

# LOSING OUR WAY: RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

## SHOUT DESK

Religion, regardless of our religious views, is a force that shapes all our lives one way or the other. Our religious views and beliefs create a source of identity; *it unites us and it divides us.*

Incidents of violence committed by people of one religion on another have been a common phenomenon in our history, a history that spans hundreds of years of co-existence in the sub-continent. Despite there being harmony within the diversity for many years, fractures started to show prominently between Hindus and Muslims from the colonial era. Between the First Partition of Bengal (1905) and the India-Pakistan Partition (1947), the differences surfaced and harmony faded. The Bengali Muslim identity struggled to find a stable place throughout history – the identity was looked down upon during pre-1947 era by a Hindu-centred sense of nationalism and later, by the then West Pakistanis who considered Bengali Muslims as “half-Muslims” – a hybrid that needed cleansing. The attempted ethnic cleansing and “purification” of the Bengali Muslims that was a large part of the agenda of the Liberation War of 1971 only goes on to show the long associated history of violence, politics and religion in our land. Through the years, disparity has grown and so has intolerance. Although freedom from Pakistanis came with the promises of a secular, tolerant nation, every sign faded soon after politics took a stranglehold on such matters.

Hindus, being the largest religious minority in the Muslim dominant part of Bengal have had their share of conflicts, successes and grief that is associated with the tag of minority. Bangladesh's minority Hindus are being attacked by extremist Islamists who seem as preoccupied with land as they are with politics or religion.

On the 5th of January, 2015, Bangladesh concluded what many judge to have been the country's most violent election to date. A large part of the violence had been targeted attacks on Hindu communities all across Bangladesh. There have been reports of burned houses and properties and destructions of puja mandaps before the much celebrated Durga Puja. A similar incident was observed during the 2001 election as well, where there were even reports of sexual assault on Hindu women. Sexual assault on women as a deliberate exercise of power has been a part of our history too, but that is a different story.

There have been many incidents of violence committed against Buddhists as well, but the one etched in our minds is that of Ramu in 2012. The mobs destroyed 22 Buddhist temples and monasteries and 50 houses belonging to Buddhists and Hindus, in reaction to the publication of a doctored image depicting the desecration of the Quran on the timeline of a fake Facebook account under a Buddhist man's name. The violence later spread to Ukhai upazila in Cox's Bazar and Patiya upazila in Chittagong district where Buddhist monasteries were targeted for attacks. Valuable and rare statues, ancient scriptures and many cultural artifacts were lost in the fire and chaos.

The reason why attacks are often carried out with the aim to destroy artifacts of symbolic significance is related to the sense of identity attached to these. These symbols are seen as threats to perpetrators, who try to dismantle the communities and push on the views through violence and destruction. What they fail to see is that the loss isn't just the communities', but also ours as a nation.

## WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

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	Christians	Muslims	Jews	Buddhists	Hindus
Faced abuse in	<b>130</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>27</b>
					countries
The law qualifies or contradicts religious freedom in	<b>157</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>40</b>
	countries	countries	countries	countries	countries
Public preaching is limited by the state in	<b>131</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>53</b>
	countries	countries	countries	countries	countries
Covertly to a different religion is limited by the state in	<b>38</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>74</b>
	countries	countries	countries	countries	countries
Wearing religious symbols is regulated by law in	<b>53</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>33</b>
	countries	countries	countries	countries	countries
Religious groups have been formally banned in	<b>40</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>33</b>	
	countries	countries	countries	countries	
There was mob violence relating to religion in	<b>53</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>33</b>		
	countries	countries	countries		
Terrorist groups relating to religion are active in	<b>74</b>	<b>33</b>			
	countries	countries			
Women were harassed for violating religious dress codes in	<b>33</b>				
	countries				

Source: Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life

Rumours definitely have the ability to mobilise masses in our country. Steve Kim Mission School, a missionary school in the Gazipur area, came under attack in November, 2014. More than a 100 people vandalised the school and assaulted the employees.

dom in the name of religion.

