

# Foreign Policy article on Bangladesh A Most Unfortunate Conclusion

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

IT'S absurd! It's preposterous to suggest that around 40 percent of Bangladeshis favour suicide terrorism. Yet this is what some American think tanks and "expert analysts" have recently come up with in their reports, to the detriment of Bangladesh's reputation. Muslims in Bangladesh – around 90 percent of the population – are peaceful, liberal, devotional, and even syncretistic, unlike their counterparts in the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Roughly two years after the publication of the Pew Research Center's findings on the so-called "popular support for suicide terrorism" in Bangladesh in 2014, Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller published an essay in the *Foreign Policy* magazine, titled "Popular Support for Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh: Worse Than You Think" (Sept 4, 2016). This alarmist, prejudicial, and provocative piece reminds me of similar smear campaigns against Bangladesh by several Western and Indian journalists during the first decade of this century, which lasted during the entire period of the BNP-led coalition government under Khaleda Zia (2001-2006), and beyond up to 2008.

There's a laundry list of such sensational, biased, and motivated writings against Bangladesh. I cite a few just to highlight that reputed individuals working for prestigious institutions often never shy away from saying or writing ridiculous things, out of ideological commitments, ignorance, political bias/prejudice, and even for material

incentives. The following examples of vitriolic attacks on Bangladesh as a safe haven for al Qaeda and its ilk make us understand why scholars like Christine Fair and organisations like the Pew Research Center have come up with absolutely motivated reports on the state of Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh.

Bertil Lintner wrote the most alarmist piece, "Beware of Bangladesh – Bangladesh a Cocoon of Terror" in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 4, 2002), giving the impression that terrorists were going to stage a successful Islamist revolution in the country. Soon, another Western journalist, Alex Perry unloaded his "deadly cargo" to attack Bangladesh. His write-up in the *Time* magazine, "Deadly Cargo – Bangladesh has become a safe haven for al Qaeda" (Oct 21, 2002) boosted the morale of those who desperately wanted to tarnish the image of the government as the harbinger of al Qaeda in Bangladesh, notwithstanding the bad reputation for the country.

While Bangladesh was fighting the homegrown Islamist terror outfits, HUIJI (B) and JMB in 2005 (and soon crushed them by early 2006), yet another nasty piece against Bangladesh came out in the prestigious *New York Times*. Eliza Griswold's piece, "The Next Islamist Revolution?" (Jan 23, 2005), "convincingly" argued about an "impending" Islamist takeover of Bangladesh. The rubble-rousters didn't stop until late 2008. While Indian journalist Hiranmay Karlekar (a former editor of the *Hindustan Times*) came up with a poorly written book with a hyper-sensational title, *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?* (Sage, New Delhi) in 2005, Harvard-educated renowned author/journalist Selig Harrison wrote a sensational nonsense, "Terrorism in Bangladesh", in the *Christian Science Monitor* (July 8, 2008).

As scholars cite Pew Center reports, I have

also cited them in support of my arguments on the states of governance, poverty, terrorism, and other aspects of society in various countries, as I always considered the organisation "a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world". I also believed that it "conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis and other empirical social science research" and "does not take policy positions". Now, in view of Pew Center's latest bombshell on Bangladesh that around 37 percent of Bangladeshis support suicide terrorism, I no longer consider it a "nonpartisan fact tank".

Christine Fair and her colleagues' (all from Georgetown University) latest piece on Bangladesh in the *Foreign Policy* is an eye-opener for me, not to agree with them that there's a huge support for suicide terrorism in the country but to see the other side of the coin, which in the name of objective research is spewing hate and prejudice against Bangladesh. I have reasons to believe, as were the vitriolic Western/Indian writings on Bangladesh during 2001-2008 were politically motivated, so are the recent Pew Report and the *Foreign Policy* article on Bangladesh. There's nothing academic, objective, or nonpartisan about them.

At the very outset, Christine Fair et al strongly disagreed with former US Ambassador Dan Mozena, who in March 2014 considered Bangladesh to be "a moderate and generally secular and tolerant" country, in the following manner: "While Mozena's statement reflects the general perception that Bangladesh is a success story of a moderate, secular, Muslim democracy, this view never rested on strong empirical grounds". Then Fair and her colleagues tell us about the slow and steady growth of Islamism in Bangladesh, that they think,

"enjoy popular support". What's exceedingly disturbing is the blatant lie, as one comes across in this piece: "Between January 2005 and June 2015, nearly 600 people have died in Islamist terrorist attacks, but 90 percent of those have taken place since 2013". If one buys this grossly exaggerated account, then it appears that 540 people got killed at the hands of Islamist terrorists since 2013! We don't have the evidence if Islamist terrorists were the killers of innocent people in late 2013 and early 2014, up to the February 5 elections in Bangladesh.

