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Clashing Values In Bangladesh: NGOs, Secularism And The Ummah

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SUMMARY

NGOs in Bangladesh are now caught up in a broader global discourse about the relationship between political systems, political culture and development. In earlier decades after liberation, NGOs operated within a normative assumption of secular democracy and a separation between civil society and state. This position was challenged by the realities of military governments between 1975 and 1990, and by problematic governance and corruption since 1991. However, within the context of global faith based movements, the centre of gravity political culture is now shifting to confront these secular and liberal assumptions. Bangladesh is now a vital site of contestation between the competing traditions of secularity and the 'ummah', and thus between western (donor led) conceptions of a civil society and a more faith-based fundamentalist basis of political inclusion and incorporation. The Islamicisation of political culture is also generating a split within the NGO community. Some NGOs, with a previous secular perspective, have opted to avoid engagement by re-positioning their profile solely in terms of service delivery. Other, often more recent, NGOs promote 'Islamic values' and are comfortable with their incorporation into a concept of 'ummah'. However, there remains a significant third group of NGOs, with secular origins, which are trying to steer a complex course, pursuing secular democracy via a rights based agenda especially around women, yet differentiating themselves from the donor, western agenda. Thus they are embarked on a basic contestation over the meaning of nationalism in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS:

Civil society; NGOs; Bangladesh; Islamicisation; political culture

RELATED READING:

Mesbahuddin, T. (2007), *The Intermestic Development Circle and the Usefulness of a Civil Society Concept in Non-Western Contexts: The Case of Bangladesh*, University of Bath, PhD Submission.

Wood, G. D. (2006), *Clash of Civilisations, Clash of Barbarisms*, Bath United Nations Association.

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Introduction

The larger NGOs in Bangladesh are now caught up in a broader global discourse about the relationship between political systems, political culture and development. In earlier decades since liberation, NGOs operated within a normative assumption of secular democracy and a separation between civil society and the state. Obviously this normative position was challenged by the realities of military governments between 1975 and 1990, and by the clear problems of problematic governance and corruption since 1991. Increasingly we can see a differentiation within the NGO community as positions are taken around the concern about 'clash of civilisations'. While that thesis has pernicious overtones in over-privileging the connection between Christianity and secular rationality[1], Huntington, along with Gellner, certainly focus attention upon the limits of western ideas about civil society when applied to Islamic political cultures.

In an era of post/post-colonialism, ideas about non-alienating progress in terms of fulfilled livelihoods and wellbeing across the globe are increasingly contested and are re-defining political cultures. The earlier, more immediately post-colonial, development decades offered a universal discourse dominated by, and ahistorically abstracted from, the experience of industrialised wealthy metropolitan democracies. A liberal democratic pluralist agenda was assumed as the universal vision for all societies, along with other accoutrements of modernisation. This is how the term 'development' was conceived in the post-colonial era. A basic proposition for this paper is that the world has shifted into a post/post-colonial phase in which the structure of authentic knowledge about development has moved from a hierarchical, 'HQ' model to a globally re-distributed 'network' model with a multiplicity of sites of discourse credibility. This architectural shift is uneven, with erstwhile centres of power perhaps not even aware that their superiority is being successfully challenged by the movements of ideas in which economistic materialism no longer has a determinant monopoly over the idea of wellbeing[2]. In key ways, the modification of Western discourses about wellbeing and development through the embracing of 'human development' has opened up a Pandora's box of variables and indicators through which non-alienating progress needs to be understood. Thus the

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[1] See 'Clash of Civilisation, Clash of Barbarisms' (Wood 2006)

[2] The ESRC funded Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research programme, directed by Allister McGregor, at the University of Bath, is particularly focussed upon the social and cultural construction of wellbeing. The research is based on primary fieldwork in 4 countries: Thailand, Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Peru. See http://www.welldev.org.uk/research

attempts to move away from economistic and materialist accounts of poverty have led us into a much more complex universe, indeed labyrinth, of claims for our attention. We have had dramatic recent illustrations of this seismic discourse shift in the Middle East, especially with the conflicts over Iraq and Afghanistan, and the continuation of struggles for the hearts and minds of the people of Iran and Pakistan. But the underlying process of such value contestation is more subtly observed in many parts of the world from Latin America to East Asia, including of course Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has become a stage on which this value contestation is being played out locally through proxy players acting as both client agents of global principals, as well as being principals with principles of their own. The country is a particularly interesting case because it fought its own ideological battles for an ethnic based nationalism over a religious one throughout the period from Partition to Liberation. It then became a significant aid recipient after 1975 and thus the site of discourse experimentation as every minor shift in development fashions was piloted via the overpowering presence of donors. The period from liberation featured a dominant fact, matched by a dominant discourse: the state was in reality corrupt, incompetent and unaccountable; and the concept of state-led development was being powerfully critiqued by the neo-liberal arguments emanating from the West and the international agencies dominated by the West. However, the problem for the neo-liberal discourse in Bangladesh (as indeed elsewhere, especially in Africa) was that the market-led alternative was itself equally problematic in a society only just emerging from its agrarian, pre-capitalist or at least mercantilist legacy. At the same time, the period of liberation struggle had produced a generation of committed activists unwilling to be absorbed into the state, and not invited anyway, but equally unwilling to pursue individual fortunes via market entrepreneurialism under imperfect conditions. These combined conditions (i.e. donor aid, problematic state and market, a cohort of socially responsible activists and the increasing presence of donor aid) produced a unique conjuncture of opportunities in the emergence of: significant NGOs, extra-state development programmes, forms of subsidised market entry, and the slow emergence of a broader concept of civil society. But this conjuncture operated within a central frame of meaning about secular modernisation, and, given mass poverty, the empowerment of the poor as the key building block for democracy and more accountable government. For a couple of decades the development NGOs in Bangladesh dominated this conjuncture as the main post-colonial phenomenon. This position of collective NGO pre-eminence over the process of civil society has, over the

last decade, become challenged by other sets of values about wellbeing and human dignity as a feature of the post/post-colonial era.

The Formation of NGOs in Bangladesh

There are numerous versions of how development NGOs in Bangladesh rose to their position of civil society prominence in the period from liberation into the late 90s. It is unnecessary for the main purpose of this paper to offer a detailed overview of that process. Instead, I intend to provide a more skeletal account of the link between the emergence of key development NGOs and the 'aided' political economy during this period. As I write (early January 2007), Bangladesh is gearing itself for a key general election which will be an important test of the country's political culture, situated within the contemporary global clash of ideas and values. The electoral process and legitimisation of outcome could be tortuous, violent and chaotic. The immediate post-liberation period (72-75) was also chaotic, even despite the populist legacy of the victorious Awami League over the Punjabi military elite. The honeymoon period was shortlived for the Awami League government. In the absence of early, post-liberation aid (lessons here for Afghanistan and Iraq), the ruling group asserted monopoly positions over attempts to state manage the economy, and plundered without danger.[3] The blatant 'winner takes all' behaviour under conditions of severely constrained resources alienated many other claimants in the society - not least the military. But other regional militias too were in quasi-open revolt, intensified after the 1974 famine and the defensive tactic of the Awami League leadership under Mujibur Rahman to form a one-party state (BAKSAL) to control an increasingly anarchic situation. The violent coup in August 1975 was both a relief as well as an indictment of failure for many. Avoiding a detailed exposition of events (see Lifshultz, L. 1979 for that account), by November 1975 a clear military regime under General Zia Rahman had emerged, though with scores yet to settle. The military remained in power until December 1990 - the period in which development NGOs especially flourished. The relative absence of international official aid support during this immediate post-liberation period (72-75) was partially a function of successful disturbance of the international order by liberation forces and India (with the USSR in the background), and partially US sanctions against the use of PL 480[4] to any regime exporting to Cuba (jute from Bangladesh, desperately short of foreign exchange). Thus any relief to the war torn

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[3] See Wood 1988
[4] Public Law 480 is a reference to food aid from the US Department of Agriculture.

country was mainly from the larger international charities such as OXFAM and War on Want, and the scale was hopelessly inadequate for the challenge of reconstruction.

