

Secularism Under Threat in Bangladesh and India

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Secularism in India and Bangladesh has hardly ever faced such grave threats as at present and this paper seeks to highlight how communal forces feed on each other in both countries and are thus intertwined. It submits that secular elements in both countries need to coordinate their efforts to start a counter campaign on both sides of the border, through the new media. They also have to consider seriously mid-stream course corrections to bond closer with the masses that is not inherently communal, but simply take pride in their religion. Unless some damage control is done, secular forces in both countries are likely to be overtaken, marginalised and silenced for ever by religious extremists.

What is more distressing is that this problem is occurring simultaneously in both countries, which is not quite common, and fundamentalists on both sides appear to be gaining from each other's programmes of hatred and violence. Despite the new aggressive India voting emphatically for a right-wing Hindu ultra-nationalist leader and party, West Bengal continues to remain one of the last bastions of secularism, but one is not sure how long. This secular government is under unprecedented pressure to capitulate before the forces of Hindu fundamentalism, that incidentally, use developments in Bangladesh and Pakistan as their alibi. At the same time, Muslim extremist forces in Bangladesh appear to have regrouped and rejuvenated themselves, despite the iron hand of the secular government, and maybe sometimes as a result of it. But there are, nevertheless, essential differences in the approach and tactics used by religious extremists. In Bangladesh they receive aid and inspiration from external elements while in West Bengal religious extremists and divisive forces are actively encouraged by the national government to destabilise the State government. But the latter's overplaying of its secular credentials and its own crushing of democratic opposition have also resulted in all its victims and antagonists, most of who had faith in secularism, to seek protection under communal forces.

Frankly, in pre-Partition India, upper caste Bengali Hindus did not require to use the communal weapon of contestation, as they had securely established their hegemony in most spheres by collaborating with colonial and imperial state power. As a corollary, agitations and movements were launched by Bengali Muslims to break free from the economic oppression of British-sponsored zamindars, mainly Hindus, as well

as for strengthening self respect in the face of derogatory social dominance of Hindu bhadrals. These often involved attempts to increasingly Islamise the otherwise common or syncretic culture and language that existed, which was viewed either as un-Islamic or deliberately Sanskritised, which meant it was too steeped in Hindu traditions. Though much of this was true, a section of Hindus considered every such step to be communally provocative — without dispassionately segregating the intentions or the methods employed by different protagonists. While some offshoots of communalism in Bangladesh arose from the movements for securing justice for the Muslim majority in a Hindu-dominated Province, it was pumped vigorously by the Muslim League, before and during the 24 years of the Pakistan phase. But the real dangers of jihadism, however, appeared in the late 1990s, when veterans of the US-sponsored anti-Soviet war returning home from Afghanistan brought it to Bangladesh. This is a few years after communal elements in India bared their fangs over Babri Masjid, between 1990 and 1993. Jihadism reached its first peak on 17th August 2005, when the Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh and the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh synchronised bomb blasts in 63 of the country's 64 districts.

One cannot also deny that in India the new wave of Hindu extremism is built on and nourished by western inspired Islamophobia — though its focus is mostly on Islam in the subcontinent. The leading communal party in India plays upon the theme of Hindu victimised at the hands of Islamic rule, that is necessarily portrayed as oppressive and as un-Indian, despite the undeniable contribution of Islamic culture in India. It feeds on the insecurities of people in Assam about being overwhelmed by successive waves of Bangladeshi infiltrators and, thereby, supports the unjust demonisation of all Bengali-speaking people there. Conversely, terrible stories of local-level misdeeds and lynching by demented Hindu fundamentalists in different parts of India are invoked by Islamic extremists in Bangladesh to justify further extremism — without mentioning the instant alarm raised and immediate agitation by secular elements who bravely defy a vindictive state. The first insistence of this writer is that there is an immediate need to pool all worthwhile information about the ceaseless battles of secular forces in both countries, that defy terror and deaths, instead of carrying individual struggles. Secular forces need to highlight these more in the mainstream and social media on both sides to counter the one-sided tarring of an entire people for the crime of a few. It is time to realise that secularism also requires as much blood and sacrifice as the struggles for political freedom in both countries.