Although it's true scholars have paid more attention to Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries with regard to Islamist terrorism than they have done to Bangladesh, it's nevertheless impossible to agree with Christine Fair and her co-writers that "almost half of the population" in Bangladesh justifies suicide terrorism. It's ludicrous to suggest: "Levels of justification for suicide attacks in Bangladesh are considerably higher than in Pakistan, Indonesia, or Malaysia." For some strange reason, they have correlated Bangladeshi Muslim-support for Sharia and Hudud Law with their support for suicide terrorism!

Researchers at the Pew Center and Christine Fair et al should have applied some common sense before making such a sweeping assertion that almost 40 percent of the population or almost 65 million people in Bangladesh favour suicide terrorism. Did they ever think before publishing their reports that even if a fraction of that population "who favour suicide terrorism" been actively engaged in terrorism – which would have been the most logical thing one could think of – how many thousands of suicide terrorists would have been around, killing tens of thousands of people within and beyond Bangladesh? They should have learnt from counterterrorism (CT) experts about the ratio of population in favour of

suicide terrorism and the number of actual suicide terrorists in given populations, before making such sweeping assertions. Terrorism is such a formidable security threat that in 2008 the M15 (British Intelligence) officials were very worried that as many as 80 IRA terrorist bombers were around in Britain, posing grave security threat to the nation.

One wonders as to how basing on a tiny sample of respondents in Bangladesh – who are always vulnerable to loaded questions – Pew Research Center could come up with such an absurd figure of 37 percent of Bangladeshis favouring suicide terrorism. One is not sure why Christine Fair and her co-writers have used the Pew data to write such an unconvincing essay in the *Foreign Policy*, which is again a prestigious magazine! Now, it's not Bangladesh's reputation that's at stake; it's Pew Research Center, *Foreign Policy*, Christine Fair and her co-writers' turn to defend themselves for publishing something devoid of facts and logic, simply not defensible at all!

We know quantitative research is better than generalised assumption-based studies, but unscientific data from micro-studies could backfire as well. Common sense is more important than randomly collected statistics, often collected for the sake of defending a hypothesis, or even worse, out of malice, political bias, and prejudice. Last but not least, I strongly believe the Bangladesh government should immediately file defamation suits against the Pew Center and *Foreign Policy* magazine, demanding unconditional apologies from them for their attempts to tarnish the image of Bangladesh. Sooner the better!

The writer teaches security studies at Austin Peay State University in the US. He is the author of several books, including his latest, *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan* (Sage, 2014). Email: tajhashmi@gmail.com

## Are women good at science?

A lifelong advocate of science, Shamima K Choudhury is a professor of Physics at the University of Dhaka and the Director of the university's Bose Centre for Advanced Study and Research in Natural Sciences. On a recent afternoon, Professor Shamima talked to Amitava Kar about the challenges women face in studying sciences and entering the professional arena. She is a member of numerous internationally acclaimed science societies including the Institute of Physics (IOP), UK; New York Academy of Science, USA and EUCU.NET, Vienna. Her research areas include Semiconductor thin films, Crystallography, Biophysics and Synthesis of Advanced and

Barriers that limit women's entry to careers in science include lack of grants and funding, balancing family and career, gender biases, scarcity of job openings, having and rearing children, lack of mentors and role models, child care support, laboratory space and lack of confidence.

Why are there so few women studying sciences at the university level?

The percentage of women at the university level in general is not low. In biological and medical sciences, the percentage of women is relatively high. However, in Physical Science, Math and Engineering Science, it is lower. There are many reasons for that.

Dropout of women from the academic ladder starts immediately after primary level, because they are considered more useful at home. From a very young age, girls are told that math, science and engineering are very tough subjects, not suitable for girls and it's unwise to pursue such competitive fields.

Despite these obstacles, the percentages of women who compete well with boys for university science education by dint of merit are not low when compared with many western countries. My recent study shows that 30-40 percent women studying Physics and Math (DU) and 20 percent in Engineering (BUET) whereas more than 60 percent women in biological and medical sciences.

What barriers do young women scientists face in the new and emerging branches of science?

