

### Introduction

The object of this paper is to examine the treatment of Taslima Nasrin by the media and its impact on the discourse of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh. By religious fundamentalism, I mean extremist tendencies to radicalise society through the politicisation of religion, whereby an attempt is made to reconstruct an imagined religious state based on certain restrictive perceptions of God's laws, and whereby women, for example, stand to lose rights enjoined upon them by other interpretations of these laws and by liberal democratic societies. I argue that the media response to Taslima Nasrin, nationally and globally, coupled with the ban on her books, inadvertently contributed to rising fundamentalism, in the process of which the public space for secular liberalism was constrained in Bangladesh.

Two issues arise about the role of the media, apart from their potential ability to make or break people. Irresponsible media coverage can play into the hands of extremists and give rise to non-negotiable positions, opening up space for rising fundamentalism and limiting the voice and scope of moderate, liberal or secular ideas. On the other hand, it can quickly identify and report on events which warn of impending fundamentalist extremism. Media response to Taslima Nasrin has resulted in both, although she is also a product of the media, as her columns would testify.

### Taslima as writer

Taslima Nasrin, a feminist writer from Bangladesh, rose to prominence in the 1990s as a result of three developments: firstly, the rise of the religious right in Bangladesh, and, more particularly in 1994, the right's desire to create a distraction from the case of the *amir* of the *Jamaat i Islami*, Golam Azam, who was being accused of war crimes by citizen's groups; secondly, the provocative nature of Taslima's writings, which were critical of male lasciviousness and the hypocrisy of clerics, and condemnatory of violations of the rights of minorities; and thirdly, the response of the media to her, her work and the controversy she was giving rise to.

As a columnist, Taslima made her mark through her writings for the press. As a provocative writer challenging given social values, she rapidly earned both notoriety and fame because of the media coverage she received. It was the quick reporting, in the international press, of the bounty on her head pronounced by *mullahs*, that catapulted her onto the global stage. But this also invited a critical international eye on Bangladesh and the precarious internal politics that allowed such unconstitutional mechanisms of social control as death threats by *fatwa*. This was unwelcome to many Bangladeshis.

Nationally, the media brought Taslima both fame and infamy. Her columns in the Bengali press acquired a huge readership and made her a household name. But it was the irresponsible coverage of an interview with her published on 9 May 1994 in *The Statesman* in Calcutta, which claimed that she had called for a revision of the *Qur'an* to improve women's rights, that gave offence to many. For the *Qur'an* is held sacred as the immutable word of God. Taslima's clarification that she had only referred to the *shari'a*, meaning the *sunna* and *hadith* traditions, failed to redeem her image; the damage had been done. The religious right

erupted in Bangladesh in righteous indignation. The subsequent *fatwa* of death by clerics, that put a price of *Taka* 50,000 (US\$1,500) on her head for blasphemy, brought international attention to her and to Bangladesh.

As soon as the international media picked up the story, human rights groups, foreign governments and international writers' groups began to campaign for her defence and the right to free speech. Indeed, had it not been for the media attention, Taslima would not have achieved notoriety at home, or become a *cause célèbre* abroad, somewhat akin to Salman Rushdie. One could also argue that had it not been for the callous *Statesman* coverage, that made no distinction between the *Qur'an* and *shari'a*, there would not have been such a furore over Taslima. Nor would the religious right have found a pretext to claim the area of social relations and women's status as lying within their jurisdiction.

### Secular space has contracted

The space for secular Islam contracted in Bangladesh as a result of the controversy surrounding Taslima.<sup>1</sup> The religious right, which had been in the ascendant since 1991 through political alliances, began to assert its particular vision of an Islamic state more vigorously. It argued that Islam was in danger; that women's liberation and emancipation were hurtful to society; and that Taslima epitomised that threat, through both her pen and her person. Girls' schools were burned; women NGO workers were harassed as instruments of Christianisation. The women's movement suffered a setback, for women did not dare to speak out any further for fear of reprisals in both rural and urban areas. Death threats were announced against other liberal and secular figures, including the national poet, Shamsur Rahman. The religious right clamoured for the enactment of blasphemy laws as in Pakistan, through which detractors of the faith or ideological opponents could be eliminated. The public space for cultural expression in the performing arts, considered secular, was constrained by threats of, and actual, political violence.

