



National Human Rights Commission, Bangladesh

Human Rights Day 2012

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Bangladesh organised a roundtable titled "Communal Harmony, Human Rights and Bangladesh" at a Hotel in the capital on December 2 as part of its celebration of the Human Rights Day, 2012. The UNDP, Swiss Confederation, DANIDA and Sweden supported the programme. A brief summary of the roundtable is presented below.

Prof Dr. Mizanur Rahman, chairman, NHRC



Let me begin by welcoming you all to the roundtable on behalf of our commission. We have organised the roundtable to mark the International Human Rights Day on December 10. On this day in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN General Assembly and since then, we think, the journey of human rights in modern times has begun and that is why we celebrate the day every year.

You must have noticed that we are passing through a critical time in our national life where our identity, history, spirit of the Liberation War and values are being threatened from a special corner and it is our national duty to ward off that threat. If we cannot withstand the threat properly, human rights will be at stake. From that point of view we thought we can once again remind ourselves the values of our communal harmony, which has long been our tradition.

Seventy years ago, President Franklin Roosevelt said the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Today this message seems to me most befitting in upholding the sanctity of celebrating the International Human Rights Day. Bangladesh has made quite a long and difficult journey towards freedom and democracy -- two prerequisites to attain the protection of human rights. Yes indeed, we have achieved freedom, but we are not yet liberated. We have overcome the economic and infrastructural hurdles, we have shown the world that, yes, we, too, can. But, even then we are overtaken by fear of distrust amongst ourselves. Human rights can never be ensured when there is no respect for each other. Today, liberalism is targeted. Communal peace is at stake. Tolerance is on the wane!

With our strength of diversity, let us today pledge our integrity for the respect of human dignity. Let the spirit of the War of Liberation continue with the kindled spirit. We believe and we know that we have had lapses, we have had weaknesses, probably at times we might have been derailed, but there had never been a dearth of sincerity and honesty in whatever we tried to do and we tried to accomplish.

Kazi Reazul Hoque, full-time member, NHRC



Human rights cover a wide range of guarantees but it are being violated at different times by different people. The discussion may include the issue of violation of human rights in 1971 when the worst violation of human rights occurred.

Apart from discussing the present situation of communal harmony in Bangladesh, we also want to focus on frequent fire incidents at readymade garment factories, the latest being at Tazreen Fashions Ltd on November 24 that killed at least 111 workers. In our discussion, we should bring the issue that whose negligence is responsible for so many deaths. What kind of punitive action will be taken against the perpetrators? As human rights activists, we too have responsibilities.

Shyamal Dutta, editor of the daily Bhorer Kagoj



We achieved independence in 1971. But after 40 years of independence, we cannot boldly say that we have been able to keep our achievement continuously in the last four decades. There were secularism, democracy and non-communalism in 1971, but I don't find these things today in 2012. Today we have state religion that we did not have in 1971. We had a non-communal constitution in 1972, but now we have a communal constitution.

The killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the declaration of state religion in 1988, the fifteenth amendment to the constitution in 2011 and the violence on minority communities in recent times -- all these demand an evaluation to be able to understand communal harmony in Bangladesh.

Currently, I think we are living in the year of 1947, when states were established on the basis of religion. We have distanced ourselves from the 1972 constitution. Under the situation, we cannot expect that communal harmony will be strengthened in Bangladesh in future.

Those who believe in secularism are minority amongst the minority people. It remains to be seen to what extent we would be able to practise secularism in this situation. It is my realisation that the political party that led the Liberation War in 1971 has become communal now.

Mahub Alam, Journalist



The spirit of communal harmony is at stake. Different political parties are using the religious sentiment to grab the power. Lack of political will is a major barrier to establish communal harmony in Bangladesh. We need to resist the communal forces for establishing communal harmony... and need to take appropriate measures to uphold the spirit of human values.

Prof Dr. Niru Kumar Chakma, honorary member, NHRC



One religion must not be given preference if we really want communal harmony in our country. The fifteenth amendment to the constitution that keeps Islam as state religion should be reconsidered. All religions should be given equal importance. Indigenous people are the minority amongst the minority. Fifteen years have elapsed since the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, but it has not been implemented yet.



Secularism should be established to ensure communal harmony. The second thing is the rule of law must be established. Those who are creating troubles should be brought to justice. I do not know what kind of punitive action has been taken against the perpetrators of the Ramu incident. Above all, creating awareness is very important for prevent violence and induce a change in behavior of the people and ensuring coexistence is one of the prime prerequisites for communal harmony.

