



reflections

# Fundamentalism and Communalism in Bangladesh : Some Literary Responses

by Anisuzzaman

I MUST CONFESS AT THE BEGINNING that I have some problem with the use of the word fundamentalism. As you know, the word was coined early in the century to identify a particular movement within Protestantism in the United States. In that sense of the term it is, perhaps, more applicable, in the case of the Muslims, to the Wahabi Movement in Arabia and the likes of them in India, such as the Tariqa-i-Muhammadya, and the Faraizi Movement, which aimed at returning to the pristine purity of Islam and rejecting the later accretions as well as many innovations of modern science and technology. In common parlance, however, fundamentalism has gained currency to refer to the tendency of using religion for political purpose, antagonism to other faiths and their devotees and symbols, criticizing the Technical Age while accepting their benefits even when they are the products of followers of such religions that do not meet with their approval. I believe, we are using the word today in that connotation. Communalism, again, is a word that has gathered a special significance in the context of the Indian subcontinent. An Englishman would understand it in the sense of something for common use or belonging to a community while in our usage it has a distinctly negative connotation: one who bears a grudge or hatred for members of other persuasion or persuasions. It is in this limited sense that we shall be using the word here. I should also add that the word secularism has also acquired a different denotation in this part of the world. In the west it stands for this worldliness and separation of the church and the state. In South Asia, another concept has developed around the word: neutrality in respect of different religions or an equal treatment by the State of all faiths followed by its citizens.

Having said this, let us proceed to examine the reflections of fundamentalism and communalism in our literature. I believe, it would be quite in order to suggest that in Bengali literature, there are more references to communal harmony than to communal conflicts. It is doubtless that there were cleavages between one group of religionists and another, but there were also cleavages within the same religious group. For instance, there was a clear divide between the Hindu and the Muslim; the Hindus again, were divided by caste

and the Muslims by their origin of descent on the one hand and by Shia-Sunni sectarianism on the other. Conflicts were there — between and within the communities — sometimes ideological, sometimes political and sometimes motivated by pure self-interest. During the first partition of Bengal in 1905 and the agitation for its annulment until 1911, Muslims and Hindus clashed in several places in Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) looked into the depth of the problem and wrote a number of introspective essays. Such clashes took the form of communal riots in 1926 when Qazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) came up with moving essays and poems. The riots appeared in their ugliest face in 1946, and, then, in 1947, at the time of partition. That who clamoured for the partition of India and those who finally conceded to that demand hoped that it would put an end to communalism. That was not to be.

I have a feeling that Urdu has produced more creative writings on communal riots, particularly those of 1947, than Bengali, perhaps, because of the fact that the partition of the Punjab was accompanied by more bloodshed than that of Bengal. Similarly, it seems that West Bengal has produced more creative writings on the partition of Bengal than East Bengal, sometimes East Pakistan, and now Bangladesh, perhaps, because Bengalee refugees from East Bengal suffered more in the West than their counterparts from the West in the East.

In 1950 there were riots both in West and East Bengal. An anthology, *Dangar Panchti Galpa*, edited by Mustafa Nurul Islam (b. 1927) and Alauddin Al Azad (b. 1932), was published the same year. It included two short stories by Azad and Hasan Hafizur Rahman (1932-83), a one-act play by Munier Chowdhury (1925-71), and translations of two short stories by Krishan Chunder and Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. I wonder whether more were written at the time in East Bengal but was not collected and why translation of Urdu stories from India was preferred to original Bengali stories from the same country. Anyway, the slender volume recorded the misery of the common man and the triumph of humanity over the religious divide.

When the next riots took place in East Pakistan in 1964, all the newspapers carried the same editorial on the front page calling the Bangalee to resist

the rioters and most of the political leaders went out with the same appeal. The people responded. Amir Hossain Chowdhury, nephew of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and a translator and writer in English, gave away his life to save a Hindu family in Dhaka. Such a positive response of the people may be seen as a cumulative-effect of political and cultural movements that were taking place since 1950, and especially since the state language movement in 1952. A continuous campaign for communal harmony and secularism which became a part of such movements resulted in the founding of non-denominational students' organization and political parties, opening the doors of the Awami League for non-Muslims, opposition to the nomenclature of the republic as Islamic and adoption of the principle of joint electorate for East Pakistan in the Constitution of 1956. With the flow of Bengali nationalism, communalism had very little place in society.

Since 1964 no further communal disturbances happened in East Pakistan. It was during our war of liberation that Hindus became a special target of the Pakistan Army and communal propaganda was carried to its height by the state machinery, aided and abetted by communal political groups. Fictions on the war of liberation have not failed to take this fact into account.

The Constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, incorporated four fundamental principles of state policy: nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism. Article 12 promised to eliminate communalism in all its forms and prohibited the abuse of religion for political purpose and Article 38 prevented *inter alia*, people from forming political organizations on communal basis.

