

## Communal Harmony and Buddhism: Perspective Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Bangladesh is a country of multiple religious groups. Major religious communities living in Bangladesh are Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. History provides huge amount of evidences that communal harmony has been prevailing in Bangladesh throughout the time. But a recent atrocious and despicable assault in Ramu, Ukiya, Teknaf and Patiya in the midnight of 29 September 2012 that burnt down the age-old Buddhist temples and villages disturbed this peaceful living and questioned and endangered the formerly harmonious co-existence. Though the Hindus and ethnic minorities have encountered a number of violent attacks it was completely

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unknown regarding the Buddhists until 29 September 2012. This very first, unexpected and abrupt (though well planned) attack has raised a multitude of questions not only among the people and scholars of the Buddhist community but also among other national and international communities.

Many questions were raised regarding the position of the government on the incident, because of its handling of the situation. Firstly, the two biggest political alliances were blaming each other of carrying out the attack. But the analysis proves that people of both the political groups were involved. A great number of recently moved Rohingyas also had joined the conflict. The administrative force was completely silent even though they were informed in time. In fact, the attack continued the next day, covering a larger area. Afterwards, different political leaders came to visit the affected areas. Different committees were formed to investigate the issue, but they did not go far from just throwing mud at each other. Within the ten months' time all the temples were rebuilt by the government itself.

Now several questions may be raised regarding the issue. Some think that because its power is going to end in one-year time, the government secretly planned the attack and handled it swiftly by rebuilding the temples to show to the international communities that it should come again in the power. Others think it is a plan of the opposite party to create chaos in the country before the election, so that people become disgusted with the government and elect them. But involvement of political parties makes the situation complex. Moreover, the contemporary communal violence in neighboring country such as Burma makes it even more complex. So, we understand that the issue is connected to politics, religions, ethnicity and even economics.

In this essay I shall examine the incident as an individual from the minority community. I shall examine if it is merely a communal problem or there is something else beneath the surface occurrence. And I shall discuss the Buddhists perspectives in building a society in which people of different communities can live in peace and harmony.

## Introduction

More than a year has elapsed since the incident took place. During this period of time much has been written on the issue, a huge amount of investigation, analysis, research, and experiments have been done that have undoubtedly proved that the attack on the Buddhist community in Ramu was not due to enmity and religious discord between the communities rather it was premeditated and well organized. But some questions still remain unanswered.

The place where I was born has Muslim families all around except the nine Buddhist families in our area. Since my childhood I have seen the intimacy prevailing between the communities. I saw my father going to work along with his Muslim co-workers. On the social occasions like wedding ceremony and other festivals the Muslims were invited and vice versa. I had a lot of Muslim friends in my school, college and university and still have many. In my childhood we used to play together. In time of danger, people of both communities help each other wholeheartedly. My parents still tell me of a Muslim village doctor who treated me when I got ill at an early age. He passed the whole night at our home without sleeping and left, without demanding money, in the morning only when I moved my body. We hear from our parents and grandparents that during the war of 1971 many Muslim men and women took refuge in our houses to save their lives. Such is the harmonious coexistence prevalent across the country. The question is why this peaceful coexistence got disturbed all of a sudden?

**Causes:** The probable causes as came out through investigation can be categorized as following:

### Apparent causes

#### *Disgrace of Islam*

News was circulated that a Buddhist man named Uttam Barua who was tagged in a photo on his Facebook wall dishonoring the Prophet of Islam. After the spread of this news people started gathering, uttering slogans against the Buddhists in the evening

and the attack took place at midnight. Referring to The Daily Star Sushmita S Preetha writes: “the said anti-Islam picture in Uttam Barua’s profile page was actually photoshopped to make-it seem as if the fabricated group “Insult Allah” had shared the image with Uttam”.<sup>1</sup> Another investigation says that it is not “Insult Allah” who shared the picture with Uttam. It was made to look like the group did it. “Somebody or a group had taken a screenshot of Uttam Barua’s facebook profile page, cut out the address of Anti-Islam website “Insult Allah” and pasted it on the address bar visible in the image.”<sup>2</sup> Two Muslim men named Omar Faruk and his friend Abdul Muktedir who were alleged in doctoring the photo and spreading it were detained before the attack had taken place. Now if we look into the matter, it becomes clear that the whole fact was orchestrated. The Facebook photo was just an issue. The speedy spread of the desecrated image of the Prophet of Islam, getting the people assembled in a very short time, preparations for the attack, participation of the outsiders attest the preplanning and well thought out act. All who visited the place asserted that this was a premeditated act. Quoting the then Home Minister M K Alamgir Kaberi Gayen says it was a “premeditated and deliberate act of communal violence against the minority”<sup>3</sup>, in the same article she also quotes Professor Mizanur Rahman, Chairman of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) who denying the Facebook photo as the cause of violence affirms the attack was “premeditated, planned and well-organized”. Farheen Khan opines that “the entire narrative of the ‘discovery’ of the photo, to its speedy ‘dissemination’ of enraged youths and then the ‘mobilizing’ and arming of miscreants is vastly problematic from the outset. The photo was strategically utilized to incite the mob to attack.”<sup>4</sup> Besides the team of the opposition party who went to visit the attacked area also commented the same and so did all who visited the place. But the question who were behind it, still remained unanswered.

