

Politics of Indian propaganda regarding Bangladesh



Kallol Mustafa
is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics. He can be reached at kallol.mustafa@yahoo.com.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

Ever since the fall of the Bangladeshi dictator Sheikh Hasina in the student-citizen uprising of July-August, Indian news outlets and social media platforms have been spreading various types of disinformation about the persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh. The disinformation includes portraying attacks on Awami League (AL) leaders as attacks on Hindus, arson attacks on AL offices as burning of temples, spreading images of past attacks or fires as images of recent events etc.

According to an investigation by Rumor Scanner, a Bangladeshi fact checking organisation, as many as 49 Indian media outlets spread at least 13 false reports about Bangladesh between August 12 and December 5, 2024. Out of this, Republic Bangla has propagated a maximum of five rumours. The *Hindustan Times*, *Zee News*, and *Live Mint* each spread three false reports. Meanwhile, Republic, *India Today*, ABP Anand, and Aaj Tak each broadcasted two false reports. The remaining 41 media outlets spread one false report each.

The rumours spread by these Indian media, according to Rumor Scanner, included: a fake letter from Sheikh Hasina after her resignation; a video of a Muslim man falsely claimed as Hindu during a search for his son; false reports about Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus's health and location; baseless claims of withdrawal of bans on militant groups; arms smuggling via a ship from Pakistan; misrepresentation of lawyer Saiful Islam's murder; alleged ban on Indian TV channels; idol immersion in India misrepresented as a reaction to attacks on Hindu idols in Bangladesh; an alleged attack on a Shyamoli Paribahan bus from India; and false UK travel advisories for Bangladesh.

The political motive behind Indian propaganda on the allegations of minority persecution in Bangladesh can be understood by looking at the statistics of attacks on minorities during the previous Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina.

As many as 3,679 attacks on the Hindu community took place in the nine years, between January 2013 and September 2021, according to a compilation of data from the annual reports of the human-rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) during that period. The attacks included vandalism and setting fire to 559 houses and 442 shops and businesses of the Hindu community. At least 1,678 cases of vandalism and arson attacks on Hindu temples, idols and places of worship were also reported in the same period.

Recent ASK data shows the number of attacks on minorities in 2022 and 2023 was 12 and 22, respectively, and between January to July 2024, there were 28 such attacks. The attacks are random in nature, influenced by various local and national political and economic factors. For example, during the first six months of 2024 when Sheikh Hasina was in power, attacks on minorities in January, February and March were 10, seven and four, respectively, while incidents of attack in April, May and June were zero, three and three, respectively. It must be noted that news reports are one of the sources of ASK data.

After the current interim government assumed responsibility, there were 10 and 11 attacks on minorities in September and October 2024, respectively, based on ASK statistics. A year ago in September and October 2023, there were eight and three attacks. But three years ago, in just three days of October 2021, while Hasina was in power, 70 puja venues, 30 homes and 50 shops

were vandalised, torched and looted in different parts of the country. The Hindu community faced the highest number of attacks in 2014; as many as 761 Hindu homes, 193 businesses and 247 temples and places of worship were attacked that year.

Therefore, attacks on minority groups in Bangladesh have not started suddenly after the fall of

accused of patronising communal violence.

Now the question is, why have the Indian Hindutva groups, engaged in attacking and torturing the minority population in their own country because of communal hatred, suddenly become so agitated about the allegations of minority persecution in Bangladesh? What

Bangladesh, using the Bangladeshi seaports, hydropower transmission from their northeastern to the southern, western and northern regions, economic zones, businesses in the energy sector etc are now facing uncertainties. On the other hand, BJP and its affiliated organisations are carrying out anti-Bangladesh propaganda in a planned manner to

people of the minority community in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal. Many Muslim political leaders and social activists including Abu Bakr, Umar Khalid, Gullisha Fatima, Sharjeel Imam have been put in jail. By taking away OBC reservation, bringing waqf bill, making uniform civil rules, and digging up temples under mosques, many rights of minorities have been or are being taken away. Thousands of minority families have been displaced by bulldozers in Uttar Pradesh and Assam."

