

The Hindu Human Rights Group (HHR) protesting before the Bangladesh High Commission in London highlighting the human rights violations against the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh



Photograph: Mukesh Depala

The Killing

Sonar Bangla or golden Bangladesh has lost its sheen. **Sumita Chakraborty** on a wave of violence that is forcing Hindus to flee their land.

Seven-year old Sulekha Das does not smile anymore. All she does is stare unfocused at the clumsily painted hospital walls, as callous government officials troop in inspecting her as if she were an artefact. Sulekha and her eight-year-old sister (who died later) were raped in Bhola, in Barisal district, Bangladesh on October 24, 2001. Their father, who was forced to watch the crime, was strangled. The culprits are still at

large and official statements claim that her rape has still has not been 'proved'. Her file gathers dust at the local police station — a curiosity item for gawking media persons and social workers.

Ironically, Bangladesh is the only country in the world to have two women prime ministers elected consecutively to office. Yet acid attacks, gang rapes, rapes of minors and sexual harassment of Hindu women are common. In the



Hindu refugees fleeing from Bangladesh after the ensuing violence.

ing of eyes and being burnt alive? This is what the Bangladeshi Hindus are going through today in Bangladesh,” says Soma Uma, a Bangladeshi lawyer and social worker.

Alarmed at the oppression of the indigenous Hindu minority in Bangladesh, the Hindu Human Rights group (HHR) held a protest outside the Bangladeshi High Commission in the United Kingdom recently. Hundreds of concerned Asians turned up as a show of solidarity against the violence in Bangladesh.

“This protest is to highlight the extreme human rights abuses against the Hindu minority community by certain political groups in Bangladesh. There appears to be an active collusion with the ruling party in that country. Hindus have been murdered, temples desecrated, people expelled from their land and young girls gangraped in the most gruesome manner. The ruling government and the media ignores this. Is it because when Hindus are victims of murder, arson, sexual assault and ethnic cleansing, it does not appear to be much of a headline grabber? As one sixth of humanity, Hindus, especially the women, have the right to live with as much respect and dignity as any other community. This means that they should have this right in Bangladesh also,” claims Anil Sharma, the spokesperson of the HHR.

“We need to protest. We need to shout and scream on top of the roofs so that people take notice of the terror being unleashed on these hapless people,” declares Soma.

Rabindra Ghosh, a social activist and head of a Hindu

past two months, more than 1,500 Hindu men, women and children have been victims of these crimes. Allegedly targeted by Islamic fundamentalists aligned to the Bangladeshi National Party, women and girls as young as six have borne the brunt of fanatical ire.

“These aren’t regular crimes of passion. They are the most heinous crimes meant to suppress people. These men want to break the back of the Bangladeshi Hindus so that they can never claim Bangladesh as their country. Can you imagine monstrous crimes ranging from rape of little girls, brutal gang rapes, torture which includes goug-

unit in Bangladesh, has been an eyewitness to the aftermath of these crimes. He has traversed several villages. He recounts grisly incidents with statistics: Two girls from Anandaprasad village gangraped, the men tortured and brutally beaten and their property ransacked and looted. In Fatimabad village, eight women brutally raped. In Das Para, which is a village where 52 Hindu families lived on the outskirts of the Mirersarai police station, 'terrorists' looted, plundered and went on a rampage of rape, torture and assaults. They brutally beat up 32 persons including children. Likewise, Chittagong had the same stories of rape and pillage. Ghosh has authenticated and collected more than 100 such cases all over Bangladesh.

"The most pathetic incident was of a woman who was raped in Bhola. After being raped, the men inserted a battery cell into her vagina. I went to the hospital where she was admitted but I was informed that the victim was 'unavailable'. The administration denied the allegations, but the local people confirmed the incident which they say took place on October 3, 2001," says Ghosh. There have been many such cases but the common problem like always, is that women are not ready to come out in the open and state they were raped for the fear of being ostracised.

