

# In the shadows of violence

South Asia needs to embrace minority inclusion for long-term growth

**A CLOSER LOOK**



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**S**OUTH Asia is home to about a quarter of the world's population. Sprawling over eight countries, the region is a vibrant mosaic of various ethnicities, religions, cultures and languages. And the region—having turned around after independence from the shackles of centuries of colonisation by the West—is all set to embrace the next big growth spurt, with many of the countries already being on an upward growth trajectory.

Despite the economic brunt of the global pandemic, South Asia is expected to achieve a 7.1 percent growth by 2022 as per the World Bank's recent South Asia Economic Focus, titled *Shifting Gears: Digitization and Services-Led Development*. As the report states, "India's economy, South Asia's largest, is expected to grow by 8.3 percent in the fiscal year 2021-22, aided by an increase in public investment and incentives to boost manufacturing. In Bangladesh, continued recovery in exports and consumption will help growth rates pick up to 6.4 percent in fiscal year 2021-22. In Maldives, GDP is projected to grow by 22.3 percent in 2021, as tourism numbers recover." Pakistan and Sri Lanka are also forecasted to experience growth during this period.

While the economic possibilities of the region remain highly promising, major socio-political challenges can stunt its growth in the long-run. Shrinking space for minorities is one such major hurdle that the region needs to overcome in order to realise its full potential. Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, and Afghanistan, along with neighbouring Myanmar, are all plagued by the malady of minority suppression—where people from various religious, ethnic, racial and marginalised backgrounds are finding themselves on increasingly shaky grounds; their rights being violated, and voices being smothered, by various actors.

While discrimination against minority communities has been institutionalised in most of these countries through laws, policies and guidelines, these communities continue to suffer at the hands of various actors, not always necessarily state-sponsored.

If we take a look at the condition of the minority communities at home, we would see an alarming increase in violence against them in the recent years. While the 2012 Ramu attacks, when 12 Buddhist temples and monasteries and 50 houses were destroyed, had shaken the roots of our communal harmony, it was not to be the last one of its kind. This was followed by episodes of communal violence in Nasimagar, Rangpur and Bholia in 2016, 2017 and 2019, respectively. Even this year, the Durga Puja celebrations were marred by communal violence that lasted for days, and spread across many parts of the country, leading to destruction of Hindu temples, houses and properties. What was supposed to have been an occasion to celebrate our communal harmony had turned into a nightmare for the people. And the constant failure of the state to bring to justice the culprits has only added to the belligerence of these criminals, who carry out such attacks with complete disregard for the laws, perhaps confident in the knowledge that the long arms of the law will never reach them.

However, it is not just the religious minorities who face persecution in Bangladesh. One should remember the 2016 attacks on the Santal community in Gaibandha's Gobindganj. The law enforcers, with the support of local ruling party leaders and their henchmen, opened fire on Santal men—killing three people—and torched their homes, leaving more than 2,500 families homeless. The incident has scarred the local Santal community. Of the affected Santal families, 1,500 are still living in fear of eviction, as they, along with some Bengali families, ancestors had entered the country after 1823. Later, in the 1974 constitution, only 134 "national races" were recognised, which did not include the Rohingya, who were treated as a non-indigenous minority. The Burma Citizenship Law of 1982 then stated that only children of the "national races" will be considered full citizens of the country. This was the final step in excluding the Rohingya from citizenship status.

The country also plans on pulling the plug on 1,000 madrasas. The worst perhaps was the forced cremation of Muslims who died of Covid, given that cremation is forbidden in Islam. Talking about policies and legalities, Pakistan has one of world's strictest blasphemy laws, second only to Iran, according to US Commission on International Religious Freedom. In the last three decades, 1,500 Pakistanis have been charged under these laws,



South Asian governments need to realise the importance of implementing religious and ethnic inclusion in order to achieve and sustain growth in all sectors. PHOTO: REUTERS

might be rendered homeless again as authorities are planning to set up an export processing zone where they now reside.

The situation is not so different in the backyard of our neighbour, India. Despite being home to about 200 million Muslims—one of the largest minority groups in the country—India is gradually deviating from its secular and pluralistic character that had been one of its pillars of strength for centuries. The unrest unleashed by the Modi government's hard-line approach against the Muslims—expanding the scope of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) from Assam to other parts of the country; pushing for the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and revoking special status of Kashmir through abolition of Article 370 of the Indian constitution—among various other measures have pushed the Indian Muslims to a tight spot where they will find little room to ask for their rights.

Once the NRC and CAA are fully implemented, many of the Muslims in India will find themselves in no man's land. These measures will effectively render them homeless and put them in an identity crisis.

Moreover, the recent attacks on Christian communities have left them feeling edgy and vulnerable. The controversy over the Indian government's refusal to renew license of Missionaries of Charity (MoC) under the Foreign Contributions Regulation (FCRA) Act, effectively limiting their funds, and the constant and baseless accusation against MoC of forced conversion, followed by subsequent threats of retribution are making the situation worse for the Christian population. The burning of Santa Clause effigies in many parts of the country, with the slogan "Santa Clause *murdabad*" during Christmas, is a sign of India's growing intolerance towards its minority communities, which in the long run could lead to increased religious tension in the country.

In predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, the Rohingya have been excluded from citizenship by successive governments. Especially after General Ne Win grabbed power in 1962, he systematically phased out Rohingyas from the citizenship law. Initially the constitution excluded those people from citizenship whose

some of them even Muslims. And as if legal measures were not enough, 70 people have been lynched by mobs since 1990 on accusations of sacrilegious acts. The recent to fall was a Sri Lankan man who had been killed by a mob based on the same accusations. And the government does little to prevent these incidents of lynching. The Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Shia Hazaras, among other minority communities, live in constant fear for their lives.

Instances of women and girls from minority communities getting abducted, raped, or converted and married to Muslim men are also very common in the country. In May 2020, a Hindu woman was sexually assaulted in a village in Sindh province. Her family was also attacked. This was revealed in a European Parliament

Later, over the decades, the Myanmar military has unleashed various ethnic cleansing and genocide operations to wipe out and drive out the Rohingyas from Myanmar. The result: the Rohingyas have been entrapped into a perpetual state of displacement, wandering from land to land, living off the generosity of others, with no place to return to or call home.

In Sri Lanka, the anti-minority orientation of the Rajapaksa brothers—President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa—is stoking communal tension and the policies being formulated are taking away from the rights of targeted minority groups. Muslims, Hindus and Christians, along with the Tamils, have been subjected to systemic discrimination because of their minority status, for decades. The 2019 Easter Bombings made the situation worse for Muslims, who have been treated as pariahs ever since.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a UK-based rights organisation, in a report titled "A Nation Divided: The state of freedom of religion or belief in Sri Lanka", suggested that the government was systematically discriminating against the Christians "through legal means, via orders to close or register their places of worship," referring to a 2008 circular that was issued requiring all religions to seek permission from the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs to register and construct new places of worship. While in 2018, the same ministry stated that it was only applicable for the Buddhist religious sites, it is still sometimes referred to in order to create pressure on minority groups.

According to the same report, the Hindu temples "are coming under threat in the north-east as they are being replaced by Buddhist temples, and the grounds on which the *kovils* [temples] stand are being claimed as Buddhist archaeological sites by the Archaeological Department."

The report also elaborated on how the government actors are working to "reduce the visibility of Islam through the destruction of mosques and restrictive stances on religious clothing." Earlier in April this year, the Sri Lankan cabinet approved a proposal to ban wearing burka in public places, citing terrorist threats.

*Shrinking space for minorities is one major hurdle that the region needs to overcome.*

report. In 2017, in Thar of Sindh province, a 14-year-old Hindu girl was abducted, converted into Islam and forced to marry a Muslim man, while her family was being held hostage.

In Afghanistan, the problems are multi-layered due the ethno-tribal construct of the nation and its turbulent political history. With various players coming to power over the decades, the tribes have witnessed highs and lows, at times exercising power, at times running away from the powers that be. However, one of the communities that has constantly been persecuted are the Hazaras, who had been the "target of mass killings and other serious human rights violations by Taliban forces in the 1990s. They have faced discrimination and abuse by successive Afghan governments going back over 100 years," as reported by Human Rights Watch.

In Nepal and Maldives, minority persecution is mostly focused on the t'religious lines. Particularly in Nepal, the Christians and Muslims among others, are often subjected to suppression based on their religious identities. The government passed a legislation in October 2017 that criminalises religious conversion. Even encouragement to convert is a criminal offense, with the punishment for the guilty parties including imprisonment for up to five years and fines amounting to USD 500.

In Maldives, where almost the entire population consists of Muslims—about 98 percent of the total population—there is very little space for other religions to have their say in national issues. And there are rifts even among the Muslim sects, with Sunni Islam being designated as the state religion and all the members of the government adhering to this sect. Non-Muslims are prevented from getting citizenship and religious exercises in public are prohibited for the minorities. And these are just some of the major problems faced by

the very small segments of religious minority communities in the country.

Bhutan, despite being one of the more peaceful nations in the region, has a notorious history of ethnic cleansing of the Lhotshampa (or, ethnic Nepalis) dating back to the late 1980s. More than 100,000 Lhotshampa have been displaced from Bhutan and have had resort to migration for survival.

This constant suppression of the minority communities across South Asia should be a cause of concern for the region and its governments. The scenario is completely in contradiction of the region's overall narrative and objective of inclusive growth.

While South Asia is one of the economically thriving regions of the world, such discords among the populations of the South Asian countries will act as a major hurdle in its quest for long-term prosperity. These unrests and conflicts, as a result of human rights violations of the minority groups, and targeted exclusion of certain communities from economic growth will dent the region's aspiration to become one of the economic powerhouses of the world.

The governments should rethink their growth strategy and assess the economic implication of these cases of minority persecution. The states need to realise that the minority communities have a major role to play in the economic growth of their countries. And unless all countries grow together, it will be difficult for the region to sustain its growth curve, because then there will invariably be factors that will pull the region backwards.