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1. Preetha, Sushmita S., *The Flames May Be Long Gone*, (October 19, 2012).
  2. Manik, Julfikar Ali, *Attack On Buddhists A devil's design*, (October 14, 2012).
  3. Gayen, Kaberi, *A Known Compromise, A Known Darkness: ‘Ramu-nisation’ of Bangladesh*, (November 2012).
  4. Khan, *Social justice: An Unfulfilled Dream*.

### ***Rohingya issue***

There is another assumption that this violence took place in consequence of the attack against the Rohingyas by the Buddhist in Myanmar. The incidents happened in reaction to what happened in Myanmar.”<sup>5</sup> “The Rohingyas and their sympathies are responsible for it; who with the assistance of international bodies and organization hatched and materialized this as a deep-rooted conspiracy.”<sup>6</sup> Participation of some Rohingyas in Ramu occurrence verifies the statement. But the number of Rohingyas is much less than that of our native people. These two occurrences might have some connection due to the nearness of the conflicting regions, Arakan and Cox’s bazar.

### ***Political interest***

As reported in the media, local political leaders and activists belonging to all mainstream political parties such as Awami League, the ruling parties, BNP, the then main opposition, Jamaat E Islami, the major ally of the opposition, were directly and indirectly involved in the vandalism. Among them were local leaders of different organs of Awami league, MP of BNP and leaders of its student wing, UP Chairman of Jammam E Islami. While some gave inciting speeches against Buddhists, some others led procession; some directly participated in the attack. Besides, teachers and students of local madrassas also joined the attack. Even the president of Ramu Press Club was seen in a rally<sup>7</sup> and the OC of the local police station delivered provoking speech on the stage of a rally<sup>8</sup>. When these leaders of the people should have played role in pacifying the situation and safeguard law and order, safety and security, they did the opposite.

After the incident, the two main political parties blamed each other. Even the two chiefs of Awami league and BNP joined this blame game.

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5. Choudhury, Abdul Mannan, *Ramu Incidence Say 'No' to blame game*, (October 22, 2012).

6. Ibid.

7. Gayen, Kaberi, *A Known Compromise, A Known Darkness: 'Ramu-nisation' of Bangladesh*, (November 2012).

8. Ibid.

This blame game is nothing new in our politics. They try to utilize every incident for their political purpose. If there is any evidence of anybody's involvement in this act it should be presented in the media. But it didn't happen. The OC was fired immediately and a lot of suspects were arrested. But nothing has been discovered about the masterminds. The question arises while all the political party men form in a knot in the attack, accusing each other instead of trying to unearth the truth. Some are saying this attack was carried out by the fundamentalists or the extremists. Does it mean that all of them have the common purpose behind the attack and now they are blaming each other in order to divert people's attention and keep the truth buried?

### ***Inaction of the law enforcing agencies***

It is said that the law enforcing agencies failed to provide necessary protection to Buddhists. If it is a pre-meditated act, our intelligence branch must have information about the planning and preparations. The extent of destruction and materials used in the act prove that it is not a few hour preparations. Besides, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Army cantonment, Police Station, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), National Security Intelligence (NSI) and Special Branch (SB) all are at minutes distance from the attacked areas. It is their duty and responsibility to gather information and stop any unexpected occurrence for what they are paid. They failed. Lack of communication is also conspicuous. NHRC chairman Professor Mizanur Rahman said: "our intelligence branch knew everything about this pre-planned and premeditated violence." It is also reported in the newspapers that the law enforcing agencies were informed before the attack had taken place but took no measure. "Though some locals informed the police, the police did not take the matter seriously and said everything is going to be okay."<sup>9</sup> Another writer says: "Particularly inexplicable and dubious appears to be the role of the police. Despite being tipped off with the news of the brewing storm, the lack of police initiative was utterly inexplicable. Indeed, as we are now aware, residents had appealed to Ramu police chief to take preventive measures as tension was building from

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9. Mannan, Abdul, *Lord Buddha Should Never Cry*, (October 6, 2012).