India's immense faith in its strong democratic and secular traditions has been rudely shattered by religious extremists coming to power. The writer proposes that one of the chief reasons for the current failure of secularism is that Nehruvian liberals who had safeguarded the principle had become too Marxian or were/are too steeped in the Western ethos of seeming atheism. By staying away from religion altogether and

by trampling over the fond religious beliefs of the Hindu masses, they alienated the god-fearing masses, who were certainly not inherently communal. When, for instance, mayhem and massacres were successfully engineered by the Hindu right over the Ram Janambhoomi and Babri Masjid issue right from the early 1990s, left liberals took an extremely academic view, which was obviously drowned in the ensuing cacophony. This brings us to the ancillary question: is taking pride in one's religion automatically a sure sign of fundamentalism or is it actually a potent antidote against the systematic poisoning of the masses by communal forces? The second prescription that is being submitted is that unless a mid-stream course correction is made by liberal and secular forces and this antiseptic distance from religion bridged, there is little hope in either country that secularism can be kept alive in the years to come.

After all, this war is a fight to the finish and secular forces must learn not to rely only on state power in both Bengals to protect pluralism and tolerance.

Secularism in India and Bangladesh has hardly ever faced such grave threats as at present and this paper seeks to highlight how communal forces feed on each other in both countries and are thus intertwined. It submits that secular elements in both countries need to (a) coordinate their efforts to start a counter campaign on both sides of the border, through the new media and (b) consider seriously mid-stream course corrections to come closer to the vast mass that is not inherently communal, but simply take pride in their religion. Unless some damage control is done, secular forces in both countries are likely to be overtaken, marginalised and silenced for ever by religious extremists.

What is more distressing is that this problem is occurring simultaneously in both countries, which is not quite common, and fundamentalists on both sides appear to be gaining from each other's programmes of hatred and violence. Despite the new aggressive India voting emphatically for a right-wing Hindu ultra-nationalist leader and party, West Bengal continues to remain one of the last bastions of secularism, but one is not sure how long. This secular government is under unprecedented pressure to capitulate before the forces of Hindu fundamentalism, that incidentally, use developments in Bangladesh and Pakistan as their alibi. At the same time, Muslim extremist forces in Bangladesh appear to have regrouped and reju-

venated themselves, despite the iron hand of the secular government, and maybe sometimes as a result of it. But there are, nevertheless, essential differences in the approach and tactics used by religious extremists. In Bangladesh they receive aid and inspiration from external elements while in West Bengal religious extremists and divisive forces are actively encouraged by the national government.

Frankly, in pre-Partition India, upper caste Bengali Hindus did not require to use the communal weapon of contestation, as they had securely established their hegemony in most spheres by collaborating with colonial and imperial state power. As a corollary, agitations and movements were launched by Bengali Muslims to break free from the economic oppression of British-sponsored zamindars, mainly Hindus, as well as for strengthening self respect in the face of derogatory social dominance of Hindu bhadraloks. These often involved attempts to increasingly Islamise the otherwise common or syncretic culture and language that existed, which was viewed either as in-Islamic or deliberately Sanskritised, which meant it was too steeped in Hindu traditions. Though much of this was true, a section of Hindus considered every such step to be communally provocative — without dispassionately segregating the intentions or the methods employed by different protagonists. While some offshoots of communalism in Bangladesh arose from the movements for securing justice for the Muslim majority in a Hindu-dominated Province, it was pumped vigorously by the Muslim League, before and during the 24 years of the Pakistan phase. But the real dangers of jihadism appeared in the late 1990s, when veterans of the US-sponsored anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan returned to Bangladesh. It reached its first peak on 17th August 2005, when the Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh and the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh synchronised bomb blasts in 63 of the country's 64 districts.

