

COMMENT 226 – ***Bangladesh in 2022: Revisiting Ancestral Secularism and Promoting Religious Pluralism***

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Recently, Bangladesh celebrated its half-century of independence and victory, the Golden Jubilee, with great ceremony and circumstance. The birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect of Bangladesh, was also celebrated with due dignity. On this crucial double occasion, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has administered oaths simultaneously all over the country (United News of Bangladesh, 2021). All of the nation's citizenry shared the vision of a new Bangladesh, a Bangladesh that is corruption-free, non-communal and democratic. In other words, a future Bangladesh built in the light of the principles and ideals of the Father of the Nation - towards his *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal).

In the last half century, Bangladesh has achieved most proud success in various sectors – including human rights and the economy. It is now time for Bangladesh to become a middle-income country, never again a 'bottomless basket'. Bangladesh's position and leadership in the global arena is on the rise. So it is time to pay attention to some crucial intra-national issues. Especially as the issues of religious freedom or religious pluralism are much discussed around the world, and especially as Bangabandhu's secularism is ever more taken as an example in Asia. During the celebration of Bangabandhu's birth centenary in 2020, Bengali economist Amartya Sen (at the London School of Economics) placed great emphasis on imitating Bangabandhu's ideals and secularism in the world, and particularly in South and East Asia (Uddin, 2021). That is why Bangladeshis must handle all remaining inconsistencies in their land.

The proper implementation of the state policies enshrined in the 1972 Constitution is crucial. Each of the four main policies involved is unique and irreplaceable; all must be applied if the nation is to meet success. In order to implement democracy, it is necessary to ensure secularism and religious freedom – just as socialism is necessary for social justice. The establishment of Bangabandhu's Sonar Bangla demands proper implementation of the four state principles. Democracy is also essential for building a non-communal Bangladesh. Furthermore, these policies are not hard to implement in the context of Bangladesh's society, history and tradition because Bangabandhu did not formulate them by imitation from elsewhere. In fact, he based his views on the everyday life affairs of Bengali multiplicities: village-town, educated-uneducated, rich-poor, Hindu-Muslim-Buddhist-Christians, and so on. He based himself on the lives of Bengalis.

About 90% of Bangladeshi citizens are Muslims. The remaining are Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and various others. People of all faiths in the country celebrate together many secular festivals such as *Pahela Boishakh* and *Ekushey February*. Religious tolerance and pluralism have shown to be historical, traditional characteristics in the region. Bangabandhu was the leader of all the land and citizenry – and took due notice of the lessons provided by the misuse of religion in Pakistan. So he strongly realized that only religious harmony could show the way to liberation and peace for Bengalis in a new, inclusive country. And so in the new constitution of 1972, he included secularism as one of the four main policies of the state – for the country to commit to the spirit of the Liberation War. Secularism is thus one of the four fundamental principles. It is also a feeling, the traditional way of living in the region, the traditional sense of life.

Secularism means many things and has various aspects. It literally refers to the separation of religion and state - in the western world, secularism refers to separation between religion and state. In western societies religion is viewed as an obstacle to the growth of industrialization, individualism and modernity. However, this has historically not been the case in all societies; in fact, it can be viewed as an anti-history thesis. Since ancient times, development and progress have been achieved in many cultural areas by maintaining religious pluralism, tolerance, patriotism and religious harmony through political means. Religion and state need not be separated, they can evolve in a symbiotic manner. That's certainly the case

of the Bengal region, as Bangabandhu realized through his life-long struggles and political tours across the country. Bangladesh can historically boast of both secularism and religious freedom based on indigenous societies, cultures and traditions. This is a particular trajectory, with little in common with western models. The Bangladeshi historical model embraces believers from all faiths and promotes religious pluralism as the state treats all religions in the same way. Religious pluralism fits the soil and heart of Bengal. Religious coexistence and tolerance are the ancient traditions of the region. Hindus and Muslims have always lived as brothers and friends. They used to participate in each other's religious festivals together and share joys (Uddin, 2015). Ceremonies by all religions have been held under state patronage. Public holidays have also been provided so that religious followers can perform their religious rites with due dignity. So in Bengal religious pluralism has deep roots and is not difficult to practice or nurture. Religious fanaticism and intolerance is a novelty in Bengal lands; it directly contradicts local history and traditions (Uddin, 2015).