On many occasions, a woman's decision to pursue a degree in the sciences depends on whether anyone encourages her to do so - and especially if that person is a woman as a mentor. Women are neglected in terms of recognition even after doing exceptionally



Professor Shamima K Choudhury

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

well. Women in scientific professions face discrimination in terms of employment, promotion and retention.

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career, gender biases, scarcity of job openings, having and rearing children, lack of mentors and role models, child care support, laboratory space and lack of confidence. It is said that women have to work twice as hard as men to show that they are equally competent.

How can universities encourage more women to take up sciences?

Encouraging women to take science should start at the secondary level. I think conditions in the universities are much better now than during our time in the mid or late sixties. Women are competing with men by merit and studying in all top universities of the country. Girls should be encouraged by the teachers in school, parents and others to take up science in both education and career.

The decline of students in science in general is a global problem. A science graduate usually has fewer options in the job market as compared with the business faculty graduates. The university has no quota system for enrolment but women are enrolled on merit and graduating securing top positions in many of the departments. If their job opportunities are ensured then they will be encouraged to take up sciences.

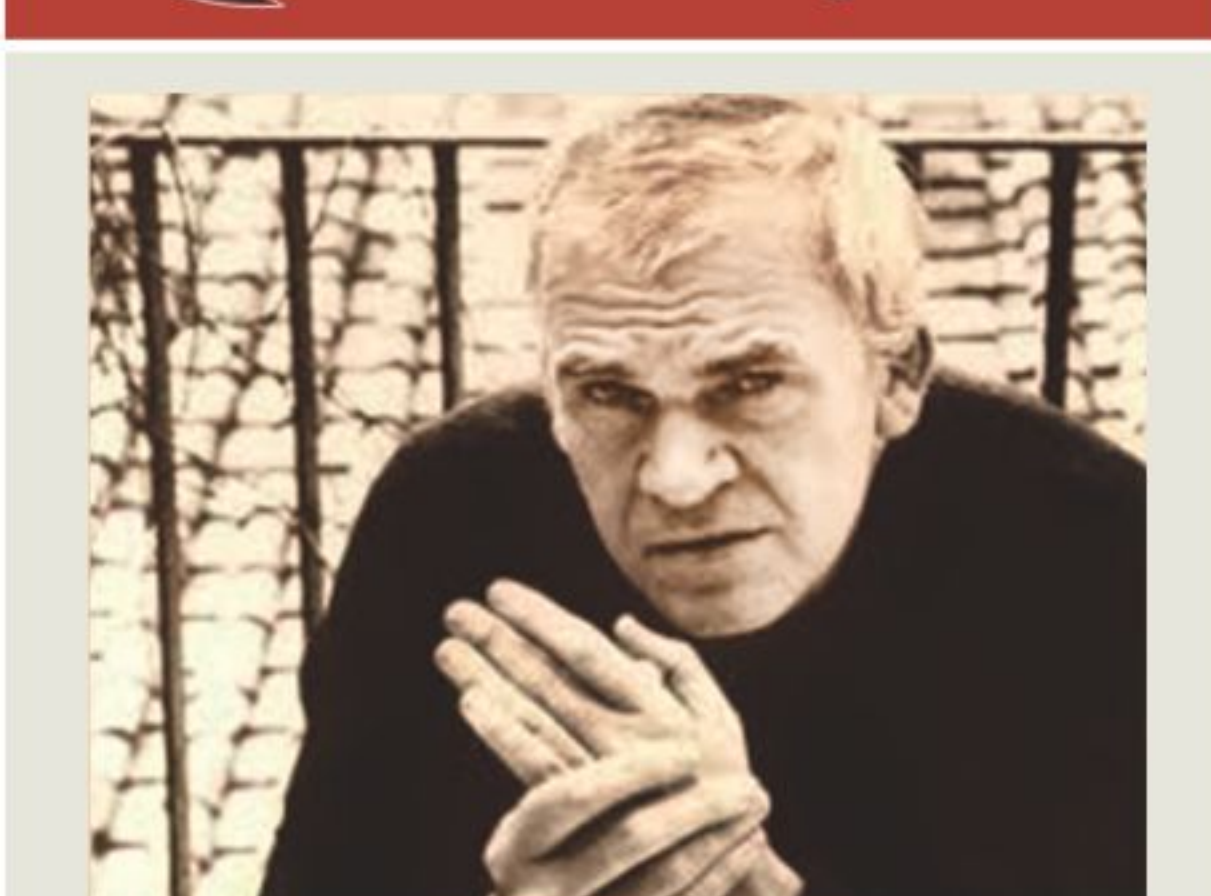
Deeply-rooted gender biases and stereotypes reinforce the idea that women should not pursue careers in the sciences. Females at all levels - from elementary school to professionals - often lack the confidence that their male counterparts possess. It makes a

big difference for women to see other successful female scientists and talk to them about their career paths. If girls are not actively recruited or given scholarships, many will be discouraged from attending graduate school altogether.

