

DHAKA STREET

Nandirhat: Bad Moon Rising

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BEFORE THE PRESENT AWAMI League (AL) regime, the tenure of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) regime was marked by a conspicuous increase in attacks on religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh. The rising tide of killings, forced conversion, arson, rape, abduction and threats was partially stemmed during the interim caretaker government. In the present AL times, the scenario for religious minorities has been relatively less violent. Unlike in the Indian Union, the minorities of Bangladesh do not have multiple political allegiances to choose. AL with all its inadequacies (the sordid backtracking on a clearly secular constitution and economic devastation of minorities by the Enemy/Vested property acts being the most egregious) has been nearly the sole beneficiary of the minority votes in Bangladesh. Numbering nearly 10 percent of the population, they are crucial for AL's design of holding on to power.

Riding on the wave of popular discontent against the rampant corruption of the BNP, AL also benefited from the people's organisations that are staunchly committed to the secular ideals of the Liberation struggle. These organisations are *Shommilito Shanskritik Jote*, *Sector Commander's Forum*, *Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee* and some others. However, this apparently secular consolidation belies a slowly boiling Islamic radicalization of significant sectors of the population. Recent events at Nandirhat-Hathazari are a stark reminder. In what was a classic scenario played out so many times in the subcontinent, a religious procession with drums (in this case, Hindus from Lokenath Sebashram) passed by a mosque. This resulted in an intolerant retaliation and a period of classic Bengali *dhawa-palta dhawa*. While a section of local elders were mediating to defuse the scenario, another faction went on a rampage, ably supported by the local Madrasah. During this vandalism, a number of Hindu temples namely *Sri Sri Jagadeshwari Ma Temple* and *Jagannath Bigroho Temple* at Nandirhat, *Raksha Kali Temple*, *Jalakumari Bari Temple*, and *Sita Kalibari Temple* at Sadar Upazila were desecrated. Attackers also set to fire the *Sri Sri Jagadesh-wari Ma Temple* and about 50 homes and businesses belonging to Hindus were attacked, damaged and looted.

This area houses Bangladesh's oldest and largest madrasah, the *Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Moinul Islam*. The *boro-hujur* of the Madrasah is also a leader of the *Islamic Oikyo Jote* (Islamic Unity Alliance), an important partner of the BNP and the *Jamaat-e-Islami*. This madrasah has produced graduates who volunteered for the Afghan 'jihad' during Taliban rule. Given the large influence institutions under its *Deobandi* sway wield locally, the events at Nandirhat were the perfect excuse to demonstrate the pent up venom that was being injected for sometime. The local police, like Gujarat, remained onlookers for the first 24 hours, where

massive attacks happened in at least three different waves. Intervention from the highest levels resulted in the imposition of Section 144. Things have been relatively violence-free thereafter.

This area, in Chittagong division in many ways represents the Bengali Muslim frontier. Between the hinterland of East Bengal and the Buddhist-animist groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the areas represent the sharpest edge of Bengali Muslim expansionism. The Tripura area in the Indian Union has seen a similar take-over by Bengalis (primarily Hindus in this case). These areas of Chittagong remain very close to the pulse of the 'deep state' of Bangladesh. The AL hunts with these hounds but also runs with the hares when it deems politically expedient. The two-faced nature of its politics, the tokenism in its professed secularism and its wariness to challenge entrenched religious fundamentalism is largely drawn from its self-awareness that the party itself (including sections of its middle leadership) is not a bulwark of muscular secularism. Unsurprisingly, the most vocal secular voices in the AL are mostly those who joined AL after long stints with Communist Party affiliated groups like the *Chhatro Union* and *Jubo Union*. AL has shirked responsibility for the incident, instead choosing to engage in political one-upmanship by blaming the *Jamat-e-Islami* and its notorious students wing, the *Islami Chhatro Shibir*.

There is undoubtedly a planned and conspiratorial element in the whole affair. The police have held Jashim, a construction worker from Hajipara, who has confessed that he was given money to break a section of the wall of a local mosque by Mohammad Lokman, the chief functionary of the Hajipara Jam-e-Moshjid. One is reminded of Bhisham Sahni's 'Tamas'. The formal and informal links between militant religious organisations, 'charities', expatriate supporters, political groups, local police and underemployed youths have created lasting cesspools. The AL can choose to look away from the growing radicalization at its own peril. In the upcoming elections, they need a spirited turnout from the base. While frightened minorities have voted the AL, a significant section might just stay home. Fright after all cannot be long-term political capital. That fixed deposit matures after sometime. AL needs to reinvest in building up the secular fabric of Bangladesh. Leaving solidarity actions only to expressedly left-secular organisations is a cynical strategy at best. A majority can still be forged against the growing clout of fundamentalism. That politics is arduous but the future of Bangladesh and the subcontinent is connected to the outcome of that struggle. □□□