There were certain damaging aspects of the hype regarding the self-perception of Bangladeshis, who felt wrongly portrayed internationally as a nation of fundamentalists rather than as moderates. This media presentation of Bangladesh persists to this day in certain contexts, much to the chagrin of many intellectuals of the left and right.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, were it not for the media hype, international pressure on Bangladesh to pursue a moderate strategy might not have been forthcoming and Taslima's rescue could have been more problematic.

So, what was the nature of Taslima's offence and how were the media used to both highlight it and resist the extremist onslaught against her? For, in effect, the media were used by both sides of the argument to mobilise opinion in their favour.

### Taslima as product of the media

I have suggested that, in a sense, Taslima is a product of the media. She rose to prominence nationally because of her columns in the Bengali press and publications in both verse and prose, which reached a very wide audience. Taslima's writings were sharp, provocative and

uncompromising in language and style. They were in demand from all sections of the media, both liberal and conservative, because they helped increase the circulation of magazines and newspapers.<sup>3</sup> The conservative papers, such as the *Inquilab* group, gave her coverage repeatedly, using her photograph as well, if only to criticise her. The secular press welcomed the distinctive freshness of her themes and style.

Thus, despite some reservations about the rudeness of her language, she was permitted to voice her bold opinions in the public arena. Her *Nirbachita Column* (chosen/selected column) struck a chord in young people because she addressed social issues and taboos that concerned them; for example, romantic and sexual relationships, social and cultural restrictions, and religious hypocrisy. Her prime concern was the condition of women, rejected at birth in favour of sons, reviled as economic burdens, restrained from free social interaction, and punished severely for crossing spatial and cultural confines.

However, in articulating the hurdles that women face in society, she took on what only a few others had done before her: she addressed the subject of religious hypocrisy, inequality and intolerance. Like Begum Rokeya, a social reformer of Bengal nearly two hundred years earlier, she lamented the use of religion by men to keep women in subjugation. But unlike Rokeya, she took on the clergy directly as 'evil, worthless and tremendously lustful men'.<sup>4</sup> That she was going to be at loggerheads with the men of religion was thus a foregone conclusion.

In the meantime, in 1992 Taslima Nasrin published a book of essays entitled *Nashta Meyer Nashta Gadya* (The Dirty Essays of a Ruined Girl), and another book, *Lajja* (Shame). As the titles suggest, both dealt with controversial issues. In the former, she provocatively demanded 'freedom of the womb', or *jarayur swadhinata*. This has been interpreted by some as a call for unrestricted sexual freedom, whereas she was essentially campaigning for the right of women to determine the size of their families.

*Lajja* depicts the horrors of persecution suffered by a Hindu family at the hands of Muslim extremists during reprisals against Hindus for the destruction of a mosque by Hindu fanatics in Ayodhya in India in 1992. Essentially it is a tale about the precarious position of minorities that could be applied in any number of situations, including that of Muslim minorities in India who have suffered under Hindu extremism. The universal aspects of the message - the need for community harmony, and the responsibility of the religious majority to protect religious minorities - were lost on the many who argued that Taslima was pandering to Hindu fundamentalism and earning her country a bad name abroad.

Thus, within two years of her literary career starting, she managed to antagonise not just the clerics, but other social groups as well: a wider segment of society that jealously guarded the virtue of their women, and Bangladeshi nationalists who refused to submit to 'shame' regarding minority rights, but rather were indignant at her audacity. There were other detractors as well: men in general, whom she accused of being carriers of syphilis, and therefore as dangerous as rabid dogs. She warned women to keep away from them.

If her objective was social reform, then her method was counter-productive. If it was to achieve personal fame, then she succeeded in gaining notoriety. Taslima continued to be read despite the ban on her book *Lajja* and the death threats levied at her repeatedly from 1993 onwards.