Prof Muhammad Abdul Hye, freedom fighter and human rights activist



During the Liberation War, all of us fought against Pakistan having been driven by a common spirit irrespective of religions and communities. But we have moved away from that spirit. Good governance and rule of law is a must in every society. But, have we reached the expected level of good governance and rule of law in the last 40 years of Bangladesh? In many cases, the law enforcers

lock into clashes among themselves over dispute centring distribution of bribe money. So, who will ensure rule of law? Hundreds of incidents of violence against women are occurring in Bangladesh. Despite repeated demand from different quarters after 111 workers lost their lives in Tazreen Fashions blaze, a judicial probe body has not been formed yet. I do not know, whether the NHRC officials, as human rights defenders, visited the spot or not.

Finally I want to say, political commitment is essential for good governance and rule of law. If we can establish good governance and rule of law, we would be able to achieve many things.

Momtaz Begum, chairman of Jatiya Mohila Sangstha



The worst kind of violation of human rights in the world history happened during the Liberation War. So, being a freedom fighter, I would request you all to be united so that the trial of the war criminals is completed in due time. It is true that all the parties that came to power have faults and could not live up to the people's expectations, but now we should refrain from blaming each other. We all, irrespective of party affiliation, opinion, religion and class, should now unite and voice our call for the trial as it is the most urgent task. And the reality is that there is no alternative to having a pro-liberation government for our emancipation in true sense.

We will definitely have to raise awareness in each household about the issue of ensuring human rights and human dignity. We have to tell everyone that we would be able to protect human rights when we consider ourselves as human being. I believe we will be able to restore communal harmony to its fullest in our country.

HM Nazrul Islam, senior programme officer, Royal Danish Embassy



There is a trend in our society that we become complacent very easily which is quite risky. For example, our political leaders, who become very complacent and often talk about the achievement and progress, never remain vigilant about the negative sources that grow in the society.

So we have to be careful about being complacent very easily. On the other hand, we also become very disheartened overnight which is also risky. So, there is a need for creating a kind of balance in our approach. Because we say that we have seen deterioration in the situation of communal harmony and human rights in Bangladesh, but at the same time, I would say, we have seen silver lining in that cloud. For example, right after the Ramu incident, we have seen tens of thousands of people raising their voice against the communal attack and this is the silver lining. This is the strength the society still has and we should not forget that.

I do not believe that the Bangladesh society has totally changed. We still have hopes and what we need to do is to strengthen the National Human Rights Commission and increase respect for human rights and human dignity. We have to acquire an attitude of respecting other people's opinion which we lack very much.

Md Emranul Huq Chowdhury, executive director, Uddipan



In our childhood, we saw strong ties among the people of all religions in our villages. But now, the picture has changed. Why the harmony has been breached? One should avoid using religion as a political instrument. The politicians play a key role in ensuring the respect of religion and culture of all citizens.

Today, when communal harmony is crucial for the country's

advancement. Our politicians should take an oath to transform our politics.

Now, the civil society member and people of all religions will have to unite and work for brining about a positive change in our politics. Economic development has given us some relief. But, conspiracy is on to frustrate the democratic process. We will have to work on that as well.

Advocate Rana Dasgupta, prosecutor of International Crimes Tribunal



I would like to begin with a question... what is the status of communal harmony in Bangladesh? The migration has been a prominent trend since 1947 to the till date, different communities have been migrated from Bangladesh for various reasons particularly the Hindu community. I would like to ask why the rate of minority population declined to below 10 percent in a span of four decades.

If we can find the answer of this "why," we will be able to find the status of our communal harmony and also who are responsible for the destruction of the harmonious atmosphere in the country. The situation would not have reached to this point had justice been delivered in the cases of violence on the minority community.

It is a concern that the minority community fears to file cases as they often face lawsuits filed by the attackers. There may not be any communal riot in Bangladesh but what is going on here is one-sided communal violence. The vast majority of people in Bangladesh do not commit any communal violence; the incident that happened in Ramu seems to have been exacerbated by some groups.

To get rid of this problem, the civil society will have to play a pivotal role. All the democratic, progressive and pro-liberation political parties and other socio-cultural forces will have to stand together and be united with the spirit of the Liberation War. Only then we can have a pluralistic society. I would urge the National Human Rights Commission to take the issue of communal harmony seriously for the sake of upholding democracy and protecting human rights.

Mohiuddin Ahmed, former secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Awareness is very essential for communal harmony. People should be made aware that if the majority Muslims repress people of other community in Bangladesh, the same may happen in other countries where Muslims are the minority.

