

TODAY'S FUNDAMENTALIST THREAT AND THE ROOTS OF SECULARISM IN BANGLADESH

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Introduction

A new situation has arisen since the parliamentary elections, held on October 1, 2001, in Bangladesh. At the end of an interim-government period lasting from the middle of July till the mentioned date, countrywide elections were held, which resulted in a victory for the party-coalition led by the BNP, the *Bangladesh Nationalist Party*. The victory scored by this four-party coalition was rather overwhelming. Whereas the former government party, the Awami League, won no more than about one fifth of the parliamentary seats, the BNP-led coalition won over two-thirds of the total. The cabinet that subsequently formed, -like the coalition that had functioned previously for electoral purposes-, for the very first time in the history of Bangladesh as independent state includes official representatives of the *Jamat Islam*, a party which had gained notoriety during the country's liberation war in 1971, when it actively and openly collaborated with the Pakistani army in implementing a policy of mass murder of Bengali civilians.

Further, in the wake of the October elections, there were numerous attacks on members of Bangladesh's Hindu community. In some cases, properties were looted, or fees were imposed on Hindu families as a condition for the right to stay in Bangladesh. Elsewhere, groups of Hindus were simply forced to leave, or fled in fear of reprisals for having voted for the Awami League. Frequently also, women were raped by their attackers, or even gangraped. In a case reported from far away Bhola District by a visiting journalists' team, over a hundred Hindu women became the victim of rape in one single village (1). The incidents, moreover, occurred not just in one concentrated rural area, but at spots at great distance from each other, including in remote Districts along the coast. Although the scale of the communal-patriarchal violence was less large than that experienced by Hindus during the country's liberation war, some observers nonetheless drew

comparisons with the victimisation of women by the Pakistani army in 1971.

The perpetrators of the attacks generally belonged to the party-coalition that had been victorious in the October 1 elections. While some reportedly were members of fundamentalist groups, more often they appear to have been supporters or members of the coalition's main component, the BNP. This already indicates that the spread of communal sentiments is not confined to political parties which define themselves as 'Islamic', but also to formations which claim to defend the heritage of Bangladesh's independence war, founded on secular principles. The newly installed Home Minister, who belongs to the BNP, initially dismissed allegations of atrocities against Hindus as 'baseless'. While he later had to correct himself, and was forced to have BNP-activists arrested in view of public criticisms, the government has not made any systematic effort to bring the culprits to justice, and seems to have got away with vague promises, stating that it is committed to maintaining communal peace and harmony.

On the positive side, the events created an outcry both in Bangladesh and internationally. A considerable section of the Bangladeshi media reported the incidents as a matter of shame for the nation. Whereas governmental spokespersons tried hard to downplay the events, blaming the oppositional Awami League for seeking to create a false image about the new government, - teams of journalists and of social activists in the course of October and November brought out facts showing that, in some cases, the truth was much worse than what originally been reported. Internationally too, the government faced a backlash. Amnesty International, in a document it published early December, expressed serious concern over the growing discrimination against Hindus in Bangladesh. Amnesty called upon the Government of Bangladesh 'to bring to justice

perpetrators of these attacks regardless of their position in society or any political party⁽²⁾. Bangladeshi academicians based abroad also reacted with dismay.

Unfortunately, however, the wave of protests was not to last for long. The dangers associated with the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh are being underestimated by the country's donors. BPSC over the last few months has actively lobbied European institutions and the Dutch government, since we are deeply worried about the erosion of secular values in Bangladeshi politics (3). We believe that the post-election attacks on members of the Hindu minority, are no unfortunate coincidence, to be downplayed in Bangladesh's greater interests. Instead, they indicate that the country is slowly reaching a dangerous turning point, with, perhaps, longterm negative consequences. For sure, the threat to secularism* is larger than it has ever been since Bangladesh's political independence, end 1971. And it has not disappeared since October last year, but is constantly present, demanding our attention on a priority basis. In the below essay, we will both outline the nature of today's fundamentalist threat, and the roots which secularism has in the country's culture and history.

Threat to Bangladesh's Secular Forces Today

Before delving further into the historical divide between pro-secular and anti-secular forces, we first should dwell a bit further on the threat to the country's secular forces today. I have mentioned the presence of Jamati leaders in the acting cabinet led by the BNP chief Khaleda Zia. Of the two Jamati leaders who have become Ministers, one is Matiur Rahman Nizami, the party's acting General Secretary. Nizami's name is associated with the *Badar Babini*, a death squad which towards the end of the 1971 liberation war kidnapped and executed hundreds of intellectuals who were known to sympathise with the nationalist cause (5). Neither Nizami nor other Jamati leaders have ever expressed regrets over the crimes which they committed thirty years back (6). Bengalees who

* *Secularism*, in line with the prevailing interpretation in South-Asia, in this text is defined as a combination of state-neutrality vis-à-vis the country's various religions, and mutual tolerance between different religious communities, in casu between the Muslim majority community of Bangladesh and other religious minorities (4).

recall the horrors of 1971 are not only shocked to know that war criminals have been entrusted with ministerial responsibility, but also have reason to fear that the killing of citizens who defend secular views will be repeated.