It is time for the South Asian leaders to rise above their individual agendas and work towards ensuring sustainable development for all, and this should be done in the spirit of the overarching SDG agenda to "Leave no one behind".

If we leave the minority communities behind, if we exclude them from our growth blueprint, neither will we be able to attain the SDGs, nor will we be able to prosper in the long run.

For the greater interest of the region and its people, the situation must be corrected now, and by all the states, under a common framework promoting inclusive prosperity.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is @tasneem\_tayeb

**ESSENTIAL DRUGS COMPANY LIMITED**

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Dhaka-1208

INTERNATIONAL TENDER NOTICE

EDCL invites **Two Envelope System** International Tender for Supply of Pharmaceutical Raw & Packing Material on C&F@ Dhaka By Air/Chittagong by Sea Basis:-

S.L No.	Tender No. Date	Name of the Item	Cost of Tender Schedule	Last date of Closing & opening
01.	IMP/RM/SEM/50/2021-2022 dated 30/12/2021	<b>Pharmaceutical Raw Materials: ( Specification as per tender schedule ):</b> 01. Glycerine BP 02. Chloramphenicol ( sterile Mic.) BP 03. Aspartame BP 04. Omeprazole Enteric Coated pellets ( Assay 22.05%) USP 05. Maize Starch BP 06. Metronidazole BP 07. Sodium Starch Glycolate BP	Tk. 2,500.00/set Equivalent to US\$ 29.00 Non-refundable	Closing : 20/01/2022 At 11.00AM Opening : 20/01/2022 at 11.15 AM
02.	IMP/RM/SEM/51/2021-2022 dated 30/12/2021	<b>Pharmaceutical Raw Materials: ( Specification as per tender schedule ):</b> 01. Ciprofloxacin Lactate INN 02. Lactic Acid BP 03. Film Coating Material White ( Wincoat WT-MP- 02005 or equivalent ) Ph. Gr 04. cefixime Trihydrate Micronised USP 05. Potassium Chloride BP 06. Metformin HCl BP	Tk. 1,500.00/set Equivalent to US\$ 17.00 Non-refundable	Closing : 25/01/2022 At 11.00AM Opening : 25/01/2022 at 11.15 AM
03.	IMP/RM/SEM/52/2021-2022 dated 30/12/2021	<b>Pharmaceutical Raw Materials: ( Specification as per tender schedule ):</b> 01. 100 ml White Glass Bottle 02. 32 mm Rubber Stopper ( Ready for Sterilization ) 03. 32 mm Alu. Seal Cap ( Green ) 04. 32 mm Alu. Seal Cap ( White )	Tk. 1,750.00/set Equivalent to US\$ 20.00 Non-refundable	Closing : 27/01/2022 At 11.00AM Opening : 27/01/2022 at 11.15 AM

Tender schedule will be sold from the Accounts Department of Essential Drugs Company Limited (EDCL), Dhaka on payment as stated above during office hours on all working days ( except Friday, Saturday and Govt. Holidays). No tender schedule will be sold on the opening date of the tender.

The Tender will be accompanied by an amount of Earnest Money in the form of Bank Draft/Pay order / Bank Guarantee from any schedule Bank of Bangladesh in favour of " Essential Drugs Company Ltd" without which the Tender will be considered as non-responsive.

EDCL authority reserves the right to accept or reject any or all tenders without assigning any reason whatsoever.

**N.B: This Information is also available at our Website: [www.edcl.gov.bd](http://www.edcl.gov.bd)**

**General Manager  
Procurement  
For : Managing Director.**

( 10 x 4 Col.)

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

1 Greedy gulps

6 Wound reminder

10 Wading bird

11 Yam or potato

13 Fill with joy

14 " - of Two Cities"

15 Lawyer's letters

16 Cobbler's tool

18 Diarist Anaïs

19 Stupid

22 2016 Olympics host

23 Valentine word

24 Strips for breakfast

27 Less coarse

28 Norway's capital

29 Decline

30 Easily offended

35 Scot's cap

36 Bauxite product

37 Bullfight cry

38 Nebraska city

40 Locker room need

42 Tin or tungsten

43 Decree

44 Cubicle fixture

45 Body shop challenges

**DOWN**

1 Bed cover

2 Cardiff residents

3 Baghdad native

4 Obtained

5 Enter with stealth

6 No longer fresh

7 Use scissors

8 Desert

9 Take over for

12 Provide

17 Question of identity

20 Sing like Bing

21 Straighten

24 Low point

25 Red-faced

26 Ecologist's concern

27 swooned

29 Go downhill

31 Celery serving

32 Bad kind of situation

33 Vote in

34 Shoulder muscles, for short

39 Owns

41 Poem of praise

WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

R	A	M	A	C	H	A	D
C	A	P	O	N	R	E	V
A	W	A	R	D	E	R	A
S	E	C	T	O	R	S	L
A	S	H	R	E	C	T	O
S	T	E	R	S	A	N	T
A	S	I	A	O	N	E	I
H	E	C	T	O	R	S	R
E	W	E	V	E	C	T	O
A	N	A	M	E	R	A	N
D	U	G	I	N	E	P	E
P	E	A	S	W	E	D	S