After India's partition in 1947 on religious pretexts, Sheikh Mujib witnessed the levels of religious hypocrisy in Pakistan (Rahman, 2012). That is why he was very careful to keep religion separate from politics so as to prevent abuses. He was also very liberal and pragmatic when it came to religious freedom. In the election manifesto and election rally of 1970, he spoke about building a state of harmony irrespective of religion and ethnicity. Bangabandhu's dream was that no one could destroy the thousand-year-old bond of harmony among Bengalis through the misuse of religion, so that people of all religions should unite to build an inclusive country.

As concerns the Constitution of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu explained secularism as follows: "First of all, I believe in democracy. Along with the belief in democracy, I firmly believe that democracy can be developed only in a society free from exploitation. That is why I speak of democracy with socialism. All religions in Bangladesh have equal rights. I mean secularism as freedom of religion. In the end, the most important thing is the need to inspire Bengali culture, language, culture and the whole Bengali environment, which I call nationalism." (Source: Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Proposal). In other words, in the relation between religion with the state, his secularism literally means 'secularism and freedom of religion'.

In Bangladesh, secularism means religious freedom in public life – for the nation belongs to all. As Bangabandhu mentioned in his definition in the National Assembly in 1972: “Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. Muslims will practice their religion and no one in this state has the power to prevent it. Hindus will practice their religion and no one has the power to prevent it. Buddhists and Christians will practice their respective religions and no one will be able to stop them. Our only objection is that religion will not be allowed to be used as a political weapon” (Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh; Maniruzzaman, 1994, p.71). To him, ‘Secularism does not mean irreligion or the absence of religion. Seven and a half crore people of Bengal will have the right to practice their religion. We do not want to stop religion by law.... For 25 years we have seen exploitation, oppression, murder in the name of religion. Religion is a very sacred thing. Holy religion should not be used as a political tool.’

As a secular Bengali, Bangabandhu believed that it was possible to maintain the religious ideology of Islam in the spirit of secularism. He used to explain the meaning, importance and necessity of secularism and freedom of religion in public meetings in an unequivocal voice. In 1972 Mujib explained this in various public events. At a large *Siratun Nabi* (Life of the Prophet) gathering at Baitul Mukarram Mosque on April 27, 1972 he further explained: “Religion is no longer a business. Exploitation and harassment in the name of religion will not continue. No one can try to gain interest by dragging religion in politics” (see, Islam, 2020). Bangabandhu promoted freedom of religion, and advocated for communal harmony (Uddin, 2015). He urged his people to build Bangladesh as a state founded on justice, showing the world that in at least one Muslim state intercultural justice would prevail.

Bangladeshi secularism, that is, the secular values of Bangabandhu, is heavily influenced by Bengali society, culture, tradition, contemporary politicians and literary ideas. The influence of Rabindranath Tagore (a Hindu/Brahma-born poet) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (a Muslim-born poet), among other secular writers, is particularly noteworthy. In Tagore’s songs, love, humanity, nature and secular values far overwhelm religious values. That is why the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu adopted Rabindranath’s song, ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’ (My Golden Bengal) as the national anthem of Bangladesh, in which the love of Bengalis for

their motherland was expressed by association with nature. The first ten lines of this 1905 song were adopted as the national anthem of independent Bangladesh. The song *Bangla Deshmatrika* expresses love, commitment and everlasting emotional bonds to the motherland (Momen, 2017). This reminds us of a 1909's novel, *Gora's* expression: 'Today I am from India. There is no Hindu-Muslim-Christian conflict in me. Today all the castes of this India are my castes. Everyone's food is my food' (see Momen, 2017). Despite restrictions on Tagore practices and opposition from the Pakistan government, the love for Rabindranath spread among Bengalis – a dynamic which eventually led to the emergence and development of secular *Bangaliana* (Bengaliness) for a variety of political reasons since the language movement (Murshid, 2014).

At the same time, Bangabandhu brought sick poet Kazi Nazrul Islam from India to Bangladesh and arranged for his stay and treatment. Many people think that Bangabandhu's lifestyle was influenced by Kazi Nazrul's poems and songs. In particular, the main slogan of the liberation movement in Bangladesh, 'Joy Bangla', is thought to have originated from Nazrul's poem (BD News24.com, 2013). Nazrul was a secular Bengali poet who composed numerous secular songs and poems, including *Gahi Samyer Gaan* which we quote: 'We sing the songs of equality. Where all the obstacles have become one; where Hindu-Buddhist-Muslim-Christian have mingled together' (Uddin, 2021). As a result, secularism became entrenched in Bengali consciousness in the 1970s. After the 1971 war the dominant mood in Bangladesh was one of generosity and inclusion. A very popular slogan in the 1970s was: *Banglar Hindu, Banglar Bouddho, Banglar Christian, Banglar Musolman; Amra Sobai Bangali* [Hindus of Bengal, Buddhists of Bengal; Christians of Bengal, Muslims of Bengal; We all are Bengalis] (van Schendel, 2009, p. 185)

During Bangabandhu's era, religious messages from holy texts by different religions began to be spread on Bangladeshi Betar and Television so as to institutionalize the masses and ensure secularism, freedom, and equal status of all religions. Thus, secularism in Bangladesh basically refers to 'religious pluralism'. Religious pluralism was prevalent in the national consciousness in Bangladesh in the early 1970's.