Again, the activities undertaken by the Jamat's student wing, called the *Chhatro Shibir*, since the party's re-establishment in Bangladeshi politics, have precisely fuelled such fears. The death squad referred to above, the *Badar Babini*, in 1971 had been formed by leaders of the *Jamat's* erstwhile student wing, i.e. by the *Shibir's* historic precursor. During the initial period of the party's resurgence, in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was the renamed student wing of the *Jamat-Islam*, which gained most notoriety amongst all fundamentalist groupings, since it sought to re-establish a foothold at various universities through tactics of intimidation and through murderous violence. At the university of Rajshahi, a District in the country's North-Western region, for instance, students belonging to progressive and pro-secular student organisations have been murdered by *Shibir* activists both in the later part of the Ershad period, and in 1992, just before a new secularist mass movement reached a peak (see below). Yet in spite of numerous activities which indeed need to be condemned as forms of terrorism, the *Chhatro Shibir* has never been banned.

Further, the threat to Bangladesh's tradition of secularism derives not just from the fact that Jamati leaders are present in government, but also from the fact that other political parties, and sections of the country's state apparatus increasingly tend towards abandonment of the principle of the state's religious neutrality. Symptomatic in this respect is the arrest, last November, of Shahriar Kabir, a very wellknown journalist-writer and chairperson of the *Nirmul Committee*. The *Nirmul Committee* has for long demanded that Jamati leaders who committed war crimes in 1971, should be brought to court. Kabir was arrested on the pretext of having engaged in 'anti-state activities' when visiting India. Yet Kabir is defending the very ideas which were the founding stones of Bangladesh as state. Thus, his arrest appears to indicate that the Jamat's anti-secular political ideology has meanwhile been embraced by sections of the country's intelligence services and Home Ministry.

Whereas Bangladesh's donors seem to close their eyes for the above evolution, and largely have ignored the structural shift that has occurred since the October elections, it would be entirely wrong to presume that a secular climate has been restored after the initial backlash against members of the Hindu minority. Intermittent incidents against religious minorities, such as attacks on Hindu temples and on Christian villages, have continued to take place also during the first months of 2002. Leaders of Islamic parties, most recently have targeted secular journalists and sections of the media, known for their pro-secular stance. They have not been called to order by Khaleda Zia's government. On March 23, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, a *Jamati* Member of Parliament, demanded that 'the blood of journalists be checked to see if they are Muslims or not' (7). And while intimidating activities by Islamic parties and group are no new feature, they now take place under a government the main component of which harbours anti-secular activists.

The outcome of the October elections, and the formation of a coalition government with *Jamati* Ministers, then, should be evaluated as a watershed in the country's history. For even though, as we will see below, the previous, i.e. Awami League government, did not consistently promote the cause of secularism either, the present, BNP-led government constitutes an outright danger to the country's secular heritage. This danger is enhanced also by the fact that governmental parties hold more than two-thirds of the seats in Parliament. Their political weight is so big that the government will even be less likely to respect democratic rules vis-à-vis the country's political opposition forces even than the previous, repressive Awami League government. Although, as we will see below, secular ideas are deeply rooted in the country's history, the penchant to belittle the threat to the future of Bangladesh's political culture and institutions is entirely misplaced.

The Awami League's Rule (1996-2001) and the Resurgence of Secularism from Below

Now let's look at the evolution of politics during the 1990s. Bangladesh's main parliamentary opposition party, the Awami League, has sought to exploit the plight of the Hindus, and has loudly decried the coalition-government for its failure to protect the country's minorities in the wake of the recent national elections. Yet the Awami League's

own record is not straight either. Surely, the party was originally, way back in the year 1949, formed with the explicit aim that East Bengal's politics be secularised. Surely, Bangladesh's Hindu minority has always been the party's vote bank. Its members have always looked to the Awami League for protection against communal currents within society. Yet during its five year rule from 1996 til 2001, the party made various concessions to the Muslim Right, - expanding the government's financial allocations for religious schools, *Madrassabs*, conceding the demand that a separate *Shariat*-bench be formed under the country's Supreme Court, etc. Moreover, where people have re-asserted their commitment to secular values from below, the support they got from the Awami League-government has been lukewarm at best.

This may be illustrated through several instances referring to the late 1990s. One is that regarding the controversy over the building of the Lalan Academy complex in a remote village in the District of Kushtia. Lalan Shah was a rural bard who through songs in which he propagated the equality of all human beings whatever their beliefs, inspired scores of minstrels, *Bauls*, to similarly preach religious tolerance. Ever since the late 19th century, Lalan Shah and the *Bauls* have been the target of abuse by conservative Muslim-religious functionaries, who condemn them for being 'anti-Islamic'. Some functionaries in the past have even gone so far as to issue a religious edict against the *Bauls*, calling for their 'destruction' (8). The shrine of Lalan in Kushtia District is a place where many *Bauls* gather every year to commemorate the reknowned philosopher-singer. With the re-rise of the *Jamat-Islam* and other rightwing religious parties in Bangladeshis politics, the existence of these minstrels is clearly under threat.

