

**BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY AND
ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH:
DURING 1991 – 1996**

**Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
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This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "**Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Islamic Extremism in Bangladesh during 1991-1996**", submitted by **Sheshadeva Behera** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, of this university is his own work and has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or **any** other university.

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*DEDICATED
TO
MY
MOTHER*

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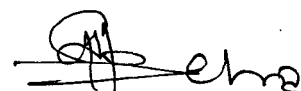
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Sheshadeva Behera

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PREFACE

In 1911, when the British effort to divide Bengal was revoked, it was victory of the Bengalese over the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy. But 1947 partition, when East Bengal became Eastern wing of Pakistan, it was the victory of Islam over the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy. In 1971 war the Bengali language and culture once more overtook Islam. Post –1975 saw that Islam once again scored a victory over Bengali nationalism. The cyclical process of victory and defeat of Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism might continue in coming time.

The process of legitimization through Islamisation by the coalition government led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) during 1991 to 1996 had fed fears amongst the religious minorities. The Islamic extremist groups were provided political shelter during the BNP regime. The growing attacks, persecutions and intolerance towards minority community by the Islamic groups, which claimed, as patent holder of Islamic faith and values will only foster the erosion of national unity and social harmony. Besides, the domestic actors, the external powers had also contributed their share in the growth of radical Islam in Bangladesh. The minority communities have also participated in their own way towards building Bangladeshi society. Their contribution and sacrifices during the war of independence and in the sovereign Bangladesh need to be recorded and acknowledged. It is for every Bangladeshi citizen to decide whether to be moderate or extremist Bangladeshi.

Chapter-1

Introduction

CHAPTER-1

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, which is officially known as Peoples Republic of Bangladesh emerged out of erstwhile eastern wing of Pakistan on 16th December 1971 through the “Operation Wind Fall”.¹ The oppression and suppression of former East Pakistan by West Pakistan compelled the former to fight against the latter. The West Pakistanis attempted to maintain their hegemony upon Bengalis in socio-cultural, political and economic sphere. The hegemonic attitude held by the ruling authorities represented by military- bureaucratic complex of West Pakistan took the path of violence instead of legitimate democratic means to rule East Pakistan.

The indifferent attitude of West Pakistan towards East Pakistan can be attributed to the cultural and geographical differences between the two. The main reason for Bengal’s exclusion from projected Pakistan was the cultural and geographical differences between the two. Mr. El Hamza, a non-Bengali Muslim writer have put forward in his book, *Pakistan: A Nation*, first published in 1941, an elaborate analysis of the differences in terms of food, dress, culture, mental, and physical capacities between the people inhabited in West and East Pakistan.² Besides the geographical and cultural causes of hatred Islam religion was also an important cause of distrust between the two.

The oppressive and exploitative bureaucratic and military elite was supported by different sections of West Pakistan in suppressing the democratic aspirations of the east wing of Pakistan. The landed politicians of West Pakistan feared that the set up of democratic form of governance would ensure the dominance of East Bengal over them. Therefore, landlords supported the bureaucrat military elite in order to suppress the Bengalees. The class of industrial entrepreneurs did not want to loose their monopoly over business

¹ Brig. H. S. Sodhi , *Operation Windfall: Emergence of Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1980), p.15.

² Ibid, p.4

activities. They found the ruling elite as protector and guarantor of their monopoly. Some fanatic elements like Jamat-e-Islami had supported the military elite to get the patronage of the military regime to promote their long cherished dream and ideology. Besides the domestic support from the aforesaid sections, the ruling clique had also got support from a big power.

During the initial years, Pakistan government followed discriminatory policies, which had created frustration among the East Bengalis. All key authorities standing from lowest to higher level in East Bengal were appointed from the West Pakistan Muslims. Consequently, a feeling of being neglected and colonized started to grip the psychology of the east Bengalis. Md. Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan possibly could have prevented the hegemonic and unfair policies of the central government towards East Pakistan, but they were either unable or disinterested to do that before former's death and latter's assassination in 1948 and 1951 respectively. The nature of exploitation of East Pakistan by the West Pakistan represents all the characteristic features of a colony.

Apart from discriminatory political, administrative, and economic policy of Pakistan government the national language policy was also very crucial in generating a spirit of nationalism inside the East Pakistanis against the West Pakistanis. The feeling of being colonized was heightened when the leaders of Muslim League suggested 'Urdu' as the only national language. In this policy the Punjabi bureaucrats who was ruling East Pakistan initiated the first attempt to impose Urdu language on East Pakistanis. The Punjabi constituted the overwhelming majority in military and civil services. They had possessed the unsatiable desire to perpetuate their hegemonic administration over the East Bengal. This mindset of the Punjabi was there before partition of India.

The Punjabis found that the linguistic cultural bond between East and West Bengal was a major hurdle before their long cherished ambition. They were also scared of Hindu intelligentsia because of the probability of their collaboration with Bengali Muslims in order to prevent the Punjabi domination. As a result of this the Punjabis were preoccupied with the fear that the greater the bondage between the East and West Bengal the more chance of political

liquidation of Pakistan. Therefore, they resorted to the policy of Hindu-baiting in order to destroy the prospects of Hindu-Muslim unity and of replacing Bengali by Urdu as the state language, or denaturing Bengali by substituting the Arabic script for the prevailing one, so that the possibility of contamination of East Bengal's loyalty to the Punjabi rulers could be eliminated at its cultural roots spreading upto West Bengal.³ The Jamaat-i- Islami, supported the government establishment on the language policy against East Pakistan. It claimed that the net result of accepting the Bengali as the national language would be that people of Bengal would only learn Bengali and would not make any effort Urdu. This would lead the East Bengal Muslims to remain ignorant of Islam and would keep them away from West Pakistan and close to Hindus.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan the then Governor-General and premier respectively were unable to measure the gravity of national language policy and its future consequences. On the other hand they continued to be swayed by the maneuvered machinations of the Punjabi bureaucrats. The students of Dacca University expressed their resentment against the imposition of Urdu language through restrained demonstration before Jinnah during his visit to Dacca in March 1948. The attitudes towards anti-Urdu campaign shown by both Jinnah and Liaquat show their readiness to forget the realities and its consequence in future on Pakistan. Though both leaders were talking about unity and integrity of Pakistan with high emotional speech but in the ground level their policies and activities were 'just opposite'.

Jinnah's declaration of Urdu as the sole national language generated several protest and resistance movements. This declaration was interpreted by the Bengalees as a threat to their beloved cultural life. The Bengali representatives of constituent assembly were not allowed to speak in Bengali language. The making of Urdu as national language had been advantageous to the west Pakistanis in getting government jobs more easily as they were well requited with Urdu. On the other hand the same language proved to be disadvantageous to East Pakistanis as they had never spoken that language. As a result of this, the West Pakistanis

³ J. K. Ray, *Democracy and Nationalism on Trial*, (Simla: IAS, 1968), p.11

were able to monopolise the government jobs. These considerations led to a serious language movement in East Bengal in February, 1952. As a result of strong language movement, Bengali was recognized with Urdu as a national language in 1954. Whatever incidents happened in East Pakistan because of national language policy of Pakistan government, were responsible for creating a negative role in the construction of the national unity and identity.

The birth of Bangladesh as an independent sovereign country is the result of a long historical process, which encompasses several millennia and possesses the impression of several great civilizations and religions. Bangladesh might be new and young sovereign state but its cultural history is steeped in history. Ethnically, the Bangladeshis are a mixture of many races including Aryans, Dravidians, Semitics, Mongols and Austriacs. Religiously, Bangladesh is the composition of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and others. In spite of being multi-religious community where Muslims have overwhelming presence, the people of Bangladesh speak one language, Bengali, which has been a unifying force in cementing the various sub- groups into a homogenous people.

Islam is the predominant religion among other religions in Bangladesh. The precise time of the advent of Islam is not known. The Muslim community in Bangladesh appears to be the combination of early Muslim immigrants from the Arab countries and the converts who embraced Islam without sacrificing their previous culture of the 'Bengali' identity. The Islamisation process started with the gradual conversion process, inter-marriage and further immigration. A large number of indigenous Bengalees was converted to Islam because of caste-system and exploitation of the Hindu rulers. The liberal, egalitarian and enlightened nature of Islam attracted more Buddhists and Hindus. Islam has been instilled in the minds of the Bangladeshis for centuries. Many Islamic institutions and movements have made serious effort to uphold and spread the Islamic values and ideals. The people of Bangladesh have strong devotion towards Islam. The rulers and the ruled do not dare to speak against Islamic customs and beliefs because of the fear of retribution from the public.

The manipulation of religious symbols for the purpose of political mobilization by the political leaders has been dominant feature of religious politics in Bangladesh. For that reason Islam occupies a prominent position in Bangladesh politics. Its ingrained and overwhelming hold upon the values and lifestyle of the people of Bangladesh make it as potential instrument in capturing political power. The slightest critical remarks on Islam generates hostile public reaction, this is why neither the political parties in power nor in opposition speak against Islam. The rulers may or may not be interested in establishing Islam in Bangladesh, but they have manifested an attitude to make their power base stronger by exploiting the public feelings towards Islam. Therefore, the societal nature has played a significant role in making Islam a prominent force in Bangladesh politics.

Starting from the division of India in 1947 and the bifurcation Pakistan in 1971, the role of the religion is very predominant. It can be traced back to the British period of colonial regime in Indian sub-continent. The 'Divide and Rule' policy followed by the Britishers had helped them to continue as masters over the subcontinent for longer period. But on the other hand it proved to be divisive and damaging for the people of the subcontinent. British rule and its policy of 'Divide and Rule' bore special responsibility for the growth religious communalism in the subcontinent.

The instrumental role of religion in dividing the Hindus and the Muslims got its worst incarnation on 19 July, 1905, when the government of India announced partition of Bengal which took effect on 16 October 1905. The 'Administrative Convenience' was the official justification of the Bengal partition. This was true to some extent, but the real motive behind the partition plan was to weaken Bengal, the nerve center of Indian nationalism.

The net outcome of the partition was making of two provinces, one is Hindu Majority, another is Muslim majority. Lord Curzon tried to woo the Muslims through suggesting Dacca as the capital of new Muslim majority province, which would provide them with a unity not experienced by them since the days of old Muslim viceroys and kings. Thus it was clear that the British

government promoted its old policy of propping up Muslim Communalists to counter the Congress and the National Movement. The Muslims supported the partition and Dhaka temporarily revived from its backwater status to become a provincial capital. On the other hand the Indian National Congress condemned the partition plan. Eventually the British heeded the Hindu opposition and, to the great disappointment of the Muslims, revoked the partition of Bengal in 1911. For several reasons, Muslims did not associate with the congress in large numbers. Part of this abstention came from the appeal of a leading Muslim educationist, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan who sowed the seeds for the "Two Nation Theory" that could eventually be a source for the partition of India in 1947. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan argued that there was sufficient difference between the Hindus and Muslims of India and on that basis there should be separate nations for both communities. After the formation of All-India Muslim League in December 1906, the demand for separate nation for Muslims on the basis of the 'Two Nation Theory' gained momentum. Finally on March 23, 1940, in Lahore, the Muslim League passed a resolution, often called as the Pakistan resolution or Lahore resolution which was moved by a Bengali Muslim leader, A.K. Fazlal Haq. The resolution stated that if conditions for Muslims in India, especially in Muslim minority provinces, did not improve, the Muslims would have no choice but to demand the separate states be established as homelands for the Muslims of India. Eventually large majority of Bengali Muslims shared this desire, which finally took shape of Bangladesh. In the 1945-46 Election, Bengali Muslims voted overwhelmingly for the Muslim League. Under the initiative of Husain Shahid Suhrawardy, a meeting of Muslim Legislation in New Delhi in 1945 decided that a single state of Pakistan should be formed than the two states contemplated in the Lahore resolution.

The communal parties and groups based on religion remained quite weak and narrow based till 1937. Despite the intensified activities of above parties and groups during 1920s, communal riots were not yet pervasive in Indian subcontinent. Since 1937 the communalism increasingly started assuming a virulent, extremism or fascist form. The Islamic extremism started to grow along with Hindu fundamentalism. The Jamaat-i-Islami had emerged on the scene at the

time when the subcontinent was convulsed with political crisis created by the 2nd world war, the Quit India Movement and the Lahore Resolution of the All India Muslim League. The Jamaat-i-Islami Movement that was founded by the late Maulana Abul Maududi in 1941 in undivided India has emerged as the most influential fundamentalist Islamic Movement in the three successor states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

M.A. Maududi had been speaking and writing against Muslim League's two nation theory for several years. He was fighting on two fronts. On one hand he was arguing against the Ulama of the Jamiat al Ulama-i-Hind who supported Indian National Congress concept of 'Composite Nationalism' and on the other hand he was fighting Muslim League's demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims of India. M.A. Maududi held that Muslims of the world considered a nation and Muslims of India were a part of that. He opposed the concept of Composite Nationalism because he believed that it would lead to absorption of Muslims in the Hindu nation. The establishment of Islamic state in which all aspects of life will reflect the character of Islamic ideology. Once Pakistan came into being Maududi's opposition became a political liability for Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan. The Jamaat-e-Islami was also divided after partition of India into Jamaat-e-Islami-i-Hind (in India) and Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan.

A new constitution of the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan was framed in 1952. It was now ready to begin its movement for Islamising Pakistan. Maududi declared that in Pakistan "the fact is that we are already committed before God, man and History for promulgation of Islamic constitution and introduction of Islamic way of life in this country and no going back on our words is possible."⁴

The campaign for the Islamic state did not become a mass movement but the constant clamour and propaganda by the well-organised publicity by the Jamaat kept the issue on the agenda through all the ups and downs of constitution making in Pakistan.⁵

⁴ Chakravari, p.32.

