

***SECULARISM
AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE –***

**THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF
BANGLADESH**

AN EXPLORATORY ESSAY

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1. Introduction

Let me start with a personal note, on how I have come to accept the importance of the theme as stated in the title of this paper. I happen to have grown up in the Netherlands in the fifties and the sixties of the previous century. This was at a time when the Dutch political elite prided itself on the country's history of tolerance, including religious tolerance. At school we learnt that after the formation of the Dutch state (17th century), the Netherlands became a safe heaven for philosophers and scientists who held dissident views, and who for this reason migrated to Amsterdam and to other cities of the young Dutch state. It is, however, only recently – at a time when basic ethical and political values such as religious tolerance have increasingly come under threat in the Netherlands – that my attention was drawn to the formative role of thinkers such as Pierre Bayle, who while teaching history and philosophy in Rotterdam in the 17th century, formulated a basic rationale in favour of religious tolerance, by proposing the '*conscience errant doctrine*', according to which humanity has no option but to grant every minority the right to freedom of conscience, since there is no way the truth or untruth of any religion can be proven (1). In formulating basic ideas in favour of political secularism, philosophers based in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe argued that the rising capitalist state has a responsibility to counter religious fanaticisms, and should take responsibility for ethical education, instead of the Church (2).

A second line of experience which has shaped my views on secularism and religious tolerance, has been my experience living in, and following political and economic developments in Bangladesh. When based there as a young journalist in the 1970s, I acquainted myself initially with the history of the movement for Bengali selfdetermination that culminated in the construction of Bangladesh as an independent, and secular state. At that time itself I was struck by the fact that the preference for secularism, stated via the term '*dharmaniropekkhata*', which literally means the neutrality (of the state) *vis-a-vis* a country's various religions, was shared by a wide range of currents and social strata that had participated in the country's struggle for political independence. It was at that time a principle shared by the Awami League, the party of the rising bourgeoisie, but also by the National Awami Party led by the Muslim theologian and politician Maulana Bhashani, and by parties belonging to various shades of the Left. More recently, in the face of a dramatic shift in the country's political culture, where the country's parties representing sections of the country's economic elite have taken their distance from the principle of secularism, I have spent considerable time trying to trace the historical roots of secularism and religious tolerance in the social and cultural history of Bangladesh. Although this has not been an easy search, given language limitations, I can assure you that it has been a fascinating search!

These notes on the thematic of secularism and religious tolerance, then, are based on a double experience, - an experience in a European country, the Netherlands, which has a place in the centre of the world economy, and a South Asian country, Bangladesh, which clearly belongs to the periphery of the world capitalist system.

2. Conceptualising Secularism: Amartya Sen's Views

My first set of comments are meant to highlight the differences between two basic views on secularism, a 'broad' and a 'narrow' view. This differentiation is, I believe, well stated by Amartya Sen in his widely publicised book *'The Argumentative Indian'*, and in papers which he has written since the 1990s (3). According to Sen, the first, i.e. broad view on secularism demands from the state that it be equidistant from all the country's different religions, that it refuse to take sides, and that it maintain a position of neutrality. Under this policy, the state ensures that there be a *symmetry* of treatment, meaning that each religion is granted the same privileges as are granted to all other religions. Under this policy, the state can for instance provide support to hospitals run by religious institutions, but if it does so it should take care to give equal backing to all hospitals, whatever their religious or non-religious denomination. This view, which indeed could be termed the *broader* view, since it leaves ample scope for religions to play a role in public life, would in essence be the conceptualisation captivated by the Bengali term *'dharmaniropekkhata'* (4). In the more 'narrow' interpretation of a secular policy, the state takes a larger distance from religions, 'must stay clear of any association with religious matters whatsoever' (5). Although Amartya Sen does not elaborate on states where the latter view has prevailed, he clearly states that the former, the 'broad' view, has been the one that India has preferred to follow since the end of British colonial dominance.