Yet problems have already risen under the previous government. In 1997, when the Awami League was in power, a scheme was devised under the Cultural Ministry for the building of a modern complex, presumably to defend Lalan's heritage. Whereas local government bureaucrats strongly favour the very commercial plan, the *Bauls* were opposed from the start, fearing they would loose control over Lalan's shrine. They launched a court case, and held public protests, but then, in October 1999, were expelled from the shrine! These events, and central government inaction, subsequently led to the formation of a solidarity

committee by Dhaka intellectuals, which includes Bangladesh's most prominent poet, Shamsur Rahman. The committee successfully brought the issue to the nation's attention, primarily through the drafting of a full report over the conflict, based on an on-the-spot investigation in Kushtia. And whereas the case is a good instance of cooperation between urban-based and village-level intellectuals, it equally illustrates an underestimation, on the part of the Awami League government, of the contribution of the *Bauls* towards Bangladesh's culture.

A parallel instance is that of the controversy over the naming of the student hostels and academic buildings of the university of Sylhet, in the North of Bangladesh. This controversy erupted in August, 1999, shortly after the university syndicate announced it had decided on its list of names, which comprised a number of prominent proponents of Bengali secular nationalism (9). Activists connected to the Jamat-Islam in Sylhet immediately initiated a campaign of defamation and intimidation. Armed party sympathisers entered the university campus on motorbikes, denouncing members of the syndicate as atheists, and threatening to kill the vice-chancellor. Moreover, whereas the campaign was, it seems, started without use of party-labels, soon Sylheti leaders of the Jamat-Islam, the BNP and other allied forces, seeing that the local government administration refrained from interfering to stop the campaign, felt bold enough to officially join in terrorising the university teachers. Threats by armed goons on motorbikes, chanting death threats, increased.

It was only when the issue of the controversy over the naming of university halls became a national issue, that the authorities felt, to a certain extent, forced to act. Thus, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, agreed to meet the two main lecturers targeted, after these had fled to the capital Dhaka. Also, the country's President went to express his sympathies to students who in April, 2000, started a hunger-strike in support of the besieged university teachers. However, these steps came primarily in response to a national outcry over the issue, and were no expression of great alertness on the part of the government. For by the beginning of 2000, a major section of Bangladesh's national press was highlighting the fact that Sylhet's university could no longer function due to the terrorist presence of *Jamati*

activists. Then, the famous novelist Humayun Ahmed announced he would go on strike, and helped mobilise thousands of pro-secular intellectuals and students to demonstrate their solidarity in Sylhet on the occasion of Bangladesh's independence day. Thus, the Awami League government was faced with a major movement from below exposing the absence of an active policy for the protection of secularism.

The First BNP-Government (1991-1996) and the Mass Movement against Fundamentalist War Criminals

Like the Awami League, the BNP can be questioned over its past policies. For the credentials of the BNP with regard to the defence of Bangladesh's secular heritage were tarnished much in consequence of the attitude which the party displayed towards Bangladesh's pro-secularist movement during the party's first governing period (1991-1996). The party won the first parliamentary elections, held in February 1991, after the overthrow of the military dictatorship of General Ershad. The party's leader, Khaleda Zia, owed her popularity to her militant rejection of army rule during the years of struggle against the military dictatorship. Yet her party's attitude towards those Muslim fascist forces which had violently opposed the Bengali people's struggle for liberation turned out to be ambiguous, to say the least. This became evident within one year after Khaleda had assumed power for the first time, when a countrywide movement for the trial of 1971 war-criminals.

The event which primarily was responsible for the emergence of this new social movement was the election of Golam Azam to the position of *emir*, i.e. chief leader of the *Jamat-Islam*, in December, 1991. Golam Azam was known to have been the topmost politician in East Bengal who had collaborated with the Pakistani army in 1971. As East-Pakistani newspapers of the time easily confirm, he had vigorously opposed Bengali liberation fighters as 'Indian agents' and as 'rebels against the Islamic state'. He, moreover, had continued to oppose the newly formed state of Bangladesh from abroad. In spite of all this, he in the late 1970s had obtained permission to enter Bangladesh, under the pretext of wishing to visit his ailing mother. Since then, the military dictatorship had allowed him to stay on, although he was not a Bangladeshi national (10).

Intellectuals who recalled how Golam Azam had assisted in the 1971 mass killings, thought they had the very strongest legal case possible against the man, when he was officially elevated to the position of the *Jamat's emir*.

