

Historical Overview of Religious Pluralism in Bengal

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Abstract. In the contemporary world, Bangladesh is possibly the only country which has had its name changed three times in less than twenty-five years. Before 1947, the present Bangladesh was known as East Bengal; from 1947 to 1971 it was East Pakistan; and in 1971 it emerged as Bangladesh. The purpose of the present paper is to give a brief historical overview of religious pluralism in the wider Bengal region of which Bangladesh comprises the larger part and to relate this historical background to the present condition of religion-based politics in Bangladesh. Despite major changes of ruling elites and occasional eruptions of violence and repression of competing religio-cultural traditions in the past, the underlying tendency of the people and their rulers in the Bengal region has been to tolerate and even support religio-cultural and social pluralism. The present survey is not intended as an in-depth analysis of the complex factors that might explain how through two millennia the people and rulers in the Bengal region have coped with marked diversity among elite 'Great Traditions' and countless 'Little Traditions' and ethnic minorities. It aims rather to present in broad terms the prevailing current of tolerant pluralism against which certain ideologically driven religio-political interests are attempting, futilely it would seem, to establish a repressive monolithic conception of an Islamic state in Bangladesh.

To understand religious pluralism in Bangladesh we need to know the historical background of the country. Before the 8th century C.E., Bengal was a land of many kings and their small kingdoms. In the beginning of that century, Buddhist rulers established the Pala dynasty and gave a proper shape to Bengal, and ruled the country for about four hundred years. The rulers were people of the land and they were quite respectful towards people of other faiths. Hindus, Buddhists and the indigenous peoples lived in such a harmonious way for many centuries that the period is known in the history of Bengal as a golden age of inter-religious harmony. Then a South Indian king conquered Bengal and established the Sena Dynasty. The Sena kings suppressed and oppressed the Buddhists. When Iqtiak Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiar Kijlji, a Muslim warrior of Turkish origin, conquered Bengal in the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Buddhists in this country felt a sign of relief. Some historians are of the opinion that when the Muslim rulers came to Bengal, the Buddhists not only welcomed them, but felt as if the Muslims were sent by the gods and goddesses to save them.

From 1203 C.E. to 1757 C.E. the Muslims ruled Bengal. During this period the rulers in Bengal generally were quite respectful towards the people of other faiths. But after the British had conquered Bengal, they adopted the 'divide and rule' policy and Hindu-Muslim conflict appeared in this land. This Hindu-Muslim conflict ultimately prompted Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, to come forward with the 'Two-Nation Theory', which holds that though Hindus and¹ Muslims live in the same land, they are different nations – their religion is different and their

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cultural heritage is different. On the basis of this 'Two-Nation Theory' Jinnah claimed that the Muslims in India deserved a separate homeland. It may be mentioned here that this same Jinnah was a great advocate of the unity of these two communities and he was called the "Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity" by some very prominent Hindu leaders of that time. But the British rulers did not sincerely want the unity of the Hindus and the Muslims and their policy created certain situations in which Jinnah, a believer in secular philosophy of life, was virtually compelled to demand a separate state for the Muslims of India.

Jinnah's 'Two-Nation Theory' became popular among the Muslims living in the western part of India and in some of the eastern part of the country. In 1947, when India won independence, the land was divided into two: India and Pakistan. Pakistan had two wings: East Pakistan and West Pakistan. At the partition of India, East Bengal became East Pakistan. It may be mentioned here that Pakistan is the only country in the world which was established in the name of religion: Islam. However, except religion, there was nothing common between the Muslims of East Pakistan and West Pakistan. From the very beginning, trouble started between the two wings. Within one decade, East Pakistan virtually turned into a colony of West Pakistan. This continued for one more decade and a half.

A great leader of East Pakistan named Sheik Mujibur Rahman led the country to independence in 1971. After a liberation war of nine months with the sacrifice of possibly three million lives, Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign state. While Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, Bangladesh became not only a People's Republic but also a secular state. Within ten months of liberation the new government presented the nation a new constitution unanimously approved by the Parliament. Secularism was one of the four basic principles of the Constitution. The Constitution also prohibited any kind of politics in the name of religion. It may be mentioned here that the term 'secularism' was not understood and interpreted in the sense it is understood in the West. By 'secularism' the leaders of Bangladesh meant 'equal opportunity for the people of all faith.'

