

## Foreword

For years, Bangladesh has successfully portrayed itself as a moderate Muslim democracy and escaped serious censure for its deplorable human rights record. In those rare instances when it has been criticized by the international community or human rights organizations, the plight of the persecuted Hindu minority has largely been ignored. *A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing: The Murder of Bangladesh's Hindus* shatters the myth of Bangladesh as a moderate Muslim nation and delves deeply into the origins and causes of the violence and oppression that has plagued its Hindu community. The culmination of tireless activism and rigorous independent research, Dr. Benkin's fascinating account brings a much needed voice to the millions of Bangladeshi Hindu victims who have suffered violence, discrimination, and indignity in silence.

Since its birth as an independent nation in 1971, Bangladesh has implemented a number of measures to expand the constitutional and legal role of Islam, while institutionalizing prejudice and bigotry against its minority Hindu population. Hindus have also faced routine acts of violence, including murders, rapes, forced conversions, temple attacks, abductions, and land encroachments. Religiously motivated violence in Bangladesh has particularly impacted Hindu women and young girls, and has been utilized as a weapon of subjugation.

Moreover, the dramatic decline in the Hindu population is indicative of a deliberate attempt to forcibly remove Hindus from Bangladesh. As Benkin points out, Hindus comprised approximately 33% of the population in 1947 (in the territory now encompassing Bangladesh), but were less than 20% by 1971. And in 2001, Hindus represented less than 10% of the population, while today many sources estimate that Hindus are only 8%. This massive population loss cannot be explained through normal birth rates or as a natural phenomenon, but instead signify an intentional effort to irreversibly change the demographics of this South Asian nation.

Drawing nuanced comparisons with the Holocaust and other historical cases of genocide and ethnic cleansing, Benkin forcefully argues to label what is happening to Bangladeshi Hindus is nothing short of ethnic cleansing. These comparisons are not intended to demonstrate equivalency in the nature and scope of the crimes, but rather to ensure that we no longer continue to ignore the clear warning signs that exist, as we have done so often in the past.

In the case of Bangladesh, the ethnic cleansing of Hindus can best be described as "quiet and steady," as it has gone essentially unnoticed by the world. The international community's failure to notice or stop the cleansing, however, in no way diminishes the sheer magnitude of the calamity.

Tracing developments from pre-independence Bangladesh, Benkin systematically outlines the multitude of factors responsible for the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Hindus, including the increased radicalization of the Bangladesh polity, the complicity of corrupt government officials at all levels of governance, discriminatory laws, and the widespread failure to act in defense of the victims. In particular, he spends considerable time describing the vast appropriation of

Hindu-owned land under the Vested Property Act (VPA) and demonstrates its impact on the forced migration of Hindus from Bangladesh. He further notes the significant personal benefits accrued by local politicians and the consequent unwillingness of successive governments to end the blatantly racist law.

Benkin also shows, contrary to commonly held perceptions, that the plight of Hindus under the purportedly “secular” Awami League government has not significantly improved compared to previous regimes. Despite several opportunities to institute reforms and prosecute attacks on Hindus, the recently elected Awami League has chosen instead to maintain the status quo. From failing to rescind the remaining vestiges of the VPA, to not returning confiscated properties under the Act, the Awami League has continued the discriminatory policies of its predecessors. Additionally, it has declined to repeal the eighth amendment of the constitution, which recognizes Islam as the official state religion, while allowing radical Islamist parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, to expand their influence.

*A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing* closely examines the situation in Bangladesh within the broader context of the global expansion of pan-Islamism, but carefully distinguishes between Islam the religion, and radical Islam and international jihad as a destructive political ideology. Similarly, it identifies the dangerous convergence of Islamists and communist political parties in perpetuating the victimization of Bangladeshi Hindu refugees living in India’s West Bengal state. Benkin provides an insightful account into the lives of these refugees, who lack formal legal status in India and struggle to survive. Based on his investigations and first-hand accounts, he demonstrates the ongoing danger the refugees face from Islamist attacks and the failure of corrupt West Bengal officials and police to protect them.

Far from being politically correct, Benkin is equally critical of the ineffective leadership of those who claim to represent the interests of Hindu refugees in West Bengal, and their incessant concern for personal comfort over improving the conditions of their constituents. He is similarly contemptuous of Hindus in India and the diaspora for their widespread apathy towards the plight of their co-religionists from Bangladesh.

The uniqueness of *A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing*, however, lies not only in its description of the origins and causes of the ethnic cleansing of Bangladeshi Hindus or the culpable parties, but in its ability to suggest comprehensive strategies to address the situation. As Benkin appropriately notes, the Bangladeshi government has no incentive to modify its behavior absent pressure from the U.S. or international community. Although the U.S. currently lacks a coherent foreign policy towards Bangladesh, he argues that it can use its significant economic leverage to bring about meaningful change.

*A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing*, therefore, makes a compelling and impassioned plea to urgently end the persecution of Bangladeshi Hindus, while providing practical recommendations that merit our immediate attention. It is a seminal and comprehensive work that contributes immensely to our understanding of the factors that have led to the ethnic cleansing, and serves as a powerful call to action.

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