

Minority Groups in Society- Some Aspects and Issues: A Sociological Insight with a Reference to Bangladesh

Anisur Rahman Khan *

Abstract : There are some members in society who are differentiated from others by race, nationality, religion, ethnicity or language. Sociologists define them as minority because they think of themselves as a differentiated group and thought of by others as a differentiated group on the basis of some negative connotations. In fact, a minority group of a particular society includes people who are treated differently from the dominant group even though they make up a numerical majority. The dimension of majority-minority relations creates a major sociological problem since it is the root cause of inter-group hostilities and tussles; and, acts as a deadly weapon against social harmony and equity. Minorities, almost in every society, are subjected to preconceived & objective discrimination and subordination although the fact of frequent use of these tools may sometimes be publicly denied or camouflaged. However, a minority's position involves exclusion or assignment to a lower status in one or more of four areas of life: economic, political, social and legal. In this paper, attempts have been made to give a sociological overview on different aspects and issues related to minority groups along with the reasons of their faced problems. The context of Bangladesh also deserves to be analyzed accordingly; and, this necessity has not been overlooked or kept unattended here.

1.0 Introduction

Inequality in society takes many forms and dimensions; but of all the patterns of inequality found in human society none is more

* Assistant Director, BPATC, Savar, Dhaka

controversial, more sensitive than that designates some members of society to be blocked from full and equal participation in all phases of social life only because of their racial, religious, ethnic and national status or origin. These members are treated as 'minority' in society. Minorities are found almost in every society; but complex societies are more prone to the formation of minority groups than simple, traditional or homogenous societies. In a simple or homogenous society internal cultural differences are very nominal, and the society itself can achieve cohesion and consensus with a relative ease. A complex society, on the other hand, with apparent cultural complexity and diverse population; has to encounter difficulties in building a coherent social order. The very nature of this kind of society keeps the minority groups away from enjoying different social opportunities equitably with the dominant group and restricts their representation to decision making process (Broom & Selznick: 488).

Thus, the members of minority groups in any society are found to be stereotyped, vilified, repressed and exploited; and continue to be among the poorest as they commonly attain lower human development label for having limited access to development programs. However, one of the main functions of contemporary multi-cultural societies is to maintain peace and harmony among the members, and to ensure equal justice for all. This task, sometimes, seems to be difficult to carry out since the dominant group seldom learns to tolerate apparent group differences and to respect distinct cultural identities of the minorities. The purpose of this paper is to introduce, in the light of sociological perception, some key concepts, terms and issues linked with minority groups and with their basic problems and rights. Besides, as a reference, the perspective of Bangladesh will also be discussed to draw attention of the appropriate authority so as to necessary measures may be taken for building a society 'livable for all'.

2.0 Identification of the Concept of 'Minority'

Literally, the word minority means less than half or the smaller in number of two entities. But sociologically, minority has a special meaning; it is not simply a group which is smaller than some other groups in society. Minority is a group which is inferior to the rest of the members of a society for having some distinguishable characteristics; either ascribed or achieved, that set it apart from the dominant group

(Koeing: 355). However, sociologist Louis Wirth (1945) nicely defined a minority group in the following way:

“We may define a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics are singled out from the others in society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination. The existence of minority implies the existence of a corresponding dominant group with higher social status and greater privileges. Minority status carries with it the exclusion from full participation in the life of the society” (cited in Anderson:

<http://carbon.cudenver.edu/public/sociology/>).

Popence’s (1986), on the other hand, defined a minority group as;

“---- any group in a society that consists of people where particular biological & social traits cause them to become the object of prejudice and discrimination” (cited in Rahman :101).

Sociological definitions on minority group often remain ambiguous and confusing since its typical quantitative meaning most readily comes to mind. To have a clear-cut conceptual orientation we need to get focused on the following distinguishable characteristics of a minority group:

- a) The members of a minority group are oppressed at the hand of dominant group in various ways. They are the victims of hostility, prejudice, abuse, humiliation, and are considered to be the inferior people in society (ibid:101).
- b) A minority group is identified separately from the dominant group by some definite group characteristics that are socially visible or noticeable such as: skin & hair colour, physical structure, way of life, religion & language. These factors vary from context to context in both synchronically and diachronically (Benett: www.clintonbennett.net www.religiousfreedom.com).

- c) A minority is a self-conscious group with a strong sense of 'own-ness' derives from the desire to preserve their culture and tradition (anonymous:www.trinty.edu/~mkearl/race.html).
- d) People usually do not want to be the members of a minority group voluntarily; they are born into it. Thus, the sense of common identity usually comes from an awareness of common ancestry (Rahman:102).
- e) By choice or by necessity, members of a minority group tend to marry within the group. As a result, minority status within a society tends to be passed on from generation to generation. Members of the dominant group are usually reluctant to marry members of the stigmatized minority group (ibid:102).

The above-mentioned hints, perhaps, are enough in making us understood the nature of a minority group; and, which may actually be the prime causes of their problems. Besides, it is also considered to be a necessary requirement to know what are the parameters of categorizing different minority groups in society.

