

## **Bangladeshi Women and the Politics of Religion**

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Introduction Over the past few years, Bangladesh has been witnessing a tremendous escalation of violence on women, provoked by the emergence and growth of power-seeking Islamic extremists. Women, who dared to venture in the public spheres, have been ostracized, deserted, denied medication, stoned, lashed and even burnt to death. In violation of Bangladesh penal code, village salish (council of elders led by local clerics and elites) have sentenced women, who allegedly did not conform to the socially accepted behavioral patterns. The government of Bangladesh has not yet taken adequate measures to safeguard the rights of women who have been targeted by *Mullahs* (clerics).

The reports and analyses recently published in Bangladesh press explaining the situation, have tied the issue to the socio-economic backwardness of our country and put the blame on a handful of unenlightened *Mullahs*. Internationally, the fundamentalist case against feminist writer Taslima Nasreen, has once again reinforced the stereotypes about Islamic and Muslim countries. Overemphasizing the a historical role of Islam not only prevents us from looking at the more underlying social contradictions that often foster religious repercussions, but also implies little hope for change, as the situation seems absolute. Islam in Bangladesh has been experienced, practiced, and interpreted quite differently over time and space. Thus in order to understand the social implication of Islamic politics, it is necessary to look at the cultural specificity, social and political structures as well as the level of economic development within which it is exercised.

The central concern of this article is to understand the processes through which religious extremism flourished in Bangladesh and the manner in which women become the primary target of religious politics. In this paper, I argue that religious politics in Bangladesh has arisen in the context of a socio-economic crisis, a crisis of the legitimacy of the state and the weakening of the traditional gender relations. In this context, gender has become increasingly problematized and politicized. The role of women, morality, and the sexual differentiation of social and familial roles have become the central concern of religious politics. This paper tries to identify the Bangladesh state's interaction with religious forces, with a view to understanding the impact of this relationship on women.

### **The Politics of Islam and the Bangladesh State**

Signs of the increasingly important role of the Islamic forces have been observed in Bangladesh in the 80s, in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the rise of so-called "fundamentalist" activities in the Middle East. The Eighth constitutional amendment initiated by the Ershad government in 1988, which prescribed "Islam" as the state religion, was the culmination of the process. Making full use of the situation, the Islamic forces (1) of Bangladesh have strengthened their clout in domestic politics. The whole picture has often been described by the catchy and loose term *Islamization*. While this paper does not go into the theological domain of Islam, it analyzes interactive aspects of the state with Islamic forces. This paper contends that by clearly defining the relations between the state and the Islamic forces, both in the ideological and political dimensions, we will be able to understand the role of the state vis-à-vis the Islamic forces on the question of women.

Bangladesh consists of the eastern, deltaic districts of the Indian subcontinent. When Pakistan came into existence in 1947 as a homeland for the Muslims, Bangladesh became the eastern wing. In Pakistan, an Islamic identity was imposed to insure West Pakistan's economic and political domination on East Pakistan. In 1971, Bengali nationalism, based partly on linguistic identity and partly on the economic exploitation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan, led to the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate identity. Former ruling cliques of West Pakistan used to play the card of "Islam in danger" whenever they faced stiff challenges from the autonomy movement in East Pakistan. However, the more the ruling circle of West Pakistan stressed Islam, the more the autonomy movement leaned upon the slogan of secularism. The experience of exploitation in the name of Islam and of the bloody liberation struggle led the post-liberation politics of Bangladesh in the line of non-Islamic secularism.

The Awami League, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib, led the nationalist movement against Pakistan and formed the first government after independence. The constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 laid down the principle of secularism and Bangladesh was declared a People's Republic rather than an Islamic one. Among the administrative actions in accord with the principle was the banning of political parties based solely on religion. The post independence history of Bangladesh has been one of growing impoverishment and landlessness on the one hand, and growing dependence of foreign aid on the other. The West was not the only source of funding for Bangladesh. The OPEC countries, most importantly Saudi Arabia, entered the ranks of major aid donors since the oil boom of the early 1970s. Bangladesh has been deeply influenced by this phenomenon. The proliferation of Islam-based institutions and organizations are an overt manifestation of the phenomenon. The rejuvenation of the Islamic political parties in Bangladesh can also be explained in terms of the enhanced role of the Muslim states in Bangladesh politics.

