

Rise of Religious Fundamentalism: Whom to Make Responsible?

By Masud Hassan Siddique

THE upsurge of religious fundamentalism these days are nothing new in our country. During the late 80's we have seen religious fanaticism that destroyed the brotherly relations between religious beliefs of the people of this country. After the Babri mosque incident the so called savers of Islam came to the ground to destroy Hindu temples/mandirs, house holds, properties, etc. which caused a great damage to the then existing congenial religious atmosphere of the country. The government that time had failed to prove its potentiality in securing public property.

In 1994 we had experienced a different sort of Islamic fanaticism through fatwa. At least 12 people, most of them were women were killed through unlawful verdict of the fatwabaz. June 31 '95 was the first day in the history of Bangladesh when these fatwabaz had successfully demonstrated their strength through a day-long hartal in the capital. Their agenda was to destroy NGO movement in the country.

After five years these religious fundamentalists again came out from their hideouts. This time also, their agenda is pre-decided. First, to destroy NGO movement, especially through restricting women's movement, women's empowerment and participation in the decision making and democratic process, participation in mass gathering/rally, and eventually destroy the democratic process of the country and bring development to a halt. Second, to kill the intellectuals, members of the civil society, NGO leaders and restrict freedom of thought, speech, expression and over all restrict all forms of rights of the people.

During the last couple of weeks we have experienced that these fanatic forces have so far successfully restricted mass rallies of grass roots' women in Bhramini Baria, Faridpur and Barisal. On 8 March, on the International Women's day, these fanatic forces organised a public gathering and declare their dream to grab state power by the year 2000. They declared themselves as Talebans and promised to start Afgan style movement in the country.

A difference of opinion within the NGO community over the present programmes of holding rallies and the use of ADAB could have been notice. Following is what can be abstracted from the thoughts of the NGO leaders.

First, it was too early for the NGOs to take this type of programmes and go into confrontation with the fundamentalist forces. It's only the beginning of the democratic process where women have started to take part in the process through being elected directly. By 15 years things would have changed dramatically and resistance would have come from the bottom not the top, i.e. the grass roots level, when people would have enjoyed the taste of democracy at that level.

Second, it's not too early, we already know the strength of these forces. Their vote bank is almost zero (referring to last parliamentary election) and man power is not uncountable. The only problem is that they have some trained people from the Afgan volunteers and some weapons (not specified). They had already successfully held eight meetings of this type in different places.

Third, the NGO community is now divided and politicised. A clear line between the pro and anti-ruling party support is visible within ADAB members. For example, the six chapter members of ADAB in Barisal are divided into two groups, none of the local level and non-ADAB member NGOs of Barisal were discussed earlier of the proposed rally and that had lead to its failure. According to this group, this is the picture every where and ADAB has been utilized for some vested interested.

Taking into consideration the above circumstances it would probably not be too much to say that the recent upsurge of the fundamentalist forces are the results of unrealistic NGO strategy and lack of unity within themselves. This would ultimately hamper a great deal to NGO movements in the country and the local level and small NGOs will suffer most.

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State of Human Rights 1998

Human Rights in Prison

By Md. Asaduzzaman

Prisons and their inmates in Bangladesh can be compared to a basket full of chickens kept in a noisy market place. Prisoners in Bangladesh are kept in a 'basket' - the prison cell-where there are so many crowd into one that there is no space to move, no proper hygienic sanitation and no drinking water.

There is, therefore, a violation of human rights and dignity and if we consider the every-day life of a prisoner, we can realise just how extreme this violation actually is.

The prisoner is made to rise very early in the morning, and has to queue to use the toilet facilities. He is granted only a few minutes to complete his morning ablutions and then joins his fellow inmates in a room in order to be counted.

He is then given breakfast - the scanty amount of which does not meet his hunger and which is unhygienically prepared. After this insufficient meal, they are counted again. Lunch is similar to breakfast in quality and quantity. Counting of prisoners takes place again after lunch and finally in the afternoon, every prisoner is given his supper/dinner at 5.p.m and is locked up for the night. Taking supper at 5.p.m, every prisoner has to fast till 10.00 a.m of the following morning.

Often a prisoner has to sleep by rotation with other inmates, as the actual number of prisoners is three or four times than that of the accommodation capacity. There is no fan, T.V, radio, newspaper or other recreational devices in the cells or the prison as a whole.

The jail system in Bangladesh began in the colonial regime for confining offenders. Now the concept of jail has become wider. Most of the under-trial prisoners are politically entangled even with the ordinary criminal cases. In 1998, in Dhaka Central Jail alone, there were 7,039 prisoners - while the accommodation capacity of the prison is only 2,116 persons (Sangbad, June 14, 1998). The prisons in Bangladesh are operated in accordance with the hundred year- old, back dated laws which have not been changed even at the eve of the 21st century. A large number of prisoners are seriously subjected to torture by the prison authority for several reasons, commonly for bribes. In 1998, a total number of 60 persons succumbed to death within the prisons all over the country. Nobody knows the actual reason for their deaths but suspect that it was due to torture. The genuinely ill persons are not admitted into the jail hospital in Bangladesh. Those who have money and power, may stay in the hospital by bribing the authority.

Another news report published in the Daily Sangbad on June 14, 1998 states that the prisoners sleep by rotation in Dhaka central jail. The report further states that among the 7,039 prisoners, there are 3,854 under trial prisoners in Magistrate Court, 1,248 in the Judge court, 201 convicted prisoners have been awarded simple imprisonment, 1400 rigorous imprisonment; 309 convicted under the Special powers Act; 12 sentenced to death - out of which 2 are female prisoners.

Number and types of jails in Bangladesh :

	Types of Prison	Number	Purpose of Use
01.	Central jail	8	Long term imprisonment and longer detention
02.	District jail	54	Imprisonment for less than 5 years
03.	Sub-jail	—	Recently upgraded to district jail
04.	Thana jail	16	Normally left unused
	Total	78	

Number of prisoners in selected jails : 1997-1998

	Name of Prison	Capacity	Prisoners at Present
01.	Dhaka (central)	2,116	7,039 (female-333)
02.	Rajshahi (central)	1,177	2,668 (female-70)
03.	Chittagang (Cen)	747	3,500 (female-80)
04.	Hobiganj (Dis.)	157	400
05.	Meherpur (")	41	200
06.	Satkhira (")	80	600
07.	Narail (")	35	247
08.	Bramanbaria	200	581 (Female-19)
09.	Narayanganj (")	126	779
10.	All other jail (")	16,421	31,779
	Total	21,101	46,423

The report was made for Odhikar, a coalition for human rights.