⁵ Ibid, p.32.

Jamaat had very little support in Bengal even before independence. After Pakistan came into being the Jamaat's campaign for Islamic constitution did not make much headway in East Pakistan. At the time of partition the Jamaat-e-Islami had only one member. The Indian members of the Jamaat who had come over to East Pakistan formed the first local branch of the Jamaat at Dacca and it had its first session on 4 May 1948. East Pakistan Jamaat made rapid progress during 1952-54.

During the seven years since independence Muslim League leadership had been discredited in East Pakistan to such an extent that in the 1954 provincial election United Front (Hindus and Communist) inflicted a shattering defeat on the ruling party. The Jamaat-e-Islami blamed the Muslim League for the growth of the provincial and linguistic prejudices and separatist slogans, which were represented by the victory of the United Front. It asserted that if the leadership had promulgated an Islamic constitution at the very beginning then this sad state of affairs (victory of United Front) would not have come about⁶

In a visit to East Pakistan in 1955-56, Maududi recognized the genuine grievances of the East Pakistanis. He argued that the growing alienation of the Bengalis could have been prevented through addressing socio-economic problems by west Pakistanis and recognition Bengali along with Urdu as National Language by Pakistan government virtually represented by the West Pakistanis. With the growth of autonomy movement in East Pakistan the veneer of moderation of Jamaat was torn apart and got more stringent and became apathetic towards the genuine aspirations of the East Bengal people. It opposed the six-point programme of Awami League called it a plan to split Pakistan.

During Pakistan army's assault on the Bengali people after March 1971 the Jamaat usually supported the massacre of Awami League supporters and attempted to cover up the atrocities committed by the armed forces.⁷ Maududi called upon the Muslims of East Pakistan to support the Pakistan armies and destroy the flag bearers of Bangladesh freedom movement, because their

⁶ Chakravarti, p.35.

⁷ Chakravarti, p.36.

movement was sponsored by Hindus, communists and atheist Bengali nationalists.⁸ The Jamaat brought discredit for itself as the enemy of the Bangladesh's National aspirations. The Jamaat-i-Islami was banned by the Awami League government soon after Bangladesh got independence. However, the Jamaat continued its activities in hidden manner. It got its life back through the political patronage provided by the military regimes of General Ziaur Rahman and General H.M. Ershad

After independence, during the initial years of Mujib government, Bangladesh trod on the path of secularism. Out of four fundamental principles of state policy secularism was declared one. Religion based political parties were banned by Awami League government on the basis that religion should no longer be used as a political instrument. Awami League stands for secularism, socialism, democracy and Bengali Nationalism. The single cultural stock, Bengali language, common pool of social customs and practices, are the mainstay of Bengali Nationalism. It was inclusive in nature. It does not discriminate any community on the basis of religion. It was secular in orientation. Secularism was understood more in the sense of neutrality among religions practiced or equal treatment of all religions and their followers, rather than a separation of the church and state. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has spoken about the internal and external pressure on him to give up its secularism and to declare Bangladesh as an Islamic state. The external pressure was emanating from the Muslim world at Pakistan's instigation. Mujibur Rahman rejected such pressure and made up his mind to build Bangladesh a secular state. The main election slogan of Awami League was to establish a secular, democratic and socialist Bangladesh. With the inauguration of the constitution on December 16, 1972, Bangladesh became constitutionally wedded to the principles of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism.

The emergence of Bangladesh as a free nation based on above principles, heralds a new vista in the fields of economic, political and cultural co-operation between India and Bangladesh. Finally in March 1972, the Peace and Friendship Treaty was signed between the two countries. During freedom struggle both

⁸ Ibid.

China and the USA adopted hostile policy towards Bangladesh. The General Secretary of A.L. has stated that the CIA agents are actively cooperating with communal forces in the country with a view to undermine secularism. The chief ministers of Assam & Tripura and AL leaders have openly charged the CIA's involvement in secessionist movement in Bangassam area.

China tried to spread her influence with the help of Maoist groups, Maulana Bhasani and pro-Pakistan elements. China condemned Bangladesh as satellite of India. It is involved directly or indirectly in secessionist movement in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Like USA, China other Western powers are also supporter of secessionist movement in Bangassam region. All these factors led AL government to adapt anti-USA, anti-China foreign policy. On the other hand AL government adopted pro-India and pro-Soviet foreign policy.

The declaration of Bangladesh as a secular state by Mujib government could not succeed in eliminating the Islamic sentiment and establishing secular political culture in Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman realized that he was alienating the Islamic forces. He had already been unpopular because of his corruption, inefficiency and dictatorial disposition. During the later stage of Mujib regime, the economic compulsions as well as domestic criticisms and pressure from hardliners forced him to adopt a policy having inclinations towards Islam. He began attending religious gatherings and islamised his speeches by using Islamic phrases such as '*Allah 'Inshallah' Bismillah*' and so on. He slowly dropped the use of '*Joy Bangala*' and in place of it he ended his speech with '*Khuda Hafiz*'.

In post-Mujib era, the successive regimes followed the policies of Islamic Socialism.⁹ After assuming president ship of Bangladesh on 21st April 1977 Ziaur Rahman proceeded to Islamise Bangladesh constitution. In his mission, he took steps in replacing secularism with 'absolute trust and faith in Almighty *Allah* and inserting '*Bismillah-Rahmani Rahim*' in the preamble of the constitution of Bangladesh, through the constitutional amendments. Apart from these changes in

⁹ Sanjay Bhardwaj, "Religious politics in Bangladesh: A New Jingoism in D. Sen Gupta and S.K. Singh (eds.) Minorities and Human Rights in Bangladesh, (New Delhi: Spandan Authors Press, 2003) p. 50.

the constitution, the Zia regime adopted many measures which symbolized the sentiment of Muslim rule, such as the display of Qu'ranic verses and the Prophet's advice in public places, hanging of posters with citations from the Holy Qu'ran in government offices, the propagation of principles of "shariat" through radio and television, the introduction of the Azan through radio and television five times a day, flying of the *Eid-Mubarak* festoon with the national flag during *Eid* festivals, and the issue of messages by the Head of the State during religious festivals like *Eid-ul-Fitar*, *Eid-ul-Adhah*, *Eid Miladun-nabi*, *Shabi-Barat*, and *Muharram*.¹⁰ The ministry of education of Zia government implemented the suggestion made by the 'syllabi committee' regarding introduction of compulsory course on islamiat starting from class-I to class- VIII. Besides those, the Zia administration created a separate ministry, the 'Ministry for Religious Affairs' to deal with religion exclusively. The transformation of Islamic Academy to the Islamic Foundation and the establishment of an Islamic University along with an Islamic Research Centre by the Zia regime were enough to give the Islamic fervour to the political and social sinews of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh remained under the presidentship of Ziaur Rahman from April 21, 1977 until 30 May 1981 when he was killed by soldiers under the command of Major General Monsoor. During this time period Bangladesh got Islamised in a more vigorous way. While AL championed secular Bengali nationalism, the BNP adopted Bangladeshi nationalism. The Bangladeshi nationalism is communalism based on Islam religion. The revival of Islam is the kernel of Bangladesh nationalism. It is crystal clear the policy of nationalism followed by AL and BNP stand against each other. The killing of Seikh Mujibur Rahman was the victory of reactionary forces of Bangladesh and pro-Pakistan forces over democracy, socialism and secularism. Anti-Indianism, anti-Sovietism on one hand and pro-USA, pro-China and pro-Pakistan on the other hand became the mainstay of foreign policy of Gen. Ziaur Rahman. The Military regime developed close relationship with Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, which was absent during Mujib era due to his commitment to secularism. With the dilution

¹⁰ Syed Serajul Islam, *Islam in Bangladesh: A Dichtomy of 'Bengali' and Muslim Identities*, The Islamic Quarterly, vol.XLI, No.1, First Quarter 1997, pp.224-225

of secularism under Zia regime the communal minded Muslim countries took interest to develop close bond with Bangladesh. The religion-based political parties, especially Jammat-i-Islami, which was banned by Mujib, got new life after removal of the ban by Zia regime. The process of islamisation initiated by zia reached the zenith during Ershad regime which lasted from March 1982 till December 6,1990. Ershad declared Islam as the state religion in 1988 by amending the constitution through the 8th amendment. Gen. H.M. Ershad went a step further and declared that Islam would enable Bangladesh to live as a nation with a distinct identity.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led coalition government during 1991-96 gave another opportunity for the Islamic extremists to use religion for political purposes. Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of late Ziaur Rahman became the prime minister of Bangladesh, through making alliance with Islamic extremist party, Jamaat-e-Islami. The establishment of an Islamic state is the political programme of Jamaat-e-Islami. The growing influence of Jamaat in Bangladesh politics has been very visible. In future the role of Jamaat with the help of its well reorganised and disciplined cadres will be very significant in shaping the social and political attitude of the Bangladeshis. The two major political parties, the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina and the BNP led by Khaleda Zia been able to capture the power at center alternatively till date i.e. The BNP remained in power during 1991-96, the A.L. remained in power during 1996-2001. Now it is turn of BNP, which control the power at the center.

The BNP regime during 1991-96 was conducive for the growth of Islamic extremism it follows the footsteps shown by Ziaur Rahman. The domestic violence against the minorities especially on Hindus and Chakmas has been increasing. The liberal Muslims and Ahmadiyas whom Jamaat does not consider as Muslims, have been facing violence, perpetrated by the Islamic extremists. While Jammat is moving cautiously towards making Bangladesh as an Islamic state, its partnership with government has emboldened more Islamic extremist and fundamentalist groups. Jamaat has been spreading the tentacles of communalism through its different outfits throughout Bangladesh. The external

communal tensions in Bangladesh reflect the deeper internal conflict between 'Bengali identity' which represents the secular Bangladesh and 'Muslim identity' which represents Islamic Bangladesh. Should Bangladesh as a nation identify itself as Bengali, Islamic, or both?¹¹ This question should be answered as soon as possible by the people of Bangladesh and its leaders in future.

The growing interdependency among countries of world community makes it impossible for any country to live in isolation. Any country big or small, powerful or weak depends upon one another for one or other reasons. The emergence of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has already had an impact on global community. Like every country Bangladesh pursued its foreign policy in order to create a conducive environment inside which it can attain its foreign policy objectives. A foreign policy is not formulated or executed in a vacuum. A country has to develop its foreign policy in the light of certain basic factors such as the geopolitical realities of the region in which it is located, its search for security, its need in terms of economic development, its ideological and historical background and its religious affinities.¹² The foreign policy of Bangladesh is understood with reference to the international order in South Asia, because Bangladesh constitute an integral part of South Asian region.

On 16th December 1971, Bangladesh emerged as an independent sovereign state. But just before independence of Bangladesh, the Pakistan government unleashed brutal killings of East Pakistanis. Finally India's military intervention on the ground of humanitarianism resulted in Indo-Pak war and emergence of Bangladesh. While evaluating the foreign policy of Bangladesh, an appraisal has to be made of events mentioned above.

The foreign policy of Mujib government was premised upon policy of non-alignment and peaceful co-existence. It tried to cultivate good relations with its immediate neighbouring countries specially with India. Mujib's foreign policy seemed to be inclined towards the Soviet Union. Mujib tried to normalise

¹¹ Parth S. Ghosh, Bangladesh at the Crossroads: Religion and Politics, *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXXIII, No.7, July, 1993, p.697

¹² Dilara Choudhury, *Bangladesh and the South Asian International System*, (Dhaka: Academic Publishers, 1992), p.2

relations with Pakistan. During later stage of the Mujib regime, some steps were taken to maintain strong relations with the Muslim countries Mujib regime was committed to oppose colonialism racialism and imperialism in any form.

In foreign policy, Zia was realistic. His major contribution to the domain to international politics is the starting of SAARC process. His liberal foreign policy made the Western Powers closer to Bangladesh. During Zia's administration, the Muslim countries strengthened their relationship with Bangladesh. Indo- Bangladesh relations suffered to some extent during initial period but later it was normalized. Zia was also successful in maintaining normal relationship with Pakistan. The vision of regional cooperation of Mujib, which was given solid form by Zia, was realized during Ershad regime. The Ershad administration succeeded in formalizing the first SAARC Summit in December 1985. The major foreign policy objectives of Bangladesh have been guided by its concerns for its independence, territorial integrity, security, economic development, peace and stability of the South Asian region. The subsequent regimes have been guided by these objectives through the foreign policies bringing some changes in it, till date.

The foreign policies of any country cannot be separated from the domestic policies. Like other countries Bangladesh had to develop its foreign policy in locating between international as well as national concerns. The domestic factors which impinges upon domestic policies are the economic development, population growth, social harmony, democratic governance, political rivalry and so on. The major challenges in those areas which affect the foreign as well as domestic policies should be tackled by the Bangladeshis and their government through pragmatic and visionary decision-making.

The main thrust of the second chapter will be on the emergence and consolidation of BNP. It will assess the domestic political context within which BNP got its embryonic form. It will analyse how the domestic situation acts as an umbilical chord for BNP to develop and mature. It will describe the party structure, ideology and programs announced by BNP. The manner in which BNP,

to strengthen its political position as well as have its legitimacy, promoted Islamic radical groups before nineties in Bangladesh, will be analysed.

The focus of the third chapter will be on the policies legislated by the government during 1991 – 1996. It will analyse both the domestic and foreign policies. This chapter will have an exclusive analysis of those policies which have directly or indirectly encouraged the rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh during the same period.

The main premise of the fourth chapter is to delineate the role played by BNP led coalition during 1991 – 1996 to Islamise Bangladesh politics. The manner in which democratically elected political parties played along with Islamic extremist groups and individuals in radically Islamising the society and politics will be analyzed.

