

HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BANGLADESH

Jannatul Maa

Assalamu alaikum!

Last few days I was looking for a common definition of Human Rights. But I could not find any such type of definition which actually provides us the specific principle of Human Rights. Among various approaches, the two main approaches of human rights are the approach of Developed countries and the approach of developing countries. The developed countries hold to the belief that personal freedom and security constitute the core of human rights. On the other hand, developing countries argue that elimination of poverty is the most fundamental right for human beings (Harun ur Rashid, 2005, 139). The fact is that, the child who does not have his today's food, human rights means to him a dish of white rice with green vegetables.

Ours is a developing country. That is why, I know many of our youngsters who are present here may raise the question what is the actual meaning of today's seminar, where we have a great population below poverty line? I know that, it is because I myself thought about the question. Then I tried to find out the answer. The Indian Subcontinent is a region where many religions and religious philosophy originated. Among them four important religions are Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. Though Islam did not originate here but it has a great population who are Muslims. The region where various faiths exist alongside is like an estuary where many rivers have assembled. That is why it is at the same time a very sensitive place, where people easily can be involved in conflicts and clashes on the basis of the variety of their faiths. Several times the earth of this subcontinent was blooded for the violent behavior of various believers groups. The riots of 1921, 1946, 1992, and 1993 are very prominent among them. Though most of the riots were politically motivated, religious emotion also played immense role to make people wild. In 1947, we got two new nations which were divided on the basis of religious belief. By studying these restless years of the history it can be said that the people of this area easily got motivated in the name of religion. Very recently the occurrence of brutality on Rohingya Muslims is also a sign of politically motivated violence. It is apparent to us that the pious people of this region are very sensitive in the question of their religion. From time to time this emotion is abused and misused by a group of politician. As example, in British period, the rulers ruled this area on the basis of divide and rule policy. Most of the cases general people could not understand that their emotions have been misused by some groups. For these reasons, we need to make our people more conscious about what religion says, and what we are doing and what we actually needed to do. To stop violence in the name of religion our youths should know the actual meaning of human rights, and the importance of religious freedom in establishing human rights properly.

Main Features of Human rights:

In search of a specific criterion of human rights, we have to take help from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

The article 1 of this greatest declaration holds,

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Article 2 holds,

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin.”

From these two articles we can hold that the main features of human rights are:

1. Free access to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

2. Equality before the law.
3. Freedom of thought and expression-including religious freedom.
4. Freedom to present grievances to the government.
5. Right to elect –and sometimes impeach –government leaders

Relationship between religious freedom and human rights:

Religious freedom is one of the foundational human rights. To protect this freedom means protecting something common to every human being—the sanctity of the conscience in matters of ultimate truth, worship, ritual and codes of behavior. This right was not created by governments, but exists prior to governments and societies. To establish the principle of religious liberty the most central role was played by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This landmark document recognizes several important religious rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that every person, in every corner of the globe, has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

The Article 18 is the key text which holds the actual feature of religious freedom.

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The Declaration vigorously asserts that individual religious differences must be respected. It embraces the political principle that a key role of government is to protect religious choice, not to mandate religious conformity. No government which fails to protect freedom of religion and conscience is likely to value the other fundamental rights, such as freedom from arbitrary arrest or torture. By the same token, the elevation of religious liberty is a sign of a healthy democracy—one which values not only freedom of conscience, but the other rights necessary to religious freedom, such as free speech and assembly.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Bangladesh:

Sixty four years ago, on December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Interestingly, even 48 years back of that, in 1900 The International Association for Religious Freedom, the world’s first international interreligious organization was founded. Bangladesh is an active member of this organization. In fact, the essence of religious freedom was formerly in the heart of people of this land. About more than 100 years ago in the language of our Bengali baul Lalon (1774-1890) we have found the words of religious freedom. He has become an icon of religious tolerance and secularism through his songs. He sings “if you respect human being, you will be the real human, without respect human o fool, you will lose your own root” (manush vojile shonar manush hobi).

In another song he proclaimed:

"Everyone asks: "Lalan, what's your religion in this world?"

Lalan answers: "How does religion look?"

I've never laid eyes on it.

Some wear malas [Hindu rosaries] around their necks,

Some tasbis [Muslim rosaries], and so people say

They've got different religions.

But do you bear the sign of your religion

When you come or when you go?"

The point should be noted that, Lalon was a poet of our village land. He sang the song of people's heart, he did not write his poems in a civilian's drawing room. He walked through the paths of village while singing song of humanity. Therefore, our people are very much familiar with humanity as well as religious freedom. They did not know the theory but they practiced it through their lifestyles.

Following independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh was established as a secular state in which national identity was based on Bengali language and culture. The constitution contains strongly-worded guarantees for freedom of religious belief and practice, as well as equal treatment by the government for citizens regardless of religious affiliation. Unfortunately subsequent military regimes amended the constitution. The affirmation was included in the constitution that "absolute trust and faith in Allah" is to "be the basis for all actions" by the government. Although not judicially enforceable, this change in the constitution has been cited by minority rights advocates as diminishing the status of non-Muslims as equal members of Bangladeshi society. Islam was made Bangladesh's state religion in 1988 under the military dictatorship of H.M. Ershad. Recently, an amendment to the constitution passed on June 30, 2011 established Islam as the state religion but reaffirmed the country is a secular state. Therefore, the constitution and other laws and policies of our country protect religious freedom.