Sayeed Ahmed, country programme manager, Forum-Asia



The responsibility of state is the most important thing in defending, respecting and ensuring human rights in any country. In our fifteenth amendment to the constitution, we could not show equal respect to all religions.

We should think about inclusion of such topics in textbooks at school level so that the children think "this country is not only mine, it is ours, it belongs to us all". If such a mindset cannot be imbued among children, then terrible incidents like Ramu may repeatedly occur.

Dulal Chandra Biwas, director general of Press Institute of Bangladesh



If we look into Bangalee's psyche from historical and religious points of view, we see that it contains communal harmony. Bangalees are a mixed race and therefore their psyche is diversified, not linear. Besides, Bangalees are such a race that one can find in them followers of all religions of the world. If we can accept all religions, we can also keep any ideology in our mind. Whenever any disaster strikes,

like what I saw during the Liberation War or the 1991 cyclone, we forget our differences or divisions and lend helping hands for each other. So it is evident that we have that mentality to maintain communal harmony. But the lack of political will we see cracks in that harmony. Nevertheless politics alone is not responsible for it. We have to identify the other socio-cultural forces that are also to blame for it.

The media has a pivotal role to play here. It has to be secular or it will be impossible to instil secular ideologies in people's mind.

Rathindra Nath Roy, renowned folk signer & freedom fighter



There was no division during our times when we used to celebrate festivals of other religions. We saw cracks in that harmony for the first time after the attack on Babri Masjid (mosque).

However, I would like to urge the National Human Rights Commission to intensify awareness raising campaigns to get rid of this problem. We have to tell everyone why we fought the Liberation War and what our dream was.

Dr. Md Rahmat Ullah, associate professor, Department of Law, Dhaka University



The purpose of establishing Bangladesh was to establish a good society through protecting human rights, fundamental rights and rule of law. That is why the issue of communal harmony was never an issue in the post-liberation period.

I think we need to bring a change in our education system immediately. If we cannot teach our children the lessons of human rights and human values, we will not be able to establish that desired society.

Fawzia Karim Firoze, honorary member, NHRC



At first I want to say education is very important for ensuring human rights in Bangladesh. We should analyse the education policy that how much human rights education we are providing to our children. Another important factor for ensuring human rights is culture. I think we are facing crisis in our cultural identity, even religious identity. It breaches communal harmony.

Our political commitment should be to establishing democracy which we have been longing for since 1971. Democracy should not be a system to be found in books and newspapers, it should rather be practised. Our professional institutions are getting politicised in the absence of democratic practice. We need motivation and awareness to come out of this nuisance.

The media can play an important role here. In TV talk shows, important issues like human rights, education policy and communal harmony should be discussed instead of political issues only. We should talk about erosion of values.

Dr. M Shah Alam, chairman-in-charge, Law Commission-Bangladesh



From our childhood, we have grown up in an environment where people of all religions lived in peace. People of Muslim and Hindu communities took part in each others' religious and other festivals.

Although the number of people of other religions has reduced, communal harmony has not broken yet. Lack of communal harmony is not the only reason for this reduction, many left the country thinking they would not be able to live with dignity and honour in Bangladesh. Religion should not be used by some politicians to jeopardize communal harmony.

Finally, I would like to say that it is not possible to change overnight everything that has developed over the decades since 1975.

Prof Dr. Mizanur Rahman, chairman, NHRC



Some of the discussants have spoken in accusing tones out of their emotions because we are lagging behind in fulfilling their expectations. In conclusion though a visible silver line of hope may be traced in all statements made here today. That is the truth which emboldens us, inspires us and directs us.

Finally, we have come to this conclusion that there is no alternative to progressive politics. We will have to nurture and disseminate the spirit and values of the Liberation War to uphold communal harmony in Bangladesh.

It may appear that our nation got divided after the Ramu incident, but I would disagree. Bangladesh did not turn into Gujarat after the Ramu incident. It reflects the harmony and sympathy among mass people. Those who conspired could not succeed. Their failures generate hopes in us. We are moving towards an ideal Bangladesh. If the trend continues, we will reach the level soon where the NHRC will be able to establish a culture of human rights in the country.

Let us leave this room with a strong message of hope and realistic optimism ringing in our hearts. In this month of victory let us repose confidence and faith on the common people of Bangladesh - they never failed in history and they will not fail in the future as well. Let us all rally behind the War Crimes trial- successful prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during our liberation war in 1971 will lead to resurgence of the spirit of 1971, the values of our liberation war, which is no compromising terms speak about the 'dignity of human person'- the essence of human rights. Let us confidently embark on that journey!

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