Bangladesh is a country of 160 million people. Of them about 88% are Muslims, 10% Hindus and the rest are Buddhists, Christians, Bahais and animists. To give equal rights to different faiths the government made it compulsory that all the national programs conducted within the country and outside the country should start with recitations from the Quran, the Gita, the Tripitaka and the Bible. Possibly, nowhere in the world has such a tradition existed. The government declared one of the songs of a poet-philosopher of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, to be the national anthem of Bangladesh. It may be noted here that another song of this great poet is the national anthem of

India. Though Tagore was not a Muslim, the government of a Muslim-dominated country showed great respect to this great man by making his song their national anthem and by declaring him one of their national poets.

Now let me review the four major religious traditions of Bangladesh and their attitudes towards the people of other faiths in the country. I hope this will help you to understand religious pluralism in Bangladesh better. Hindu religious practices were followed by the people of this land from time immemorial. Vedic Hinduism developed slowly in Bengal and merged with folk religions and local customs. The Hindu religious rites and practices of Bangladesh are similar to those of the Hindus of West Bengal, but in many respects are different from the Hindus of the rest of the subcontinent. For centuries, the Hindus of this land have been influenced by the Vaishnava philosophy of Sri Chaitanya. The basic teaching of his philosophy is selfless love for God and His creation. Later on the Hindus of Bangladesh were tremendously influenced by the teachings of some great saints and philosophers of Bengal. Among them the names of Raja Rammohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda are worth mentioning. The Hindus and the Muslims of Bangladesh have been much influenced by some contemporary Hindu saints and philosophers like Sri Anukul Chandra, Swami Swarupananda, Dr. Govinda Chandra Dev and Dr. Mahanambhrata Brahmachari.

Raja Ramamohan Roy, who is called the father of modern India, was immensely influenced by the teachings of Islam. As a result, he became an ardent believer of monotheism and a great advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity. He vehemently opposed traditional Hinduism and established the Brahmo Samaj, which means a society of the followers of the Supreme Being. Members of this society do not believe in any kind of discrimination among castes and creeds. Some of the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj are quite similar to the teachings of Islam.

A great advocate of the unity of mankind, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was born in a Hindu Brahmin family. At certain stages of his endeavour to know God, he tried to practice Islam and Christianity like genuine members of these traditions. After this spiritual journey, he was convinced that all religions have the same goal, but only their paths are different. The essence of Ramakrishna's philosophy is: do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each (person), which is spirituality. Learn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Saint-philosopher of Bengal, Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, propagated a philosophy that service to any living being means service to God. He did not believe in any kind of discrimination based on caste and creed. He believed in inter-religious harmony, particularly harmony among the people of the two major faiths

of the sub-continent. In a letter to one of his friends, he stated that the future of a harmonious India depends on the Upanisadic brain and the Quranic heart.

Among recent Hindu thinkers of Bangladesh Dr. Govinda Chandra Dev devoted his entire life for unity among people of different faiths. Though a confirmed bachelor, Dr. Dev adopted a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy and brought them up under the same roof, but provided each of them with their respective modes of religious education. When they were highly qualified adults, they were married, each according to their own religious traditions. I am fortunate that Dr. Dev was my professor at Dhaka University. In his classes, when he was asked about his religion, he used to say that he was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but a man and his religion was to serve humanity.

Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari, a saint-philosopher of Bangladesh who received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1933, was Secretary General of the Fellowship of Faiths for more than a decade and spent the rest of his life in Bangladesh for the promotion of human values and interfaith understanding. He used to tell everybody that a dog is a dog and dies also as a dog, but a dog can neither acquire dogness nor cease to be a dog. So is the case with any other animal. But a human is unique. A human baby is born with all the potentiality of a human being, but has to turn that potentiality into actuality. That is, she or he has to acquire the qualities of a true human being and maintain them or risk becoming inhuman. Through this and many similar examples and stories, he used to urge millions of his followers belonging to different religious traditions to realize that their primary goal of life should be to acquire the qualities of a true human being, no matter whether they are Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists or Christians. It may be mentioned here that when Dr. Brahmachari was a small boy he was miraculously saved from a sure death by a Muslim neighbour. He never forgot that and till his death in 1998 at the age of ninety-seven he used to tell everybody that a Hindu father was responsible for his birth and a Muslim father for saving his life and that, therefore he must work for the unity of both communities.

Now about Buddhism in Bangladesh. The Bengal region was the last stronghold of Indian Buddhism, where it prevailed through the eleventh century. In modern India, renewal of Buddhism usually is attributed to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who led the mass conversion of millions of low caste Hindus to Buddhism beginning in 1956. However, back in 1887, the Chittagong Buddhist Association had been founded. This was the first Buddhism society in the subcontinent in modern times. I have reason to feel proud of this since Chittagong is in Bangladesh. I have already mentioned that on the basis of Jinnah's 'Two-Nation Theory', Pakistan came into being in 1947. The areas of Muslim majority in western India and in part of eastern India formed Pakistan. It is quite interesting to note that the king of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an area then with more

than 90% Buddhist population, opted for Pakistan and so this area became a part of East Pakistan and subsequently of Bangladesh. It is also interesting to note that until 1956 the total number of the Buddhists living in Bangladesh was more than the Buddhists living in the rest of the subcontinent.

