

# The Daily Star

## **A spectre is haunting Bangladesh, the spectre of communalism**

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Given the doubts, confusions and anxieties of the modern age, it is perhaps expected—and certainly obvious—that there is a resurgence of religiosity almost everywhere. Unfortunately, this is not being expressed as a greater commitment to personal virtue or piety, but in increasing levels of misunderstanding, bigotry, and violence against the "other."

So, if it's a world-wide phenomenon, why should we be so incensed that it should also be expressed here in Bangladesh? The answer to that question consists of two words: Liberation War. One aspect of the war was certainly reactive: it was a response to the economic disparities, political unfairness, and cultural callousness that Pakistan had represented, and the genocidal attack it unleashed on its Bengali population in 1971. But it was not fought in an ideological vacuum. It represented a struggle for the establishment of some principles that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had exemplified, the people had demanded, the historical forces had compelled, and the constitution had enshrined.

It is for this reason that the vandalism and arson inflicted on Hindu citizens lately was so painful for those who had fought, suffered and died for a democratic, socialist and secular country. It was not only an attack on some puja mandaps, but an affront to the foundational pillars of the state.

Secularism was the simplest of the state principles adopted by the constitution. After all, we had already renounced a religion-based state and established one defined by language, geography, and an overarching cultural unity. This did not mean the rejection of religion as personal belief, commitment, or as a marker of identity, but only that, in the Enlightenment/Voltairean/Jeffersonian tradition, it would not be reflected in the public sphere (one may hear echoes of that in the Medina Charter as well). This sentiment was encapsulated in the slogan that the state belongs to all citizens, but faith belongs to the individual person. The issue appeared to be settled.

The optimism and clarity of that hope was soon mired in confusion and controversy. After Bangabandhu's dastardly assassination in 1975, "religionist" elements (i.e. those using Islam for political objectives) re-emerged in the public arena. Taking advantage of gradual compromises that various regimes had made with them, they were able to peel back secular promises and guarantees. Even the constitutional status of the concept became murky.

The Fifth Amendment in 1979 removed the word "secularism" from the constitution, and the Islamic invocation was inserted at the beginning of the text. The Eighth Amendment in 1988 declared that Islam would be the "state religion." In 2011, the 15th Amendment restored secularism as a fundamental principle of state policy, and prohibited any discrimination based on faith. However, the invocation as well as the constitutional position of Islam remained in place. Thus, Bangladesh claimed the odd distinction of professing to be secular and simultaneously declaring a state religion.

These "religionist" forces steadily consolidated their presence. Prof Abul Barkat, who wrote the book "Political Economy of Madrasa Education in Bangladesh," has estimated that, between 1970 and 2008, the number of Alia madrasas increased from 2,721 to 14,152, and the number of Qawmi madrasas could be anything between 13,902 (government estimate in 2015) and 33,000 (Bangla Tribune, January 20, 2020). These numbers do not include almost 70,000 mosque-based Furqania maktabas and more than 4,000 Hafezia madrasas, as of 2008 (Banglapedia).

To underscore their growing authority, the Qawmi madrasas, which are beyond the scope or authority of the government in terms of educational content or testing standards, were able to get recognition of their Dawrah-e-Hadith degree as equivalent to an official Master's degree in 2017.

They were also able to tinker with the curricula of the "secular" education system. In 2017, several chapters, written by people such as Lalou, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Gyandas, Humayun Azad, and Rabindranath Tagore, were quietly removed from school textbooks and replaced by more "Islamist" pieces by Shah Ahmad Sagor, Alaol, Golam Mostafa, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Habibullah Bahar. Similar efforts continue to this day.

In a rather spectacular display of their resolve and strength, they publicly demanded and eventually succeeded in the removal of the Lady Justice statue (a universal symbol of blind justice and the rule of law) from the High Court premises because they considered statues to be inconsistent with Islam. Even though the judgement came from the courts, the decision was fully supported by the ruling regime.

