these groups are pumping money in a battle for more converts and for militancy among their followers. As humanists, we are constantly catching up to novel methods by which this hatred is being spread. We are positive about the long term, though, because we believe that most people are intrinsically good and decent and that we would be able to appeal to their logical faculties, even when they are unable to read and write.

What do you think is contributing to a rise in religious extremism in Bangladesh?

Jahed Ahmed: There are direct and indirect causes. One of the direct causes, I would say is poverty and unemployment. Hundreds of thousands of youths are unemployed in our country. They do not have a hope to live with. Fundamentalists or militant Islamists take advantage of this psychological void through mental manipulation. They lure those poorly educated youths in the name of paradise in order to get their own political ambitions fulfilled. With some sincerity from the government this vast number of youths could be turned into a great asset like they could be trained in English, IT and put on outsourcing job projects as we see in India, China and Philippines. Our youth are no less talented than their counterparts and more over, we have people in IT sectors in the West who can help us get contracts. But before that, we need to ensure quality service. Remember, to get those jobs done, one doesn't need a very big degree from a university

The concept of a Sharia-based theocracy is a frightening one. Yet some wicked minds continue to fool people in the name of religion. Europe and America learned the dreadful lesson from the bloodshed of several hundred years when religion controlled politics. They have separated religion from the state. Unfortunately, we have yet to realise that. Even if you look within Islam's own history, you'll see Islam reached its peak under the caliphate of secular rulers such as Caliph Al Mamun, Harun-ur-Rashid. Thus a demand for a secular democracy is the most crucial demand of our time.

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What kind of system of government do you think is appropriate for the establishment of a free society?

Mehul Kamdar: Constitutional democracy is the best known means for protecting the rights of all people to form worldviews and live out their commitments in a free and mutually respectful way. A democratic and secular government should promote open societies, ensure universal human rights, and be secular, having no bias against any religious or non-religious group.

In a region where a majority of the people live in abject poverty and do not have access to the Internet, how can Mukto-mona help establish a secular society?

Avijit Roy: Despite our limited resources, mind you, Mukto-Mona is not an NGO run by donations from foreign countries. We carry out activities with our own funds i.e. donations collected from our members of advisory and editorial board (who are mostly expatriate Bangladeshis such as researchers, activists, students, etc) we are trying to target the most neglected areas. For example, as our first project, we undertook the reconstruction of a primary school in remote Roumari in Bangladesh. We have additionally promised to continue our support for more years provided the school authority promote secular and rational thinking among the students. We undertook that project for many reasons: that was a place of poor rural people and thus was neglected by the rich class/government. Secondly, the most important stage of life when we can instill a value/lesson in the minds of our children is when they are in primary school.

We have started publishing books on science and rationalism. In a few remote areas, our activists have formed Rationalist Forums drawing likeminded youth and students. Such forums or associations provide a sense of cohesiveness in the mind of young humanists and they do not feel they are isolated. In the future, we plan to work on mobilising and uniting youth toward rationalism and humanism in every part of Bangladesh.

Fortunately, we are not alone. There exist vast number of like-minded people in the world and nothing can beat the internet in making friends with such people. For example, we have humanists of Bangladesh and other South Asian origin in our group from virtually every corner of the world. Lots of people are showing eagerness to help Mukto-Mona in every possible way but we have been cautious in our response because we simply don't want to turn into yet another NGO. Ours is not just an organisation, it symbolises a movement, an ideal.

Avijit Roy is author, "Alo Hate Choliyachhe Adharer Yatree" (a Bangla book on the origin of universe); he is also the founding Moderator, Mukto-Mona.

Jahed Ahmed is a humanism activist and writer; he is also co-moderator of Mukto-Mona.

Mehul Kamdar is former Assistant Editor (with MD Gopalkrishnan as editor), the Modern Rationalist, India; he is also freelance writer and co-moderator of Mukto-Mona. Originally from Tamilnadu, India, currently settled in Chicago. ■