Two brief comments are necessary regarding the Western conceptualisation and practice of secularism, as a preliminary to my discussion on Bangladesh's historical experience. First, the Western, internal state practices regarding secularism have not been as unequivocal as is often thought or pretended. Whereas France for instance, ever since the beginning of the 20th century, has had a law on the *'laicite'*, which demands from the state that it stays clear from religion in the country's public life, - other Western European countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, to my knowledge have always left significant scope for the state to provide financial support, or mediate support to religions and religious institutions based within the country, for instance in the sphere of education and in relation to the collection of taxes. Beyond this, however, and more ponderous, is the fact that Western-European states have never consistently pursued the policies on secularism and religious tolerance practised at home, when implementing policies of domination over their colonies. In the case of France, for instance, the demand that the law on the *'laicite'* (November 9, 1905) be applied to Algeria was almost immediately rejected by the country's lawmakers. Instead, as Xavier Ternisien argues, the colonial administration 'relied on the most conservative religious discourse' and rejected demands for separation between state and religion, in the country's colony Algeria (6).

The latter can easily be corroborated with evidence from South Asia. Previous to colonisation by Great Britain, the subcontinent as is well known had seen several historical waves of mystical religious ferment, waves such as the great *Bhakti* movement which not only contributed to religious tolerance between different religious communities, but also advanced other emancipatory demands, such as the demand for more equality between women and men. However, subsequent to the establishment of British colonial rule, sustained efforts were

undertaken to promote precisely the most orthodox interpretations of the subcontinent's main religions, Hinduism and Islam. Thus, one can justifiably speak of the 'ossification' of religions under the impact of British colonialism. And although this point has been stated well by South Asian historians, such as by Ramkrishna Mukherjee in his monumental study on the rise and fall of the East India Company (7), there has been less discussion regarding the contrast between two sets of differential policies – policies followed by colonial powers at home, and policies pursued by colonial powers when seeking to ensure control over the peasantry and other sections of the colonized. No debate on secularism and religious tolerance – whether it be structured around themes such as contemporary Muslim fundamentalism, or any other form of religious fanaticism – can ignore the very deep contradictions that have characterized the policies of Western states ever since the days of colonialism.

3. Roots of Secularism in Bangladesh: The Thematic of 'Syncretism'

I shall now start reviewing themes which essentially need to be covered in order to highlight how secularism in its broad sense, and religious tolerance in particular, are rooted in the history of Bangladesh. The first point which I wish to address is that of *syncretism*. Syncretism is a term which I know is surrounded by controversies, and it also is a term which is not easy to define. Richard Eaton in his rich study on the rise of Islam in the Bengal 'Frontier' interprets the term to mean 'the production of a new synthesis out of two or more antithetical elements'(8). At another, perhaps less philosophical level, the term is used to refer broadly to the intermingling of, supposedly very distinct, religious traditions. These forms of intermingling can vary: intermingling could, for instance, take the form of the integration of symbols or symbolism from one religion into another. An appropriate way in which, perhaps, the term can be employed, is by using it specifically to cases where holy or religious figures described in religious narratives take on a double identity, - such as an identity drawn from the two religions that have dominated life in the subcontinent for many centuries, Hinduism and Islam. Whereas this form of *syncretism* may not be the only one that needs to be looked at in the context of a discussion on the history of secularism/religious tolerance, it certainly is one of, if not the most striking illustration of a population's willingness to accept the coexistence of the religions referred to in the narrative.

