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OPINION

Bangladesh and the shrinking space for free thinkers: ‘Don’t call me Muslim, I am an atheist’

Sunday 12 April 2015, by [NASREEN Taslima](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2015).

Writer-in-exile Taslima Nasreen calls for reining in religious fundamentalism, saying that criticism of religion is not the domain of non-Muslim intellectuals alone.

Writer Taslima Nasreen fled Bangladesh in 1994 when extremists threatened to kill her for criticising Islam, and has been living in exile since. Her country has, in recent times, seen many intellectuals expelled or killed. Ahmed Rajib Haider, an atheist blogger who wrote under the name Thaba Baba, was hacked to death after the Shahbag protests in 2013. In February this year, atheist blogger Avijit Roy was killed in Dhaka by extremist groups for his writings on the Bangla blog Mukto-Mona (Free Thinker) that he founded. Feminist and secular humanist Ms Nasreen now lives in New Delhi. In an interview with Suvojit Bagchi, she spoke about the shrinking space for free thinkers in Bangladesh and says that Islam cannot be exempt from the critical scrutiny that other religions go through.

Suvojit Bagchi - Tell us a little bit about Avijit Roy.

Taslma Nasreen - I knew Avijit for a long time. He started Mukto-Mona to accommodate writings of atheists and humanists, as newspapers do not publish their work. Avijit was a science blogger and a free thinker, an atheist and a rationalist, who wanted to secure a space to dissect and debate issues. Later, he turned his blogs into books. Mukto-Mona became a window through which people could look at each other and raise questions about all religions, including Islam. In Bangladesh, over a period, the space for free thinkers has been disappearing. Avijit brought it back using a new platform... precisely why his contribution is outstanding.

When and how exactly did this space for free thinkers start shrinking?

The change was noticed at the time of General Hussain Ershad in the mid-1980s. A secular Constitution was given away to make Islam the state religion. I have witnessed the mass movement of 1969, the newly independent country of the 70s... the situations then were different. People could voice their opinion and women hardly wore the hijab or the burqa. But society slowly changed. For instance, whatever I wrote in the 1980s, early 90s — criticising Islam and women’s condition in Islamic societies — was published in newspapers with a wide circulation. But that cannot be imagined now. Freedom of expression is an alien term now.

Why has this change taken place?

The progressive community is partly responsible. When I was expelled in 1994, the whole of society

went silent. If this community had objected then, Bangladesh would not have had a society in which an Avijit is hacked to death, a Humayun Azad targeted or an Ahmed Rajib Haider killed for criticising Islam. Perhaps the conflict in Bangladesh is whether to have a country on the basis of language or on the basis of religion.

How can this be resolved?

"We must stop stoning women to death in the name of religion. Laws should be based on equality, not on religion"

Bangladesh was born on the idea of a secular Bengali nation. Since 1952, Bengali Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians have wanted their state language to be Bengali, not Urdu. The people who opposed our independence, along with the Pakistani army, killed three million Bengalis in 1971 and are now involved in the Islamisation of Bangladesh. They are killing free thinkers and intellectuals. Pakistan is a country which is based on religion. But the Bangladesh constitution must remain secular, and separate state from religion. We must have secular education rather than education through madrassas. The government must not let the country become a safe haven for religious extremists.

People say your criticism of religion is rather excessive and provocative.

I said religion oppresses women. Laws should be based on equality, not on religion; women should have equal rights in marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. I said we must stop stoning women to death in the name of religion. Is that provocation? Every civilised state has questioned the relationship of the state with religion, eventually disentangling and distancing the two. Islam should not be exempt from the critical scrutiny that other religions have gone through. My opinion is based on my belief in secular humanism. If that is provocative, then it is absolutely necessary to provoke.

But it's often said that your writings strengthen fundamentalism.

Governments are strengthening fundamentalism, not me. When religious fanatics set a price on my head, instead of taking action against them, the government targeted me. The Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party joined hands with these forces and so did the caretaker government. Even in West Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led government expelled me; the Imam Barkati of the Tipu Sultan Mosque, who set a price on my head, was adored by the Marxists. Interestingly, Mamata Banerjee befriended the Imam as soon as she came to power.

Another allegation is that by making statements against Islam, you strengthen the right wing in India.

Absolute nonsense. I criticise all religions, including Hinduism. I opposed Hindu godmen, rituals such as karva chauth and shivaratri, and condemned the oppression of Muslims in Gujarat. I donated Rs.10,000 to poet Shankha Ghosh, who was collecting funds for rehabilitating Gujarat riot victims. I objected to the oppression of Hindus in Bangladesh, Jews in Nazi Germany, Muslims in Bosnia, Palestine and Christians in Pakistan. I also wrote in favour of films such as PK, Water and The Last Temptation of Christ. Please don't call me a Muslim, I am an atheist.

When Indian rationalist Narendra Dabholkar and CPI leader Govind Pansare were killed, you were silent.

Who told you? You need to check my Twitter account to find out about my reactions and how the Hindu right-wing elements abused me for that. However, it is true that I consider Islamic fundamentalism a bigger threat.

As do many western countries...

Only the western world thinks that Islamic fundamentalism is dangerous? Rather, it's the opposite — the West is keen to side with Islamists.

As a Muslim writer, your work often reflects the West's paranoia about Islam. Is the West forcing you to say what it wants?

Are you saying Muslims cannot have a mind of their own to criticise their religion? Is criticism of religion the domain of non-Muslim intellectuals? That is an anti-Muslim remark, seriously.

What could be Bangladesh's future?

The country will be heading for a complete disaster if Islamic terrorists are not brought to justice. However, given the past record, nothing will happen and such incidents will increase in the coming months, as they are intrinsically connected with politics.

P.S.

* [The Hindu](#), March 21, 2015. Updated: March 23, 2015 18:34 IST.

* Corrections and Clarifications - The article has been corrected for a factual error.