

Review Essay

Dangerous Symptoms

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Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?

by Hiranmay Karlekar, Sage, New Delhi, 2005.

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When noted journalist Bertil Lintner first broke the story in April 2002 about the growth radicalism in Bangladesh, it was ridiculed and dismissed as a malicious story. There was complete outrage in Dhaka about the story; its lack of credibility and various motives were ascribed to it, even to the extent that its publisher, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, was banned by the government. Unfortunately for Bangladesh, the matter did not end there but was soon followed by many such similar stories in the international press, including in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, *Time*, *New York Times* as well as by the Indian media. On its part, the Bangladesh media has only in the last few years begun highlighting the problem of the growth of Islamic fervour and militancy. But it was the country's political class that first raised the issue; as early as in 1998 Awami League leader and then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina warned the country of possible dangers of Bangladesh transforming into a situation not different from that in Afghanistan when the Taliban took over the reins. Indeed, it was her fears over Taliban's presence and activities that led to the cancellation of US President Bill Clinton's Bangladesh visit in March 2000 outside Dhaka.

The issue was subsequently raked up during the campaign for the 8th *Jatiya Sangsad* elections in 2001. There were fears that some Taliban activists, who fled Afghanistan following the US offensive, had taken refuge in Bangladesh. During the campaign, '*aamra hobo Taliban, Bangla hobe Afghan*' (we will be the Taliban, Bangladesh will become Afghanistan) was a popular slogan among a particular group of religious voters. Indeed, it was not uncommon to find rickshaws plying with bin-Laden's poster stuck

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on them. Post her electoral defeat in 2001, Sheikh Hasina has been periodically using the prospect of Bangladesh transforming into another Afghanistan as a means of delegitimising and unseating the Khaleda government. BNP and its allies have consistently denied any such linkages calling the Awami League the real Taliban.

The October 2001 Jatiya Sangsad elections ushered in the BNP-led government that included two religious political parties (*Jama'at- i- Islami* and *Islami Oikya Jote IOJ*). Since then, there has been a definite spurt in violence and acts of terror that had begun in 1998.

The issue has today become a part of the discourse in Bangladesh given the sudden rise of violence in forms of bomb blasts, terror attacks and other forms of intimidation. Journalist and author Hiranmay Karlekar in his *Bangladesh the Next Afghanistan* actually delves into the trajectory of this phenomena in great detail. He traces events which gave rise to the militant Wahabi creed in Bengal as early as in the 18th century. The detailed footnoting of the trail of events that followed lend it great academic credence. This work of topical importance, indeed the first by any Indian author, has quite obviously been written by someone who has been closely watching Bangladesh.

While, the author says Mujibur Rahman's role in giving amnesty to collaborators is rather valid, he does not explain why Mujib did what he did. This would have gone a long way to explain why Bangladesh society has unfolded the way it has. To squarely put the blame on a particular political power or government undermines some of the core problems that lie within the state itself. If it's simply the doing of a political party then the problem of Bangladesh becoming the next Afghanistan can be eliminated by the removal of some parties. But this phenomena is far deeply entrenched in society itself, as is evident from the secular socialist Awami League constantly having to drape itself in religious garbs.

There can be no quarrel about how Bangladesh has played into the hands of religious extremism. The book focuses on how Bangladesh has now become the Al Qaida's launching pad for operations against the US. Given the linkages that the Inter Services Intelligence of Pakistan has maintained with the Director General of Field Operations of Bangladesh, it was but an obvious recourse for the Al Qaida operatives to take. The author also equates the role of *Jama'at- i- Islami* to that of the Al Qaida, which imposed similar conservative rules in Afghanistan.