To highlight the presence of this form of syncretism in the cultural history of Bengal I have selected two exemplary stories, the legend of Satya Pir, and the story of the conflict between Dakshin Ray and Badi Ghazi Khan. With regard to the first, the legend of *Satya Pir*, Richard Eaton states that over a hundred manuscripts have been identified dealing with this legend, dating from the 16th through the 18th century. In one of these, Satya Pir is described both as the son of a daughter of the Sultan Ala al-Din Husain Shah, hence a Muslim, but also as born of a Goddess, Chandbibi, and as having come into the world 'to redress all human ills in the *kali yuga*'. Eaton adds that in some texts Satya Pir himself is identified with Satya Narayan, a form of Vishnu. In the cult regarding Satya Pir, there apparently was eagerness to project the holy man as bearer of both Islamic religion and of Hinduism (9). The second example, the story of *Dakshin Ray* and *Badi Ghazi Khan*, details the conflict between the former, seen as the king God of the Sunderban forest, and the latter, portrayed as a Muslim pioneer. Clearly, the story here referred to the growing conflict between two religions in consequence of the pioneering efforts carried out by Muslim saints, to help clear the jungles and forests of East Bengal, and make the land suitable for agriculture. However, in the *Ray-Mangala*, an epic poem composed in 1686, the conflict did not result in displacement of one by the other, but in coexistence, thanks to the mediation of an agent who was represented as 'half Krishna and half Muhammad' at the same time (10).

Without going further into the controversies over the meaning and significance of syncretism, it may initially be stated that the existence of syncretic elements in a country's culture makes it difficult for conservative religious currents to construct strict boundaries between religious communities. Syncretism thus helps to counter fanaticism, and helps to build an atmosphere of religious tolerance.

4. Mysticism and State Policy in Bengal

I will now move on to discuss the significance of mystical trends in Bengal's religions, for the formulation of a secular policy. It is well known and hardly needs being stressed for this audience, that Bangladesh's history is unique – for instance in comparison with the history of the Netherlands – in that three of the world's major religions have historically competed here for social dominance, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. What needs to be stressed, however, at the very same time, in order to draw insights on the country's special cultural history, is that in each of these three cases, *mystical currents* aiming at a direct spiritual experience have been enormously influential historically. Thus, spiritual teachers belonging to the *Sahajiya* trend in Buddhism are known to have contributed to the creation of Bengali language through the Charyapada lyrics (950-1150) with a critical social content, sympathetic to society's oppressed (11). Again, the followers of the *Vaishnava* mystic Chaitanya (1486-1533) who is known to have been critical of the caste system and who preached social equality, reportedly were tolerant of other religions existing in 16th century Bengal. Through the movement of Chaitanya also, the strength of Bengali language was affirmed, since it became the medium for the propagation of mysticism, the *Bhakti* (12). Lastly, Muslim mystics known as *Sufis* too have left a major imprint on the history of (East) Bengal, since it was they who introduced Islam to the region's populace. And although according to academic studies, it would be wrong to presume that mystic trends in all cases advocate religious tolerance, several trends of mysticism historically *have* contributed well towards creating an atmosphere of religious tolerance.

One case recorded in the literature is that of the *Chistis*, Muslim Sufi saints who in the centuries after the Muslim conquest established themselves in East Bengal. In the period of Mughal dominance in the 17th century, members of the Sufi order of the *Chistis* are reported to have been close to the rulers of Bengal, and are said to have promoted a policy whereby religion was separated from matters of state. This policy was reflected amongst others in the fact that political rule and the collection of taxes were concentrated in the city of Dhaka, whereas the urban centres of Pandua and Gaur emerged as sacred centres of Islam. Pandua is also known to be the location of the shrines of Bengal's most prominent *Chisti* saints. According to Richard Eaton, Mughal officials in Bengal, influenced by the *Chistis*, did not perceive Islam as a state religion, and refused to promote the conversion of Bengalis to Islam (13). To a certain extent then, the state in this period preceding British colonialism did pursue a policy of neutrality, of *dharmaniropekkhata*. And whereas the given policy surely is not only to be explained by the presence of Sufi saints, and should also be analysed in terms of the political economy of the given historical period, it is nevertheless significant that the existence of a relatively secular state policy was not a by-product of colonial dominance, but precisely accompanied *pre-colonial* Muslim rule in Bengal and the subcontinent. It is thus fully justified to emphasize this experience, in opposition to the tendency of Western academicians to see secularism as a by-product of Western-led modernisation. The latter interpretation is at variance with Bengal's historical experience. Whereas political secularism

in the 'narrow' sense may not have its historical precursor in South Asia, political secularism in the broader sense, as defined by Amartya Sen (see above), definitely does have precedents.

