among the most likely to justify suicide bombing of civilians. So much for Bangladesh's ad nauseum "communal harmony" claim.*¹⁶

So clearly, minorities in the free nation of India are much more secure than minorities in Bangladesh; and in both countries, it has been that way regardless of who happens to be in power at the moment. But I want to skip to the final—irrefutable—bit of evidence: *Muslims continue moving from Pakistan and Bangladesh to India*, indicating that they feel more secure in India than in either of the other two countries. And in fact India is projected to have the world's largest Muslim population by 2050—even though they will remain minorities there. Hindus are not moving to Bangladesh. Since the first post-Partition census, in fact, Muslims have gone from 9.8 percent of the Indian population to just under 15 percent today. The Hindu proportion in East Pakistan cum Bangladesh has gone from almost one in three to about one in 15 today.

Regardless of transitory political figures, India offers all religious communities a sense of security that comes from its democratic tradition, rigorous secularism, tolerance for public protest, their inter-communal character, and India's refusal to enshrine a state religion that. If anything, Bangladesh is moving further away from these elements of security.

¹⁶ "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050." *Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life*. April 2, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>