LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit

June 2018
Minority Rights

South Asia Centre
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LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit

Working Paper 1: Minority Rights

June 2018

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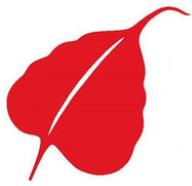
Executive Summary

The discussion in this panel addresses what it means to be part of a minority community in Bangladesh. While all rights are said to be reserved and equal, the reality portrays something different. Different groups such as religious minorities, the LGBT community and sexual minorities, as well as indigenous groups, face discrimination and the silencing of their needs. Simply having views that are different from the majority can completely marginalise a person from society. However, recently social media has been seen to be a major driver in advocating for minority voices and raising awareness about their issues. Speakers agree that there needs to be a push to go beyond this and bring issues into the public sphere so that targeted policy approaches can be taken to address the matters individually, rather than the application of a blanket approach for all minority problems.

Discussions on this topic are seen to revolve around India when South Asia is mentioned and thus to regain recognition, partnerships such as these are all the more important.
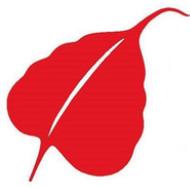
Recommendations

- Individual stories should be made more vocal in which a face becomes associated with the issues.
- Safer spaces must be created for all social classes and people with special needs to make it more accessible, beyond the internet.
- Creating a place for collective voices to raise awareness.
- Challenging taboos through grassroots and community projects.
- Further push to go beyond social media and take issues into public sectors so that targeted policy approaches can be taken to addresses the matters.
- A blanket approach for all minority problems should not be applied.

Panellists

- Shelley Feldman, Professor of Development Sociology, Cornell University (Retired).
- Delwar Hussain, Lecturer and Chancellor's Fellow at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh.
- Speaker on sexual minorities.
- The panel was chaired by Katy Gardner, Professor of Anthropology, LSE.

Introduction
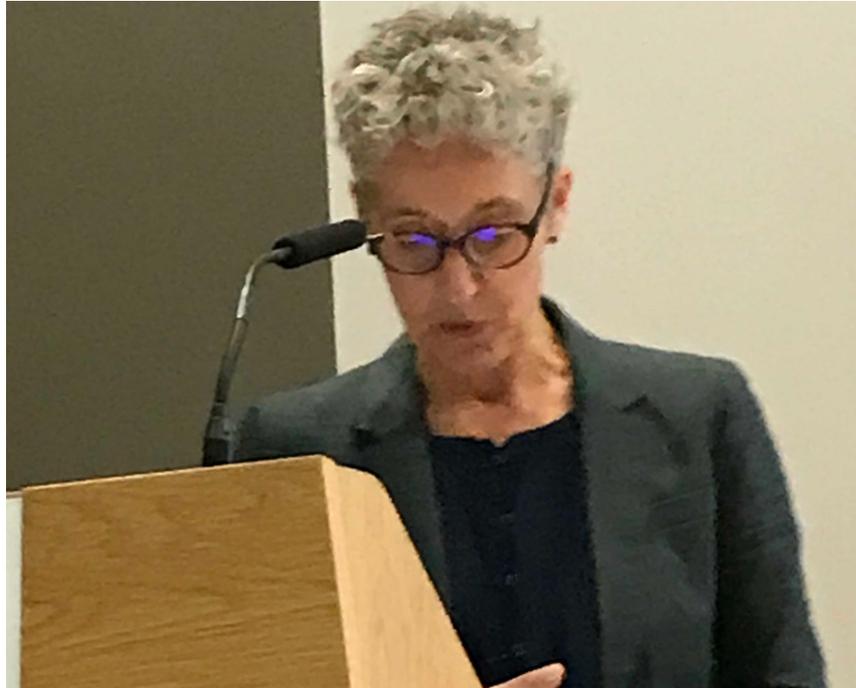
Katy Gardner addressing the audience

Intellectual discussions around the issue of minority rights are carried out. Katy Gardner opens the discussion by addressing the topic of what it means to have minority status in Bangladesh. Although it tends to be portrayed as homogeneous in terms of religion, language and ethnicity, the country's various minorities struggle for recognition and for their voices to be heard.