5. The Nyaya Vaisheshika's Influence in Bengal

A next point for discussion is the possible influence of the philosophical school of the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* towards the building of a secular atmosphere in Bengal in the past. Here my views can only be tentative. The *Nyaya Vaisheshika* is one of the great schools of Indian philosophy, with a very prolonged history. Debiprasad Chattopadhyay quotes sources indicating that the two, *Nyaya* and *Vaisheshika*, as separate systems of philosophy emerged some 200 to 300 before Christ (14). An early and fascinating feature of the *Nyaya* was syllogistic reasoning, the method of construction of logical arguments whereby logical conclusions are drawn on the basis of one main, and a secondary thesis (15). According to Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya also, the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* in the course of the 12th century entered a new phase. During this new phase, philosophers of the school took great pains to promote terminological precision (16). The *Nyaya Vaisheshika* thus appears to have contributed significantly towards the development of the technique of public debate. One of the specialties of this school's philosophers was that they constructed the various categories of logical proof. Below I wish to refer to the possible contribution of the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* towards the creation of a climate of rational reasoning. What needs to be stated first, is that Bengal became the very centre for the study of the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* in its new phase. Surendranath Dasgupta goes so far as to argue that in Navadweep, then one of Bengal's most important urban centres, the new school of the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* became the very most important school of philosophical study being practised, in particular in the 16th century (17). This appears to have been overlooked in many studies on the modernisation of Bengal.

Now, the point to be discussed in particular is whether the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* school with its emphasis on logical argument, and on the development of the technique of public debate, has contributed towards the creation of a climate of tolerance in Bengali society. At first sight, this does not seem to be the case, since – contrary to other schools of Indian philosophy – the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* also, and alongside its concern for logical consistency, are known to have constructed logical arguments for the existence of a supernatural Being, God. Moreover, the promotion of debate around questions of logic in itself does not necessarily result in more tolerance; in fact the result can be the opposite, in as much as it can also lead to very heated debates, and thus in a fanatical concern by debaters with their own arguments. What is clear in any case, is that the *Nyaya Vaisheshika*, just like the Buddhist Sahajiya and Chaitanya's Vaishnava trend, has contributed towards the development of Bengali language, through the construction of a variety of concepts, such as *tarka*, *hetvabhasha* and *vitanda* (18). Moreover, this philosophical tradition being well distinct from the Islamic intellectual tradition which reached Bengal from the Middle East, - the recording of the *Nyaya Vaisheshika*'s influence helps to ascertain and underline the fact that a wide range of cultural and religious currents have historically shaped the culture of Bengal. Whereas Muslim fundamentalists may seek to introduce their own concepts to give Bengali culture and language an Islamic imprint, - in reality Bengali culture and language have historically been shaped through the intermingling of a great variety of philosophical and religious trends. If nothing else – my reference to the new school of the *Nyaya Vaisheshika* studies in Navadweep serves to emphasize this crucial point.