3.0 Classification of Minorities

Minority groups are classified in terms of a few important criteria. The identifiable criteria are:

3.1 Numerical criterion

The term minority, literally, expresses a numeral inferiority of a group compared to the rest of the population. Here the important question is, of which figure and percentage a community can be considered as minority? The answer is, there is no lower limit for the definition of minority; even a single individual having some distinguishable characteristics has the right to be treated on an undiscriminating basis. Control of power is the determining issue in this respect. A good number of examples show that the numeral minority is capitalizing the dominant role; while the numerical majority falls in a subordinate position. In the Republic of South Africa and in the Republic of Zimbabwe the whites; until recently, being the numerical minority dominated the blacks (numerical majority) and enjoyed supremacy over them. A contemporary example comes from Burundi; where 24%

Tutsi population dominates 75% Hutu population (Ladkany:www.tharwaproject.com). Women, on the other hand, constitute a slight majority in many societies; but in many respects they are treated nothing but a minority (Stewart & Glynn : 196). Hence, as a concept, minority must designate something besides the relative proportion of people constitutes in a population.

3.2 Religious criterion

Though religion usually preaches the virtues of equity, peace and love, but throughout the history of mankind it has often divided people into warring camps; differences in beliefs, faiths and rituals have been the factors of competition, argument, conflict and of bloodshed (Horton & Hunt:259). Sociologists opine almost every state provides privileges to a certain religion while other religions are dishonored or even prohibited, although discrimination on grounds of religion is expressly forbidden in the constitution of every modern state. The followers of the non-dominant religions, thus, become the minorities; suffer from constant denial of human rights since the persecution by the dominant religion has been a prominent issue in the history (Ladkany:www.thrarwaproject.com). Religious minorities are found every where in the world and are the victims of different destinies. Millions of people have been killed or driven out of their homeland only because of their religious differences (Kabir:1). It is to note that, the tug of war between religious minority and majority is usually not directly concentrated with religious doctrines and principles, but is generating out for the control of power and from idea of supremacy (Ladkany:www.thrarwaproject.com). Muslims in occupied Palestine & India, and under the ex-Soviet Union, Bahais of Iran, Hindus and Sheiks of Pakistan, untouchables of India, Hindus and Christians of Bangladesh are some of the burning examples of typical religious minorities.

3.3 Racial criterion

The most frequently used term for leveling a minority is 'race'. Race is a confusing concept, for it has no consensus-based meaning. In popular usage, race may mean all human beings (the human race); a nationality (the German race, the French race); and even is applied to groups of people speaking the same language (the Aryan race) [Gisbert: 263]. Biologists have defined race as a collection of individuals sharing some common observable physiological traits transmissible by biological

inheritance. Generally the traits are: skin-colour, head-shape, stature, eye-color, lip-form, hair-form and the like. But social scientists do not regard a race as the product of an exclusive or indissoluble biological heredity since some admixture of outside stocks and the gradual changing of physical characteristics refute the supposition of the existence of any pure race in society (MacIver: 385). Dunn & Dobzhensky refuted the hypothesis of the existence of pure race as:

“Race mixture has been on during the whole of recorded history incontrovertible evidence from studies on fossil of human remains shows that even in the pre-history, at the dawn of humanity, making of different species (at least occasionally) took place. Mankind has always been, and still is, a mongrel lot” (cited in Gisbert: 263).

However, race is, as a matter of fact, not merely a biologically distinct grouping of people; it is a socially significant reality and is substantially determined by popular social definition (Horton & Hunt:352). Sociologists find some genuine reasons; particularly in the line of majority-minority relations, to be interested to explore the social significance of this much-discussed concept. One of the important reasons is that each racial group thinks to be the superior one to all other groups existed in society and therefore; each of the races has some ethnocentric ideas (Rahman:99). Human races have primarily been classified as: the Caucasoid (white), the Negroid (black), and the Mongoloid (yellow and brown); the remaining sub-groups are placed in one of these categories. This is the classification of higher and lower races since; in the opinion of racist thinkers, the Caucasoid race usually is considered as the superior race and is believed to have contributed much to the human civilization. All other races are considered to be the inferior ones, and to have contributed very little or nothing to the human civilization. Such ideas are known as racism; based on the belief that race is an important determinant of people's abilities, and that, people should be treated as inferior or superior on the basis of race. This view was nicely represented in characterizing the differences between the black and the white by eighteen-century's great philosopher David Hume:

“I am apt to suspect that negros, and all other species of men----to be naturally inferior to the whites. There was never a civilized nation of any other complexion

than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or in speculation. No ingenious manufacturer among them, no arts, no sciences-----such as a uniform and constant different could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men" (cited in Bolaffi & et.al.: 242).

The thoughts and ideas on racism have expanded the dimensions of inequalities in society and have paved the way to slavery, extermination and colonization (Stwert: 199). Following lines, summed up by Jean Paul Harte (1963); to have justified the white men's colonial role in different societies of non-white races, will give us a vivid picture the way a racial minority is treated in society:

"Not so long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants, five hundred million men and women and one thousand five hundred million natives" (cited in *ibid*: 199).

3.4 Ethnic criterion

Derived from the Greek root *ethnikos*, ethnic is a term related to culture. The sociological meaning of an ethnic group is generally conceived to be one whose members, living in a separate region as part of a more complex society, share a distinctive cultural tradition e.g., values, beliefs, customs, religion, language, dietary practices, tools and techniques as used & maintained within the group from generation to generation (MacIver: 387). In other words, an ethnic group is one which is recognized by society or by itself as a separate group, and unlike racial differences ethnic differences are culturally learned and not genetically inherited (Rahman:101). Ethnicity is a type of caste, different from social classes as it restricts movement of the members in and out of the group. Sociologists have noticed the members of an ethnic group within a community are usually subjected to antagonism and persecution though it is frequently claimed by the civilized countries to have been succeeded to put different ethnic groups on equal terms in all respects. The ethnic groups are groundlessly leveled as minorities not because of their smaller size, but on the basis of their distinct cultural characteristics; which, in the eyes of dominant group are odd or even outrageous. These minority groups want to preserve their cultural entities and refuse the process of cultural assimilation into

the dominant culture. American-Indians, Australian-aboriginal, river-gypsies and the tribes of Bangladesh are some of the examples of ethnic minority groups (Ladkany:www.thrawproject.com). Even, many ethnic groups consist of people of different national origins. In the United States we find Indian-Americans, Polish-Americans, Mexican-American and so on; but interestingly, though America is said to be a melting-pot of cultures; the members of ethnic groups of other parts of the world have had a great deal of trouble to be assimilated in the United States. (Stwert:201). However, as a matter of fact, so called modernity has not been able to give guarantee to ethnic people against hatreds and cruelties (Stwert & Glynn:198).

