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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/1262>
DOI: 10.4000/samaj.1262
ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

Ali Riaz, « Constructing Outraged Communities and State Responses: The Taslima Nasreen Saga in 1994 and 2007 », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 2 | 2008, Online since 31 December 2008, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/1262> ; DOI : 10.4000/samaj.1262

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Constructing Outraged Communities and State Responses: The Taslima Nasreen Saga in 1994 and 2007

Ali Riaz

'I do not want any more twists to my tale of woes.
Please do not give political colour (sic) to my
plight. I do not want to be a victim of politics. And
I do not want anybody to do politics with me.'
Taslima Nasreen (2007) *Hindustan Times*, November
27.

- 1 Taslima Nasreen, the exiled Bangladeshi author, once again attracted the attention of the international media as a result of events in India beginning in August 2007. The physical attack on her at a book launch in Hyderabad was followed by riots in Kolkata, the capital of the state of West Bengal, in November 2007. Nasreen was then forced by the government to leave the city she called her second home and was shunted from one city to another. She was kept under security protection for months in undisclosed locations. Finally, in mid-March 2008, after 110 days in the 'safe custody' of the Indian government Nasreen left India for Europe.¹
- 2 These events were reminiscent of the events of 1994 which led to her exile from Bangladesh. At that time, she not only became the target of the 'religious zealots' who demanded that she be killed for heresy but was also charged with blasphemy in a court. After 44 days of hiding she was given a 'safe passage', thanks to the intervention of the international community. Her detractors claimed that she had offended the religious sensitivities of the Muslim 'community'. In 2007, the organization of the attack and the agitation was claimed by Indian 'Muslim groups' which insist that one volume of her autobiography (published 4 years ago) and her other writings have offended their religious sentiments.

- 3 The uncanny similarities of these two series of events and the responses of the authorities in Bangladesh and India deserve close scrutiny at various levels. Interestingly, these events (*i.e.*, the 1994 agitation in Bangladesh and the 2007 violence in Kolkata), took place in the background when other outraged communities, based on larger political demands, were in the making.
- 4 In this paper I analyze the events on the ground and the responses of the states. I argue that these events demonstrate how 'outraged communities' are constructed, and symbols are invented to mobilize the community. These events also demonstrate, among other issues, how states in South Asia, particularly Bangladesh and India, deal with 'outraged communities'; and what, if any, role states play in the construction of the outraged community. The paper's focus on the 'state response' is not to suggest the primacy of the state in these issues; instead the dynamics within the groups of non-state actors and how the outrage is framed are important in understanding the trajectories of the events. But the state's role has received little attention in the extant discussions while I contend that states bear a significant responsibility in engendering the controversy. The banning of the book is a case in point. In Bangladesh Nasreen's book *Lajja* (Shame) was proscribed in mid-1993 before the agitations against the author ensued; similarly, in West Bengal, her book *Dwikhondito* (Split in Halves) was banned in 2004, three years before the street agitations gripped the state capital Kolkata. The paper, therefore, intends to address the absence of the discussions on states' roles.
- 5 Four sections follow this introduction; the events of 1997 and 2007-08 are described in the first and the second sections. The third section presents the analysis drawing on both events and their significance in understanding the complexity of the politics of emotion. Concluding thoughts comprise the final section.

Episode 1: Bangladesh, 1994

- 6 The sixty-day episode of turmoil and mayhem and the eventual exile of Taslima Nasreen from Bangladesh took place between 4 June and 4 August 1994, but this was in the making from the beginning of 1993. An author, a columnist and a medical doctor by profession, Nasreen was known only to the middle class literate population until the government confiscated her passport on 23 January 1993 allegedly for traveling under a 'false identity'. Although providing a false identity is a misdemeanor according to the laws of Bangladesh, and as a public official she could have been subjected to administrative disciplinary measures, the government took no further action against her. This, however, was not an indication of leniency towards Nasreen, but the usual bureaucratic way of dealing with such issues in Bangladesh; that is to do something without getting too involved in 'trifling matters'. The government's action was caused in part by Nasreen's high-profile trips to India since she had won a coveted literary prize in Kolkata the previous year. The government headed by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which champions anti-India feelings, was also trying to send a signal that it was not thrilled to see such intimacy with the West Bengal literary community.²
- 7 By the middle of the year, there was a conspicuous change in the attitude of the government: on 10 July 1993 Nasreen's novel *Lajja* (Shame) was proscribed. The book, published in February 1993, became an instant best-seller and by July more than sixty thousand copies had been sold, a major success by Bangladeshi standards. The book,

depicting the agony of a Hindu family during the communal riots in Bangladesh after the demolition of the Babri Mosque (6 December 1992) in India, stirred debate among Bangladeshi intellectuals; but nobody expected the book to be banned, because there were no precedents to draw upon in regard to fictional works. The government action came on the heels of a move by a small religious group from the northeastern town of Sylhet.

