

Face to Face

Badruddin Umar: Champion of Free-Thinking

It is not always easy to look at contemporary issues from a dispassionate distance, evaluate them in a wider historical context and remain unbiased. **Badruddin Umar**, who turns 67 this year, is a great example of a searching mind with a deep understanding of our socio-political culture. He is the founder-secretary of the country's only progressive writer's circle and over the past three decades has regularly contributed to the periodical *Sanskriti*, writing on issues that require contemplative look-through. Interviewed by **Ziaul Karim**

Q: You wrote *Communalism way back in 1966. What is the state of communalism in this country now, 33 years after the publication of your book?*

A: Actually, the basis of communalism was eliminated, to some extent, in 1947, and uprooted in 1971. Social basis of communalism no longer exists in this country. The only form in which it survives here is anti-Indianism. The Jamaat-e-Islami is one organisation based on religious ideas. But it cannot be called a communal organisation. It's not a successor to Muslim League. But what runs common at the heart of these political parties is the political use of religion.

Previously, during the British period or in the early days of Pakistan, communalism was a form of political use of religion. Religion as you know has been used by the ruling classes since time immemorial. Most people think that when you talk of religion and political use of religion, it amounts to communalism. But that is not true.

Q: Where does the misconception lie?

A: Communalism has its own target — the other community. It is a conflict between two definite communities. Fundamentalism is altogether a different proposition. Fundamentalists try to implement basic principles of their religion. In that sense there can be Hindu or Muslim or Christian fundamentalism. So, apparently the Jamaat-e-Islami people stand for basic principles of Islam and they want to implement tenets of Islam. That way they are not directly opposed to Hindus or Christians or anybody.

But sometimes they make marginal use of communalism whenever the opportunity arises. It happened during the Babri Mosque affair. But they are not basically communal. When you come to the issue

of Bengali and non-Bengali, which became very important during the War of Independence in 1971 and before that, you will find that the target was different. Hindus were not being targeted. The non-Bengalis or the so-called Biharis were. On the other hand, the Biharis were targeting the Bengalis. The Jamaat people are not targeting any Hindus. Perhaps, there is no single example of a Jamaat-e-Islami making an attack on a Hindu. Their student organisation Chhatra Shibir killed a large number of students who were all Muslims, because they thought that they were radicals or nationalists or whatever. So, you see, the targets of Muslim League and their communalism are quite different from those of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Anybody who fails to understand this fails to understand the actual situation and the changes which have taken place in the political use of religion.

Q: Then how are you going to explain the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh?

A: The rise of fundamentalism here and the world over is basically a reaction to the fall of communism in Soviet Union. The imperialists and the capitalists are saying now that they are the saviour of humanity. But that has not been the case. After the fall of Soviet Union and East European states the situation in the world has only deteriorated. And, in one word, you can say reactionary forces have actually replaced anything progressive in our country or any other country of the world. This is a reactionary phenomenon. These people — whether fundamentalists or communal — used to be challenged by progressive people. With the fall of Soviet Union and with the massive propaganda that socialism has become a thing of the past, frustration has heightened in people's mind. So the left organisation or the socialist movement are in a low key. The Jamaat-e-Islami or, for

that matter, any reactionary force can be really fought by the progressive forces of the society. Their passivity actually led to the rise of the Jamaat-e-Islami in this country since 1972. And I would say that Awami League and its leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman actually initiated a policy which led to the rise of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the fundamentalists.

Q: How?

