Freethinkers of Our Time

For over the last one and a half decades Mukto-Mona has been fighting for the development of humanism and freethinking in South Asia. The organisation's member-contributor's included linguist Ahmed Sharif and novelist Humayun Azad. In an email conversation with the SWM, three members of mukto-mona.com talk about the state of freedom in Bangladesh, and South Asia in general.

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

How has Mukto-Mona evolved? Can you please explain the idea behind Mukto-Mona for our readers?

Avijit Roy: Mukto-Mona came into being in the year 2000, with the intention of debating and promoting critical issues that are of the utmost importance in building a progressive, rational and secular society, but usually are ignored in the mainstream Bangladeshi and South Asian media. On 26th May, 2001, I created a Yahoo group under the name Mukto-Mona. A year later, it was developed into a complete web site (www.mukto-mona.com), which, to the best of my knowledge, was the first South Asian Humanist and Rationalist forum on the net. Our aim is to build a society which will not be bound by the dictates of arbitrary authority, comfortable superstition, stifling tradition, or suffocating orthodoxy but would rather be based on reason, compassion, humanity, equality and science.

Since its existence, Mukto-mona has been able to draw the attention of many like-minded thinkers including many distinguished authors, scientists, philosophers and human rights activists from all around the world. We have always tried to raise our voices wherever people's freedom and civil liberties have been attacked. For example, we were (still are) acrid critics of Bush's policy of aggression and invasion of Iraq in the name of the so-called 'war on terror.'

We have always tried to raise our voices wherever people's freedom and civil liberties have been attacked. For example, we were (still are) acrid critics of Bush's policy of aggression and invasion of Iraq in the name of the so-called 'war on terror.'

Within the subcontinent, we have affiliations with the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations and the Science and Rationalists' Association of India (SRAI) led by Prabhir Ghosh. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) has also provided continuous encouragement and support to us. Mukto-Mona forum is approaching 3000 members..

Can you please explain humanism further for us?

Jahed Ahmed: The type of humanism that closely resembles views held by Mukto-Mona is Secular Humanism. In simple words, it is an outlook or way of life that centered on human need and interest. Secular humanists reject supernatural and authoritarian beliefs, rather they affirm that one must take responsibility for his/her own life and the communities and world in which he/she lives. It had its roots in the rationalism of the 18th Century and the free thought movement of the 19th Century. Humanist Manifesto III, titled "Humanism and its aspirations" was written in 2003. It is not published as a dogma that Humanists must believe; rather it represents a consensus of what Humanists do believe

What do you think is the biggest impediment to free thinking in Bangladesh, or South Asia in general?

Mehul Kamdar: South Asia has a major problem of illiteracy, which makes it easy for fundamentalists from outside the region to spread hatred and false propaganda. When people cannot read critical texts questioning this propaganda they are more easily deluded by preachers of hatred. As humanists, we seek to help people develop love for other human beings irrespective of their religion, caste or creed. But we always have to fight against superior money and numbers.

Whether it is the Jihadi groups who get their money from Saudi Arabia or Middle East, Overseas Friends of the RSS who contribute to Hindu Fundamentalist groups from UK and USA or Christian groups who get their money either from Rome or from other parts of the world depending on what denomination they belong to, all of