

From the time it was born in 1971, Bangladesh has been the theatre of conflict between the liberal and fundamentalist forces of Islam. The struggle began much earlier; it motivated the fight for independence from Pakistan. It was in the name of a common religion that the rulers of Pakistan had justified their neo-colonial grip on their eastern province; it was the rejection of this overarching role of religion that inspired the Awami League's struggle against them. Apart from the widespread anger aroused by the mounting difference between the political and economic status of the two halves of what was supposed to be one country, the Bangla revolt was fuelled by the West's campaign to impose Urdu as the national language. This campaign, too, had religious overtones: Urdu was linked to Arabic; Bengali to Sanskrit. For most Bangladeshis, culture could not be subordinated to religious fundamentalism.

Reacting against the exploitation of religion by the rulers of Pakistan, Bangladesh went even further than India had in trying to insulate politics from it and in committing the new state to secularism. Political parties with religious affiliations were banned, including the Muslim League and the Jamate-i-Islami. Many who had collaborated with the Pakistan army were mullahs; popular antipathy to them was evident to those of us who visited the country in the early days. Yet, most Bangladeshis were religious. So, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, first President and hero of the liberation campaign, thought it advisable to clarify the meaning of secularism in his address to the Bangladesh Constituent Assembly.

"Secularism does not mean the absence of religion", he assured the Assembly. "The 75 million people of Bengal will have the right to religion. We do not want to ban religion by law. Muslims will observe their religion and nobody in this State has the power to prevent that. Hindus will observe their religion and nobody has the power to prevent that. Buddhists and Christians will observe their respective religions and nobody can prevent that. Our only objection is that nobody will be allowed to use religion as a political weapon."

For a variety of reasons, political and economic, in which India figured, Bangladesh's commitment to secularism diminished, but did not

SITUATING TASLIMA NASREEN'S "LAJJA"

By Ajit Bhattacharjea

I detest fundamentalism and communalism. We gained our independence from Pakistan at the cost of three million lives. That sacrifice will be betrayed if we allow ourselves to be ruled by religious extremism. The mullahs who would murder me will kill everything progressive in Bangladesh if they are allowed to prevail.... I am convinced that the only way the fundamentalist forces can be stopped is if all of us who are secular and humanistic join together and fight their malignant influence. I, for one, will not be silent.

Preface to *Lajja*

disappear. This was in response to continuing opposition to fundamentalism. Sheikh Mujib's successors found it politic to appeal to religion to retain their hold, but trod cautiously. The Hindu minority of some 25 million was able to stay on despite communal reactions to events in India. The tradition of tolerance, with its strong Sufi and pre-Islamic roots, survived, especially among the intellectuals. Pride in the Bengali language and culture grew, to the extent that anniversaries related to Rabindranath Tagore were celebrated with more enthusiasm than in West Bengal. Women played a role in society and politics that orthodox mullahs would not approve.

It is this historical and cultural background that gives the proposed trial of Taslima Nasreen in Dhaka such crucial significance. If she is tried, it will be Bangladesh that will actually be on trial. Taslima has made it clear that she meant no disrespect to the *Quran* in her interview to a Calcutta newspaper. She had advocated conversion of Muslim personal law, as defined in the *Shariat*, into a uniform common civil code treating both sexes equally. But the reporter interviewing her had confused the *Quran* with the *Shariat*. Yet the fundamentalists continue baying for her blood. In a letter circulated while in hiding, Taslima complained that her arrest was ordered though she has said nothing about the holy book; on the other hand no action has been taken against the fundamentalist groups offering rewards for her death.

In fact, the Calcutta interview only provided the latest occasion for a sustained campaign against Taslima Nasreen and what she is

proud to stand for. The orthodox have not been happy with her permissive books and style of life. But the real reason for fundamentalist wrath is her single-minded attack on their role in society and their efforts to capture power by promoting communalism. This was done not by making speeches, but describing in detail the plight of a Hindu family after the disturbances sparked off in Bangladesh by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992.

Taslima's passionate commitment to secularism invests her writing with a sincerity that no politician can generate. She begins her preface to her controversial novel *Lajja* with the declaration: "I detest fundamentalism and communalism". And later: "Bangladesh is my motherland. We gained our independence from Pakistan at the cost of three million lives. That sacrifice will be betrayed if we allow ourselves to be ruled by religious extremism. The mullahs who would murder me will kill everything progressive in Bangladesh if they are allowed to prevail.... The disease of religious fundamentalism is not restricted to Bangladesh alone and it must be fought at every turn.... I am convinced that the only way the fundamentalist forces can be stopped is if all of us who are secular and humanistic join together and fight their malignant influence. I, for one, will not be silent".

Unlike many in this country, Taslima Nasreen focuses on the excesses committed by the majority community at home, thus antagonising the religious extremists as well as the Government. But her message resonates beyond Bangladesh; *Lajja* itself is inscribed: "To the people of the Indian subcontinent". She does

not condemn the demolition of the Babri Masjid, that monumental of Indian exercise in fundamentalism, but the inspiration it gave to fundamentalists in her country emerges vividly in the graphic account of the plight of the Dutta family as the demolition is watched live on the TV in Bangladesh.

The fact that Taslima is so concerned with the plight of Hindus and her subcontinental vision is exploited by her opponents to dub her an Indian agent. In the political arena, that is almost as great a liability as being accused of showing disrespect to the holy book. For Babri Masjid is only the latest of the many incidents in this country that have promoted counter-fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Dormant fears of Hindu expansionism, re-awakened by communal outbreaks in India, combined with perceived economic and administrative pressures, have promoted the retreat from secularism. Pro-Taslima demonstrations in New Delhi will not necessarily help to change attitudes in Dhaka. What will help her cause is a similar sensitive approach to minority concerns in India. Will any Hindu write as feelingly of the sufferings of a Muslim family in Ayodhya in the wake of the demolition of the masjid?

From all accounts, Taslima Nasreen is not alone in Bangladesh. Women's organisations, writers, students, workers and others have rallied behind her. The outcome of the trial, if held, will show whether they carry more clout with Dhaka than the fundamentalist mullahs.

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