The urgency of relief, combined with a sole reliance upon the voluntary sector (domestically and internationally), brought together local liberation activists into the formation of local NGOs alongside the international ones. There were different routes to formation. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), founded in the first year of liberation, was essentially and initially a remittance operation from the Sylheti diaspora in the UK, focussing relief aid attention upon the Sylhet region in the North-East, and upon the plight of women in particular. It soon attracted the support of both OXFAM and the Ford Foundation, and then other charitable and later official donors. The Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO)[5] set up a counterpart organisation in 1974 which quickly evolved into PROSHIKA-Dhaka and PROSHIKA-Comilla, with the former becoming the dominant after a few years. These PROSHIKAs then received technical support from CUSO and financial support from CIDA[6] during its first decade. Many other NGOs followed suit, some with national ambitions, others content to remain local and regional. Some of the national ones were spin-offs from international entities (such as CARITAS). Some remained international, with local offices like ActionAid and Diakonia. Some had strong Protestant, even evangelical, origins (such as Rural Development Support Services in the NW region of Dinajpur, Thakurgaon and Rangpur Districts). Some were international church charities working locally such as the Mennonites. Some were heavily sponsored by a single charitable donor, such as Samata in Serajganj District supported almost exclusively by OXFAM (see Devine 1999). Some, in the early 80s, followed BRAC and PROSHIKA in assembling a range of supporters, charitable at first then official, to pitch at national significance even if starting from a particular regional base - such as Gono Shajaho Sangstha (GSS), with initial support from OXFAM for its start up in Khulna. Another significant example has been Nijera Kori. Some were generalist in their poverty focus, others were sector-specific, concentrating on health or education or water or legal rights and so on.

The point, though, is not to list or to over-classify. Depending on definitions, hundreds of NGOs emerged in the late 70s and through the 80s, registered under one Ministry or another. They also organised themselves into the

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[5] Resembling VSO in the UK
[6] Canadian International Development Agency

Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), in effect a club trying to police standards and act as a collective lobby. In the latter role, it became a player of variable significance in emerging civil society: variable on account of internal politics between NGOs as well as the external political conditions which fluctuated in stance towards NGOs and their donor supporters. Slightly to one side of these processes was the formation of the Grameen Bank, with its founder Director Md.Yunus just receiving a Nobel prize. Though eventually registered as a bank, in its early years it behaved in similar ways to many NGOs in forming small groups of poor men and women (significantly more women over time) to save and borrow collectively as well as engage in other collective action. The microcredit model to emerge from the Grameen Bank evolved into the microfinance model for the NGO sector as a whole, via large scale imitation. While microfinance has its limitations[7], it has also been a major technological contribution globally to the relief (if not removal) of poverty. It has thus put Bangladesh, via its NGO movement, on the global development map.

Although a rather uncomfortable fact for many NGO leaders and their senior/founder staff, the military regime period from 1975 to 1990 brought them to prominence as key national and international players. Military regimes, arising from coups, always have a problem of legitimation and constituency building, especially if they plan to become legitimate by metamorphasising into a political party. Since their oft stated initial mission was the 'clean up' of corrupt politicians, military leaders therefore have to find ways of by-passing the political elites they have just displaced (even if they are interrelated by kin and other networks). There appear to be two classic options, often combined: decentralisation; and alliance with NGOs, sometimes acting for the state under franchise. Both were pursued by Generals Zia (up to his assassination in 1981) and thereafter, Ershad. Both options limit the room for manoeuvre for potential opposition to the government, either by keeping it at arms length at the local government level (especially if political parties are banned from competing for local office under their own banners) or by rewarding cooperating NGOs with more freedom of action and less bureaucracy in accessing foreign aid. All of this happened in Bangladesh up to 1990, helping to explain why the NGO movement was so slow in joining the democratic forces against the waning military regime of Ershad.

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[7] See Wood and Sharif (eds) 1997; and Sharif and Wood (eds) 2001

The outcome of this pragmatic equation was a substantial expansion of NGO activity and a significant increase in direct donor support. For the main argument of this paper, there was an unstated secular consensus. Again without presenting elaborate history, Bangladesh had been suffering the classic conditions of underdevelopment both before 1947 and during the Pakistan era. Through its production of jute, it produced the bulk of foreign exchange for the combined wings of West and East Pakistan. However, the bulk of these export earnings were re-cycled into the development of West Pakistan and not re-vested at the point of production. The peasants of East Bengal were formally subsumed under capital (Brenner 1977), experiencing no change in their production relations while having the surplus value of their labour underwriting capitalist development elsewhere via fixed and low product prices. The liberation struggle was fought on these issues as well as the linguistic discrimination[8] against the entry of Bengali middle classes into government, military and professional careers. The Awami League was successful precisely because it managed to combine both of these messages in mobilising a Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan. Given the stronger identity of West Pakistan and Urdu with Islam, the liberation struggle in East Pakistan was implicitly re-ordering the nationalist discourse, ranking the image of the Bengali small peasant (supported by an educated Bengali elite) higher than religious identity, indeed confining faith to the private domain. This was how the political principles of the newly formed Bangladesh were constructed.

In political economy terms, however, there was considerable myth-making in this formula of the classless, small peasant society with common interests against the external oppressor. The agrarian production relations within Bangladesh also involved landlords, moneylenders, patrons, sharecroppers and other forms of tenancy, and significantly rising proportions of landless alongside smallholding peasants. Even during the Pakistan period, the dominant construction of rural development priorities was expressed through the image of the smallholding peasant, as in the Comilla programme. The post-liberation Awami League government, and the military ones which followed, invested further in this myth by spreading the principles of the Comilla pilot to the rest of Bangladesh as the Bangladesh Rural Development Programme (BRDP). However, even by 1978 from our research within the Ministry of Agriculture, the anecdotal understanding of growing landlessness was statistically re-affirmed from survey data. These

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[8] The combined government of Pakistan, seated in Islamabad, favoured Urdu as the national language. While Urdu was the second language of most in West Pakistan, it was hardly spoken or understood in East Pakistan.

indicated that while the rural population at that time comprised up to 80% of the country's population, 50% of these rural dwellers were effectively landless in having less than 0.5 acres, thus operating way below subsistence levels for an average nuclear family size of 5. The failure of the Comilla programme, and its government replication across the country, to recognise the extent of landlessness undermined its relevance to rural poverty reduction and the vulnerability of large swathes of the population to famine. This widespread vulnerability had been particularly revealed during the liberation struggle itself, but reinforced during the horrific famine of 1974/5. There is little doubt, applying Sen's entitlement theory, that landlessness received a boost during the famine as families had to exchange long term assets like land for shorter term food supplies.

It was this policy neglect of the central problem of landlessness which provided the entry point for the development NGOs and Grameen Bank. The 'poor' in the villages were targeted for NGO support on the grounds that their condition of poverty was the outcome of exploitation by other rural and urban classes. In that sense, the community, village-wide, solutions of the Comilla programme were considered as simply reinforcing the power and domination of the local patrons and landlords. Rather the NGOs followed Marxian inspired analysis of agrarian class relations in which the interests of the poor and landless were opposed to the community leaders. Thus the poor had to be organised into self-help groups in order to challenge other classes (e.g. over wages and land access) as well as provide collectively for themselves through joint productive projects, pooled liabilities for microcredit, and savings through which to mitigate collective and individual risk. Increasingly within this stance, the position of women came centre stage. Thus added to the critique of class inequality and the rejection of the 'community of small peasants' myth, the patriarchal norms of the society came under fire. Both of these critiques (class and patriarchy) implicitly identified religious leaders locally and nationally as contributing to a conservative order which reproduced the poverty and exploitation of the poor, and among them women especially. Reflecting Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970) the common thread, in effect uniting different organisations into a movement, was empowerment. The seeds for later conflicts were therefore sown early in the process of post-liberation NGO creation.