The main thrust of the conclusion will be on the overall assessment of the political and social conditions of Bangladesh during 1991 – 1996. Simultaneously, in this section it will be strived to put forwards the views of long-term consequences of Islamic extremism on Bangladesh politics and society. It will also present the prospects before Bangladesh to develop as a democratic country maintaining the developmental pace, communal harmony, good neighbourhood foreign policy and containing the spread of Islamic extremism.

Chapter-2

Genesis of BNP and Islamic Extremism

CHAPTER – 2

Genesis of BNP and Islamic Extremism

With the assassination of Sher-e-Bangla, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the entire political system of Bangladesh went into total disarray and chaos. Within the Awami League itself, the vacuum that was created with the sudden disappearance of Mujib from the political spectrum, made the party members go into a phase of political bickering, back stabbing and a competition within the party ranks, to fill up the top posts.

The months that followed after the assassination returned Bangladesh to the days of the early seventies, when politics was recognized more by instability and the ultimate struggle of political leaders to get lucrative positions in the government. But Mujib's government within that short span of time had initiated a process, that soon found shape in all the forthcoming governments in Bangladesh till the end of the eighties; and that is the politics of legitimacy. As there was a gross lack of free and fair elections and people's participation in the governance of Bangladesh, there were always attempts by the governing elites to legitimize their governance.

The post-colonial states, in their endeavor to create a nation or homogenous population, often undertake state-sponsored models of nationhood, which adopt various elements such as culture, language, and religion as tools of homogenization. These elements are more often than not the attributes of the dominant or majority community. The state of Bangladesh has experimented with two such models: Bengali and Bangladeshi. In both instances minority communities have been marginalized and alienated.

Though the state of Bangladesh started its journey on a secular basis of nationhood, religion soon became an important component. The nationalist movement of the East Bengalis was predicated on Bengali nationalism, which had a

distinct secular orientation based on Bengali language and culture. Seeds of this nationalism were sown in 1948 when Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the father of the nation, declared in Dhaka that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. The new state of Pakistan also used religion as a tool for constructing Pakistani nationhood. Bengali language and culture were alleged to be influenced by Hinduism. Thus, in 1949, the central minister for education openly proposed the introduction of Arabic script for Bengali. It was argued that: Not only Bengali literature, even the Bengali alphabet is full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess of Hindu pantheon...Pakistan and Devanagari script cannot co-exist. It looks like defending the frontier of Pakistan with Bharati soldiers! ...To ensure a bright and great future for the Bengali language it must be linked up with the Holy Quran ... Hence the necessity and importance of Arabic script.¹

To counterpoise this “Islamic” nationalism, a secular nationalism emerged in East Bengal that was militant in its emphasis on the Bengali language and culture. The Language movement, which continued from 1948 to 1952, acquired an emotional and politicized content for the Bengalis on February 21, 1952 when Pakistan authorities opened fire on students in Dhaka when they were protesting the imposition of Urdu as the state language, resulting in the death of four. By the mid-1960s the Bengalis had moved on to the demands for economic and political autonomy as discrimination and domination of the West Pakistani ruling elite over the Bengalis were evident in all spheres of life.²

The new state indeed based itself on a secular plank. The constitution of Bangladesh, adopted by the Bangladesh Parliament on 4 November 1972, in its preamble paragraph 2 accepted “nationalism,” “socialism,” “democracy” and

¹ Maniruzzaman, *Creativity, Reality and Identity* (Dhaka: International Center for Bengal Studies, 1993), p. 107

² Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (Dhaka: University Press, 1972), pp. 34 – 42

“secularism” as state principles. In the context of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, defined it in the following words:

Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. Hindus will observe their religion; Muslims will observe their own; Christians and Buddhists will observe their religions. No one will be allowed to interfere in others’ religions. The people of Bengal do not want any interference in religious matters. Religion cannot be used for political ends ...³

To implement the above, Article 12 of the constitution stated that the principle of secularism shall be realized by the elimination of:

- Communalism in all forms;
- The granting by the state of political status in favor of any religion;
- The abuse of religion for political purposes; and
- Any discrimination against, or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion.⁴

Gen. Ziaur Rahman set off his political journey from 15th August 1975 when Mujibur Rahman was assassinated. Zia rose to power through resurgence of anti-Indo-Soviet forces and his ‘Politics of Unity’ which intended to combine the two bases from where he drew his initial support, (i) the communal anti-independence force on one side and the democratic pro-independence forces on the other; (ii) the rightist forces from one side the leftist forces from the other.⁵ The joining together of these forces was evidenced in the controversy ‘Politics of Unity’ which Zia propounded and launched as the principal vehicle of his political Journey.

³ Government of Bangladesh, *Parliament Debates, October 12, 1972* (Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh, 1972), p. 20

⁴ *The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*, Ministry of Law (Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh, 1972), p. 5

⁵ Moudud Ahmed, *Democracy and the Challenge of Development: A study of Politics and Military Interventions in Bangladesh*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 1995 p. 72).

On 29th November 1976, Zia became the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA). After being the president on 21st April 1977, he started the process of consolidation of his position and formation of a political base to stand on firmly. He formed a political forum with politicians, who defected from various established political parties including NAP (Bhasani), the Bangladesh Muslim League (BML) and the Awami League (AL). This forum popularly known as Jatiyatabadi Gonotantrik Dal (Nationalist Democratic Party) or JAGODAL. On the eve of presidential election, Zia formed a political Alliance with six political parties consisting of the JOGODAL, the NAP-B, the BML, the Bangladesh Labour Party (BLP) and the Bangladesh United People's Party (UPP) Bangladesh Scheduled Caste Federation (BSCF).⁶ This political alliance or forum put Zia as its candidate for the presidential election. While he was chairman of this alliance he promised the preservation of this alliance until the parliamentary election. The massive victory of 76% vote gained by him in the presidential election gave him a national stature and established his credibility in the minds of the people.⁷

The Nationalist Front, which supported Zia in the presidential election was a conglomerate of Pro-Beijing radicals, the ML and Liberal Democrats having differing beliefs and Ideologies.⁸ Being uncomfortable with this front because of its internal cleavages decided to form a broad based political party. Finally in September 1978, he floated the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with some members of JAGODAL and the leftists and rightist renegades from other parties and factions. He became its founder chairman.

General Zia propounded the 19-point programme soon after coming to power. Bangladeshi nationalism or Islamic Nationalism was the corner stone of above programme. Both Bangladeshi Nationalism and 19-point programme

⁶ Golam Hossain, *Gen Ziaur Rahman and the BNP: Political Transformation of a Military Regime*, (Dhaka: UPL, 1998), p. 20.

⁷ Ibid, p. 20.

⁸ Ibid 20.

constituted the ideology and programme of BNP. The 19-point programme of the BNP is as follows:⁹

1. To preserve the independence, integrity and sovereignty of the state at all cost.
2. To reflect in all spheres of our nation's life the four fundamental principles of the constitution i.e. complete faith in and reliance on the Almighty Allah, democracy, nationalism and socialism meaning economic and social justice.
3. To build ourselves into a self-reliant nation through all possible means.
4. To ensure people's participation at all levels of administration, development programmes and in the maintenance of law and order.
5. To strengthen rural economy and thus the national economy by according priority to agricultural development.
6. To make the country self-sufficient in food and ensure that no body has to starve.
7. To step up cloth production so as to ensure supply of at least coarse cloth for everybody.
8. To take all possible measures so that no one remains homeless.
9. To rid the country of the course of illiteracy.
10. To ensure minimum medical care for everybody.
11. To place women at their rightful position in the society and to organize and inspire the youths for nation building.

⁹ Ibid, p.119.

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12. To give necessary incentives to the private sector for the economic development of the country.
13. To improve the condition of the workers and develop healthy employer-worker relations in the interest of increased production.
14. To create an urge for public service and nation-building among the government employees and improve their financial condition.
15. To check population explosion.
16. To build up friendship based on equality with all countries and especially strengthen the relations with the Muslim nation.
17. To decentralize the system of administration and development and strengthen local government.
18. To establish a social system based on justice and fair play and free from corruption.
19. To safeguard the rights of all citizens irrespective of religion, colour and sect, and consolidate national unity and solidarity.



The BNP managed to win over pro-Islamic groups, some of which had opposed the independence struggle of Bangladesh. President Zia's policy was strengthening ties with Arab and other Muslim countries. At home he provided facilities to improve Islamic education in the country, he introduced modern education in madrassas and made religious studies compulsory in all schools. He established an Islamic university and Ministry of Religious Affairs.¹⁰ These acts combined with his own style of starting all his speeches in the name of *Almighty Allah*-contributed to drop political support from Muslims. The Bangladesh Jamaiyat-

¹⁰Ibid, p.35

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e-Mudarrasin, representing about a million all over the country supported the BNP and worked hard for Justice Abdus Sattar during the 1981 presidential election.¹¹

The Pirs and Dargahas have tremendous influence over the BNP and its leaders. President Zia, Justice Abdus Sattar, ministers and army officers often used to visit the Pirs and Dargahas. At the time of presidential election in 1978 Zia started his campaign from Dargah sharif of Hazrat Shah Jalal at Sylhet.

The pro-Islamic parties banned during the Awami League regime organized themselves after military takeover. These groups were not in favour of either secularism or socialism and for this reason they were hostile to AL and found the BNP more acceptable. Another important factor behind pro-Islamic forces supporting BNP may also be the fact that by themselves these orthodox parties had never been succeeded in gaining any noteworthy victories since 1937. That is why the ulema groups strongly backed president Zia in the same way as they had backed Ayub Khan in 1960s. The pro-Islamic sentiments, which were always latent among the masses, became articulate during the BNP regime.

The fundamental principles of Bangladeshi nationalism as defined by Zia are: race (people), the war of independence, the Bengali language, religion, land (geographical area) culture and economy¹². Badruddoza Chowdhury, the Secretary General of the BNP remarked that Bengalee nationalism is partial and incomplete while Bangladeshi nationalism has a totality¹³. Shamsul Huda Chowdhury, Zia's Cabinet Minister remarked Muslim sentiments formed the base of Bangladeshi nationalism.

Sheikh Mujib's regime propagated and enshrined nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism in the constitution. The Zia regime had reversed the domestic policy of Mujib. By way of presidential proclamation, he effected certain

¹¹ Ibid, p.42

¹² Ibid, p.62

¹³ Ibid, p.63

constitutional amendments. The amendments came almost instantaneously and included the following:

- (a) dispensing with “secularism” as a fundamental principle of the constitution and its substitution by absolute trust and faith in “Almighty Allah”;
- (b) defining socialism, another fundamental principle of the constitution, as “meaning economic and social justice; (c) guaranteeing that there will be no nationalism, acquisition or requisition of private property without compensation; (d) the addition of clauses in the Fundamental Principles of State Policy, Seeking Solidarity with Muslim states, the promotion of local government institutions and participation of women in national affairs.¹⁴

The 5th constitutional amendment carried out through a Martial Law Order of April 1977 deleted the references to the people of Bangladesh as Bengalis and their country as Bengali nation and replaced by Bangladeshis and Bangladesh.¹⁵ Zia substituted the values of secularism and Bengali Culture with Islam and Bangladeshi Nationalism. The linguistic and cultural basis for Bangladesh unity was removed completely. *Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim* was made the opening words of the preamble of the Bangladesh Constitution.

The ‘historic struggle for national liberation’ was substituted by ‘historic war for national independence’. While the former represents the struggle fought by East Bengal since 1952 to 1971 the later represents only the 1971 war.¹⁶ ‘Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah’ became the guidelines for all actions by the Zia government.

¹⁴ Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*, (Dhaka: UPL, 1988), p.215-217.

¹⁵ I.P. Khosla, “The Internal Political Dynamics of Bangladesh”, *AGNI: Studies in International Strategic Issues*, Vol.-VII, No.-II, September-December, 2003) p. 12

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.13

After Zia's assassination Gen. H. M. Ershad came to power in March 1982 who followed the footsteps of Zia. The 8th amendment on 9th June 1988 was the clear manifestation of that. Through this amendment Islam was declared as the state religion. These measures went parallel with the re-emergence of the religious or pro-Islamic, the so-called Islam pasand groups led by the Jamaat-e-Islam (Jel) and its leader (Ameer), Gholam Azam who were hated deeply for years, having opposed the language movement, and the liberation struggle, and openly sided with the Pakistan army during the liberation war.¹⁷ But now they were allowed to come out into the open, so apart from JEI other groups like the Islamic Oikya Jote, the Islamic Constitution Movement, the Khilfat Majlis, the Islamic Chhatra Sena and the Muslim League came out to propagate their views openly about an Islamic society for Bangladesh.¹⁸

The Military regime under Ziaur Rahman starting from 15th August 1975 to 30th May 1981 adopted different type of foreign policy. Zia's foreign policy represents a paradigm shift when compared with that of Mujib's. The first target was to minimize India's influence on Bangladesh for that purpose Zia internationalised the Farakka issue and got included it in the agenda of Special Political Committee of the United Nations Organisation. Simultaneously his government developed closer diplomatic engagement with USA, China and Pakistan. The pro-USA, pro-China and pro-Pakistan foreign policy followed by Zia regime was nothing but reversal of Mujib's foreign policy.

During Mujib era because of his secular commitment the Islamic countries were not so much interested to develop closer relationship. But when Bangladeshi nationalism having Islamic overtones adopted by Zia, the Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia started to develop closer diplomatic engagement. Ziaur Rahman visited Saudi Arabia in July 1977. He took part in several international conferences and he also established good rapport with Islamic countries.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.13.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.13.