They also felt sufficiently emboldened to carry out acts of repression and violence against minority communities. Odhakar reported that between 2007 and 2019, 12 people belonging to other religions were killed, 1,536 injured, and 1,013 properties and 390 temples attacked. Hindus bore the brunt of this bigotry, though other faith communities

also suffered. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) reported 3,710 attacks exclusively on Hindu communities (10 deaths and 862 injuries) between January 2013 and September 2021.

It's possible that some of this could be driven by people coveting the land and properties of the Hindus. But the attitudes, rhetoric, and behaviour that are routinely displayed cannot be explained by that materialist explanation alone. Given this pall of threat and intimidation, there was a steady emigration of Hindus. From 13.5 percent of the population in 1971, their numbers dwindled to 10.5 percent in 1991, and 8.5 percent in 2011.

Therefore, the recent attacks on Hindus were neither sudden nor unprecedented. However, the scale and severity of the attacks, the geographic distribution of the assaults, and inflicting this during the biggest festival of Bengali Hindus to maximise their sense of fear, shock and pain, have had a jarring effect. It is imperative to ask why it happened.

It is probably unhelpful to consider this merely as an administrative, personnel or policing failure. That plays into the blame-shifting culture that we have perfected. Also, simply saying that an OC, or a UNO, or chairman, or mayor, or detective is responsible is to trivialise the issue, and after someone is transferred, demoted or symbolically "punished," it allows us to congratulate ourselves for "solving" the problem and "sternly" dispensing justice. It treats this as a disaggregated "incident" and ignores the structural nature of the failure(s) that it exposed.

Similarly, the finger-pointing excesses of our political leaders, with their pious platitudes and their glib peddling of conspiracy theories, are embarrassing since they were all, in varying degrees, responsible for creating this situation. These "religionists" were allowed, sometimes invited, to become part of the bargaining-based and alliance-oriented arrangements that came into existence as purely cynical and opportunistic transactions for mutual advantage. These policies of "appeasement," the Faustian bargains that we made, and our willingness to repudiate our history and forsake our ideals for temporary gain eventually created the Frankenstein we have to confront today.

Moreover, the two major political parties have never been particularly concerned about the safety and welfare of the Hindus. One can afford to be indifferent about Hindus because it takes them for granted as a captive vote bank, while the other remains unconcerned since it would never garner their support anyway.

What these events starkly exposed were problems in our understanding and practice of democracy. Democracy is not a proclamation, a poster, a lecture or a completed project. Nurturing it requires effort, patience and courage. It is famously said that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." The requisite effort has been lacking here.

Bangladesh ranks well below its neighbours (except Pakistan) in most measures of freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders, the Cato Institute, and Freedom House, and its position is gradually slipping further down. Its elections remain questionable. Its political parties do not practise internal democracy. Its one-party-controlled, business-

interest-dominated parliament does not engage in deliberation of major issues, and remains completely subservient to the Executive branch. Its justice system is overwhelmed by over-full dockets (more than 3.5 million cases awaiting adjudication). Its public space for debate, discussion, and dissent has shrunk in an atmosphere of psychological intimidation, physical bullying, and legal pressures (aided by such instruments as the Digital Security Act). It demonises politics (without which democracy is not possible), and attempts to "resolve" issues through the use of goons and gangs.

When we construct a hyper-polarised environment deeply intolerant of others in speech, opinion or ideology, and consider all differences as challenges which must be physically crushed, it is bound to be expressed as intolerance against others who eat, pray, or dress differently, and to be expressed in aggressive ways.

The faltering rule of law is part of the same syndrome. It is clear that there is a culture of impunity that encourages routine law breakers—such as extortionist bahinis and unsafe factory owners, forest cutters and river polluters, money launderers and tax dodgers, traffickers of women and torturers of children, even rapists and murderers—who feel relatively protected from consequences. Even on the issue of violence against minority communities, most cases over the last 20 years (some collective and brutal) remain unresolved, most perpetrators remain free, and as Tagore said, "The pleas for justice cry in silent and lonely corners."

