

STATE OF THE RELIGIOUS MINORITIES: INTERVIEW WITH ASMA JEHANGIR

Declaring Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim in Pakistan has serious repercussions on civil liberty

The famous Pakistani human rights lawyer and UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Asma Jehangir, during her recent visit to Dhaka, was interviewed by Inam Ahmed and Ashfaq Wares Khan of The Daily Star on the state of the religious minorities, specially Ahmadiyyas vis-a-vis human rights. The excerpts follow:



The Daily Star (DS): What is your assessment about the situation of the Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh?

Asma Jehangir (AJ): Since freedom of religion is my UN mandate, when I came here and shared my observations with the government and the government sent me a reply saying that there are no forms of repression against any religious minorities here and the freedom of religion is ensured by the Bangladesh constitution.

But this time, I am here in my individual capacity, so I am not at liberty to make any comments or observations.

DS: How did Pakistan deal with the repression of Ahmadiyyas?

AJ: In Pakistan, the issue was used by religious parties to use the emotion of the people to enrage them and build new constituencies. It became the foothold for the religious parties to gain entry into parliament and government institutions.

DS: How did it unfold?

AJ: During the rule of President Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator, in 1984 Ordinance 20 was passed, for which the penal code was amended so any Ahmadiyyas who pretend to be a Muslim would be punished. For example, we had a number of what came to be known as "Assalamalaikum Cases" where Ahmadiyyas would be arrested for greeting another Pakistani by saying Assalamalaikum. The arrests ran into hundreds, if not thousands.

There were numerous cases like this, where Ahmadiyyas were not allowed to recite the Kalimas, they were not allowed to call their places of worship as Mosques. When it came to getting passports, members of the Ahmadiyya community had to sign a document declaring themselves as non-Muslims and their religion as a fake one. Everybody signed, of course, but the ones who refused

to sign were arrested. The situation really degraded Ahmadiyyas in the society, and members of the community kept leaving the country.

DS: What really made the situation so degrading for the Ahmadiyyas?

AJ: The situation kept worsening, and it really became derogatory for the Ahmadiyyas, when government high officials and even politicians were dubbed as Ahmadiyyas to harass them politically and socially. When the current Prime Minister of Pakistan Shaukat Aziz was called an Ahmadiyya he had to make a public announcement saying he is not one but a Muslim. The previous Chief Justice had to go to a Mosque and denounce his father who was an Ahmadiyya.

When such high officials go out in public and denounce Ahmadiyyas, it is quite derogatory for the members of the Ahmadiyya community. Such an attitude extended itself to institutions and hostility grew there, they became untouchables and still are.

DS: What is the current state of the Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan?

AJ: Well, as I said they are still treated as untouchables, people do not want to marry their children into Ahmadiyya families, there are widespread discriminations against them in the workplace. They are boxed in to their own isolated communities, in their own 'ghettos'.

But now, a very strong demand is out there in Pakistan to announce the Zikris non-Muslims and recently they have also turned against the Aga Khan community and are demanding that they be denounced as non-Muslims.

DS: You have said in other forums that the civil society in Pakistan did not do enough and are not doing enough to prevent these atrocities against the Ahmadiyya community. But was the repression

under Zia's regime so severe that perhaps the civil society could not do anything?

AJ: No, that is not the case. The movement against Zia-ul-Haq was very strong, and not just by women who were fighting for their rights, but lawyers and journalists were being flogged for taking to the streets. But when it came to protesting against the minority repression, especially the Ahmadiyyas, there was an eerie and awkward silence. And I believe the civil society failed.

DS: Why would the religious parties turn their focus to labelling groups as non-Muslims, what did they stand to gain?

AJ: It was a very, very good political gimmick for the religious parties in Pakistan. They wanted to make it an issue to show to the people that they have power and they can make the government do it. More importantly, they wanted to create new constituencies by fomenting these claims of non-Muslims and enraging the general people.

DS: Do you see any parallels to what has been happening in Bangladesh?

AJ: Since I am not here in my capacity as the UN Rapporteur, I can't really say much about it. Otherwise, people here are aware of what has been happening through the media, I personally do not know what has been happening in Bangladesh.

My UN report on religious freedoms here came out in October last year and its a public report available on the website.

DS: How can we in Bangladesh protect religious freedoms?

AJ: Guarantees by the government to protect their freedoms should be put in place. The freedom to practice and manifestations of their belief should be practiced as long as one group does not take away the rights from anyone else.

DS: How do you see the situation in South Asia?

AJ: It was always sad for me when I got reports from South Asia. For countries such as Bhutan and Maldives, it was hard to figure out what's happening since the societies were so closed. But overall the patterns are similar,

duced as the nature of crime is changing and that is why the introduction of modern technology in forensics is vital. Sealing crime sites off limits, modernisation of the process, and overall send the message out that you cannot lie in court.

DS: How is that change possible, who do you think should make that change? Are not lawyers and judges open to corruption and political inclinations?

AJ: Simply, it cannot be done

only by the lawyers, but the effort also has to come from the political parties. People have to be committed to the law where the separation of judiciary and the rules of appointment of judges are key and very important.

DS: In Bangladesh, there is a big move to separate the judiciary from the legislature, what are your thoughts on that? Do you think it can really bring about change?

AJ: It is not going to work piecemeal, but has to take place holistically.

It is not going to work if you have an extra-legal government which throws the constitution into the dustbin.

But the package has to be put together piece by pieces and in phases.

DS: What do you think about the civil society here in Bangladesh?

AJ: I think it is a much more vibrant civil society here than the one we have in Pakistan. You are lucky you do not have the military here. But democracy

here is a transitional one, and it started off at the same time as the transitional democracies in Nepal and Pakistan between the years 1988 and 1991. However, look what has happened there, their democracies have been reversed while yours still exist. What I say is to strengthen that democracy through independent judiciary, effective parliament, free media and a vibrant civil society. You cannot let democracy stagnate.

RANGS advertisement featuring a washing machine and a price list table. The table lists various models and their prices, such as RC-1468 for 8,690/- and RC-2108 for 12,290/-.

TOSHIBA advertisement featuring a row of mobile phones and promotional text in Bengali. The text includes 'সুন্দে মূল্যহাডি' and 'সে কটা ই যদি বেছে নিতে হয় - তবে সুন্দে...'.

Advertisement for RANGS washing machines, featuring a cow illustration and text in Bengali. It lists prices for different models, such as 19,500/- for a 1.5kg model and 18,500/- for a 1.2kg model.

Large advertisement for GrameenPhone featuring a grid of mobile phone models and their prices. The grid is organized by phone type (GP-National, GP-Regular, EASY Pre-Paid, EASY Gold) and lists various models like Nokia 1100, Motorola M 3788, etc., with their respective prices.