In a coup d'etat on the 15th of August 1975, Mujibur Rahman and his close associates were killed. The coup ushered a new stage in which the Islamic forces staged a substantial comeback to the political arena of the country. In order to maintain his power, General Ziaur Rahman was too willing to win the support of the Muslim forces. An amendment of the constitution was made to delete clauses defining secularism and to insert the preamble "*Bismillah ar rahman ar rahim*" (We begin in the name of Allah, the merciful). A reliance on a discourse of religion helped General Zia to undermine the claims of the oppressed social strata. On the groundwork prepared by Zia's compromising and appeasement policy for the Islamic forces, his successor General Ershad actively implanted his own support base, comprised of *Madrassa* (Islamic school) teachers, *imams* (priests), and other religious professionals. The Islamic forces were chosen along with the armed forces to be made major support groups whose patronage the government tried to cultivate. For the pursuit of the policy of the patronage, Ershad government highlighted two concepts, '*Rashtra dharma*' (Islam as the state Religion) and '*Masjid kendrik samaj*' (Mosque-centered society). His religious hegemony served to gloss over existing structures of differences: the increasing depression in economic activities, massive unemployment and underemployment, and deteriorating law and order situations.

Islamic extremists' (most prominently represented by the Jamat-i-Islami) goal became the annihilation of secular Bangladesh and the establishment of an Islamic theocracy within the country. By definition, this meant their active involvement at both political and cultural levels. This politics has guided Islamists from the very inception of Bangladesh in 1971. Their stated goals, coalitions formed, ideological positions taken, have all been directed towards developing a political base and ultimately acquiring a political hegemony. Upon returning to the political arena they have contested elections at all levels. They have also pursued a systematic policy of infiltrating educational and government institutions with a view to eventually taking up the political power. They are also aware of the need to disseminate their ideas throughout the civil society. Therefore, causes behind the resurgence of Islamic politics are not difficult to identify. First is the Middle Eastern aid and influence. Second, co-optation of the fundamentalist elements as the support base of the military regimes.

After the fall of General Ershad in 1991, the other two dominant political parties tried to make alliances with the Islamic constituency in their quest for state power. As far as the Islamists are concerned, they are reasserting themselves in the socio-political arena by making women their primary targets. Islamic movement declares itself as the solution of the country's cultural, political and economic problems. Women are seen as the main transmitter of societal values and behaviors; therefore, the changing role of women is associated with the disruptions of a more systemic social order. As a result, efforts are made to try to re-impose traditional behaviors for women as a remedy for crisis and destabilization.

### **Women and Socio-economic Transitions**

Historically, a broad gender division of labor has existed in Bangladesh, in which field-based agricultural work is done by men while women are responsible for all activities carried out within the household. Because of the perceived public-domestic(2) distinction, any woman entering the public domain is perceived to be risking violation of her *sotitto* (chastity) - which is considered a loss of honor not only for herself, but also for the rest of her family (Adnan 1989). The practice of *pardah* has effectively maintained the separation of public and private spheres. Although, millions of Bangladeshi women have been engaged in a myriad of informal sector activities and other survival strategies in any given time of the history, such activities escape the attention of statisticians and ideologues alike. However, even the existing gender division is no longer applicable in many households due to critical shifts at the national and international level. These shifts have been impelled by the process of an uneven capitalist development in which Bangladeshi female labor is being used in local and global capital accumulation. In this process, structures of family, kinship and production relationships are going through alterations and adjustments. Particularly over the past several years, the accelerated reduction of landholding to non-viable units, the loss of land through indebtedness and forced sales, and growing impoverishment has transformed subsistence households into wage-based households (World Bank 1990). Consequently, total family participation in income-producing activities has become imperative for the family's survival (Hossain *et al.* 1990). Production for the market, which ensures cash returns, has taken precedence over production for household consumption, and women are becoming engaged in multiple production roles. The mushrooming of income generating projects, sponsored by the government and nongovernmental organizations alike, made available a new form of employment for women in the rural areas. Women's employment in the urban areas has doubled over the last four years following the rapid expansion of the garment industry.

Among the middle class, inflation and the erosion of living standards also led to increased labor force participation among educated women, primarily in the "respectable" occupation of teaching, and recently in the service sectors such as community development, health and family planning programs. Declining economic standard have been one element in the broader climate of change in women's lives in Bangladesh. The other has been the commitment professed by the state to the cause of women and development and thus mobilizing the vast untapped resource of female labor for capitalist development.