### Role of the media

In the controversy surrounding Taslima, the media were used by all ideological persuasions to stake out their claims to right conduct. As I have indicated, the liberals and secularists were somewhat intimidated by the vigorous onslaught of the fundamentalists, not least because they were caught unprepared. Their response was therefore somewhat disjointed. Widespread opposition to the *fatwa* culture continued both in the English and Bengali liberal press. While there was general unease about the content and literary merit of Taslima's works and the brashness of her feminism, there was no support for the death threat, for example, in *Ananya*, *Robbar*, *Dainik Dinkal*, *Bhorer Kagaj*, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Here I wish to articulate how the media were used by the religious right in support of its position. The religious right includes the Islamist political parties, such as the *Jamaat i Islami* and its various front organisations and youth cadres, like the radical *Jamaat Shibir* and *Islami Chhatra Sena* (Soldiers of Islam). Their aim is to establish an Islamic state ruled by *shari'a* laws which would be determined by committees consisting of the *madrassah*-educated *ulama*. The right seeks to do this both by constitutional and extra-legal means; that is, through the political process and outside it. While the *fatwa* against Taslima is an example of the latter, the right also participated in electoral alliances to gain a wider political profile. During the elections of 1991, the *Jamaat* made a political comeback as a result of a political alliance with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which won a majority of the seats in the National Assembly. It won two key portfolios in cabinet, education and home affairs, through which the right continued to pursue its ideological objective.

Significantly, on 4 June 1994 the Home Ministry issued a warrant of arrest for Taslima under article 295A of the Penal Code, which makes insult to religion or religious belief a punishable offence.<sup>6</sup> The immediate cause of offence was her *Statesman* interview in May in which she had allegedly claimed that the *Qur'an* was written by man, that it was outdated and so required revision. Taslima immediately went into hiding and eventually left the country whilst still on bail. There was general dissatisfaction with what were said to be her vulgar writing and promiscuous disposition.<sup>7</sup> A more localised campaign demanding the confiscation of her works, and death by hanging, had already begun in Sylhet in October 1993, led by three groups: *Sahaba Sainik Parishad*, *Hafezi Huzur Sangsad* and *Shah Waliullah Smriti Sangsad*.<sup>8</sup> It took several months for this campaign to gather momentum elsewhere.

### The right mobilises

The month of June was a period of intense propaganda by the *mullahs*. They addressed gatherings at political rallies and in mosques. The intensity of demands for *shari'a* laws and death sentences for atheists increased. Some threatened street violence and destruction of public property as methods of protest. A decision was taken to launch a comprehensive

movement across the country to restore faith in Islam and secure its sanctity through the enactment of blasphemy laws as in Pakistan, so that atheists and *murtads* (apostates) could be punished. Thirteen religious and conservative groups came together to form a *Sanmilita sangram parishad* (organisation for united resistance).<sup>9</sup> The stated objectives of the component groups varied from death sentence to punishment for atheists and apostates, who were defined as *rashtradohi* (traitors to the state) and *dharmadrohi* (traitors to religion). The editors of several Bengali newspapers like *Bhorer Kagaj* and *Jai Jai Din*, that support a liberal disposition, were also charged and arrested under Section 295A, and subsequently released on bail. Various other intellectuals, writers and cultural activists were singled out as *murtads*: for example, the national poet, Shamsur Rahman, and the academic, Ahmed Sharif. According to one journalist an atmosphere of civil war was created by the '*dharmabyabsha*' (traders in religion).<sup>10</sup>

In this mêlée, Taslima was singularly targeted for demonisation through pamphlets and right-wing newspapers like *Inquilab*. In a pamphlet entitled *Dharmadrohi o deshdrohi nastikder rukhe darao* (Resist the religious and political treachery of the atheists), the country was asked to judge Taslima.<sup>11</sup> Her alleged offences ranged from her support for sexual promiscuity to apostasy and hurting the feelings of Muslims by wilfully attacking Islam and undermining it. Through rather frank media interviews about her personal life, Taslima had opened herself up to public examination and censure. Her revelations were now being directed against her.