Thus when we compare Mujib's foreign policy with Gen. Ziaur Rahman it is clear that while Mujib followed close friendly relations with India and Soviet Union and difficult often uneasy relations with the West, China and Conservative Muslim states, the Zia regime considered the West, China the Muslim countries more crucial and maintained very close relations for various reasons. The Zia regime was provided economic needs, military and security needs, and fraternal solidarity by the West, China and the Muslim countries respectively.

Bangladesh has become a breeding ground of Islamic terror. By all indications, the activities of Islamic militants have grown in Bangladesh and intelligence agencies have conformed their links with various foreign religious extremists organizations. In fact, the annual report on the patterns of Global Terrorism during 2002 contains an account of the activities of the Bangladesh branch of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJIB) which is a member of Osama bin Laden's International Islamic Front (IIF).¹⁹ The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) reported that the Islamic extremists groups in Bangladesh have links with Al-Qaida and remarked that Bangladesh might emerge as a 'haven for Islamic terrorists'.

Bertil Lintner in his article titled "Is religious extremism on rise in Bangladesh ?" published by the "Jane's Intelligence Review" of May 2002 had drawn attention to the worrying developments in Bangladesh.²⁰

He referred to activities of organizations such as AUJI the so-called Jihad movement, the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS), the JeI's students' wing, the Islamic Olkyo Jote (IOJ), which like the JeI is a member of the present ruling coalition, and two organizations of Rohingya Muslim refugees from the Arakan area of Myanmar called Aranan Rohingya National Organisation and to the proliferation of interests in Bangladesh and said: , 'interalia'.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid p.30.

²⁰ Ibid. p.32.

²¹ Ibid, p.33.

According to India, among the fundamentalist organization present in Bangladesh are National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), All Fripura Tiger Force (ATTF). The Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland –Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM), the People’s Liberation Among (PLA), the United Liberation Front of Assam (UDFB), The Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), the Achijk National Liberation Front (INLF) and Dimd Halam Daoga. From above mentioned feminist Networks of Islamic extremists it is crystal Clear that every moment Bangladesh is getting more and more conducive nest for the growth and spread of Islamic extremism.

Besides domestic politics and policies the foreign policies devoted by subsequence BNP regimes have been incursive to the Islamic fundamentalist groups. In foreign policy making thee groups have put their influences to make Bangladesh as an ideal Muslim Country and upholder of Islamic values.

The foreign policies followed by Gen Ziaur Rahman was adopted in same manner and attitude by the subsequent BNP regime from 1941-96 and 2001 – till now. The 1991 election manifesto clearly to build up a special relationship with Muslim Countries and friendly relations with all foreign countries and neighbouring countries through the manifesto says to maintain close relationship with neighbouring countries but it was not done. So with India. In 2001 election manifesto, the BNP repeated that either coming to power, it would arrive to build special relationship with Muslim Countries. If analyzed, it can be concluded that very nature of foreign policy remain same still date.

The Islamic extremists activities have been tolerated to a greater or lesser extent by successive BNP government in Bangladesh. Islamisation has come along way in Bangladesh with Islam now the official religion and agitation led by the Jammat-e-Islami for an Islamic Republic; the Islamic movement was prospered under BNP regimes. Adulana Matiur Rehman Nizami, who was pre 1971 Secretary General of the Jammat used to extort the razakars/ collaborators (who are responsible for perpetrating thousands of rapes and massacres in some of Islam) to “Carry out their

national duty to eliminate those who are engaged in war edgiest Pakistan and Islamared to finish off academic league supporters. B. Ramon, Bangladesh and Jihadi Terrorism.

The fundamentalist Party, Jei enjoys significant electoral support along with IOJ and HUJI. It was carefully retained and nursed the nexus with government, military and police. There is real and effective threat of Islamic extrusion stemming from religious parties as Jamaat – e-Islamic, which are very active in their efforts to train Muslims by infiltrating Mosque and madrassas and engaging in political action.

This extremism has created climate of fear, insecurity handsome and death among non-Muslim Minorities like Hindus, Christians, Buddhism, ethnic groups and Ahmddu Muslim minority community. Since BNP came to power riding piggy – back on its fundamentalist July j-e-I, the Bangladesh government has left no stone conformed to play the Islamic card. With a right radical BNP – Jamaat Coalition in power in Dhaka the politics of intolerance and persecution has unleashed the worst pogrom in the country since 1971. The political patronage given by the BNP to obscurantist and religious and terrorism inside Bangladesh. The growth of Jehadi terrorism in Bangladesh is likely to assume even more Serious preparation than neither to. But the question is how for Bangladesh can afford it?

Chapter-3

**BNP and Islamic Extremism-1991-1996:
The Policy Perspectives**

CHAPTER – 3

BNP and Islamic Extremism -1991-1996 : The Policy Perspectives

The political compulsions, calculations and power hankering attitudes of the BNP leaders have made them to take shelter under the communal politics. The BNP has encouraged the growth of religious feeling and extremist activities by way of constitutional amendments, government acts and proving political support to the cause of Islamic extremism. BNP is not overtly religious and extremist like Jamaat-e-Islami, but it had reinvigorated the latent Islamic undercurrent during 1991-96.

By the time of first free multi-party elections held in 1991, the Islamisation process and religious-politics linkage were firmly in place and most political parties, including the secularly inclined, the Awami League, were reconciled to the Islamic indoctrination of Bangladesh.¹ During the election campaign, although the military rule was prime concern, parties found it judicious and politically rewarding to champion Islamic issues.² This tendency continues till now and it has helped the Islamic extremist forces like Jamaat-e-Islami to maintain its grips over Bangladesh politics. From the very beginning, the Zia regime or first BNP government recognized the tremendous potentials of Islamic idioms as political resource, which was enthusiastically adopted in the fifth general election in 1991.

On the eve of 1991 general election, the BNP and J-e-I has published their election manifestoes, which show clearly inclinations towards Islamic values. BNP in its manifesto mentioned to maintain special relationship with the Muslim countries. It also talked about radical

¹ Sreeradha Datta, "Bangladesh's political Evolution: Growing uncertainties", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.27, No.2, April-June, 2003, p.241.

² Ibid, p.241.

change in the educational system and adoption of Madrassa education with the mainstream of the society. Out of four fundamental principles pronounced by BNP in its election manifesto, “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” was the principal constituent.³

Jamaat-e-Islami had manifested 32-point election agenda. The manifesto issued on January, 1991 said that Bangladesh would be transformed into an ideal Islamic state where rights of the people belonging to all religious faith would be guaranteed.⁴ The Jamaat wants to change the system of government peacefully and ensure maximum democratic practices in the country in the light of the tenets of the Quran and Sunnah, it said. It announced that, if voted to power Jamaat would bring an end to all injustice, oppression, and anarchy and restructure the society on the basis of Quranic values. J-e-I promised that it would abolish all un-Islamic laws.

About the reformation of country’s educational system the Jamaat said it would include in the curricula the Islamic philosophy of life from primary level to highest level. The Jamaat’s election manifesto called for setting up an Islamic commonwealth for the greater interest of the Muslim countries. It urged the people and the armed forces to work together with the spirit of Jihad for the greater interest of the country. Acting Ameer of J-e-I, Abbas Ali Khan said that only Islamic spirit could protect Bangladesh’s independence and sovereignty.

The Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina in her election manifesto said that secularism was not against Islamic principles. She argues that secularism is not irreligious instead it is the practice of one’s religion freely. During election campaigning, the BNP leader Khaleda Zia alleged

³ POT, Bangladesh Series, Vol. XVI, No.21, 11th Feb. 1991, p.261.

⁴ Ibid, p.282.

that if the AL voted to office, it would remove “Bismillahir Rahmir Rahim” from the Constitution, but Sheikh Hasina dismissed this as a smear campaign against the AL and declared that she had “no quarrel with Bismillah”.⁵

From the above election manifestoes it is clear that no political party wanted to displease the public either speaking or acting against Islam and its values. While some are moderates in their approach towards Islam others are radical. Every political party tried to legitimize their claims upon the government through citing different Islamic quotations from Quran. It seemed that every party kept themselves busy in fanning Islamic sentiment without considering its impact upon Bangladesh’s future politics and society.

The BNP-led coalition government had followed a policy of discrimination towards minorities. The Islamic fanatics Jamaat-e-Islami, the political and government ally of BNP attempted to move “Blasphemy” law in the Bangladesh parliament in 1994 to victimize minority communities and secular sections for alleged trading of insults against prophet and Holy Quran.⁶ Finding a favourable environment, the fundamentalists became more active than any time since independence, and demanded the introduction of the blasphemy law that could be applied in cases such as that of Nasirin.⁷

The BNP-led coalition government also took the initiative of introducing a new curricula based on the Sharia that was introduced in the Madrassa educational structure. In the government policy itself thousands

⁵ The Daily Sangbad, Feb 16, 1991, p. 1.

⁶ R. Joshi, “Situation of Minorities”, *Himalayan and Centre Asian Studies*, Vol.7, Nos.3-4, July-Dec, 2003, p.103.

⁷ G. Hossain, Bangladesh in 1994 : Democracy at Risk, *Asian Survey*, Vol.35, No.2, Feb. 1995, p.134.

of madrassas were introduced or developed.⁸ The radicals' ranks are being swelled by graduates from the madrassas or religious schools, which have mushroomed in the past decade and are described by a retired high-ranking civil servant as a "potential political time bomb".⁹ But the government has no control over the madrassas, a journalist Salahuddin Babar wrote in a recent edition of Probe Magazine, "Passing out from the madrassas, poorly equipped to enter mainstream life and professions, the students are easily lured by motivated quarters who capitalize on religious sentiment to create fanatics, rather than modern Muslims".¹⁰

The madrassas' focus is on religious instruction and many are funded by the proselytizing Arab charities. It is feared that the madrassas in Bangladesh might become exporter of Islamic extremists. Therefore, the policy of government towards madrasa education is nothing but supporting, promoting and strengthening the Islamic extremism in Bangladesh and outside.

Due to negligence of BNP-led coalition government during 1991-1996, the CHT has become Chittagong Hell Tract which in turn act as the 'Heaven Tract' for the militant organizations having support from Islamic extremist groups. The root of CHT problem goes back to legacies of partition where the non-Muslim Budhist Chakma found themselves in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The settlement policy followed by Mujib's government by allowing lowland Bengali Muslim families to settle in CHT area in order to establish national integrity and homogeneity amongst the people of one 'Bengalee Nation', proved disastrous. The subsequent governments policies proved the same consequence for the Chakmas.

⁸ policies under the Bangladesh Nationalist Policy (BNP), The BNP Home Page (Translated from Bengali), see <http://www.bnpsbd.com/bnpgovt.html>.

⁹ Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol.165, No.13, April 14, 2002, p.14.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Bengali, which constituted just 9% in 1951, rose to 49% in 1991.¹¹ The lowland settlers were allotted or allowed to grab land belong to CHI people, dislodged them from their homes, took their business and injured their cultural pride. The state has exploited the local resources in name of development, a practice that has completely marginalized the local people. No spectacular solution has emerged to this problem despite the armed rebellion by CHT people against the government policies towards CHT area. They formed a broad-based association called 'Jana Sanghati' with an armed wing called 'Shantibahini' who started murdering the settlers.¹² In retaliation Bangladesh army was used to suppress them and their legitimate claim. Though BNP-led government in 1993 conducted 6-rounds negotiations with the CHT people but no success was achieved. The BNP government policy during its regime was half-hearted and it did not want to care the sufferings of the CHT original inhabitants. This is clear from the remark given by the BNP when the AL-government had signed a peace agreement on 2nd December 1997 with PCJSS (Parbattya Chattogram Jana Sanghati, the rebel body of CHT).

Despite BNP's previous negotiations with the Chakmas, the BNP-led by Khaleda Zia, has been vociferous opponent of the agreement and portrayed it as a 'sell-out' to India. This shows the negligence and apathetic attitude of the BNP towards suffering of tribesmen of CHT area.

In name of national security, the Bangladesh army launched full-scale militarisation of the CHT.¹³ The BNP regime witnessed a numerous incidents of human right violations. The Hill people were forced to migrate and took shelter in cluster villages, where their lives were controlled by the

¹¹ S. Datta , "*Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy*", (New Delhi : Shipra Publication, 2004), p.97.

¹² M. Ahmed, *Democracy and the Challenge of Development: A Study of Politics and Military Interventions in Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd, 1995), p.293.

¹³ Amena Mohsin, *The Development Trap and the Hill People of Bangladesh*, "*Peace Initiatives*", Vol.VII, Nos.I-III, January-June 2001, p.183.

military. The Peace Accord on Dec. 2, 1997 with CHT people by Sheikh Hasina government has been hijacked by the BNP-led opposition. This has led the Peace Agreement to remain in illusion. This accord had led to division among CHT people into two camps, namely, the pro- and anti-accord group. This division resulted in deterioration of law and order situation in CHT area, which has been a fertile ground for the operation of militant organizations of Islamic extremists having links with the terrorist network of Osama bin Laden.

The 1997 Peace Agreement with the Jumma or hill people of the Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT) could have emerged as a move to reaffirm Bangladesh's non-communal tradition.¹⁴ But the treaty has been used as vehicle by opposition; especially the BNP and its fundamentalist allies to activate communal forces in the polity by focusing on the Communal divide between tribal and Bengali settlers in the CHT. This intrusion of Communalism by the BNP starting from its emergence till today could open up fissures in the political and social landscape, which could in the future expose Bangladesh to the destabilizing tensions emanating from the Islamic extremism.