The Global Context: Combined and Exclusionary Growth

The world has moved on since the late 70s and early 80s. Although in one sense globalisation is as old as mercantilism, and although the dependency and underdevelopment theorists offered us 'combined and uneven development', we are now in a new and dangerous era of combined and *exclusionary* growth both globally and reproduced within national political economies as well. This is a world-wide phenomenon of which Bangladesh, situated in South Asia, is a part. Thus since the end of the Cold War, we have been witnessing, with some exceptions[9], a decade of growth albeit from a low base in some of the poorest areas of the world. In important respects this has been stimulated by export-oriented low wage economies, following the earlier paths of growth in Latin America and SE Asia from the late 70s (Gough, Wood et al 2004). But while countries in SE Asia have been relatively successful in spreading the income benefits of growth to keep absolute poverty low through their productivist welfare regimes (Wood and Gough 2006), this has not yet been evident in the poorer countries of Latin America, nor sub-Saharan Africa, nor swathes of the Indian sub-continent, nor parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, nor crucial locations in the Middle East, nor in regions within China, as well as the Russian Federation.

The concern for this paper is not to provide detailed evidence of these processes which are broadly familiar, but rather to investigate the implications of these for clashing values. Coinciding with the shift of emphasis from unevenness to the exclusionary characteristics of globalisation, and also as a function of it, there have also been significant discourse shifts in development fashions. The headline of discourse change in the Western approaches to 'development' has been towards a rights based agenda (Human Development Report 2000) - a more nuanced and complicated version of the empowerment and participation themes. This agenda explicitly accepts the paramountcy of the capitalist market and the inequalities and diversities of opportunities which arise from it. It thus argues that people have rights to be citizens with legitimate expectations to security, minimum basic needs and social protection, underpinned by the state. It is a Polanyian 'de-commodification' argument (Wood and Gough 2006).

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[9] Until the last 3 years, Pakistan was experiencing stagnation in its economy. The aftermath of 9/11 has produced an aid dividend for Pakistan, along with ironically greater economic security inducing more inward investment, partly from the widely dispersed Diaspora through remittances.

How have these socio-economic changes played out in Bangladesh? Over the last two decades, the economic fortunes of the country have reflected wider globalisation, most notably in the garments industry in which a male management class employs and controls a large urban female workforce. While jute has faded in export significance, shrimps and leather also connect production relations to the world economy. Other sectors like coal and gas are rising. Importantly, these production relations and labour generally are now really (i.e. not just formally) subsumed under capital, in the sense that labour is commodified, but essentially without the regulative protection of the state. Other trade, aid and knowledge dimensions of globalisation have also stimulated a rapid process of urbanisation. Current World Bank projections to 2025 indicate that Bangladesh will be 60% urban at an overall population of approximately 260 million. This is a profound demographic transformation not only for livelihoods, but also for perceptions and psychological experience. The transformation of major cities already appears dramatic enough. Growing urban populations where the workforce cannot be absorbed into available employment opportunities. Poor people experiencing relative deprivation for the first time as they live and interact (e.g. through the provision of low paid domestic services) with more favoured classes. The expanding urban middle classes only serve as a reminder to those excluded from the globally stimulated opportunities rewarding education, skills and capital.

This is a very different environment from even two decades ago when the NGO focus was upon agrarian inequality, and where the NGOs were the sole bearers of a vision to the villagers beyond localised patron-clientelism. These new urban classes are, of course, materially aspirant and seeking secure livelihoods like everyone else. They are also desperate to maintain their distinction from their dispossessed and humiliating rural origins as supplicants of landlords, moneylenders and employer-patrons. However, for increasing numbers, their urban experience comprises awful slums dominated by *mastaans*[10] who mediate their access to employment, to small

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[10] The word 'Mastaan' refers to urban brokers and intermediaries, who act as 'mafia' patrons over the inhabitants of urban slums and more widely. They fix labour supply to the formal and informal sector, as well as basic needs in informal settlements where rights to residence, sanitation, electricity and other services are not legalised. They are seen as part of an oppressive criminal underworld, but they do provide protection and access (to services and employment) under conditions where the state and municipalities are highly corrupt and thus not performing correlative duties to rights. With 'rurbanisation' these *mastaan* intermediaries also operate increasingly in the countryside, ousting the more familiar patron classes, which derived their power from landownership and culturally accepted seniority. This is a clear WeD

scale hawking and business opportunities, to living space in the slums, to essential services (sanitation, water, fuel, electricity connections), and to protection either from other *mastaans* or their colluding municipal authorities. Meanwhile such classes see continuous new construction of luxury apartments; a proliferation of shopping malls; new offices (often financial services); hotels, guest houses, restaurants and clubs; new cars (including 4x4s) and their glamorous occupants.

This relatively recent experience of relative deprivation under conditions of combined but exclusionary growth is not just confined to the major urban centres. The new inequalities arising from a rapidly changing economy affected by globalisation penetrate into the countryside via complex patterns of migration and rurbanisation. In addition to the steady rural-urban migration there are many other patterns of cyclical and partial movements, which effectively connect parts of the rural population to the urban transformation. Migration is also international in a country heavily dependent for household livelihoods upon remittances from overseas, with workers experiencing the relative deprivation of growing economies in the Middle East and SE Asia, alongside the UK and elsewhere. This cognitive expansion is reinforced by developments in rural infrastructure, especially feeder roads to main highways bringing sub-district headquarters into easier linkages to regional and national centres. These administrative sites have also stimulated growth poles in terms of markets with commodities flowing in both directions. These processes of rurbanisation are also changing their hinterlands in terms of crop choices and economic activity, with increased levels of daily work migration. There is, therefore, a general increase in mobility, including for women. So the idea of the sedentary rural population waiting to be targeted by development NGOs, funded by foreign donors with post-colonial modernisation agendas, is no longer a valid strategic socio-economic premise.

The Millenarian Tendency

The political consequences of globally combined and exclusionary growth have been revealing themselves strongly for more than a decade, and are intensifying. For some, the world changed on 9/11. But for many others 9/11 concluded a phase, a decade and a half of re-alignment following the end of the Cold War era. With its dramatic symbolism, it brought post-modern

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finding. In Bangladesh observers increasingly refer to the 'mastaani culture' as the dominant operational form of the society. (See also Khan 2000)

identity politics to the global political forefront as the main outcome of unfair globalisation. Although horrific in its personal consequences, alongside atrocities before it in East Africa, and subsequently in Bali and elsewhere, these events represent a clear message. The structural processes, which these 'terrorist' events have dramatised, comprise the post/post-colonial era in which the idea of capitalism with a human face, as the post Cold War dividend, gives way to widespread perceptions of inequality and injustice.

It may legitimately be observed that inequality and injustice are not original to the post Cold War era, and of course they are not. It is the breadth and nature of the perceptions about inequality and injustice which have changed, along with the explanations offered for them. One could argue that the post Cold War dividend comprised an unlocking of globalisation from the geo-politics of superpowers and their respective client states, or client movements within states, such as Angola. The apparent triumph of neo-liberalism released countries and classes from state socialist solutions to the inequalities of free market capitalism. But the poor and frustrated in those societies soon realised that their new found ideological and market freedoms simply took them into a new era of globalisation, unmediated by secure prospects of state-led decommodification and thus social protection. Such realisation was reinforced by the extension of structural adjustment polices from the World Bank and IMF into parts of the world not hitherto reached, now that Soviet protectionism had been withdrawn. Thus both the opportunities provided by globalisation and the opportunities to explain the unequal outcomes of globalisation have been 'liberated' in the last decade and a half. In a sense, there is no hiding place any more, no alibis for the proposition that untrammelled capitalism reproduces inequality and injustice if not regulated and modified by legitimate and popularly supported states.

