

## Examining the Discourses of Political Islam in Bangladesh

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### Dilemma of the desire of growing as a modern state: Religiosity vs. Secularism

Secularism is considered to be the inherent spirit of Bengali nationalism on what Bangladesh had come into being as a democratic secular nation-state through a bloody Liberation War. In the original constitution of Bangladesh of 1972, this was held up as one of the four state principles (the other three are democracy, nationalism and socialism). After the assassination of the war leader and then prime minister Shiekh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the subsequent military regimes discredited the original principles and eventually in 1977 'secularism' was removed from the constitution by President Ziaur Rahman replacing with "*Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions*". Henceforth, a series of constitutional amendments and governmental proclamations between 1977 and 1988<sup>1</sup> led the body politic towards a process of Islamization. Generally, the transformation of the basic state principles into a specific religious vocabulary and action plans taken by the state upon it has been translated into the discourse of political Islam in this politico-historical context of Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup>

The protagonists of Bengali nationalist consider the removal of secularism as a betrayal of Bengali Nationalism and while the promise and spirit of Liberation war (*muktijuddher chetona*). The print and electronic media has become flooded with opinions reflecting the attitude, disappointment and anxiety of the secularist middle class. The secularist groups used to chant a slogan when in 1988 the military government of H.M. Ershad amended constitution to establish Islam as state religion *jar dhormo tar kache, rastrer ki bolar achhe?* which means *Religion is a personal choice and the state has nothing to do with it* or *dormo -bhittik rajniti nishiddho korte hobe* which means *Politics on religion have to be banned*<sup>3</sup>.

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In the nationalist intellectual tradition the Bengali culture and society has been exemplified as organically syncretic, plural, tolerant, progressive and secular. In this view, formation of Bengali culture in a wide spectrum of history from ancient time, often expressed as “time immemorial”, holds this ideal. The rise of Islam in Bengal in about thirteenth century has been often depicted as a synchronized cultural process of cohabitation of Buddhism, Hinduism, Animism and all other diverse faiths for more than thousand years. This is often cited as *osamprodayik chetona* or spirit of communal harmony.

However, in opposition to this liberal Bengali nationalism, referring the country to be an Islamic Nation (considering the faith of the majority), Bangladesh Nationalist Party, led by Ziaur Rahman, professed the term Bangladeshi nationalism to reformulate secular nationalism into Muslim identity based nationalism. During the sequential military and democratic regimes the controversy continues into deeper labyrinth and to shape the state politics and social life. Nationalism in Bangladesh has taken into a shape upholding religious identity in the forefront. There are ongoing controversies and fierce disputes on “whether our primary identity is Bengali, Muslim or Bangladeshi” etc. Shaping of national Identity and Nationalism turned into a constant battle field and contested issue. In the state policy and public discourses, unlike India or Pakistan, there would be no resolution in the question of Nationalism and national identity in Bangladesh. Again, there are active political movements demanding scripture or ‘Sharia’ as the basis of state law. Increasing Islamism in politics and influence of religious discourses for legitimacy of power in recent decades has become vivid in public life. For number of reasons, the examination of the attitudes and interpretations on secularism versus religiosity in Bangladesh is required.

Islam has been turned into the modern state political manifesto with multiple interpretations from different Islamic blocks through pro-active partisan activities constituting politics upon Islamic principles during the last decades. Making Islam as the basis of state law and realizing the practice of Islam as state religion has been interpreted in



the vocabulary of liberty and freedom from persisting poverty and predicaments of general people. After the demise of secularism as one of a fundamental principle of the state and resurgence of religiosity in politics, dream of growth of independent secular modern state of Bangladesh has become shattered down. Thus religion/Islam comes into as state principle in opposition with separation of religion from state, secularism. The Islamist blocks claims Islam to practice not only in personal domain, but also simultaneously in public political domain and statecraft. This course of debate raises huge controversy and split in politics of Bangladesh state in the new wave especially, when, in the wake of the U.S. led global "war against terrorism" Bangladesh has become labeled as a "moderate Muslim country" thriving to uproot the sources of Islamic Militancy in her soil.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, in a number of ways, religion remains analytically significant in understanding living society and politics in Bangladesh. This is a crucial moment of examining the meaning of religion and modernity made to us, to the post colonial modern mind.

#### **Political Islam perceived as violent means of establishing Islam as state ideology**

There are analyses of political Islam in contemporary Bangladesh in the efforts of several researchers like Enayetur Rahim, Taj Hashmi, Lamia Karim, Ali Riaz and so forth. They attempted for an understanding of significance of recent Islamic resurgence and explosions in the dynamics of the politics of Bangladesh with a political historical overview and even future forecast whether Bangladesh would going to be a Taliban state or not through a Islamic revolution. State-backed politicalization of the Islamic ideology in post-independence period has been analyzed in their discussion.