3.5 National criterion

When a minority is concentrated in a particular area of a state, and is treated inhumanly by the central dominant authority, this minority might form a national minority looking for autonomy or independence. The demands here are not about restoration of citizenship, but about getting rid of the central authority. Tamils of Srilanka, Kurds of Iraq, Sheiks of Punjab, Kashmirians, Palestinians, Muslims of former Yugoslavia are some of the minority groups who broadly fall into this criterion. It has been noticed that, in most of the cases, central authority pays little respect and honour to the original inhabitants or to the inhabitants of conquered or annexed regions; as a result, avenues for dispute and tussle-mongering are paved into. Simultaneously, some gradual events do take place among the minority groups i.e., reviving of cultural awareness, reviving of tradition and uniqueness, forwarding of economic demands, and finally to the process of independence or autonomy underground movements or direct revolutions. These are not the fixed strategies; these exclusively depend upon suitable historical conditions and favorable situations (Ladkany:www.thrawproject.com). We, the Bengalis, in this sense, were a national minority during the period of Pakistani regime, and had to shed blood to become independent; while for the many African French colonies peaceful negotiations were sufficient.

3.6 Linguistic criterion

Language is an important factor in understanding the majority-minority relations. The language-based minority groups struggle to preserve

their languages and different elements as well. Sociologists opine that there are some considerable differences between linguistic and national minorities; the claims of the former regarding the rights of using, preserving and developing their languages, while the later has predominantly political aspirations. It is to note that, political aspirations do cover different factors including the aspiration of preservation of language. As a national minority the process of flourishing of nationalism within us began as soon as our language had been targeted to be crushed into some time in the early days of Pakistan era.

3.7 Sex criterion

Sex is also considered to be a noticeable criterion since most people assume that two sexes are different in terms of capabilities and qualities, and therefore; should be treated differently (Stwert & Glynn: 198). Such attitude, sociologically, is termed as sexism. Sexism undermines women and keeps them away from social processes. It encourages advanced education for men, limits professional advancement for women, and prepares boys better than girls for a competitive society. Women's numerical majority, if any, is still not assumed to be an important factor to take into consideration. In sexism, minority group is believed to be the subject to the law of three obediences: in childhood, they should obey their parents; as adults, their husbands; and if widowed, their sons. However, in many societies, sexism has resulted such treatments of women as wearing of veils, confinement to homes, sexual harassment, frequent female infanticide particularly at the fetus stage etc. (ibid.: 197). There are some other noticeable groups suffer from discriminatory treatments, and could be treated as minority groups. Some of the noticeable groups are the elderly, the physically handicapped and the homosexuals.

4.0 Prejudice and Discrimination: Major Tools of Oppression

Prejudice comes from two Latin words *prae* (before) and *judicium* (a judgement). Literally, it means to judge before or a judgement expressed before knowing all the fact. Prejudice refers to negative beliefs, attitudes, opinions and feelings towards any social group, object or anything else that are characterized by inflexibility, dogmatism and narrowness of mind (Bolaffi & et.al:227). Prejudice becomes a problem when the performed judgement remains stable or unchanged even after facts or explanations show it to be untrue and unrealistic. A person who

is prejudiced against any social group tends to evaluate its members in a specific manner (usually negative) merely because they belong to that particular group (Baron & Byrne:195). Sociologists indicate three causes of prejudice; (i) Ethnocentrism: All people believe in the supremacy of their own norms and values, and judge others as unworthy and inferior. It is surprising that ethnocentric persons judge their own ways as not only right and superior, but often as natural; (ii) Stereotype: Prejudice necessarily involves stereotyping. Stereotypes are culturally based images and oversimplified descriptions applied to subordinate groups. These are exclusively negative notions and deny the existence of positive characteristics of other groups. Blacks are less intelligent, teenagers are irresponsible, women are emotional & dependent, old people are incapable, gypsies are mysterious; are some of the examples of typical stereotypes. Actually, stereotypes are mental shortcuts or short-hand descriptions for understanding others and making judgements about them (ibid:196), (iii) Scapegoat: Prejudice can be inflamed by making some one a scapegoat. The word scapegoat comes from the ancient practice, described in the Bible, of sacrificing a goat to pay for the sins of people. In sociological sense, scapegoat means blaming of people, particularly the minorities, for the ills of society. The bubonic plague of 1348, known as Black Death in the history, killed about one third of all Europeans; surprisingly minorities were blamed for that curse. Hitler blamed the Jews for the Great Depression in Germany, and even for Germany's loss in world war I. The most expensive use of this ill-concept in modern times was incorporated in the Nazi programs during the world wars in Europe, sociologists opine (Stwert & Glynn:207).