### **The State and the Ideological Reproduction of Gender Relations**

Pyle (1990) found for the Republic of Ireland, state policy can have contradictory goals: development of the economy and expansion of the services on one hand, maintenance of the "traditional family" on the other. Although state leaders of Bangladesh have sought to promote an Islamic identity of Bangladesh with the rhetoric of female propriety, they have also put forward women and development rhetoric, mainly under the pressure of Western donor countries. Bangladesh state's contradictory policy on the question of women has yielded divergent outcomes. On the one hand, there has been a resurgence of religious consciousness, expanded membership of the religious fundamentalist parties and growing numbers of Islamic institutions. At the same time, income-generating projects for women have proliferated, the ideological preconception about women's domesticity is being challenged and growing visibility of women

has become a threat to the fundamentalist ideology. The state rulers are trying to balance between the conflicting gender ideologies of modernists and fundamentalists alike.

### **The Rise of Religious Politics: the Politics of Control**

The emergence of working women tied to the capitalist economy would seem to represent the weakening of the traditional patriarchal order. On the contrary, state policies foster and perpetuate the authority of the male in a more modernized form of patriarchy, or what Sharabi (1988) calls "neo-patriarchy." Thus two parallel, apparently contradictory developments may be discerned in Bangladesh: (1) the propagation of women and development discourse, the expansion of industrialization and proletarianization, which undermine the traditional patriarchal authority; and (2) the retention of Muslim family law, and highlighting the Islamic identity, which legitimate the prerogatives of male family members and religious leaders over women. Polemics surrounding women and the family are responses to the contradictions of social change and emerge in the context of a patriarchal society undergoing economic and political transitions. The transformed role of women in earning and decision-making invariably generate contradictions and tensions in the existing social and familial order. Socialized in traditions that justify male superiority on the basis of their provider role, men are frustrated and humiliated at being unable to fulfill their traditional role and at the threat posed by women's increasing spatial mobility and access to paid employment. As Shaheed and Mumtaz (1990) observe in a similar situation in Pakistan, the fundamentalists target women's issues not only because they are perceived by men as the most immediately threatening, but also because they are the one sphere where control remains possible. It makes men feel safer at the deepest level to keep women in their place. *Mullahs*, therefore, use theological justifications for reproduction of surveillance and control over women's labor and sexuality. "Fundamentalism," as Chhachhi (1989) explains, "provides an ideological justification for bringing women back under the authority and control of men." Additionally, the Bangladesh state legitimizes its own power on patriarchal structures and politics and sponsors fundamentalism. Thus, constructions of gender and discourses about women have become a convenient weapon between contending political groups. Some observers also note that the state may raise the woman question in order to divert attention from economic problems and political corruption. A recurrent theme of the Islamic movement is that "Islamic identity is in danger, Muslims must return to the tradition," and "identity lies in the female private sphere" (woman's behavior, dress, and appearance). For some Muslim men, the new Islamic ideology reduces anxiety because it is able to offer a new form of assurance, and the movement provides new forms of collective solidarity and support.

In summary form, the wake of Islamist politics in Bangladesh have emerged in the wake of three processes: (1) economic crisis, including the uneven process of development and distribution of advantages between groups and classes; (2) a crisis of political legitimacy, previously a decline in popular support for the religious groups and now for the state; and (3) changes in traditional patriarchal system, with the growing visibility and the public participation of women. While it is highly doubtful that the fundamentalists will be able to achieve their goals, it is probable that we will see continued violence by frustrated activists. In the absence of fully developed, socially rooted, and credible social alternatives, the fundamentalists will continue to pose a threat.

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### **Notes**

1Hashmi (1994) categorizes the different groups of people championing the cause of Islam into four broad categories: (a) the militant reformist (fundamentalist), (2) the fatalist, (3) opportunist and pragmatists; and (d) the orthodox. Militant reformist, generally represented by the Jamat-i-Islami, believe in the total transformation of the society in accordance with the tenets of Islam understood and interpreted by their leaders. The non-violent fatalists organizes Muslims with a view to guiding them to the "right path." The opportunists aim at synthesizing Islamic and Western values. They are often vacillating for the sake of legitimacy and power. Orthodoxes representing

mystic Islam have tremendous influence on their followers. At times they can be politically active and influential.

I am not using public/private as binary oppositions. Private (feminine) and public (masculine) are not absolutely separate spheres and they often overlap. At the same time I am also aware that there are symbolic boundaries of both feminine and masculine spheres (socially constructed and based on perceived differences between the sexes) in Bangladeshi society, and masculine sphere is historically marked by privilege.

**Source**

<http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/dept/owr/Gitiara.html>