Reports from Rajshahi, Chapainabaganj, Pabna, Atgoria, Kashinathpur and other northern districts of Bangladesh talk of the same gruesome incidents. Hindu minorities from Dinajpur, Takurgawn, Gopalpur, Tarash Sirajganj, Ullapara, Gaibanda and Shahajadpur are supposedly on a mass exodus to flee these attacks.

"The minority Hindus have suffered harrowing torture by gangs of supporters



The carnage: Rape, pillage, violence, who will the Bangladeshi Hindus turn to?

of the new government. Our volunteers have met families whose women were raped. Many of them would not speak out fearing more attacks," says Rokeya Kabir, head of Nari Pragati Sangha, a leading women's rights group. Recounting the torture faced by Shefali Rani, a village council member at Agailjhara in Barisal district, she says, "Terrorists attacked and ransacked Shefali's home on October 2. They beat her up and then gangraped her."

"There have been spine-chilling cases of little girls being raped. Why has not even one police station recorded these incidents?" asks Soma.

The Bangladesh government as well as the Bangladeshi High Commission, where the above-mentioned protest was held, refuse to acknowledge these incidents. The Bangladesh Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury accused opposition Awami League of provoking "communal disturbances," while the Opposition pointed an accusatory finger at the ruling party. Chowdhury described the assaults on the indigenous Hindu minority as an "exaggeration and part of a conspiracy to embarrass and defame" the newly installed government.

"The Bangladeshi government may claim what it wants, but reality speaks otherwise, which is for all to see. Hindus are murdered, women raped and brutally violated by a growing group of influential fanatics. If any other community was to be wiped out from a country, it would be called genocide, and mass protests would issue from various quarters. But it looks as if the Bangladeshi Hindus will become another group of forgotten people. We, from the Hindu Human Rights group, will however, ensure that this never happens," asserts Sharma.

Concerned leaders of the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh have met the country's president Badruddza Chowdhury and asked him to ensure the safety of the country's minorities. But if one goes by the statement made by the former Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who said in New York recently that Bangladesh Hindus "have one foot in India, and the other in Bangladesh," one can definitely perceive a deep rooted bias against the Hindu minorities. Ironically, she is considered "pro-Indian" in Bangladesh while prime minister Khaleda Zia, on the other hand is considered more anti-Indian.

India claims to being extremely perturbed about all this. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in fact, in a show

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of concern, had sent his National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra to Dhaka in November. Mishra returned to Delhi without any concrete assurances from the Zia administration. However, despite the 'concern', New Delhi remains silent and no official statement is forthcoming from India.

"Hindus in Bangladesh need to pay *zaziya* tax to stay in their ancestral homes, according to a *fatwa* issued by Islamic fundamentalists in Rauzan and Rangunia, in Bangladesh. They cannot offer Durga *puja* — not even 'Ghat-*puja*' (symbolic Durga *puja*). The historic Ramna Kali Bari Temple in Dhaka, hundreds of years old, was destroyed by these vandals. And now women are being tortured. I have lived in Bangladesh for years but now I think it is time to say goodbye to this land," laments Jhimlee Ray, a resident of Pabna.

Protest marches and uprisings, however have not stopped. In fact, even Star Television news channel NDTV



Former prime minister Sheikh Hasina is non-committal about the violence against the Bangladeshi Hindus

had sent a team to Bangladesh and beamed accounts of the increasing violence on its channel. In a recent development, Amnesty International warned Bangladesh's government to take urgent action to protect the Hindu minority, following weeks of grave human rights abuses. The government has, reportedly, set up a committee to investigate the ongoing attacks on the Hindu community but Amnesty has categorically said that it is not aware of any progress it has made.

Bangladesh, or as people call it Sonar Bangla (Golden Bangla), is now the land of the oppressed. Taslima Nasreen, spurred by the horror of atrocities against Hindus, wrote a novel, 'Lajja' (Shame), and was issued a *fatwa* (death sentence). This land can no longer call itself a land of the civilized. It is time now, for the world to wake up and take some positive action before these people are reduced to mere statistics. ■