



Religious freedom , a gateway to fundamental rights

Background

Freedom of religion or belief generally has a wide interpretation that covers traditional religions or faiths but also non-religious persuasions. Typically, international instruments strive to protect all kinds of religions, beliefs or persuasions.

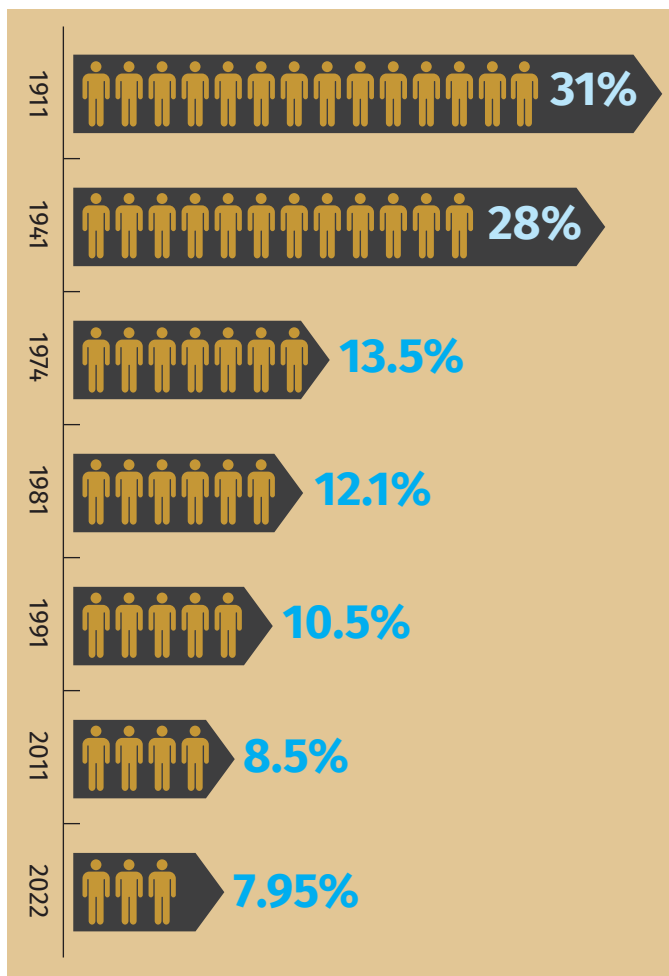
In short, however, it can be said to mean the fundamental human right that allows individuals to believe and practice whatever religion they choose, or to not follow any religion at all. Religious freedom (which also includes freedom of belief) is enshrined in many of the world's legal systems and international agreements.

According to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." The article continues to state this right includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief. The declaration further reads that it also includes the "freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance". A general comment of the UN Human Rights Committee notes that religious freedom also includes the right to neither profess a religion nor practice one.

In Bangladesh, this freedom is protected as one of the fundamental rights under article 41 of the constitution, which states, "every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion". The same article of the constitution further states that "every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions". The constitution prohibits pupils of one religion to be required to attend religious instruction of another religion in schools.

There are a host of UN resolutions and declarations that also protect these rights. More notable of these include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 18), European Convention on Human Rights (article 9), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966 requires parties to respect the civil and political rights of individuals including freedom of religion. A host of other UN declarations and resolutions include religious freedom and recognise freedom from coercion and freedom to manifest one's belief of religion. These include Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Convention relating

Hindus in Bangladesh (as percentage of population)



to the Status of Stateless Persons, Convention against Discrimination in Education, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Rationale

Freedom of religion or belief is important, firstly because it is a basic human right. It is a key element of the right to freedom of expression, speech and thought. Everyone should be able to express their beliefs openly and without fear. Secondly, it is essential for ensuring social cohesion and preventing conflict. It allows people of different faiths to live side by side without discrimination or violence.

Discrimination against religious communities or those with a different belief, like all forms of discrimination, causes pain, creates rift and fosters a climate of intolerance. It gives rise to fear and stigmatization as well.

The promotion and protection of human rights, including religious freedom, is important for people to be content and lead meaningful lives. It is this freedom, that leads to other freedoms like freedom of expression or freedom of association.

However, freedom of religion or belief is not absolute. It must be balanced against other rights and freedoms, such as the rights of others not to be subjected to discrimination or proselytization. It is also important to remember that freedom of religion or belief does not extend to acts that would cause harm to others. Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right that is essential for a peaceful and tolerant society that must be protected and respected by everyone.

Context

As mentioned previously, freedom of religion or belief can be said to be a 'gateway' freedom since it leads to other freedoms like freedom of speech or thought, people's freedom to movement and thereby women's freedom to choose and decide for themselves. This freedom can potentially lead not just to social cohesion but also women's empowerment. The freedom of religion and belief is as inalienable as any other and thus a very core element of basic human right that requires steadfast safeguarding, which is a collective responsibility of the citizens as well as the government.

There is no definitive study to ascertain freedom of religion or belief across the world. However, according to a 2018 report from the Pew Research Center, about three-quarters of the world's population (74%) live in countries where freedom of religion is either restricted or outright prohibited. That same report found that Muslims are the most likely religious group to face restrictions, with 87% of Muslims living in countries with high or very high restrictions on religious freedom. Christians are the next most likely group to face restrictions, with 70% Christians living in countries with high or very high restrictions on religious freedom.

