not just extreme terrorist activities that expose the existence of a communal mindset. While in India the BJP-supported 'cleansing' acts of Muslim, Christian and Sikh minorities destroyed its image of a secular democracy, in Bangladesh the slide in the number of Hindus should be a case for concern for the government which comes to power in the New Year. According to a study by Professor Abul Barkat, of Dhaka University's Department of Economics, the Hindu population has dropped from 18% in 1961 to 9% in 2001. The total Hindu population in 2001 was 11.4 million, half the expected 22.8 million it should be as per growth estimates. Already there are reports in the media that certain religious bigots have been distributing leaflets asking people not to "go against Islam" and refrain from voting for Hindu candidates. The past BNP government already has a revolting record of minority oppression. Land-grabbing, looting, raping and killing of Hindus in 2001 was very similar to a parallel scenario by the BJP government supported persecution of Muslims and Christians in India. In 2005, the same BNP government failed to provide protection to the Ahmadiya minorities from religious zealots working under the banner of the Khatme Nabuwat Movement. The government failed to revoke its ban on Ahmadiya literature, or to prosecute the vandals who attacked the mosques. BNP and Jamaat have always maintained their strong opposition towards the historic CHT Peace Treaty that promised to give rights to the most marginalised indigenous people of the country. Under the caretaker government the only two large political parties representing the rights of the Pahari people of CHT UPDF (United Peoples Democratic Front) and PCJSS (Parbotto Chottogram Jonoshonghoti Samity) have been denied registration by the EC.

While a rise in the number of people joining extremist groups shows a clear sign of the disillusionment faced by the poor and the governments' failure to address the issues, successive governments have also failed to address violence and prejudicial attitude towards religious minorities.

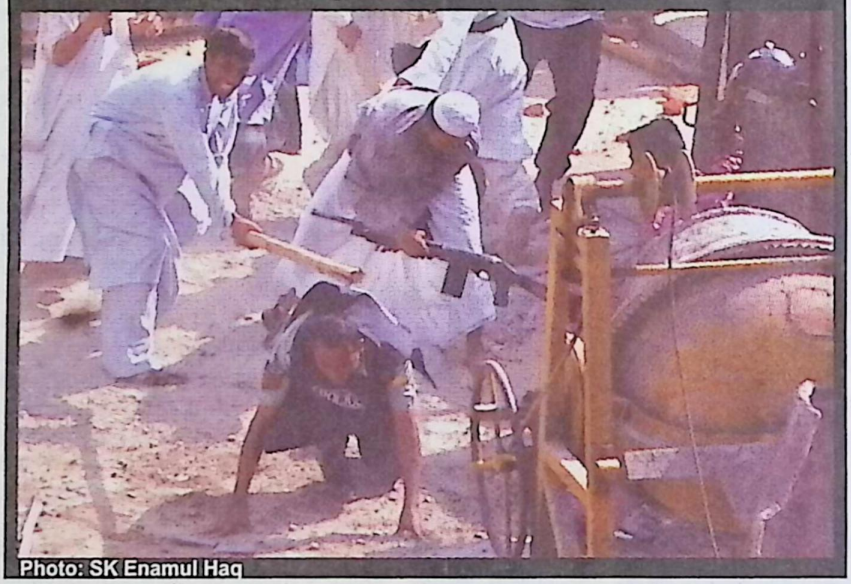


Photo: SK Enamul Haq

The first casualties of communalism are usually freedom of speech and women. Bigots have always felt threatened by the two. Little wonder then that Taslima Nasreen may never be able to come back to Bangladesh, that Humayan Azad's books incited such rage amongst fundamentalist groups. It is no wonder then that Mufti Mohammad Nuruddin, the acting khatib of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque who headed the committee which 'reviewed' the National Women Development Policy said, "A woman cannot enjoy rights equal to a man's because a woman is not equal to a man by birth" and asked for the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to be withdrawn. It is also little wonder that the caretaker government worked with amazing speed at the complaint of the bigots and ordered the airport and civil aviation authorities to take down the sculptures of the bauls after 50 lakh takas had already spent on it.

Secularism does not mean going against religion. Nor is it anti-Islamic in the least, as many bigots will try to have us believe. Secularism means that the government of a country should not carry out its duties or frame policies based on any religious texts. Inherent in the idea of secularism is the plurality of religion and tolerance. The military dictators, who ruled the country after the murder of the founding father, initiated the idea of religion-based politics to achieve their own personal gain. Economic motives for violence have always been around and minorities have always had to bear the brunt of this violence. Any party that comes to power in the election that is to take place three days from now must unequivocally embrace the idea of secularism, that is religious plurality and tolerance. Secular sentiments need to exist at the very grass-root level, where Christian and Muslim families will live as good neighbours in a small village in Noakhali, where a Muslim voter will vote for a Hindu candidate because he believes the candidate is worthy to represent his village and not have to fear that the worst hell awaits him because he voted a 'non-believer' to power. Khushwant Singh, in his book 'The End of India' coins a motto that he believes should be a guide for modern India, "Work is worship, but worship is not work". With the rising communal sentiment in Bangladesh leading to nothing but violence and insecurity, this motto should give any party that comes to power in 2009, something to think about. ■