Though the constitution provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions, subject to law, public order, and morality. Bangladesh's high levels of political violence and instability have provided opportunities for religious and other extremist groups to engage in criminal activities.

Three examples of politically motivated violence are:

1. A group of religious extremists coordinated a wave of hundreds of almost simultaneous bomb attacks, carried out in all but one of Bangladesh's 64 districts on August 17, 2005. These extremists were also implicated in a series of bomb attacks on Bangladesh's judiciary in October-November 2005 which accompanied a demand to substitute sharia law for Bangladesh's secular jurisprudence system. In March 2007, six members of the armed Islamist group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), including JMB leader Sheikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiquil Islam, alias —Bangla Bhai, were executed for their involvement in the 2005 bombings
2. On December 29, 2008, a few hours before the general elections, Buddhist temple and three homes in a minority-dominated part of Fatikchari, CHT were subject to an arson attack, reportedly to intimidate minorities and scare them into nonparticipation on voting day.
3. Bangladesh's small Ahmadi community of about 100,000 was the target of a campaign to designate the Ahmadis as —non-Muslim heretics. (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)- May 03, 2007. (<http://bangladeshwatchdog.blogspot.com/2009/06/bangladesh-dropped-from-religious.html>) These all are the politically motivated incidents where religion has been used as an arm of politicians. But the general people of this land contain the message of equality and religious freedom. Here, I am tempted to give the example of Durga Puja of 2006 and 2007. It is because in these two particular years the people of Bangladesh enjoyed Durga Puja and Eid ul Fitr with great festivity at the same time. Here is some news from those years' daily news paper.

In October 17, 2007, a prominent daily newspaper of the country 'The Daily Star' holds, "Hindu devotees are all set to invoke Goddess Durga, daughter of the majestic Himalayas, with the Mahasaptami puja at some 20,000 puja mandaps across the country today...Leaders of Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad and Mahanagar Sarbojoneen Puja Committee said people from all walks of life will gather at puja mandaps mostly from today as the main attraction of the Durga Puja begins from Mahasaptami...Ansars have been deployed at every puja mandap while Rapid Action Battalion, Bangladesh Rifles and police will patrol the puja venues for ensuring security of the visitors. Monitoring cells have also been formed to help Hindus observe their biggest annual religious festival...Different political, social and cultural organisations, meanwhile, continued to felicitate Hindus on the eve of the festival. They also condemned the attacks on puja mandaps and desecration of Durga idols throughout the country..

Government sources said 14,170 Puja mandaps have been set up across the country. However, according to Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad, 20,000 mandaps have been set up in the country including 162 in Dhaka.

Different political, social and cultural organizations felicitated Hindus on the eve of the biggest festival. The organizations also condemned the attacks on mandaps and desecration of Durga idols across the country. The organizations include Awami League, BNP, Bangladesh Minority Lawyers Association, Bangladesh Hindu Parishad, and Bangladesh Hindu Youth."

The issue of October 6, 2008, of the same newspaper holds, "Just after Eid holidays the city is witnessing more festivity especially the Old Dhaka...President of Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad, Professor Nim Chandra Bhowmik, said "Despite the increased expenses of puja materials, the number of mandaps increased in recent times. Better communal harmony is creating a positive environment."

Bhowmik however mentioned that there have been a few incidents of vandalism this year as well.

Around 22,000 mandaps have already been set up across the country including 165 in Dhaka. Last year the number of mandaps was 20,000.

Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad (BPUP) Adviser Major Gen (retd) CR Dutta Beer Uttam at a press conference yesterday said the increase in number of mandaps this year indicates communal unity among people in the country.

BPUP leaders demanded that the government ensure equal rights of people of all faiths, giving Durga puja state status, four-day vacation on this occasion and celebrating Janmashtami of Sri Krishna at state level."

These are the example of peaceful co-existence of various faith groups of Bangladesh.

Therefore, Bangladesh has a very suitable platform of establishing religious freedom. Its general people are not obviously arrogant. They are habituated to hear the azan and the tune of shankha at the same time. Now, to establish the proper religious freedom our political leaders should take necessary steps. We have to elevate us from the stage of toleration to the stage of religious freedom. It is because; in a free country nobody wants to be tolerated for his religious opinions or sacred convictions. Religious freedom means, we will respect our own religion as well as others. We should respect other believer group's prophets as we respect our own. As the member of IARF and as the student of World Religions and Culture we have to strictly protest any kind of activities which could strike the religious emotion of any believers group. In this perspective from this very appropriate platform we are expressing our discontent to the provocative and insulting film 'Innocence of Muslims' which has not been banned yet in the name of freedom of expression. From this platform we want to say, that freedom of expression cannot actually protect human rights which hampers the right of religious freedom of others.

Thank you all.

Sources:

1. P. Barash, David and P. Webel, Charles, 2002, *Peace and Conflict Studies* by Sage Publications.
2. Rashid, Harun Ur, 2005, *An Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies*, The University Press Limited
3. Gongopaddhay Shunil, 2008 *Moner Manush* (Bengali) Anondo Publishers.
4. 2011 Report on International Religious Freedom Bangladesh, 30 July 2012, Published by United State Department of State. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/502105db69.html>
5. The Daily Star, Prominent daily newspaper of Bangladesh, October17, 2007 and October 6, 2008 Issues.