- 8 The previously unknown 'religious' group named Shahaba Sainik Parishad (later discovered to have a large following and suspected of connections with a group in Pakistan) from Sylhet—a city northeast of Dhaka—issued a *fatwa* sentencing her to death and placing a reward of taka 50,000 (approximately 250 US dollars) on her head on 23 September 1993. The group retracted its statement after severe criticism from various sectors of society. However, it continued to demand the banning of all her books and that she be put on trial on charges of 'blasphemy'. Two cases were lodged in the local courts of a northeastern city by two individuals, presumably members of the aforementioned group, alleging that Nasreen's writings had offended their religious sentiments. After a preliminary hearing in which Nasreen was represented by her attorney, these cases were shelved. Nasreen also filed a suit against one Maulana Habibur Rahman and six others who were leading the campaign against her. Nasreen complained that they incited people in a public meeting in Sylhet against her, that a death threat had been made in the said meeting, and that she was at risk because of the threat.
- 9 While a pseudo court battle was going on in Sylhet, the group that called for the banning of Nasreen's books continued its agitation and organized several demonstrations—initially outside Dhaka, but later in the capital. In November, the group called a general strike in Sylhet. Shahaba Sainik Parishad's (SSP) demonstrations began to draw a large crowd. Most of the participants, according to eyewitness accounts, were students of madrassahs and activists of religiopolitical parties, including the Jamaat-i-Islami [JI]. The JI initially claimed that it had no hand in this *fatwa*, but gradually it became clear that the demonstrations were manned by JI activists as the SSP had little or no support and little organizational capacity to mobilize the masses.
- 10 After declaring a bounty on her head militants intensified their campaign against Nasreen. She herself 'appealed via fax and phone to the Western media and human rights groups' (Wright 1995: 4) to put pressure on the government to ensure her safety. Consequently, a number of international human rights groups asked the Bangladesh government to guarantee her safety, and international writers' associations began to unfurl their flags in support of Nasreen.
- 11 The situation took a dramatic turn at the beginning of June 1994. In May, soon after receiving a new passport, Nasreen left for Paris. On her way back from Paris, she visited Kolkata and was interviewed by the Indian English-language daily *the Statesman*. In her 9 May 1994 interview, she reportedly said that the Quran was written by a human being. Nasreen, according to the report, also said that she was against any partial changes in the Quran, implying that she wanted a total revision of the Quran. In a rejoinder published on 11 May 1994, Nasreen denied that she made any such remarks.
- 12 Both the interview and the rejoinder remained unknown to Bangladeshi readers until a government-owned English daily in Dhaka reprinted the interview in early June, without the necessary permission from *the Statesman* and without Nasreen's rejoinder. The reason the story was reprinted became obvious within a week. The government lodged a case against her under Section 295A of the Penal Code, which stipulates that a person must

serve two years in jail for offending religious sentiments. The court issued a warrant for Nasreen's arrest on 4 June 1994. She then went into hiding.

- 13 Meanwhile, some thirteen Islamist parties, factions, and organizations formed an alliance to put pressure on the government to arrest Nasreen, waged a campaign against almost all secular intellectuals, attacked the offices of newspapers that showed even the slightest sympathy for Nasreen or had criticized religious groups on previous occasions, and ransacked bookstores selling Nasreen's books.³
- 14 Behind the scenes, negotiations took place in New York between Bangladeshi authorities and PEN's Women Writers' Committee, which pressured the Bangladesh government to allow Nasreen to leave the country. Finally, a face-saving formula was worked out. After receiving assurances that she would not be incarcerated, Nasreen surrendered to the court on 3 August 1994, represented by a pool of qualified lawyers, including a former foreign minister. The court granted bail. Within a week, she left for Sweden 'on an invitation from a Swedish writers association'.
- 15 The above narrative of the events on the ground, especially the street agitation provides an impression that the government was responding to the demands of the outraged community/groups hurt by Nasreen's comments. But it also raises questions as to why the 'outrage' was expressed at that time, especially involving a book published more than a year before. Equally important is the question: were the street mobilizations spontaneous? Anyone familiar with Bangladeshi politics and those who observed the demonstrations would respond negatively. Evidently, organized political forces, Islamists of various shades to be precise, with a specific agenda were at the forefront of these agitations. The prevailing impasse in domestic politics and different hidden agendas of the political actors of Bangladesh created the imbroglio. Before going into details, let me point out once again that Nasreen's interview, which served as a stirring prelude to a drama that lasted for exactly sixty days, was published on 9 May but remained unknown to Bangladeshis until a government-owned newspaper reprinted and highlighted it. There are reasons to suspect that it was reprinted only to create an environment conducive to filing a case against her.
- 16 In May 1994, four features of Bangladesh politics stood out: first, the opposition political parties, which had been boycotting the Parliament for more than two months, demonstrated their firm determination not to return to the house; second, and a corollary to the first feature, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the relationship between the Jamaat-i-Islami and the ruling BNP had become strained, and consequently a new long-term alliance between the Awami League (AL) and the Jamaat-i-Islami was in the offing; third, a verdict was forthcoming on the eighteen-month-long troubled citizenship trial of Golam Azam, the ameer (chief) of the Jamaat; and fourth, the Jamaat was looking for an opportunity to bring its proposed blasphemy law into public discussion. Interestingly, none of this was happy news for the ruling party, and all of it involved the Jamaat-i-Islami.
- 17 On 1st March 1994, opposition political parties led by the Awami League began to agitate for a constitutional amendment that would allow the holding of future elections under a caretaker government instead of under the ruling government. In a not-so-surprising move, the Awami League formed an alliance with the Jamaat-i-Islami, an old-time friend of the ruling party. The opposition's boycott of Parliament began like a usual walkout, but soon it became clear that the opposition was trying to hold on to its demand to amend the constitution to hold all future elections under a nonpartisan caretaker government. The

opposition threatened that it would continue to boycott parliamentary sessions unless the ruling party bowed to its demand. Opposition parties engaged in a series of agitation programs. Although the public at large was in a state of confusion with regard to the demand raised by the opposition parties, the immediate reaction of the press was in favor of the demand, which the ruling party mistook for popular support. But the confrontational mood of the opposition was not welcomed by a large section of the population, especially the business community. The ruling party's initial posture was to disregard the issue altogether. But by May 1994 the BNP became visibly frightened as its support fell rapidly. What concerned the ruling party most was the emerging alliance between the Awami League and the Jamaat-i-Islami. The former had always been a rival of the ruling party, but the latter provided support for the ruling party whenever it was necessary. In fact, the BNP had come to power with the help of the Jamaat, whose twenty MPs extended their whole-hearted support to the BNP in forming the government in 1991. Ostensibly, Jamaat was now deserting the BNP.