6. Towards Religious Tolerance within the Framework of Islam

At a time when sections of the world's press are constantly trying to show that Islam is an intolerant religion by nature, that this religion cannot be reconciled with the construction of a modern, secular state, and that Western societies are faced with intolerant Muslim minorities (!), - it is useful to briefly review cases where religious tolerance has been propagated from within, or partly from within the framework of Islam. Whereas to an extent I have already made such a review when referring to the historical legacy of Muslim *Sufi* saints in Bengal, here I shall refer briefly to examples drawn from the modern history of East Bengal/Bangladesh. My first example is that of the great poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (19). Nazrul Islam's rise was facilitated by the fact that at a very critical point in time, i.e. in the wake of World War I, he promoted a Muslim *renaissance*. In writing and publicising poetry that glorified personalities in the history of Islamic religion, he sought to promote a re-awakening among Muslims, a neglected population under British rule. Nazrul Islam, however, soon moved on to champion the cause of nationalism against British colonialism, and to ardently support the struggles waged by the peasantry and other oppressed social sections in Bengal. However, the part of his poetry that in my view ultimately stands out as most impressive, are those poems written in favour of religious tolerance. On the basis of his experience as youngster in a local cultural group, Nazrul Islam – as no other Bengali poet – did draw on imagery from both Hinduism and Islam. For this reason, he drew hatred from the most orthodox sections of the Muslim clergy, and from politicians linked to the Muslim League. And before collapsing into silence, at a time when communal hatred was spreading, he composed poems advocating unity between Hindus and Muslims. In one poem he appealed to the prophet Mohammed to 'send from Heaven the message of equality', and projected Hazrat as the one who came into the world believing in the virtue of toleration. In yet another beautiful poem, he argued passionately that Hindus and Muslims are 'two flowers on the same stem' (20). Without exaggeration it can be stated, that Nazrul Islam, who himself was a believer, at a time of growing communal tensions powerfully advocated religious tolerance.

Whereas it is debated whether Nazrul Islam's main body of poetry was specifically Islamic in spirit, - Maulana Bhashani clearly represents secularism from within the framework of Islam. A trained theologian, Maulana Bhashani became one of the foremost politicians of East Bengal in the period when it was a province of Pakistan. In terms of party allegiance, Bhashani's history appears to present itself as checkered: he 'shifted' from being the president of the Muslim League, a party with an openly communal agenda – to leading an anti-imperialist party with pro-Chinese leanings, and that at a time when China went through revolutionary upheaval. However, a close reading of Bhashani's pronouncements and deeds, reveals that he consistently stood for religious tolerance. Thus, in the 1940s when he was based among Bengali peasants in Assam, he firmly opposed communal hatred between Muslims and Hindus (21). Again, after Partition, it was Bhashani who led the struggle for the formation of East Bengal's first secular political party, the Awami League. Being well aware of the fact that the choice in favour of Bengali national selfdetermination – in the then historical context - was a choice in favour of secularism, Bhashani in the 1950s ensured that the movement for national selfdetermination spread to the remotest corners of East Bengal. When organising his historical Kagmari Conference, in 1957, Bhashani offered ample scope for folk culture performances, including performances expressing Bengal's culture of religious tolerance. Both in East Bengal and abroad, Bhashani openly advocated the need for a separation between matters of religion and matters of state. And although he did not hesitate to use religious imagery and his status as *pir* amongst his religious followers, in order to incite people to rebel, - Bhashani stood opposed to and was opposed by conservative Muslim

theologians in Pakistan. It is therefore correct to interpret Maulana Bhashani's position – and more decidedly than Kazi Nazrul Islam's – as a secular position within the framework of Islam. Until the formation of Bangladesh as independent state, in 1971, Bhashani consistently promoted secularism and religious tolerance (22).

7. Conclusion:

Religious Tolerance and Political Democracy

I am tempted to conclude this speech with a comment on political actuality, i.e. on the still growing trend of religious intolerance in today's world. Perhaps this should be in the form of a commentary on the relationship between secularism and political democracy. For Bangladeshis who have been part of the historical struggle for the country's independence, as well as for those citizens who value the Bengali people's historical struggles, there is no doubt that the issues of political democracy and of secularism are interlinked issues. They have been interlinked ever since the French revolution indeed. Thus, *The Declaration of the Rights of Man* adopted on August 26, 1789, argued that 'no man may be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their manifestation does not trouble public order as established by law' (23). And although the French revolution was not to uphold this right through all the different phases it subsequently went through (24), - theoreticians of political democracy in Europe, both preceding and after the French revolution, have suggested a variety of measures to ensure that the bourgeois democratic state upholds the principles of secularism and of religious tolerance. Under this policy, the freedom of religion of all citizens is to be protected by the state, and the principle of religious freedom is to be defended alongside and at a part with other political freedoms defended by the modern state, such as freedom of press and freedom of association.