A: First he released all the collaborators of 1971. Secondly, he encouraged Madrassah education in a way. It had never been done before, not in the Mughal period or the Sultan period or the British period or even the Pakistan period. He increased grants for madrassahs and later, as a follow-up to that, Ziaur Rahman and others changed the curriculum of madrassahs, and allowed madrassah students to go to colleges and universities, thereby paving the path for creation of the Islamic Chhatra Shibir. No such possibility was there before. I won't say that there is a high tide of Jamaat-e-Islami or fundamentalism now. It could have been to some extent. The desperate ruling classes of the country now need to make political use of religion and they are doing just that. They have very largely appropriated the principles and practices of Jamaat-e-Islam. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina goes to perform Haj almost every year and says she wants to increase grants to the madrassah, she, in fact, tries to appease the fundamentalists. This government has recently put a ban on a particular issue of the *Desh* which carried a short story of Taslima Nasreen. I am not personally enamoured by her story or *Desh* but I have made a protest against that because when you do that it is not far from promulgating a blasphemy act. When you say something must be banned, because it hurts the religious sentiment of the Muslim, it means that you are going to

have certain kind of control over the ideas of men, of their freedom to say whatever they want. You are doing this on the basis of religion. So you are doing what the Jamaat-e-Islami would have liked to do. This was also done during the BNP regime. What the Awami League is doing now by banning a particular issue of *Desh* is tantamount to an attempt to promulgate a blasphemy act, an attempt which was made during the BNP period and was foiled.

Q: With the fall of Soviet Union and the subsequent new world order, do you think that the free-market economy will deliver the good?

A: Free-market economy is as old as the capitalism. It's like old wine in a new bottle. Instead of saying capitalism they are now trying to give free-market economy a wide currency. I need not want to go into any detail. You can look around and see what the free-market economy has done to the world. On the home front just see what it has done to us. It has opened our market to outsiders. Our domestic products and products are being completely priced out by imported commodities. Our industries are soon or later going to be destroyed by the onslaught of foreign goods to benefit of the imperialists. It's the imperialists who are getting benefited by the free-market economy. They are actually mopping up all the surplus whatever we are creating. They are draining all the resources from our country through various channels. A few multimillionaires who control the world economy are trumpeting the victory and the glory of the free-market economy through media. And the media is also controlled by them. These days media controls the public opinion. If you go on haranguing through 25 TV channels and newspapers all the time about the benefit of free-market economy, the propaganda will have an effect on you. This illusion of free-market economy is

being created in the mind of the people by this propaganda. You look around and tell me what positive gains we have so far achieved through market economy. This country has been practically ruined.

Q: There has been intellectual crises also in the west after the downfall of the Soviet Union. Do you think the ideas of Amartya Sen will be able to address it?

A: I have recently written a piece in the *Sanskriti* about Prof Sen's thoughts on poverty and famine which has been applauded world over. I don't think he has made any contribution either to humanity or to the intellectual history of human being. He has practically nothing to say to mankind. "In a sparkling language," one of my friends, Dr Ashoke Mitra, said, "what Prof Sen has to say about poverty and famine was known even to my great grandmother." About the famine what he has written is nothing but pure nonsense. That's what I have written in my piece in the *Sanskriti*. He says that in a democracy there cannot be a famine which is sheer nonsense. To corroborate that he says there was no famine in India. We all know that there were big famines in India particularly in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Orissa, Kalahandi in Andhra and Mijoram. During Nehru's time there was such a great famine in Mijoram that thousands of people died of starvation. At that time a famine resistance committee, the Mijoram Famine Resistance Committee, was formed. This committee gradually turned into the Mijoram Liberation Front. Surprisingly, Prof Sen claims that there was no famine in India. Since he has been awarded the Nobel Prize whatever he says is taken as gospel.

If anything can be done, it must be done at the social level by changing the distribution system. And, Amartya Sen has nothing to say on this point. He talks about entitlement but not



about how it will be created. There is no hint about through what kind of struggle or policy this entitlement will be achieved. This is a kind of exercise which may be of high intellectual standard, but when it comes to the question of implementation, you find yourself nowhere.

Q: Where, do you think, lies the future of Marxism?