Prejudice, as we have seen, is an attitude that is mostly negative. But discrimination, in turn, a practice or a system of unequal treatment that is usually directed towards minority groups. Both prejudice and discrimination often go together; but these are separate concepts. Discrimination may be defined as an overt behavior which favours one group over the other solely because of being the members of a particular group or category of people. Discrimination denies groups and individuals their unique qualities, characteristics and their place in the community (Phillips:103). Discrimination can take many forms and dimensions, but there are a few modes of discriminations considered as crucial as anything since the whole structural arrangement of dominant-minority relations depends upon them. The major modes are; a)

Economic: By such means a minority group is denied equal opportunity for social mobility as the dominant group controls jobs, land, credit, investment and other sources of resources; b) Education: Preconceived discrimination in education relegates any minority group to a inferior position in the class structure and makes the practice of economic discrimination more easier; c) Politics: Discrimination in political activity indicates of an effort to limit the participation of a minority group in the political process. The denial of political rights to a minority is a denial of human rights; d) Health: Access to medical facilities is a basic right. Discrimination in access to medical facilities makes the existence of the minorities questionable; e) Housing: Discrimination in housing is primarily a matter of segregation that restricts the entrance of a minority group to a specific residential area (Mackee:246-249); f) Violence: Violence is the extreme form of discrimination mostly directed at the members of a minority group because of their memberships in a particular group; g) Cultural Imperialism: Cultural imperialism covers the ideas of generalization of dominant group culture as superior and stereotyping of the minority ones as inferior.

Thus, prejudice based discriminations are, of course, the tools of oppression which are systematically reproduced in all the major economic, political and cultural institutions in different forms and degrees, and deny the rights of minority groups to enjoy a good and happy life (Anderson: www.carbon.cudenver.edu/public/sociology). Prejudice and discrimination both are negative & emotionally loaded-terms, and most people will deny they are prejudiced or that, they discriminate minority groups. But to sociologists, every causes of discrimination is a consequence of a prejudicial attitude. It means, attitude causes behaviour. The relation of prejudice to discrimination is very complex and confusing since it operates within the context of prevailing culture and social formation. Modern sociologists, in this connection, opine that discrimination without prejudice or prejudice without discrimination is also possible. Prejudice without discrimination occurs when a prejudiced person can not discriminate or, discrimination is not so much the behavior of the individuals with prejudicial attitudes. Law, official policy, custom, formal or informal pressure may preclude a prejudiced person to discriminate or may prepare him to discriminate without prejudice for good or for bad. The interrelation between prejudice to discrimination has shown by Robert Merton, an eminent sociologist of modern time, in the following

diagram. Here P stands for prejudice, D stands for discrimination, + means the presence of, and – for absences of;

	P	D
1.	+	+
2.	-	-
3.	+	-
4.	-	+

(Source: Mackee: 315)

The first two relations indicate where there is prejudice there is discrimination, and where there is no discrimination there is no prejudice. In the last two relations both prejudice and discrimination can occur without the influence of each other. For example: a prejudiced person may have a negative attitude towards a minority group, but that person may not discriminate the members of that minority group in giving appointment to his office. It indicates he may not show unequal treatment to the qualified people towards whom he possesses negative attitude. Another good example is that: an owner (white) of a company may be impressed by the qualification of a Negro job seeker; but he may not appoint that man to a position because he is afraid his clients may not like to deal with a black, and such, the business may suffer. Nonetheless, many forms of discriminations derive from prejudiced attitudes and continuing discrimination can create prejudice to a great extent (Rahman: 104).

5.0 Some Patterns of Intervention-Cohesive or Coercive

Dominant groups all over the world are dealing with differences between them and with the minority groups in a number of ways. Some of the ways are quite humane and harmonious, others are not, since they often result in annihilation or mistreatment towards minority groups. George Simpson & Milton Yinger (1972) have given a very useful typology consisting of five patterns for inter-group hostility or co-operation (ibid:104).

5.1 Assimilation

Assimilation refers to complete integration or absorption of a minority group into the dominant community. When assimilation occurs, two groups that used to be distinct are no longer distinguishable from one

another or the groups are no longer able to be told apart (Anderson: www.carbon.cudenver.edu/public/sociology). Assimilation takes two forms: cultural and biological. Although assimilation may seem to be harmonious but there are a lot of instances which show the identities (cultural and biological) of minority groups have been completely eliminated by being assimilated into the dominant group.

5.2 Pluralism

Pluralism is a form of accommodation; in which, minority groups retain their distinct cultural differences and traditions, and keep loyal to their own groups. In a pluralistic society different groups live together peacefully, and almost equally enjoy all political, economic and social rights and opportunities (Horton & Hunt:358). The process is successful when the dominant group permits and encourages other groups to retain their group identity and cultural unity. The standard example of cultural pluralism is Switzerland where four ethnic groups speaking German, French, Italian & Roman retain their sense of group identity and live together amicably under the same government. Original Swiss inhabitants do not feel their religion, culture and ethnicity are threatened by other Swiss. Other good examples of cultural pluralism include countries like Canada (English & French), Belgium (French & Flemish speaking) and Malta (Greek & Turk). In those countries different ethnic groups; though speak in different languages, live in harmony (ibid.). However, pluralism is sometimes doomed to failure as it is not very easy to maintain. Conflict within the groups is a common barrier in this regard. The 'mini-wars in Africa, in the Balakns, in Srilanka and in India are some of the living examples of this failure. But cultural pluralism has no alternative to ensuring stability and solidarity in society (Anderson :www.carbon.cudenver.edu/public/sociology).