September 29, but it was largely ignored.”<sup>10</sup> Another report says the intelligence branch warned the officers of the district police to keep alert. But the police remained inactive when the violence took place.<sup>11</sup> It is evident that this inaction of the police was intentional. Why?

## **Inherent cause**

### ***Contemporary International issues (inter-imperialist conflict)***

Every incident is connected with each other and hence the whole occurrences of the world. Thus every separate occurrence is the part of the whole occurrences of the world. If it is so the occurrence in Ramu is also not an isolated incident. It is also linked with its surrounding happenings and thus with the whole world. If we consider it all, the causes mentioned earlier are also connected with each other and with the whole.

There is another analysis that intends to show the occurrence in the Cox’s Bazar as one of the consequences of ‘inter-imperialist conflict’, conflict among the world super powers. This conflict is among the capitalist and imperialist countries and their organizations such as the USA, European Union led by Germany and France and Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) led by Russia and China. The causes are mainly to occupy market and spread dominance and influence. After the fall of the USSR as socialist country in 1991, the USA appears as the sole ‘superpower’ in the world. Since then the USA continues its supremacy all over the world. But it has been challenged by the newly emerging super powers in recent times. After the Revolution in 1949 led by Mao Tse Thong, China has undergone a revolutionary economic change and appeared as a capitalist country. Due to fast growing financial development, it is going to arise as an imperialist country. Now China is the 2<sup>nd</sup> economy in the world. While the USA and European Union and other imperialist countries are sliding into recession, China’s surplus is constantly increasing. The experts opine

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10. *Ramu Massacre a Blot on Nation’s Conscience*, Published as the Editorial in ‘The Daily Star’, on October 3, 2012, URL: <http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=252151>, accessed on December 8, 2013.

11. Kaler Kantho, Dhaka, October 2, 2012.

that within a few decades China would replace the USA as the sole superpower. That's why it becomes a huge headache to the western giants. It is worth mentioning that power increases in proportion to capital. In order to export and invest capital and commodities, competition and conflict continue regarding occupying market and extending dominance and influence over the least developed countries. This is the root cause of conflict among the imperialist countries.

The importance of Bangladesh to the capitalist and imperialist countries is due to its geo-political and military significance. Being a country located by the Bay of Bengal adjoining the Strait of Malacca that connected the Pacific and Indian Ocean and being the land bridge of the south and southeastern Asia, Bangladesh is getting more and more importance among the capitalist and imperialist countries. Emergence of china as a new economic power and its fast advancement by forming an alliance with Russia named Shanghai Co-operative Organization (SCO) throws new challenge to the western imperialist countries. In order to check and stop the rise of China, USA declared new 'defense policy' on 5 January 2012 in which emphasis has been put on the Asia-Pacific region and Middle East and decision was taken to increase the deployment of navy from former 50% to 60%. Besides putting emphasis on the Strait of Malacca, steps have been adopted to increase the deployment of naval forces in Singapore.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, China has also adopted its own policy to tackle and safeguard its free navigation across the sea. Consequently, it has decided to set up 15 naval bases from east coast of China to the east coast of Africa including in Chittagong of Bangladesh. In the meantime, China has started to implement its policy and set up naval base at Goadhor, Pakistan using it as military base, after building deep seaport at Hammam Totta and another one is being built in Colombo, Srilanka; a port is being constructed in Kyaukpyu, Myanmar as alternative to the Strait of Malacca and pipeline for fuel transportation, rail line, road communication, through Arakan to Kunming of China, have been built. The USA named this whole policy as 'String of Pearls'.<sup>13</sup> USA and its

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12. Houque, Hamidul, *Attack on the Buddhist Community of Bangladesh--Part of Imperialist Conspiracy*.

13. Ibid.

western allies are prompt to check this step of China. In order to stop, check and disturb this step of China, the riot between Rohingyas and Rakhines was created in Arakan, Myanmar. With a view to provoking this clash in Myanmar, the occurrence in Cox's Bazar was created in the name of Communal conflict. This whole episode was framed by the USA and its western allies and the NGOs, various Christian missions, AL, BNP, Jamaat E Islam and other political organizations were involved in it.<sup>14</sup> That's why the law enforcing agencies were inactive despite being aware of everything.