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Though religious militancy on both sides of the border literally fed on each other, their aims were and are different — but both consider secular forces as hated enemies that, along with secular governments in both Bengals, are merely stumbling blocks in their ambition to run their people on strict religious lines. It would be

instead of highlighting that intolerance has also been part of the Hindu tradition in the past and they were thus lured by motivated Hindu rightists, who sold an exaggerated pride in ancient India's achievements. Nehruvian left liberals appear to have lost complete touch with the masses, and often cannot differentiate between faith in god or religion from communalism.

Though the Indian state would like to retain at least one friendly, secular nation as an immediate neighbour, especially because of its calibrated intolerance of Pakistan, and also in view of the unpredictable often-negative feelings in Nepal and Sri Lanka, its ruling ideology runs counter to the requirements of diplomacy. Similarly, the present secular government in Bangladesh faces the dilemma of retaining the well-earned satisfactory level of good relations with its larger neighbour, its increasing loss of secular ideals and practices pose real problems, and lends fodder to its own domestic anti-secular forces.

But in West Bengal, such negative forces are also spreading rapidly due to continued political mistakes of the secular government itself and its hard, intolerant attitude towards the opposition.

that has recently reared its head in West Bengal regularly plays upon the excesses of Islamic fundamentalists all over the world, but

—“Secularism Under Threat — Interplay Between Forces (or Factors) in Bangladesh and India”. These appear to be ‘made for each other’ and while communal and fundamentalist forces gain from each incident, secularists have to draw on reserve energies so as not to lose this battle.

I will focus on how the cultural cores of the two major religions of the Bengali speaking people were always different, as they represented competing aspirations and class interests —under the veneer of religion. But that did not prevent a syncretic, overriding Bangaliana prevailing over apparent distinctions in (say) the choice of words.

Dear The central focus of the east has been to regain its rightful place as the centre of Bangali values and expressions, while the struggle of the west has been to retain the separate Bangali identity from being swamped by majoritarianism in India. The forces of Hindi Hindu Hindutva are gaining every day and the parallels that are evident in the struggles of secular forces on both sides need to be lessons for each other. We need to draw strengths from each other, instead of operating in separate 'silos'.

that can be analysed and utilised by the intelligentsia — which has historically been an essential vanguard of secularism.

feeding, at times, on the dissatisfaction are unleashed to destroy its tradition of tolerance. pincer attacks are made political polarisation reaches historic highs and local jihadist groups forge links with transnational movements, conditions are ripe for new forms of militancy that could threaten the country's security and religious tolerance. Two groups, Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) is and Ansarul Islam, dominate today's jihadist landscape; a faction of the former appears to have consolidated links to the Islamic State (ISIS) while the latter is affiliated with al-Qaeda's South Asian branch. Both have perpetrated a string of attacks over the past few years, some targeting secular activists, others Bangladeshi minorities. The ruling Awami League has politicised the threat. Its crackdowns on political rivals sap resources from efforts to disrupt jihadist activities. Instead, it should invest in reinforcing the capability of the security forces and judiciary and build political consensus on how to tackle the threat.

The country's recent history of jihadism dates to the late 1990s, when veterans of the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan returned to Bangladesh. A first wave of violence, involving two groups, the Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh and the JMB, peaked on 17 August 2005, when the latter group synchronised bomb blasts in 63 of the country's 64 districts. Successive governments subsequently took action against the JMB's leadership, but the group has revived itself, albeit in a new form. Another group, Ansarul Islam (or Ansar), has also emerged, while a JMB splinter - dubbed the "neo-Jamaat-ul Mujahideen" by law enforcement agencies - calls itself the Islamic State-Bangladesh and has funnelled fighters into Iraq and Syria.