5.3 Population Transfer or Relocation

Relocation or population transfer is a simple way of treating differences among people. If the groups cannot tolerate one another; or incase of intense hostilities between the groups, the easiest method is to keep away the minority groups from the scene altogether. This was the most preferred method for dealing with differences between the Muslims and the Hindus in India during the time of partition in 1947. The Muslims were moved off into Pakistan and Bangladesh from India and vice versa. In the former Yugoslavia, Bosnian Muslims had been forced out

off areas conquered or occupied by the Christian Serbs. Population transfer is a kind of partitioning within a society that covets deep lasting problems for the areas where the minority groups are forced to live in (ibid.).

5.4 Subjugation

Subjugation occurs when the dominant group wants to continue its dominance over the subordinate groups identifiably. Dominant group, with the help of this strategy, places the subordinate group in slavery or in near slavery. Subjugation generally means that the minority groups have limited rights and freedoms in the society of which they are a part. Subjugation is a common policy, it occurs in many societies of the world in different dimensions. We can cite the example of colonial rule as an effective subjugation strategy. Colonial rule maintained its privilege and domination over the inhabitants of occupied territories, made them minorities and wanted to continue the process (Rahman:108).

5.5 Extermination or Annihilation

Extermination or annihilation has been one of the most extreme policies and a frequently used device adopted by many dominant groups in several parts of the world. Extermination, as a term, is equally uttered with genocide. Genocide (*genos* is the Greek word for race) means the preconceived and attempted extermination of a group. One of the greatest genocide in the history was seen during the World War II when Nazi Germany deliberately killed approximately six million European Jews. Jews were herded into cattle cars, transported to concentration camps and were forced to sent to gas chambers. This tragedy is known as the 'Holocaust' in history. In the former Yugoslavia, Bosnian Muslims were not only uprooted from their territories but also slain in large numbers by the Serbs. Details of extermination in the twentieth century will probably exceed those of all earlier centuries in world's history (Horton & Hunt:357).

Sociologist David Popenoe. (1986) opined of all the above mentioned patterns only assimilation & cultural pluralism may be called the *patterns of acceptance*, while the remaining ones may be called the *patterns of rejection*. In the patterns of acceptance minority groups; in terms of enjoying rights and opportunities, stand on the same platform with the dominant group. But in the patterns of rejection, there are

possibilities of violation of human and of other fundamental rights (Rahman:105). In the former patterns, social harmony and social solidarity remain as the norms of society; but in the case of later patterns, brutality and hostility are the characteristics of society.

6.0 Rights of Minorities: Role of International Declarations

In this part of discussion, we shall try to shed light briefly on some of the basic human rights of minority groups, and will examine the role of international declarations to preserve and to protect those rights. The rights of every human being are too precious to count; that is why, eminent French social philosopher Jacques Maritain proclaims:

“the human person possesses rights because of the very fact that it is a person, a whole, a master of itself and of its acts-----the human person has the right to be respected, is the subject of rights, possesses rights. These are things which are owed to man because of the very fact that he is man” (cited in Sen: 44)

Protection of minorities started long back in seventeenth century with the introduction of provisions of the protection of religious and ethnic minorities in treaties settling some of the basic European political and territorial matters. The first important treaty of its kind is the ‘Treaty of Westphalia’ (1648) dealing with mutual tolerance of religious communities in Germany (Anonymous: www.ijf.hr/eng/euz/vasiljevic.pdf). Nevertheless, in the history of mankind, protection of minorities has been one of the critical concerns since some of the most systematic violations of human rights around the globe have targeted the minorities in particular. As human beings, the rights of minorities must be respected, promoted and fulfilled. Every state has an undeniable responsibility in this connection. The UNO, as the supreme organization, has obliged its nation-states to preserve and promote the basic rights of minority groups. Some of the important rights are:

6.1 The right of non-discrimination

Discrimination is a major barrier to the full human development of minority groups. The right to non-discrimination is contained in all international human rights treaties with equal emphasis. The UNO General Declaration on Human Rights (1948) firmly depicts [Article-1]: all human beings are born free and equal in rights and dignity---. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965) is assumed to be the core international treaty for promoting the right to non-discrimination. It covers several provisions not only to ensure the participation of minority groups in the development process but also to promote their fundamental freedoms (MRGI: www.minorityrights.org). The convention has obliged the state parties [Article 5]; to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, colour, national or ethnic origin, to equality in the law, notably in the enjoyment of the following economic, social and cultural rights: (i) the right to work; (ii) the right to housing; (iii) the right to public health, medical care, social security and social services; (iv) the right to education--- (ibid.). The right to non-discrimination is established in laws in most of the countries. But in practice, government policies and development programmes surreptitiously deny equal participation of minority groups and are biased in favour of a particular sector or social strata from which minorities are deliberately excluded. As far as the declarations of the ICERD are concerned, states are required to ensure development and legal protection of minority groups and individuals. Thus, avenues for agreement and friendship in between the groups may be created (Anonymous: www.see-educoop.net/education).

6.2 The right of recognition

The UN International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) depicts [Article 27]: in these states where there are ethnic, religious or language minorities, persons who belong to such minorities must not be deprived of right, together with the other members of the group, to have their own cultural life, to confess their own religion or to use their own language (Anonymous: www.ijfhr/eng/euz/vasiljevic.pdf). The central message of this article further elaborated in the UN Declaration on Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) [Article 11]: states should protect the existence of national or ethnic, cultural or religiously defined identity of minorities within their respective territories (Guhathakurta: www.adhunika.org). The obstacle in fulfilling the obligation of this particular article is that;

some countries do not want to recognize the existence of minorities within their territories. The non-recognition might come from fear of certain claims: economic, political, social and many more. But it has clearly been affirmed by the UN Human Rights Committee; charged with monitoring the implications of ICCPR, the existence of minorities is a matter of fact, found in every society, not a matter of law. However, recognition is essential for development; and the states, under treaty obligations, are required to take positive measures so as to ensure that minorities can nurture and safeguard their distinct identities (MRGI:www.minorityrights.com).