These developments also reflect an intellectual and moral failure. Our scholars have been unwilling to explore difficult issues of history. The question of relations between Hindus and Muslims can certainly be prickly and awkward—we should remember that almost 90 percent of Bengali Muslims had voted in favour of Pakistan in 1946. Instead of presenting balanced, thoughtful and informed accounts, they sought comfort zones and retreated to echo chambers, were not interested in questioning mythicised narratives that were simplistic, shallow and misleading, and never challenged the silly and dangerous stereotypes that prompted, shaped, and distorted our views of each other.

The Liberation War suffered almost a similar fate. The vast majority of the numerous books and speeches on it are based on individual memories. They are essential to understanding the bravery and sacrifices of those involved. But their scholarly value is limited, because most are not based on empirical evidence, objective analysis, sound methodologies, or testable conclusions (as Karl Popper pointed out, that which cannot be interrogated or subject to disproof cannot be scientifically acceptable).

Therefore, the most important event in this nation's evolution, certainly the most consequential in terms of Hindu-Muslim relations, is recounted as stories, not as engagements in history, the social sciences, or the humanities. Apart from these individual memorials, most other war narratives are clouded by partisan agendas and hagiographic compulsions. How can we be inspired by "mukti-juddher chetona" when we don't even know the mukti-juddho itself, or even have a vetted list of the mukti-joddhas—heroes we should publicly and regularly honour (rather than merely placate with stipends and job-quotas)?

It must be pointed out that the weaknesses in the education system have also contributed to this malaise. It concentrates on teaching students to pass exams and find employment, and ignores ethics, values, and humanistic ideals. Even in the universities, the moral authority of the institutions, or the personal example of our professors, are problematised by partisanship and "scandals" (involving vice-chancellors, teachers and students).

Either in the classroom or outside it, the principles of inclusiveness, courtesy, integrity, humility and tolerance are neither taught nor modelled by our teachers. For this reason, we have learned to accept pervasive rudeness in our interactions with people, rampant injustice, and crude displays of sheer physical force. All people are unsafe in these environments. Women and minority communities, because of their inherent vulnerabilities, suffer disproportionately.

Admittedly, the "religionist" forces have been greatly helped by external factors. First, several countries and groups in the Middle East provide assistance to these forces, millions of Bangladeshis working there are exposed to Salafist doctrines which they bring back with them, and objectionable messages are easily shared through social media and the relatively uncontrolled environment of waz mahfils. Second, the successive attacks of US-led coalitions against Muslim countries, and the anti-Islamic tendencies evident in the West, have encouraged the fears, angers and organisational liveliness of these groups. And finally, India's display of big-brotherly arrogance, its policies that have gone against Bangladeshi interests (water sharing, trade, border killings, etc), and the current wave of anti-Muslim sentiments and behaviour, have energised the "religionist" forces here.

But none of this was shrouded in secrecy. However, countermeasures were not considered. It must be pointed out that the relevant authorities deserve to be congratulated for their firm and hugely successful response to the challenges of extremists, and the wild-eyed, bomb-throwing fanatics WERE effectively contained. But, the quieter and more insidious forces of division and hate remained untouched and uncontested.

We must understand that while the state is a legal entity, the nation is an "imagined community," as historian Benedict Anderson put it. The first deals with the apparatus, institutions, procedures and protocols of governance, and the latter with the values, sentiments, emotions and civic consciousness that define the people. In Bangladesh, the false and mischievous dichotomy of being either Muslim or Bengali has festered because it has not been examined with the honesty and sensitivity it deserves. We dismissed the resultant tensions as "law and order" problems, and not the "hearts and minds" issue that it is, and hence could neither negotiate nor clarify our sense of belongingness, ownership and identity in terms of the nation we claim. Our intellectual/moral laziness represents a massive failure of our "imagination."

It is neither possible nor desirable to smother our differences. But we must try to accept them, respect them, and eventually celebrate them. As Cassius said to Brutus, "The fault lies not in our stars, but in ourselves." Accepting this responsibility is both our obligation and our opportunity.