But, generally, this political Islam is seen as negative politics made out of the political crises of the state of Bangladesh : the periods of militarism and democratic struggles. Islam came into the political climate as the contrary of the fundamental ideal of the state. There

came a slow but steady process of Islamization over the three decades through the failure of the secularist political powers to direct people toward peace and prosperity. Underdevelopment, Lack of industrialization and employment, social security, political unrest, terrorism, law and order crisis, lead people to religious shelters losing hope on the progressivists. The economic dependence upon the Middle Eastern countries and flow of aid played added role in this Islamization of politics of Bangladesh.

This is utter simplification of a complex issue when it is said as the product of political failure of the political parties of Bangladesh being incapable of leading people into a desired life. The construction of Bengali nationalism as the secular nationalism and very formation of modern secular itself has to be questioned thoroughly and reexamined. There lies substantial relations with our history, society and culture, which have remembered and celebrated collectively in response to US lead imperial aggression into Muslim states and in the marginality of Muslims community as migrants in the west. For the Diaspora community in the West, religion plays a crucial role of symbol of identity, solidarity, place of refuse and symbol of resistance.

#### **Islam/Religion as Political Agenda**

With contested sects and schools of religious belief, the new meaning of the religiosity has turned into, on one hand, building theocratic state and on the other, holding a collective identity of *Islami Ummah* of pan-Islamic nature in the global world. There are two dimensions of it, reforming practices within the Muslim society and setting political programs apparently against modernization and progress in the western term. This encounter, in the meanwhile, has been staged in the language of violence and has taken into a militant character.

There are assumptions and evidences of international network of the Islamic militant groups and their action programs with an agenda of establishing totalitarian Islamic state dismantling secularism as an ideology of state and of introduction of *Sharia* as the source of state



law. During the post 9/11 era the definition of violence and terrorism has been constructed by the global power in the uni-polar world, the United States, as in the name of "war against terrorism", denoting to the religion of Islam and the Muslims, conflating a Muslim as a potential terrorist. The military aggression of the U.S.A. led alliance into Afghanistan and Iraq and recurrent threat of attack in some more Muslim states like Iran and Syria and political and military support for the Israeli occupation and Jewish state on the Palestinian land, trigger the reaction, resistance and encounter of imperialist aggression in the Muslim regions. Resistance crystallized in a particular religious identity and religious solidarity as the oppressed collective singled out with a particular religious faith.

Thus, in this historical process, Islam has been thought to be strengthened as the ideology of the oppressed and the occupied and of the counter power of resistance to the western/US hegemony. Again, the juxtaposition of sects and schools of Islam and the local conflicts and clashes among them took acceleration.

The wave of this religiosity, with multi-dimensional facets, has been crystallized in the practicing dominant and subordinate discourses of social and political life. And this intriguing transformation could be captured in the dialogues, conversation, attitudes and behaviors, rituals and celebrations in the public life and discussions of the organic intellectuals.

The constant battle on symbols adopted and legitimated by the state express the conflict of religious and secular ideologies. It reached into the higher point at the bomb blast in the festival of celebrating Bengali New Year *pohela boishak* in Ramna *Botomul* in 1999. Many of the national symbols are constantly denied as religiously illegitimate by the religious political parties, supported by the religious institutions. The rituals in the celebration of 21 February on bare foot rendering flowers on the altar of *Shahid Minar* or on the grave of the martyrs, paying homage to the memorial monument in the victory day, the procession in *pohela boishak* are unacceptable as allegedly non-Islamic as the wide practice of saint cult in Bengal.

### Religious reformation and formation of secular and in the post-colonial state

As the period of modernity has been characterized as secular, in the construction of modern nation and nation-state, religion has been assumed to be less significant in the regulation of state and civil life and supposed to be continued in private and individual practice which is often explicit in the public pronouncement of the educated middle class intelligentsia, social workers and politicians led the liberation war of 1971. Often the dream of the liberation war is expressed and described in the statist discourses as to build a modern secular, non-communal state (*adhunik, dhormoniropekyā, osamprodayik rashtro*) leading to harmony, peace, prosperity and progress and at the same time disappointment at the rise of religious discourses in politics is obvious.

