

BOOK REVIEW

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Minority Politics in Bangladesh by Muhammad Ghulam Kabir (new Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.), 1980, 167 pages, Rs. 60.

Minority communities have always been an issue in domestic politics of a country. But a minority community may assume an added dimension in terms of their participation in political activities. In particular, when a part of a demographic majority and economically and politically dominant community becomes a minority in a new geo-political set up, their political response to the changed situation is very important and needs close observation and study. The Hindu community of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, is a case in point. Muhammad Ghulam Kabir in his book *Minority Politics in Bangladesh* has focused on the political behaviour of the Hindu community against the backdrop of a similar transition from a dominant and majority position to a minority position as a result of the partition of India in 1947. Following partition, the Hindus living in East Bengal, now Bangladesh, were caught in a new political environment for which apparently they were not prepared. They faced the question of survival, safeguarding economic and political right and when possible, enhancing their position. Mr. Kabir in his book addresses himself to these issues.

The author takes 1974-1971 as the period of reference and divides it into three phases on the basis of the political behaviour of the Hindus in terms of their reaction, initiation and adjustments: (i) 1947-1954—period of Chaos, (ii) 1954-58—period of Maximisation and (iii) 1958-71—period of Retreat and Regrouping.

In examining the political behaviour of the Hindus, the author proceeds with two hypotheses: (1) When a previously dominant community is thrown into an irrevocable minority position, its leaders attempt to reconcile with the existing situation and adopt pragmatic policies to adjust to the new political system, (2) the achievements of the goals of the minority is dependent on the attitude and internal cohesion of the majority community.

In the introductory chapter the author presents (i) demographic and other factual evidence to the effect that the Hindus have been reduced to a position of minority from a dominant economic and political power following the partition of 1947, (ii) theoretical framework leading to a workable definition of minority and (iii) basic propositions and hypotheses for the study.

Though there is no clear mention, it appears that the author has tested the first hypothesis in Chapter 2 where the period 1947-54 has been characterised by chaos and struggle for constitutional safeguards. The author has rightly pointed out that the initial reaction of the Hindu community to the new reality of Pakistan was characterized by psychological unpreparedness, reservation and great confusion as to how to react and adjust. To them emergence of Pakistan as a homeland for

majority Muslim was a defeat of the much cherished symbol of Indian nationalism. Their sense of confusion was reflected in whether to join the newly formed more or less secular Gana Samity (people's Association) or Pakistan National Congress or whether to keep link with the former Indian Congress. In the mean time certain developments led to exacerbation of their threat perception and the Hindus reacted by mass migration to India. However, as the author points out, some amount of active involvement in politics by certain section of the Hindu community was also observed. Members of the Scheduled Caste who constituted the largest Hindu group in East Bengal formed Scheduled Caste Federation and came in alliance with the ruling Muslim League. Though their political activities were confined to the Legislative Assembly, it is significant they echoed the sentiment of East Bengal by demanding one session of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan be held in Dacca and Bengali as the state language of Pakistan. One significant, though unsuccessful, attempt was their fight for joint electorate to safeguard their political rights. Finally toward the close of the 1947-54 period, a trend toward forging unity among different castes of the Hindus presaged the active role they played in the following period.

The second phase of 1954-58, rightly called period of maximisation by the author, witnessed significant advancement of the Hindu cause. During this period, they definitely exerted greater influence in making the constitution more liberal and democratic.

Their greatest success was the incorporation of joint electorate system in the constitution. From 1955 to 1958 they shared power with the Muslims both at the centre and in the province, with the exception of the 2-month Chundrigar Ministry in 1957. They received ministerial awards disproportionate to their size. They were successful in implementing 23 per cent service quota for the Hindus. The sense of security was regained and migration dropped significantly.

The author characterises the Ayub and Yahya period of 1958-1971 as period of retreat and regrouping for the Hindus. They suffered politically and economically (as also did the Muslims of East Bengal). According to the author, the Hindus as a political force were suppressed to the extent of virtual nonexistence. Political leaders were either put to jail or harassed. The author also rightly points out that the condition of the Hindus depended, to a large extent, on the Indo-Pakistan relation. The 1964 riots, 1965 war and aftermath are glaring examples of this. All this prompted either migration or noninvolvement in active politics by the Hindus.

However, following the rise of Bengali nationalism, the Hindus regrouped with the Bengalees and this marked the end of their period of retreat from politics. Period 1966-1971 witnessed active involvement by the Hindus in East Bengal politics.

The book is a significant departure from all other similar works done so far in that it starts with the inception of Pakistan, a Muslim homeland and goes

up to 1971 when Pakistan disintegrated and a new state of Bangladesh, based not on religion but on secular ideologies came into being. This wide coverage over different phases may prove helpful in predicting the political behaviour of the Hindus in future.

However, it may be pointed out that the period of study just marginally covers 1971 when Bangladesh came into being. The author says that he has included 'Bangladesh' in the title "for convenience of future researchers" (see Preface). This point could have been elaborated further. Since the book is the outcome of the author's Master's thesis completed in 1978, it could have included a post-script for the period 1971-78 to lend more justification to the title.

While phasing of 1947-58 into periods is quite realistic, lumping of 1958-71 into one single period with the characterization of "retreat and regrouping" seems to have been made at the cost of some details. In particular, the periods 1958-65 and 1965 onward are qualitatively different, as the author has also admitted, since the latter period saw the initial phase of rise of Bengali nationalism. Hence, if the periods of 'retreat' and 'regrouping' were separated, the latter period could serve a logical prelude to "resurgent" Hindu politics in Bangladesh.

An observation on Chapter 5 titled "Conclusions" may be made here. In fact Chapter 5 contains the summary findings of the study, not exactly conclusions.

Finally the appendices contain valuable documents which would be extremely helpful for similar studies in future.