The sense of injustice about contemporary inequality is intensified from previous eras by literacy, mobility and migration, urbanisation and rurbanisation, wider media access and observational proximity to wealth and success. The cognitive experience of relative deprivation is a function of this exposure to other lifestyles, with which poorer people negatively compare their own. Such negative self-conceptions translate into feelings of inferiority, lack of self-respect, loss of dignity, shame and humiliation. The world is very familiar with this equation, say, in the context of Palestine and the Palestinians who have been confined by Israeli and US policy to the marginal zones of the West Bank and Gaza. However the argument here is that this equation is generic, and that it reproduces alienation and 'millenarian' accounts of injustice which appear in different forms all over the

world. Although the term 'millenarian' has a stricter meaning about belief in the 'saviour' coming to solve current problems of poverty, deprivation and alienation, I am seeking to use the term to refer to wider socio-cultural processes, while not also losing aspects of the stricter meaning.

Thus millenarianism is associated with cults, and therefore via shared perceptions of identity. It is associated with intense spiritual and metaphysical beliefs, and therefore in religious terms with more fundamentalist, fixed, literal or reductionist interpretations of scriptures as guides to human purpose, moral behaviour and wellbeing. To the extent that such beliefs constitute what Weber called 'value rationality', so believers are offered frames of meaning in which suffering and deprivation during life can be endured *en route* to the cure in the life hereafter. Endured in the sense of offering dignity in suffering by attributing the 'victim' condition to the exclusionary machinations and discrimination of others while acknowledging that such experience is only temporal and finite. In other words, powerlessness on earth will be compensated for by power, or at least reward, in heaven. This more passive version of millenarianism is to be found across the major religions e.g. caste and *dwija*[11] in Hinduism; Pentecostal and other 'second coming' sects in Christianity in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and parts of East Asia, but also including the large 'born again' movements and cults in the USA; and the Wahhabi sect[12] among the Sunni in Islam, as well as fervent Shia sects.

Some of these have their more militant wings, which takes us in modern popular parlance from intense religious belief to what is usually mistakenly termed 'fundamentalism'. This is a confusion. Fundamentalism is a reference to absolutist forms of religious belief, and should be distinguished from militancy which operates more in the realm of identity politics, seeking to confront and punish the material oppressors on earth instead of just

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[11] 'Dwija' means 'twice born': biologically and into one's caste position, with corresponding fate.

[12] The Arabian Wahhabis were and are followers of the puritanical reformed Islam first taught by Ibn al-Wahhab in Medina in the Eighteenth Century. In his 'The Last Mughal', Dalrymple (2006) discusses the leadership in Delhi of Shah Waliullah who studied in Medina at the same time as Ibn al-Wahhab. On returning to Delhi, Waliullah, with his sons, opposed the degenerate practices of Islam especially the Sufi and other syncretic traditions. Instead, he promoted a strictly Koranic monotheism, devoid of idol worship. 'Judging human reason to be incapable of reaching divine truth on its own, Shah Waliullah emphasised the importance of revealed divine revelation and urged a return to the text of the Koran and the Hadiths.' pp 76-77.

relying upon 'being saved'. Indeed, for some militants, being militant is also a route to salvation - the '*Jihad*' as proof of one's moral purpose on earth.[13]

Taking this analysis and definitions into Bangladesh, what do we find? A society as a microcosm of these broader global tensions brought about by combined and exclusionary growth, and thus struggling with itself, its values clashing and increasingly difficult to reconcile within one overarching philosophy. The four principles of nationhood at liberation advanced by the victorious Awami League were: nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy. The country has come along way from those principles, including some major deviations on the way. 'Socialism' has in effect been abandoned in the face of globalisation, reinforced by structural adjustment and aid conditionality[14]. Democracy was undermined early on by its original advocates[15], with the military in direct control for 15 of the 34 years since liberation, and never far from the seat of power. Secularism as a distinguishing characteristic of 'Bengali' identity has been increasingly confronted by a nationalistic definition of being 'Bangladeshi', in which Islamic faith has been brought out of the private family sphere into the public *ummah*.[16] Thus nationalism is increasingly associated with Islamic faith rather than secularism, with worrying implications for faith minorities.

For me, it is no coincidence that these 'cultural and religious' rejections of the four founding principles of Bangladesh occurred within the context of the socio-economic equation noted above: a heightened sense of relative deprivation and consequent alienation arising from combined and exclusionary growth, assisted by the corollaries of urbanisation, migration and mobility. They have also been assisted by the weakening of the Western monopoly of external influence upon Bangladesh as 'Islamic'

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[13] Dalrymple's marvellous book also indicates the significance of *Jihad* in the mobilisation of *sepoys* against the British in 1857, with many *Jihadis* fighting against the British forces in the siege of Delhi, though ineffectively.

[14] Immediately after Liberation I was a tutor at IDS, Sussex to four senior officials of the Bangladesh government. One of them, the Additional Secretary Establishments Division - a key patronage post - and a brother-in-law to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was in effect the 'thought police' of the group. When challenged about economic strategy, he would always recite: 'We aim to combine to the best of capitalism with the best of socialism.' So perhaps the socialist agenda was only ever rhetorical, for populist consumption.

[15] With the declaration of the one party state in January 1975, combining the Awami League with some other supporting movements into the acronym BAKSAL. This was a response to the increasing anarchy in the countryside.

[16] 'Ummah': all embracing religious community, implying no separation between religion and politics.

sources of aid entered Bangladesh via the petrodollar bonanza[17] from the late 70s. These sources, together with Diaspora remittances, have supported hospitals, clinics, educational foundations, orphanages and more recently *madrassas*.[18] It has been interesting that these 'Islamic' sources of aid have by and large avoided the classic development sectors favoured by Western sources, such as agricultural development[19], infrastructure and water management, gas and coal, and the more recent poverty-focussed livelihoods programmes (especially support for microfinance, but also training and employment generation) via NGOs and some government departments. With the current trend towards sector-wide programme aid, Western aid is supporting education and health sectors, thus turning these sectors into contested terrain - especially education.

The millenarian tendency, using the broader definition offered above, has brought the Jamaat-e-Islami party into greater national prominence. While it has never been successful so far in mobilising popular votes[20], it is alleged to be significantly influential in its coalition with the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the governing party between 2001 and 2006. The BNP arose out of the attempts by General Zia Rahman to legitimate his presidency following his eventual victory in the coup sequence August-November 1975. The stance of the BNP has always been closer to the military establishment inherited from the Pakistan period[21], and represents a more pro-Islamic definition of what it means to be Bangladeshi, in contrast to the more secular notion of Bengali. It is therefore highly susceptible to fundamentalist influence on its own political leadership. It has also been interesting to observe during the 2001-2006 period how senior civil servants, senior army officers, police and lawyers, as well as sections of the press have also been more vocal and explicit in their religiosity. Those 'signs' are everywhere in terms of dress, the conduct of meetings, the respect for prayer times as well as public pronouncements and international political allegiances. At the same time, when the Awami League was in office (1996-2001), it too had a 'working relationship' with Jamaat-e-Islami, allowing its secularist policies to be moderated. In office, the Awami League had to tread a fine line between being accused of being pro-India (since its liberation victory was

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[17] An irony to reflect on.

[18] *Madrassas* are religious schools, focussed upon a rote learning of the Koran, but including other forms of Islamic socialisation.

[19] Though some IFAD support should be acknowledged.

[20] Though it certainly improved its position in the 2001 election.

[21] One of the reasons for its victory in 1975 was to re-assert the seniority 'queues' for promotion within the army, which had been overturned and politicised by the Mujib regime as rewards for loyalty to the Awami League and Liberation were handed out.

orchestrated by India in 1971), while not being captured by pro-Islamic symbolism and losing its secularist instincts. There is little doubt that the 'fence' has now shifted significantly in favour of religious imagery for any party seeking national office.