Religion and nationalism has become complexly interwoven in the politics of Bangladesh. This has got its origin from the modern Western understanding of religion and spread of this modernity over the world where distinction between religious and secular is a central feature. The tension between religious and secular become expressed in the religious and secular ritual performing. If we accept Clifford Geertz's definition of religion<sup>5</sup>, probably the most influential one in anthropology, which hinge is on the conception of religion as symbolic communication rituals plays a very important role in making of reality. Maurice Bloch (1945), in his study of circumcision ritual of the Merina in Madagascar, agreed with Geertz upon the point is that the religious ritual could be distinguished from other social practice. Thus, it "becomes a universal category of symbolic behavior and part of that larger universal category, called religion". But the point of departure of Bloch's view is that the 'ritual legitimates several types of domination in its authoritative discourse: gender hierarchy as well as state domination'<sup>6</sup>. To understand antagonism and violent conflict between groups in society, this perspective is useful, rather than Geertz's. The genealogy of modern religion as analyzed by Talal Asad (1993) shows the way of a 'social history of religion with an



emphasis on the social conditions of particular discourses and practices' what a universalist, ahistorical definition of religion lacks.

The politico-historic context of the birth of independent state as the state of the Bengali nation is entangled with the wide arena of South Asia, especially with India and Pakistan through the common colonial experience and the experience of partition in 1947. At the eve of the birth of the new states, communal riots and violence took place and separation of Hindu and Muslim identity got sharpened and to establish different homelands for the both claiming different religious identity to be legitimate for state formation and belongingness to the religious community. Birth of Bangladesh splitting Pakistan evidently shows the demise of such religious nationalism headed towards the formation of modern state. Secular nationalism has been brought into being in the case of the new state where religious harmony among the different religious community and sects has been expected as an ideal. The socio-political trajectory of the country has not become compatible with such hope; rather it expresses the persisting tension among Hindu and Muslim and even among the diverse practices within Islam. Hence, the strength of the idea of secularism diminishes, though not yet abandoned.

The struggle between the religious and secular to be the mutually exclusive legitimate authority and the boundary of religious and secular need to explain with historicity. The nature of this struggle has taken into very different and specific shape unlike European history where the major shift is considered from the seventeenth century when Roman Catholic Church lost its authority to define the civil codes in advent of the new authority of secular democratic governments in the modern nation states (emerged as colonial and imperial states simultaneously) of that continent. Western understanding of religion and immensely powerful construction of the dichotomy of secular modern West vs. religious and backward 'Rest' conceptually obstructs us to go for a deeper understanding of the place of religion in our society and placing it in the context of the modern world. The fundamental assumption of this view has been created through the discursive process of making modern society

where religion losing its creative force, either turns to stagnation in sterile conservatism or have to submit to syncretism and thus be subject to assimilation with the secular world. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, in the Western European context, theological and ecclesiastical strife and conflict occupied great historical importance, this very secularism and its symbols were made from with a form of Protestantism; in the eighteenth century, nationalism in Britain and the Netherlands was complementary with a 'generalized' Protestantism integrating the differences among the Churches. This is interestingly, comparable with the making of *Brahma dhormo* and *Brahmo somaj* in British India as complement of the nationalist movement leaded by the fresh modern educated Indo-British class; getting rid of endless 'absurd' rituals of Hindu religion, it was thus become ideologically prepared for accepting the western project of modernity. Though delayed, the Muslims also joined to the march of progress integrating itself into the modern but different education introduced by the British Government running a separate stream, but no less important, of religious education in the *moktob* and *madrassa*'s of various sectarian values. Many Muslim families made compromise with essential profane areas and still strategize to keep the sacred up in their life as the modern way of life does not compatible with observing their religious rites. There are examples of sending one of their sons to *madrassa* while others go for western education for sake of survival in the adverse worldly life.<sup>7</sup>

The configuration of struggle of the post-colonial states of South Asia has a particularity and can be compared to the situation of some other post colonial societies as well. As in British India religious revivalist movements, *Khelafat* Movement, *Farayezi* Movement, *Oyahabi* Movement, Ahle-Hadith for example, addressing the predicament of the British-Indian Muslims, had an anti-imperialist character and hence played a strong role in formation of post colonial social, cultural and political identity of the people rooted in the human fabric of our society. Though recently, the ideology of returning to the original and puritan Islam, widely known as



fundamentalism, is depicted as backward and archaic, this came out of modern time and actually is a response to western expansion as such. That is why it is often labeled as reactionary. All these are in fact, modern reformist movements mostly originated in the nineteenth century getting impetus from the western educational challenge. That was an effort to redefine the boundaries of religious belief and practices in the name of conserving tradition in confronting with western modernity. The paradox of this effort is the desire of making of modern Muslims through the restoration of the fundamental principles as it was in the place of origin, denying the local social, cultural and historical dynamics and contextualization. Thus, at the same time it confronted the localized forms of Islamic belief and practices; discredited and tried to abolish those forms.

