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Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 1988

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Pakistan's Troubled Hindus Hope for Tolerant New Era

On August 17th, a bizarre plane crash took the life of Pakistan's 64-year-old Islamic military dictator General Zia, throwing most Muslims into a period of mourning. Males attended his lavish state funeral, and the womenfolk were allowed to wail at a distance. But for the country's one million (one percent) Hindus, Zia's passing did not bring tears.

With political experts unanimously predicting democracy in some form for Pakistan, Hindus see their best future in the hands of leading presidential contender Benazir Bhutto, 35-year-old daughter of once Prime Minister Ali Bhutto. Recently married and now pregnant, she is determined to win her country's first open elections in November. Oxford, Radcliffe and Harvard educated, this politically savvy, cosmopolitan Muslim woman promises parliamentary democracy, a non-Koranic judiciary, free press and protection of human rights.

Others are less optimistic. Avid chronicler of all Hindu/Muslim issues and Houston engineer Arvind Ghosh feels, "They will never let a woman be president. Zia's death doesn't change much for the Hindus in Pakistan. Betrayed by their political and religious leaders now in India, our brothers and sisters in Pakistan face slow but sure annihilation or Moslem assimilation."

Those Hindus who live today in this fervid Islamic land of mosques and simple villages, are the few who failed to flee to India when it was partitioned in 1947 and Pakistan was set up as a Muslim homeland. While eight million Hindus made it successful across the new border, another eight million Moslems left their homes in India and crossed into new Pakistan. In the chaotic criss-crossing of these two armies of human souls, 200,000 Hindus and Moslems died - tragic victims of religious hatred.

Several Hindus who have fled or recently visited postpartition theocratic Pakistan, explained to Hinduism Today that the Hindu in Pakistan was made a pariah by the Muslim majority, called a kafir (heathen), publicly and privately bullied and abused. While the wealthier Hindus who stayed have niched out a somber, almost hidden, merchant's life in the port city of Karachi, the lower castes have been forced into the most menial job strata. Most of the Hindu temples were abandoned by the priests, who before fleeing to India, threw the murthis into the Sind river so Muslims could not desecrate them. For forty years, Muslim demolition gangs reduced thousands of gopurams to rubble, with unofficial government sanction. The Hindus' already frail social/cultural infrastructure slowly collapsed.

General Zia took rule of Pakistan by force in 1977, suspended the Constitution and established martial law. For 11 years this barrel-chested, devout Muslim single-mindedly tried to mold Pakistan into a 100% Islamic country. Public Hindu worship was outlawed, though permitted inside the home if it was inaudible and not visible to a Muslim. Hindu women were required to dress like Muslim women, completely covering themselves with the chador and obaya. Thousands of Hindus, broken in spirit, were converted to Islam whence they are garlanded with new economic privilege and social equality.

Hindus were not the only minority to feel the sting of Zia's Islamic fundamentalist stick. Minority Muslim sects were persistently persecuted and women's few rights further dwindled. A new Koranic law abolished the civil "family" law that required a husband to obtain his wife's permission before taking another wife.

While a Bhutto-led democracy would not solve the Hindus' problem of being an isolated minority trapped in Moslem land, Hindus clearly appreciate that she has breathed the freedoms of the West and tasted persecution first-hand - her father was hung by Zia.

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