6.3 The right of participation

Minorities have the right to participate in programmes and initiatives carried out for economic, social, political and cultural betterment and change. The necessity of implementation of this right has reiterated in the different articles of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights (1948) and in the ICCPR (1966). Some of the worth-mentioning declarations proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are: the right to take part in the government and the right to equal access to public sector [Article-21]; the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community [Article-27]; the right to work, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to form and join trade unions [Article-23] (Rahman:71&72). Besides, the ICCPR proclaims [Article-25]: every citizen shall enjoy the right and opportunity to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives (MRGI:www.minorityrights.org). It is a sad demise, that the development programmes and policies in most of the countries do not address minorities as specific beneficiaries. The importance of participation can never be overlooked to have the benefit of a cohesive social formation.

However, there have been a lot of declarations, conventions, obligations as well as formulation of monitoring bodies to ensure that, persons belonging to national, ethnic, religions or linguistic minorities may enjoy the right to realize their culture, to profess and practice their religion and to use their mother tongue in private and in public; and to establish their own part in the social and political life and to have a real protection of their civil, political, economic and social life (Anonymous:www.see-educoop.net/education). But the obligations and declarations are found to be more written than practice; the attitude of

the leaders of all the nation-states towards minorities should be rectified first. This is the pledge for the future development of civil society.

7.0 Minorities in Bangladesh

It is good to note that the constitution of Bangladesh does not distinguish any particular group or section thereof as minority. According to Article 6 (2), the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis; Article 27 states that all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law; and Article 28 (1) depicts, states shall not discriminate against any citizens on ground only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. However, in the opinion of modern sociologists, any multi-cultural society is constituted with people of different categories; of them, some are considered as majorities and some are treated as minorities since every society is stratified in terms of the relationships of superiority and subordination. Minorities, almost in every society, have to live in a subordinate position and enjoy little authority over societal matters. The desire for a classless society seems to be an unattainable goal and the concept of classless society is regarded nothing but a myth. The existence of minorities in Bangladesh can be determined on the basis of some important criteria e.g., sex, number, religion, language and ethnicity. In terms of sex women are considered to be the minorities; in terms of religion the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Christians are the minorities. Some social scientists say about the Ahmediya or Kadiani community as a religious minority group. According to numerical criterion old people may be treated as minorities. There are as many as thirty-five indigenous groups who are largely concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and in the plain land of northeast and northwest regions of the country. They are the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh. Besides, river-gypsies or charmer communities, hermaphrodites may also be deemed as ethnic minorities for their distinct cultural entities. The Biharis, who are mostly concentrated in and around the capital city as well as in Syedpur, Rangpur and Mymensingh, represent a linguistic minority group since they are the only Urdu speaking people in Bangladesh. Apparently, within the composition of minority groups the Hindus represent 10.5% of the population to represent the largest religious minority group in Bangladesh, the Christians make up 0.32% of the population, the Buddhists (mostly cover hilly ethnic people) hold 0.59%, and other minorities including the indigenous people and the Biharis amounting to 0.26% of the total population.

(Ghuhathkurta:www.adhunika.org). On the other hand, both women and the elderly constitute 48% and 2% of the total population respectively. These communities with their diverse cultures, languages and traditions contribute a lot to making Bangladesh a culturally rich country.

Bangladesh bears the unique qualities of a moderate country. The followers of different religions are living here in communal amity & social harmony. They participate whole-heartedly in each other's religious occasions & festivals and stand together through thick and thin and thus, uphold the traditional cultural values of the society. In the short history of Bangladesh, we notice only a few attempts of extortion or attacks upon religious minorities. But these are all isolated incidences as heralded by some imprudent orthodox people who have no room in mainstream of society. However, isolated instances can not be a threat to imperil the very fabric of religious minority communities in Bangladesh. Every government, irrespective of its political identity, is obliged to the nation to ensure peace and stability by not patronizing any group of people to use religion as a pretext to breach laws and to create strife between people. Nevertheless, the blind followers of some extreme political parties want to use religion as a tool of their political ends though there is no provision of force detestation and oppression in religion. But religion could not be used as a political end in a country like Bangladesh where the mass people are well aware of the real enemies of society. They did not and hopefully would never allow Bangladesh to be an unhindered playground for the extremists since all the inhabitants of Bangladesh including the religious minorities living in Bangladesh have the right to have been guaranteed of their personal security, self-determination and freedom of voice.