What roles will women scientists and scientists in general play in meeting our development goals?

Women's empowerment is essential for the advancement of science and technology in a society. Science can empower women and women in science can indeed, empower women in society. Women in science and technology are innovators. They are creators, appliers, and users of knowledge and not merely laboratory workers. Underrepresentation of women in faculty and leadership positions is a global phenomenon. Senior faculty members, both male and female, have to make sure that women have equal access to resources, space, salary, and responsibilities to achieve equity in the department. As such using both male and female role models can in some ways be seen as a more inclusive approach to alleviating gender disparities in science. Due consideration of work-life balance for women, their exclusive family responsibilities and thus creating a family-friendly environment in the work place will inspire women to be more involved in S&T ensuring 50 percent national development through their contribution in Science and Technology.

### QUOTABLE Quote

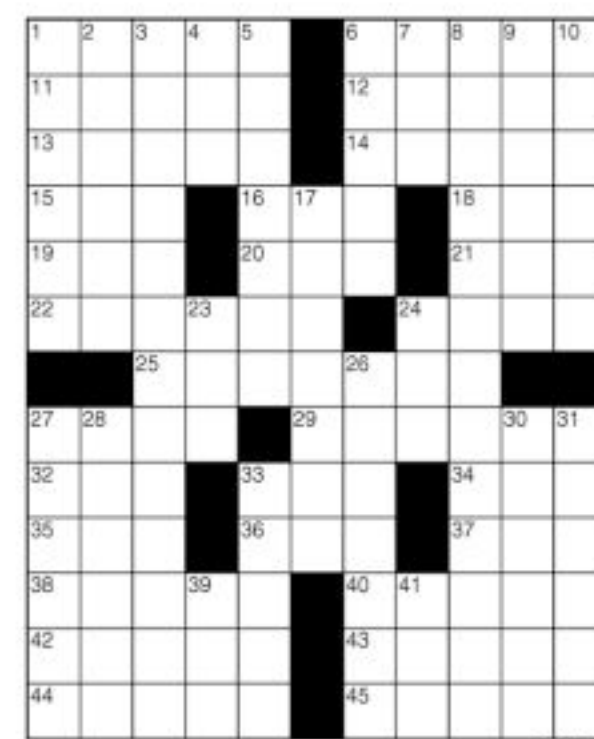


MILAN KUNDERA

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
- 1 Track events
  - 6 Quick kisses
  - 11 Ultraviolet filterer
  - 12 Forsaken
  - 13 New parents' choices
  - 14 Astronomer's find
  - 15 Stout relative
  - 16 Playwright Burrows
  - 18 Put away
  - 19 Flowery ring
  - 20 Wallowing place
  - 21 Pindar work
  - 22 Hula and hora
  - 24 Trick
  - 25 Home drug test, e.g.
  - 27 Brake part
  - 29 Quartet plus trio
  - 32 Bar bill
  - 33 Funny fellow
  - 34 Small bill
  - 35 Deplore
  - 36 Co. abbr.
  - 37 Links org.
  - 38 Rap sheet item
  - 40 Island dances
  - 42 Backyard barrier
- DOWN
- 1 Jimmy's successor
  - 2 Showy bush
  - 3 Form
  - 4 Hydrocarbon suffix
  - 5 Bun seeds
  - 6 Betrayed nervousness
  - 7 "Xanadu" band
  - 8 Friend's exhortation
  - 9 Messages
  - 10 Sofa's cousin
  - 17 Makes a raid, perhaps
  - 23 Semicircular shape
  - 24 Tatter
  - 26 Burger topper
  - 27 Rake with gunfire
  - 28 Conveyed
  - 30 Hire
  - 31 Puzzle
  - 33 Less foolish
  - 39 Superb serve
  - 41 Can. neighbor



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

STRAW TOPAZ  
HAILE ROUGE  
EMCEE OPTED  
EXODUS  
PICNET FBBS  
INASEC FBRT  
CAKESANDALE  
KNEW GARBLE  
YES JOYCAP  
PINATA  
CAROM LIKES  
AXIOM LINERT  
REPLY ESSAY

### BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



### BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