The Bangladesh government under BNP should have understood that it has to pay a heavy price for its negligence of CHT issue. It might act as a recipe for promoting insurgency, extremism and terrorism inside Bangladesh more vigorously. The coastal area stretching from the port city of Chittagong through Cox's Bazar to the Burmese border is a notorious centre for piracy, smuggling, arms dealing, and gunrunning.¹⁵ It is also a stronghold of the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, its youth wing Islamic Chatra Shibir and other more extreme Muslim groups. These pirated arms

¹⁴ Rounea Jahan (ed.), *Bangladesh : Promises and performances*, (London : Zed Books Ltd, 2001), p.344.

¹⁵ Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh : A Cocoon of Terror", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol.165, No.13, April 4, 2002, p.17.

and weapons are being used in politically and religiously motivated violence in Bangladesh. Some analysts link this phenomenon to the increasing influence of Islamic fundamentalism and rise in religious intolerance in the country and they fear the situation could worsen as more militants obtain weapons.¹⁶

The Chittagong-Cox Bazar has also proved to be fertile soil for recruiting warriors to the fight against India and others seen as enemies of Islam, according to Asian intelligence sources.¹⁷ And there are unconfirmed reports that the Harkat maintains six training camps near Cox's Bazar.

Besides domestic policies, the foreign policy followed by the BNP had been influenced by Islamic values propounded by the fundamentalist Muslim political parties and its allies. The pro-Indian and pro-Soviet orientations of diplomacy was abruptly modified by the BNP regimes. It became pro-Islamic, pro-West and Pro-Chinese. The Bengalee nationalism was replaced by Bangladeshi nationalism. The doctrine of secularism which was meant for elimination of communalism, state neutrality towards religion, prohibition of any political use of religion and absence of any discrimination or persecution on religious ground was completely removed from the constitution and substituted by absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah in the preamble and article 8.¹⁸ Ershad used Islam more explicitly and extensively in his political carrier.

Bangladeshi Nationalism was the dominant viewpoint in the BNP regime during 1991-96. With the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991, the majority alliance led by BNP formed the government. The civil

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Md. Tajuddin, *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh : Liberation War to Sheikh Hasina*, (New Delhi : National Book Organisation, 2001), p.70-71.

and military elites participated in governance indirectly through nomination. The orthodox Muslims groups and individuals maintained good rapport with the military for each other's interest. While the Islamic fundamentalist supported the military for the promotion of Islamic values, the military supported the Islamic extremists for its legitimacy as the Islamic extremist groups had a wide network of public support. In between military and Islamic fundamentalist, the moderate Muslims, the minorities and other liberal individuals got sandwiched.

The bilateral relations of Bangladesh with other countries have been guided by Islamic values. The most important external factor for Bangladeshi foreign policy and diplomacy is its big neighbour India.¹⁹ The geo-political location of India makes it as an important variable to be taken into account by the foreign policy decision-makers of Bangladesh. The pro-Indian stand of AL regimes had been changed by the BNP regimes. The BNP government followed anti-India foreign policy. The main reason for this shift in foreign policy vis-à-vis India is that the BNP has been following Islamic ideology to obtain legitimacy. Therefore its domestic and foreign policy have been coloured by the religious overtone. The orthodox Muslims and other fundamental organizations having wide public network constitute the BNP's support base. It has been either for compulsion or a calculative strategy of the BNP to maintain an anti-India image to remain in power.

During the regime of Khaleda Zia (1991-1996) there was an ebb and flow in Bangladesh-India relations as it was in her predecessor's regime. The border problem between India and Bangladesh which is a product of geo-physical and historical circumstances has been very promotive factor for the spread of terrorism and Islamic extremism across the border. The

¹⁹ Ibid., p.74.

porous border seems to be the den of the terrorist and their act of terrorism. The Indira-Mujeb Land Boundary Agreement in 1974, which provided for exchange of enclaves after the ratification of the Treaty by both parties remains to be implemented with the spirit of the agreement.²⁰ The protracted dispute has led to (i) enormous illegal influx of Bangladeshi citizens into India, (ii) the perpetration of cross-border crime by Bangladeshi nationals within Indian territory, and (iii) anti-national activities by insurgents in India's North-East and other secessionist forces that have take refugee in Bangladesh.²¹ Though a formal agreement between India and Bangladesh had been signed in 1992 during Khaleda Zia's India visit, it is apprehended that it might work as another channel for Islamic extremism and terrorism.

The India-baiting, it is alleged that, has been promoted by anti-India and pro-Pakistan elements which are strongly entrenched in the critical sectors of Bangladesh administration, armed and paramilitary forces, and intelligence agencies.²² These elements have been provided sheltered by the Pro-Pakistan and anti-India regime led by the BNP. They have tried to sabotage the initiatives by the AL regime to crack down the ISI's training networks for insurgents. The anti-India elements along with the BNP supporters and extremist political party J-e-I sustained their co-operation by providing political shelter for the ISI agents, who fined a base for spreading terrorist activities against India.

The presence of illegal Bangladeshi Nationals has been the most controversial and contentious issue that undermines India's ties with

²⁰ Alok Kumar Gupta, "Border Dispute between India and Bangladesh : Strategic Concerns and Conflict Resolution", *Peace Initiative*, Vol.VII, Nos.I-III, January-June, 2001, p.116.

²¹ Ibid, p.117.

²² Ibid, p.122.

Bangladesh.²³ The total number of illegal migrants is on rise in the bordering states of Northeast India. This region of India has been a fertile ground for the growth of Islamist groups. According to Major General B.K. Bopana, GOC, 21 Mountain Division, some madrasa (Islamic religious institutions) schools in Assam are helping the growth of separatist forces with active ISI help.²⁴ It is a serious threat for India's security as the Islamic militant might use these institutions as their nest.

The question of illegal crossing has to be judged within the framework of the growing radicalization of Bangladesh Society and politics. As Bertil Lintner argues, "A revolution is taking place in Bangladesh that threatens trouble for the region and beyond it left unchallenged. Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, Militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups, powerful military with ties to the militant, the mushrooming of Islamic schools churning out radical students, middle-class apathy, poverty and lawlessness – all are combining to transform the nation."²⁵

The process of radicalization and illegal crossing reinforce each other. There are indications that the cadres of Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh have been active in Manipur and the growth of a number of Islamic groups and organizations in Assam has been directly linked to the illegal migrants from Bangladesh.²⁶ In the past suggestions were made that while Begum Khaleda Zia was in power in the early 1990s the Bangladesh government did allow the ULFA to operate from its soil.²⁷

²³ S. Datta, *Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy*, (New Delhi : Shipra Publications, 2004), p.134.

²⁴ Ibid, p.136.

²⁵ Bertil Lintner, "A Cocoon of Terror", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 April 2002, p.14.

²⁶ S. Datta, *Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy* (New Delhi : Shipra Publications, 2004), p.139.

²⁷ Ibid, p.143.

The Bangladesh government has been consistently denying the presence of Bangladeshi illegal migrants especially during the BNP regime. The Islamic militants have been depicted as 'Freedom Fighters' by the BNP. The first term in 1991-1996 by Begum Khaleda Zia had provided conducive political climate for HUJI for its terrorist activities against India, with support from the global terrorist organization, Al-Qaida. The second term by the BNP did raise the morale of the Islamic extremists and their groups.

Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship during the first BNP regime had been given a greater momentum. Pakistan was the first country to recognize Zia regime, on the very coup day. Zia took further initiative to strengthen the bilateral ties with Pakistan. Begum Khaleda Zia followed her husband's foot steps in same manner. She visited Pakistan in 1992, and again in 1995 as the Chairperson of SAARC. She met also with Benazir Bhutto in Cyprus in the Common Wealth Heads of Government Summit in October 1993.²⁸ This close relationship between both countries which build their policy on the basis of anti-Indianism had provided a conducive political atmosphere for the Islamic extremist and terrorist organizations present in both countries to pursue their terrorist activities more vigorously against India and against Hindus in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's relationship with Myanmar deteriorated in late 1991 – due to migration of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, which reached 250,000 in early 1992.²⁹ A working group was formed in April 1992 when Myanmar Foreign Minister visited Dhaka to decide the modalities of repatriation of the refugees. Repatriation started in November, 1992 but

²⁸ Md. Tajuddin, *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh : Liberation War to Sheikh Hasina*, (New Delhi : National Book Organisation, 2001), p.22.

²⁹ Ibid, p.23.

stopped when UNHCR accused Bangladesh for forced migration.³⁰ The young, stateless Rohingyas are being used by the Islamic extremist outfit inside Bangladesh to fight against India and others who are against Islam.

Like Pakistan, China also recognized Zia government just after the 1975 coup because of the Zia's ante-Soviet and anti-India stand. Khaleda Zia visited China after coming to power. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) delegation visited Bangladesh in 1992 and 1994. Chinese-aided Bangla-China Friendship Bridge on Old Brahmaputra was completed in 1991 and the defence workshop for maintenance of defence equipment, was commissioned in 1992.³¹ During the BNP regime (1991-96) the defence dependency had increased significantly. The defence preparedness by Bangladesh was against India to minimize the military imbalance of Bangladesh vis-à-vis India. The Islamic extremist political parties and organizations supported the BNP government for its anti-India defence policy like other similar policies. Like other anti-India planks followed by the BNP, the defence policy of the BNP sent a message to Islamic extremists that the BNP government is walking on the line as desired by them, which is an encouraging factor for the Islamic extremists though indirectly.

One of the important foreign policy concerns of Bangladesh was that of widening deepening friendly and fraternal relations with the Islamic countries. The constitutional requirement in this regard in Article 25(2), as a matter of fact, reflects the close-ties binding Bangladesh historically and culturally with Islamic countries.³² Zia established new missions and enlarged the existing ones in West Asia and North Africa to foster closer

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, p.25.

³² Md. Shamsul Huq, *Bangladesh in International Politics : The Dilemma of the Weak States*, (New Delhi : Sterlings Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1993), p.234.

relations with Muslim countries. Oil exporting Arab countries became a dependable source of aid to Bangladesh and a lucrative market for its manpower exporting during his regime. Saudi Arabia was the country after Pakistan recognized Zia's military regime.

Begum Khaleda Zia like Ershad went to Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait on her first official tour.³³ She sent troops to Kuwait for mine clearing operation in 1991 and contributed in the United Nation peace keeping force in same country in 1993.³⁴ The BNP regime maintained the Zia's and Ershad's policy with Arab countries which were major source of income for the Bangladesh in form of remittance and grants for charity. Bangladesh was receiving huge amount of money in form of charity for the Madrassa educations institutions. These religious institutions were producing religious zealots who became latter the members of Islamic extremist groups.

Bangladesh is and has been for many years now a true and tested friend of the US. The shift from anti-USA policy to pro-USA policy started from Zia regime. The BNP regime maintained good relations with USA. Bangladeshi Foreign Minister visited the United States in September 1991 and Khaleda visited USA in 1992 and 1994 to address United Nations General Assembly sessions.³⁵ On these occasions she met president Bill Clinton. Bangladesh Army Chief of Staff met president during his visit to Haiti to meet the Bangladeshi forces deployed there for peacekeeping duty. US agreed to provide military training to Bangladesh Armed Forces under US International Military Education and Training (IMET) Programme.

³³ Md. Tajuddin, *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh : Liberation war to Sheikh Hasina*, (New Delhi : National Book Organisation, 2001), p.26.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Md. Tajuddin, *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh : Liberton War to Sheikh Hasina*, (New Delhi : National Book Organisation, 2001), p.29.

Bangladesh Navy participated in a joint military exercise with the US in Chittagong Bay in 1995.³⁶

During Gulf War Bangladesh was among few Muslim countries to send troops to the area. Bangladesh often at the urging of the US, has been regularly contributing to UN peacekeeping missions all over the world including Haiti, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Bosnia, East Timor and Somalia.³⁷ The implications of close Indo-Bangladesh relations has been to meet two needs of Bangladesh. One is the economic need and other is the defence need. The ultimate aim is to check India's hegemonic influence over Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh's help in different UN Peacekeeping missions and Gulf War has helped it to soften the stand of US on issues of terrorism and human rights violation in Bangladesh. US appreciated the efforts of Bangladesh to uphold the values of democracy and also its effort to enable Islam to exist peacefully with democracy. Through this policy Bangladesh scored a point against India's allegation regarding the spread of Islamic terrorism inside Bangladesh and outside, and the human rights violation by the BNP government in form of the minority persecutions. The silence or closing of eyes on part of a superpower on those issues has definitely encouraged the Islamic fundamentalists to spread terror in mindset of the minorities specially the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh and outside specially against India through their terrorist network.

While the Jamaat is moving cautiously towards its goal of an Islamic state, its relation to government has encouraged other more extreme Islamic fundamentalist groups and individuals. They include the shadowy Harkat-ul-Jehad-al-Islami, which is believed to have been

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Farooq Sobhan, "US-Bangladesh Relations : Helping each other in time of Crisis", *Peace Initiatives*, Vol.VII, No.I-III, Jan-June 2001, p.31.

founded as an offshoot of a Pakistani group in 1992 with money and support from suspected global terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden.³⁸

Starting from the political manifesto in the eve of 1991 general election to policy formulation and its implementation during the BNP regime (1991-96) has clearly shown its biasness towards Islamic fundamentalist organizations. It is more visible in its alliance with fundamentalist political party J-e-I that has links with different terrorist outfits inside Bangladesh. Beginning from the educational institutions to minority persecution the BNP-government had tried to convince its constituency that it was committed to the Bangladeshi nationalism instead of Bengalee nationalism. The foreign countries, especially the Muslim world have been providing a direct or indirect helping hand in turning Bangladesh into a radical Islamic state. The other countries like China and US had been adding fuel to the fire of Islamic extremism by way of providing economic and military help.