Thus, in January 1992, secular intellectuals in Dhaka convened to found the *Nirmul Committee*, the committee of intellectuals committed to preventing the further rehabilitation of the *Jamat Islam*. To this end, the *Nirmul Committee* proposed the holding of a symbolic trial of Golam Azam as a war criminal, in the form of a 'people's court', i.e. a public trial reminiscent of the Russell Tribunals against the Vietnam War. The idea, although it had been voiced before without receiving similar resonance, immediately caught the imagination of journalists and other public opinionbuilders. In no time, there were so many grassroots' organisations and prominent intellectuals who extended their support to the campaign for the holding of Golam Azam's public trial, that both progressive leaders belonging to the Left Democratic Alliance, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, and other political parties felt obliged to rally to its cause. By the beginning of March, 1992, one hundred members of Bangladesh's Parliament signed up for the idea of the people's trial, trailing behind groups of intellectuals, such as lawyers, filmmakers and poets (11).

The date fixed for the people's court was March 26, 1992, - a date which the BNP supposedly considers sacred in view of the date's association with the history of the liberation war. By the middle of March it was evident that massive numbers of people would participate in the historic event. The *Nirmul Committee*, and its associated, broader political platform, the Coordinating Committee to 'Uproot' the Collaborators of 1971, well publicised the trial, through postering and leafletting all through Bangladesh. The *Nirmul Committee* also made extensive investigations, so as to effectively assist both witnesses asked to testify against suspected criminals, lawyers entrusted with the task of drawing up the charge-sheet, and people asked to be judges. When the people's court was staged, attended by some two hundred thousand Bangladeshi citizens, comprehensive evidence had been collected to back up the demand that Golam Azam be given capital punishment for his many crimes.

Yet Khaleda Zia's BNP-government, instead of welcoming this important initiative, tried to prevent its occurrence. It issued edicts stating that the people's court was 'unconstitutional' and undermined the country's legal system, - this in spite of the fact that the *Nirmul Committee* repeatedly emphasized the symbolic character of the event. Shortly before March the 26th, the government further announced that it would not allow people to gather for the public trial, thus throwing a part of the politicians who had gathered to the side of the *Nirmul Committee* into temporary confusion. And although police-obstruction around the day of the trial failed to stop the tide of the movement - police-officials tried to prevent the building of the dais, and seized the microphones -, the BNP-government went on the offensive soon after, launching court cases against Jahanara Imam, colonel Kazi Nuruzzaman, Shahriar Kabeeb and other leading intellectuals. Clearly, the BNP during its first governing period already showed little inclination to support the secular legacy of Bangladesh's independence war (12).

Secular Nationalism and the Creation of Bangladesh

Some notes should be added on the historic roots of secularism in Bangladesh. Above I have already referred to the historic divide between those forces which favour a state-structure based on Islamic-religious principles, - and those championing secular-nationalism, which was the very ideological basis for the formation of Bangladesh as independent state. Here we should briefly recall the trajectory of state-formation, since it helps to understand how much the principle of secularism is rooted in the country's history. The state of Pakistan, to which Bangladesh has belonged as a province - the largest province - from 1947 til 1971, had been created on the basis of the view that the Muslims of the subcontinent formed a separate 'community', whose interests could only be defended through the formation of a separate state. This ideology was the guiding ideology of the Muslim League, which gained ascendance in (East) Bengal in the early 1940s. It then was clearly favoured by the province's Muslim peasantry because of its official support for the abolition of (Hindu) landlordism (13).

It should be recalled, however, that the programme for the creation of a Muslim state in

the subcontinent, in the manner as envisaged by the Muslim League chief Jinnah, was not wholeheartedly supported by the whole Muslim League leadership of (East) Bengal. In fact, within the provincial leadership there was a major current favouring a different political project. On the one hand, a section led by the theologian-journalist Maulana Akhram Khan for long had propagated the two-nations' ideology that Jinnah stood for (14). But on the other hand, there was a major section of leaders who argued that the state of Pakistan would not be viable, and that, instead, Bengali Muslims should aim at creation of a separate political identity in the Eastern part of the subcontinent. The matter was settled only last minute, shortly before the power transition of 1947, but only so narrowly as not to last. Thus, although East Bengal apparently opted for the formation of one Muslim-communal state, the composition of the province's Muslim League remained diverse.

The case for a Bengali secularism that is deeply rooted in the country's past can also be traced to the history of the Muslim League itself, i.e. to the experience of the party of communalism. Imagine a party which projects the Bengali Muslim peasantry as an oppressed religious community, yet is composed of leaders as diverse as the communal thinker Maulana Akhram Khan on the one hand – and the secular-emancipatory thinker Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani on the other. The latter, around the time of the transition from colonial British rule towards independence in the subcontinent, was of course not living in Bengal, but in Assam, amongst a Bengali diaspora peasantry struggling against discrimination. Nevertheless, the example of Bhashani's politics at the time graphically illustrates the divide between communalism and secularism within the very Muslim League. For at a time when other party leaders called for 'direct action' to enforce Partition, triggering the worst kind of communal riots in Calcutta and elsewhere in Bengal, Maulana Bhashani reportedly championed religious tolerance, as the best policy to protect the Muslim peasants' interests (15)!