### ***Inter-relationship of the causes***

From the above discussion it is clear that the conflict was a created occurrence. Now if we have a close look at the apparent and inherent causes and follow the method of deduction we find the connection between the categories. If it was a consequence of the inter-imperialist conflict, these capitalist and imperialist countries in order to keep up their influence and outspread it, thus continue their activities of collecting raw materials, trading commodities, and create such fake scenes in the countries like ours. They do it through their paid agents and the political parties backed by them. When the ruling party itself is supported by imperialist countries it cannot go beyond the purpose of that or those imperialist countries. The law enforcing agencies also have to keep silent even after knowing everything because they also work for the state, the political parties and their bosses. General people are of no concern to them.

### ***Buddhist perspective***

Buddhism enunciates peace and harmony and so do all other religions. What causes problem is misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the religious principles and doctrines or more accurately misuse of religion by the ruling class and political parties in order to garner political gains. Buddha was concerned about the socio-economic and political matters of his time. His awareness as to the fact that the stronger party in the society is interested to keep the weaker in its subjugation is visible from his words to the

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14. Ibid.

female devotee Visakha. The Buddha says: “dependence on others is suffering, independence is happiness.”<sup>15</sup>

He was also very much concerned about the discrimination based on ‘caste system’ and opposed the disparity prevailing in ancient India. He also possessed a very high democratic view. Example of his democratic ideal is his constitution of the Sangha in which people from all strata of life were allowed.

Now to establish a sustainable society following Buddhist ideals what we can or should do is to realize the Buddhist ideals and at the same time we also have to comprehend and have a perfect understanding of the society and its problems. Unless and until we are able to understand the problems we will fail to look for solutions. So we have to be aware of:

1. the existence of problems (communal conflict)
2. causes of problems
3. solution of the problems and
4. ways to the solution

Thus we can approach the problem through the criteria of the four noble truths as displayed in the above list. Here the problem is the communal violence. Its cause as discussed in the preceding discussion could be many from different perspectives and analysis. Similarly, the solutions should also be more than one by treating the causes separately. Considering the basic cause which served as the basis for the atrocity, it is important to be more rational and wise. The facebook photo in which the Buddhist youth was tagged and was framed as a culprit disrespecting the Islam sentiment ignited the anger in the minds of the attackers, as it was reported. But the investigation showed that the Buddhist youth had nothing to do with the photo appearing on his facebook timeline. So, if the attackers did not rush in their protest and had waited to find out about the reality behind, there would not be that sort of inhuman destruction of the Buddhist community. It simply displays how naïve and ignorant people can become when they are led by irrationality and anger. The

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15. Udana, p.18.

solution to such a situation, in order to prevent them from happening in future, would be to develop proper rationality. Before we rush out to expose our emotion, we should pause and give some thought to ponder about the real situation. In Buddhist perspective, there are teachings on how to conduct proper investigation. The Kalama sutta categorically says that we should not go by mere 'hearsay'. Although this discourse does not ask us to ignore others completely, what it points out clearly is that one should only accept and believe that which is skillful and beneficial for harmony. The case of attack on the Buddhist community of Chittagong shows clearly that those attackers lacked the quality to investigate further about what they heard or were reported about regarding the facebook photo.

On the other hand, if the main cause behind was just to find an excuse to carry out the attack, then the solution to such problem should be different. As discussed above regarding the possibilities of political involvement in the attack are also high. If that is the case then, the political parties are also to be blamed. One should keep in mind that political parties or governments are responsible for the protection of the people. In a country like Bangladesh, people give their votes to choose the political leader. But it is really ironic when these political leaders are seen to act against the people. Though part of a minority group, Buddhists are yet the legal citizens of Bangladesh. Therefore, they deserve their safety and security from the government just as any other majority citizens do. To negate their rights would be to violate human rights. They must not be ignored just because they are minority. The Buddhist approach to the protection of citizens by the government of a country is vividly remarked in the Cakkavattisihanadasutta of Digha Nikaya. Here it is clearly said that all citizens of the country should be protected by the king (the government in charge of the country). Failing to do that would be a testimonial to his irresponsibility. We have seen this in case of the incident in Bangladesh. Although there were sufficient ways for the police and other authorities to take action in time, nothing was done until the next day when all the houses were already burnt at night. Therefore, in order to ensure the safety of all the citizens, the government should be aware of the rights of minority groups as well.