For the time being Bangladesh's secular roots are in weak position, but the fundamentalist cause is in ascendant. And as the rise of militant Muslim groups in Indonesia has shown, the bad governance and political instability can galvanise support for extremists very quickly. The growing religious extremism and intolerance within Bangladesh, and the rise of groups linked to the overseas militant groups were not addressed during the BNP regime. The process is not irreversible, but it left unchallenged for too long, Bangladesh could deteriorate and become a new nest for terror.³⁹ There is still time for a counter-terrorism.⁴⁰

³⁸ Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh : A Cocoon of Terror", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol-165, No.13, 4th April, 2002, p.15.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

Chapter-4

**BNP and Islamic Extremism-1991-1996:
The Political Dimensions**

CHAPTER 4

BNP and Islamic Extremism -1991 – 1996:

The Political Dimensions:

INTRODUCTION

The rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh made a significant impact within the nation as well as within the region. General Ershad used Islam to legitimize his military hegemony and to create a strong religious base against the democratic forces that stood as a challenge against Ershad's regime. With the ushering in of democracy, Khaleda Zia and her party went along with the policies of Ershad to have the support of the Jamaat and create a significant distinct identity of Bangladesh as an Islamic nation in the South Asian region. Following closely on the heels of her husband, General Ziaur Rahman, she established a strong relation with Bangladeshi politics and Islam, which even became embroiled with regional detrimental forces.

BNP was a party that took over the reigns of the nation after a long drawn military dictatorship. The people of Bangladesh were overly expectant on the BNP alliance and wanted immediate results, showing stability in governance and economic growth. Islam remained as the only element that could lower down the expectation levels as well as give the government some breathing space for working out and implementing policies.

It also saw that there was a simply way of winning the hearts of the masses, which is different from the secular fabric of India, the opium that has already spread wide and large throughout the territory of Bangladesh and that is using the Islam card. It also created a large support base within the masses, which started identifying themselves more with religion that with the more favoured language of yesteryears.

Religion provided a balm for the high amount of illiterate, unemployed and extremely poor people. And the political dimension that got added to it gave various colours to it. It made a significant impact within the nation, changing the secular character of parties even like that of the Awami League. But the BNP, which was already a party that was strongly recognized with that of its Islamic ideals, gave a finishing touch to mould Bangladesh into a radical Islamic state.

The political uncertainty, problems of governance and communally divided society in Bangladesh act as the umbilical cord for the growth and spread of religious extremism in the shape of Islamic terrorism in Bangladesh. Prior to 1991, the BNP regime had been supportive of Islamic cause pronounced and propounded by various Islamic outfits. The 1991 general election is a watershed development in Bangladesh politics. For the first time Bangladesh witnessed the emergence of multiparty democracy and the open bonhomie between a political party and fundamentalist outfits in shape of political alliance. The opportunistic BNP-Jamaat-e-Islamic (J-e-I) alliance for 1991 election enabled it to win the election by absolute majority. The J-e-I which is essentially a fundamentalist political party having link with Islamic extremist groups. This political alliance had emboldened the J-e-I and the extremist groups which were involved in many communal violence and minority cleansing operation.

The support of J-e-I largely had enabled the BNP to form the coalition government in 1991. Even though the BNP is seen as the natural ally by Jamaat, its strength lies in its ability to forge issue-based partnership with diverse groups while maintaining its Islamic credentials¹. The growing Islamic fervour in Bangladesh and growth of the Jamaat manifested themselves in far reaching changes that were taking place in the country. The Jamaat which fought the election as an ally of the BNP sought to regulate and institutionalize mosque-based education.

¹ S. Datta, "Bangladesh Political Evolution : Growing Uncertainties", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.27, No.2, April-June, 2003, p.241.

By the time of first free and fair of multi-party general election in 1991, the Islamisation process had consolidated itself in Bangladesh. This trend led to the rehabilitation of Islamic parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami in the political process of Bangladesh. Furthermore the dependence of military rulers upon religious elements for legitimacy made the religious parties more acceptable.² Consequently major political forces especially the AL and BNP were not averse to enlisting the support of Islamic groups that had gained substantial support base and influence.³ Among the Islamic extremist groups J-e-I has gradually emerged as a major player in the radicalisation of Bangladesh politics and society which might prove costly for Bangladesh. The communal incidents which had taken place during 1991-96 could be directly attributed to the growth Islamic extremism in Bangladesh.

The Golam Azam Controversy which rocked Bangladesh political scenario in 1994, started in December 1991, when he was appointed as the ameer of J-e-I. He was also granted Bangladeshi citizenship. Golam Azam, an active collaborator with Pakistani force in 1971 and a known enemy of the liberation war who fled from East Pakistan just before it became Bangladesh and settled down in what was then West Pakistan.⁴ In 1978, he returned to Bangladesh with a Pakistani passport and has lived there as a Pakistani national. His application for Bangladesh citizenship was challenged by the Awami League leaders and Jahanara Imam. The AL demanded for Azam's trial as a war criminal under the War Criminals Act of 1978.

Jahanara Imam, the author of *Ekattorer Dinguli* (an autobiographical record of the program unleashed by the Pakistani army and its collaborators in which she lost her son) directed her apolitical crusade against one individual: Golam Azam. Jamaat elected him as its leader and the ruling BNP winked at the choice.⁵ On March 26, 1992 Bangladesh Independence Day, people's court had given a verdict of death sentence. The Committee for the Elimination of the Killers and Collaborators of, 71

² S. Datta, *Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy*, (New Delhi : Shipra Publications, 2004), p.22.

³ Ibid.

⁴ P.S. Ghosh, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads : Religion and Politics", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, No. 7, July, 1993, p.704.

⁵ Ibid.

and Restoration of the Spirit of Liberation War (in short the Elimination Committee) which was consist of representatives from 59 political and other organizations hoped to keep this Azam issue alive to harass and embarrass the BNP government.⁶ The Elimination Committee in which AL was a major participant knows that the Azam issue can not be solved but the more it drags on the more political dividends will be forthcoming.

Those developments worried the BNP, which had worked out some kind of political understanding with the Jamaat during election and had helped it form government. Reportedly, a number of BNP leaders feared the trial would lead to domino syndrome, after Golam Azam, the forces opposed to him might look for others who had been against the liberation war. President Abdur Rahman Biswas himself could be next target for his involvement with the Barisal Zila Peace Committ in 1971, as such Committees were formed to help the Pakistani forces.⁷

Finding itself in a awkward position, BNP tried to fend off the life anti-Azam group by arresting the ameer, prior to the holding of the people's court on March 26,1992. Azam was placed under arrest but formal trial was never held. BNP was not happy with Jamaat for exposing it to such an embarrassment, and felt Jamaat should have at least consulted it before taking unconstitutional step for appointing Azam, a Pakistani, as its ameer.⁸ The BNP regime had ignored the people's court and the state owned communication system (radio & TV) suppressed the news completely.

As days passed the BNP government realised that its confrontationist strategy would not work. So it took revenge by filing case against 24 organizers of the people's court. In reaction to BNP's strategy, the AL, boycotted the current session of the parliament and put up four-point demand as the minimum condition for reconsidering the move. At this juncture both AL and BNP did not want a showdown because of their concern that the greatest benefit would go to Jatiya Party of Ershad.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. p.705.

⁸ Ibid.

For that reason BNP and AL entered into an agreement on June 26, 1992, which said that the trial of Golam Azam would be held according to the constitution and the laws of the land.⁹ The AL demanded Azam be tried as a war criminal under War Criminal Act of 1973 and the BNP was in favour resolving the problem on the basis of the existing law of the land.

Whatever the legalistic nitty gritty of the case, politically it was clear that neither side wanted a showdown. The fear of the return of authoritarianism loomed so large for all that both the BNP and AL relented. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia favoured a conciliatory approach to the AL, and in a hurriedly called cabinet meeting on July 8, she advised her ministers not to indulge in unnecessary abuse against opposition members either in or outside parliament.¹⁰ A section of BNP did not want to favour Jamaat in Golam Azam case at the cost of the BNP's nationalistic image. In any case the Jamaat's support was no longer so vital to the BNP as it now had 170 seats in the 330 member parliament.¹¹ In September, 1991, the by-election for 11 seats which helped BNP to reach at 170 seats. The Golam Azam issue shows one thing clearly that not only the BNP but also AL as two major political parties show their inclination towards Islam for political mileage which in turn act as moral boost to Islamic extremists and for their terrorist activities

The minority question has been an integral part of politics in Bangladesh. The minorities have been sandwiched between the fight of the Bengali and Bangladeshi identity politics. They have been subjected to violence over the question of their political loyalty. The Awami League charged BNP for its total disregard towards minorities especially Hindu population and projecting them as a victim of the radical policies pursued by the ruling coalition.¹² The Awami League argues that violence has a political message because it has been directed against the Hindus along with other minority communities who are considered as opponents of the Bangladeshi or

⁹ Ibid, p.706.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Khaleda Habib, *Bangladesh : Elections, Parliament and the Cabinet*, (Dhaka : Murshed, 1991), pp.128-132.

¹² S. Datta, *Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy*, (New Delhi : Shipra Publication, 2004), p.83.

Islamic nationalism by the BNP and its fundamentalists allies. The perceived mistreatment of minorities comes against the background of re-emerging Islamic identity, which appeared to have intensified the common divide in Bangladesh¹³

The Bengli cultural identity has marginalized the Chakmas and the Islamic identity has done same thing with the Hindus in Bangladesh. The Chakmas and the Hindus which constitute two major minority communities have been sidelined from the mainstream of Bangladesh politics by Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism respectively. The consequence of the discriminatory policies and politics and violence has reflected in the dwindling population of minorities in Bangladesh.

The Chakmas, who constitute the dominant group among the tribals mainly inhabits in the hills and valleys of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The vulnerability of minorities in Bangladesh is most visibly manifested by the periodic recurrence of Chakma problem and the deteriorating delicate ethno-social fabric in the Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT).¹⁴ The decision of Mujib government to allow lowland families to settle in the secluded highland of the tribes in order to establish national integrity and homogeneity amongst the people of one “Benglee nation” proved not only to be wrong but disastrous.¹⁵ The ethno-linguistic and religious differences assumed a cultural economic dimension when landless Bengali Muslims from outside CHT were encouraged to settle amidst them.¹⁶

The outsiders were allotted or allowed to grab land belonging to the tribesmen, dislodged them from their home, took away their business and injured their cultural pride. The tribesmen had to retaliate for their own existence and survival. It has led to armed rebellion, confrontation, reprisals, military action and escape to India where the tribesmen are trained for these insurgency action across the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. , p.94.

¹⁵ M. Ahmed, *Democracy and Challenge of Development : A Study of Politics and Military Interventions in Bangladesh*, (Dhaka : University Press Ltd, 1995), p.292.

¹⁶ S. Datta, *Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy*, (New Delhi : Shipra Publications, 2004), pp.94-95.

border.¹⁷ The BNP régime (1991-96) deliberately sidelined this issues, and instead of listening their legitimate demand it applied military force to quell the rebellion in CHT area. The militant campaign by the Shanti Bahini and political pressures from India compelled Bangladesh to eventually seek a political settlement in 1997 in the form of the CHT Peace Accord.¹⁸ The BNP-led by Begum Khalida Zia has been vociferous opponent of the peace agreement and portrayed it as a sell-out to India.¹⁹ The proximity of the CHT area to the North-East India led to fear in India that CHT could become a safe haven for some of militants operating in India's Northeast.²⁰

The treatment of minorities has become an agenda in the domestic politics. The perceived mistreatment of minorities comes against the background of re-emerging Islamic identity, which appeared to have intensified the communal divide in Bangladesh. The human rights violation which includes massacre of minorities burning of their homes arbitrary arrests, torture extra judicial execution and disappearance reportedly perpetrated by or with the connivance of the Bangladesh law enforcement personnel during 1991-96.²¹ Among minority communities the Garo tribes majority of which are converted Christians. They are inhabitants at the Garo hills in the greater Mymensing and Sylhet district in the north-eastern Bangladesh. Right from Modhupur forest, near Tangil to the West of Mymensingh district is the traditional homeland of the Garos. An Asian Development Bank (ADB) official informed Modhupur Garo Aboriginal Unity that on 4 March 1994 that "as part of the Project frame work it was specifically agreed with the government that no wood lot plantations will be established on permanently cultivated areas so as to avoid possible social conflict relating to competing land uses."²²

¹⁷ M. Ahmed, *Democracy and Challenge of Development : A Study of Politics and Military Interventions in Bangladesh*, (Dhaka : University Press Ltd, 1995), p.292.

¹⁸ S. Datta, *Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy*, (New Delhi : Shipra Publications, 2004), p.95.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.96.

²⁰ Ibid, p.104.

²¹ Ibid, p.83.

²² R. Joshi, "Situation of Minorities in Bangladesh", *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, Vol.7, No.34, July-Dec, 2003, p.124.

In 1994 the Bangladesh government started a massive forestation programme in order to fill the goal of the new forest policy of 1994 move from present 8% tree coverage to 20%. The cultivable lands which originally belong to Garo community area were forcibly occupied without compensation contrary to terms and conditions of forestation project. The government resorted to indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force to silence the peaceful protest against afforestation program by the Garo tribes. On 10 July 1994 about 1500 people of 10 villages including three villages occupied by tribals for 70–100 year gathered at Nalijani in Muktagacha Thana to stop the tree planting being enforced by about 70 forests guards and officials, the guards opened fire and injured seven persons.²³ The injured people were arrested under anti-terrorists Act. The suffering of the tribal continued.

