

ANALYSIS

# Bangladesh's writers --- battling terror, ethnic conflict and fundamentalism

KHONDAKAR ASHRAF HOSSAIN

Nowhere has literature been so much entangled with the political history of a land as it has been in Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh had to fight for self-determination; that political struggle against colonial exploitation by Pakistan was over in 1971. But soon another monster raised its head, a hydra-headed monster with multifarious tentacles, the worst of which were religious fanaticism and communal hatred. After the killing of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975, fundamentalist forces came to power with the help of the anti-liberation forces both inside and outside Bangladesh. A new fight started, which was more bloody and devastating, because this time the enemies were more covert and guileful and more relentless and brutal. Bangladesh has experienced some terrible carnage since 1975, particularly in the nineties. Mass killings through bomb attacks on religious and cultural venues, on Bangali New Year celebrations, in cinema halls and mosques have been witnessed by us. Following the demolition of the Babri mosque, there were riots, forcing many Hindus to flee across the border. Bands of fundamentalist thugs appeared in the northern districts of the country and went on a killing spree. Members of minor religious sects like the Ahmadiyas were persecuted: bombs hurled into their mosque in Khulna killed dozens of people. Bangladesh turned into a virtual killing field and figured on the international media as a potentially dangerous tract of land.

But Bangladesh is far from being a 'fundamentalist' country. Its people are on the whole peace-loving, and they have a long tradition of religious tolerance. Throughout the thousand years of the recorded history of the Bangali race, people of various religious and cultural denominations have lived together in harmony and peace. Bangla literature since the time of the *Caryapadas* has extolled the value of religious syncretism. The medieval Bangali poet Chandidas said: "*Sabar opore manush satya, tahar opor nai* (Man is true above everything, nothing is higher than man.) Our 'baul' folk-singers sang: "*Nanan boron gabhi re bhai, eki boron dudh; jagat bhoromiya dekhilam eki mayer put.*" (Cows are of various hues, but their milk has the same colour; I travelled the world and saw the sons of the same mother.) Bangladesh is a land where sufi preachers spread the doctrine of peaceful Islam and the Vaishnava philosophy of Caitanya mixed with it to create a climate of mutual understanding. But the onslaught of fundamentalism is a recent phenomenon, a by-product of the global rise of political Islam after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban. Bangladesh, like many Asian countries, is grappling with this new monster. Writers in Bangladesh are working in this climate of fundamentalist terror and are responding to it in various ways. Being the most articulate section of society, they have responded through their writings as well as through organizing campaigns on the streets and holding seminars and symposia.

It was the poets and litterateurs who, through their works, sharpened the sensibilities of the public so that they could stand up in unison against the monster whenever the need arose. Bangladeshi literature covers two periods --- one stretches from 1947 to 1971, the cataclysmic year of the country's birth, the other from 1971 till date. Both the periods are subsumed under the common appellation, Bangladeshi literature. In 1947, the Bangladeshi (i.e. East Pakistani) scenario was dominated by the bigots, who chanted the slogans of communal segregation and opted for a kind of literature that was removed from the immediate realities into a kind of jaded romanticism about the Middle East. But very soon, the secular voice was



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raised by poets and writers. They propounded humanistic values and the culture of tolerance. Poets Sufia Kamal and Shamsur Rahman, novelist Shawkat Osman, dramatist Munier Choudhury these were among the people who were the standard-bearers of communal harmony and religious tolerance in the pre-1971 period. In 1971, these values were seriously jeopardized by the onslaught of communalism and hatred. People were massacred because they had voted for secular harmony and civil rights. The worst sufferers were the Hindus, firstly because they were Bangalis, but also because they were non-Muslims. In free Bangladesh, the monster was reincarnated after 1975, when the killers of the founding fathers fanned the communal fire. Communal disharmony led to riots after the Babri mosque debacle. Many suffered as a result. Taslima Nasrin's famous or infamous outbursts typify, albeit in an extreme form, the reaction of the writers and poets against the outrage. Poets and writers have, in their respective genres, addressed the question of religious bigotry and communal persecution in varying degrees and with different tonalities. But it can be safely asserted that Bangladeshi literature is probably the most

vociferous in this particular respect in the whole of South Asia.

