was incorporated in the Bangladesh Constitution well before it was in India. (India introduced the word secular in its constitution through the 42nd amendment in 1976.)

The majority of the founders of the Bangladesh Constitution were Muslims, who were drafting a constitution for a country with an overwhelming Muslim population (about 85 percent at the time). They could have easily opted for a constitution that recognised Islam as the state religion, yet they did not do so because they firmly believed that a democracy survived best when rights of every human being -- irrespective of religion or ethnicity -- are guaranteed by the constitution. The founding fathers of our constitution put Bangladesh in an honourable place among nations when they enshrined secularism (even in its narrowest definition) as a guiding state principle.

Despite the soft definition of secularism, its very incorporation in the Bangladesh Constitution was enough irritation to the pseudo-Islamic consciousness of the governments that followed the coup of 1975. Step by step, the bold move by a Muslim majority country to uphold secularism as a state principle -- be it religious neutrality -- was removed from our constitution.

It was eliminated because the first military dictator-turned-politician wore the mantle of religion to please new alliances to maintain his strangleholds on the power he was catapulted into. He succeeded in doing so by changing the constitution with the help of a sycophantic parliament dominated by a party that was patched together by him. It happened because he introduced religion into state politics, and for political support he leaned to religious rights. In April 1979, the Legislature in Bangladesh ratified the 5th Amendment legitimising all amendments, additions, and modifications made in the constitution during the period between August 15, 1975 and April 9, 1979. The fifth amendment to the constitution in 1979, besides giving legal cover to all proclamations by the military government after August 15, 1975, also rang the death knell of our short secular life.

Some 25 years later, in a watershed decision in August 2005, the High Court of Bangladesh declared 5th Amendment to Bangladesh Constitution as illegal and unconstitutional. It was a twist of fate, however, that this historic decision by the court was handed down at a time when the government would be led by the very party that had been the architect of the amendment. It is also equally ironic that the government of that time was buttressed by political and moral support of a religion-based party that had been effectively banned from the country by the secular constitution, and was rehabilitated by the fifth amendment. No wonder the government of the time would challenge the High Court verdict and appeal to the Supreme Court to restore the amendment. Our hopes for return to secularism seemed to disappear as the court order was moved to the back burner.

It would take us another five years and two changes in government (one interim) to get a final ruling from the highest court on the challenge of the High Court verdict. In February this year, the Supreme Court dismissed two petitions challenging a 2005 High Court ruling that declared the constitution's Fifth Amendment illegal. We came full circle.

As we wait to see the new dawn in our bumpy secular journey, we cannot yet celebrate the court verdict until we all realise that secularism is not an abstract concept only to be enshrined in our constitution. This concept has to be embedded in our national consciousness and obeyed in its full spirit. This has to come through acceptance of diversity of all beliefs and creeds in our society, and safeguards against discrimination based on beliefs and religious persuasion.

There are many reasons for a country to have a negative image internationally, but the one reason that provides the most raw materials for such an image is the absence of constitutional safeguards for people's rights. In a country where Islam has a following of nearly 90 percent, it does not require constitutional declaration to be recognised as the state religion. Rather, it has some adverse results. It gives critics of Bangladesh a weapon to hammer the country with prejudice against religious minorities. The religious bias brought forth by the now repealed fifth amendment also helped to fuel an international perception in the past years that our government that period had been tolerant toward growth of religious extremism in the country. We have had enough evidence of such elements in the country that were intent upon bringing about a coerced change in our political philosophy.

We should be thankful that the rational elements among us woke up in time to stem a vicious tide of intolerance. The court verdict is a stitch in time that should guide our legislators not only in upholding neutrality of the state in matters of religion, but also in ensuring that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise without their choice.

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