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The Khagragarh explosion, India, the Bangladesh connection and South Asian Politics

Khagragarh: The Communalisation of Security Threats, the Targeting of Communities

Wednesday 5 November 2014, by [Radical Socialist \(India\)](#) (Date first published: 3 November 2014).

Certain things stand out with clarity over the Khagragarh [[1](#)] incident and its follow up. Two political parties, the TMC, ruling West Bengal, and the BJP, ruling at the Centre, are both bent on using it primarily, indeed almost entirely, for their party political agenda. And there is a real security issue - not just for India, but even more for Bangladesh.

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On Bengal history

The Bangladesh connection and South Asian Politics

It is necessary to understand clearly and fully, the nature of the Bangladesh connection. The history of the Eastern part of Bengal, and its transformations, have much to do with how strong communalism becomes in the sub-continent as a whole. Bengal was a Muslim majority area, where, during the British colonial rule, the main Indian exploiting class that developed was mainly Hindu - the new zamindars of numerous layers. Connected to them was an emerging urban social layer, the *bhadralok*. Mainly Hindu, mainly upper caste (with a few notable exceptions), these people became the most important indigenous social layer in Bengal under British rule. Administrators, landed middle class people and especially their urbanized segment, and the intelligentsia generally, were all put together under the term *bhadralok*. The rise of the *bhadralok* is considered to be the most significant intellectual trend in Bengal and among the most significant for India in general. At the same time, the majority of the peasants were Muslims. So a communal dimension could enter class conflicts.

This was further compounded by how the Bengali *bhadralok* intelligentsia articulated their nationalism. Cultural constructions of the nation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw, quite often, the nation being imagined in Hindu terms, using Hindu imageries, and sometimes with Muslims being portrayed as the opponents of the nation. In one of the most famous cases, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*, the early thrust on anti-British action was edited later and turned more into an anti-Muslim thrust, and the past, present and future of the country was imagined as three visions of a goddess. Even the campaign against the partition of 1905 involved actions that on occasions looked only after the interests of this minority elite section - for example

the opposition to setting up a separate university in Dhaka after the partition was rescinded.

The last significant attempt by a Bengali Hindu leader of the Congress to forge a national/regional identity without religious division was the Bengal Pact, initiated by C.R. Das. Within a short time after the death of Das, the provincial Congress leaders overturned it. Subsequently, when A. K. Fazlul Haque's Krishak-Praja Party elbowed out the Muslim League in the elections of 1937 from the Muslim reserved seats, class considerations were crucial in the Congress not collaborating with them (Haque's party was pro well-to-do peasants and jotedars, while the Congress at the provincial level was dominated by zamindars). The communalisation of Bengal politics, in other words, was at least as much the work of Hindu communalists (if not more) as of Muslim communalists. However, in 1946 it was the Muslim League, which through its Direct Action Day, sought to unify Muslim opinion behind it.

The creation of Pakistan [2], however, had more complex consequences. On one hand, there was a strong communal identity. By 1956 Pakistan proclaimed itself to be an Islamic Republic. Riots had recurred. All the way to 1971, Hindus were targeted. As a result, there were repeated influx of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan to India (close to 52-55 lakhs between 1947-1971, including the about 15 lakhs who did not return out of the over one crore of people of all communities who had come in 1971). On the other hand, the goal of constructing a homogeneous Pakistani Muslim identity led to the attempt to impose Urdu as the language of Pakistan. In fact, Urdu was not the language of any of the provinces of Pakistan. The struggle over the language would initiate a revival of Bengali nationalism.

Jinnah, the leader of Pakistan, had insisted that Urdu must be the language of all Pakistanis. Students in Dhaka University, with covert work by the Communist Party, led the struggle against this. On 21 February, 1952, this resulted in firing and the death of students. After years of unrest, the Pakistan Government finally accepted Bengali as a national language in 1956. But they persisted in oppressing the Bengali speakers. The cyclone of 1970 and the devastations caused in East Pakistan showed that Bengali speaking Pakistanis were not equals, a perception strengthened when Yahya Khan refused to hand over power to the Awami League in 1971, though it won a majority of the seats in Parliament. In the 300 member Provincial Assembly, they won 288 seats, and in the 300 member Parliament, they won 160 seats, with Bhutto's Peoples' Party, with a pseudo-socialist rhetoric, got 81 seats (none in the East). Despite this, the military regime of Yahya Khan refused to accept an Awami League government.