The popular perception of minorities being staunch supporters of the Awami League worked against the Bangladesh Hindus and have earned the wrath to the BNP and its allies.²⁴ The Hindu population mostly Bangla speaking people are the biggest religious minority in Bangladesh and are scattered all over the country. The Hindu minorities have been subjected to different type of persecutions. Their lands and properties which include homesteads, farmlands and religious places have been forcefully occupied. Another form of Hindu intimidation has been the issuing of fatwa against those who have according to the Muslim radicals tried to hurt or undermine the existing social system and religious sentiments

The Hindu minority constitutes the largest chunk of the minorities in Bangladesh. They are the prime target of the Islamic extremist. They are perceived as pro-Indian by Islamic fundamentalist and pro-AL by the BNP. During BNP led regime (1991-96) the Hindu minority had faced the most barbaric treatment in 1992. In reaction to Babri Mosque demolition the fundamentalist forces resorted to arson, loot, murders rape and demolition of Hindu temple. It had continued for over one month. Begum Khalid Zia said on the floor of parliament, “a wonderful communal

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ S. Datta, *Bangladesh : A Fragile Democracy*, (New Delhi : Shipra Publication, 2004), pp.84-85.

harmony is reigning in Bangladesh". Similarly the home Minister of BNP govt. remarked that Bangladesh was a model of communal harmony

In response to Babri Mosque demolition on the same day riots took place in Dhaka, which left 70 people including two journalist injured and also a number of shops belonging to Hindus were burnt.²⁵ The Indian Airline office and several Hindu temples were attacked. The Indian cultural centre was set fire, violence spread to other parts of the country as well. In Sarwar, the biggest rath (the chariot Hindu use to parade their deity Jagannath on particular day of the year) in country was set on fire.²⁶ Hindu leaders protested against government callousness and its failure to protect Hindu properties.

On the political front all parties unanimously condemned the demolition of the mosque. But as violence spread in the country resulting in the destruction of Hindu temples and properties the opposition led by the Awami League began to blame the government for its inept handling of the law and order situation.²⁷ The fear and uncertainty gripped the Hindu minority which was very evident from their decision not to participate in the shiva chaturdashi fair, 300 year old Hindu religious fair a three hundred year old Hindu religious fair in Chittagong that draws hundreds of thousands devotees every year.

Interestingly, however, instead of giving a opportunity to Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh to score a point over their secularist enemies, the post-Ayodhya reaction gave that latter a chance to strike at the former. Both Jahanara Imam and Sheikh Hasina Wajed alleged the hobnobbing of Jamaat-e-Islami with Bhartiya Janata Party (the Hindu Chauvinist party of India that had masterminded the demolition of Babri Mosque). On December 8, 1992 a resolution jointly passed by the AL the CPB-led Progressive Democratic Front, the five party left alliance and the Ganatantric (democratic) Party said that "the anti-liberation and anti-democratic

²⁵ Bangladesh observer, 7th December, 1992.

²⁶ P.S. Ghosh, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads : Religion and Politics", *Asian Survey*, Vo.33, No.7, July, 1993, p.707.

²⁷ Ibid.

fascist Jamaat-Shibir (Student wing of the Jamaat) elements in Bangladesh are involved in heinous crime to gain its political mileage by capitalizing on the barbaric act of extremist forces in India.²⁸ The resolution also stated that the Jamaat leaders had meeting with BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) leader, L.K.Advani in India and both had finalized their plans for communal disturbances in their respective countries.²⁹

The opposition's strategy was a double-edged weapon. On one hand the opposition tended to identify with the widespread Muslim sentiment against the Babri mosque demolition, on the other hand it underscored the danger of religious politics by comparing J-e-I with BJP. The All Party Communal Harmony Committee comprising pro-liberation and democratic parties, professional bodies and other progressive groups organized a peace rally in Dhaka in which India government was urged to reconstruct the mosque on its original site and the people of Bangladesh were urged not to disrupt the Muslim-Hindu communal harmony.³⁰

The Muslim radicals first drew international attention in 1993, when a feminist writer Taslima Nasrin was forced to flee the country after receiving death threats from Islamic fundamentalists. Her book *Lajja* (Shame) which deals with the hostility towards the Hindu minority in Bangladesh provoked the Islamic extremists to issue fatwa. They interpreted the statements and writings of the book as blasphemous. Taslima Nasrin defended herself by arguing that she was misquoted and was referring not to Holy Quran but to some legal codes of Islam and Sharia.³¹ When some European country offered asylum to Taslima Nasrin, the BNP government came under pressure and through a negotiated settlement between the government and some top lawmakers, she was granted bail and allowed to leave Bangladesh for Sweden.³²

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bangladesh Observer, 9th December, 1992.

³⁰ P.S. Ghosh, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads : Religion and Politics", *Asian Survey*, Vol.33, No.7, July 1993, p.708.

³¹ G. Hossain, "Bangladesh in 1994 : Democracy at Risk", *Asian Survey*, Vol.35, No.2, Feb. 1995, p.174.

³² Ibid.

The year 1993 can be termed as first year of organised protest from the Hindu community in Bangladesh against unabated repression and oppression by the government. During the biggest religious festival of “Durga Puja”, the Hindu community demonstrated in anger and protest by hoisting black flags in all religious temples and places of worship. During the festival no deity or idols were set up and no decorations were made. They urged the government to accept their charter demands. They demanded to revoke the Vested Property Act, repeal of the 8th amendment of the constitution and provision to reserve seats for the minorities in the parliament.³³

The Hindu community in Bangladesh has also faced persecution in the field of business. In mid 1993, the BNP- led coalition government issued orders, which were interpreted as government policy of persecution of Hindu community. The Home Ministry asked the commercial banks to control withdrawal of substantial cash money by the Hindu community in the districts adjoining the India Bangladesh border.

Apart from the persecution of Hindus the Christian community has come under attack several times in Bangladesh. In 1991-92 during the Gulf war, supporter of Saddam Hussain, the authoritarian leader of Iraq and Muslim fanatics in Bangladesh attacked the Christians. The Islamic fundamentalist forces attacked Christian churches in reaction to Babri mosque demolition.

The tentacles of Islamic extremism have also spread to academic institution. Reports collected from local newspaper show that at least 35 student were killed during the year 1994, about 900 wounded, and thousands of bullets fired on campus throughout the country.³⁴ Some 65 educational institutions were either closed immediately or had more than one serious disruption of the academic calendar deteriorating the standard of education at all levels.³⁵ Behind the student demands on

³³ R. W. Timm (ed.), *State of Human Rights*, (Dhaka : Co-ordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh, 1996), p.128.

³⁴ G. Hussain, “Bangladesh in 1994 : Democracy at Risk”, *Asian Survey*, Vol.35, No.2, February 1995, p.175.

³⁵ Ibid.

various academic issues, the political rivalry among the political parties got reflected in student clash inside educational campus. Not only the student community but also the faculties involved themselves in violence because of politicization and polarisation among themselves. The student support of political parties was reflected in college elections in 1994. In this election Jatiyatavadi Chatra Dal (BNP's student wing) won 330 seats while its main opponent the AL's Bangladesh Chatra League won 179 seats demonstrating the dominant position of the BNP within the student community.³⁶ In this campus violence the hands of Islamic extremist groups was suspected.

The non-governmental organization (NGO) had also faced the attack from fundamentalist groups in 1994. The extremist groups launched a united movement demanding suspension of NGO activities in Bangladesh claiming that the NGO are supported and backed by Christians and Jews. They denounced the NGO's as 'anti-state' 'anti-people' and 'anti-Islamic' and said that these organizations have been operating in the country with the ulterior motive of capturing state power by undermining the Islamic faith.³⁷ They further alleged the NGOs with encouraging women to become too independent and turning them against Islamic values.³⁸

It is alleged that some Islamic groups have destroyed thousands of sapplings planted by NGO workers and burned down some NGO-run schools on the suspicion that schools are working against Islamic values and converting poor rural Muslims to Christianity.³⁹ The main targets however have been the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Grameen Bank, two giant NGOs that are engaged in voluntary activities in fields of health, family planning, primary education and mass literacy, income generation, credit operations, community development, and human rights.⁴⁰ The government moved very carefully, assuring the NGOs of its

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dhaka Courier, June 17, 1994.

³⁹ G. Hussain, "Bangladesh in 1994 : Democracy at Risk", *Asian Survey*, Vol.35, No.2, February 1995, p.175.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

support for their work but formulating a comprehensive act to regulate voluntary activities in Bangladesh which the NGO perceived as restrictive and contrary to their demand for more flexibility. The BNP government also criticized the Islamic fundamentalists for their anti-NGO actions and misinterpretation at Islam

Bangali scholar, Meghna Guhathakurta aptly sums up the plight of the minorities in her country. “Although technically speaking there is nothing to prevent minorities to participate in mainstream politics in Bangladesh and hence bring in their own kinship structures into play, the foregrounding of a majoritarianism inscribing Bengali as a state language and Islam as a state religion automatically marginalizes religious and ethnic minorities from attaining a central role in determining class hegemony.⁴¹ The popular perceptions of minorities being staunch supporters of Awami League worked against the Bangladeshi Hindus and have earned the wrath of BNP and allies.⁴² The distinct feature of minorities’ persecution and their disappearance as a result of domestic violence perpetrated by the BNP and its allies clearly reflected from the population figures presented in the following Table.⁴³

Census year	Muslim%	Hindu%	Budhist%	Christian%	Others%
1901	66.1	33.0	-	-	0.9
1911	67.2	31.5	-	-	1.3
1921	68.1	30.6	-	-	1.3
1931	69.5	29.4	-	-	1.0

⁴¹ S. Datta, “Bangladesh Political Evolution : The Growing Uncertainties”, *Strategic Analysis Vol.27, No.2, April-June 2003, p.245.*

⁴² Ibid, p.246.

⁴³ R. Joshi, “Situation of Minorities in Bangladesh”, *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies, Vol.7, No.34, July-Dec. 2003, p.124.*

1941	70.3	28.0	-	0.2	1.6
1951	76.9	22.0	0.7	0.1	0.1
1961	80.4	18.5	0.7	0.3	0.1
1971	85.4	13.5	0.6	0.3	0.2
1981	86.7	12.1	0.6	0.3	0.3
1991	88.3	10.5	0.6	0.3	0.3

Assessing the situation it can be said that the policies taken by the BNP government opened the gates of religious extremism in the nation. From every other political and civilian sphere, religion started playing a significant role in the lives of the people of Bangladesh. Now the extremism that was initiated by the political elements of the nation had gone out of hands of the political elements and has provided the initiation of a strange extremist phenomenon in Bangladesh. The J-e-I had been held responsible by Bangladeshi and moderate Muslims for many of the attacks against religious minorities, secular intellectuals and journalists in the country.

The 8th parliamentary election on 1st October 2001 was a clear verdict against the five-year (1996-2001) rule of the Awami League government. All those pro-Pakistani fundamentalist forces who were defeated in the liberation war have not only resurrected but restored to power as equal and honourable partners in Begum Khaled Zia's BNP-led four-party alliance government with the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party and Islami Orikiya Jote (IOJ) as constituents. The election campaign and voting pattern reflected the massive communalization of Bangladesh politics. Islam and protecting Osama bin Laden had greater appeal than upholding the "lofty" ideas of

Muktijudho, which are now considered expendable baggage.⁴⁴ In fact Osama bin Laden had emerged as a major issue and cast a spell on Muslims who had been told by BNP, JeI and other fundamentalist partners that this election would decide the fate of Islam and Laden's crusade. The BNP and Jamaat leaders demanded Islam and Islamic way of life should be the state's guiding principles since 88% of total population of Bangladesh is Muslims. An Islamic identity can produce economic spin-offs. The tie-up between BNP and the fundamentalist parties was very much symbiotic – the BNP needed fundamentalists' votes to win marginal seats and the fundamentalists need BNP support to increase their tally. Begum Zia allowed entry of staunch Islamists into her party.

The country-wide post-election Hindu-cleansing operations in 2001 jointly conducted by BNP and Jamaat workers subjected the minority Hindu Community to a wave of centrally planned and directed murder, loot, extortion, arson, gang-rape that triggered a massive exodus of Hindus to India. Later, operating at the micro-level, the fundamentalists notably guerrillas of the J.e.I. affiliate Islamic Chhatra Shibir, selectively killed a number of leading Hindus like college principal, school teachers, priests, and Buddhist monks to sustain and exacerbate the sense of insecurity among the minorities. The small Ahmediya sect has come under attack from J-e-I and other fundamentalist forces. Three years after the unprecedented mayhem under the BNP-Jamaat dispensation, atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities have continued unabated. Besides countless cases of dacoity, 226 serious cases of minority bashing were reported in the first half of 2002 which consisted of murder (20), rape (22), kidnapping (17) including seven girls (student), and extortion, loot and forcible occupation of houses and other immovable property.⁴⁵ BNP and Jamaat cadres were mainly involved in the perpetration of these crimes.

Countless horrendous crimes have been perpetrated against religious and ethnic minorities over the years, but barring a very few cases, the police have not investigated them. Though the culprits were known and the press had named them all,

⁴⁴ The Statesman, 26 October, 2001, 6.

⁴⁵ The Statesman, 8th September 2002, p. 8.

no action was taken against them. Under BNP-Jamaat regime the sequence of crime and punishment has ceased to operate in Bangladesh in respect of all cases involving Muslim offenders and non-Muslim victims. In the given situation, the minorities have the stark choice of embracing Islam or migrating to India en masse. Until now they have chosen the second alternative.