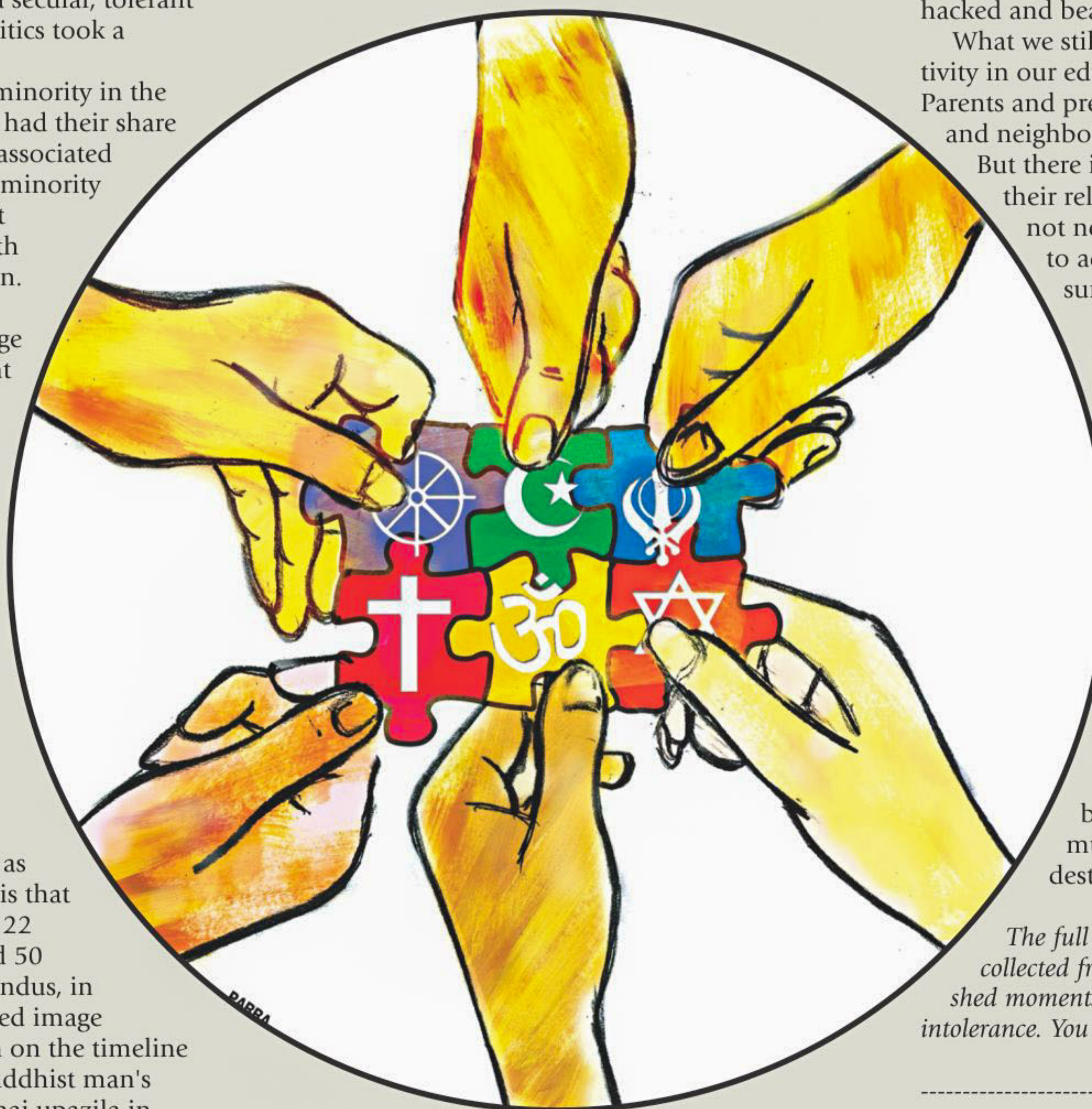
It doesn't end with culture. Intolerance seeps into our personal lives, with surveillance over whom we are allowed to love and who we are allowed to marry. Freedom is hindered in every way possible and when voices reach the ears of the intolerant ones, we are hacked and beaten and told we are wrong.

What we still lack is the concept of religious sensitivity in our education system and parenting methods. Parents and previous generations preach that friends and neighbours of a different religion are “tolerable”. But there is a marked disregard to preach that their religious views and life perspectives are not necessarily trivial or unnecessary to learn, to accept and incorporate in our social surroundings.

Bangladesh was born out of a sense of nationalism that grew from a unified cultural identity and a thirst for freedom – the freedom to speak, to think and to *live*. It was born through one of the world's most terrifying genocides with the promise of being the land where “Shadhinota” was valued and all religious and ethnic identities were embraced.

Where is that Bangladesh today? Four decades later, we stand and watch people die unjustified deaths because they were “different”. Our silence does more damage to the country than the hands of the extremists do, because in silence we give our consent to murders in the name of religion, to the destruction of freedom.

*The full version of this article includes opinions collected from readers as well as a timeline of watershed moments for Bangladesh on the topic of religious intolerance. You can find them on our online edition.*



A rumour was all it took to abandon morals and ethics, to attack a school where children go to gain knowledge and be the future of our nation.

The implementation and impact of religious intolerance doesn't end here. It hinders many other aspects of our lives. Remember when the statues of five Baul mystics commemorating Lalon's contributions to our culture, built in front of the airport, was brought down? It was done so because certain people saw it as “un-Islamic” and equal to “idol worship”, but in reality it was the legitimising of policing of cultural free-

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