Similarly, her writings and interviews were analysed to show that she had insulted Muslims. She was charged with accusing God of being a 'liar' in an interview;<sup>12</sup> and of making fun of the Day of Judgement in her poem *Israfiler jar hoyechhe*, where she writes 'Israfil has fever/ and Gabriel a cough'. Her book *Nimantran* (Invitation) was accused of showing she did not believe in Heaven, Hell or God, since she declares they are all man-made.<sup>13</sup>

In her poem *Udyane nari* she presents Eve as a rebel who plucked the forbidden fruit because she accepted no restraints: *Nishedh mani na kono/Srinkhal amar shash bandha kore ane* (I disobey rules/order stifles me). She was accused of showing disrespect to Bibi Khadija, the first wife of Prophet Muhammad, by suggesting in her book *Nashta Meyer Nashta Gadya* that it would be more useful for young girls to read about the lives of Joan of Arc, Sarojini Naidoo, Begum Rokeya, Lila Nag and Ila Mitra.<sup>14</sup>

Essentially, none of these are punishable offences, although a demand to revise the *Qur'an* can be considered objectionable by those who revere it as the sacred Word of God. So by repeatedly attributing this demand to her despite her denials, and mounting a campaign of calumny against her, the religious right attempted a psychological manipulation of the public. She was demonised as a monster which could then be destroyed.<sup>15</sup>

Taslima Nasrin no doubt played with fire and articulated the unthinkable. She opened herself up for attack on several fronts, leaving herself alone and isolated.<sup>16</sup> The political timing was such that the religious right could make an example of her. But by making death threats and enforcing a ban on her books, they ensured she would be read, and her case internationalised.

The papers of the *Inquilab* group failed to make this connection. Instead, they saw the international attention as a plot to undermine the sovereignty of the country. The USA and the EU, along with Amnesty International, urged the Bangladesh government to provide security to Taslima and let her leave the country if she so wished. The *Inquilab* papers questioned whether India would provoke a similar response if a Hindu had blasphemed.

They saw collusion between Christians and Hindus. Firstly, the Hindus of India awarded Taslima the Ananda Award for her *Nirbachita Column*. The Bharatiya Janata Party made revised copies of her book *Lajja* widely available at a nominal rate in order to prove that Islam is an intolerant religion. Secondly, the US and the West employed double standards in accusing Bangladesh of fundamentalism while failing to see Hindu fundamentalism in the destruction of the four hundred year old Babri Mosque, or in the communal killings that saw more than 2000 dead in India subsequently. The weekly *Purnima* accused India and the US of conducting a media war against Bangladesh, motivated by their search for a new enemy after the fall of communism; *Purnima* said Islam was the new enemy.<sup>17</sup> In their view, Taslima's implication in this plot stood revealed. One journalist argued that she had three assignments: the destruction of Islam and the institution of marriage, the elimination of social and ethical values, and the end of the sovereignty of Bangladesh.<sup>18</sup> Columnists of the *Inquilab* group argued that the Bangladesh government and the opposition party were both to blame for not having done enough to stop her. Now the country was in flames. The rule of law and democratic governance were under threat.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

I implied earlier that what Taslima had said was neither radical nor new in terms of the way religion has been used by men to keep women in control. Two hundred years ago, when Begum Rokeya publicly articulated similar views and advocated education and economic independence for women, she faced no death threats. It was merely pointed out that men and women would never be equal. So what has changed since, and how can we account for the violent reaction to Taslima? The answer lies in the polarisation of ideology both globally and nationally. Globally, rising Islamophobia in Europe and the US has provoked suspicion in certain quarters, who fear that evangelical activities may be directed through foreign-funded NGOs and western education. Nationally, the religious right had just begun to make a political comeback after virtually two decades of oblivion. It had not only opposed the creation of Bangladesh, but also resented the secular ideology on which it had been founded. It therefore took every opportunity to challenge that ideology. Taslima Nasrin provided them with the opportunity.