## Major terrorist incidents since 1975

1. *State terror against the tribal ethnicities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.* Started when President Ziaur Rahman encouraged Bangali settlers to settle in the districts of Rangamati, Bandarababan and Khagrachhari in the late seventies. Many tribal families were uprooted from their homestead and their 'jhood' land. Terror reigned supreme in the area until the government of Sheikh Hasina signed a peace accord with the tribal insurgents in 1996.
2. *Communal riot after the demolition of Babri mosque in December 1992:* 13 people killed; 2800 houses looted and destroyed, 2600 women raped. Taslima Nasrin wrote her novel *Lajja* basing on this incident. The book infuriated the fundamentalists and led to her banishment from the country in 1996.
3. *Bomb attack on cultural evening of Udichi (1999) and Pahela Baishakh gathering at Ramna park in 2000.* Twenty people were killed in these incidents.
4. *Bombing of Ahmadiya mosque in Khulna in October 1999.* Nine killed, 35 injured. The Ahmadiyas are a minor religious sect. They are Muslims, but the fundamentalists call them non-Muslims and want their sect to be banned and their mosques closed. Until last year it was a regular feature on Fridays for the fanatics to bring out processions against the Ahmadiyas.
5. *Post-electoral violence on the minorities in 2001.* Widespread looting and arson took place after the elections of October 2001. Several women of the minority community were gang-raped.
6. *Grenade attack on Communist party rally in Dhaka in 2001.* 7 killed, 50 injured.
7. *Bomb attack at Mymensingh cinema halls on 7 December, 2002:* 19 killed, over a hundred injured. The then government falsely accused writers Muntasir Mamun and Shahriar Kabir, arrested them and had them tortured in jail.
8. *Bomb attacks on various mazaars of pirs in 2003 killing many.* In one incident, British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury was wounded when he was visiting the mazaar of Shah Jalal in Sylhet. 6 people died.
9. *Police fired upon a rally of the aborigines at Madhupur Tangail on January 3, 2004 killing a Garo youth named Piren Snull.* The tribals were protesting the establishment of a so-called eco-park by destroying their habitat.
10. *Grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina's anti-terrorist rally on 21 August 2004:* 13 grenades were hurled at Sheikh Hasina. 24 persons killed; many were maimed forever. It was subsequently proved that Harkatul Jihad, an Islamic outfit, masterminded the attack.
11. *Assassination attempt on poet-scholar Dr. Humayun Azad in February 2004.* Dr. Azad was brutally hacked at by religious terrorists.

## The writers' response to terror

Taslima Nasrin is the first name to be mentioned, because her case is an example of the extent to which a writer's insecurity can

go. She has become an epitome of protest and free speech. Although many people have reservations regarding the quality of the literature she has penned, nobody doubts her force and relevance. Taslima published *Lajja* in 1993, in which she graphically described the torture and communal violence unleashed on the Hindu community following the demolition of Babri mosque. The book was banned by the Bangladesh government. The fundamentalists issued a fatwa declaring her a 'murtad' (infidel) and demanded her execution by hanging. They also set a price on her head. The government of Bangladesh filed a case against her on the charge of hurting the religious sentiments of the people. She went into hiding with the help of some secular intellectuals of the country. She recounted her days of hiding in her book *Shei Shob Andhakar* (All those darknesses) in which she exposed the hypocrisy of her countrymen. There was a worldwide protest against the persecution of Taslima; so after two months she was granted bail but was forced to leave the country. She has been trying to come back to her land of birth ever since but without success. Her stay in India has been eventful: she has been attacked; her residence permit has been cancelled several times; she has been bundled out of Kolkata and Jaipur, put into unknown hiding places, etc. etc. Every Indian knows her sad story. Nothing can show the condition of a writer living under the cloud of terrorism more graphically than the case of Taslima Nasrin.

More tragic is the case of Dr. Humayun Azad, a famous poet, novelist, essayist and linguist of great repute. Although Taslima Nasrin could avert physical assault in Bangladesh by going into hiding, Humayun Azad could not. He infuriated the bigots by writing scathing satires on the fundamentalist mullahs and by propagating atheistic ideas. The author of seventy books, Azad started his career as a poet. Then he moved into linguistic research and finally got immense popularity by writing columns in newspapers. Religious fanatics (later identified as members of the terrorist outfit Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh) tried to assassinate him on February 27, 2004, on his way home from a book fair. The terrorists mercilessly hacked at his neck and face with machetes. Although he survived the attack, he died later that year in Munich, Germany. Some say the trauma of the killing attempt contributed to his sudden death in August 2004. Humayun Azad created a lot of dissatisfaction among the fundamentalists by writing *Naari*, a Bengali version of Simone du Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. In response to their protests, the then government of Bangladesh banned the book. But the more immediate cause of the assassination attempt was the publication of a devastating novel named, *Pak Saar Zamin Saad Baad*, in which he satirized with extreme vehemence the activities of the collaborators of the Pakistani army during the liberation war in 1971.