This trend has to be understood with subtlety. It would seem the world over that the more fundamentalist appearances of Islam occur within cities rather than the countryside - a social phenomenon of the lower middle classes, excluded from the cosmopolitan elites. With urbanisation and rurbanisation, as indicated above, we can thus expect these trends to grow, especially as any previous notion of a rural-urban divide is now certainly blurred through mobility and migration. At the same time, with the expansion of the middle classes, especially concentrated in the major cities, we observe livelihoods progress via the coat tails of globalisation and a corresponding desire to combine investment in English speaking education for one's children alongside current ostentatious consumption[22]. Are these consuming new middle classes secularists cum lapsed Muslims and Bengali in identity, or do they actually represent a more subtle blend of Islamic consumers, careful to define boundaries between *halal* and *haram*[23], as in the economically dynamic Gulf States? These consumers are not abandoning faith, and they are not (mainly) abandoning senses of moral virtue. Of course compromises are made, especially with the richer younger generation. But, for example, even within these privileged circles, love marriages still have to be approved and sanctified in traditional ways. There is not an appetite for any excessive rejection of faith. There is an appetite for seeking to apply faith based moral principles to the conduct of the state and operation of the market, and a desire for politics generally to be less corrupt as the way to support business and reward entrepreneurial initiative. In a sense the clash of values is partly between the *nouveau riche* of the business community who are maintaining faith alongside investment and consumption, and the more long term established middle classes from among the educated intelligentsia in the Universities, among the Press, some lawyers, some civil servants, in the think tanks and consultancy groups, and among the NGOs.

There is a further aspect to the need for subtlety in understanding. It is simply not possible in Bangladesh, and perhaps elsewhere in the sub-continent too, to classify occupational sectors among the middle class as

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[22] The list is as above: luxury apartments, new cars and 4x4s, the latest electronic goods, fashionable clothing, smart restaurants and international travel.

[23] These dual opposites of pollution categories (*halal*-acceptable, *haram*-unacceptable) are familiar in many cultures and in Hinduism would be understood as *pucca/kacha*.

faith based or secular, hence the words 'among' and 'some' above. While there may be some broad distinction between business and the professions that works in terms of religiosity, there can be no watertight categories. There are crosscutting identities in two senses: sectors employing people with contrasting values, and kin groups straddling both sectors and values. It is these crosscutting ties which have held the society together at the top so far, with pluralism outweighing socially closed identity groups. Large kin groups can contain within them a wide portfolio of contrasting, sometimes opposing, occupations and stances. So radical secular NGO leaders can be closely related to senior army personnel, and periodically rely upon them to get themselves out of trouble. Likewise with civil servants, kinship connections can be used across the 'values divide' to delay investigations, prosecutions, implementation of judicial or executive decisions. It is also the case that an NGO, like PROSHIKA, may have a strong secularist stance, reflecting both its mission and leadership, while employing more faith-based employees throughout the organisation. In other words, actors in this political culture are juggling incommensurate sets of values and making compromises with themselves and others all the time. That is the oil of an otherwise fractious society.

Nevertheless, even with this caveat, the battle lines within Bangladesh are being drawn more sharply in a manner reflecting those globally. Global value clashes are intensifying, in part as a function of the awareness of combined and exclusionary growth, but also stimulated by the fundamentalist rhetoric coming from the White House and Whitehall and translated into failures in Palestine, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan[24]. These global events do appear to be re-shaping political culture within Bangladesh and some of the development NGOs are in the forefront of contestation between secularism and fundamentalism, with the moderate Islamic middle ground squeezed out, perhaps along with other forms of indigenous social capital (Mesbahuddhin, 2007). Certainly there is an increasing popular discourse about the 'talibanisation' of Bangladesh. Furthermore, recent attacks upon the more secular actors within the political class, including successful assassinations and near misses of prominent political leaders in the Awami League, have allegedly been carried out by extremist, militant

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[24] And Bangladesh is not alone in internalising the global environment, or clash of barbarisms (Wood 2006, Feb). Witness the violent clashes in France between the authorities and ethnic minorities, and the ongoing ethnic tensions in the UK. We can look elsewhere in Africa too, such as Somalia.

groups[25] citing Islamic protest and *jihad* as their justification. These have included suicide bombings. The ruling BNP government has been slow to distance itself from these groups, and is certainly accused of being insufficiently proactive in pursuit of these killers[26] During the same period, and especially since the formation of the BNP government in 2001, there have been a series of legislative attempts and executive orders (based on pre-existing legislation about the registration status of NGOs and their regulated functions) intent upon setting tighter controls over development NGO access to foreign funding and the uses to which it is put. The NGOs, which have been most affected by this closer attention (some would say harassment), are in little doubt that the Jamaat-e-Islami influences in the governing coalition are responsible. They perceive a direct attack upon their secular mission, a mission, they would argue, which derives from the four founding principles of the Bangladeshi state. This is a good point to leave discussion of the millenarian tendency and consider the discourse within which some of the major development NGOs in Bangladesh have operated.

The Secular Origins of Civil Society

As noted in an earlier section, it is necessary to appreciate the origins of these major development NGOs. Some emerged from the relief and reconstruction environment of liberation. Other leaders, in addition, had direct involvement in the liberation struggle itself via underground guerrilla activity following a student career of demonstrations in the language movements. They believed in the four founding principles of the Bangladesh state, while seeking to distance themselves from the widespread corruption which rapidly engulfed the new political leadership. The discourse of liberation was akin to the later Sen notion of 'development as freedom', and was certainly strongly influenced by Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970) which presaged both the development as freedom and the capability philosophies. One cannot under-estimate the impact of the Latin American liberation theology of the late 60s and 70s upon the emergence of the NGO movement in Bangladesh from the mid-70s. It

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[25] Two groups advocating violent opposition to the secular liberal tradition are the Jagrata Muslim Janata and the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has linked these organisations to an upsurge in terrorist violence during 2005.

[26] The ICG report (The Guardian 9.01.07) warned: 'The issues of foreign funding of extremism and the growing madrassa system are concerns for the longer term…circumstantial evidence, as well as cold political logic, suggests underground terrorist groups have been cultivated and sheltered by those in power.'

offered a human development approach to the confrontation with hostile political economies[27]. It put empowerment and participation on the agenda, again a long time before Western development philosophers caught up[28]. The NGO missions were defined in these terms: mobilising the disorganised poor to have collective effect upon their oppressors, while also doing collective things for themselves. It was the practical embodiment of 'structuration', even before Giddens had formulated it. It preceded Long's 'actor-oriented epistemology' (Long 1992). This was a ground breaking, paradigmatic shift. A direct challenge to the top-down, technocratic approaches of agricultural extension before Chambers, before 'Putting the Last First' (Chambers 1983), and before the 'Farmer First' discussions (Scoones and Thompson 1994)[29].

What was the analysis, which underpinned these NGO origins? The Awami League won its 60s battles with the Punjab bureaucratic-military elite on the myth of an homogenous smallholding peasantry, bound together by Bengali identity and Muslim brotherhood - in that order. But that was a myth. Even though post-partition East Bengal did not have the extreme agrarian structures of West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh in neighbouring North India and the provinces of West Pakistan, there was significant inequality and class differentiation based upon landowning and landholding, as well as controls over agricultural inputs, services, subsidies and markets. The early post-liberation research led by myself in the densely populated Comilla belt, east of Dhaka, revealed significant inequalities even within minifundist land settlement where a large landholding was 5 acres[30]. The Land Occupancy Survey of 1977 revealed for the first time the extent of landlessness, nation-wide. Although there were regional variations (Wood 1981), the countryside was dominated by a petty landlord class from the old *toujidars*[31], controlling

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[27] Again, an approach which preceded its adoption by UNDP and the series of Human Development Reports over a decade later.

[28] I recall debating empowerment ideas in the context of Marxian revolutionary positions with PROSHIKA colleagues from 1975 onwards. The examples of the Naxalites and the CPI(M) in West Bengal were uppermost in our minds, and the CPI(M) dominated the Left Front government in West Bengal from 1977 to present day.

[29] I am certain that leading colleagues in Bangladesh have been major development innovators over the last 3 decades, as illustrated in the recent Nobel Peace prize for Prof.Md.Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank. Other leaders have also received international prizes and honours.

[30] See A. Huq (Ed) Exploitation and the Rural Poor, Bard, Comilla, 1976 & 1978. But also Wood (1994).