Bangladesh can feel proud of many great Buddhists this region has nurtured. One especially notable is Atisha Dipankara. He played a vital role in making Buddhism popular in Tibet and in promoting harmony among people of different faiths. To show respect to this great son of the soil a university was established in his name in Dhaka city in the year 2002. This is possibly the only university throughout the subcontinent which has been named after a Buddhist scholar. Among recent Buddhist scholars Venerable Vishuddhananda Mahathero deserves to be mentioned. A Buddhist philosopher of Bangladesh, Venerable Mahathero dedicated seventy years of his life to promoting understanding among people of different faiths in Bangladesh. He is no more in this world, but I am sure he is still alive in the hearts of those who knew him as a model of inter-religious harmony.

Now about Islam, which came to Bangladesh comparatively late. Though Arab Muslim traders came to coastal Bengal within a hundred years of the advent of Islam, proselytizing Muslim Sufi-saints came only from the eleventh century. Influenced by the teachings and ideals of the Sufi-saints, huge numbers of Hindus and Buddhists and other indigenous people embraced Islam. Islam entered here in full force, however, with the Turkish conquest towards the beginning of the thirteenth century. Islam, with its social justice and principles of equality and fraternity, came to downtrodden people as a saviour at a time when the society was steeped in inequality and caste oppression. It may be mentioned here that many of the Muslim converts retained their inherited customs and social behaviour, as is evident even today. Thus, while the social and religious life of the Muslims profoundly influenced Hinduism, conversely some practices of the Hindus entered into the life of the Muslims.

I have already mentioned that until British rule in Bengal, Hindus and Muslims were living harmoniously. Even when the British Government, through its 'divide and rule' policy, created misunderstanding among these two communities, there were many Muslim scholars and others who worked for the unity of the people of different faiths. The names of Lalan Shah, Hassan Raja, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Abul Hussain, Abul Fazal, Muhammad Shahidullah and Kazi Motahar Hussain are prominent among them. Several were professors in Dhaka University. Through their writings over many decades, they were successful in promoting free thinking and making people accommodating and respectful towards persons of other faiths. In their personal lives they practiced inter-religious harmony.

Lalan Shah was a folk-singer. Throughout a life of more than ninety years he was active composing and singing songs to remove misunderstanding among people of different faiths. To fulfill his mission he became so intimate with both Hindus and Muslims that he did not even care for his own identity as a Muslim. He is equally loved by the Muslims and the Hindus throughout the country. Kazi Nazrul Islam's contribution in this respect is unique. He wrote quite a good number of poems and composed hundreds of songs against social discrimination and in favour of inter-religious harmony. These have inspired millions of people of Bangladesh and West Bengal to stop discriminating against others in the name of caste, class and creed. As these are ever inspiring, one can confidently assert that Nazrul's writings will inspire generation after generation, as is equally true of the songs of Lalan Shah. It may be mentioned here that Nazrul's wife was a Hindu and that he was so much devoted to Hindu-Muslim amity that he named his first son Krishna Muhammad, Krishna being a Hindu god and Muhammad a prophet of Islam. Nazrul's uniqueness is evident from the fact that he composed hundreds of songs in appreciation of Prophet Muhammad and the teachings of Islam and likewise composed an equal number of songs praising the gods and goddesses of Hinduism. This great soul is a national poet of Bangladesh.

Now let me say a few words about Christianity, which came to Bengal first in the sixteenth century, as Portuguese Christian men married Bengali women. In Bangladesh converted Christians are mostly from low caste Hindus and backward tribal peoples. Colonial missionaries' attitude towards Hinduism and Islam was highly critical and confrontational for most of the nineteenth century. This naturally caused a considerable amount of resentment from the Bengal intelligentsia. However, this negative attitude did not continue for long. The missionaries changed their policy and started devoting their time and money for social service, which helped them change the situation. It may be mentioned here that educational work represents their main contribution to the development of modern West Bengal and present-day Bangladesh. People belonging to this faith are highly respected for their social work. They are so much respected that people in present-day Bangladesh feel proud of being able to send their children to the Christian missionary schools and colleges. In Bangladesh there are many organizations for the promotion of interfaith understanding. The first organizations of this kind were established by the members of the Catholic Church and these have their branches throughout the country. The main purpose of these organizations is not to convert people into being Christians but to convert them to being better human beings. That is one of the reasons why the Christians are highly respected in Bangladesh.