If Taslima Nasrin protested in her way against the communal crimes after the Babri mosque affair, Mustafa Panna, a young short story writer, did his bit regarding the communal atrocities during the post-election

period of 2001. Unlike Taslima, Mustafa has not yet come under any serious threat from the perpetrators of the crime. One reason may be that the issue this time is more political than religious. The post-election violence assumed huge proportions when the winners of the general election, the BNP-Jamaate-Islami-led coalition, let loose a reign of terror on the Hindu minorities. These minorities are traditionally thought of as being supporters of the Awami League. Hundreds of communal attacks have been recorded; the newspapers were awash with reports of rape, loot and arson. Purnima Rani Shil, Mahima and other young girls narrated their harrowing tales of suffering to journalists. Mustafa Panna, in his recently published collection of short stories, *Magha Aslesha*, depicted the stories of communal atrocities in a moving manner.

Violence on the ethnic minorities has also drawn sharp reaction from writers. Writers and activists like Mesbah Kamal, Sanjeev Drong and Audity Falguni depicted the plight of the ethnic minorities in their writings. They also organized seminars and sit-ins, formed human chains in public places to protest against all kinds of religious, ethnic and political terrorism. They have been jailed and tortured by the BNP-Jamaat regime. Shahriar Kabir, a novelist, juvenile writer and human rights activist, has been a relentless campaigner against the fundamentalist terrorists. He, along with Dr. Muntassir Mamun, a historian and writer, was imprisoned after the Mymensingh cinema hall tragedy. Shahriar Kabir has been nearly maimed by torture and has had to appear at the court for interminable hearings over the years. Poet Shamsur Rahman, Poet Syed Shamsul Haq and National Professor and writer-translator Kabir Choudhury have been in the forefront of the fight against fanaticism and terrorism. Shamsur Rahman, venerated as the number one poet of Bangladesh, came under attack by Harkatul Jihad in his own house in January 1999. He narrowly escaped death, but his assailants were never brought to justice.

The writers of Bangladesh have to work under such constraints that there is always a kind of edginess in their literary expressions. Bangladeshi poetry has been overtly political, as the poets had to grapple with such monsters as political autocracy, religious fanaticism and communal hatred. They have been tireless and vociferous in their protest against these ills. Judged from pure aesthetic viewpoints, Bangladeshi literature might appear to be too loudly political, but it could hardly be otherwise. Nowhere has politics been more oppressively real as it has been in Bangladesh. The writers of Bangladesh have never found an ivory tower of aesthetic disengagement to contemplate their navels in total oblivion of the harsh realities around them.

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CELEBRATIONS

# Baishakh --- a tapestry of poetry

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

Pahela Baishakh fills us with renewed ardour and zeal which comes in new contours every year. Shubho Nababarsha is the tiding of the day, and I cannot but help share my thoughts with all. Tagore's classic call esho hey baishakh esho esho awakens us today as always on this auspicious day.

The nature of my father's job made us stay away from home for many years together, and hence out of touch with the real flavour of the event! At times like these, Pahela Baishakh connected all Bengalis living abroad, as we were, in Lebanon for instance. We cheerfully welcomed it with immense exhilaration and bliss! We were convinced that this celebration was indeed an integral part of our culture, especially for us who were so far away from our motherland. We all joined and found it an occasion free of the barriers of caste or status. It was indeed a heartfelt bond of love and unity. Not only that, it surely ushered in the commencement of a year filled with new hope, happiness and anticipation. After liberation when we came back to a free Bangladesh, it was quite an intriguing discovery for me that Bengali businessmen began their new accounts book (haal khata, from this day, but also that in some places this day was considered an auspicious one for marriages.