The other relevant factor is the ever-growing involvement of the media in the making of celebrities. The media are constrained by readership, finance, the need for a story that sells, along with demands for responsible coverage. While Taslima would have been a controversial writer in any case, because of her language, style and content matter, it was the media interest that contributed to her fame and notoriety. It was the media interest that led to her *Statesman* interview, its misquotation and repetition, the *fatwas*, the warrant of arrest, and exile. But it was also the media that gave coverage to the fundamentalist backlash and led to her rescue. Ironically, in the twentieth century Taslima Nasrin has had to take shelter for apostasy in Christian lands, whereas in the eleventh century it was the exact opposite: apostates from Christianity sought shelter from the Inquisition in the lands of Islam.<sup>20</sup>

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> A cursory glance at the newspapers of the time makes it very clear that the right was on the ascendant and very vocal. See, for example, *Inquilab*, 12 August 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> See Helal U. Ahmed's editorials in the internet editions of the *Weekly Holiday*, Dhaka, 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> Dailies such as *Inquilab*, *Prothom Alo*, and weeklies such as *Robbar*, *Ananya*, *Purnima*, *Bichitra*.
- <sup>4</sup> *Nirbachita Column*, Dhaka: Vidyaprakash, 1991, 1992, pp. 27-28. All translations are by this author.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ananya* editorials, 1-15 November 1993. Also see interviews with the novelist Humayun Azad, the historian Ahmed Safa, the academic Kabir Chowdhury in Farukh Faisal, 'Tarka bitarka ebong taslima', *Ananya*, 1-15 November 1993, pp. 25-40. Interview with writer and former state minister for Social Welfare in 1975, Mrs Noor Jehan Murshid, see Nazimuddin Manik, *Bartaman Dinkal*, Year 8 No.12, 15-25 August 1994, p. 19.
- <sup>6</sup> Md. Nurul Alam of Motijheel Thana filed the case under the instruction of the Home Ministry, *Sangbad*, 5 June 1994.
- <sup>7</sup> See local dailies of the period, as well as literature produced by the Islamic right, e.g. the leaflet 'Dharmadrohi o deshdrohi nastikder rukhe darao', produced in Dhaka, 26 June 1994, by the *Oitijhya Sangsad*.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ananya*, Year 6, No.2, 1-15 November 1993, p. 41.
- <sup>9</sup> The membership included the Pir of Charmonai, Syed Fazlul Karim, Azizul Huq, Young Muslim Society, *Jamaat i Islami*, Khilafat Movement, Pir of Sarsina, Maulana Ubaidul Huq the Khatib of Baitul Mukarram Mosque, etc., *Bikram*, weekly, Dhaka, June 13-19, 1994, p. 31.
- <sup>10</sup> Syed Borhan Kabir, 'Blasfemi ain: moulik odhikarer sange jar shahabosthan shambhab noy', *Khaborer Kagaj*, 9 August 1994, p.17.
- <sup>11</sup> *Oitijhya sangsad*, *ibid*, 26 June 1994.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview in Bombay in November 1993.
- <sup>13</sup> *Nimantran*, p. 19.
- <sup>14</sup> *Nashta Meyer Nashta Gadya*, p. 121.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with her defence lawyer, Dr. Kamal Hossain, 26 August 1994, Oxford.
- <sup>16</sup> Farukh Faisal, *Ananya*, *ibid*, pp. 25-40.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Special report: khaleda hasinar red signal: taslima nasrin', *Purnima*, Year 7 No. 47, 27 July 1994, pp. 19-25.
- <sup>18</sup> Mobayedur Rahman, 'Samprodayikata dharmadrohita o bibaha prothar bilope: taslima nasriner mission', *Purnima*, Year 8 No. 13, 17 November 1994, p. 24.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 22-23.
- <sup>20</sup> Mark R. Cohen (29 October 2002) 'Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt: the view from the Cairo Geniza', Colloquium, *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*. Cohen recounts the story of a Jewish proselyte from Christian Spain who had left the faith to marry a Jew and was being hunted by her family to be burnt at the stake for apostasy. The lady eventually found her way to prosperous Egypt, where she was offered charity food rations till she remarried.