A: Going into the question of Marxism I would like to change it for future of socialism which is, of course, based on Marxism. The future of socialism is basically the future of human being. If mankind has no socialist future, he will have no future at all. It has been greatly demonstrated now that capitalism has failed to give anything to people after the downfall of the Soviet Union. I wouldn't say the downfall of socialism. Look at post-socialist Soviet Union, thousands of people have died, particularly the old people — the pensioners and others. The society has been ruined and is full of criminals now. Only a handful of billionaires, who were created, are exploiting the economy. Foreigners have gone there to make money and drain out resources from that country. From a great country, it has

turned into a country of destitute. So that is what capitalism has done to these people. It is not true that socialism is dead. For various historical reasons, into which I cannot go now, there has been downfall of the Soviet Union. But they have demonstrated what socialism can really give to the people. They provided food, shelter, education, health and everything that people needed within a very short period of time. A very backward country became a superpower. People do not evaluate what was actually achieved by socialism. The west even describe Stalin as a criminal. Is it possible for a criminal to achieve all that Soviet Union had achieved? This is only an imperialist propaganda and their allies are spreading it around.

Socialism just says that whatever you produce should be appropriated by the producers themselves, in the final analysis it should be appropriated by the people. Now what capitalism says, in the name of individual incentive and etc., the result is: everything is being appropriated by a handful of people. Moreover, the essence of socialism is the elimination of contradiction between social production and

private appropriation. This is the major crisis capitalism is in. And out of this, hundreds and thousands of other contradictions develop in the system. Even if you go to America you will find people without food, shelter and education. There are lots of Americans who can't even read.

Q: What is your view about the NGOs working in the country? Do you think that they can change the lot of the people?

A: First, you will have to ask where they are getting their money from, the money that they are spending so lavishly. All the NGO chiefs have become multimillionaires. They enrich themselves by talking about poverty. Moreover, you have to remember one thing: they are being financed by the imperialist agencies whom they lovingly call donors. Do they donate anything to us? Rather we donate to them. If we don't produce, if we don't give our surplus to them, they won't be that well off. Whatever they give us they take hundred per cent more than that. This is a common-sense knowledge, if imperialists are financing these projects there is no question of the benefit reaching the people.

When I was a Teenager

“FROM my early childhood days, for some strange reason, I felt attracted to chess even though I never had the chance to play the game, for it was for the grown-ups not the children,” recalls the country's lone international woman master Syeda Jasimunnessa Khatun, popularly known as Rani Hamid. Her love for the game has only intensified with time.

Born in 1944, Rani was the third among eight brothers and sisters. Her father Syed Montaz Ali was a public prosecutor.

“My father was a graduate in English. He was a very good-looking man, tall and fair. He was a fluent speaker of English, so fluent that people often took him for an Englishman. My mother, Komornunessa, was just the opposite. Her courtship with education ended at the primary school. English was a language she never felt attracted to. Yet, she was educated in her own special way, conscious of her familial responsibilities.”

Rani's parents were liberal in its true sense, but it was her father who had inspired all his children to engage in various sport activities. He believed that sport would keep his children from getting spoiled.

“In a conservative societal atmosphere, our family was an exception. We were

brought up in an environment of which sport had been a regular feature. My father used to bring carom boards and other indoor games and every winter made arrangements for badminton and table tennis. But mostly he loved to play carom with us. Often father and I played as a team against my two elder brothers and won. It was real fun.”

Rani spent her childhood in different parts of the country as her father's job was subject to transfer. She began her schooling at Non-donkanon Girls School in Chittagong. She was admitted in the primary section and there she became more involved in outdoor games.

“I remember, in the beginning, I was easily out-paced by my classmates. Sprinting had not been my strongest point. So I started practising and after six months, the scenario completely changed. It was I who would outpace them any time, anywhere.”

Rani also started competing in school sports competition and always became champion, and also the champion of the champions. Even before the competition began, everyone knew who would win.

Next stop in her schooling was Comilla Missionary School. It was a nice English medium school with a few Muslim students. Most of the students were Christian.



