

A Secular Cultural Approach to Deradicalization: Bangladesh Perspective

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1. Introduction

Radicalization is a widely discussed issue in recent time. It has emerged as one of the most dangerous threats to peace, security, development and civilization. It can be found more or less everywhere in developing and developed worlds. In South Asia, the birth place of Ahimsa (non-violence) and non-violence movements, radicalization has become a great concern now in these days. Almost everyday many people are killed in terrorist suicide bombings in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is believed that a large segment of the societies of these countries has been radicalized and involved in radical Islamic movements and has justified the terrorist activities in establishing Islamic rule. On the other hand, radicalization is also a major problem in India too although it is a secular state. Hindu radical groups have been responsible for Gujarat massacre, the destruction of Babri Mosque and some other fanatic activities against the Muslim and Christian minorities in the largest democracy.

Bangladesh, a Muslim majority country, is also not free from the poison of radicalization. However, if radicalization is considered as lower end of the terrorism spectrum, it can be argued that radicalization is at a very early stage in Bangladesh compared to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The governments of Bangladesh have already shown zero tolerance on terrorism and have taken strong measures to combat the terrorists through various security sectors. Although success came in many cases in combating terrorism, the root causes of radicalization facilitating terrorism and how people can be deradicalized have not been adequately addressed. Under this milieu, this paper attempts to address the causes behind the rise of radicalization in Bangladesh and also argue that a secular cultural approach can be vital in deradicalization. This paper consists of five sections including the introduction. The second section focuses on the definition and causes of radicalization. The third section sheds some light on the concept of secular culture. The fourth section provides the current scenario of radicalization in Bangladesh and the causes of radicalization in the context of Bangladesh. The last section focuses on the prevailing secular culture in Bangladesh and provides some specific policy recommendations in promoting this secular culture for deradicalization in the country.

2. Radicalization: Definition and Causes

There is no clear definition of radicalization. The term is used casually, and little has been done to systematically develop it into a conceptual tool through which to understand the process that may lead individuals to support violent extremism. Generally, it is widely referred to as a departure from normal social and political attitudes and behaviors. A person who is radical favors fundamental and sudden changes in existing institutions due to their perceptions of the presence of injustices by adopting uncompromising and hard-line policies. In other words, it can also be argued that a radical person or group of people do not have respect or tolerance for other religions or culture and want to impose their own belief or philosophy on others and prefer to take a violent path to achieve their goals.

Radicals facilitate terrorism and encourage others to become terrorists. Terrorists get moral, physical and financial supports from a radical man, groups or institutions.

There are a number of causes that may lead to radicalization. The causes may vary from country to country. Some key causes are addressed here: (I) Teaching of hatred toward other religions and Western values in some religious schools; (II) Poverty and unemployment; (III) Illiteracy and Ignorance; (IV) Political instability; (V) Economic and social deprivation, (VI) Perception of political injustice by the radical groups; (VII) Using religious groups for political interests of the mainstream parties; (VIII) Propaganda against any religion, e.g., propaganda against Islam, more known to be Islamofobia, has contributed to the rise of Islamic radicalization.

3. Concept of Secular Culture

A secular culture (*in Bengali Dharmanirapekha Shongiskriti*) meaning “equal treatment towards all religions and cultures” can play a significant role in reducing radicalization. A secular culture can uphold a culture of tolerance and communal harmony among the communities. The idea of secular culture does not give any priority to any particular religion or its followers in state and social affairs. In this culture all religions are equally valid ways of religious expressions or salvation. This culture accepts diversity, multiculturalism, and creates a peaceful environment where people do not grow any sense of hatred toward different ideologies. It introduces an educational system stressing Ahimsa, equity, humanity and forbearance. A secular education, reforming religious curricula, inter-faith dialogue, cross cultural education, and increasing interaction between cultures (e.g., Bangladeshi Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist join and enjoy each others religious festivals like Puja, Eid, X-mass, and Buddha Purnima together) are some tools/elements to achieve a secular culture in deradicalization.