[31] 'Toujidars': a landlord class in Bengal, as part of sub-infeudation of tax farming in the zamindari system. The *toujidar* classes in Bangladesh were especially dominant in the North and Western regions of the country at the time of independence from the British Empire, and

sharecropping tenants, employing direct rural labour and doubling up as moneylenders. These classes came from the upper lineages (*bangsho*) and dominated local institutions at the village and sub-district levels (i.e. *shalish*/informal courts, elected local government positions, contract opportunities, and access to common land, water and orchard/forest). The tenants and labouring classes of both sexes were desperately poor, insecure and vulnerable to the slightest risk either from within the household (e.g. death of a productive member, or ill-health, or a dowry obligation) or from the local environment (e.g. floods and droughts). In these relationships, the poor were clients of patrons, tied by multi-stranded transactions. Their security was highly dependent (Wood 2001 and 2003). And as clients, they were disorganised against themselves - in the Marxian lexicon, they were a class in themselves but not for themselves[32]. With the state in the hands of the narrow, educated, professional elites, and the business classes yet to emerge, a class based struggle on behalf of the poor had to involve some critical stance towards the state. The early NGOs such as PROSHIKA and Nijera Kori, but also including the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) which now has a more apolitical, service orientation, all shared this political economy analysis.

Obviously a key aspect of this analysis of agrarian inequality was the powerlessness of these client classes, in two dimensions. First the class basis of exclusion from education with widespread illiteracy as a result. On the eve of liberation, East Bengal has to be understood as an elite-mass society: the masses were illiterate. The scale and significance of this illiteracy cannot be under-estimated. In legal terms it meant either complete exclusion from any legal redress, or excessive reliance upon local literates who were more likely to side with, or be bribed by, the landlord opposition (e.g. in land grab cases), or most likely dependence upon the local *shalish* in which support would only come from one's own patron if in opposition to another faction leader. It meant being unable to enter into any written contract with any confidence. It meant being reliant upon others to be aware of payment and work conditions (e.g. in locally administered public works/employment/relief schemes), (Wood 1985). The early NGOs addressed the problem of literacy head-on through functional literacy

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retained a position as landlords with tenants and sharecroppers, as well as employers and moenylenders. The term is fading as the agrarian structure re-configures.

[32] I shall always remember listening to a brilliant analysis of local patron-client exploitation from a poor tenant in a village near Comilla in 1974, but my informant had never travelled more than 8 miles in his 35 years, and had little knowledge that there were millions of clients like himself across the country.

programmes, again taking their cue from Freire. Functional literacy became a euphemism for broader teaching about the inequalities of the political economy, and the need for the poor to mobilise and be organised[33].

The second aspect of powerlessness was gender. In many ways, BRAC was onto this dimension of powerlessness from the outset, with its initial relief focus upon women in Sylhet. But it was also clear as Grameen Bank got underway that the highest proportion of its borrowers were women. PROSHIKA and Nijera Kori had a more inclusive class analysis, in which other inequalities (gender, ethnicity, even literacy) took second place. However, gender soon became prominent for them also. Thus women's groups alongside men's groups were organised, alongside mixed groups (in which men inevitably dominated). Programmes of functional literacy for women, which also embraced family planning issues, were therefore also adopted by these NGOs. All these dimensions of inequality (and of course including the ethnic based inequalities for the Hindu and tribal minorities) involved a critique of the local alliances between religious figures and the landlord interests. It also entailed a critique of the conservative *mullahs* who were resistant to the mobility or autonomy of women and any tendencies towards their empowerment (later on this included resistance to girls' education in non-formal primary education). Indeed, it was the gender issue, and the related microcredit interventions[34], which became a central confrontation between these secular NGOs (with a 'feminist' dimension - especially urged upon them by the external feminist representatives of donor aid) and the *ummah*, and especially the more fundamentalist wing of the *ummah*.

This is how the analysis of powerlessness in the agrarian political economy and the secular issue become intertwined. To the extent that the religious institutions and leaders were propping up the established order, as they had done in Ireland, in many parts of Europe, and in Latin America[35], so were they seen as a drag upon progress, upon 'development'. But the secular stance goes beyond this and connects, as suggested above, with the four liberation principles. Thus the emphasis in these principles was upon the

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[33] I was personally involved in sharing my agrarian political economy analysis with colleagues in both BRAC and PROSHIKA, and also less directly with some other early NGOs too. 'Exploitation and the Rural Poor' (Huq Ed, 1976 and 1978) was also widely read (hence going to second print after 2 years).
[34] with interest, and also directed at women
[35] Precisely giving rise to liberation theology in Latin America among the younger priesthood, daily exposed to the injustices meted out by the established order upon their poor parishioners.

specificity of being Bengali, whether Muslim, Hindu, Christian or tribal. PROSHIKA has most obviously stayed very loyal to this principle and is very explicit in this aspect of its mission. Some observers would argue that this clear stance is partly the cause of its harassment at the hands of the BNP led government since 2001. However, PROSHIKA has not been alone. Before GSS was dissolved[36], it also had a strong secular stance, led by a classic leader from the literati, pre-business, establishment. Likewise, Nijera Kori and many regional NGOs within the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB). BRAC held this stance, especially in the practice of its large-scale non-formal primary education programme. Indeed in the late 90s, it was the BRAC schools which were being burnt down by fundamentalist militants, though it was PROSHIKA rather than BRAC which chose to organise large-scale demonstrations in protest over these attacks[37]. The BRAC leadership preferred to defend itself through quieter diplomacy.

It is important to appreciate the symbolism of liberation in political and populist terms. We have a good test of this by comparing the 1991-1996 period of the first BNP led government with the 1996-2001 Awami League government, and again thereafter. During the military regimes and the first BNP government, there were few pictures of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in public places, including offices and school classrooms. The liberation discourse was marginalised from the language of government. If any memory was to be institutionalised, then Begum Zia as Prime Minister was concerned to justify the actions of her late husband General Zia Rahman, who had emerged victorious from the coup sequence of August-November 1975, and ruled (sometimes viciously[38]) until his assassination in 1981. To justify her husband, the liberation discourse had to be downplayed to the point of almost being forgotten. This was quickly reversed after the Awami League's victory in 1996. The pictures, posters and placards of Sheikh

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[36] Gono Shahajo Sangstha had many problems from the mid/late 90s in terms of management and donor funding, so its secular position was part of a wider problematic picture. It may yet revive as an organisation, having completed a number of court cases over registration status, mission and management.
[37] There was a significant incident in the 90s in the eastern district of Brahmanbaria, in which pitch battles were fought between PROSHIKA led protesters and Islamic activists.
[38] He actually authorised the bombing and strafing of the Bogra cantonment soon after taking control in order to put down or intimidate into submission the *biplopi* (revolutionary) forces. These were supporters of Colonel Abu Taher, the military hero of Liberation in Bangladesh and who had deployed his supporters to free General Zia from brief incarceration after the first coup in August 1975 and thus ensured his victory in November 1975. Zia subsequently hanged Taher. (See Lifschultz, 1979).

Mujib appeared everywhere. In the press, the discourse was back - though notably softer on both secularism and socialism. Some accommodation with Jamaat-e-Islami was found, and the neo-liberal structuring of the economy could no longer be reversed: for example the public distribution of agricultural inputs through the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) had long been displaced by privatisation and market outlets. But liberation was clearly re-visited and the Bangladeshi-Bengali issue re-awakened. Deals with the old Awami League ally (i.e. India) were quickly done over the controversial and long standing disputes over managing the lower Ganges waters, thus cementing the Bengali affinity in the region. The slow but steady trickle of out-migrations of Hindus across into West Bengal or Assam slowed down. The minorities felt more secure.