That's why, the APDR stated that the Indian government's statement about protecting the right of expression of minorities in Bangladesh is nothing but crocodile tears. The Modi government has no right to demand equal rights for minorities in other countries by turning minorities into second class citizens at home. This is just an attempt to spread political dominance over Bangladesh and create opportunities for unfair interference.

People of both countries should be aware and careful about this Hindutva agenda of the BJP and its affiliates. Meanwhile, communal attacks in Bangladesh must not be justified just because India's minority population is being attacked or because Hindus were attacked during Hasina's tenure in Bangladesh. People, political organisations and the government of post-Hasina Bangladesh have the responsibility to bring down the attacks on all religious and ethnic minorities, including Hindus, to zero, ensure that the attackers are brought to book and given exemplary punishment.

Furthermore, the government should take the initiative to debunk every kind of misinformation propagated by the Indian media and communicate it to both Indian and International media. For this, a special monitoring team can be formed to investigate each incident through local and foreign independent fact-checkers and bring out the real facts. Most importantly, unity and solidarity should be enhanced with the secular and democratic people and organisations of India who are fighting against the communal politics.



In 2016, religious zealots physically assaulted over 100 people and vandalised and looted over 100 homes and 17 temples of the Hindu community in Nasirnagar, Brahmanbaria.

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Sheikh Hasina. Over the years, various motives—from land grabbing to local political conflicts and even posts about religion on Facebook—led to attacks on the Hindu community and sometimes other marginalised groups in Bangladesh. Of course, these are very sad and unacceptable incidents and many Bangladeshis are fighting and protesting against these attacks, just like many Indians protest attacks on minorities in their country. However, an important difference between the situation in Bangladesh and India is that there is no communal political party in power in Bangladesh like India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which itself is

was their reaction when the Hindu community was regularly attacked during Sheikh Hasina's regime? Did they attack the High Commission of Bangladesh in India then as they recently did in Agartala? Did they stop the export of onions and potatoes to Bangladesh and urge the United Nations to send peacekeeping forces to Bangladesh?

In fact, all this is being done for political gain by creating communal tension. On the one hand, the Indian ruling class cannot accept the painful reality of losing dominance over Bangladesh after Hasina's fall. India's various strategic interests such as road, sea and rail transit through

portray themselves as the protectors of the Hindu community.

A statement issued by the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), a human rights organisation of West Bengal, on December 1 is important to understand the political motive behind this. The statement read "the Indian government or the BJP has no moral right to say anything about the oppression of minorities in Bangladesh. Minority Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists are being persecuted continuously in India. Dalits and tribal people are also suffering. Just a few days ago, the Uttar Pradesh police shot dead six

India's 'concern' over Bangladesh's internal affairs and beyond



Shamim A. Zahedy
is a journalist. He can be reached at szahedy@yahoo.com.

SHAMIM A. ZAHEDY

Imagine if Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had issued a note of concern regarding an incident in India's Uttar Pradesh last month, where at least four minority Muslims were gunned down allegedly by police during violence linked to a court-ordered survey of a centuries-old mosque. Some Hindu groups claim the mosque was built on the site of a destroyed temple. New Delhi would likely have reacted with the strongest possible language, accusing Dhaka of interfering in its internal affairs.

No, Bangladesh did not express its reaction at the disturbing incident that took place in its neighbouring country, ostensibly considering its internal affairs. Moreover, in the last 10 years, numerous incidents involving religious minorities, ranging from repression to killings, have occurred in India, with Bangladesh showing no diplomatic concern, perhaps.

Last month, India responded to the arrest of Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmachari in Bangladesh by expressing "deep concern," claiming it was part of a broader pattern of attacks on Hindus and other minorities in the country. Bangladesh, however, was forced to respond to India's statement with utter dismay, stating that it was its internal affair.

India's Ministry of External Affairs statement on Chinmoy Das rather displays a pattern that the Indian administration has adopted since the fall of Sheikh Hasina's autocratic regime on August 5, 2024 through a student-led mass uprising. Hasina, considered an all-weather ally of the Indian administration, was replaced

agreed and she has been staying there since.