This may sound ancient history, but all this has contemporary resonance. Nurul Amin, Ghulam Azam, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi were among those who opposed the Awami League. An explicit Islamic identity was the basis on which many of these people collaborated with the military government, including in assisting its criminal activities after the military crackdown. Subsequently, the overthrow of Mujibur Rahman by a military coup made it possible for sections of these forces to creep back into legality and legitimacy, a legitimacy further confirmed when the Zia government in 1977 amended the founding principles to replace "secularism" by faith in Allah as a constitutional principle. In 1988, General Ershad declared Islam as the state religion. On the other hand, the restoration of democracy has seen a revival of the struggle for secularism, both by forces which had been active in the 1971 struggle, and then, during the Shahbag movement, by younger generation activists. It was the Shahbag movement which fought for the conviction of the criminals of 1971. But the communal forces are also quite strong, and as a result of the ideological as well as organisational decimation of the Left, have considerable base among the toiling people too.

Muslim communalism in Bangladesh has taken on violent forms over the years. Verdicts against Ghulam Azam, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi and others have been met by violent protests. Jamaat-e-Islami and other communal organisations, which have historically opposed the creation of

Bangladesh and rejected the idea of a Bengali identity, have used all forms, including terrorist activities.

With 90% of the Bangladesh population as Muslims, it should be evident that the struggle for secularism is also being waged by Muslims there. But violence on Hindu and other minorities is a trademark of the communalists there, since they try to use these to consolidate an aggressive Muslim identity, rather than a secular Bengali identity. However, the Shahbag movement and the role of the Awami League government (including its going ahead with elections despite the BNP-led boycott in early 2014) has put these forces on the defensive. It is under these circumstances that they have turned to shelters in India and making bombs and other weapons there.

The revelations that have come since the Khagragarh explosion a month back tend to suggest that the manufacture of bombs was aimed at Bangladeshi targets, including possibly top Bangladeshi political leaders. And this also shows, that while India has always complained about neighbouring countries sheltering real or alleged terrorists in camps within their borders, India has been sheltering such elements.

The communalisation of West Bengal politics

In the West Bengal Assembly elections of 2011, the BJP had won 4% votes. In 2014, during the parliamentary elections, this rose to over 16%. With the TMC holding on to its vote share, the BJP votes came at the expense of the parliamentary Left. This has to do with many factors. But certainly, one very important factor is the successful communalisation of politics in West Bengal, in which the BJP and the TMC are both participating with great gusto.

For the BJP, all Muslims are assumed to be suspects. For the BJP, migration from Bangladesh comes in two forms – if the migrant is a Hindu then he/she is a religious refugee but if the migrant is a Muslim then he/she is considered to be an infiltrator. That there can also be migrations driven by economic hardships are not acknowledged.

What is even more dangerous is the game the BJP government has played. Now, after the bomb explosions, the NIA has been called in. But the Modi government has been installed some months now. So it cannot pretend that it is not answerable. It is being claimed that regular trips were made between India and Bangladesh by the people arrested or their bosses, in Khagragarh. With the Central Government being responsible for the border, the Modi government cannot escape its responsibilities.

Instead of looking at the struggle between secular democratic forces and their rightwing opponents in a neighbouring country, what the BJP government has done is, started a blame game against the West Bengal Government, and attempted to further raise the communal pitch in West Bengal. Ever since the Khagragarh incident, the target has become the Muslim community of West Bengal, as if all Muslims everywhere are responsible for the terroristic activity of a rightwing group.

This of course ties in with the BJP's overall thrust. It denies that Hindu rightwing politics can also be terroristic. Since coming to power, the Modi government has been taking actions to ensure that those of the Hindutva-right accused of terrorism, or any kind of violence, get off.

At this point, we also need to highlight the fact that all the hue and cry in defence of the NIA is a further attack on human rights. Whether a person is accused of being a thief, a murder, a tax-evader or a terrorist, she or he should have equal rights with all others. That is because you are not guilty just because the police is bringing charges against you, to say nothing of trial by media. And

increasingly, the label “terrorist” has been used to arrest people, to get dubious confessions from people, to create special law courts where the defendants find their legal rights curtailed or simply ignored. The UAPA Amendment and the creation of the NIA fall under such activities. That is why, to demand that not the local police, but the NIA must be called in, cannot be a communist stance. Rather, the demand must be for proper use of law by the state police.