Ansar portrays itself as the defender of Islam from those who – in its leaders’ view – explicitly attack the religion. The JMB, on the other hand, has named a longer list of enemies: it considers perceived symbols of the secular state and anyone not subscribing to its interpretation of Islam as legitimate targets. The Bangladesh police allege that JMB operatives have played a part in attacks claimed by ISIS on prominent members of minority communities and religious facilities and events, including Ahmadi mosques, Sufi shrines, Buddhist and Hindu temples, and Shia festivals. An attack on a Dhaka café on 1-2 July 2016 that killed over twenty people, mostly foreigners, appears to have involved loose cooperation between different groups, including both rural-based madrasa students and elite urban young men.

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Bangladesh’s contentious national politics have played a role in enabling the jihadist resurgence. Ansar found its initial *raison d’être* in the Awami League government’s post-2010 trials of people accused of war crimes perpetrated in the 1971 war of independence. Those trials, targeting the senior leadership of the largest Islamist party *Jamaat-e-Islami* (Jel), prompted criticism for violating due process, lacking transparency, and involving intimidation and harassment of defence lawyers and witnesses. The prosecutions were used to crush the Jel, a close ally of the Awami League’s main political rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and to discredit the BNP itself. They provoked widespread anger among Islamists, which was mostly expressed through mass protest, not jihadist violence. Yet Ansar, depicting the trials as an assault on Islam, recruited urban, educated youth, albeit in relatively small numbers, and perpetrated brutal attacks on secular activists and bloggers who had demanded harsh punishment for those prosecuted.

Political polarisation has contributed to the growth of militancy in less direct ways, too. The marginalisation of the BNP through politically motivated corruption and other trials of its leadership, including party chief Khaleda Zia’s 8 February 2018 conviction and five-year sentence for corruption, and of the Jel, through the war crimes trials and a ban on its participation in elections, have eliminated most democratic competition and encouraged the growth of a jihadist fringe. A purge of BNP and Jel sympathisers from the armed forces has elicited animosity within some military circles toward the

Awami League, which the jihadists also appear to be seeking to exploit. The BNP, for its part, has on occasion used terrible violence, or supported groups that do so, fuelling political animus and deepening schisms.

The influx of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar's Rakhine state in August-December 2017 also raises security concerns for Bangladesh. Jihadist groups - including ISIS and Pakistani militants - have referenced the Rohingya's plight in efforts to mobilise support. For now, though, little suggests that the refugees are particularly susceptible to jihadist recruitment. Bangladesh's response to the humanitarian tragedy should focus primarily not on counter-terrorism but on providing support for refugees and redoubling efforts to assuage potential friction between them and host communities.

The state response to the surge of jihadist violence over the past few years has relied primarily on blunt and indiscriminate force, including alleged enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Such tactics have eliminated large numbers of jihadists and weakened militant groups. But they undermine intelligence gathering. Security officials fear the ability of jihadist movements to recruit, raise funds and conduct operations remains intact. To make matters worse, Awami League leaders have exploited the threat to further discredit the BNP and Jel, accusing them of complicity in high-profile attacks. The government continues to use security forces to target its opponents, motivated, it appears, by the imperative of victory in the December 2018 general elections.

While the past year has seen a lull in attacks, marginalising the mainstream political opposition is likely to play into the hands of jihadist groups. Politicised, the police force and judiciary will continue to struggle with the detailed investigative work necessary to disrupt networks that now tap not only madrasa students and their families in deprived rural areas but also privileged students in wealthier quarters of the capital. While the Awami League appears little inclined to do so ahead of this year's vote, reversing the polarisation that creates an enabling environment for jihadists and building political consensus on how to tackle the problem, while investing in a professional police and judiciary, are likely prerequisites of forestalling further jihadist violence. Without a change of course - and particularly if the December elections trigger a crisis similar to that

around previous polls - the country could face another jihadist resurgence.