- 18 For the BNP, this situation called for immediate action to diffuse the brewing tension and reestablish the old order. For the ruling party, two goals had to be achieved: first, to divert public attention from the opposition's demand; second, to create a division within the emerging alliance. Nasreen's interview provided the ruling party with an issue that had the potential to help achieve both these goals. An issue pertaining to religion was sensitive enough to arouse concern, while at the same time, members of the emerging alliance—because of their different ideological orientations—were destined to take different stands, rendering the alliance practically ineffective. Both politics and tricks played their roles. The ruling party's strategy to divide the opposition alliance did not work as well as expected. Contrary to the expectation of the BNP and the general masses, the Awami League distanced itself from the issue, allowing the Jamaat to run the show. The Awami League was more interested in pursuing a closer relationship with the Jamaat than with fighting a battle for a secularist cause. In the name of a combined parliamentary opposition, the AL was working with the Jamaat and intended to intensify the street agitation programs. The Jamaat, at an early stage of the crisis, kept a low profile. But perhaps because of the Awami League's inaction, the Jamaat soon joined the anti-Nasreen agitation. Therefore, the split that the ruling party expected did not materialize. The Islamists outside the ambit of the Jamaat-i-Islami, especially the militant organizations, soon forged an alliance called Sammilita Sangram Parishad (Alliance for United Movement).
- 19 The Jamaat had two agendas: firstly, to divert public attention from the citizenship trial of Golam Azam;⁴ and secondly, to highlight the proposed 'Blasphemy law'.
- 20 The hearing concerning Golam Azam's case in the Supreme Court began on 4 May 1994, and from the beginning it was evident that the process would not take a long time, meaning a verdict might be forthcoming. In the meantime, the anti-Azam movement turned into a movement against those who had actively collaborated with the occupation regime in 1971. The organizers set up a Public Inquiry Commission to collect evidence against a number of collaborators, most of whom were the current leaders of the Jamaat. The initial enthusiasm and fervor of the movement subsided, but it did not lose all its steam. It was expected that a verdict in favor of Azam might steer the movement to a new phase. Hence the Jamaat wanted to create a situation in which the issue of Golam Azam would become of secondary importance and the movement against him would face an uphill battle to prove its worth. Their hopes came to fruition when the Supreme Court

delivered its judgment on 22 June 1994, in favor of restoring Golam Azam's citizenship as a Bangladeshi.

- 21 The restoration of Golam Azam's citizenship through a court verdict frustrated the opponents, but gave Jamaat the opportunity it was looking for to bring a specific issue to the fore: the proposed blasphemy law. The bill was proposed in 1992 and tabled in 1993, but discussion continued within the confines of the Parliament building. In 1994, owing to the fact that the opposition members of the Parliament were engaged in a boycott, the Jamaat aimed to bring up the issue through some other means.
- 22 Nasreen's comments in the Indian newspaper *the Statesman* on 9 May provided the Jamaat with the opportunity it was looking for. As soon as her comments were made known, Islamists in general and the Jamaat in particular argued that the article proved the need for a blasphemy law. The statement issued by some 101 pro-Jamaat intellectuals on 1 June; the statement of Matiur Rahman Nizami, the secretary general of the Jamaat-i-Islami, on the Nasreen issue on 8 June; and numerous articles in the daily *Inqilab* and the daily *Sangram*, both mouthpieces of the Islamists, insisted that the situation would not have arisen if there had been a blasphemy law. Other newspapers joined the fray (*e.g. New Nation* 1994: 5)
- 23 The JI had attempted to table a Blasphemy Law, akin to the law passed and implemented in Pakistan, in 1992, but had not succeeded.⁵ Learning from their limited success in 1992, the Islamists, and the Jamaat in particular, did not rely on one single case to prove their point. Instead, to intensify their campaign, they also targeted a Bengali daily, the *Janakantha*, which since the beginning of the year had relentlessly tried to expose the persons involved in and the factors behind the ubiquitous rise of *fatwabaz* (those who decree an edict) in the country. In an editorial in the 12 May 1994, issue, the *Janakantha* showed how orthodox and illiterate mullahs were misinterpreting the Quran and the Hadith. The Islamists alleged that this specific article had offended the religious sentiments of the Muslim community and called upon the government to bring charges against its editor. The government picked up the issue and filed a case against the editor (Atiqullah Khan Masud), the advisory editor (Toab Khan), the executive editor (Borhan Ahmed), and an assistant editor (Shamsuddin Ahmed) of the newspaper under Section 295A of the Penal Code.
- 24 It was the first time since independence that a newspaper had been charged under this clause. Ironically, during the twenty-four years of Pakistani rule, when the cry of 'Islam in danger' was all too familiar, no newspaper had ever faced a charge under this clause; but it happened in Bangladesh, which had once proclaimed secularism as its guiding state principle. Both the advisory editor and the executive editor were arrested on 8 June 1994. They appeared before the court on the same afternoon, and their bail petition was denied. Accordingly, they were sent to jail. The assistant editor surrendered to the court later and faced the same fate. Eight days later, Masud was granted bail by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. Borhan Ahmed and Toab Khan were granted bail on 15 and 20 June, respectively (Ahmed 1995). But all of this was overshadowed by the Nasreen saga and received little attention outside Bangladesh. Bangladeshi secularists, unfortunately, failed to highlight the issue altogether. The street agitation continued until she left the country in August⁶. The state machinery not only allowed these violent demonstrations to continue and death threats to be waged against the author, but also prioritized the issue of dealing with the offenses related to hurting religious sentiments

over the demand for trials of Golam Azam and others for their involvements in war crimes.

- 25 Thus, the first grassroots movement against the Islamists, particularly the Jamaat-i-Islami, since their resurgence in 1979 was dissipated—not by clamping down on the movement but through constructing a diversion and by cultivating an outraged community.