The parliamentary elections of 2014 showed that West Bengal has both potentials for the BJP as well as problems. TMC, another deeply rightwing party is in power in West Bengal, and like the BJP, this party is also willing to use rightwing tactics to retain power. However, its specific tactical line is very different. In the last stage of the 2014 elections, the TMC practically stopped talking about its principal adversary i.e. CPI(M), as it seemed to have realised the way things were moving, and campaigned against only the BJP. It did so, by seeking to consolidate a Muslim vote by favouring Muslim communalism. There is a considerable difference between supporting and protecting a minority, and aiding any kind of communalism, including minority communalism. This is precisely what the TMC did. This probably enabled it to consolidate the bulk of Muslim voters behind it. But this also gave the BJP a handle. In the past, for all its faults, including occasional compromises with Muslim communal forces (for example over the demand for expelling Taslima Nasreen from West Bengal) the CPI(M) led Left Front government did not take such blatant stances of the type taken by the TMC. On the other hand, the Left had in the past seen the issue of refugees as a matter of human rights rather than in religious terms. Refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan had fought for resettlement under Left leadership. The coming to power of a Left Front Government had changed that. Refugees settled very badly in Madhya Pradesh sought to come to West Bengal and were terribly attacked in Marich Jhanpi. Nonetheless, the older generation had been settled, and had got some stakes. A kind of social democratic balancing act had been done. The TMC’s blatant siding with Muslim communal forces to win elections pushed a section of the former refugee voter in the direction of Hindutva forces. In addition, the rightward drift of the CPI(M) has meant it is increasingly unable to provide a militant radical line that attacks communalisms of all shades while putting forward real alternatives. With its succumbing to the neoliberal strategies, at best offering what has been called “social liberalism”(liberalism with a few sops) it has tended to become less and less central.

So, we argue, it is not a matter of fact that all Muslims are terrorists, or even that all terrorists are Muslims. Rightwing terrorism is tied up with the overall politics of rightwing parties. The politics that Amit Shah espouses, the politics that has brought the BJP absolute control in Gujarat, these too were and are politics of violence, of terrorising people. Gujarat pogrom of 2002, Kandhamal, these are cases of use of terror on a minority community to consolidate the majority on a communal-fascist project. That does not make all Hindus, or even all BJP voters terrorists.

The fact is, the TMC has been going soft on these forces, including going to the extent of trying to destroy evidences, because it believes that all Muslims can be mobilised by supporting Muslim communalism. The BJP has also been targeting all Muslims, in the hope that by doing so, it can gather support from all Hindus on the basis that they are Hindus, rather than on class basis, or on any progressive social basis.

The response to this lies in fighting for a series of issues.

On the question of terrorism and violence, we demand that it is not by special laws, but by proper application of normal laws, which are adequate, that real culprits be apprehended. We oppose the assumption of guilt by religious identity.

At the same time, we argue that to fight the BJP, the TMC is not an option. It is necessary to oppose the neoliberal agenda, of which the BJP government is now the leading proponent. But to do so, it is

not useful to rely on a right wing regime that can only occasionally hand out doles to selected supporters and funds to clubs, etc. Instead, we need to build a militant alternative that will fight for extension rather than demolition of MNREGA, that will fight for minimum wages as per the 15th ILC norms, oppose GMOs, oppose privatisation of healthcare and fight for bringing more of health and education back under state expenditure and control. It is by looking after real social needs that we can undercut the insidious ways in which both communalisms try to gather followers.

Radical Socialist

P.S.

* Published on Monday, 03 November 2014 18:00:

<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/statement-radical-socialist/652-khagragarh-the-communalisation-of-security-threats-the-targeting-of-communities>

Footnotes

[1] On 2 October 2014 at 12:00 noon an explosion occurred in a two-storeyed building in the Khagragarh locality of Burdwan. The building was owned by Nurul Hasan Chowdhury who used to stay in another house across the road. Hasan Chowdhury was a leader of the Trinamool Congress and the ground floor of the building was used as Trinamool Congress party office.

[2] At that time, what is now Bangladesh was part of Pakistan (ESSF note).