4. Radicalization: Bangladesh Perspective

The phenomenon of radicalization in Bangladesh is not very old, rather a recent one. In fact, religious terrorism in Bangladesh did not as such go through the radicalization phase. We have not seen yet any radical movement able to put immense pressure on government for Islamization. However, the leftist radicalization has existed in Bangladesh since the erstwhile East Pakistan. The recent incidents regarding the rise of radicalization in the name of Islam is quite very new. This type of extremism can be traced back to the liberation war days of Bangladesh when the self-proclaimed Islamists, namely the Al-badr, Al-shams, Razakars etc. tried to prevent the breakup of Pakistan terming it as a debacle for Islam, of course through using violent means. Here, it should be noted that some Bangladeshi people mainly from madrasa voluntarily went to Afghanistan to join Mujahideen fighting against the Soviet troops in 1980s. After the victory of the Mujahideen, they came back to Bangladesh with arms training and radical ideologies and started dreaming to establish Islamic rule or Sharia in Bangladesh. However, it is the beginning of the new millennium when we see some religious elements rising as a threat to the peace and security of the country. The extremists began to come to spotlight especially since the US invasion in Afghanistan. This was a key event in promoting extremism in Bangladesh.

The extremists like Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Jagroto Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), and Harquat UL Jihad (HuJi) in Bangladesh have demanded a radical transformation of our political, judicial and educational systems, with even more emphasis

on madrasa education than in the past. There were a total of 18 major terrorist attacks across Bangladesh on different occasions between March 1999 and November 2005. The nationwide synchronized bomb explosions carried out by JMB at some 500 spots across 63 districts on 17th August 2005 were the most dangerous attacks, panicking both security sector and ordinary people.

With the whole hearted support of the Bangladeshi people, the government of Bangladesh subsequently apprehended the known senior leadership of JMB. Six JMB leaders including Bangla Bhai and his spiritual mentor Sheikh Abdur Rahman were executed on March 29, 2007, and since then hundreds of leaders and activists of JMB and other extremist groups have been apprehended across the country. There was no sympathy for the terrorists in the country. People considered that justice was delivered by the execution of the terrorists. Despite many operational successes by the security forces, success in disrupting terrorist motivation, ideologies and networking has been limited. Emergence of new extremist groups like Allahr Dal, Hizbut Tauhid confirms this. It should be noted here that even after suffering massive losses both in terms of people and logistics, these fanatic groups do not seem to concede defeat. It seems that they are vowed to carry on their acts of militancy in the name of religion. Therefore, in such cases, deradicalization can play a vital role in any attempt to deal with this continuing problem.

Causes of Radicalization in Bangladesh

There are various causes behind the rise of radicalization in Bangladesh. However, some of the key factors are discussed below:

(I) Poverty and unemployment: One of the key causes behind the rise of radicalization is poverty and unemployment in Bangladesh. For the radicals (who already are), it is very easy to entice the innocent poor by various means and thus increase the number of people in their camps. They may also be forced to join the radicals fearing for lives. Thousands of youths are unemployed in Bangladesh. They do not have a hope to live with. Radicalized groups or militant Islamists take advantage of this psychological void through mental manipulation. They lure those poorly educated youths in the name of paradise in order to get their own political ambitions fulfilled. The madrasa education system is much worse in terms of providing employment than the modern education system and it can be seen that the radical people, in many cases, are students from madrasa.

(II) Illiteracy: Many people in Bangladesh do not have enough ability to meet the basic needs of human life, of which education is one. Even when they somehow manage to receive education, they, in numerous cases, can not get it sufficiently and leave education incomplete. People, who have little or no education, can easily be indoctrinated by the radicals from inside and outside the country.

(III) Teaching of Radicalization in Kawmi Madrasa: It is strongly claimed that the students of some religious schools named Kawmi madrasa are taught hatred, intolerance and disrespect to the other religions and cultures. Naturally, the students become radical. Sometimes, they are also taught to fight to establish the rule of Islam or Sharia instead of the existing secular judicial system we inherited from the British. These schools of thought also believe that the government or the mainstream political parties follow and practice the Western values undermining the values of Islam. This perception misleads them to be

radicalized. Some clergies knowingly or unknowingly present distorted version of Islamic teachings and as they are respected in the society, people listen to them with care and may turn into radicals.

(IV) Religion in Politics: There are political parties in Bangladesh who often propose a combination of religion (Islam) with politics and in doing so, they always present the concepts of a state based on religion. Thus they knowingly or unknowingly promote radicalization.

(V) Political Instability: Due to the political instability, and conflict between the mainstream political parties, the political parties based on religion strategically gain rooms in promoting their values and ideologies causing further radicalization.

(VI) Through local and international NGOs: Sometimes, the radicals go abroad, send money and other logistic support to promote radicalism inside Bangladesh. Some Islamic local and international NGOs also contribute to spread radicalization.