Most are not a minority by birth but move through life to become part of certain groups (disabled, widowed, victims of history, among others). They are not fixed categories and they all assume different states of power with different life chances, which are deeply political. While the Bangladesh Constitution grants equal rights to its minorities, this is not upheld. Dispossession, detention, killings, extreme violence and intimidation are among the few violations minorities face daily. New groups such as atheists and sexual minorities are especially targeted in the current landscape.

The speakers dive into specific minority categories and examples on what minority rights look like in reality on the streets of Bangladesh today and the complexity of the solutions and tensions around the voicing of such opinions.

Theory versus Practice

Delwar Hussain explored the ways in which minority rights could be measured in any country through moral and ethical grounds. Minority rights are seen as a public good, as defined by the UN Convention of Human Rights. In Bangladesh, the 15th amendment of the constitution includes a problematic understanding of who minorities are. The state's position remains dominant and top-down, allowing limited space for top-up approaches, such as from grassroots organisations.

Throughout its history, Bangladesh has struggled with the term 'minority rights', as it seems to be taken care of at first glance. However, there are ways that the implementation of these rights in practice can be measured and analysed. The problem with minority rights is not only definitional but also institutional. The topic struggles to have agency and to be included in education as well as in other sectors. The Daily Star newspaper tackles the legal position of minorities and has been critiqued for their liberal views. Minority rights have been overlooked in the 1972 Constitution, and also by certain local cultures, traditions and their communities, however, these were said to be included in the 15th amendment of the constitution. This did not however solve the issue on the problematic understandings of who minorities are. States' relationship still remains dominant and top-down and minorities continue to have counter ideas to the majority.

Examples were demonstrated regarding the last general election and how the issue on minorities surfaced. Detentions and disappearances were common practices as citizens were silenced. Stories of individuals from different social classes were shared, such as a 15-year-old girl's, who is part of the urban working-class. She is the main breadwinner in her household.

However, the avoidance of fire hazards in the garments factory in which she worked led to a deadly fire which killed 119 employees. Little justice was offered to the workers from the Garment association. This is an example of the marginalization of an entire class. Specific minorities such as atheists, or those writing about religious freedom on their blogs, have also been seen to face persecution in direct and indirect ways.

Another story shared was about a blogger who opposed Islam named Asif who was abused and attacked.

He wrote about the hijab and government surveillance, along with other topics around gender. He was arrested and sent to jail, and his blogs were shut down. However, it was argued that in Bangladesh the majority community is also under threat and exploited. Therefore, it is questioned what minority rights hold when the wider population faces the same threat of extreme ideas, making Bangladesh a topic for academic scrutiny in the West.

The Hidden and Forbidden Identities

The speaker on sexual minorities starts by describing an incident about his friends who were slaughtered in their apartment in 2016 after trying to speak up for LGBT rights. He felt that there was no hope for LGBT rights in the conservative environment in Bangladesh.

Homosexuals, he argued, are seen as disgusting, and as carrying disease, as well as against nature and god. Homosexuality is degraded as a Western concept to which marriage is the best solution and regarded as something only to be associated with sex.

The legal situation in Bangladesh shows how unwelcome the issue is. Individuals can be arrested or detained for merely expressing views on social media. All same-sex activities are criminalised. Ignorance on the issue is high.

Is Internet the bigger virtual closet?

The discussion revolves around the use of social media as a safe space to come out and express views, as fake profiles can be created and networks built through them. Individuals from the LGBT community are often seen to live double lives and are often forced by society to eventually get married.

Finding partners on social media is fairly simple through various Facebook groups and ever growing applications which each have hundreds to thousands of members. These growing numbers are becoming increasingly difficult to monitor however this type of online engagement is only a privilege for those who have access to the internet. Economically privileged classes can come out and live a lifestyle of their own choosing while others in lower classes cannot. There is still no platform to bridge the gap between the rich and poor.

Sex workers and sexual minorities have a highly inferior position in society and are insulted for being identified as either a 'MSM person' (men who have sex with men), a person with HIV, or a hijra. Donor funding is provided for HIV treatment however this can be an issue of funding as they are not really HIV victims which leads to a waste of funds as the real issue is not identified.
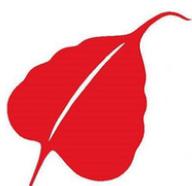
However, hijras are becoming more normalised in society with various campaigns starting up in the virtual space to speak in favour of their rights. They are regarded as a third gender, and questions have been posed on providing them with jobs. In medical test they are regarded as men however they are perceived as women.