However, the book tends to ignore the growth and sustenance of other religious political parties like the IOJ, which has been far more conservative and vocal about its Islamic norms and code of conduct, especially for women. This is in contrast to the *Jama'at* that has women cadres at district and national levels, and has been the 'queen maker' in Bangladesh since the 1991 ushering in of electoral democracy. The IOJ, it is as rightly pointed out, supports 15,000 *madrassas* in Bangladesh and its leader Amini openly supports an Islamist revolution in Bangladesh. But today IOJ factions are not only breaking away from the BNP coalition but also joining hands with the Awami League as well as Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) party, both supposedly secular, middle of the path parties.

The author has squarely blamed the coalition for the present state Bangladesh finds itself in. It would be useful to ponder how in less than five years, the militancy (which is said to be home grown by a large section of Bangladeshis) has been able to muster such strength? It would be naïve to think this development took place virtually overnight. In fact, as the book says, militancy in Bangladesh began long before the BNP came to power in 2001. While the Awami League can be said to be the only mass base secular party in Bangladesh today, to absolve it of any role or rather lack of role in controlling the ascendance of militant elements when it was in power is too simplistic. The Awami League is now highlighting militancy at both national and international forums purely for temporary political gains.

If Bangladesh is a moderate Islamic country where the bulk of the population is tolerant and disinclined towards fundamental bigotry, how come Taslima Nasreen still needs to live outside her homeland? How did a riot-like situation prevail when the country's high court gave a ruling against a fatwa? How come the *Ahmadiyahs* were nearly declared non-Muslims were it not for serious US pressure? How is it that sports events with women participants have had to be cancelled? Is all this just a reflection of *Jama'at-i-Islami* influence over Bangladesh state and society or is there much deeper malaise that no one seem to be addressing? Why is that those advocating education for women are ostracised from the society?

That the *Jama'at-i-Islami* has been harsh on women is well known. But, as the author mentions time and again, their mass base is rather small. Then what is it that makes them so relevant to all political parties that want to form a government? It may be easy to demonise the *Jama'at*, but

it is still difficult to explain the party's or the scramble amongst the mainstream political parties to include them as part of any government formation move.

Karlekar does not adequately address the questions that if *Jama'at- i- Islami* is able to play such an influential role in society, why will it upset the apple cart just before the elections and draw unwanted attention to itself? What has made it run out of patience given the dividends that its 'deep well, tubecentric' politics had given it? The answer obviously lies in the deep schism that has developed not only within the BNP over the issue but also in the *Jama'at- i- Islami* as well as other religious political parties that have grown impatient over the slow pace of Islamisation of Bangladesh society

While the author has a rather bleak prognosis for Bangladesh, he has been rather one-sided about the critical estimation of the irresponsible role of the country's leadership. The book does not really address the issue of how leaders like Sheikh Hasina and Mohammed Ershad had failed to rise to the occasion in addressing this problem. It is a fact that the growth of militancy was largely overlooked and ignored, and often passed off as a law and order situation because of BNP's coalition with religious political parties.

While the BNP, even without its coalition partners, enjoys a substantial majority in the Jatiya Sangsad, it is said that the party with greater mass appeal is the Awami League. This makes the picture more interesting in Bangladesh. And this is probably why the BNP has been reluctant to break free of its religious partners despite all evidence of militancy leading towards these religious groups. Coalition politics in Bangladesh is an obvious choice: one, because the Awami League managed to regroup itself with a 14-party coalition which in November 2005 held a very successful rally; and two, given the ability of the *Jama'at- i- Islami* to rally around other political parties. In fact, it is because of this fear that the BNP continues to hold on to the Jama'at.

In fact, it would have been easy to predict the electoral mood in aftermath of the recent violence as witnessed in Bangladesh, most of which, as has been pointed out, is said to be related to religious political parties. Logically then, the BNP also should break free of such a coalition partner for the elections, which are due in the next six months. But the advantage that accrues to those in power is so strong that none of the political parties

in Bangladesh are willing to look at the larger problem that is staring them in the face. And this is the real crisis facing Bangladesh and not Talibanisation. The latter is only a symptom of the disease that afflicts Bangladesh.

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