Now let me address certain changes in the government and some amendments to the

Constitution and their impact on the different religions of Bangladesh. The first President of Bangladesh presented the nation a Constitution where special emphasis was given to 'secularism'. He was assassinated in 1975 and soon after General Zia Rahman came to power with the help of the military. To consolidate his power General Zia took a number of political steps that helped return reactionary Muslims to the political arena. Through a martial law order he first dropped 'secularism' from the Constitution in 1976. In 1977 another article of the Constitution was amended to legitimize religion-based politics in the country. In the same year, a new clause, namely, 'Islamic solidarity' was added to the Constitution. This allowed cultivating fraternal relations among Muslim countries. In principle there was nothing wrong with this, but eventually it opened the flood-gates for using religion for political purposes. Many Islamic NGOs sprang up in the wake of politicizing religion. These Islamic NGOs have served as instruments for political Islam. Millions of dollars have been pumped into the country to cater to the politically motivated mullahs whose political aspiration is to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic Republic.

In 1982, General Ershad took over power as a military ruler. He went one step further than General Zia and used Islam to counter the political opposition to his dictatorial rule. He drove the last nail into the coffin of secular ideals at the state level. By his dictatorial power he got the Constitution amended in 1988 to declare Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. This virtually degraded the members of the minority religious communities to second class-citizenry. In 2001 a nationalistic political party with the support of some Islamist political parties came to power. After that the religio-political scenario changed beyond imagination.

From October 2001 to October 2006, fanatic Muslims became a threat not only to the non-Muslim minority but also to the smaller sects among the Muslims. For example, some fanatic Muslims, evidently with support and guidance of a revolutionary Islamist party named Jamaat-e-Islami, a partner in the coalition government, killed one imam of a mosque and made several attempts to demolish all the mosques belonging to the relatively small Ahmadiyya sect in Bangladesh. They tried to force the government to declare the Ahmadiyya Muslim community as non-Muslim. This was absolutely unfortunate. These fanatics wanted to replace all the existing laws of the country by Islamic Sharia laws. In August 2005 fanatic terrorists exploded about five hundred bombs throughout the country simultaneously to demonstrate their strength. This was a great challenge to the government, which was forced by pressure from civil society and the international community to take action against them. It is also worth mentioning that the most powerful of the Islamist political parties, namely, the Jamaat-e-Islami, disowned these terrorists. Many of the terrorists implicated in the five hundred bomb blasts were arrested and death sentences of their six top leaders were carried out.

In Bangladesh there is a unique provision in the Constitution. After the five-year term of an elected government is over, the Prime Minister resigns and the President appoints a ten-member Advisory Board for a brief period to oversee a national election. The Chief Advisor of the Board becomes the executive head of a neutral caretaker government. After the election is held, the caretaker government hands over power to the newly elected Prime Minister. At the time of this writing Bangladesh is being run by a caretaker government. Fortunately all the members of the Advisory Board are against any kind of fanaticism.²

I am quite hopeful that the people of Bangladesh will be able to permanently resist the emergence of religious fanaticism and religion-based politics. This is not merely wishful thinking. I have reasons for my confidence in the people of Bangladesh. As mentioned at the beginning of this account, Bangladesh may be the only country in the world where people have given their lives for the prestige of their mother tongue. Bangladesh may be the only country in the world where three million people sacrificed their lives for the independence of their motherland and that, too, within a span of nine months. Bangladesh is the only country in the world where the birthdays of Sri Krishna, Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad are celebrated with equal importance and with equal respect by the government and also at the private level. These days are also celebrated as national holidays. Again, Bangladesh is the only country in the world where during the major religious festivals of all faiths adhered to by large sectors of the population public schools and colleges remain closed as a symbol of respect to the people belonging to the religious traditions concerned. Bangladesh may also be distinguished for special and substantial annual budget provisions for the development of minority religious traditions. For example, the Hindus, Buddhists and Christians are provided with special financial support for the development of temples and churches – and for celebrating religious festivals in a befitting manner.

Because of all these factors, I am quite convinced that religious fanaticism, intolerance and religion-based politics cannot last long in a country where people have been accustomed to inter-religious harmony for centuries. Bangladesh cannot be a permanent safe haven for any form of religious fanaticism. Rather, because of her unique cultural heritage, Bangladesh is poised to be a lasting abode of religious pluralism and inter-religious harmony.

² Editor's note: In December 2008 a general election returned to power with more than a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly the Awami League, of which Sheikh Hasina Wazed, daughter of former Prime Minister and President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is the leader and has become Prime Minister.