Homes were decorated with leaves and flowers; and people dressed in fine clothes. Women wore white sarees with red borders; and men went for lungis and pyjamas, and kurtas. Many

city-people started the day with the traditional breakfast of pantha bhaat, fried hilsa fish, shutki maachh, bharta, pickles, green chillies, and lentil soup. Parades akin to carnivals occupied the streets, eventually to be attached to the Institute Of Fine Arts in the mid-1980's, to add colour to the day. The additional treat? Our very own quaint products were put up for sale. Entertainments like dramas, puppet shows, jatra and pala gaan attracted people from all walks of life. Unlike Eid or Christmas, Pahela Baishakh was really about celebrating the simpler rural roots of Bengal, all the more reason for people to participate without the burden of having to reveal one's class or religion or financial capacity. A good learning for our children, without question.

There are some thoughts I would like to convey to the torch bearers of our traditions. Let us today note the key facets of a worthy life.....friendship. Bertrand Russell once said, 'Modern man should aim at avoiding self-centered passions. The happy man is he who lives objectively, who has free affections and wide interests. Such a man feels himself a citizen of the universe enjoying freely the spectacular view that it offers and the joy it affords.' People these days have become quite self-centred. By extending your open arms, enfold all sorrows and griefs and replenish your friendship. Try being a catalyst, to prevent a fast degenerating world. Endeavour doing good things which you may not think big, but which really mean a lot. They brighten the day for others because they are a reminder that some-

one cares. The world will be touched by your thoughtfulness, lifted by your kindness, and renewed by your goodness. It will be twice as meaningful and half as challenging.

Life is supposed to be fun and no challenge is so serious that it cannot be figured out together. Murky days ahead are threatening us. Brush away the clouds by your sunny smiles, infuse the positive of support, and you will witness the magic of heaven on earth. Build a 'tapestry of friendship'. It is a weaving together of many lives around you. It is a creation of passion, artistry and soul that should be honoured, nurtured and embraced. Let your friendship be an ever-growing, ever-changing work of art that weaves together and apart, that which is true, alive and beautiful.

Pahela Baishakh is a time to blot out old conflicts and bellyaches, to rejoice and sing the selfsame songs, to engage yourself with others by trying to blend into the same colours without harking back to old differences, distances or disputes. Let us today eliminate all grudges, spite, resentment and animosity. Would it not be wonderful if we did not make the sky a private haven but a shared canopy? I am convinced we would behold a sudden crumbling of all barriers.

Let us today and always try and ring out old laments and ring in all glee and gaiety. This will be our gift to the world to be.

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA IS A SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND WRITES POETRY.

# On a lonely rock

POETRY

TASNEEM TAMBAWALA

She sat there on a lonely rock  
Face buried deep in her palms  
She smiled at every passer-by  
As they offered her some alms

But she was not on the lonely rock  
For want of petty morsels  
She sat there out of solitude  
Escaping the gawking masses

In her lonesome days she looked  
At the deep blue skies  
The dark and poignant nights she spent  
With tears in her forlorn eyes

One morning as she lifted her head  
Someone knelt beside her  
Surprised at the new companion-ship  
She said, "Can I help u Sir!"

As he raised his dark brow  
She gazed into his eyes  
"Just resting a while, my lady,"  
He said, still locking eyes

They talked till the morrow  
Laughing and smiling all the way  
Sharing their pains and sorrow  
Till the end of day

She smiled and thought about him  
In the moments he was away  
The deep blue skies were full of life  
And nights she used to pray....

Whenever he came passed that  
lonely rock  
Her tearful eyes were full of elation  
She waited just for a sight of him  
Her hopeful heart in jubilation

Her heart believed in everything he  
said  
But her mind didn't let her stray  
She locked her mind dead  
But she would realize one day

It was sooner than later  
When the happy bubble burst  
She let her mind out of its box  
She wished she had listened to it  
first

She woke up from her slumber  
And kept her dreams away  
She stopped dancing on her lonely  
rock  
It was where she had to stay...

And then one day he came again  
He was not alone  
Accompanied by his love he was  
Not a lonely stone

She smiled a never-ending smile  
And concealed her welling eyes  
She prayed her heart to stay a while  
Until they passed her by

Never believe the passers-by  
Coz they will never stay  
Laugh a while and make u cry  
And they'll be on their way

But she was not on the lonely rock  
For want of petty morsels  
She sat there out of solitude  
Escaping the gawking masses

In her lonesome days she looked  
At the deep blue skies  
The dark and poignant nights she  
spent  
With tears in her forlorn eyes.