Today it is sadly necessary to underline the fact that the issues of religious tolerance and of religious freedom are an intrinsic part of political democracy, since some Western states – including the Netherlands – when faced with religious intolerance from two sides, tend to follow a policy of pick-and-choose. That means, we put forward principles of democracy as a matter of convenience, and ignore whatever fundamental democratic right does not suit us right now. Illustrative here is what happened after the publication in a Denmark newspaper earlier this year, of cartoons which were injurious to the feelings of Muslims worldwide. Whereas some Western governments were convinced that freedom of speech can not be defended at all costs, that in a political democracy this right stands *at par* with other political rights (such as freedom of religion) – other governments, including the one of the Netherlands went all out to criticise Middle Eastern governments for failing to stand in defence of 'freedom of opinion' (as expressed in the Danish press!). Yet this view is both hypocritical and ahistorical. Whereas in recent history, the far Right in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe has been hammering singularly on the 'right to free speech', in order to engineer a shift in the public discourse (in the direction of **intolerance** towards Islam) – in the past Western countries have not hesitated to put a break on one form of freedom in order to defend other, equally important freedoms of their own citizens.

Lastly – just like the issue of freedom of speech, the issue of religious tolerance and secularism cannot be discussed in a vacuum. Each discussion must be contextualized, must be analyzed in the context of actually existing contradictions between the social interests of different parts of the population, including the interests of a country's economic and political elite. To take once again the case of secularism in its 'narrow' sense, in the sense of a hands-off-policy of the state in relation to religion and religious matters: whereas forty years ago

the implementation of such a policy may have signified the withdrawal of support towards Christian schools, today it instead may signify primarily that financial and other forms of support towards Islamic schools are withdrawn. Both in view of the fact that Western states have not always been so strictly secular as is often claimed (25), and since a radical, strict secular policy may be targeted at depriving a minority of previously guaranteed rights, it appears to be essential that a *consistent* policy of *political democracy* - i.e. one comprising all basic political freedoms – be combined with a policy to defend secularism in the broad sense, in the sense of consistently *symmetrical* practices. For only thus can discrimination of dissenters, and of people belonging to political and religious minorities, be countered and true political democracy be guaranteed in today's world.

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(2) for an elaborate review of conflict between civilian and ecclesiastical authority in the history of Europe, see for instance Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Routledge Classics, London/UK and New York/USA, 2004); see also Perez Zagorin (2003), op.cit.;

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(10) *ibid*, p.212 and p.270; for another poignant example of syncretism, see Dusan Deak, 'Shah Datta – A Hindu God in Muslim Garb' (*IIAS Newsletter*, July 2005, p.20);

- (11) see eg. Shatabati Giri, 'Maddha Juge Banglar Bhasha O Shahitya' (in: Aniruddha Ray/Ratnabali Chattopadhyaya, *MaddhaJuge Banglar Shamaj O Sanskriti* (Bengali Society and Culture in the Middle Ages – K.P.Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, India, 1992, p.217);
- (12) see Ramakanto Chakraborti, 'Maddha Juge Banglae Baishnab Dharma O Tar Prabhab' (in Aniruddha Ray/Ratnabali Chattopadhyaya (1992), op.cit., p.141;
- (13) Richard Eaton (2000), op.cit., p.89, p.175-179;
- (14) Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Philosophy* (People's Publishing House, New Delhi, India, 1975), p.160;
- (15) for Aristoteles' views on syllogism, see Bertrand Russel (2004), op.cit., p.188/189;
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- (21) see eg. M.Waheeduzzaman Manik, 'Maulana Bhashani's Resistance Movement Against Mass Repression of Peasants' (*The Independent*, Dhaka, Bangladesh, December 5, 2001);
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- (23) see eg. Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA, 1979), p.221.
- (24) see Peter Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution. 1789-1793*. Volume II (Elephant Editions, London, United Kingdom), Chapter LXII, p.538;
- (25) see Stephanie Baumann, 'Tolerance a l'Allemande' (*Le Monde*, December 16, 2005, p.26).