A critical aspect of this symbolism resided in the materials for functional literacy training as well as the popular theatre performances across the villages. Here PROSHIKA and GSS had much in common but other NGOs also followed suit. Although these materials and performances had not been dormant during the military and BNP periods, popular theatre certainly re-emerged strongly when the Awami League gained office. Given the continuing widespread illiteracy across Bangladesh, popular theatre troupes passing through the villages have always the traditional form of cultural bridging between elite and mass. NGOs adopted this cultural medium, adding key political, socio-economic and cultural messages to the drama. The scripts, costumes and exaggerated performances are not very subtle as *mullahs* are ridiculed for their fundamentalism, landlords and the military for their collaboration with Pakistan and Islamic/Urdu impositions, officials for their aid corruption, and politicians, moneylenders and local contractors for their exploitation of local labour. Excessive patriarchy is also sent up. It is all caricature. For those who have never witnessed one of these performances, they resemble an English pantomime. There is a stage. There is lighting. They are staged in the open air, at night, to large audiences cross-legged on the hard baked mud of a courtyard, surrounded by stalls selling snacks and trinkets. The audience is lively. There is much laughter but also identity with the storyline and characters and so moments of intense and serious engagement with much nodding at recognised themes. A further step in these performances is when some of the local audience have been selected earlier in the day to play minor roles. As they ham it up, so their friends and kin urge them on with clapping and cheers. The liberation principles define good and evil and wrong-doers always end the evening shamed and humiliated as the secular heroes deliver the final speeches and the political messages are driven home. Of course, in a village nothing is secret. So

while these performances may be staged in the poorer *paras*[39] of the village, the 'spies' are everywhere both in the audience and sometimes rather obviously standing at the edges. Typically the sons of landlords and contractors will be identifiable by their cleaner clothes, shoes, wrist watches and hair cuts, and by their demeanour - glowering.

I have dwelt upon this description at some length, trying to 'bring it to life' in the imagination of the reader, because these are frontline representations of the secular-religious divide, the political loyalties, the form of nationalist identity, the clash of values. The re-invigoration of the liberation discourse during the 1996-2001 period and the accompanying confidence of the secular-radical movements to deploy the 'safe' liberation discourse for a renewed mobilisation around the inequities of the political economy, which were by now significantly urban as well as rural, sharpened the terms of potential conflict. When the BNP-Jamaat coalition regained power in 2001, scores were to be settled and the fulcrum of political discourse re-located as the discourse was again marginalised. However, this was not just tit for tat factional oscillation. Structural changes, globally and nationally, continued through these periods of government - in other words combined and exclusionary growth had deepened, producing not only new global reference points but also heightened senses of relative deprivation among the dispossessed urban lower middle classes. The global reference points have been increasingly but erroneously represented as a clash of civilisations (Wood 2006), but certainly reproduced internally as a tussle between versions of civil society, jointly despairing of state failure but having contrasting recipes for improvement.

Thus Bangladesh, interestingly, represents a vital site of contestation between the competing traditions of secularity and the *ummah*, and thus between western (donor led) conceptions of civil society with a rights based agenda and a more faith-based fundamentalist basis of political inclusion and incorporation. Some NGOs, with a previously secular perspective in Bangladesh, have opted to avoid engagement with this dilemma by re-positioning their profile solely in terms of service delivery and choosing not to guide any empowerment outcomes from such service delivery. In the context of increasing violence from militant Islamic groups, these NGOs are keeping their heads well below the parapet. Other, often more recent,

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[39] 'Para' is a distinct residential location within a village, often able to trace several generations of genealogical descent. They are likely to have their own patrons drawn from the stronger lineages, and perhaps their own mosque too. They are similar as a notion to *mohallah* in Pakistan.

NGOs have been formed with a much clearer 'Islamic values' purpose from the outset and are comfortable with their incorporation into a concept of *ummah*. However, there remains a significant sub-set of NGOs, with secular origins, which are trying to steer a complex course. On the one hand, they are determined to pursue the normative assumptions of secular democracy by advancing a rights based agenda, with the issue of women strongly in their discourse. This rights agenda refers to essential 'liberal' principles of the autonomy of the individual, and directly addresses issues of governance and corruption. At the same time, these same NGOs are trying to avoid the tag of being anti-nationalist and the accusation of aping the donor, western agenda. Thus they are also embarked upon a basic struggle and contestation over the meaning of nationalism in Bangladesh.

Dilemmas for Civil Society

There is clearly a risk in writing just before the 2007 election, to be conducted in an environment of intense procedural distrust, nation-wide strikes and *hartals*[40] and rising political violence. At this point several outcomes are possible. The elections will be further postponed due to these conditions, with a state of emergency declared, backed by the military. Or they are held but the outcome so heavily contested with accusations of foul play (more likely if the BNP coalition wins again at the expense of the Awami League led opposition) that resulting instability will require military intervention. Or the Awami League will actually win but bring down more violent militancy upon its head and will find it enormously difficult to hold onto power[41]. Under any of these conditions, the challenges to the idea of civil society promoting the interests of a mass underclass are immense. The society is at a crossroads. Will it retain a political culture based upon secular democracy and a separation between civil society and the state, albeit heavily eroded by successive military governments and pervasive problems of corruption and poor governance? Or, within the context of global and domestic faith-based movements, will the political culture of Bangladesh evolve in ways which confront the normative assumptions of secular democracy and state-civil society separation? Will the Islamicisation of political culture, now evident within the country, re-order the discourse about

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[40] 'Hartal' is a standard instrument of widespread public protest in Bangladesh, involving the shutting of shops and attempts to close other services. They are often achieved through intimidation by organised elements of the political party or movement calling for the action.
[41] While writing, the first of these options has occurred. The situation is unfolding and for the moment revolves around preparing a more up to date voters list.

civil society and the role of NGOs towards the notion of the all-embracing *ummah*, or community?

The latter of these options is a complex proposition. The 'western' reaction to the problematic state in terms of legitimacy, corruption and poor governance is to promote the idea of a strongly independent civil society, represented by organisations with their various respective constituencies. These engage in advocacy and lobbying to improve the functioning of the state, with the implied threat that if governing elites do not improve they will never attract or retain the loyalty of constituents who will end up creating alternative movements and oust those elites from power. Recognising that that can be a long process, organisations within civil society also actually perform service functions for those they represent, as well as encouraging forms of organised collective behaviour so that poor and vulnerable people can help themselves while states and markets fail them. Within these notions of improving the functioning of the state there is clearly a rights based agenda which entails a broader notion of citizenship both in terms of entitlements and expectations of protection and service, as well as the capabilities and agency to ensure that the correlative duties of the state are performed. Capabilities and agency are required for people to help themselves too: individually in the market or through collective action. This is the agenda which the western donor community supports in Bangladesh through its aid priorities. It is a stance derived from the European Enlightenment and western political philosophy. Even when the state is functioning reasonably well, this philosophy holds that vigilance is always required via the organisations of civil society to ensure standards of acceptable governance, protection and service. To do that job well these organisations always need to be independent of the state - hence the principle of separation. This is the account of liberal, secular, democratic political culture. This is also a notion of 'gesellschaft', of organisations or associations deliberately created for a purpose, and deliberately and voluntarily joined. The plurality of these organisations in a society keeps the exclusive demands of each other in check.

It is this version of political culture, which is under threat in Bangladesh. The threat is also a reflection of contestation globally between the merits of secular democracy and theocracy as systems of government. Widespread corruption and poor governance is seen by some faiths as a failure of the liberal democratic path, which therefore needs to be replaced. Liberal democracy over-privileges individuality and self-interest. It appeals to venal instincts and encourages corruption and personal acquisition. Such

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individualism is immoral and favours the already advantaged. These failures are excluding the faithful poor and thus breaking up the superior notion of community or 'gemeinschaft', in which people are members through birth and belief. Thus faith is public not private and should guide political behaviour and social capital. Thus the state and any other organisations in the society, including market ones, cannot be distinguished as having different moralities checking the potential excesses of each other. With the pre-eminence of faith, theocracy is the logical form of rule since the leaders of the faith are by definition trustworthy. This is the *ummah* conception of political culture, in which the idea of separate civil society is nonsensical. This was the origin of Gellner's critique.

