

The Impact of Religious Fanaticism on Women in Bangladesh

by Saira Rahman

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tolerance, peace and harmony. The Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh follows the path of hatred, malice and violence ... Let our government ban Jamaat-e-Islami without further delay and declare all communal and other fascist organisations illegal ... Jahanaan Imam. February 1994

The early years

MUSLIM domination over the land of Bengal was not established before the fall of the 13th century AD. Combined with the preaching of traveling Sufi's various Muslim conquerors who established their hold over the sub-continent, helped preach Islam. The form of Islam preached by the wandering Sufis emphasised on a spiritual union with God and did not require followers to give up traditional beliefs totally. One may call this an unorthodox form of Islam and it was not until the awakening of the Islamic Reformer movement which commenced in India during the sixteenth century — and spread into Bengal in the 18th and 19th centuries, that the conflict between religion and custom arose for Bengali Muslims. This conflict is yet to be resolved.

In the early 19th century, there was a reform movement in Bengal founded by one Hajji Sharif Allah. He was born in the late 18th century and apparently went to Mecca in 1782, where he stayed till 1802. On his return to Bengal he instigated the 'Fara'id' movement or the 'movement of purification' which was based on three factors: 1. an anti-British sentiment by declaring the India was no longer the 'abode of Islam', but had become the 'abode of war'; 2. socio-economic reform directed against the rich landowners and land lords in the interest of the peasants and workers; 3. purification of Islam from Hindu ideas and Sufi excesses. The movement was continued by his son, Duduji Miah, but Sufism did not disappear altogether. It took on a new form under strict, orthodox pressure which resulted in denuding the practice of its metaphysical character and robbing it with the thoughts and practices of orthodox Islam.

Independence of Bangladesh and the role of Razakars

After partition in 1947, the geographical, cultural and economic disparity of the two wings of Pakistan and the inhuman dominance of West Pakistan over East, led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Islam was frequently used by Pakistan as a political tool both before and after Liberation of Bangladesh. The Mullahs and self-proclaimed 'religious' political parties misinterpreted Islam in order to mislead the uneducated, innocent rural Muslims that liberation forces were out to destroy Pakistan and that the separation of East Pakistan would lead to destruction and loss of religion. During the war the politicisation of Islam took dizzy heights. The Pakistani army tutored its soldiers that the Muslim of East Pakistan were converts from low-caste Hindus and were therefore not 'pure-blood' Muslims.

The role of the Razakars (collaborators) during the war is known to all. These and their supporters — the religion-based

'Life' launches no-tobacco signature campaign

In observance of World No-Tobacco Day, different organisations organised various programmes yesterday, reports UNB.

Dhaka University, unit of Life, an anti-drug organisation, launched a 'no-tobacco' signature campaign in cooperation with United Nations Information Centre (UNIC).

Dhaka University Vice Chancellor Prof AK Azad Chowdhury put his signature first at an inaugural ceremony at his office.

Pro-Vice Chancellor Prof Shahid Uddin Ahmed, UNIC official Kazi Ali Reza, Life Chairman Kamru Islam Soni, Life DU Unit President Abu Abdullah Mohammad Saleh were present.

Meanwhile, Bandhan, a voluntary blood donation organisation, and Students Anti-Smoking Committee, jointly organised an anti-tobacco rally on the Dhaka University campus.

To mark the day, Underprivileged Children's Educational Programmes (UCEP)-Bangladesh declared all its premises, including vehicles, as non-smoking area. The decision was taken in a recent management meeting to encourage anti-tobacco movement in the country.

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political groups — benefited themselves from the partition of India in 1947 due to the establishment of an 'Islamic' state of Pakistan. Such groups were specially helpful to the invading Pak-Army in rural Bangladesh, where the latter found the unfamiliar terrain difficult to maneuver in. In the villages they abetted in the killing of people and reducing women to sex slaves for the invading army. According to a report by Joseph Freid in the New York Daily News dated 27 December 1971, 'A stream of victims and eyewitnesses tell how truckloads of Pakistani soldiers and their henchmen razed swooped down on villages in the night, rounding up women by force. Some were raped on the spot. Others were carted off to military compounds. Some women captives were still there when Indian troops battled their way into Pakistani strongholds. Weeping survivors of a village raised because they were suspected of siding with the Mukti Bahini told of how wives were raped before the eyes of their bound husbands who were then put to death.'

