Poison Tree of Partition

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In 1953, my grandfather Maulvi Emdad Ali made a point to tell visitors to our Rankin Street home that it was not acquired through a "distress sale." A small *dhvaja-stambha* structure in the garden marked the home's pre-1947 provenance as a Hindu household. There was a residual stigma for new Muslim elites of East Pakistan about gaining property through the despair of departing Hindus. Our family patriarch wanted to mark himself as a fair purchaser of property—hence his additional references to having a British Indian Civil Service job *before* 1947.

Partition literature, from *Toba Tek Singh* (Saadat Hasan Manto, 1955) to *Vatan Aur Desh* (Yashpal Singh, 1960) to *Kalo Borof* (Mahmudul Haque, 1977), has circumnavigated dramatic changes in family fortunes during rupture and collapse (Sayeed Ferdous, 2022). In our encircled geography of intense land scarcity, it has been the property under your neighbour's feet, not the rituals in their temples or mosques, that have been the target of sudden acquisition. Riots, intimidating people into crossing borders or going into hiding were from India and West Pakistan) were trapped into the geographically inaccurate "Bihari" category and "left behind" by the new Pakistan state (Dina Siddiqi, 2013). The moment of independence that we commemorate was also accompanied by looting and occupation, this time of Urdu speakers' land (Seuty Sabur, 2020). In 1972, the "Bangladesh Vesting of Property and Assets Order" merged the abandoned property of those who had left for Pakistan with those who had left for India. This was further solidified in the "Vested and Non-Resident Property Act" of 1974. Thus, both Urdu speakers' and Hindu land could be targeted for takeover.

Back in 1965, the Pakistan state had also discovered another vulnerable population whose land could be used for the magic of "development"—the indigenous Adivasi people in southeast Bangladesh who depended on customary rights for land ownership. Supported by American engineering technology, the Kaptai Hydroelectric Dam was built in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, flooding Adivasi villages and the Chakma royal palace. The oral history of this event, a micro-scale "Nakba" for the Adivasi peoples, is recorded in Samari Chakma's *Bor Porong* (2018). The Adivasis saw their crisis as limited to the Pakistan state, but in 1972, they received a new system shock when the constitution of Bangladesh defined only "Bengalis" as the "people" of the nation. The first defiance of the new Bangladesh government was Manabendra Larma's remarks on the Parliament floor: "Under no definition or logic can a Chakma be a Bengali, or a Bengali be a Chakma" (his remarks also erased the many non-Chakma Adivasi peoples).

After 1975, the Chittagong Hill Tracts became the site of the Adivasi guerrilla war, led by the Shanti Bahini—met with force by the military and accompanied by Bengali settlers. The equations of 1971 were inverted when India allowed the Shanti Bahini to set up clandestine camps, repeating the Agartala scenario. The huge number of Adivasis who had crossed into India after 1965, and then again with dramatic force after 1976, was the Indian state's *raison d'etre* for interference, just as the tidal wave of Bengali refugees was in 1971. The occupation of non-majority populations' land has been a bipartisan, as well as a civilian-military project for 53 years, no matter what sweet cultural ceremonies are presented to visiting dignitaries. Even the popular slogan of "Tumi Ke? Ami Ke? Bangali, Bangali!" erases Adivasis and Urdu speakers, and privileges "the Bengali sense of victimhood" (Rahnuma Ahmed, 2010).

The saintly aura we invest in our people creates lethal blind spots. The desire to take by force from vulnerable populations exists in all people, and after rupture events, that is what stays in our memory as a collective stain, while the moments of courage and community get forgotten. The media fans the flames, but it is our denial of contradictory histories, and the continuance of unjust laws and practices, that creates the opportunity for hostile eyes. Bengali Hindus, Adivasi Paharis or plainland Indigenous dwellers, Urdu speakers, Ahmadiyyas, Shi'a—all vulnerable communities have faced our wrath, always twinned with a gimlet eye on their land. Underneath are laws with a seventy-five-year legacy, that facilitate "distress" transfer and theft of land. If India and Pakistan are Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" (1981), Bangladesh emerged as what I call "Midnight's Third Child" (Mohaiemen, 2023). Our independent nation-state has survived and grown despite setbacks and interference, but we are yet to escape the forever poison tree of 1947.

VISUAL: **NAEEM MOHAIEMEN**, RANKIN STREET 1953 (BLUEPRINTS), COURTESY OF EXPERIMENTER GALLERY.

the first steps in this process of land acquisition.

The Government of East Pakistan, after 1947, needed a set of laws to acquire property for accommodation of new government servants and setting up offices. "Requisition of Property Act" (Act XIII of 1948) gave the right to take over property "needful for purposes of the state." This flowed into the "East Bengal Evacuees Act" (1951). In 1964, new riots after the Hazrat Bal incident in Kashmir led to the "East Pakistan Disturbed Persons Rehabilitation Ordinance" (1964). This new regulation restricted the transfer of "immovable property of minority community" without permission of the authorities. This meant that any Bengali Hindu wishing to leave East Bengal for any reason would now face barriers to even the lawful sale of their property.