Following the killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, that part of Article 38 was removed from the Constitution in May 1976 and, six months later, Article 12 was deleted — both under Proclamation Orders issued under the Martial Law. These enabled the religious-based parties to stage a comeback and the communalists to carry on their propaganda afresh in the name of Islam. A Dhaka newspaper, belonging to one of the worst offenders of 1971, carried a news item on 31 October 1990 that the Babri mosque has been destroyed. It sparked off communal disturbances in many

places in Bangladesh, Chittagong and Dhaka being the most affected ones. The resistance, spontaneous but ill-organized came mostly from non-government quarters. When the Babri mosque was actually demolished in December 1992, the scale of atrocities in Bangladesh was much higher. Churches and Buddhist temples were also reported to come under attack. The people resisted at places and the administration moved at some other, but the loss of confidence on the part of the non-Muslim population in Bangladesh was irreparable.

The writers played their part. Akhtar Hussain (b. 1945) edited *Sampradayikata-birodhi Galpa* (Dhaka, 1991) in which 11 short stories in Bengali (eight by Showkat Osman (b. 1917), Syed Waliullah (1922-71), Ishaq Chakhari (1922-?), Abu Ishaq (b. 1926), Sucharit Chowdhury (1929-94), Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Alauddin Al Azad and Hasan Azizul Huq (b. 1939) from Bangladesh and three from West Bengal by Ramesh Chandra Sen, Samaresh Basu and Salil Chowdhury), three from Urdu (those by Sadat Hosain Manto, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Krishan Chunder), two from Hindi (Yashpal and Rangaya Ragho) and two from Punjabi (by Bhisma Sahabi and Kulwant Singh Viru) were collected. Many of these stories were written much earlier, but the anthology was meaningful in the context because it brought out the similarity both in the communal situation and the writers' responses in the three countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Nineteen ninety-two produced more. Shafi Ahmed and Purabi Basu edited *Ekhono Golo'Na Andhar* (Dhaka, 1993) which collected all the articles, editorials, post-editorials and letters to the editors published in the Dhaka press between 7 and 13 December 1992, on the subject of communalism. It also included some poems and stories most of which were written contemporaneously. Mafidul Huq from Dhaka and Arun Sen from Calcutta jointly edited *Dhvangastupe Alo/Babri Masjid-Rammandir Vibad* (Dhaka and Calcutta, 1993), a compilation of anti-communal writings published in the Dhaka and Calcutta press, following the demolition of the Babri mosque.

I have already mentioned some of the writers of Bangladesh who have responded to the communal situation. To this list must be added the names of Ahmed Sharif (b. 1921), Kabir Chowdhury

(b. 1923), Aatur Rahman (b. 1927), Zillur Rahman Siddiqui (b. 1928), Mahbub-ul-Alam Chowdhury, Ajoy Roy (b. 1928), Mazharul Islam (b. 1928), Shamsur Rahman (b. 1929), Badruddin Umar (b. 1931), Faiz Ahmed, Syed Atiqullah (b. 1933), Shamsuzzaman Khan (b. 1937), Hasnat Abdul Hai (1939), Hayat Mamud (b. 1939), Rabiul Hossain (b. 1943), Mahadev Saha (b. 1944), Nirmalendu Gun (1945), Syed Manzoorul Islam, Rabindra Gop (b. 1951), Taslima Nasreen and Sushanta Majumdar.

Shamsur Rahman, our foremost poet, produced some remarkable poems, both in 1990 and 1992. He proclaims that non-Muslims shall not leave their home and hearth — a sentiment echoed in Sushanta Majumdar's story. Like Rahman, Mahadev Saha calls man a biped animal and is full of self-reproach for his misdeeds. Nirmalendu Gun reminds his readers that while a Hindu does not take beef and a Muslim abhors the flesh of a he-goat, the butcher kills both the animals with the same knife. Taslima Nasreen has created a lot of controversy over her novel, *Lajja* (1993). Although as a novel it is weak, Nasreen has good reasons to be indignant and that she expresses in several forms of writings. Hasnat Abdul Hai wrote three exceptional stories, two of which are now collected in his *Sreshtha Galpa* (Dhaka, 1994). In one, the characters have no name: they could have been members of the minority community anywhere in the world. No greater harm is done to them except that a missile thrown from outside breaks the window-pane. But the fact that the main character is asked to stay home and not to attend office, assured that he is safe, enquired after his well-being all on a particular day on which the processionists and the police chase each other alienates him totally. In the other story, the Headmaster's daughter is kidnapped on the eve of her wedding. The father asks almost everyone to help trace her. And when she returns home after three days in a dishevelled state, the Headmaster only whispers: 'Why did you have to come back, my child?'