The above, supposedly 'religious' forces, whose leaders disappeared after the liberation of the country in December 1971 — and who were left out from being punished for their war crimes by the country's first political government — reappeared in Bangladesh after the first Martial Law regime, to form 'religious' political parties under the Political Parties Regulation. This ultimately gave birth to the Bangladesh edition of the fascist organisation the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), whose supporters, along with social and religious rural elite are violating all sense of moral, religious and humane behaviour and violating the human rights of women in the country in the name of 'Fatwa'. These fanatic forces have found further strength from different constitutional amendments. The Fifth Amendment introduced the phrase 'Bismillah ur-Rahman ur-Rahim' and 'absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah...' into the secular constitution of 1972. The Eighth Amendment further destroys secularism by stating 'the State Religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic.' These amendments were made during Martial Law regimes — which have, in practice, had links with fascist parties.

The definition of 'Fatwa'

What is 'fatwa' really? Fatwa, in the true Islamic context, has been defined by Dr Syed Anwar Hussain as the opinion of a mufti who is a versatile person having sufficiently strong grounding in Islamic principles. A Mufti is a religious person appointed by the state for the purpose of issuing fatwa and no one else can do so. Therefore, in other words, a 'fatwa' is a religious decree or edict according to Quranic doctrine. The term itself is derived from the Arabic 'to give decision'. During the time when Islam was still young, during the Umayyad and Abassid dynasties religious courts were held where fatwa was passed. Due to outside influences and changes in society, the responsibility of judging the people was given to the state, but everyday, domestic disputes were resolved by special fatwa institutions, which were, however, not allowed to pass decisions over criminal offences.

Fatwa in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh today, considered from a strict Islamic point of view, the practice of Fatwa is an anathema. It is an instrument of exploitation disguised in religious garb. It is targeted against the most vulnerable members of society to achieve social, political and

economic advantage and has roots in the policies and practices of political elite who seek gain through the patronising of anti-social anti-development forces. Furthermore, the practice of Fatwa is not sanctioned by the law and, therefore, the sentences of death, and the sentences and acts of whipping and stoning, passed by some rural mullahs with the silent approval of the rural elite, are criminal offences in the eyes of the law. The Jamaat-e-Islami and other like-minded political

parties claim that they do not recognise the Constitution of Bangladesh since it is a 'man-made' code. They fail to realise that the Constitution is the 'law of the land' and any law made or act done in contravention to its provisions is illegal.

The effects of 'fatwa' on women in rural Bangladesh

The Constitution, in its Articles 10, 11, 16 and in its chapter on Fundamental rights plays a role in protecting wom-

en's rights and NGOs and GOs are cooperating in improving the standard of rural women. The village elite and their so-called religious counterparts have no right to undermine these efforts, specially when they do nothing to improve the standard of living themselves.

Not only does the practice of Fatwa violate statutory law and Muslim Law, it is also a gross abuse of the basic human rights of life and liberty. The Quran

contains doctrines which enshrine the necessity for believers to be humane, tolerant, patient and respectful towards each other as well as towards those who are of other religions. It is, in many respects, a document of Human Rights. Fatwa in rural Bangladesh has caused the death of many women who were never even given a chance to defend themselves. Noorjahan, Dulaili, Firoza and many like them were forced to commit suicide after being flogged or stoned as

a result of 'fatwa'. One was even burnt to death. The Quran states, in Surah Al-Nisa: 'It is unlawful for a believer to kill another believer except by accident... he that kills a believer by design shall incur the wrath of God, who will lay his curse on him...' Women have been prevented from voting — even in the Parliamentary Elections of 12 June 1997 — and from working or continuing to work in development projects due to fatwas passed by local Imams that women should not leave the four wall of their homes and should not come in front of strange men. If women were required to go into segregation and cover themselves from head to toe, perhaps the Imams forget the teachings in Surah An-Nur: 'Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them...' and also the teachings in Surah Al-Nisa which lays down that women have as much right to earn a living as men: 'And covet not the thing which Allah hath made some of you excel others. Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned. Envy not one another but ask Allah of his bounty. Lo! Allah is ever Knower of all things.'

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used innocent victims of rape and as being adulterous. On study of the Quran, it will be noted that it is the accuser who has to prove the act of adultery. If he cannot prove it substantially is he and not the victim who is punished. The Quran says: 'Those that defame honorable women and cannot produce four witnesses shall be given eighty lashes. Do not accept their testimony ever after, for they are great transgressors — except those among them that afterwards repent and mend their ways. God is Forgiving and Merciful.'

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