

Hindus safe in Bangladesh, says country's I&B Minister

Dhaka professor warns 'no Hindus will be left in 3 decades'

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DHAKA, Jan 18: "Religious minorities, including Hindus, are safe in Bangladesh," said the country's Information and Broadcasting Minister Hasan Mahmud to visiting Indian journalists, adding, "last year the number of (Durga) puja pandals increased by 700. The festivities included 33,000 puja pandals in the country that has two crore Hindus. During the festive season, ruling Awami League party leaders monitored the puja pandals so that miscreants cannot create trouble."

Hinduism is the second largest religious affiliation in Bangladesh, with around 13.1 million people identifying themselves as Hindus out of 165.16 million and making up about 7.95 per cent of the total population, according to the 2022 cen-



Dhakeswari temple

sus in the country.

The Hindu population in Bangladesh has come down from roughly 30 per cent in 1947, during the time of partition to about 20 per cent in 1971, during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, as many Hindus fled to India over time. The figure came down to around 13 per cent during the 1990s and today, it is hovering between 7 to 8 per cent.

According to Professor Abul Barakat of Dhaka University in his book *Political*

Economy of Reforming Agriculture - Land Water Boles in Bangladesh, around 11.3 million Hindus fled Bangladesh from 1964 to 2013 due to religious discrimination.

In other words, on an average 632 Hindus leave the country each day with an annual exodus rate of 230,612. Prof Barakat warns that if this trend is not checked, "there will be no Hindus left in Bangladesh in three decades."

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The hangover of the 2021 communal violence in Bangladesh still vitiates the atmosphere in the country. The violent protests that marked Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka in March, followed by the attacks on Hindus, their property, temples and puja pandals in October during Durga Puja festival have left the minority community shaken. In Noakhali, a 500-strong mob vandalised the ISKCON temple. In a village in Rongpur district, 65 Hindu homes were damaged and 20 residences burnt down. Anti-Hindu violence occurs in regular intervals. In fact, Noakhali was the scene of the horrific massacre of over 5,000 Hindus during partition.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has reached out to the Hindu community and assured that justice will be done. Security personnel were moved to the affected areas and Border Guard Bangladesh troops were posted in 22 districts. The government has filed 71 FIRs and rounded up to 450 suspects.

However, Hindu community leaders are not satisfied with the steps taken by the government to bring the culprits to justice. At a reception organised by the Dhakeswari Temple Committee to felicitate the visiting Indian journalists, Hindu community leaders pointed out to the/discrimination and insecurity faced by the community and the government's failure to act on the FIRs filed against the culprits of communal violence.

Santosh Sharma, editor and publisher of the new Bengali daily *Kalbeia* and a senior Hindu community leader said, "the government's failure to follow up on the FIRs only reflects its hesitation to take action against the radical elements in view of elections next year."

However, the secular and liberal policies pursued by the Awami League government headed by Sheikh Hasina during the last one decade has given courage and confidence to the Hindus in Bangladesh, who are today raising their voice to assert their rights and take part in the nation's march towards peace and development.

Asked about the impact of

the Indian Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) on the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, Santosh Sharma said, "the opposition to the CAA in West Bengal has made Hindu refugees unwelcome. The economic and social situation in India today is no longer congenial for Hindu refugees. The number of people migrating to India has come down in recent times," he added.

However, this will depend on the place of residence of the Hindus in Bangladesh. On our way back to India, as we travelled by road from Dhaka to the Akhaura border outpost near Agartala on the land border, we passed through Brahmanberia district. Most of the Hindus of this district migrated long back to Tripura.

Compared to Brahmanberia, Comilla and other districts, the situation for the minority Hindus in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts is much better. Farhan, a senior software engineer with deep roots in Chittagong said, "the minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, constitute about 17 per cent of the population there and they are

a deciding factor in the political arena."

Farhan's words were indicated when we turned up at the dinner hosted by Cox's Bazar ruling Awami League party MP Kamal Bhai where we saw a good mixture of Buddhist Baruas and tribal Rakhina dancers, who were part of his electorate.

Of late, the Hindus have overcome their passivity and have become vocal about their rights as citizens of Bangladesh. They also organised a mass hunger strike and mass sit-in protest on October 23 last year. Of the eight administrative divisions, the Hindus constitute more than 10 per cent of the population in at least three - Sylhet (14.5), Rongpur (13.21), Khulna (12.94), and account for more than 20 per cent of the total population in districts like Gopalganj, Khulna, Maulvi Bazar and Thakurgaon. In 60 of the 300 Parliamentary seats, the Hindu vote can be crucial to the outcome. With some deft negotiation, the Hindus can expect considerable influence in the national government, but who will bell the cat?