

To the polls, unless your name be Das, Tripura, or Roy

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"Why can small numbers excite rage? They represent a tiny obstacle between majority and totality or total purity. The smaller the number and the weaker the minority, the deeper the rage about its capacity to make a majority feel like a mere majority."

[Arjun Appadurai, Fear of Small Numbers]

"Hey Ghosh, don't do so much Ghosh-Ghoshani!"
Another day in school, another round of mutual teasing. Schoolyard taunts can be casually cruel, but nicknames are nothing to be upset about. Everyone had one. Even the son of the Police IG had been renamed "kaula" (lovely reference to his hue).

In that context, teasing Ranjan Ghosh by his last name seemed very mild. But something about this particular dig stuck, even though my class 6 brain couldn't navigate the cause of unease. Much later, many years on, I realized that it was the first time I was forced into awareness of a Hindu surname.

Relative to all things we have seen in this epoch, St Joseph seems to be a model of communal balance. Propelled by an affirmative action policy in admission, almost half the students were Hindu and Christian. At that age, the only difference we saw was that the Hindu students studied Geeta in a separate room during Islamiyat class. Who cares, to each his own.

The mind soaks up many fragments and saves it for future processing. Even at that age some part of me vaguely registered that the wealthy students all had last names like Rahman, Ahmed, and Hossain. One day a teacher asked for a collection of money to help Gomes, poorest student in the class, buy the required geography atlas. A strange unease, but nothing I could pin down.

In 1985, we anxiously crowded around a notice board to find the SSC results. Star Marks, First Division, Letter. Magic symbols of future success and prosperity. Two decades on, many in my graduating class (sometimes referred to as Generation 71) have become industrialists, bankers, television directors, ad firm creatives — executives of every stripe. When I sit with my old crew, there's a palpable air of "masters of the universe."

But when I take a closer look, not a single non-Muslim among my classmates has made it into this magic circle. 1985 was perhaps the last moment of parity between us. The in-between time has been rough for those who don't fit the national identity project. When I ask my classmates about this, they shrug. Not my problem. One of these bright souls even said to me, during a BUET strike, *"Hindu students protesting again! They are always making trouble. Lai dithe dithe mathai thule rekhechi."*

Amena Mohsin talks about the flaws of Bengali nationalism — a structure that sings of Ek Shagoro Roktho, yet remains blind to the invisible second class of Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Paharis, Adivasis, and all other communities that don't fit within a Bengali Muslim ethos. The concept of a singular nation, needing to be produced or naturalized at any cost, is not unique to us.

Hannah Arendt argued in 1968 that the idea of a national peoplehood was a fatal flaw in developed societies. Philip Gourevitz, surveying the brutality of Rwanda, observed that *"genocide, after all, is an exercise in community-building."*

But what is remarkable for Bangladesh is a national memory project devoted to the 1971 genocide that fails to recognize how we are replaying that scenario on a smaller level against all non-Bengali and/or non-Muslim identities. When these small groups assert their presence and refuse to be assimilated within a "Bengali Muslim" identity, spectacular and extreme violence is our tool for producing a homogenized national map.

My St Joseph memory trip came while considering the crucible of the approaching elections. In

keeping with the overall pattern of convulsive violence, minority communities are already under threats to stay away from the polls. Unlike in 2001, when the orgy of anti-Hindu violence was enacted after the elections, this time the idea is to block these communities from even daring to vote. As documented by The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, and others, a significant proportion of minority voters have already been taken off the controversial voter list. When even Muslim voters find themselves missing in large numbers from the list, what chance for Bahadur, Kumar, Larma, or Gomes?

The 1991 and 2001 results could have been different given the razor-thin margins by which many seats were won, and the huge number of minority voters that were prevented from voting in those very seats. Out of 300 constituencies, there are 71 where minority voters are significant (ranging from 11% to 61%) and 50 where they are visible (5-10%). The current election sets every incentive for the 4-party alliance to aggressively choke off the minority vote.

The AL's embrace of secularism has always been shaky (is there anybody with the guts to hold their feet to the fire and force them to eject Nejam Islam from the 14-party coalition?). But even this weak commitment has produced many potential Pahari candidates for Hill Tracts, as compared to the exclusively Bengali Muslim candidates from the BNP. For Bengali candidates to win in Pahari-majority areas, a massive blocking of the Pahari vote is needed. A similar pattern is expected in all areas with a significant minority population. This is not to say that minority voters should vote en masse for AL — but simply that they to be allowed to vote.

I invoke St Joseph because anecdotes sometimes carry more emotive power than statistics. When the silent majority continually ignores the pain of others, we end up at the embryo stages of ethnicide. These days it is hard to sit still for a song ashor during 1971 commemorations without choking on the failure of the nation project. Our numerical majority has chosen methods of predatory nationalism that include racist tactics that echo the Pakistan period, reify Bengali

Muslims, and render all other identities invisible ii.

My uncle used to tell the story of the maulana who stood in front of a temple in 1940s Noakhali, using his body to defy those who wanted to burn alive the Hindus who had been their former neighbours. If that village elder found an interpretation of religion that taught compassion, how are we in this backwards trap fifty years on? I shout at all of you with rage, because I refuse to accept a haven for me that is a nightmare for others. There is still time to stop this with our words, our actions and our bodies.

i. *Daily Star*, May 6, 2006: "Religious Minorities Under Pressure"; *Daily Star*, May 10, 2006: "Minority Voters Intimidated"; *Prothom Alo*, January 6, 2006: "Voter List Compilers Say They Didn't Go to 4 Minority-heavy Villages By 'Mistake'"; bcdjc.org/mreport-1.html.

ii. This can be seen in the drastic drop in minority populations: 1961 (18.5%), 1974 (13.5%), 1981 (12.2%) and 1991 (10.5%). Analysts expect the 2001 census to reveal even further drop, but the government has not released those numbers.

P.S.

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