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8.2.1. General information

Bangladesh's constitution prescribes a secular state and designates Islam as state religion. The state is to ensure equal status and rights of other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and guarantees all citizens the constitutional right to profess, practice or propagate any religion.783 Bangladesh has ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination784 and constitutionally protects 'the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities'. The constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, or place of birth.785

A great majority of Bangladesh's population belongs to the Bengali ethno-linguistic group, and most are Sunni Muslims.786 According to the most recent census from 2022, only 1 % of the population belonged to an ethnic minority.787 Most ethnic minorities thereto belong to a religious minority, and they are distinct from the Bengali majority as regards physical features, language, and culture.788 There are 50 groups that are recognised as ethnic minorities under the constitution.789 Many of these identify themselves as 'indigenous',790 but specific indigenous rights are not recognised by the state.791 Religious minorities include Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, animists,792 Shia Muslims, and Ahmaddiyya.793

Under the former government, indigenous communities faced censorship,794 but since its fall media has reportedly started to use the local term for indigenous communities (adivasi) more frequently, according to IWGIA.795 In contrast, a human rights activists reporting for the Daily Star stated that some politicians have become more hesitant of using the term.796 The inclusion of the term on a new school textbook cover, for instance, triggered protests in Dhaka 797 from a group perceiving the reference to adivasi as undermining Bangladesh's territorial integrity.798 In response, the term was removed,799 which triggered protests from indigenous students in Dhaka. On 15 January 2025, protesting indigenous students were attacked by a group opposing the term, who were armed with wooden sticks.800 The next day, indigenous students protested again, demanding justice after the attack, but police dispersed them with water cannons, sound grenades, and batons.801

Minorities have been underrepresented in policymaking in general,802 but particularly in areas relating to 'cultural preservation, land rights, and overall social justice', according to IWGIA.803 They are also underrepresented in state authorities,804 as well as in the reform commissions.

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Many minorities live in remote and inaccessible areas,806 mainly in the CHT807 and in northern and southern plainlands.808 The lack of infrastructure in remote areas pose challenges in accessing public services,809 and indigenous children generally ‘face systemic barriers to education’ due to poverty, language, and limited opportunities and awareness.810 According to MRG, people with disabilities from minority and indigenous communities face intersecting discrimination, due to their minority status and their disability. They face discrimination from the wider society and within their communities. In particular, minority and indigenous women and girls with disabilities fall ‘far behind’.811

Indigenous people have been facing discrimination for a long period of time.812 MRG reported that ‘discrimination and marginalisation pervade daily life’ of minorities,813 and that indigenous people face a general context of stigmatisation, discrimination and violence.814 According to IWGIA, indigenous people are one of Bangladesh’s most vulnerable and marginalised communities.815 Access to land has been a key issue for indigenous people, who face conflicts with Bengali settlers, as well as discrimination from state and local administrations.816

Local indigenous parties, as reported by IWGIA, recorded 200 human rights violations in the CHT in 2024, including 6 000 indigenous people facing various types of violations, including 2 134 acres of indigenous land being grabbed by companies, settlers, and influential persons. They further reported on at least 21 persons being killed by security forces, settlers, land grabbers and in inter-party violence between indigenous political groups.817 This information could not be corroborated with other sources. According to IWGIA, violence against indigenous women and girls remained a ‘persistent concern’ in the plains and in the CHT. The state has responded to cases inconsistently, which ‘suggest discriminatory treatment’, according to the source. In five recorded incidents the police filed a case, but in 12 other cases they either refrained from taking action, or the response was ‘inadequate’ or delayed.818

Some groups face caste-based discrimination and practices of ‘untouchability’,819 including Dalits.820 Dalits face challenges in accessing education, health, political, social and cultural rights, employment and economic opportunities.821 Limited opportunities for social mobility822 often restrict them to perform ‘dirty, dangerous and demeaning work’, for example cleaning out sewers and septic tanks without protective gear.823 Most Dalits live in segregated informal settlements, and experience social prohibitions of renting824 or building houses outside these areas,825 as well as intermingling with people from upper-caste Hindus and Muslims.826

Biharis are an Urdu-speaking Muslim minority, facing hostility and persistent discrimination for their perceived alliance with East Pakistan during the 1971 independence war. Biharis became stateless after the country’s independence and remained so until 2008 when they were granted

a right to citizenship by the Supreme court.827 Many Biharis, however, still face barriers in accessing their rights and privileges as citizens, as most live in extreme poverty828 and in overcrowded slum-like camps set up for them after the independence829 in the outskirts of Dhaka.830 In 2018, MRG reported that there were 300 000 Biharis in Bangladesh.831

As regards religious freedom, those with ‘nonconformist views can face societal opprobrium and attacks from hardline Islamist groups’ as reported by Freedom House.832 Odihkar reported on attacks and vandalism against ‘individuals with differing religious views’ taking place in various parts of the country in January–March 2025.833 UN OHCHR reported on Ahmadiyya Muslims experiencing ‘hostility and discrimination by some adhering to other Islamic schools of belief’.
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