Episode 2: India, 2007

- 26 The heightened media coverage of the second episode of the Nasreen saga began with the attack on her at Hyderabad on 9 August 2007. During a book launch at the city's press club Nasreen was attacked by 'an unruly crowd' (NDTV 2007) under the leadership of three state assembly members of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM). The party chief extended his wholehearted support to the attack and threatened to kill Nasreen himself (IANS 2007). A small local group, named Dasgah-e-Jehad-Shaheed, claiming itself the representative of the Muslim community, held a demonstration in Hyderabad on 11 August where it demanded that the author be expelled from India. By then Nasreen returned to Kolkata where she had been living for almost 3 years. The Imam of a local mosque, Syed Noor-ur-Rahman Barkati, issued a death threat against Nasreen on 17 August: 'Anybody eliminating her would be given 100,000 rupies and unlimited rewards if she does not leave the country immediately. She has insulted Islam and continued to create problem in this country' Maulana Barkati told reporters (WebIndia123 2007; *Hindustan Times* 2007).
- 27 After more than three months of calm, the issue re-emerged in violent form on the streets of Kolkata on 21 November 2007: the All-India Minority Forum's demonstration demanding that Taslima Nasreen's Indian visa be revoked and that she be forced to leave the country turned into a city-wide riot (BBCNews 2007). The scale of violence, not seen in Kolkata for decades, gripped the city for a day. The West Bengal government immediately put pressure on her to leave the state,⁷ within hours she was forced by law enforcing agencies to move to Jaipur. She was then thrown out of the state of Maharashtra towards Delhi, where she was put in an undisclosed safe house under the supervision of the central government. The cabinet ministers of the central government allegedly pressured her to make a public apology. The Foreign Minister commented that India would continue to provide her 'shelter' as a guest but she would have to show restraint. Pranab Mukherjee told the Indian Parliament on 28 November 2007, that 'It is also expected that the guests will refrain from activities and expressions that may hurt the sentiments of our people' (AOL News 2007).
- 28 On the same day, Taslima Nasreen informed her publisher in Kolkata to delete sections of the second part of her autobiography published in 2002. Announcing her decision Nasreen told the press, 'I have withdrawn some parts of my book *Dwikhondito*. Some said parts of the book were hurting the sentiments of the people. I hope after its withdrawal, there would be no more controversies ... The decision to withdraw these parts from *Dwikhondito* is to prove that I never wanted to hurt the people's sentiments. I hope now I will be able to live peacefully in India and Kolkata' (*Hindustan Times* 2007). Ironically, after a court victory over the same book Nasreen commented, 'If they had asked me to change or delete even one word as a precondition to lifting the ban, I would've gone to the

Supreme Court. To me, changing two pages and changing one word is one and the same thing' (*Telegraph* 2007).

- 29 Despite this concession and publicly giving in to the demands of the demonstrators, Nasreen was not allowed to stay in India, let alone return to Kolkata. She remained incommunicado until her departure in late-March 2008 when her second exile began.
- 30 In India, particularly in West Bengal, Nasreen was hounded in 2000, 2004 and 2006 and *fatwas* were issued against her. Yet the government did not intervene to prevent the recurrence of such events or to 'appease' those who claimed that they were speaking on behalf of the Muslim community. For example, in March 2000 an organization named the Reza Academy of Mumbai threatened that if she ever set foot there she would be burned alive (*Times of India* 2007). In January 2004, Syed Noor-ur-Rahman Barkati of Tipu Sultan mosque in Kolkata denounced the author in his Friday sermon, commented that 'Her face can be blackened with ink, paint or tar. Or she can be garlanded with shoes.' Maulana Rahman also offered a reward of 20,000 rupees (about 500 US dollars) to anyone who would carry out the act. In June 2006, Maulana Barkati issued what he described as a '*fatwa*', after Nasreen's speech at a conference in Kolkata. Maulana Barkati said to a local TV channel: 'I've issued a *fatwa* against her. After the Jumma namaz [Friday prayers], I said if anyone blackens her face and drives her out of India, I will give him 50,000 rupees.' He later retracted and insisted that a *fatwa* cannot be issued verbally.
- 31 What prompted the decisive step of the West Bengal government in 2007 to address the issue raised by the 'outraged' Muslim community? The answer to this question is not only important in understanding the government's actions but also to highlight the similarity between the events in 1994 and 2007.
- 32 Like with the situation in Bangladesh in 1994 we need to delve deep into other events connected to the larger political scene of West Bengal politics to find an explanation for the actions. In a textbook copy of the incident in Bangladesh, the West Bengal government first banned her book, *Dwikhondito* (Split in Halves) in 2004 and thus created an environment to move against her should that become necessary. The ban was later rescinded by the Indian court.
- 33 The 2007 episode, on the part of the agitators, began in March when Taqi Raza Khan of the All India Ibtihad Council, issued a *fatwa* against Taslima, threatening to kill her. Khan offered an inducement of 500,000 rupees (11,760 US dollars) for anyone who would behead ('*sar qalam karna*') the author. He claimed that he had the full support of the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board (*Khaleej Times* 2007). The *fatwa* was condemned by many Muslim representatives, for example, Safia Naseem, member of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, Maulana Naimur Rehman, general secretary of the Ulema Council, and Yasef Abbas, general secretary of the All India Shia Personal Law Board to name but a few (*Times of India* 2007a). Detractors of Nasreen were looking for an opportunity to highlight their demand and thrust themselves onto the national scene. But the opportunity emerged because of an entirely different and unrelated set of events: the growing resistance to the government's plan to set up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) allowing a foreign company to build a factory in Nandigram causing the eviction of thousands of hundred of local residents, who happened to be Muslims, and the mysterious death of a Muslim youth named Rezwanur Rahman allegedly with the connivance of the Kolkata police.