We know the constitution of Bangladesh gives no recognition of the existence of any ethnic community because the inhabitants of Bangladesh were to be known as Bangladeshi. But sociologically, we must admit the existence of indigenous or aboriginal people in the name of different ethnic communities for solely of their distinct cultural identities. Hence, if we coerce any ethnic community to be assimilated with the mainstream culture it would be suicidal for them as happened to Chittagong Hill Tracts. Despite today's hard-earned peaceful coexistence and tolerance, the situation of Chittagong Hill Tracts, where most of the ethnic minority communities live had been turned into a chronic issue for Bangladesh for many years. From the beginning of Pakistan period some imprudent policies of successive governments had been directed to be a threat to their traditional foundation of living

and livelihood. The Kapti Hydro Electric Project had flooded their land and homes and displaced one sixth of the population. Then, the policy of “Bengalizing” by the way of making room for permanent settlement of poor Muslim peasants of the main land further aggravated the situation there. These subsequent policies had led to the creation of an armed indigenous insurgent group, Shanti Bahini, and a start of civil war which gave a lot of trouble to the governments in power (Rahman:<http://www.idproject.org>). However, the situation has completely been changed as some assimilation of ideologies have been established between the government and the ethnic groups. Some pragmatic policies and programmes have also been adopted at the state level with a view to making Chittagong Hill Tracts a land of peace and development. But it is, on the other hand, a matter of sad demise as noticed by some social researchers, the process of conversion to Christianity is going on in a disguise mood in many ethnic areas of Bangladesh. The process started from the British period and the imperial government patronized unhindered propagation of Christianity to a great extent among the backward indigenous communities. We can cite the example of Garo community; today, almost 99% of the total population have been converted to Christianity by sacrificing their primitive religious values and beliefs. Christian missionaries, many international NGOs and aid-workers are actively working in the areas of indigenous people to make the purpose a success. However, conversion to Christianity is not alone in the scene; a lot of efforts are also being adopted on the part of the preachers of other religions. But, as a matter of fact, conversion to Christianity has outnumbered any other similar efforts. Though, as stated in Article 42 (1) (a) of the constitution; every citizen has the right to profess, practice and propagate any religion, but to sociologists, religious conversion is not a redemption, rather it is deemed as a persecution, a slyness, and a tool for hegemony. Government must come forward to stop the preaching immediately in the areas of ethnic people so as to restore the cultural and religious distinctiveness.

Women in Bangladesh, despite being constituted nearly half of the population, are counted as a minority group. It has been proved that the status of women is much lower than that of men. Traditional cultural, social and religious values, customs and practices have confirmed the lower status of women, and have limited their scopes for participation in the development process of the country (MoWCA:7). They have limited access to education, technical and vocational training, health care facilities, social welfare services, employment opportunities,

freedom of decision making at all levels, political process and property share. Besides, women of this country frequently have to confront physical violence, mental abuse, torture and sexual harassment both at home and outside (Hossain & et.al. : xix). Now-a-days, a lot of interventions are being carried out both at government & non-government levels to ensure full development and advancement of women with a view to guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of legal rights and fundamental freedoms by elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Still, a lot more efforts to be adopted in this regard; but above all, people must be made aware of the potentials and contributions of women in society.

The elderly people of Bangladesh do also cover all the criteria to be treated as a minority group. The problems of the elderly are innumerable; and are compounded by economic, cultural, social, psychological and biological factors. There has been a little attention on the matters related to the elderly since the care of aged people in Bangladesh has been regarded exclusively as a private or a family matter. Sociologists have noticed family worldwide is becoming a vulnerable social institution in meeting the economic, emotional and social needs of the elderly. That is why it is suggested, every where state should come forward with condign policies and programmes that would empower the family to share and bear the responsibilities through a wide range of social and welfare services for better caring the elderly. However, in our traditional societal context, the elderly people still are the most esteemed ones in every family. But ironically, today, a process has been started to treat the elderly as economic or social burden. Consequently, to restore their position in society, to maintain solidarity among the generations and to responding to the needs of the aging people appropriate actions must be directed to support, protect and strengthen family. Thus, we can discuss the situation of minority people in Bangladesh. But the sociological interpretation of the situation of minorities in Bangladesh pushes us to be on the horns of dilemma, because we can neither say that the society has been able to preserve every privileges for the minorities nor they are living in a situation which stands as a serious threat for their existence. Perhaps, this is one of the basic features of a multi-cultural society.

8.0 Concluding Remarks – In Search of a Solution

Problems lying with minorities are innumerable; only a few societies have been able to address the problems with emphatic attention and care. As far as the solutions of the problems of minorities are concerned, there should be some well-directed approaches and initiatives. Sociologists, in this connection, have talked about two basic approaches: one is called individual approach, and the other is group approach. Both the approaches may equally be applicable almost in every societal context.

8.1 The individual approach

This approach holds the theme that state should protect the fundamental rights and basic freedoms of all individuals. It has, then, no responsibility to preserve or promote the identity and interest of any particular group including the minorities (Horton & Hunt:358). Majority or minority identity, according to this approach, is an immaterial factor to consider. The approach assumes each individual solely as a person, not as a member of a particular group. Government should seek to provide individuals with equal opportunities for their overall advancement. To achieve the objectives of this approach, it is required to evaluate the individuals on the basis of their merits and skills first so as to remove the structural obstacles from the society. And, above all, there will be no official effort or formal measure to preserve any particular culture or to destroy any other (ibid:359). If the philosophy of the approach may be materialized, each group will find that the state is doing justice to them. However, the goal of this approach is to make an integrated society in which, members of all groups may equally participate in social life according to their talents and interests, and would stand together for any noble work (Rahman: 111).

8.2 The Group Approach

The essence of this approach is that, the government should support & promote the survival strategies of minority communities in particular; and, their cultural distinctiveness should be protected. In group approach, 'cultural relativity' is a much uttered concept which means no culture is superior or a threat to any other culture; cultures are simply different. The government or the dominant group will ensure that all minorities are living in peace and harmony with their distinct cultural identity as well as social opportunities are being distributed equitably.

