The idyllic non-communalism

Thanks to the Supreme Court's judgment in the fifth amendment case, we are on board the ship of state, about to journey back to a secular Bangladesh. Anyone who believes in non-discrimination -- which is a peremptory norm of international human rights law -- cannot but be happy with this. We would, however, be living in a fool's paradise if we thought that we could return to that idyllic land that the framers of our Constitution dreamed of in 1972: a society free of "communalism (*o-shamprodayikota*) in all its forms" and one in which there is no "abuse of religion for political purposes" (original Article 12, Constitution of Bangladesh). Freedom from the various forms of 'communalism' (read racism) can only come if our Constitution not only gets back its stolen pillar of secularism, but is also supplemented with provisions that expressly, accurately and respectfully acknowledge the identities of the different peoples that have lived in Bangladesh since time immemorial.

Our secular heritage

No doubt, communalism -- or religion-based discrimination, or racism (especially where perpetrated through state power) -- was the greatest threat to social progress and democratic practices from 1947 to 1971, when we found ourselves huddled into the state of Pakistan, which had religious identity as its *raison d'etre*. Our tryst with 'Pakistanihood' was necessarily uncomfortable at best and stifling and oppressive at worst, because the legacy bequeathed to us by the forbears of our ancient heritage impelled us, as a society, to remain tolerant and multicultural. We could, and still do, recall the proud heritage of the multicultural and secular Bangladeshi rulers of the past: of the Buddhist Pala civilisation, the Hindu Sena rajas, the Muslim sultans and nawabs and Adibashi rajas and chiefs. Blood was spilt over land, wealth and people, but never over religion. The torch of secularism was carried, equally vigorously by so many of our poets and philosophers: from Lalon Fakir to Hasan Raja, Nazrul Islam to Shamsur Rahman.

From 1972 to 2010

However, the circumstances of 2010 are so very different to those of 1972, at least in some very fundamental respects. In 1972, we were trying to rid ourselves of the hangover of a religion-based identity that purported to subsume the cultural identities of the different peoples of Bangladesh. The medicine given was secularism. It did make sense in many contexts. Or so some would say. But where it concerned the identity of those peoples who now choose to call themselves Adibashi, it was regarded as assimilative. We may recall Manobendra Narayan Larma's one-man walkout from the Constituent Assembly in 1972, when his demands of multiculturism fell upon deaf ears. Larma rejected the Constitution because the national identity that was espoused in 1972 was monocultural; oriented around an identity based upon Bangaleeness, which again minoritised the indigenous peoples; this time on account of ethnicity and language, rather than religion (while in 1947, it was religion). But let me come to that later.

The challenge that we face in 2010 is that, while we still need to combat religious intolerance that stifles cultural expression, democratic practices and women's rights, our greatest nemesis is not a colonial state ruled by foreigners. Our nemesis now is the proverbial "*shorshete bhoot*" (the ghost in the mustard), of a homegrown variety, albeit with occasional foreign links and loyalties. However, if we pursue our non-communal ideals based upon a national identity that blindly espouses a monocultural Bangalee identity, we not only continue to do a great disservice to those citizens who are not ethnically, linguistically and culturally Bangalee (the Adibashis, primarily, and the far smaller number of Urdu-speakers)), we also risk incurring the wrath of those who feel insecure in a national identity that draws its values from a heritage that to them is insufficiently distinguishable from the identity of the similar cultural and ethnic groups that live across the international borders to our west and east. How then -- some would say -- do we assert our distinctiveness from the Bangalees of West Bengal and Tripura, and justify the partition of the then East Bengal from a united

What we need to espouse is a national identity that asserts its uniqueness in positive terms, based upon the multicultural heritage of the peoples and communities of Bangladesh, and not an identity that focuses upon the non-Muslimness or non-Bangaleeness.