



Freethinking and Islam, not an unlikely coalition

The flawed discourse on the Islamic and secular identity in Bangladesh



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TODAY marks the 44th anniversary of the Pakistani army's systematic killing of pro-liberation Bengali intellectuals, of some of the brightest minds behind the political movement that fought for the very civil liberties that we, as Bangladeshis, now proudly claim to have. In an attempt to wipe off the future leaders of a potential independent East Pakistan, the Pakistani army, along with the Al-Badr militias, murdered hundreds of Bengali intellectuals comprising of doctors, journalists, engineers, artists, academics and writers. The only danger that these martyred individuals posed to those in power was their recognition of the blatant suspension of Bengalis' political and economic rights, and their courage to fight for those rights. Bengalis were seen as "lesser Muslims" by the ruling Pakistani junta according to whom the "Hindu-dominated" Bengali culture was incompatible with the ideals of Islam, and Bengali Muslims, in their struggle for independence, vehemently defied this exclusionary notion.

But after forty-four years of independence, the tumultuous question of the "secular" identity of the Bangladeshi, and by extension, of the nation, haunts us

even today. The duality of the "Bengali culture" and the "Muslim identity" that the Pakistanis actively sought to create to preserve their domination hasn't eroded away, and is very much alive in a land that has historically had a strained relationship with the formation of a secular identity.

Discrimination against minorities
Following the outbreak of the Indo-Pakistani war in 1965, the military government of Pakistan instituted the Enemy Property Act (EPA), one of the most discriminatory laws in the world, designed to dispossess Hindus and other minority communities in East Pakistan of their property. Post-independence in 1971, each successive government of Bangladesh has retained provisions of this nefarious Act through the Vested Property Act (VPA) that has not only led to a large-scale appropriation of Hindu-owned land but also a severe decline in the Hindu population, the largest minority in the country.

Then there's the 2012 Ramu incident, one of the worst instances of communal violence in recent memory, in which Buddhist monasteries, shrines and houses of Buddhists were destroyed by local mobs following the posting of a blasphemous image on Facebook under a fake account carrying a Buddhist name. Justice for the victims and their families is

yet to be served.

More recently, blogger killings, attempts to murder Christian pastors and the Hussaini Dalan bomb blasts targeting the Shia community are further proof of the shaky ground on which the pillar of secularism stands today. With ruthless violence inflicted upon the "other" who doesn't seem to "belong" to Bangladeshi society because s/he doesn't fit the profile of a "Muslim Bengali", the space for religious and ethnic minorities is fast shrinking in a country that claims to be "secular" and whose fight for independence stemmed from the suppression of the very rights that are now being denied to these groups.

A rich heritage of freethinking in Islamic history

Whether it's the blogger killings or bomb blasts in a Shia mosque or a Hindu temple, the name of Islam is invoked to justify these barbaric acts that go against the very teachings of Islam. With no counter narrative to defend the tenets of the faith in sight, the cause of radical Islamists, whose motivations in reality have little to do with defending Islam, has been reinforced in the present day. This has given rise to the frequent abuse of the term "freethinking" which is falsely understood by many as something outside the realm of Islam, even though Islamic

history is laden with centuries of freethinking philosophers and polymaths whose contribution to humanities, arts and sciences is nothing short of remarkable.

The Islamic Golden Age, the period in Islam's history that experienced cultural, economic and scientific flourishing between the 8th and 13th century, could not have been possible without the vast array of freethinking scholars, hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds, coming together to translate classical knowledge into Arabic. The teachings of the Quran and the Hadith that emphasise the importance of education and knowledge seeking influenced the exploration of the arts and the sciences at the time. Scientific knowledge gathered from conquered civilisations was translated into Arabic and Persian, and later into many other languages.

Alhazen, or Ibn-al-Haytham, is sometimes referred to as the "world's first true scientist". Alhazen, a devout Muslim who spent most of his life serving the Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo, is credited with discovering the method of testing a hypothesis scientifically, two hundred years before it was found to be true by Renaissance scientists. The anniversary of Alhazen's works on the optics, a major

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