Regarding the international involvement to the planning of the

incident, there is more to be learned by the local people. The local people have developed some form of alienation from the Muslims around there thinking that the attack was carried out by Muslims to show their intolerance of the Buddhists. This is a natural thing to happen. But, considering the international involvement, which is also highly probable, one should not just accuse the Muslims only. We have to know the things as they are. That means a perfect knowledge and understanding about the problems and their causes. Our knowledge about the facts must be perfectly true, what exactly happened and why. Then we can look forward to solutions. When we are aware of the first two points we can speak and act appropriately. Then we will depend on rationality not on emotions. Once we know the truth we have to be fearless to expose it. We might not be able to do everything. We have to do what we need to do and as far as we can. Thus we can build peace in society. Simply uttering the speeches of peace might be of no use unless we can reach the root of the problems. After we acquire perfect knowledge about violence and causes of violence we have to expose it before the people. We have to let the truth be known to people irrespective of caste, color and religion.

### ***Developing inter-communal relationship***

Goenka says: “religion is not for dividing people but for uniting people”. In order to fight the criminals inter-communal relationship is necessary. We are at first human being and then we belong to different communities. As human beings our first aim is to live in peace, equality and dignity. This is what all religions propagate. Man always struggled to survive with all his necessities and rights to survive as human being. He fought first against nature and then against his fellow human being who tried to suppress and oppress them. But always the oppressors were very few and so they used many tricks to rule others.

We have seen in the history that religion was abused at the hand of the “Ruling class”. Religion has been a tool to the ruling class in different times. They have used religion in order to satisfy their evil purpose and to oppress the poor. Our very first identity is our existence as human being. With the advance of time various religions were invented and people accepted those doctrines. Religious beliefs

are different but the creature with same biological conditions is alike. So our goal for survival irrespective of caste-creed-color is common. Conflict arises when there is difference in our aim and interest.

There should not be any type of religious fundamentalism. Sticking to one's own religious views and considering them as the highest and the only true teachings lead to irrational fundamentalism. It is also the type of dogmatism that is not encouraged in Buddhist teachings. Such exclusivist assertions as 'this alone is true, all else is false' (*idam eva saccam mogham annam*) arise from one's adherence to the notion of righteousness of his own views – '*sanditthi-raga*', '*idam sacca-abhinivesa*'.<sup>16</sup> Such exclusive attitude towards other religious teachings is very much instrumental in resulting social chaos and atrocities such as that we have seen in above mentioned situation in Bangladesh. Commenting on the futility of the ideological fundamentalism, Karunadasa says:

“An attitude of mind, driven by exclusivism, can easily provide fertile ground for bigotry and intolerance, indoctrination and unethical conversion, militant piety and persecution, interpersonal conflicts and acts of terrorism.”<sup>17</sup>

It is obvious how dangerous one can become when blinded by irrational attachment to one's own faith only, excluding others' completely. When we try to exploit or oppress others or seize other's property, division among human beings arises such as the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressors use all devices to secure and monopolize their oppression. They do not spare religion from their evil purpose. Sometimes they demand them as the supporters of the religions, at other times they create conflict and division among the common people using religious issues. It is noticeable that when religion becomes a tool to the ruling class and oppressors they instigate fundamentalism and drive the people in wrong direction. They continue their oppression by creating divide among the people and keeping them engaged in conflict.

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16. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings: the Middle Position in Theory and Practice*, pp.159-160.

17. *Ibid.* p.160.

In case of the conflict in Cox's bazar the Muslims must not be accused. Those who did the crime don't belong to any religious community. They are the enemies of humanity. When we perfectly understand it we can act accordingly. We see there are organizations like Hindu, Bouddho O Christian Oikyo Porishad, have been formed by and of the people of the minority communities. It is not a justified decision in the sense that it might create more schism between the minor and major communities. We should know that not all people of the majority group are bad or against social harmony. So we should not blame the whole community or do anything that might lead to further conflict. Rather we have to reveal the faces of the miscreants to the people of all religions. Because it is not religion that is responsible for this violence, it is the meanest interest of a small group of heinous people.

### **Conclusion**

Though it is the first attack on the Buddhists in the last 43 years of Bangladesh, Hindus and other ethnic minorities have had a lot such experiences. In every case the political parties engaged in blaming one another. Many times the governments changed but no government could stop it. Rather it has been proved that in many such cases of violence ruling party or persons having connection with big political parties are involved. Law enforcing agencies also corroborated with the culprits or kept their identity hidden or didn't take proper action and let them escape the punishment. "In most cases, law enforcing agencies, instead of protecting the minorities' families, have tried to defend the perpetrators, simply because of their political identity or social status."<sup>18</sup> Problems in the hill tracts are one like this. It is up to the people irrespective of caste-creed-color, religion or ethnicity, to protect themselves from all sorts of violence because in every case the sufferers are the common people while the political parties exploit the issues in order to gain their political ends.

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18. Jahangir, *Civilization on the Edge*.

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