The Father of the Nation realized that religious pluralism was inherent in the soil and heart of Bengal. Peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance are the oldest traditions of the region. Bangabandhu witnessed in his childhood and political trips how Muslims rejoice in Hindu worship and how the followers of other religions share joy in the two Muslim Eids. In addition to religious freedom, secularism is a monument to humanitarian, democratic justice and freedom. In fact, Bangabandhu's other inseparable principles including secularism are very close to the life of the people. As a result, the common man adopted his policies and constitution as a way of life rather than policy or rule. Through this he wanted to build an inclusive Sonar Bangla, free from strife and exploitation. As a result, as long as the policies formulated by Bangabandhu were effective, Bangladesh proudly progressed.

But the vicious circle was always waiting for an opportunity. Bangabandhu and his family were assassinated on 15th August 1975 for the sake of political interests and for the purpose of plundering state resources. The dream of a Sonar Bangla remained unfulfilled. His killers removed secularism from the constitution. They purposefully combined Islamic message and consciousness, yet their lives did not reflect the consciousness or teachings of Islam. For political reasons, the military government and its allies have promoted secularism as *dharmahinata* (irreligion), not *dharmaniropekkhata* (religiously neutral). In the eighties, Islam was gradually declared the state religion. For almost two decades after 1975, religious conflict and religious hatred penetrated deep into the society. Apart from politicians, a number of 'religious' leaders, who opposed Bangladesh's independence, have propagated secularism as anti-Islamic through various propaganda and waaz-mahfils in favour of the state. They sowed the seeds of religious hatred – seeds whose influence still exists in society today.

Almost thirty-five years after the removal of secularism, Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina restored secularism in the constitution of 2011. Yet over time, the situation has utterly transformed. The secularism of 2011-2021 much differed from the secularism of 1970-75 (Sharma, 2021). Some adjustments had to be made so as to revive secularism in the country. Islam had to be kept intact as a state religion. However, strict laws have now been enacted to protect the rights of all religions, religious institutions and freedom of expression.

Regarding the practice of religion, the current government believes that tolerance and coexistence is the best way to stay away from religious conflicts. And so, in the government's mindset, there is a positive attitude towards religious freedom and pluralism. Rejecting Islamists' demands for blasphemy laws, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangabandhu's secular successor, stated that secular democracy is to prevail in the country (Ethirajan, 2013). Everyone is to have the right to practice religion freely and fairly. However, it is not right to hurt someone's religious feelings. Existing laws are enough to punish anyone who tries to insult religion. Thus the legacy of Bangabandhu's philosophy and ideology is somehow preserved in the present regime (Halim, 2021).

Religious hatred or conflict cannot be eliminated through law alone. In order to eliminate communal conflict or religious hatred, a wide array of steps must be taken at all levels – inside families, in education, in workplaces, in the public arena, etc. to eliminate the already deep-rooted religious divisions and the misuse or political use of religion. Therefore, proper implementation of the four state policies, including secularism and democracy, is essential for building a non-communal Sonar Bangla of Bangabandhu's dream.

The ongoing discussion contends that a proper practice of secularism is necessary to maintain social stability. Secularism in Bangladesh has strong historical and cultural roots – all we need appropriate contemporary policies in the spirit of the 1971-2 institutional consciousness. The national struggles and glories of those times were also those of secularism and religious harmony. The post-1975 extremist religious turn which culminated in the 1980s is not in the Bengali spirit and was duly resisted as people from all walks of life again took to the streets and protested against religion-based politics (Uddin, 2015; van Schendel, 2009). Bangladesh's ancestral secularism became further evident in 2010 when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of restoring the 1972 constitution (Uddin, 2021).

Bangladesh has successfully met the golden jubilee of its independence and victory. It can't step back in the second half of the century. The only goal now is to build a progressive Bangladesh in a democratic environment – with secular values.

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