Hindus Flee Bangladesh
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## Adoption of Islam as State Religion Prompts Exodus

Sketchy and conflicting reports continue to come in from the Indian state of West Bengal claiming that hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of Hindu refugees are streaming into India, victims of persecution by Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh. This is not just an increase in the usual flow of illegal immigrants into India since Bangladesh's independence in 1971. That group, now numbering 100,000, is mostly Muslim laborers in search of work. The new immigrants are Hindus fleeing good jobs and ancestral land to save their lives in the tumultuous wake of the 1988 constitutional amendment declaring Islam the "state religion" of Bangladesh (pop. 85 million, 86% Muslim).

The world's Hindus have appealed to India to act, but official recognition that there even is a problem only came with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's statement on January 18th that the flow of Hindus has grown since the declaration and that, "many were victims of religious intolerance."

The Indian press is reporting horror stories such as that of Sailendra Roy who fled his home and successful business in Bagerhat district. Roy told reporters, "For Hindus in Bangladesh, there is no law and order. Fundamentalist groups like the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Al Badar Muslim have unleashed a reign of terror to drive us Hindus out of Bangladesh." Another refugee. Advocate Chittaranjan Medha, left behind a successful law practice because local police had launched a massive drive against "Hindu secessionists," according to Indian Worldwide. The property of Hindus who flee the country can be seized under Bangladesh's "enemy property" law. Hence, Hindus who leave do so with little chance of ever seeing their homes again.

The Bengali newspaper, Bartaman Patrika, told other stories from the refugee camps in West Bengal. Khagendra Nath Ray, 45, said, "No one would believe my accounts of the nature and magnitude of molestation of Hindu women that is going

on in Bangladesh today. The Moslem rowdies have taken over my land and home by force and there is no redress to be obtained from the authorities. I had no way but to leave my home in Bangladesh in order to survive." Ashwini Kumar Ray, 31, accused "Hindu young men are imprisoned without charges. Oftentimes, they are murdered inside the jails." Ranjit Biswas once lived in Chararampur in Magur district with his wife and six children. He left "to protect my wife and daughter." He said, "I am a poor cultivator. They took over my small plot of land and then threatened to harm my family."

The exodus has brought a new business to the Hindu areas-agents who arrange for a family's escape across the border. The going rate per person is US $19.25 (three month's wages), with extra charges for baggage. Trucks and buses periodically pick up the refugees and drop them at the border at dark. They sneak across when the border guards are not looking and run into India, usually ending up with relatives or at one of several private refugee camps set up in West Bengal.

A Bangladesh government spokesman denied the reports of a Hindu exodus, calling them "incorrect and baseless." The government also denies that there is any harassment and says the whole matter is an attempt by opposition and minority leaders to invent problems.

Bangladesh's Hindus are caught in a complex situation. Not all the country's Muslims are behind the declaration of an Islamic state. The opposition is particularly opposed to the imposition of Sharia laws, such as the enforced veiling of women in public. The minority Hindus, Christians and Buddhists have aligned with the opposition Muslims, invoking the wrath of the fundamentalist Muslim organizations such as Jamaat-i-Islami. Clashes between the Muslim groups have led to many deaths already.

The most recent development is the call by radical Bangladesh Hindus for the formation of "Bangabhumi," a new country comprised of one-third of the present territory of Bangladesh. Three competing organizations claim the support of Bangladesh's Hindus: the Nikhil Banga Nagarik Sangha (NBNS), the Bangladesh Liberation Organization (BLO) and the Liberation Tigers of Bangladesh (LTB). LTB Vice President Anil Krishna Mullick said, "We have become second-class citizens in Bangladesh since Ershad made it an Islamic state. If the Muslims could ask for a separate homeland in 1947, then why can't we demand the same today?" Already NBNS chief Partha Smanta has announced, "On March 25, 1989, the Banga Sena

(army) will jump across the borders and emancipate Bangabhumi "

What obviously frustrates the Bengali people in Bangladesh, India and America is the near total lack of attention the world is paying to their problems. The Palestine situation involving only 1.6 million Palestinian continually occupies both the world's press and diplomatic corps. Unless the world community quickly turns its attention to the situation in Bangladesh, we may see another catastrophic "war of liberation" such as has laid waste to Ireland, Cyprus, Lebanon, Palestine, the Punjab and northern Sri Lanka