The father in the story is however not alone in his anguish. The writers in Bangladesh share his burden and Shamsur Rahman, again, says: I do not have enough tears in my eyes that I can put out that terrible fire. I do not have enough room on my writ-

ing desk that I can accommodate the hundreds of men now pursued by those cannibals

The words that were coming to me ... fluttering like butterflies, swimming like fishes, like a shining current of stars, like buzzing bees ... they are now burning in a terrible conflagration.

(Translated by Kabir Chowdhury)

It is not the rioters alone that our writers have been confronting. In the countryside, the Imams of local mosques and the head Mudarris of Madrasas have, for sometime, started playing the role of protectors of public morality. In several cases, they have accused women, in particular, of immorality and sentenced them to stoning for a period of time or to suffer a specific number of lashes on their body. In one case a girl died of the punishment and in another she committed suicide for such humiliation. Many writers have voiced protests and Imdadul Huq Milan is writing a two-volume novel after the suicide's name, *Nurjahan*, of which one volume (Dhaka, 1995) has come out. In the cities several writers like Sufia Kamal, Ahmed Sharif, Kabir Chowdhury, Shamsur Rahman, Faiz Ahmed and Taslima Nasreen (and an artist of the late Qamrul Hasan's eminence) have been declared *murdat* or apostates by some religio-political groups and re-wards have been publicly declared for their heads. Taslima Nasreen is now self-exiled in Europe.

The same groups are clamouring to declare the Ahmadiyas and the Shias non-Muslims. Systematic attacks have been made on the Ahmadiya centres, mosques and homes. Without entering into the religious debates, most of our writers have deplored these attempts at dividing the people, these demonstrations of intolerance, and these violations of rights, norms and civilities. It is not enough for a writer in Bangladesh to respond to fundamentalism and communalism through his writings, the circumstances demand him to turn an activist as well.

About the writer: Anisuzzaman is Professor of Bengali at Dhaka University.

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poem

## Halloween '96

by Mahbub Jamal

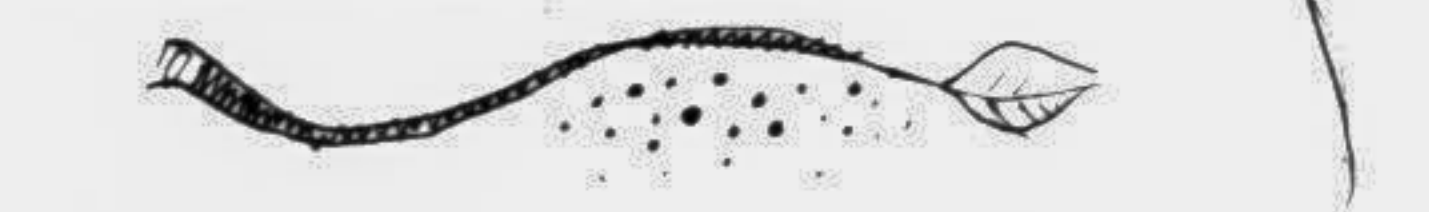
With the kids out 'trick or treating', I turned to Peter Jennings. Following the usual election-year news, The TV blinked me to a dusty street in some distant land. To my right lay Conrad's grove of death. Filled with dark phantom-like figures, once human, Now able to express neither grief nor pain.



Weary witnesses to the apathy of a blind world, These moribund forms, these shadows of disease and starvation. Stood still in a limbo of mournful silence, Huddled in masses, clinging to the parched earth, Legs drawn up, chins often propped on knees, Bodies reclined full length, all waiting to die.



Across the street remained some at journey's end, Emaciated and petrified beings, both young and old; Though wrapped in tattered clothes, and bound both ends, A few gnarled, twig-like limbs reached out, And beckoned the world to experience this horror, To witness once more the unthinkable.



Sophocles, long ago, had heard it on the Aegean: The turbid ebb and flow of human misery, But this? Another Thebes? Another City of Death? Where suffering has no end, And where pleas for mercy rise, And a wild hymn for the Healer blazes.



That night, while Batman, E.T., and Supergirl were busy Sorting candy with eager hands, I felt I saw half-effaced in the dim bedroom light, The frail hands of a nubian child, Sifting sand ... Ever so patiently.

About the writer: Mahbub Jamal teaches English at Purdue University, Indiana, USA.

language

## Critics Lost for Words over 'Newspeak' Reform

by Petar Hadji-Ristic

EUROPE'S CURRENT best-selling book remains virtually unread. It is sitting on millions of bookshelves, ready for the day when it will be an essential reference for any literate German.

The publishers of the red-and-yellow *Duden* say it has sold an estimated three million copies within six months of publication.

Not far behind is the blue-and-white *Bertelsmann*, with sales topping two million.

Both books aim to be the essential guide on the reform of German spelling (*Rechtschreibreform*), and how the world's 150 million German-speakers should write in the 21st century.