Secularism, then, re-emerged as a moral principle in East Bengal's politics very soon upon the formation of Pakistan, just like, and as an intrinsic part of Bengali nationalism. It re-emerged in the form of a break-up of the Muslim League, and the founding of a new party with a secular

ideology, - the party that was to subsequently drop 'Muslim-' from its name and become the Awami League. Indeed, secularism re-emerged as a common principle of all those political forces which built the movement for Bengali self-determination in East-Pakistan. Thus, when Bangladesh was constituted as an independent state, in 1971/1972, the principle was incorporated in the country's constitution, and such without arousing any controversy amongst the country's political elite. In the first phase of the country's existence, the moral principle of secularism, of brotherhood between people belonging to different religions, was shared as much by different sections of the peasantry, as it was by most members of the urban elite.

The above discourse, then, serves to illustrate that the present resurgence of the Muslim Right, of forces which, whether sincerely or out of moral conviction, propose to 'Islamicise' the state, is a very dramatic reversal of history. The movement for secular Bengali nationalism, in the fifties and sixties of the previous century, was a movement that received broad acclaim. It developed from an urban-based struggle, led by university teachers and students, into a province-wide movement, upheld with equal enthusiasm by village-teachers, priests and peasants living throughout the countryside of East Bengal. By the end of the 1960s, the ideology of secular nationalism, to all accounts, was the hegemonic ideology in society in Antonio Gramsci's sense (16). And although some may want to argue that the social predominance of Islam as one single, monolithic religion is historically inevitable (17), - at the time of the Bangladesh's independence mutual openness between Muslims and Hindus and syncretic ideas undoubtedly prevailed.

Sources of Secularism in Bangladesh's History and Culture

Lastly, a brief summing up of pre-existing sources of secularism, i.e. pre-dating the liberation struggle. At least *four historical sources* of secular influence upon Bangladesh's culture and politics may be distinguished. First, though the process of globalisation has already left its imprint on the cultural patterns of people living in Bangladesh's cities and towns, - the country's folk culture continues to be a living heritage, especially in villages in the countryside. This heritage forms a *secular heritage* in the sense that symbols, ideas and

celestial figures used in village songs, poems and other forms of folk culture, are intermingled across religious boundaries. This *syncretism* is a consequence amongst others of the fact that in Bengal no less than three religions have been dominant religions in historic succession. Competing for popular influence, both the Hindu Brahmin caste of priests, and religious leaders belonging to the Muslim section of the people, have frequently felt the need to be liberal towards the cultural practices of their followers.

A second source of secularism in history are the policies of Bengal's pre-British rulers. Thinking within the bureaucracy of the Moghul rulers in the province was nurtured by the mystic tradition in Islam, i.e. *Sufism*, more specifically the religious order of the Chistis, who favoured a clearcut separation between religion and state-rule. The tombs of *Sufi* saints were seen as central points of religious worship by members of the then aristocracy. Yet neither the bureaucracy nor the aristocracy considered Islam to be a state religion. Consequently, the pre-British rulers of Bengal on the whole upheld a policy of non-interference, i.e. of non-interference in people's choices of religious worship (18). These facts are not merely of historic interest. They have actual significance. For while it is often presumed in the West that ideals of secularism and secularisation are an expression of 'modernisation', i.e. that they form a reflection of the influence which Western ideas exert upon non-Western societies, - the historical evidence proves that this presumption is wrong (19).

A third source of secularism is the prolonged history of mystical reform movements in the Indian subcontinent. Mystical movements did not just gain a tremendous *support* among the poorest section of the rural population, they frequently also were *initiated* from below. A good example of the latter is the movement led by Lalan Shah, a semi-literate liberal thinker hailing from Kushtia whom I have referred to above. Lalan Shah believed in the possibility of a spirituality which is directly experienced by human beings individually. He preached the virtues of religious tolerance and human equality, and for his purpose employed the same form of cultural expression as was used by his reknowned mystical precursors, Kabir and Chaitanya, i.e. the hymn (20). Though he praisingly referred to the prophet Mohammed in his songs, - his ideas were squarely abhorred by conservative

Muslim priests. Lalan Shah's following among Bengal's intellectual elite was limited during his own life-time, the 19th century. Yet in the countryside his movement constituted a crucial countervailing force, i.e. in opposition to the fanatical *Wahabis* (21).

Lastly, a fourth source of secularism that should be separately mentioned, are the cultural products of the most prominent Bengali poets of the Twentieth Century. Both Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam were staunch representatives of cultural secularism. Both wrote their poetry and songs precisely in a period when religious *intolerance* among Muslim and Hindus was on the rise. Their work in a way constitutes an autonomous source of secularism, because their poetry had a deep influence both on the peasants, and on the thinking of Bengal's middle classes and its political elite. There is, however, no strict dividing line between the influence of their work, - and the influence exerted by previously mentioned sources of secularism. Thus, Rabindranath Tagore consciously drew his inspiration from the mystical songs of Lalan Shah (22). Nazrul Islam in his poetry, in editorial comments and in other writings fervently advocated the maintainance of peace between Muslim and Hindus, and purposefully used mixed symbols from both religions, - as is common in traditional rural songs (23).