(VII) The Perception of Political Injustice: The groups who subscribe radicalism think that their ideology or right is denied by the state, so they are victim of political injustice, although state perceives that their ideology insecure others rights.

(VIII) Anti-Islamic actions and Propaganda against Islam: The ongoing propaganda against Islam, and the brutality and atrocity going on against Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir and the other areas have albeit contributed to the rise of extremism in Bangladesh. These issues are of great importance to the radicals; they use these to stir up innocent people's emotions and thus may succeed in radicalizing them, definitely for fulfilling their own vile interests.

5. A Secular Culture in Deradicalization in Bangladesh

Before providing some specific recommendations for deradicalization, it is wise to tell a few words giving the picture of the other side of Bangladesh focusing on a trend of secular culture. Although radicalization has become a security concern for Bangladesh, another picture shows the acceptance of multicultural and communal harmony in Bangladesh. All religions are treated equally in Bangladesh. For instance, in Bangladesh, national holidays are declared for all the major religious festivals so that all people regardless of their religious identity can join and enjoy each other's festivals. Bangladesh is a Muslim majority, however, a large number of Muslim equally participate and enjoy in the other religious festivals like Puja, X-mass and Buddha Purnima every year. In this connection, one may argue that in many developed countries for example, in England, there is no such national holiday for Hindu or Muslim religious festivals, although millions of Hindu and Muslim are living in England. One may ask so what? It is an important issue because it does not address the sentiment of the large minority communities living in England. Hindu and Muslim possibly miss their religious rituals if the festivals fall on a working day. It is quite unimaginable for Christian in England missing out their X-mass in a similar manner.

From another perspective, it can be argued that people of Bangladesh do not prefer religious politics as it is evident that political parties based on religion have never gained any significant number of seats in the national elections. On the other hand, the recent strong demonstrations of university teachers, artists, singers, students and cultural

personalities against the radicals who destroy the sculpture of Baul Lalon Shah, a symbol of secular culture, in front of the Dhaka Airport indicate that majority people reject darkness and communalism. In addition, in the last parliamentary election, the defeat of the country's political parties based on religions decisively proved that people have denied politics of religion and embraced secular politics. Although some positive scenarios are mentioned above, there is no guarantee that Bangladesh will be free from the menace of radicalization soon. Unless and until the seeds of extremism are not out rooted, the threat will continue. However, it is not possible to eliminate radicalization with a single stroke although the phenomenon has not gained deep roots in Bangladesh yet, but it has substantial influence. However, as it is mentioned earlier that a secular cultural approach with a democratic values can reduce the threat of radicalization.

A Secular Cultural Approach: Some Specific Recommendations:

(I) A secular education system stressing equal treatment of all religions and cultures should be introduced. Instead of teaching of any particular religion, teaching and moral values of the other major religions should be included in the texts. Examples of historical non-violence, equity, humanity rather than glory of war or victory of a particular religious group can and should be addressed in the text of primary level to college level.

(II) Madrasa has been a subject of much speculation in the light of links between madrasa and radicalization. However, since madrasa is centuries old and located all over the Islamic world, it is not an easy matter to eliminate madrasa system, and of course it is a sensitive issue too. Rather what is possible is to counter the ideology of intolerance if they promote any. The madrasa curricula should be modernized to include English, Science and Technological subjects so that the madrasa graduates are also enlightened and can compete with general graduates to get a suitable job.

(III) Media, both electronic and print, can play a crucial role in promoting deradicalization. By broadcasting and publishing programmes and writings on the negative impacts of radicalization, they can influence people to a large extent to deradicalize them.

(IV) Inter-faith dialogues are very important for promoting peaceful coexistence between people of different faiths and cultures. It can minimize misperceptions among the religious communities and can help in deradicalization.

(V) Despite the operational success in combating terrorism, de-radicalization has not been given enough priority as an issue. Research and convergence of thinking on how radicalization occurs is limited. Therefore, research on radicalization should be initiated and continued. The government, NGOs and international organizations should take further steps in this regard.

(VI) Dialogues among intellectuals, think tanks, civil society and moderate Islamic scholars can be initiated in delegitimizing radical groups and their ideologies.

(VII) Strict regulations must be established to deal with social injustices so that influential people can not have the opportunity to extort the weak who might eventually join the radicals to take matters into their own hands being deprived from due legal procedures. This is the driving factor that lead deprived people to join the leftist radical in Bangladesh.