Measured by weight and size, there seems to be nothing to choose between the two. But out of about 20,000 details, one professor has already spotted hundreds of differences in what both claim is the official, unpurged version of the reforms, agreed last year by the cultural ministers of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Trailing behind are another 1,275 titles on the same subject. And the number is growing by the week as Reform Day — 1 August, 1998 — draws closer.

On that day, a new double-S will be introduced to hundreds of words. Many other letters are to be dou-

bled up. Capital letters are used even more liberally. New hyphens go in and some old ones go out. And there is a general blitz to remove commas.

"We have actually reduced the number of rules in the German language by more than 100," says Dr Claus Heller of the German Language Institute in Mannheim, who has been working intensively on reform for 23 years.

The result has also been a reduction in the number of exceptions to the rules, which the American writer Mark Twain would have welcomed. He was convinced that German contained more exceptions to the rules than rules.

The overall aim of the exercise is to make German easier to learn, both for Germans and foreigners.

But not all teachers welcome the changes that are already being taught in German schools.

"The reform is utterly superfluous. It deserves the worst possible marks," says Friedrich Denk, a German language teacher in a small town near the border with Switzerland. "It is an attack on the German language. It resembles the 'Newspeak' that George Orwell wrote about in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*."

Denk is campaigning to block the reform. Fifty thousand people have signed

### New words for old

Old spelling	New spelling
daß (that)	dass
essenziell (essential)	essenziel
Full-time-Job (full time job)	Fulltimejob
Hämorrhoid (haemorrhoid)	Hämorrhide
Imbiss (snack)	imbisse
Pornographie (pornography)	Pornografie
wieviel (how much)	wie viel

Even what is reputedly the longest word in the language - Rhein-Main-Danau-Großschiffahrtsweg (Rhine-Danube Canal) becomes - Rhein-Main-Danau-Großschiffahrtsweg

his petition, including 100 of the most prominent writers in the German language.

Among them is Hans Magnus Enzensberger, known as a master of German style and the epitome of the modern-day German "man of letters".

"I have no need whatsoever for these people. The very cheek of them! I know better than they do," he says.

But it is not only Germans who might eventually object when everyone starts reaching for their *Dudens* and *Bertelsmanns*. The reform experts have also tinkered with the foreign words that have crept into the language since the last reform, back in 1901.



The English speciality of corned beef and mixed pickles will lose spaces between words to become *Cornedbeef und Mixedpickles*. Being nouns, the two new longer words must always be given a capital letter. The same rules hold true for other dishes, such as *Hotdogs*.

Sometimes words are joined; sometimes they are hyphenated. A *New-Yorker* might now be distinguished by a hyphen, but there is nothing to say what happens to a *New Englander*.

New letters are also sometimes tagged onto the end of English words when they appear in German. A tip in a restaurant becomes

a *Tip* and a stop becomes *Stopp*.

English words do, however, escape the tripling up of some letters that will now occasionally occur — as in *Schneeewe* (snowy owl).

The reformers dare not tamper with the golden rule that distinguishes their language from all the other 3,000 or so around the world. All German nouns, however lowly, will continue to begin with capital letters. The rule will now apply to foreign words, too.

The reform exercise offered an opportunity to iron out some perceived anomalies in the gender of nouns. But the reformers chose not to opt for sex changes. A German girl (*das deutsche Mädchen*) remains neuter, while German guards (*die Wache*) stay feminine.

*Sex appeal*, meanwhile, becomes elevated to the status of a single word, without a hyphen, but, of course, with a capital letter: *Sexappeal*.

The order of words in a sentence will not change. Verbs will continue to be lined up at the end of a sentence.

How long will it take people to catch up with all the changes?

One of those best-placed to answer the question is Dr Otmur Klage, who is responsible for bringing all the schoolbooks published by one of the country's

largest publishers into line with the reforms.

"You can't master them in an hour," he admits. "It's a learning process. I've been intensively involved with this matter for three-quarters of a year and have largely mastered the rules. I don't have all the new rules in my head yet, but I know where to find them. It's not been an easy job."

The cultural ministers of Germany, Austria and Switzerland have given the public another seven years to get used to the changes. They will become obligatory on 1 August, 2005. Only officials have until 1998 to learn them, although the German President, Roman Herzog, has reportedly said he will never change how he writes.

Some lawyers are also determined to put off the day when they have to write to their clients with new double and triple letters and hyphens. Professor Ruper Scholz, a leading constitutional lawyer and an influential MP, says he thinks the reform is illegal.

"Any attempt to carry through the reform would be unconstitutional," he says. "The cultural ministers overstepped themselves. Language reform is the prerogative of parliament alone."

—GEMINI NEWS  
About the Author: Petar Hadji-Ristic is a British Journalist and film-maker based in Berlin.