

Drift In Bangladesh

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Last month, invoking a rare colonial law that made insulting any religion a crime, a Bangladeshi Court had jailed two teachers of Hijla High School in Bagerhat district. Their crime was to deny the existence of a heaven above earth where mortals go after death, apart from asserting that the Holy Quran is not the word of an Allah one cannot see or hear. The students along with others from a nearby Islamic Madrassa became incensed when the high school's head teacher backed up his colleagues. A mob including students, their parents and villagers thrashed the teachers with sticks, who were then sentenced to six-month prison terms each by a magistrate on the spot under the rarely-used colonial-era law aimed at preventing or inciting communal violence. The sentencing was done on the evidence of statements from seven Muslim students of tenth grade, who were minors. The Magistrate claimed to have done a favour to the accused by reducing their prison term from one year allowed by the law to only six months in consideration of the fact that they were respected teachers and not ordinary criminals.

Secularism was one of the four fundamental principles enshrined in the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh, but it was removed from the Constitution by the Fifth Amendment in 1977 by President Zia-ur-Rahman, and replaced by a statement of "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah". Islam was declared the state religion in 1988 by President Hussain Muhammad Ershad. In 2010, the Bangladesh Supreme Court restored secularism in the Constitution but Islam still remains the state religion. I had the opportunity to live in that country for some time, and I can testify that the people of Bangladesh are thoroughly secular in their thinking, outlook and behaviour and are no different from the average Indian on that count. But the politics of Bangladesh is deeply polarised between the secularists and those wanting Islamic *Sharia* rule – chief proponent of which is the Jamaat-e-Islami supported by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) formed by Mr Zia-ur Rahman, of which his wife, the ex-PM Begum Khaleda Zia, is the President and under whose rule during 2001-06, militant outfits such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh and Jamat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh had thrived, being patronised by the State. Jamaat today is beleaguered and is fighting for survival due to the ongoing trial against war crimes and genocides committed during the liberation war of Bangladesh, in which many of their leaders have been convicted and some have already been executed. The death-sentence on its Chief, Motiur Rahaman Nizami, has just been upheld by the Bangladesh Supreme Court.

During the last two years, the country has been reeling from a relentless wave of brutal attacks and murders of secular writers, atheist bloggers, religious minorities and civil society activists and the horrific spate of such murders continues unabated. In the latest of such killings, a Rajshahi University professor, editor of a gay magazine and a theatre artiste were hacked to death in two separate incidents, with the Islamic State and al-Qaida respectively claiming responsibility for the brutal murders. Unable to control the spate of killings, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina continued to be in a denial mood, exhorting secular writers and bloggers instead to refrain from hurting the religious sentiments of people.

Religious intolerance and Islamic fundamentalism, like Hindu fundamentalism being seen in our country today, is nothing new in Bangladesh – long before the recent killings of bloggers like Abhijit Roy in 2015, Islamic fanatics had driven away poet Daud Haider in the 1970s and Taslima Nasreen in the 1990s into permanent exiles. As writer K. Anis Ahmed pointed out in a recently published article, in a highly ruralised country like Bangladesh with low literacy rates, ‘there is little comprehension or sympathy for anything intellectually as rarefied as atheism’. But by targeting liberals and freethinkers, the Islamists are posing as defenders of religion. Worse, the void created by the decimation of Jamaat is now being attempted to be occupied by other Islamic terror groups, whether home-grown or from outside, who can then spread sinister their terror designs into the Indian territory as well. It is undeniable that religious fundamentalism is growing in the country and the Government is showing little firmness to control it. It is in this context that the jailing of two innocent teachers should be examined, because it indicates a new low in Bangladesh’s fractious politico-religious history. It also bears an uncanny resemblance to another trial that took place in USA during the 1920s and immortalised in the 1960-movie “Inherit the Wind”.

In 1925, a high school biology teacher named John Thomas Scopes in Dayton, a small town in Tennessee, was arrested for teaching that humans had evolved from lower forms of life, according to Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, after the Tennessee state legislature had enacted a law forbidding teachers in publicly funded schools to ‘teach any theory that denies the Story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals. Many other states in USA were soon to follow suit. In the famous trial, the prosecution represented by the noted lawyer Mr William Jennings Bryan noted that in biology textbooks, humanity was clubbed together with 3499 other species of mammals and argued that it was unfair not to distinguish between man and lower forms of life, doubting the intelligence of those who ‘put a man with an immortal soul in the same circle with wolf, the hyena and the skunk’. “What must be the impression made upon children by such a degradation of man?”, he asked.

Despite being defended by one of the best lawyers of his time, Mr Clarence Darrow, Scope was convicted and fined a hundred dollars by a prejudiced court that refused to accept any evidence from outside the Bible, in spite of the fact that Darwin’s Origin of Species was published in 1859, and by the 1920s, the Theory of Evolution was well established and accepted almost universally. But then the Bible says, God created man in his own image, to have dominion over the fish of the sea, fowl of the air and over all the earth and ‘over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth’. Similarly the Holy Quran teaches that merciful Allah is the creator of everything including heaven and everything on earth. Each religion has its own explanation for the creation of the world, which is not necessarily a scientific description established through hypothesis, observation, theory and direct or indirect validation through experiment. Faith and science are never to be mixed together – the mixture then becomes a dangerous cocktail that only creates confusion and conflict. The only sensible thing is to leave them alone in their respective spheres. The world has already seen too many Galileos and Brunos.

Till the 1960s, and even during the 1970s, teaching of creation by an almighty God and biological evolution had to be given equal time in most publicly funded schools in the US. But from the second half of the last century, the US Supreme court was becoming more sensitive to the requirements of the First Amendment to the US Constitution which had built a ‘wall of separation between the state

and religion' by forbidding the passage of any law 'respecting an establishment of religion'. In a landmark judgment in 1987 against the so-called balanced treatment of creationism and evolution in public schools, the Court firmly struck down a Louisiana law, ruling that its purported aim of promoting academic freedom was a sham, hiding behind its real intention of advancing the religious viewpoint that a supernatural being had created humankind. Thus since its primary aim was to endorse a particular religious doctrine, it went against the First Amendment. But even though anti-evolution laws had been declared unconstitutional, opinion polls show that 45-50% of US population still believe otherwise.

'The forces of darkness and ignorance are never permanently defeated', the celebrated scientist and science-writer Asimov had noted. Since the 1990s, they are trying to reassert themselves in the form of Intelligent Design movement in the US, in order to sneak back into the classroom through backdoor. These forces should never be appeased. As Thomas Dixon points out, the debate about evolution and ID is not between science and religion but really about who should control education, State or Religion. The jailing of two teachers has demonstrated who is in control today in Bangladesh. If Bangladesh fails to take the lesson from history, it might irrevocably slip into medieval conservatism, from which it will be difficult to remerge into a society defined by rational objectivity and scientific inquiry.

Bangladesh was born with the ideal of secularism which has reinforced itself after a tumultuous period in its history. As Mr Anis Ahmed asserted, it could serve as a model of a Muslim-majority nation with the progressive ideals of tolerance and pluralism. As he said, "The less we do to challenge the inhuman arrogance of violent extremists, the more we are in danger of allowing the normalisation of intolerance. To reach our most profound ideals, we Bangladeshis, and our government, must avoid appeasement, and muster the courage once displayed by those who died for our language, and for our independence."