- 34 The Nandigram issue had been brewing since January 2007 when the local authority (*i.e.*, the Block Development Office, BDO) announced the seizure of land. Protests and clashes between police and local residents ensued. As the local administration failed to implement the plan, the state government viewed this as a law and order situation and consequently decided on 9 March that it would resort to police action. The local members of the ruling CPIM were also included in the force sent to 'retake' the villages. The police action on 14 March caused the deaths of local people, incidents of rape, and complete mayhem. However, the local resistance continued and the police actions, particularly their heavy-handedness, attracted national and international media attention. In the following months, anti-government political forces, especially the Trinamul Congress led by Mamata Banerjee, became involved and were effectively trying to cash in on the situation. But the mobilization remained, in large measure, local initiatives. The Kolkata-based civil society was divided on the issue and very slow in responding to the on-going locally-inspired resistance to the government industrial development plan. Between March and November, low-level conflict continued; the residents returned to their homes, the movement gathered momentum, and the government was increasingly becoming impatient. Finally, on 8 November, the government forcibly retook the villages. The result was less bloody than the March events, but no less disheartening. As for the local people, they were evicted from their homes, anyway. These events galvanized a section of the civil society leading to a massive protest in Kolkata on 14 November 2007. In the words of Sumit Chowdhury, this was a reflection of the 're-awakened conscience'. Chowdhury states that 'overnight, various platforms sprouted, all of which took place without a political party or bloc lending a hand, and unsupported by any political ideology. This citizens' uprising appeared spontaneous, bypassing the winding alleys of party politics' (Chowdhury 2008, § 2)
- 35 The demonstration was followed up by a government sponsored public gathering of hundreds and thousands of activists in support of 'peace' in Nandigram and the prospects of economic development through the SEZ. The forceful demonstration of the power of pro-government civil society at the heart of the city showed that the issue was far from over. The two public gatherings also revealed that the religious identity of the victims was irrelevant to the issue at hand. But behind the scenes an issue tied to 'religious sentiments' was emerging, as the government suddenly banned a magazine *Pathasanket 1414* on 9 November for publishing an article critical of the Bangladeshi government's actions against Taslima Nasreen and voicing support for her criticisms of Islamic religious texts. The support of the ruling CPIM hierarchy for the magazine was obvious from the list of authors, yet the state government acted quickly to proscribe it once an obscure organization called the All India Minority Forum (AIMF) under the leadership of Idris Ali demanded that it be banned. Morally boosted by the government's easy capitulation, the AIMF leaders announced an agitation program against the atrocities in Nandigram and demanding the cancellation of Nasreen's visa.
- 36 The sudden emergence of the AIMF and the government's inclination towards this organization is interesting on two counts; first, the veracity of their claim of representing the Muslims of the state; and second, the consequence in regard to an emerging alliance. As for the representation issue, many Muslims of West Bengal insist the organization does not represent them: 'Contrary to its name, the AIMF is not found all over India, nor does it represent all minorities. Its president, Idris Ali is known for raising emotive issues. He was found guilty of being in contempt of the high court when he reportedly urged the

imams of Kolkata to defy the court ban on the use of loudspeakers for aazan' (Indianmuslimsblog 2007). Had the government intended to listen to the Muslim voice it could have turned to the Milli Ittehad Parishad which brought hundreds and thousands of coreligionists onto the streets of Kolkata on 15 November to peacefully protest against the Nandigram incidents. As for the emerging coalition, the Nandigram issue paved the way for the creation of an unprecedented alliance—poor Muslim peasants and the disenfranchised urban intelligentsia, the mainstay of the CPIM's support for almost three decades. Thus the hegemony of the CPIM was being challenged from an emerging coalition that never existed before nor had been expected to emerge. The Nasreen issue, as presented by the AIMF, essentially cut out the roots of this emerging coalition. Two elements of the alliance were pitted against each other—Muslims were asked to coalesce around faith, while the urban intelligentsia was bound to stand for freedom of speech. As the coalition began to unravel, Nasreen was shunted from city to city and then had to leave the country.

Constructing an outraged community and the politics of emotion

- 37 Despite the appearance that these two series of events, in 1994 in Bangladesh and 2007-08 in India surrounding Taslima Nasreen, are spontaneous emotional outbursts of a segment of society, there is more to it. They are not fleeting reactions to events or ideas or even a moral panic⁸ but the product of a community primarily guided by the politics of emotion. It is important to note the longevity of the controversy: these two series of events took place 14 years apart. This debate could re-emerge at different times and at different places because, in part, of the physical presence of the author; but also because of the instrumentalization of emotion by non-state actors and the state's connivance in it. Essentially, in Bangladesh and India (particularly West Bengal) the outraged communities were constructed through a variety of ways. An outraged community is no different from any other collective identity created through deliberate efforts. James Jasper, citing Gamson's study of 1995 (Gamson 1995) reminded us that 'collective labels are necessary for action, even though they are largely fictional' (Jasper 2006: 26).⁹
- 38 This argument requires an explanation of how an outraged community is constructed and what the 'politics of emotion' means. The construction of an outraged community requires a combination of a few elements. Objective conditions aside, inventing an 'Other' is a prerequisite for rallying a group of people. The invention of the Other means that the group needs to be assigned an identity and differences with the Other are to be highlighted. The most immediate step in this direction is to create a binary division—us versus them, or in the words of Peter du Preez, constructing 'identity frames'—which maintain each other (Du Preez 1980: 3). Not only are they emphasized but the differences are given a new meaning in the current context. The Other is characterized as demonic and powerful. Whether the outraged community is a localized entity or a nation makes very little difference in regard to such characterization.¹⁰ Within this frame of explanation the Other does not deserve sympathy, for it is powerful and a perpetrator. Demonization of the Other also makes it morally imperative to oppose it; and thereby makes it larger than the issue at hand.

39 In both instances, Taslima Nasreen was the constructed 'Other'. In the case of Bangladesh the Islamists constructed Nasreen as the symbol of the 'demonic Other' who had challenged the faith of the Muslim community and the Bangladeshi identity. The pamphlets and speeches of the detractors of Nasreen insisted on several aspects of the 'Other'—the apostate, the atheist, the westernized, the agent of the Hindus, the transgressor, to name but a few. Both her writings and personal life were highlighted at once. Her writing style (that is, writing in first person) was helpful to the agitators as they insisted that her writings and she are same. Her opponents insisted that she represented moral decadence and was an affront to Islam, as an author and as an individual. Therefore, it was not Nasreen alone they were fighting against, although that was important to them; but the enemies of Islam and the nation. This appealed to a segment of society, because she was transformed into an issue larger than the individual. The issue, to some was blasphemy, to others gender transgression; to some it was her writing that made her the demonic Other, to others it was her lifestyle. In West Bengal, in similar vein, Nasreen was constructed as the instrument of Hindutva's design to malign the Muslims and Islam. The events in Bangladesh in 1994, particularly the charges brought under Article 295A in a court of law, made it easier for her detractors to say that her writings were a challenge to religion. The protestors' deliberate effort to merge the issue of atrocities in Nandigram, a Muslim majority locality, with Nasreen's presence in the state reveals that they wanted to make their cause larger than an individual—the Indian state's anti-Islamic stance.