IN CONVERSATION WITH RANI HAMID

by Sonia Kristy

There, her classmates made Rani, who was least interested in cultural activities, perform a dance number at a school function once. Before the function, they had instructed her to make knots with her hair for three days in order to perm her hair. After three days, she found that her hair has really got permed.

“In the accompanying song for the dance, there was a reference of hair like dark cloud. My hair, in my eyes at least, matched that description,” she said.

After a year in the missionary school, Rani took a test for admission in Foyzunnessa High School, one of the prestigious schools in those days. Getting admission in that school was pretty tough as it had limited seats. Out of the twenty-five examinees, only five were selected and she was one of them.

“I was quite surprised because I didn't work for it at all. My concentration was more on sports. But I wasn't a mediocre student, either. I was always among the top of the class, not first, perhaps, but not out of the top ten, either. Mathematics was my favourite and I would always get highest marks. My parents never pushed any of us to study. They only appointed a permanent house tutor, who lived in the house

as a *jaagir*, and thus were satisfied that they had fulfilled their responsibilities towards us.”

Little Rani used to skip lessons showing different excuses and sat beside her father, watching him playing chess.

“Father used to play chess every evening and I was the most attentive observer. I often used to query him about different moves and though it was a game for the grown-ups, he tried to explain different rules and tactics. That was my initiation in chess.”

Sport seems to possess the major part of Rani's childhood.

“I remember once on the 14th of August, the then independence day, our school held a running competition. But everybody conveniently forgot to tell me about the race. They knew that I would win. Anyway, when I joined them at the starting block, the all the girls started protesting, saying I hadn't registered. But my sports teacher allowed me as she knew how good I was in sports. I won the event as usual and got a beautiful crystal jug and glass. Later, when I got married, my mother gave the jug and glass for use in my family.”

But Rani had to quit the school just when she had started paying more atten-

tion to her studies. Her father got transferred to the Sarda Police Academy. Unfortunately, there was no girls' school in Sarda, and Rani had to stay home leading almost an imprisoned life. She then grew a passion for books and finished all the books available at the police library in four months.

Although she couldn't go to school for two years her father made arrangements for her to appear in the final exam of class eight in the boys' school. She sat for the exam in *burkha* at the teachers' lounge. When the result got out, she found out that she had stood first.

But she refused to appear for the final exam of class nine under similar arrangements. It was getting quite difficult for her to study at home. Fortunately, her father got transferred to Sylhet and she was admitted in Sylhet Girls School from where she sat for her matriculation. However she didn't do up to the mark and secured second division, for there had been a two-year break and also she had got married two months before the exam.

Going to grandpa's on holidays was fun. Her grandfather would send a huge *panshi* (boat) for them. Vacation meant swimming, fishing, plucking fruits, and all the fun she knew of.

Going to movies was very

special. The whole family would go to the theatre once or twice a month. Even the servants were not excluded. Her father would arrange luxurious car from his rich clients. One of their maids would make a mess throwing up in the car.

Then there was the intriguing Komla Circus. As her father was a police officer, he got tickets without hassle. Whenever they went to go to circus one of the best cabins were reserved for them.

Rani Hamid considers the present generation to be extremely fortunate, especially the female. Discrimination between male and female children has been reduced to the minimum. Girls are enjoying all sorts of liberty and facilities.

Still, she misses those days.

“Life, then, was so simple and serene,” said the 12-time national women's chess champion Rani Hamid, as she trod down memory lane.

CORRIGENDUM
The interview, appeared on April 9 in this page, titled 'In Conversation with Professor Razia Khan' contained a few errors. In paragraph 4, line 3, the word should be 'autodidact' instead of 'auto-directed'. In paragraph, 13, line 15, the sentence should be: 'He (Tanzimuddin Khan) was an elected member of the Indian Constituent Assembly.' The errors are regretted.