Conclusion

Above I have outlined the threats to secularism existing in Bangladesh under its new BNP-led government, and have indicated the potential for a restoration of the country's secular tradition, by describing its roots. Firstly, there can be no denying the fact that the threat today is real. Whereas some may argue that the strength of the forces that are out to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic republic is very limited, the nature of today's governmental coalition marks a dramatic historical shift. For the first time, the Jamat-Islam which had violently opposed the Bengali people's striving for national liberation in 1971, is an official constituent of the cabinet. The cabinet harbours communally oriented war criminals. Moreover, the coalition's main constituent, the BNP, too harbours communal leaders and activists, and is very unlikely to formulate a policy to stem the further evolution of the country's politics away from secularism. Whereas one could still be somewhat optimistic during the BNP's first

period of rule, when the Jamat was formally in opposition, today we are alarmed.

Secondly, and contrasting sharply with the present, is the fact that Bangladesh has a uniquely secular history. Whereas the vast majority of the population ever since the 1947 Partition and East Bengal's incorporation into Pakistan have been Muslims, the principle of the state's religious neutrality was well established through the country's 1971 liberation war, and the principle of religious tolerance is still shared as moral principle by large sections of the people. This principle got rooted through a mass movement in the 1950s and 1960s which reached every nook and corner of East Bengal, and have been re-asserted through struggles waged in Bangladesh's society over the last decade. Witness the people's court for the trial of the Jamati leader Golam Azam held in Dhaka ten years ago, in 1992. And witness the smaller scale pro-secular actions and initiatives which have been staged more recently, during the Awami League's rule. Undoubtedly, the principle of secularism continues to be upheld by many organisations and institutions of Bangladesh's civil society.

Further, the principle of secularism is also rooted in various components of Bangladesh's traditional culture. Over the last millennium three different religions have in succession been dominant in Bangladesh's society – i.e. Buddhism which ruled longer than elsewhere, Hinduism, and Islam. In consequence, there is much intermingling of religious symbols and ideas in songs and poems that for centuries have been sung and recited by the country's peasantry (24). Again, the idea that all human beings are equal whatever be their religious beliefs, has been propagated by both Hindu and by Muslim mystic currents which have flourished in Bengal's past. And it has been one of the key messages spread by the great poets of the modern period, including by the country's most prominent contemporary poet, Shamsur Rahman.

Nevertheless, this tradition is gravely at risk under the present government. The restoration of secularism to a position as hegemonic principle requires not only that secular forces in Bangladesh itself re-assert themselves, but it equally demands the formulation of a policy on behalf of the country's donors, including the European Union. Unfortunately, however, most of Bangladesh's donors so far have refrained from chalking out an

agenda on the issue, in the apparent belief that those who ring the bell of alarm are exaggerating. The European Parliament on two occasions in the past has expressed its support for the demands of secular organisations in Bangladesh, but to our knowledge it is alone in having committed itself. Western governments, foremost the government of the United States, in the past have sought to manipulate Muslim-fundamentalist forces in the most cynical manner. The people of Afghanistan and other countries in the Muslim world have already paid the price. Isn't it time the European Union and European governments start learning from history, and take a principled stance in favour of the demand for restoration of secularism in Bangladesh? ■

References:

(1) Star Roving Team, 'Harrowing Tales of Depravity - No Action Yet Against Perpetrators of Bhola Outrage' (*The Daily Star*, November 9, 2001);

(2) see the Amnesty International Report published in December 2001, '*Bangladesh. Attacks on Members of the Hindu Minority*' (Amnesty International, London, United Kingdom, AI Index: ASA 13/006/2001);

(3) two concrete results of our lobbying efforts have been: last year's resolution of the European Parliament, incorporating the EP's support to the demand of secular organisations in Bangladesh for the trial of war criminals (see BPSC-pressrelease, January 9, 2002); and a joint letter by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Development Corporation, Mr.J van Aartsen and Mrs. E.Herfkens, of the Netherlands addressed to BPSC's director, stipulating concrete commitments with regard to the defence of secularism in Bangladesh;

(4) for South-Asian views on the meaning of secularism, see for instance the following essays: Rajeev Bhargava, 'Giving Secularism its Due' (*The Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Issue, Vol.XXIX No.28, July 9, 1994, p.1748) and Partha Chatterjee, 'Secularism and Toleration' (*The Economic and Political Weekly* (1994), op.cit., p.1766);

(5) see the book *Ekattorer Ghatak O Dalalra. Ke Kothae* (in Bangla: The Agents and Executioners of Nineteen Seventy-One-Who's Where?), Muktiyuddho Chetana Bikash Kendra (The Centre for the Development of the Awareness on the Liberation War), Dhaka, 10 February, 1978, p.109 and p.171;