Sociologists have given paramount importance on pragmatic applications of these theoretical interventions with true spirit and real zeal. This is a must to uphold the distinct identities of minorities, to safeguard their lives and property, and to make them equal in all respects with the members of dominant group. Our Bangladesh society, we should admit, is stigmatized with fundamentalism, intolerance, ill-feeling and mistrust between the groups. These shameful features of the society ever and anon mislead us to overlook how viciously the minorities are crushed into, condemned to wither away, or denied the right to develop. Hence, there is a significant need to address the problems of minorities in Bangladesh with greater attention and care along with adoption of a strategy of 'priority concern' from the state level. The areas of 'priority concern' must encompass Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen's five entities of freedom e.g., political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency quarantines and protective security (Mukto-mona:www.mukto-mona.com.humanrights/minority). However, the overall situation of minorities in Bangladesh will not improve unless the implication of fundamental rights depicted in the state constitution as well as different UNO declarations, recommendations on human rights and minority rights could be materialized. Furthermore, we must work for a pluralistic society; and to have the aroma of it, the attitude of majority group must be directed towards alliance and fortitude. This is the prime requirement to uphold the philosophy of 'unity in diversity'. The strength of 'unity in diversity' gives birth of a society free from prejudice and discrimination. This is a challenge for Bangladesh, and undoubtedly; the challenge is very tough, but is it impossible to meet?

References

- Ahmed, Imtiaz (2002) *Violence Against Minorities in Bangladesh*, <http://www.alliancesouthasia.org>, accessed on 28/2/2005
- Anderson, Richard H. (1997) *Racial and Ethnic Inequality*, <http://carbon.eudenvr.edu/public/sociology>, accessed on 12/3/2005.
- Anonymous, *Protection of Minorities in International Law*, www.ijf.hr/eng/euz/vasilqevic.pdf, accessed on 28/2/2005
- Anonymous, *International Institutions and Tools for Human Rights and Minority Rights*, www.see-educoop.net/education, accessed on 28/2/2005
- Baron, Robert A. & Byrne, Donn (2001) *Social Psychology*, New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited.
- Bennett, Clinton (1988) *Religious Minorities: Challenge or Threat*, www.clintonbennett.net www.religiousfreedom.com, accessed on 28/2/05
- Bolaffi Guido and et.al. (2003) *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*, London: SAGE Publications
- Broom, Leonard & Selznick Philip (1963) *Sociology*, USA: Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated.
- Gisbert, Pascual S. J. (1960) *Fundamentals of Sociology*, Bombay: Orient Longmans.
- GOB. (1997) *Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Report in Accordance with Article 19 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, Dhaka: Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.
- Guhathakurta, Meghna (undated) *Minority Rights, Identity Politics and Gender in Bangladesh*, www.adhunik.org, accessed on 23/04/05
- Horton Paul B. & Hunt Chester L. (1980) *Sociology*, Tokyo: McGraw-Hill Kogakusha Ltd.
- Hossain, Ekram & et. al. (2002) *Assessment of Attitudes of Govt. Officials of Different Levels Towards Gender Issues in Bangladesh*, Bangladesh: United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).
- Kabir, Muhammad Gholam (1986) *Minority Politics in Bangladesh*, New Delhi : Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.
- Koenig Samuel & Hopper Rex D, Gross Feliks (1960) *Sociology-A Book of Reading*, USA : Prentice-Hall Inc.

- Ladkany, Samer (2004) *The Concept of Minority*, www.thrawproject.com, accessed on 25/2/03.
- MacIver, RM & Page Charles H (1965) *Society: An Introductory Analysis*, Bombay : Macmillan and Company Limited.
- Mckee, James B (1969) *Introduction to Sociology*, New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc.
- Mukta-mona, Dhaka Source (undated) *Minority Oppression In Bangladesh: Report of the Public Inquiry Commission*, <http://www.mukto-mona.com>, accessed on 28/3/2005.
- Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) [2003] *UNDP Policy Note on Minorities Project*, www.minorityrights.org, accessed on 28/2/2005.
- Phillips, Bernards (1970) *Sociology: Social Structure and Change*, London: The Macmillan Company.
- Rahman, Md. Habibur Rahman (1995) *Some Thoughts on the Patterns of Race and Ethnic Relations and Human Rights*, in A.B.M. Mafizul Islam Patwari, (edt.) *Human Rights in Contemporary International Law*, Dhaka : Humanist and Ethical Association of Bangladesh.
- Rahman, Shah Asif (undated) *Bangladesh: Land Disputes Perpetuate Internal Displacement*, <http://www.idproject.org>, accessed on 28/2/2005
- Rezwan & Hussain, Sharif (2003 & 2004) *Bangladesh Ahamadiyya's Under Siege*, www.nirajweb.net, accessed on 25/2/2005
- Samad, Saleem (1998) *State of Minorities in Bangladesh: From Secular to Islamic Hegemony*, <http://mukto-mona.com>, accessed on 28/2/2005
- Sen, Rangalal (1993) *Reference to Minorities in Bangladesh*, in Debesh Chandra Bhattacharya & et.al. (edt.) *Communal Discrimination in Bangladesh. Facts and Documents*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.
- Stwert, Elbert W. and Glynn James A. (1985) *Introduction to Sociology*, Singapore : McGraw Hill Book Company.
- Stwert, Ebert W. (1981) *Sociology : The Human Science*, USA: McGraw Hill Book Company, New York. www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/race.html, accessed on 25/2/2005
- Whitaker, Ben (1986) *Minorities : A question of human rights?* England : Pergamon Press, Oxford