Not only has India's Ministry of External Affairs raised such concerns, but Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has seized the opportunity to express so-called sympathy for Hindus in Bangladesh.

For instance, in late August, Modi tweeted about a conversation with US

remain under pressure to varying degrees around the world. This is not just a problem in Bangladesh and India. Has India's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), not been criticised for spreading its Hindu agenda since 2014, when it swept to power? Has Prime Minister Modi not been criticised for making Islamophobic remarks in 110 election

It is understood that public statements and rhetoric favouring majorities while undermining minorities are often made by ultranationalist politicians in every country to woo populist votes.

Regarding rights issues, while human rights are primarily a country's internal matter, they are also a concern for the international community, particularly in countries that have adopted or are in the process of adopting democratic systems.

Countries that sign international human rights treaties are bound to uphold, safeguard, and ensure the fulfilment of human rights. They are responsible for protecting individuals and groups from violations and for taking measures to prevent and address such abuses. If national legal systems fail to resolve these issues, individuals have the option to seek recourse through regional or international mechanisms.

Every country is under watch. Human Rights Watch in its 2024 report says, "The Indian government undermined its aspirations for global leadership as a rights-respecting democracy during 2023 with its persistent policies and practices that discriminate and stigmatise religious and other minorities."

Establishing a deeply rooted democracy can significantly help combat practices that stigmatise religious and other minorities. However, in recent years, the quality of Indian democracy has dwindled. US based non-profit Freedom House downgraded India's status from a free democracy to a "partially free democracy" in 2021, while the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute classified India as an "electoral autocracy." The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked India 53rd in its 2020 Democracy Index, which made it a "flawed democracy," citing factors such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the revocation of special status in

Indian-administered Kashmir. The EIU's 2023 Democracy Index put India in the 41st position, putting it in the flawed democracy category.

For Bangladesh, when it comes to restoring democracy, a golden prospect beckons in the aftermath of Sheikh Hasina's fall. The Hasina regime gradually ruined democracy through deeply flawed national elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024.

India itself is beset with numerous challenges related to democracy, human rights, and overall good governance. Therefore, it could work jointly with its neighbours to address these issues. In this context, reviving SAARC could serve as an effective launching pad, fostering cooperation and eradicating hostility in the region. Divisive and discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) are not going to help India either.

Can the European Union—a union of 27 nations that has accomplished political and economic integration through a shared currency and a cohesive foreign and security policy—act as a model for South Asia in fostering peace and democracy?

For a lasting relationship with Bangladesh, India must build a friendship based on equality and mutual respect—the policy that Dhaka has repeatedly sought after Prof Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel peace laureate, took over as the chief adviser of the interim government.

After being summoned by the Bangladesh authorities following a security breach by zealots at the Agartala mission, Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Pranay Verma told journalists that the wide-ranging and multifaceted Indo-Bangla relationship cannot be stuck on one issue.

It is time now for Dhaka to adopt a wait-and-see approach, as Verma stated, "We are ready to engage with Bangladesh's interim government and are committed to working together."



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

For a lasting relationship with Bangladesh, India must build a friendship based on equality and mutual respect.

in the aftermath of this upheaval following more than 15 years of rule, during which she dismantled Bangladesh's electoral system, allowed enforced disappearances—an act unimaginable in the democratic world—using security forces, and facilitated the laundering of money from banks through her cronies. Notably, after her regime collapsed like a house of cards, Hasina sought refuge in India, to which New Delhi

President Joe Biden, stating that they discussed Ukraine and "also talked about the situation in Bangladesh, emphasising the need for early restoration of normalcy and ensuring the safety and security of minorities, especially Hindus, in Bangladesh." However, the White House's readout of the same conversation made no mention of Bangladesh.

Yes, minorities—whether based on religion, language or ethnicity—

campaign speeches?

It is the responsibility of the majority to protect the minority. When it comes to protecting and caring for religious minorities, both Bangladesh and India—which share a 4,096 km border—should work together rather than engage in unnecessary bickering in public, especially since many people in both the countries have family ties across the border.