40 Often these new meanings of identity as well as the construction of the Other are connected to history, to demonstrate that the current events are not an aberration but part of a recurrent pattern. In this context one can easily discover the presence of a paradoxical 'dual teleology' within the discourse of the progenitors. The Hindu nationalist movement under the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its like, commonly referred to as Sangh Parivar, is a case in point. Thomas Hansen's fine exploration of this movement is helpful in understanding this dualism:

On the one hand, history is invoked to justify the movement and its objectives. The movement is but a realization of inevitable historical development, and individuals in the movement are merely inconsequential actors in a great, unfolding drama ... On the other hand, the founding myth almost always revolves around a notion of self-birth, self-celebration, depicting the founding of the movement in an extraordinary situation by farsighted individuals who, through extraordinary difficulties, succeeded in creating the present movement. Due to their intervention the course of history will be altered as the movement will gradually realize its vision (Hansen 1999: 91).

41 The extent of this teleology varies according to the scope and nature of the events and issues at hand, but they are not entirely absent in any instance. Thus a specific reading of history is essential in presenting the case to the public at large and understanding the part of the public. In the context of Bangladesh, the history was framed with the Muslim identity as the pivotal issue as opposed to the ethnic Bengali identity. Nasreen's writings that called into question the partition in 1947 provided Islamists with the means of portraying her as anti-Bangladesh. Interestingly, those who opposed the establishment of independent Bangladesh became the standard bearer of the national sovereignty. The secularists, within this frame of reference, are recast as the 'stooges of Indian hegemony'. To them, India and Hinduism are synonymous; therefore secularists in general and Nasreen particularly are the 'enemy within'. The movement is an inevitable development

of history as it is portrayed as bringing the Bangladeshi Muslims back to their roots after a brief secularist interlude. For the protagonists, the rise of the movement was a part of the reawakening of the Muslims. The agitators in West Bengal and other parts of India framed the movement as the assertion of a disenfranchised minority. They claimed to be the voice of the Indian Muslim community. The history of disenfranchisement and deprivation served as the backdrop and justification of their movement. Thus, in West Bengal, cognitive and symbolic relationships between these two issues were established. These movements, particularly Islamists in Bangladesh, also used global politics as an element of the history—Muslims under attack from the Judeo-Christian western onslaught.

- 42 An important element of the construction of outraged community is personification and/or symbolization of the issue(s). The person/symbol represents the ‘Other’ and the essential negative aspects of the issues in question. In some form or the other, the central issue is attached to a specific individual or a group of individuals; and/or symbols that can be universalized. It is worth recalling that any symbols have three levels of association: personal, cultural and universal. The importance of symbolization, either through a person or an object, is on the one hand to transform an abstract idea into a tangible material, and to map an individual’s relationship with society, on the other (For an exploration of the latter point, see Voegelin 1990). Corneliu Bjola has pointed out, drawing on Sears (1993) and Kertzer (1988: 4), that political symbols are ‘any effectively charged element in a political attitude object’ by which ‘we give meaning to the world around us (...) [and] interpret what we see, and, indeed what we are’ (Bjola 2000: 9).
- 43 How was Nasreen, as a symbol, universalized? Her detractors pointed to the plight of the Muslims in India, the Indian governments’ inaction and the support given to her by the state and the secular intellectuals; these were intrinsically connected, they argued. The loss of a moral mooring of Bangladeshi society, brazen westernization, and Nasreen’s writings in support of sexual liberation of women were described as parts of one phenomenon. The powers in play were local and global. One aspect in the discourses of the protestors is worth recalling; that is to refer her as the ‘female Rushdie’. The analogy was coined and frequently used by the Western press sympathetic to Nasreen to describe her plight; but her detractors also used it to show that she was no different from Salman Rushdie. The Indian government’s decision to ban the *Satanic Verses* in 1988 was an impetus to Indian agitators that they can force a similar fate on Nasreen’s books.
- 44 It will be erroneous to suggest that the Nasreen detractors are the only ones who evoked symbols to appeal to the masses. The evocation of symbols to relate individuals to issues of importance is an integral part of politics in general. Political parties and states employ symbols on a regular basis to garner support. This is called ‘symbolic politics’— that is construction, distribution and internalization of political symbols such as phrases, images, norms, rules, etc. Discussions abound on the significance of ‘symbolic politics’ in mobilizing the masses and the assumption of leadership by political elites. The seminal studies of Murray Edelman (1985) and David O. Sears (1993) have demonstrated that the ideational aspect plays very significant roles in political activism. Their studies have also shown that ‘People may use political symbols simply as convenient information shortcuts for grasping an understanding of the political environment. On the other hand, their perceived symbolic predispositions may invite political elites to manipulate them for various political purposes’ (Bjola 2000: 7).

