



BANGLADESH

The Hindus of Bangladesh Fear for Their Future

Bangladesh's minority Hindus are being attacked by Islamists who seem as preoccupied with land as they are with politics or religion

By [Joseph Allchin / Satkhira](#) | Jan. 14, 2014

Subhash Ghosh was away when, early on Dec. 13, dozens of activists from [Bangladesh's](#) largest Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), descended on the home in which generations of his family have lived. They paid particular attention to his valuables, smashing TVs and looting gold. They gave the same treatment to the home's Hindu shrine. Then they torched the property.

On Jan. 5, Bangladesh concluded what many judge to have been the country's most violent election to date. But in the rural Satkhira district something much more substantial than ballot papers is at stake. Here, minority Hindus are targeted for their land.



Joseph Allchin

Subhash Ghosh, back, and his brother stand in the ruins of their family home in Satkhira, Bangladesh. The home was razed by Islamists seeking to drive minority Hindus from their holdings

“When anything happens, Hindus get attacked in Bangladesh,” explains Ghosh, 63, standing in the verdant greensward at the back of his house. Even if it weren't ruined, he would be too scared to live in it. “They came at around 9:30 and suddenly set fire to the building with petrol bombs and gunpowder,” he explains.

The district of Satkhira lies only a few miles from the Indian border and just north of the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans. It is spliced by creeks and tributaries that form the final reaches of the Ganges riverine plain. With a large Hindu minority, this area has seen some of Bangladesh's worst violence over the past year. Much of that violence is down to land — or rather its scarcity.

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With a population in excess of 160 million crammed into less than 148,000 sq km, Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries. To make matters worse, almost the entire country lies in a floodplain, with lives, farms and crops constantly hanging in the balance. The pressure on land is enormous.

“When we say it's just political, it legitimizes the violence,” explains Jyotrimoy Barua, a Supreme Court lawyer in the capital Dhaka. “Most of the people's houses they are burning are [those of the] poor. If you burn their house, they will leave the country, and you get their land.”



Ghosh, who fought for Bangladesh's independence from [Pakistan](#) in 1971, is determined not to give his enemies that satisfaction. "If we leave the country, then everybody will take our property," he says. "I cannot leave and be a rickshaw puller in [India](#) like a coward."

In Satkhira's isolated villages, however, there is palpable fear. Ghosh's sons, like many Hindu children, can no longer go to school. When we visit a Hindu community, dozens emerge out of the mist and huddle around us, explaining how they are unable to travel the small rural lanes alone for fear of attacks by Islamists. A local journalist we are traveling with receives threatening calls from an Islamist leader.

In parts of Satkhira, the Islamists are a law unto themselves. The village of Agordari lies just a few miles from Satkhira's main town, but the police dare not visit. Locals call it "East Pakistan," run as it now is by the JI, which supported Pakistan in the 1971 war. The authorities are trying to restore order. "People didn't come out of their houses, no vehicles, no people, no nothing, like a graveyard," is how the new chief of police for the district, Chowdhury Monzirul Kabir, describes the atmosphere after a recent crackdown that saw 90 arrests. But fear of the Islamists persists.

There clearly is a sectarian basis to attacks on Hindus. Bangladesh's ruling Awami League (AL) was voted into power in 2009 on the strength of its promise to try pro-Pakistan figures for atrocities committed during the 1971 war, and violence often accompanies attempts to mete out justice to war criminals. The hanging of JI leader Abdul Quader Mollah, on Dec. 12 last year, preceded the attack on Ghosh's house.

However, the sectarian issue is exacerbated by intense competition for usable land. After the monsoon of 2011, tens of thousands of Satkhira's small holdings — almost half the homes in the district — were ruined by waterlogging, which occurs when groundwater saturates the soil and makes agriculture extremely difficult or impossible.

The violence isn't just perpetrated by JI. In other provinces, opportunistic AL leaders have been accused of using divisive communal sentiments to enrich themselves. "In some constituencies, it's Awami League," says the lawyer Barua. Both the AL and JI, he says, "are tussling from the same group of voters — if anyone loses, he blames the Hindus."