Although Bangladesh constitution recognises the right of religious freedom, expression and thought, both government restrictions and social hostilities are shown to have increased over the last decade in global studies. That trend is not entirely inconsistent with the rising instances of religious extremism in Bangladesh. To be fair, though, Bangladesh was no stranger to religious extremism even before it emerged out of a liberation war on 1971. Despite the government's effort to uphold secularism, violence against religious minorities, social hostilities and acts of violent extremism have contributed to eroding religious freedom.

The constitution of Bangladesh ensures its citizens' freedom of religion. All the citizens of the country have the liberty to practise their own religions. Despite their differences of religious backgrounds, they have equal rights. The "Freedom of Religion" discourages any kind of discrimination based on religion.

Citizens have the constitutional right to practise their religion freely and it is crucial to ensure this right. For years, MJF has been working devotedly with a view to ensuring "Freedom of Religion" in Bangladesh. This policy brief lays out the ground reality of religious freedom in Bangladesh and presents findings related to Bangladesh's current status and makes recommendations to reduce existing religious extremism that will direct the country towards being part of the global compact to not only ensure religious freedom but also promote diversity and tolerance.

Historical population trends are also consistent with the periods of social strife, hostilities against minorities and rising intolerance. Bangladesh has typically been home to a large number of Hindus who constitute the largest religious minority. Hindus accounted for 31 percent of the population in 1911 but have been on the decline since then. In 1941, Hindus were 28 percent and 13.5 percent in 1974, which decreased to 12.1 percent in 1981 and to 10.5 percent in 1991. This religious groups accounts for just 7.95 percent according to the latest census, down from 8.5 percent in 2011. Currently, the other minorities include 0.61 percent Buddhists and 0.30 percent Christians.

What can you do?



Government

- Education reform
- Positive discrimination
- Legal reform
- Social and cultural programme



Civil society

- Awareness raising activities
- Advocacy for legal reform
- Promotion of dialogue



Media

- Advocacy for tolerance and secularism
- Fact-checking
- Critical reporting on religious fanaticism
- Strong vigilance on hate mongering



Youth

- Participate in social and cultural activities
- Increase interfaith dialogue
- Engage in community building
- Embrace inclusivity

Findings

- Social media platforms have become tools of spreading hatred against other religions
- Local leaders and influential people often lead vandalism at places of worship of religious minorities
- Spreaders of hatred against religious minorities are often unaware of their own religion
- Dissent is often socially unwelcome
- University graduates are proven to be more tolerant
- Fanaticism mostly festers away from urban areas
- Social and political instability have been found to contribute to religious intolerance
- Economic inequality is another factor that is endemic to lacking religious freedom

Recommendations

Government

Education can be the most potent weapon to strengthen freedom of religion and belief. Textbooks of the primary and secondary schools should be modified with care to include stories and anecdotes of different religions and cultures. This effort should not be limited to religious textbooks. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) can be a tool towards a more tolerant youth and stronger religious freedom. While certain legal reforms may be required, there should be a whole-hearted drive to restore the genuine secular spirit of the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh.

Legal reforms should be extended to ensure effective positive discrimination so that the marginalised sections and religious minorities or those with different beliefs may be prioritised through quotas and special programmes.

Places of worship must be protected while local leaders and influential people should be warned that no one will be spared if they are found guilty of vandalism against religious minorities. There must be a culture of intolerance towards such criminals.

Government sponsored programmes to consistently promote social and cultural activities across the country encouraging participation of all religious groups to foster harmony, friendship and tolerance.

Civil society

Awareness raising campaigns among the youth should be another means towards stronger religious freedom. Youth groups representing different religions and non-religious beliefs should be encouraged to interact together to understand each other and be able to feel the negative impacts of any kind of discrimination.

The civil society must lobby for legal reforms and advocate appropriate laws wherever needed to curb religious fanaticism and discrimination. On the other hand, the civil society can initiate programmes to encourage tolerance and religious harmony so as to strengthen religious freedom.

Inter-faith dialogues have proven to increase empathy, understanding and awareness. This eventually leads to respect for other beliefs and religion.

Media

The media establishment must play an active role in advocating tolerance and secularism in its news coverage and commentary. There should be strong editorial guidelines to report on religious fanaticism critically and hold those fostering extremism to account.

The media outlets must become vigilant about hate mongering and keep an eye out on fundamentalist or fanatical platforms that exploit religious divide and report accordingly so as to inform the public. Lastly, but certainly not the least, the media establishment must proactively dispel rumours with proper fact-checking to ascertain actual spreaders of rumours giving rise to religious tension.

Youth

As one of the most vulnerable groups who suffer due to the absence of religious freedom, the youth should firstly become more aware through interaction, inter-faith dialogue and socio-cultural activities.

The youth groups can themselves become catalysts for stronger freedom of religion or belief through campaigns against religious extremism. They can play a more constructive role by becoming fact-checkers themselves. There can be special sessions as part of ICT instruction on the means to ascertain facts and prevent rumours from spreading. This can be done with basic fact-checking skills, especially on social media where the youth are most active.

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