According to Bangladesh Society for Enforcement of Human Rights, as many as, 1219 people were murdered and 6890 injured in criminal terrorist operation between October 2001 and February, 2002.⁴⁶ In March 2002 alone, 238 murders and 119 rapes occurred.⁴⁷ To arrest rapidly declining law and order situation, the BNP-Jamaat government launched Operation 'Clean Heart' in October, 2002 and 'Operation Spider' in July, 2003. Jointly carried out by the army, police and BDR, these high-profile exercises achieved hardly any success. Sensing trouble, the real culprits had undergone underground and action was directed against political opponents of the ruling coalition. Innocent people were made victims of the ruling coalition. Clearly for the incumbent BNP-Jamaat regime lives of secular opposition leaders, minorities and moderate Muslim intellectuals are expendable in the interest of perpetuating its hold on power.

Beginning in 1987, the JeI in co-ordination with its Pakistan counterpart and ISI recruited no fewer than 5,000 Madrassa alumni as Mujahideens and sent them in successive batches to Afganistan to participate in the jihad against Soviet occupation army.⁴⁸ In Afganistan, they came in contact with the Hizbul Islam, Al-Qaeda, Taliban and Pakistani terrorist outfit like L-e-T and J-e-M. Inspired by Osama bin Laden and trained by Al-Qaeda these Mujahideens formed the vanguard of Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh on return from Afganistan these soldiers of Islam organized a host of terrorist outfits in the country with the aim to establish a Talibanised transnational

⁴⁶ The Statesman, 15th July 2004, p.2

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

state comprising Bangladesh, Assam, Tripura, Muslim majority of West Bengal and the Rohingya Muslim dominated Arakan Hills of Myanmar.⁴⁹

There are two kinds of comments on the re-emergence Islamic extremism. First one is the rise of Islamic political parties, which divide Bangladesh society more sharply into Islamic and secular. Second one is 'journey of Bangladesh towards fundamentalism' after 9/11, which claim that the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh was intertwined with the rise of JeI, then it connects with rise of terrorism. The second view reflects that Bangladesh has become a cocoon of terror, that "Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist group, powerful military with ties to the militants, the mushrooming of Islamic schools churning out radical students, middle class apathy, poverty and lawlessness – all are combining to transform the nation".⁵⁰

Since the beginning of 2001, there were many violent incidents in which the involvement of the Islamic extremist elements was suspected by the Bangladesh police. The more important of these incidents were:

- (a) on January 20, 2001, six persons were killed and 50 others injured in two separate bomb blasts in Dhaka. Home Minister Mohammed Nasim held the JeI responsible for the attack. Water Resources Minister Abul Razzak accused Pakistan's ISI having instigated the incidents;
- (b) On February 6, 2001, seven persons were killed and 100 injured in a clash between Islamic fundamentalist and security forces at Brahanbaria, bordering the Indian state of Tripura. These incidents were sequels to the arrests of two top leaders of the IOJ for having threatened two judges who had banned the issue of fatwas by clerics and killed a police constable;

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ I.P. Khosla : "The Internal Political Dynamics of Bangladesh", AGNI : Studies in International Strategic Issues, Vol-VII, No.11, Sept-Dec, 2003, p.13-14.

- (c) On April 2001, a bomb exploded at an open-air concert in Dhaka, killing at least a people and wounding nearly 50. The concert was part of celebrations marking the Bengali New Year. Sheikh Hasina blamed the blasts on “forces who opposed Bangladesh’s independence (from Pakistan) and want to destroy Bengali culture.” The JEI had been campaigning against the celebration of the new year on the ground that it was un-Islamic;
- (d) At least 22 people were killed and more than 100 injured in an explosion at a local office of then ruling Awami League in June, 2001;
- (e) On December 7, 2002, a series of near-simultaneous bomb blasts at four Bangladesh cinema halls peaked with families celebrating the end of the Ramadan Muslim fasting month killed 15 people and wounded nearly 300; and
- (f) Earlier, in September 2002, bomb wounded 30 people at a circus show and in a cinema hall in southwestern Satkhira.

In the wake of 21st May, 2004 bomb blast at the Hazrat Shahjalal Shrine in Silhet, 3 persons killed and at least 100 others including British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, sustained injuries. The deadly bomb attack on the Awami League rally in Dhaka on August 21, 2002 in yet another stark reminder that none ‘save the ruling clique, is safe in today’s Bangladesh. Though Sheikh Hasina escaped the attack with minor injuries, it took a toll of 19 lives and injured 15 others, and many of them crippled for ever.

The growing religious extremism in form of Islamic terrorism had its resonance in Bangladesh and it could threaten social harmony increase communal tension and upset the ongoing nascent democratic process. The open alliance with the fundamentalist forces like J-e -I by a major political party, the BNP, had helped the Islamic extremist groups in consolidating their positioning in Bangladesh politics. The communal violence during 1991-96 clearly shows that the civilian administration failed to provide basic security to citizens in general and the minority communities in particular. Referring on the current state of affairs in Bangladesh Mufakharul Islam of Dhaka University very perceptively remarked: "We (have been) in the midst of a continuous and violent revolution for the last two decades. During the period all kinds of society forces have been unleashed. But nobody now knows how to leash them"⁵¹

Ascendancy of the Islamic identity and corresponding dilution of secularism and Bengali cultural identity have worked against the practice of tolerance and accommodation. A culture of tolerance and respect needs to be practiced. The Hindus Chakmas, the Garos, the Malos, the Santhals and all other communities have contributed and participated in their own ways towards building up Bangladeshi society their contribution and sacrifices during the war of liberation and in independent Bangladesh also need to be recorded and acknowledged in the national history of Bangladesh. The overall situation of the minorities in Bangladesh will not improve unless fundamental rights laid down in the state constitution as well as by the United Nations Human Rights declaration are not implemented. Without political will of the government it would be difficult to see a society of social harmony.

⁵¹ P.S. Ghosh, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads : Religion and Politics, *Asian Survey*, Vol.33, No.7, July 1992, p.710.

Chapter-5

Conclusion

CHAPTER-5

CONCLUSION

Religious extremism has taken deep roots in the region of South Asia and Bangladesh has remained no exception. One thing that has been worthwhile to note is that mostly in those nations where religious extremism has been playing a significant role, in some ways was introduced into the character of the polity by the governing leadership. A religious extremist element in the nation's political and social fabric slowly gains power within the society changing along with it the social character of the populace making them either more religiously vibrant or mute, having a very small minority who speaks out against such a change. Religious extremism creates a sort of friction between various religious groups, which sometimes takes a violent shape in the form of communal violence and riots. Political parties having affiliations in these societies' acts as a catalyst, bringing a religious overtone to the type of politics that govern the nation.

Religion is used by governing bodies for mostly two reasons; first, to build a national identity on the basis of religion within divided communities made up of different *ethnies*; and secondly, to provide legitimacy to either a political party having minimal grass-root base or a political leader who has taken the reigns of governance through undemocratic means. It has also been used to get recognition by Islamic group of nations, nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran, where such recognition comes along with funds and even a platform where one's voice gets considerable strength in the international political fora. Religion also has been used as a strategic game plan to divide communities on religious line, tacitly, in unfriendly nations. It is done either by supporting factional religious groups within the community to break the society up on religious lines threatening the sanctity of a state from within the community structure.

One thing that has been common within such societies is once the wheel of religious extremism starts rolling, it becomes difficult for any secular leadership, to bring back the original character of the state. If the change is brought in artificially, such change gains permanence by filtering practically in every nook and corner of the society.

Bangladesh has been such a society where religion has remained as a secondary factor of identity in the initial stages and the powerful and distinct linguistic character of the nation had remained more vibrant. Though the creation of East Pakistan was singularly based on the issue of religion, but the element of religion did not immediately percolate fully within the community, and rather the phenomenon of such change remained to be very slow. This character was singularly different from that of West Pakistan, as religion; from the early stages it started taking deep roots within the community.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman, father of Bangladesh set off his political journey on the high of secularism. He propounded the idea of Bengali Nationalism on which he wanted to build the Bangladesh society and polity. However, he could not be able to stick to the spirit of secularism during the last days of his political career. His government was mired into corruption, problems of governance and economic crisis. The domestic pressures from anti-Mujib forces were also mounting because of his secular stand in Bangladesh politics. Besides domestic factors the foreign powers were exerting pressure to abandon secularism and adopt Islamic ideology in his political life. Finally Mujib was forced due to above compelling factors to compromise with his Bengali nationalism. He started quoting different Quranic verses in different public occasions. This compromise with secularism on the part of its proponent gave a rude shock to Bengali nationalism and boost the morale of orthodox religious forces.

The role of Bangladesh Nationalist Party in the promotion of Islamic radicalism and extremism in the nation has been significant. Awami League, though had taken the support of Islamic radical groups for their sustenance as well as coming to power, but BNP had been phenomenal in abetting, protecting, and promoting Islamic radicals and extremist elements for two principle reasons. First, BNP political manifesto itself clears out the intention of protecting and promoting the cause of Islam; and secondly, Islam provides a national identity of its own, which is entirely different from that of India, a nation that has intentionally or unintentionally superimposed its identity over the neighbouring smaller nations. Politics of these

nations in South Asia has been mostly to create a separate and distinct identity of their own which is free from the influence of the Indian polity.

After Mujib's assassination on 15th August 1975, General Ziaur Rahman appeared in the political scenario of Bangladesh. He strengthened his position through the political platform in the shape of BNP. He out rightly rejected secularism. Through different presidential proclamations and constitutional amendments, he injected Islamic values into the sinews of Bangladesh politics. All the governmental machinery was used to spread Islamic ideals specially through the communication network. He propounded Islamic or Bangladesh nationalism. This doctrine was overtone with orthodox and radical Islamic faiths. He also took the help of different orthodox religious forces and anti-India forces, pro-USA, pro-Chinese and pro-Islamic forces. All these anti-Mujib forces were dead against Mujib's secular outlook and approach. Now these forces became very close to Zia. Zia started his policy of legitimization through Islamisation. He started the foreign policy of solidarity among muslim countries raising the fraternal feeling among them specially the oil exporting ones. The policy of 'political Islam' as a potential tool to gain legitimacy in his own country and to get closer with Islamic countries proved to be very productive. These radicalization process started by Zia was followed by subsequent General H. M. Ershad and BNP regime.

General H. M. Ershad after succeeding Zia promoted Islamic extremism. He declared Islam as a state religion through the 8th constitutional amendment in 1988. The administrative system and the fundamentalist groups were moved vigorously. He maintained good relationship with Islamic countries. All the pro-Islamic and pro-Pakistani forces were encouraged for the process of Islamisation of Bangladesh.

However, with the coming in of General Ershad, religion became more of an element that started providing legitimacy to the illegitimate rule of the military general. He forcefully islamised the Bangladeshi society, so that these religious groups provided support to the military rule, strengthening, legitimising and providing

some sort of permanence to the military rule. The *madrassa* culture got initiated from his period of governance.

The rise of religious extremism has been synonymous with the rise of the Jamaat and other religious organisations having some sort of affiliation with Jamaat. Its rise to political power by being in the political alliance with that of the BNP government in 1990, made it significantly powerful and provided enough freedom to remould the rural Bangladeshi communities bringing in a stringent religious code within them; Building of *madrassas*, curtailing freedom of the womenfolk, functioning on the terms of the *Shariat*, declaring *fatwas* on individuals who possessed a challenge to the dictates of the religious leaders, are some aspects, which have become very common in Bangladeshi society.

Taking the assistance of Jamaat remained as a necessity during both the periods of governance for Khaleda, making the Jamaat exorbitantly powerful. Having the political power at hand they were able to create a platform for other Islamic groups, even intelligence agencies of nations to launch anti-Indian actions, which cover supporting insurgent activities, meting out atrocities against the minority, creating a religious temper within the community that would be favourable for their activities.

The BNP led coalition during 1991-1996 had manifested the first open political alliance with the radical Islamic outfit Jamaat-e-Islami (J-e-I). With its help the BNP was able to form the government. The leader of BNP and premier of Bangladesh followed her predecessors' radicalization process. During her tenure the minorities had faced the attacks, persecutions and torture. These all happened with the coordinated effort by the BNP and extremist allies. The government policy towards CHT was conducive for the Islamic terrorist groups to continue their activities.

With the return of the period of democracy under the governance of BNP, the overt Islamisation that was followed by Zia and Ershad was also relentlessly observed by the party members of the BNP. Keeping in close contact with the philosophy of Ziaur Rahman, Khaleda Zia brought in policies of land reforms, special assistance to

Muslim education centers, non-governmental as well as governmental religious organisations, and even strengthened the religious office of the government.

The Jamaat, HUJI, the Islami Chhatra Shibir and the like worked hand in hand with various other religious extremist groups meting out atrocities against the religious minority groups within the nation. Even the communal incidents that took place in India made a significant impact in the society of Bangladesh, triggering of major hate killings against the Hindu minority. The main sad part that has taken place is that the Awami League for securing a political base is also slowly shedding off its secular façade and following in the footsteps of the BNP. The manner in which the secular minority has been targeted without any protest from either party members of the BNP as well as the Awami League shows that both the major political parties has felt the necessity of keeping close connections with the religious political parties and the extremist groups for their own survival.

The 2001 elections has made it more clear, that the rising trend of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh has come to stay, changing the character not only of the community and society at large, but making significant influence within the armed forces, bureaucracy, and other government organs.

Religion playing a role in politics for increasing cohesion within the society, bringing in oneness, strengthening the roots of democracy, can be surely tolerated, but when the same religion takes an extremist colour bringing harm to the minority community, bringing in stringent rules in the name of purification, harbouring gender biased opinion, even having a woman prime minister and a principle woman leader in the opposition, it harms the society than it assists. Bangladesh has started walking on a dangerous path, and if there does not come any significant re-modulation of the functioning of the governing bodies, and then the state of Bangladesh not only would threaten the region but also will be a threat to herself.

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