



April und August 2022

Detained for discussing the difference between science and religion

Bangladesh

In April 2022, teacher Hriday Chandra Mondal has been released in Bangladesh. He had been imprisoned for talking about the difference between science and religion in his classes. Until August 2022, all charges against him were subsequently dropped.

Before Amnesty International demanded that Bangladeshi authorities should immediately and unconditionally release Hriday Chandra Mondal. The schoolteacher was arrested on charges of “hurting religious sentiment” after he discussed in the classroom the distinction between religion and science. In the discussion at school, where teachers should be free to discuss any ideas or facts without fear of reprisals, the teacher argued that “religion is a matter of faith” while “science looks at evidence”, according to a recording that was filmed by [a student/someone in the class and?] shared on social media. In the audio recording accessed by Amnesty International, the teacher said: “There is no evidence in religion. Religion in the end says God will take care of everything. Religion offers memorized words whereas science shows evidence”.

On 22 March, two days after the recording was made, the school’s headteacher told the media that students and other people from the community were demonstrating outside the school calling for punishment for Hriday Chandra Mondal. Later that day, an office assistant of the high school filed a case before the police against the teacher, who was subsequently arrested.

“Hriday Chandra Mondal is detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression and must be released immediately and unconditionally,” said Smriti Singh, Deputy Regional Director for South Asia at Amnesty International.

“Hriday Chandra Mondal’s detention is emblematic of a disturbing trend in Bangladesh where the space for free expression is rapidly shrinking. Detaining a teacher for simply discussing ideas in class sets a dangerous precedent where even challenging students to think critically can now land someone in jail”

Amnesty International has been documenting a growing sense of fear among people in Bangladesh stemming from the arbitrary detention and growing criminalization of the right to freedom of expression. Hriday Chandra Mandal's case only exacerbates the situation and represents a direct threat for one of the last bastions of free expression in the country.

Several civil society and academic organizations, including the Bangladesh Astronomical Association and the Centre for Women Journalists, have condemned the arrest and raised concerns about the ability of academics to teach. Similarly, human rights defenders, lawyers and teachers around the country have raised questions about the time of the arrest, which according to them appears to be politically motivated.

"Hriday Chandra Mondal's detention is a shameful demonstration of the erosion of the human rights situation in Bangladesh. The authorities must take urgent measures to improve the conditions that allow people to express freely and safely, and ensure that teachers can speak freely in class without fear of reprisals," said Smriti Singh.

Background

Under international human rights law, the exercise of the right to freedom of expression may only be subjected to certain restrictions if they are provided by a clearly formulated law and are demonstrably necessary and proportionate for the purpose of protecting specified public interests (national security, public order, or public health or morals) or the rights or reputations of others. Protection of abstract concepts or religious or other beliefs, or the religious sensibilities of their adherents, is not a permissible ground for restricting the right to freedom of expression.

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief recently observed that "sensitivity concerning religious sentiments of different religious and belief communities should become an important feature of culture of communication... Subjective feelings of offensiveness, however, should never guide legislative action, court decisions or other State activities".