

THE RITES OF THE PASSAGE: RISE OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

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A cursory look into the way, in which the western political ideals have been internalised by the developing countries, would reveal that the true liberal democratic concepts have not found a clear expression in their political systems. Precisely, secularism and the dictum of separation of religion from politics, which were a natural concomitant of the principle of nation state, are very conspicuous by their absence in the discourse of developing countries. In fact, religion is being advanced only for political purposes and used for mere sloganeering. However, the impact of religious extremism has dwindled in the face of modernization and liberalization in the post-Cold War era. But the 11 September catastrophe seemed to have turned the applecart, once again in the favour of the *Jihadi* elements. The infamous Gujarat riots in India, the harsh treatment being meted out to the minorities across the whole of South Asia are a couple of case in points. The recent extremist activities in Bangladesh have shown its face in various forms including fundamentalism, Talibanisation of Bangladeshi society, arms smuggling, Bangla Bhai' s causalities and also religion as a political instrument by the political parties for their vested gains.

The Face of Present Jingoism in Bangladesh

Bangladesh known for a liberal and moderate Islamic state has been much diluted because of the rise of fringe elements in the nation polity. In the last general election of October 1, 2001, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia scored a landslide victory, capturing an absolute majority of 192 seats by itself and 215 with its hard-liner allies Jamaat-e-Islam and Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ). This alliance with a two-third majority in the parliament is in a position to pass any constitutional amendments. Many moderate Muslims and minority communities in Bangladesh and overseas are concerned that with the BNP's accession to power, the Islamic component of Bangladeshi nationalism would acquire higher salience, which would not only

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adversely affect the image of moderate Islamic state but also pose problems for the Indian sub-continental's pluralistic society. These Islamic components of the ruling alliance represent the forces of the 1947,¹ which played an anti-liberation role in 1971².

In the sign of how the wave is changing, the ruling BNP's electoral alliance came to power with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami that won 17 seats in the parliament. The Jamaat had actively opposed the independence from Pakistan in 1971. Now having its voice in the government, and is moving cautiously towards its goal of an Islamic state. Its leaders, Matiur Rahman Nizami was appointed agriculture minister while Ali Ahsan Mohammad got the social welfare portfolio. "In a developing and agriculture based country like Bangladesh, these are powerful positions," says a Western diplomat in Dhaka³. Its alleviation to government has encourage other more extreme Islamic fundamentalist groups and individuals of the order of its student's wing, Islamic Chatra Shibir. They range from rabble-rousing cleric Maulana Ubaidul Haq to around a dozen radical groups often referred to as the Bangladeshi Taliban. For example, Maulana Ubaidul Haq, preaching to hundreds of thousands of people, including cabinet ministers, at the national mosque in Dhaka, condemned the US war on terrorism and called for a jihad against the United States. They launched a fund to help the victims of American war in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq.⁴The incidents like Harkat's attack on American Cultural Center in Kolkata and of Inter Service Intelligence (ISI)' securing a foothold in West Bengal through the infiltration of extremists across the border with Bangladesh⁵ has created more bitterness in the society of the sub-continent. It also criticised Bangladesh for "abetting" the ISI of Pakistan in its alleged scheme of destabilizing the India's northeast states.⁶ A recent happening in which a large cache of arms was confiscated in Bangladesh with an explicit involvement of regime backed extremists

¹ These forces supported concept of Two Nation Theories i.e. the Hindus and the Muslims are two different nations.

² Opposed Liberation war of Bangladesh and wanted a united Pakistan.

³ Lintner, Bertil, 'Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 4, 2002, pp. 15-16.

⁴ Ibid, p.14.

⁵ Ibid, p.15.

⁶ *POT: Bangladesh Series*, July, 2000, pp. 875-6.

serves as a worrying sign in the direction of the vitiated state of affairs. A purported aim could have been to curb the Talibanised elements in the domestic scene and act as a helping hand to the North Eastern insurgents in the Indian neighbourhood thus fulfilling its utility as a potent political weapon.

The political centres hope that the Bangladesh National Party with its centrist credentials would usher in an era of state neutrality in religious matters have been belied. A notable outburst of Ummah's frenzy at the staging of 'Katha Krishnakoli', a play by one Sombit Shaha, has created communal commotion in Bangladesh. Another incident of the murder of a dissenting poet in Northern Bogra has too discoloured the scene which began with the police personnel banning the play nearly a couple of years back⁷ A quick look into the historical baggage is mandatory to properly understand the deep-rooted fissures in the Bangladeshi polity and society with a now sparkling communal colour.

Historical Perspective

There is a stereotype held perception that the history of Bangladesh begins with its struggle against West Pakistan in general and with its independence in particular. But, for Bangladeshis the emergence of Bangladesh on 16th December 1971 was the culmination of the struggle of Bengali nationalism, launched in mid-thirties, to establish a separate identity of its own. It was not only distinct from the Hindu majority of the province but also from their co-religionists of the other regions of India⁸. For the Bangladeshis the history of Bangladesh does not just start with the liberation struggle of the country. In fact, for them, the Muslim consciousness in India started by the twelfth century itself. The conquest of Bengal by Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1204 AD, Muslims found themselves in a superior position in the political and military context. This change in the political frame of reference signaled the dawn of a new Muslim consciousness in Bangladesh.⁹

The most of Bangladeshi scholars do not agree that Hindu-Muslim differences came into being because of the 'divide-and-rule' policy of the British. For them, there were fundamental cultural, religious

⁷ *The Hindu*, September 28, 2002.

⁸ Zaheer, Haston, *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nationalism*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁹ Osmany, Shireen, *Bangladesh Nationalism, History of Dialectics and Dimensions*, Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1992, p. 13.