Can visibility be a solution?

A rally named 'Rainbow Rally' was recently organised in Bangladesh by students in which four people were detained; the event was stopped by the government. Work on rights determination started in 2007 and in 2009 was addressed by the government. Recommendations were proposed to address this. It is concluded that Bangladesh is a country with strong cultural and traditional values therefore it cannot be included, even to this day.

Women are discriminated and forced to get married and live dual life without dignity. There are two lesbian working groups, which differentiate by class however they operate without funding.

Changes in religious extremism has been seen in Bangladesh. Recently there has been an announcement from the tourism board wishing to declare Bangladesh as a state of Islamic tourism. Meanwhile the murders of bloggers and atheists speaking against religion have not resulted in arrests or persecution. Bangladesh has always had an issue with self-censorship however this has increased now more than ever . The speaker mentions that the space for thinking is decreasing in Bangladesh which is a major concern. It was questioned whether stories can be used to solve the issue of an eroding space for discussion as a safe space is needed for academics but also for activists to exercise their concerns and rights.
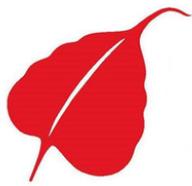
Shelley Feldman, a Retired Professor of Development Sociology at Cornell University, speaking during the panel discussion

This discussion on how to overcome the existing norms concluded that there is a lack of storytelling because of the challenge to make stories public, along with restrictive monitoring from the government. It remains a struggle to find a solution to bridge these gaps. It is increasingly important to have platforms where stories can be voiced. Shelley Feldmen talks about the historical study of violence against the Hindu minority in Bangladesh.

There has been a constant process of minoritisation taking place. Nationalism, Feldman argues, is a good thing as it works as a driver for national struggles but also increases tensions between two or more countries, thus it inherently perpetuate racism, as nationalism feeds a form of exclusion and discrimination.

Most work around nationalism and racism is Eurocentric and there is a need to focus on the Global South. Some borders are needed while others are not, along with constant struggles around sameness and othering. Hindus are not regarded as a same kind of minority as the indigenous population in the Hill Tract.Citizenship and property rights are important for belonging into a community.

Minoritization and its Solutions

According to Feldman, institutions make it sustain as state policies do not allow or include it. Hence this creates a sense of what Bangladesh taught about unsettling these categorizations.
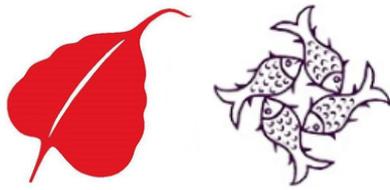
It is not only enough to look at the events of 1971 but more at the everyday lives of minorities.

It was discussed whether rejecting the categorization of minorities would reduce protection. Minorities should not be identified into one group of minorities. All groups need a separate approach and mechanisms to manage their status in society. Strategic approaches can be taken to allow the groups that are desired to persist in society.

However this needs to develop in the opposite direction by discovering strategic ways to address the individual needs of groups. The work on minority rights will depend on who is the majority. The power must be embedded into multiple communities where security is needed. Thus it is important how society is organised and whether inclusion or exclusion is its driver. These terms are however deemed to be unstable and political.

It was questioned who the exclusionary identities are created by and whether groups become silenced through the lack of freedom of expression in Bangladesh. However, the government does leave space for individuals to be heard and to make demands, but it does not work from a top-down approach. It is mentioned how identitarian politics generate mobilisation but do not speak to how inequalities are formed.

The majority rarely voice demands for the minority groups and those left outside the group must bear the burden. The government is seen to take action on things matching their agenda, much like any other government. External influences on these decisions are also indirect such as decisions that are justified through policies, thus discriminating against certain minority groups.

In conclusion it was aruged that the decision to include this panel was a conscious one as organisers saw the need to problematize this issue and to perpetuate further discussion and awareness about the challenges facing the citizens of contemporary Bangladesh.

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