The 1965 Indo-Pak war ended after 17 days and left behind the poisonous "Enemy Property Order" (1965). This was matched by a reciprocal "Enemy Property Act" (1968) in India. Demonstrating a civilian-military joint project to continue expropriating land, after the pan-Pakistan uprisings of 1969 led to the lifting of military emergency, the government immediately passed the "Enemy Property (Continuance of Emergency Provisions) Ordinance" (1969). Again, following the 1971 liberation of Bangladesh, this law miraculously survived via the "Laws of Continuance Enforcement Order" (1971).

On December 17, 1971, a new enemy population was born, as the Urdu speakers of East Pakistan (former refugees and transplants

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Once I earn the minority tag, my worth is always less than another person who sees themselves as part of the majority.

VISUAL: **ALIZA HRIDULA**

I reject the minority tag. Here is why

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BISHAKHA DEVNATH

People from all backgrounds stood shoulder to shoulder supporting the students' anti-discrimination movement for the fall of autocracy, absolutism, and totalitarianism, that the just ousted government had established during its 15-year rule. However, as soon as celebrations began, those who stood united started seeking out enemies within; enemies who may look different, and may have different views about things other than the regime that they brought down together.

So, another chapter within a chapter began—where, on one side, celebration went on of the movement's success while, on the other, some people found themselves in another battle for their existence. In other words, some were subject to the very notion of discrimination that they had been up against. And they were labelled a minority.

According to the United Nations, minorities are groups of people who have either religion, language, or culture in common or a combination of those, but they comprise less than half of a country's population. As per the definition, I belong to a minority group. I was born a Hindu in Bangladesh, a country where more than 90 percent of the people adhere to Islam. Hindus make up only about eight percent of the 170 million people living in the country.

But let me be clear what the majority-minority dichotomy means to me. The minority label carries far more weight than just a number. It brings everything—one's hard work, identity, pride, social dignity, and self-esteem—down to nothing but that label; so much significance on the insignificant labelling of a person, a human life!

Once I earn the minority tag, my worth is always less than another person who sees themselves as part of the majority. The quantifiable image elicits a sense of helplessness, vulnerability, and a need for protection. That makes one meek, on the edge of getting down to one's knees for sympathy instead of fighting for rights, equality, and justice. If the approach becomes collective in nature, any community constituting less than 50 percent of a society tends to accept repression by those from the majority.

That's the reason why after each episode of arson, killing, and vandalism carried out against Hindus, Buddhists, or any other "minority" community in Bangladesh, victims have pleaded for support, scrambled to rebuild their lives, or fled the country. But they hardly summoned the courage to fight back and demand actions against the attackers. Bureaucrats and politicians make pledges to heal the wounds, but the repressed know well those are just hollow words. Over time, the absence of justice for attacks on the communities tears up threads of social harmony.

This time around though, I see people from the Hindu community take to the streets in the capital and in other district headquarters, raising their voices against the "reprisal" attacks on them after the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina-led government. The anger of the attackers has supposedly emanated from the predominant perception that the Hindus support the Awami League, and that Hasina had enjoyed all-out support of India, where Hindus are a majority.

These reasons are merely weaponised to justify communal hatred. It would be foolish to believe that Hindus in Bangladesh have any control over India's stance regarding Bangladesh. When it comes to supporting a political party, everyone should have the freedom to choose who they vote for. However, surmising that everyone belonging to a particular religion shares an identical political belief is nothing but preposterous.

The face of the minority keeps changing depending on national borders. The oppressors in Bangladesh become the oppressed in India. Muslims, who account for nearly 15 percent of India's population, are subject to communal attacks, including arson, looting, and vandalism of houses, shops, and mosques by Hindus. The majority, whoever they are, get provoked and emboldened by divisive political campaigns. In India, both Congress and the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party used political strategies along religious lines to come to power, even though secularism is enshrined in the constitution. The BJP's third consecutive term after its win this year is feared to consolidate further divisions between Hindus and Muslims in India.

The gathering on August 9 and 10 at the Shahbagh intersection calling for minority rights is probably the biggest of its kind in years, if not decades, in Bangladesh. They have put forth an eight-point demand. I, however, find myself opposing the demand for a minority protection commission and a separate ministry for minorities. When humanity is advancing toward equality, the minority label would drag us behind. Equal rights, respect, and justice are imperative for social and economic progress. Those who are small in number would not appear weak if we can sow seeds for an egalitarian society to take root.

If we look back at history, we would realise that it is always the weak who get the minority tag. The number does not count. During the time of serfdom, landlords and kings were few in numbers, yet they were ruling over vast swathes of land. Even today, the richest of the rich are in the top one percent across the globe. They are not called a minority.

The minority tag will only perpetuate violence and discrimination. It is something we need to forgo to forge a Bangladesh where I am no less because of my religious or cultural identity.

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PHOTO: **STAR**