- 45 Thus there are two aspects of symbolic politics: instrumental aspects and interpretative aspects. The former deals with manipulation by the creators of the symbols while the latter deals with how these symbols are used by the recipients.
- 46 The instrumental aspect of the symbols depends on the emotional intensity of recipients towards the political symbol. The emotional involvement and intensity '[are] contingent to the place occupied by the respective symbol in the dominant political discourse and/or in that of its main competitor(s)' (Bjola 2000: 5). But nonetheless, there remains a close connection between the symbolization and emotions.
- 47 As for the interpretative aspect of symbolic politics, as I have hinted previously, a specific reading of history insisting on a distinctive identity was crucial. Reference to history occupied an important position in the discourse of the leaders who gathered crowds and mobilized them for activism. While the history varied between the Bangladesh and the West Bengal episodes, they were never devoid of history. One key difference between the West Bengal episode and the Bangladesh episode is the relative position of the Muslims within the society which influenced not only how the outrage was framed and articulated but also how the symbols were used by recipients. For the recipients, in the former instance a small organized secularist/atheist minority is insulting the religious feelings of the silent disorganized majority, while in the latter instance the weak marginalized minority's religious rights are being trampled on by the majority.
- 48 The role of emotion in politics has received less than its due attention because, generally speaking, until recently the study of political action has been dominated by the rational choice paradigm. Within this broad framework exists a dichotomy between rational and irrational impulses for actions, emotion falls under the latter deserving less attention (For a succinct introductory discussion on the treatment of emotion in politics, see Jasper 2006). But it is impossible to avoid two facts: (a) 'politics always had an emotional element'; and (b) 'a leading function of the political state is to legitimate some emotions and differently encourage, contain and dissuade others. All political organizations in fact, not just the state are engaged with emotions in the promotion of various dispositions, actions and inhibitions' (Barbalet 2006: 31-32). Thus it is necessary to recognize that emotions have been a crucial determinant of individuals' and organizations' political actions; but the vexed question is how an individual's emotion (*e.g.* hate, anger, resentment, fear, compassion) is collectivized and translated into the central element of political actions. For making emotion the driving force of the group, individuals' direct experience cannot be the only means, for many may not individually experience it. It then depends upon how the emotions are articulated and framed, and returning to our earlier point, what symbols are used. But it is also important to note that emotions alone cannot explain the actions of the individuals/groups; motivation for collective actions may come from different sources.
- 49 The events of 1994 and 2007-08 demonstrate that in both instances, symbols were constructed to give salience to the politics of emotion. A new collective/community identity was created, the Other was invented, and personification of the Other followed.
- 50 In the case of Bangladesh the movement to bring war criminals to justice needed a symbol to bring the issue to the fore. The protagonists, albeit unsuccessfully, utilized the Golam Azam issue in this regard. While their demands had legal and political legitimacy, they were avoided by political parties of all hues for more than two decades and thus became a distant issue to the younger generation. The hegemony of the political parties,

who befriended the 'war criminals' for political expediency, needed to be challenged from the grassroots and through constructing a new alliance of generations cutting across the political divide. As this alliance began to take shape, thanks to the civil society initiatives, the supporters of the JI and the ruling BNP became uncomfortable. The anti-Golam Azam movement also challenged the legitimacy of Islamist politics in Bangladesh. The Islamists, therefore, intended to stop it in its tracks. This was achieved through constructing Nasreen as the symbol of the Other. The Islamists, in this instance, succeeded, not only in creating a symbol to represent their issues but also in distracting the public from the war criminal trial issue. Thus the Islamists not only created a rift among the community that was being constructed by the secularists demanding the trial of the war criminals, but also created a community which was 'outraged' by the comments of Nasreen. Nasreen, in this context, was a symbol through which the world around us was given a meaning.

- 51 The events in 2007-08 were no different; the emerging peasant-intellectual alliance was drawing on the politics of emotion as much as it was building on the opposition to globalization and neo-liberal policies of the West Bengal government. While for the protagonists Nandigram was the symbol of resistance to the SEZ,¹¹ the ruling party portrayed this as the battle-line between 'us' and 'them' by.¹² Despite such binary division the emerging coalition showed no sign of breaking until a counter-symbol was inserted into the political equation. The AIMF's demonstration, protesting against the Nandigram violence, added the Taslima Nasreen issue and a new symbol appealing to a different kind of emotion was brought into the discourse.
- 52 The actions of the states, in large measure, have been explained as the policy of appeasement of Islamists and Muslims, respectively. This explanation assumes that rational behavior such as self-interest prompted the state's reaction to the situation. Indeed the increasing strength of the Islamists in Bangladeshi politics in 1994 was a factor in how the Taslima Nasreen issue would be dealt with, but whether the same can be said about the Indian situation is an open question. The ruling party of Bangladesh in 1994 was trying to create a schism between the JI and the Awami League (then the main opposition party), as the JI was gaining saliency within electoral politics, particularly after the new democratic era began in 1991. The case brought against the author indicates that the state became a party to the ongoing tension; in so doing the Bangladeshi state essentially contributed to the construction of an outraged community. Equally important to bear in mind is that the leaders of those who were demanding the trial of the war criminals were charged with sedition. The latter is a clear indication that the state wanted to neutralize the outrage of the secularists in regard to the trials of the war criminals.
- 53 The actions of the Indian state, on the other hand, cannot be explained only by the electoral equation (*i.e.* the needed support of the Muslim community as a vote bank); although that may have been a factor in the actions of the government of West Bengal where 25 percent of residents are Muslim. The central government's frenzied response is far less strategic. The demand for a trial, the alleged attack on Muslim sensibility by Taslima Nasreen, the unprecedented response to the Nandigram events and the demand for Nasreen's removal from India were all framed within the politics of emotion. Emotions were politicized and collectivized by parties involved and the state also became a part of it when it intervened on behalf of a party of the debate.

In lieu of a conclusion

- 54 The foregoing discussion has demonstrated the similarities between the 1994 and the 2007 events in regard to the Taslima Nasreen issue; described the responses of the Bangladeshi and the Indian states; and discussed the modalities of construction of outraged communities. The paper also demonstrated that the events surrounding Taslima Nasreen—played out in two countries and at two different times—have implications not only for the day-to-day politics of these two countries but also for our understanding of how emotions are instrumentalized and how symbols are created for mobilization of outraged communities. The actions of these outraged communities cannot be explained by looking only at the dynamics of the group and methods of collectivization of emotion but the role of the state in the process warrants attention as well.
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NOTES