Mesbahuddin (2007) argues that something of value is being squeezed out and lost in this stark contrast between western liberal democracy and Islamic ideas of *ummah*. In other words, is it possible in Islamic societies to conceive of Islamic civil society? Such a proposition would mark out an educated, moderate Muslim middle class, prepared to honour their faith privately and be guided by it in their personal behaviour, but keen to accept the principles of democracy and pluralist institutions keeping each other in check rather than relying upon a theocracy[42]. In so behaving, they would be distinguishing themselves from Wahhabi millenarianism and accepting that human agency in the material world can change fortunes and improve livelihoods. They would be fighting for inclusion for themselves and poorer others, and they would be deploying religious identity inclusively rather than as an instrument of social closure and exclusion. Because they were not claiming public universalism for their faith, others outside the faith would not automatically be dispossessed of citizenship. That would be an important contrast with the fundamentalist agenda.

How should we map these dilemmas for civil society onto the stances of the NGOs in Bangladesh? The problems of choice for NGOs with a rights based, western stance are compounded by the issues of nationalism and sovereignty, as they are being re-defined by these processes of Islamicisation. In other words, it is not a straightforward contrast between

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[42] Perhaps an approximation of this process has been Ireland, where the rule of the clerics has faded without the populace losing its faith and personal worship. The regionally concentrated born again communities of middle America also operate in the space between strong, fundamentalist faith, guided by evangelical leaders, but remaining, at least so far, citizens in a liberal democracy - thus being part of civil society. The Pentecostal movements in Latin America are in a similar position in the sense of being separate from the state rather then intent on merging with it.

secularism and faith based movements. There is also a further complicating dimension: the rights of 'beneficiaries' in relation to the NGOs which operate in their areas and dominate some of their options and opportunities through services and microfinance, in return for some evidence of loyalty. We too easily forget that the clients of NGOs are supposed to be independent citizens with the freedom to be serviced by a plurality of agencies across the state-NGO divide, as well as to have their own values and the freedom to express them. Thus NGO leaderships and their staff may be secular, for example, while their beneficiaries or followers are also being courted by the local *mullahs* and the agents of political parties, as well as other NGOs, bearing gifts and incentives. Thus NGOs on a continuum of stances across the secular/fundamentalist divide end up having a composite profile which reflects a combination of levels: the international discourse about civil society in the context of global categories, the national political culture and the various local political cultures.

A single NGO may not be exactly the same at each of these levels because their stance is affected by the conditions and required compromises and negotiations at each of these levels. Obviously too great a dissonance of stance between these levels would reveal an NGO as hypocritical and untrustworthy - so there has to be a degree of consistency. But it has always been clear in Bangladesh that an NGO may be strongly secular and rights based at the national level (and seeking donor endorsement and funds thereby), while having to do 'deals' at the local level, and having to moderate its objectives (Devine 1999). These deals have involved local *mullahs*, landlords and *mastaans* along with the agents of political parties, local officials and contractors. And according to location, the local deals are not the same. Perhaps more compromises with Islamic sensibilities in the more conservative areas, especially in the Eastern and North Eastern parts of the country. These compromises might be fewer female teachers in the non-formal primary schools; or at least accepting more constraints upon their modesty and mobility. It might be a less aggressive programme of labour rights for women in the local rural works programmes. It might be a modification of interest rates on loans. It might be that women can only meet behind closed doors rather than in open spaces. It might be accepting that locally mobilised groups cannot be mixed gender. It might be conceding the claim of the local mosque to *khas*[43] land and water resources. It might be accepting that local *mastaans*, contractors and officials will have to enjoy some rent at the expense of local labour, thus limiting their employment

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[43] Untitled land arising from intestate wills, or government under-utilisation, or disputed land arising from migrations since Partition.

rights. The realities of local power have always circumscribed the rhetoric of NGOs at the national level. It is also the case that NGOs vary in the compromises they are prepared to make at the national level, with some of them making continuous incremental adjustments to the shifts of political culture in the context of Islamicisation while others have more determinedly defined their line in the sand nationally while making tactical deals locally.

Conclusion: the Shifting Rights Agenda

By recognising these complexities, we can understand that we are not looking at a situation of simple opposites as in the formulation: secularism or fundamentalism. At the same time, it is convenient for manoeuvring protagonists to mutually label and 'other' in this way (Wood 2007b), and this is becoming the mode of contestation in Bangladesh. This construction of each other is not only a recruiting device, it is a move into a subtle form of identity politics which is cutting across the original class analysis of the Marxian political economy as applied to Bangladesh and even more dangerously at the global level too. This means that the rights agenda itself is being re-formulated away from class and vertical inequality notions towards horizontal inequality notions. From a Marxian perspective, the danger lies in dividing the poor among themselves along variables which are less significant to the explanation of material poverty and more to do with broader, less material and more spiritual notions of identity, dignity, avoidance of alienation and conceptions of wellbeing[44].

This shift in the rights discourse has wider implications. It takes the notion of empowerment, the early mantra of development NGOs in Bangladesh, inspired by Freire, into different territory. Empowerment becomes more expressed in terms of faith identity as a deliberate challenge to the class and secular notions of empowerment arising from the inequality discourses of the West. I have argued earlier that, in my judgement, this is a function of global combined and exclusionary growth in contrast to the more familiar Marxian proposition of combined and unequal growth. There are further, theoretical as well as nationalist implications of this trend.

Theoretically, if empowerment is being re-defined, then so too are broader notions of human development and indeed wellbeing and a western

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[44] See the publications arising from the UK-ESRC funded Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research programme in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Bath.

discourse about agency. This is complex to summarise. The western discourse about development shifted from the orthodox development accounting of the World Bank and friends in terms of material indicators of poverty which were deployed to rank comparatively the development status of different countries. This shift was expressed in the thinking of the Human Development Reports arising from the UNDP since 1990. These reports introduced process and input indicators, requiring an underlying approach to human agency as the principal vehicle of change. This paradigm shift in measuring development and forming a more nuanced view about poverty and wellbeing drew upon three intellectual traditions: the structuration of Giddens; the capabilities of Sen; and the positive understanding of citizenship advanced by Rawls. Each of these themes argued normatively for the rights of human agents to engage with and transform determining structures whether embodied in the state or the market. Each was concerned about how to bring those rights about. Each therefore converged upon the formula of 'development as freedom', although this phrase was specifically popularised by Sen. The principles of agency derived from these three traditions found their way into the Human Development Indicators, via the pioneering transformative and applied thinking of the late Mahbubul Huq. Implicit within these indicators were concerns about the quality of life and wellbeing (and for me that includes a preoccupation with alienation), as well as, towards the later 90s, security (Wood 2007a). Two dimensions of freedom emerged: human development as freedom to, and human development as freedom from (i.e. from political oppression and economic powerlessness, via social protection).

It is this discourse which is now being challenged by fundamentalist millenarianism and the politics of identity at national levels, like in Bangladesh, and globally. Agency, capabilities and citizenship are all re-defined within an embracing notion of faith and *ummah*. In a 'consensual' theocracy, what is there to struggle against? In what sense does one part of society need to regulate the behaviour of another part of society when separation between public and private, between the moralities of state and market cannot be conceived? What is there to lobby for in a civil society process when all are part of the same gemeinschaft? Thus the concept of rights can only be applied at a level of conflict between believers and non-believers, rather than between believers.

It is in this sense that a basic clash of values about principles and rights increasingly prevails in societies like Bangladesh. Part of the respective political missions within the country is to harness and capture the emotive

discourse of nationalism to one's own version of human development and wellbeing. It is in this way that the western discourse about rights in Bangladesh is more easily wrong-footed precisely because it is external, and derived from 'othered' intellectual traditions. And it is in this sense that the four principles of liberation are under severe threat as the defining variables of Bengali nationalism in Islamic Bangladesh. Those NGOs espousing the western rights and human development agenda are thus manoeuvred into being treacherous, anti-nationalists. They are increasingly failing the loyalty test.

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