Early Islamization in pre-modern Bengal, as Eaton (1993) showed, was thoroughly made by the saints, *sufi*, *pir*, and *awulias* pre-dominantly in peasant cultivators of the eastern frontier, 'who in extra-ordinary ways assimilated Islam to their agrarian world view'. Hence, the peasants, not the urban *ashraf* was the dominant carriers of Islamic civilization in Bengal who do not appear to have perceived Islam as alien, closed, exclusive system to be accepted or rejected as a whole, as we think today. The understanding of religion in pre-modern Bengal frontier was rather fluid seeped into local cosmologies occurred over such a long period of time that the moment of conversion into Islam cannot be very specified and did not make a dramatic break the with the past.

The struggles against British rule in India sprung in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century could be intrinsically characterize with religiosity both in the elite and subaltern consciousness. Religious belief played as a source of communal power and legitimacy of the movements often illegalized by the state law. In Santal *Hul*, Munda *Ulgulan*, *Kheroar* the subaltern class took the religious symbols to build resistance to colonial rule and religious reform was again a part of political program of inner purification to prepare the community from inside with moral, spiritual and organizational way. In the spread of ghost dance in

Africa also carry that essence of religion. Even in the example of the clandestine meetings of African National Council led by Nelson Mandela used to be held in the churches as a form of religious mobilization. As the historical consequence, religion has a very different meaning in the world of the Rest comparing to the West.

While the eastern frontier of Bengal as East Pakistan joined with the new state for Muslims, with West Pakistan, in spite of same Great Tradition of Islam<sup>8</sup>, the contextual particularity and the difference in the daily life practice of the ordinary people become explicit. The history of Bengal turns from religious nationalism to secular nationalism through the emergence of Bangladesh. But very soon for the last three decades religiosity returns in the state politics in Bangladesh in more aggressive form and this could be described without any doubt as intense phase of it. Religion started having more appeal than secular values to the people of both elite and the subaltern, but in different meaning. I understand it as a more complex socio-political dynamics which should be examined in deeper interpretations.

#### **Progress as paradox**

As I emphasis on the long course of the socio-historical process of Islamization for an understanding the discourse of political Islam and the violence today, I also keep on stressing the intersection of colonization with Islamization to explain the present context of U.S. Lead trans-national war and military intervention in the countries incidentally Muslim.

The paradox of Muslim religio-cultural identity in home and global context is to resist western expansion, its economic and cultural hegemony, without having the charge of killing innocent people in the name of religion at the same time.

Since the emergence of bomb blasts in the political scenario of Bangladesh, an expression of overwhelming shock and horror immersed the country as could be seen in media and public places. This could be conceived as the consequence of our historical



trajectory. Rise of religiosity in our politics is an inevitable outcome of the ways meaning of progress and modern world has been constructed as oppressive and violent for the rest of the people of the world.

Violence is not action; rather violence here is appeared and generated as reaction of oppressive and coercive order. Coercion generates violent outburst. Western educated intellectuals are often induced with the orientalist view of the Muslims portraying them as essentially backward, bigoted, and incapable of positive change tending to vindictive violent activism or terrorism as a stereotyped generalization which traps us intellectually into a dead end and inertia.<sup>9</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Islam has been Introduced as state religion in 1988

<sup>2</sup> In the work of Enayet Rahim (1998), Taj Hashmi (2000, 2003), Lamia Karim (2004), Ali Riaz (2004) for example

<sup>3</sup> Secularism prescribes state neutrality in religious matters, but they are not morally or politically neutral. They are positive goods which must be defended as foundations of liberal democracy. This is why they are opposed by authoritarian religious institutions and authoritarian religious leaders. Secularism and secularization is supposed to enhance the broad distribution of power and oppose the concentration of power in the hands of a few

<sup>4</sup> "In 2009, the newly elected Awami League government announced that it would re-introduce the original Four State Principles into the Permeable of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Although recognized by the United Nations as a "moderate Muslim democracy", Bangladesh's new foreign minister Dipu Moni announced that the country would like to be viewed as, in her words, "a secular, not moderate Muslim, country". The announcements have been widely welcomed by a cross section of people including the country's outspoken media and civil society." See for detail in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularism\\_in\\_Bangladesh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularism_in_Bangladesh)

<sup>5</sup> "A religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing this conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz: 1973:90)

<sup>6</sup> For detail, see, Bloch: 1985

<sup>7</sup> See for detail, Barnard & Spencer: 1996

<sup>8</sup> Robert Redfield introduced the term little and great tradition in 1950.

<sup>9</sup> This article has been revised from a earlier version presented in the "National Conference on State, Violence and Rights" at Jahangirnagar University, organized by the Department of Anthropology, 2006. The feedback I have received during that conference and afterwards from my colleagues enriched my understanding of the problem I have tried to put forward. My teacher and colleague Professor Ainoo Naher provided me with her generous support of references for this article.

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