(6) Shahriar Kabeer/Asif Nazrul, 'Akramanatak Bhumikae Jamat Shibir Shamne Bibhisika' (in: *Ekattarar Ghatak Jamate Islamir Atit O Bartaman* (in Bangla: The Past and Present of the Jamat-Islam, the Executioners of Nineteenseventyone, Muktiyuddho Chetana Bikash Kendra, Dhaka, 1989, p.190);

(7) see the Press Release issued by the Asia Desk of Reporters Sans Frontier, 'Bangladesh. Islamist Movements Threaten the Press', Paris, France, April 3, 2002;

(8) see the report of the Lalan Akhra Rakkha Committee, *Kushtiar Cheuria Lalan Fakirer Shomadhi O Akhra Shorejamin Paridorshoner Pratibedan* (in Bengali: The Report of the On-the-Spot Investigation at the Grave and the Shrine of Lalan Fakir in Cheuria of Kushtia, Dhaka, January 8, 2001, p.3); on a historical precedent to the more recent expulsion, i.e. an event whereby a Maulana rode on horse to Lalan's Akhra in Kushtia, and expelled

the Bauls from there, see Sudhir Chakraborti, *Bratta Lokayat Lalan* (In Bangla: The Outcast Folk Figure Lalan – Pustak Biponi, Calcutta, India, 1996, p.95);

(9) see M.Zafar Iqbal (Lecturer at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet), 'Social Forces for Change in Bangladesh: A Case Study' (Speech held at the Annual Meeting of the Bangladesh Association, Hannover, Germany, July, 2000);

(10) see Shahriar Kabeer, *Ganoadalater Patobhumi* (The Background of the People's Court - Dana Printers Limited, Dhaka, February 1993); Shahriar Kabeer's book primarily focuses the organisational and political process leading to the holding of a people's court regarding Golam Azam's war crimes, in 1992; it also contains several documents and articles referring to the issue of Golam Azam's citizenship, and his activities previous to his return to Bangladesh in the late 1970s;

(11) see Shahriar Kabeer (1993), op.cit., p.154, Appendix 9, 'The Declaration of One Hundred Members of Parliament';

(12) for the BNP's policy vis-à-vis the Jamat-Islam during its first governing period, see also Fayez Ahmed, *Rajinoti O Annyanna* (in Bangla: Politics and Others – Desh Prakash, Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 1995);

(13) Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia. The Communalisation* (The University Press Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1994);

(14) A.T.M.Atiqur Rahman, *Banglar Rajnitite Moulana Akram Khan* (in Bangla: Moulana Akram Khan in the Politics of Bangladesh – Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June, 1995); for the issue of the internal divide within the Muslim League around the time of Partition, see also: Kamruddin Ahmed, *The Social History of East Pakistan* (Pioneer Press, Dhaka, East Pakistan, 1967, Chapter III, p.40-96);

(15) M.Waheeduzzaman Manik, 'Maulana Bhashani's Resistance Movement Against Mass Repression of Peasants' (*The Independent*, Dhaka, December 5, 2001). There are many sources detailing Maulana Bhashani's political experience and contribution to the evolution of East Bengal. A notable source amongst others is the voluminous biography of Syed Abul Maksud, *Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani* (in Bangla – Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1994);

(16) it should be noted that Gramsci's conceptualisation of 'civil society' differs much from that which today is being put forward in circles of non-government organisations internationally; contrary to prevailing notions in the latter circles, Antonio Gramsci defined civil society as an arena of struggle; for a part from being the sum of social activities and institutions which are not directly part of the government, the judiciary or the repressive bodies of state, civil society also constitutes the sphere in which a dominant social group organizes consent and hegemony, as opposed to political society where it rules by coercion and direct domination; already

during the fifties, the hegemony of Pakistan's ruling class over civil society in East Bengal was, at least partly, broken; for Gramsci's definition, see David Forgacs (ed.), *An Antonio Gramsci Reader. Selected Writings 1916-1935* (Schocken Books, New York, USA, 1988, p.420);

(17) see Richard M.Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier. 1204-1760* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, 1997), Ch.10, p.267, 'The Rooting of Islam in Bengal';

(18) *ibid*, p.82 and p.176;

(19) Amartya Sen, 'The East and West: Reach of Reason' (*The New York Review of Books*, Vol.XLVII, Number 12, July 20, p.33); Amartya Sen in this important essay traced the origins of state-neutrality vis-à-vis different religions in the Indian subcontinent to two historical, pre-British rulers, namely to emperor Akbar (late 16th century), and to emperor Ashok who ruled nearly two millennia before Akbar; with regard to Akbar's policy, Amartya Sen states: 'Taking note of the denominational diversity of Indians (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Parsees, Jews and others), he laid the foundations of the secularism and religious neutrality of the state, which he insisted must ensure that "no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him."' (p.33);

(20) an English-language account of Kabir's life and philosophy has been provided by Muhammad Hedayetullah, *Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt.Ltd, New Delhi, India, 1989);