1. Nasreen has since been allowed to return to India. On her return to New Delhi on 8th August 2008, she was 'immediately whisked off to an undisclosed location.' On 15th October 2008 she complied with a government instruction to leave the country.
2. In mid-1993, a government official commented to the author in a personal conversation that if Nasreen's trips were not covered in the press, both in Kolkata and Dhaka, the government could have avoided these steps. The official repeatedly used the phrase 'trifling' in describing the passport confiscation. However, the official also suggested that some influential members of the ruling party were pressing for action (Interview by the author, Dhaka, August 1993).
3. For details of the events see the fourth part of Taslima Nasreen's autobiography *Sei Sob Andhakar* (All that Darkness, in Bengali, 2004). Nasreen summarized the content in an interview in 2004: 'Every day thousands started staging demonstrations against me, issuing fatwas one after the other, declaring bandhs, and the government, instead of taking action against them, turned on me, accusing me of hurting the religious sentiments of people. By then the mullahs had begun demanding my death through hanging and instigated lakhs [hundred of thousands] of people to take to the streets. On the one hand there was the police hunting me down, and on the other fundamentalists were baying for my blood. My lawyer then advised me to go into hiding. Matters had come to such a head that even if I had given myself up, I would certainly have been killed in prison. So, I spent the next two months in hiding and darkness. The whole country was in the grasp of fundamentalists at that time. *Sei Sob Andhakar* is about those two months in hiding and it ends with my leaving the country. This is more like a documentation of the time—my situation and the society outside. It is a documentation of how fundamentalism, with the support of a government, can become dangerously powerful' (Nasreen 2004).
4. In 1971, Golam Azam, then chief of the East Pakistan wing of the Jamaat-i-Islami, actively collaborated with the Pakistani military junta and helped organize paramilitary forces (called Razakars and Al-Badr). In the last days of the liberation war, Golam Azam fled to Pakistan. In April 1973, the Bangladesh government canceled his citizenship along with that of thirty-eight others (*Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary*, 22 June 1973, part III). In 1978, Golam Azam returned to Bangladesh with a Pakistani passport. In 1979, the Jamaat-i-Islami was revived, and Azam became the de facto chief of the party. On 29 December 1991, the Jamaat declared Golam Azam the *ameer* (chief) of the party. Within a month, eminent citizens and intellectuals challenged the election of Azam on the grounds that Azam was a foreigner and could not head any political party under the laws of the land. They contended that because of his involvement with the genocide in 1971, Azam should be tried as a war criminal. By February 1992, the intellectuals had organized a committee and public campaign for his arrest and trial. The day before the symbolic 'public tribunal' the government arrested Golam Azam and filed a case of high treason against twenty-four persons involved in organizing the trial. The public tribunal, however, went ahead drawing

an unprecedented crowd. A writ petition on behalf of Azam was filed within a week of his arrest. It asked for the release of Golam Azam and challenged the premise of his arrest, denying that he was a foreigner. Thus it became an appeal to restore his citizenship. The hearing of the writ petition of Golam Azam began on 19 July 1992, and continued until 5 August 1992. But the case remained unresolved, as the two judges failed to reach a consensus and rendered separate judgments over a period of five days. The chief justice forwarded the case to a single-member bench of the High Court for the final verdict. The hearing on the government's appeal to the Supreme Court against the verdict of the High Court began on 4 May 1994.

5. Bangladesh and India both inherited a colonial law in regard to the acts of blasphemy. The Penal code 295 and 295A deal with the issue of 'offences related to religion'. None of them gives salience to any specific religion, any religious texts or any religious symbols. The penalty for 'hurting religious feelings' is between 2 to 10 years. In Pakistan two additional sub clauses are added—295C and 295D—which specifically address punishments of defiling the Quran and derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad with a maximum punishment of death sentence. Additionally, sections 298, 298A, 298B and 298C are added which stipulates that members of the Ahmadiyya community are not Muslims and their reference to Prophet Muhammad is construed as blasphemy. The JI in Bangladesh insists that Bangladesh adopts these new sections and clauses to address 'blasphemous acts'.

6. Taslima Nasreen made a brief visit to Bangladesh in September 1998 to see her terminally ill mother. As soon as the news of her return became public, Islamists organized demonstrations in Dhaka and elsewhere calling for her trial under *shariah* law. The protests drew a handful of people and have had very little impact. The government headed by Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League made no special arrangements for her safety, nor showed any sympathy to her. On 22 November, Nasreen surrendered to a lower court to face a case filed by an individual under Penal Code 295A (offending religious sentiment) and she was granted bail. Following her mother's death and further threats from small militant organizations (AFP 1999) Nasreen left Bangladesh in January 1999. Since then her autobiographies have been banned by the government, and in October 2002, a magistrate's court in a remote city sentenced her to a year in prison. The government has refused to renew her Bangladeshi passport and has never allowed her to return to the country.

7. The most obvious indication of the state government's inclination towards removing her from the state was the comment of the CPIM leader Biman Bose that Nasreen should be sent either to Jaipur or Gujarat in the wake of protests against her stay in Kolkata (*The India News* 2007). Bose told reporters, 'I don't want to speak elaborately on the role played by the Centre on Taslima Nasreen's stay in West Bengal. But if her stay creates a problem for peace, she should leave the state' (Banerjee 2007).

8. The term 'moral panic' coined by Stanley Cohen in 1972 is described as a response of a group of people who consider that some behaviors are not only deviant but also a threat to societal norms and values. It creates outrage (see Cohen 1972).

9. The fictional nature of the collective identity has been underscored in Benedict Anderson's classic study *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Anderson 1991).

10. Post-9/11 xenophobia and Islamophobia in the United States is a case in point. A particular notion of the 'Other' loomed large as the politics of fear that dominated the country for at least 3 years.

11. The word 'symbol' has been used in almost all analyses of the events of Nandigram. A quick Google search of 'Nandigram symbol of resistance' generates 4,490 documents/websites in 0.26 seconds (10 July, 2008). The CPIM leadership, however, has questioned the use of the expression 'resistance'. For example, CPIM leader Brinda Karat asked: 'Resistance against what?' (Karat 2007).

12. This binary division was at the heart of the argument of the CPIM leadership, see Karat (2007).

ABSTRACTS

Taslima Nasreen, the exiled Bangladeshi author, was forced to leave India, her adopted homeland, in March 2008 after being under 'security protection' for months following street agitation against her writings in Kolkata. The events between August 2007, when she was physically attacked in Hyderabad, and March 2008, when she left the country, were reminiscent of those in Bangladesh in 1994 which led to her departure from there. In both instances, the states' responses were her forced removal from the country to placate the agitators. In this paper I analyze the events on the ground and the responses of the states. I argue that these events demonstrate how 'outraged communities' are constructed, and symbols are invented to mobilize the community. The role of state has received little attention in the extant discussions while I contend that states bear a significant responsibility in engendering the controversy.

INDEX

Keywords: Bangladesh, emotion, India, Islamist, outraged community, religion, symbol, Other

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