(21) see Sudhir Chakraborti (1996), op.cit., p.87; on the Wahabis and their influence see also: 'L'Islam au Pied de la Lettre. Retour Illusoire aux Origines' (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2002, p.3);

(22) for Rabindranath Tagore's relationship to Lalan Shah and the Baul tradition, see Abul Ahsan Chowdhury, 'Rabindranath O Silaidaher Baul-Sampraday' (in: Sri Sanatkumar Mitra, *Baul – Lalan – Rabindranath*, Pustak Bipani, Calcutta, India, February 1995, p.189); Sanatkumar Mitra, 'Baul Prasange Rabindranath' (*ibid*, p.242) and other essays printed in the collection of essays mentioned;

(23) see the anthologies of Nazrul Islam's poetry, Sajed Kamal (transl.), *Kazi Nazrul Islam. Selected Works* (Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1999); and Rafiqul Islam, *Kazi Nazrul Islam. A New Anthology* (Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1990);

(24) for the influence of Buddhism on the folk culture of Bengal, see Abdul Kadir, *Banglar Ganasahitya* (in Bangla: Folk Literature of Bengal – Bangla Acedemy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1994); a crucial source on the history of syncretism in Bengal further is: Sri Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bangla Mangal Kavyer Itihas* (in Bangla: A History of Medieval Bengal Narrative Poetry – A Mukherjee and Co. Private Limited, Calcutta, India, November 2000, p.13).

BPSC's Pressrelease

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SUPPORTS KEY DEMANDS OF THE PUBLIC IN BANGLADESH ON SECULARISM AND THE QUESTION OF GAS EXPORTS

A new situation has arisen in Bangladesh since the holding of parliamentary elections on October 1, 2001. These elections resulted in a victory for a party-coalition with pro-fundamentalist sympathies. One of the constituents of the coalition is the *Jamat-Islam*, which party during the country's liberation war in 1971 had actively collaborated with the Pakistani occupation army when it had executed genocidal policies in its efforts to impose 'Islamic rule'. But the leading party of the coalition, the *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* (BNP) does not seem to respect Bangladesh's secular heritage either. Supporters of the party immediately after the elections went on the rampage in various parts of the countryside, attacking members of the Hindu community, including women. Moreover, the fresh government formed under the leadership of BNP-chief Khaleda Zia comprises two Ministers from the *Jamat-Islam*, including one personality known to have been leader of a notorious death squad (the *badar bahini*) in 1971.

In consequence of the given situation, the maintenance of *secularism* has become a top-priority for the people's movement in Bangladesh. Almost a decade ago, a broad amalgamation of social forces seeking to stem the re-emergence of the *Jamat-Islam* in Bangladeshi politics, staged a '*people's court*' in Dhaka city, around the demand that war criminals who had been guilty of complicity with mass murder in 1971 should be put on trial. This demand continues to be a key demand for progressive organisations questioning the composition of Bangladesh's present national government. It, however, is a demand which has also been supported by the European Parliament ever since 1994. In a resolution adopted last year (B5-0048/2001/rev.1), the European Parliament has once again expressed concern 'about the existence of various pressures aimed at undermining the country's longstanding secular traditions', and gave support to the idea of international adjudication 'of leading war criminals responsible for war crimes committed during the country's independence war in 1971'.

Further, the outcome of the recent parliamentary elections has also had an impact for implementation of the agenda pursued by international oil companies engaged in extracting natural resources from Bangladesh's soil and territorial sea. During the previous government period, the number of production sharing contracts signed with foreign oil companies had increased considerably. The question as to whether Bangladesh's natural gas could be exported had, however, remained unresolved. Bangladeshi professional experts in the past have repeatedly advised that exports are not in the interest of the country's population. The US-government and the World Bank, primarily on behalf of the American company *Unocal*, have used their leverage to try and push through a decision in favour of the building of a pipeline for exports of gas to India. Very soon after the formation of the BNP's coalition government, high government officials have indicated they believe that *Unocal's* demand should be complied with.

Gas exports, however, are anathema for a major part of the Bangladeshi public. Bangladesh's proven gas reserves cover only a small part of the country's domestic needs for the coming half a century, even if assessed in terms of present domestic consumption levels. In consequence, the momentum for a people's movement against gas exports is gradually building up. On January 3, 2002, a huge Convention was held in Dhaka around the issue of the protection of the country's natural resources. Prominent academicians and progressive politicians jointly adopted a resolution against the export of natural gas. Coming March, peasants, students, oil- and gas-experts, and other professional intellectuals will stage a historic March on the *Bibiyani* gas field, one of the extraction sites controlled by the *Unocal* company which, coincidentally, has for long targeted Afghanistan for construction of a gas pipeline as well. Once again, with regard to this issue, the Bangladeshi public is morally supported by the members of the European Parliament. In the resolution referred to above, it has stated unequivocally that the European Union should support Bangladesh's right to give 'priority to the country's domestic needs before embarking on exports'.

BPSC, Amsterdam, January 9, 2002