

Interview

Freethinkers of Our Time

For over the last one and a half decades Mukto-Mona has been fighting for the development of humanism and freethinking in South Asia. The organisation's member-contributor's included novelist Humayun Azad. In an email conversation with the SWM, three members of mukto-mona.com talk about the state of freedom in Bangladesh, and South Asia in general.

Ahmede Hussain

1. How has Mukto-Mona evolved? Can you please explain the idea behind Mukto-Mona for our readers?

Avijit Roy: Mukto-Mona came into being in the year 2000, with the intention of debating and promoting critical issues that are of the utmost importance in building a progressive, rational and secular society, but usually are ignored in the man stream Bangladeshi and South Asian media. For example, consider the question: Does one need to adhere to a religious doctrine to live an honest, decent and fulfilled life? This may seem like an off-the-track topic to many, but at the same, we cannot deny that this is a very critical and crucial question.

It was 2000. I was very active on the net and writing in several e-forums simultaneously on topics pertaining to rationalism, humanism and science. One such e-forum which I came across at that time was News From Bangladesh (NFB) which regularly published debates between believers and rationalists like me. Although only a handful in number, I discovered, I was not alone. I met a few more expatriate Bangladeshi writers (of whom some constitute today Mukto-Mona's advisory and editorial board) who also thought in same way about religious doctrine and conventional beliefs. We started communicating among ourselves but felt the need for an independent platform to raise our voices. On 26th May, 2001, I created a yahoo group under the name Mukto-Mona. A year later, it was developed into a complete web site (www.mukto-mona.com), which, to the best of my knowledge, was the first South Asian Humanist and Rationalist forum on the net. **Our aim is to build a society which will not be bound by the dictates of arbitrary**

authority, comfortable superstition, stifling tradition, or suffocating orthodoxy but would rather be based on reason, compassion, humanity, equality and science. We argue for a rational and scientific approach to human problems as an alternative to religious dogmas, strongly defend freedom of thought and civil liberties, and, strive for the secularization of politics, society and educational system.

Since its existence, Mukto-mona has been able to draw the attention of many like-minded thinkers including many distinguished authors, scientists, philosophers and human rights activists from all around the world. We have always tried to raise our voices wherever people's freedom and civil liberties have been attacked. For example, we were (still are) acrid critics of Bush's policy of aggression and invasion of Iraq in the name of the so-called 'war on terror.' We condemned the oppression and persecution of minority Hindu, Quadiyani and other ethnic communities in Bangladesh ; targeted killings of minority Muslims in Gujarat , India ; oppression of Palestinians and others. Equally, we were active on the net when Prof. Humayun Azad (also a distinguished member of our forum at the time of his death) was assaulted by religious fanatics. Our advisory committee member Prof. Ajoy Roy has been actively protesting all kinds of minority and human rights violations through national and international platforms including Mukto-Mona. Prof Ajoy Roy along with other journalists from Bangladesh was invited to participate in a discussion on fundamentalism in the British Parliament. Our writers at home and abroad regularly publish articles/thoughts on issues of concern in many national and international newspapers. And in a very different sense, Mukto-Mona was "acknowledged" by the government of the UAE which decided to ban the organization and block its website. We are unaware if any other discussion group has been banned by a fundamentalist government anywhere in the world. Being banned by such a government, is, to every one of us, a badge of honor.

Mukto-Mona, however, is more than a platform for just philosophical discussion. One of our targets is to reach out people on the ground. With this goal in mind, we have undertaken several projects including but not limited to, building a school in a remote area in Bangladesh, publishing books in Bangla on scientific and rational issues, arranging seminars on secularism, humanism and freethinking. We have also contributed toward the Humayun Azad Foundation and helped secular journalists with medical treatment. Since we don't believe in the suppression of freedom and free inquiry, lately along with our partner "Shikkha Andolon Moncho" in Dhaka we have raised our voices when the Islami Chatra Shibir, the militant student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, issued death threats to two eminent secular intellectuals of Bangladesh : writer Hasan Azizul Haque and Dr. Zafar Iqbal. Our collaboration with the "Shikkha Andolon Moncho" to promote field work in Bangladesh has manifested itself in publicizing scientific and secular awareness by celebrating Einstein's century, awareness of Giordano Bruno's martyrdom, and seminars and reviews of secular books, among several projects. Recently Mukto-Mona and "Shikkha Andolon Mancha" has jointly arranged a day long seminar at the Dhaka University campus on the occasion of Mukto-Mona's fifth year anniversary. Our first publication "Alo Hate Chaliyache Adharer Jatri" (written by me)—a Bangla book on the origins of the universe has been extremely well received among general readers and the intellectual community of Bangladesh and expatriate Bangladeshis. The

three other books including one on origin (Mohabisshe Praan O Buddhimottar Khoje by Avijit Roy and Farid Ahmed) and another on evolution (Bibortoner Poth Dhore by Bonna Ahmed) of life are expected to be available in 2007 February book fair.

We have received support and appreciation from many internationally respected humanist and secular bodies such as the Atheist Alliance International (AAI) in USA, the Center for Inquiry International (CFI) led by secular humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz, James Randi Foundation, Richard Dawkins Foundation etc. International Darwin Day celebration committee has shown keen interest in our work on evolution and our website, in their words, could serve as a "template" for many science forums. Within the subcontinent, we have affiliations with the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations and the Science and Rationalists' Association of India (SRAI) led by Mr. Prabhir Ghosh. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) has also provided continuous encouragement and support to us. Mukto-Mona forum is approaching 3000 members (although we don't judge ourselves by number of membership alone) as a milestone and our advisory committee member Alan Levin declared in the Atheist Alliance International Convention in Los Angeles in January 2005 that Mukto-Mona had become the fourth most visited secular humanist website worldwide on the Internet.

2. Can you please explain humanism further for us?

Jahed Ahmed : The word "humanism" could be defined in several ways. **In general, to a humanist, our first identity is not that I am a Hindu, or a Muslim, or Christian etc, but I'm a member of the universal family of mankind.** Humanism means a way of thinking and living that aims to advance human welfare and solve human crisis through the use of reason, free inquiry and science, as opposed to belief in any supernatural deity/deities. Humanists include a wide range of people who do not subscribe to an organized religion, for example: agnostics, freethinkers, rationalists and atheists.

The type of humanism that closely resembles views held by Mukto-Mona is Secular Humanism. In simple words, it is an outlook or way of life that centered on human need and interest. Secular humanists reject supernatural and authoritarian beliefs, rather they affirm that one must take responsibility for his/her own lives and the communities and world in which he/she lives. It had its roots in the rationalism of the 18th Century and the free thought movement of the 19th Century. Humanist Manifesto III, titled "Humanism and its aspirations" was written in 2003. It is not published as dogma that Humanists must believe; rather it represents a consensus of what Humanists do believe. Its basic points include:

*Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.

*Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.

*Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

*Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.

*Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.

* Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

3.What do you think is the biggest impediment to free thinking in Bangladesh , or South Asia in general?

Mehul Kamdar : South Asia has a major problem of illiteracy which makes it easy for fundamentalists from outside the region to spread hatred and false propaganda. When people cannot read critical texts questioning this propaganda they are more easily deluded by preachers of hatred. As humanists, we seek to help people develop love for other human beings irrespective of their religion, caste or creed. But we always have to fight against superior money and numbers.

Whether it is the Jihadi groups who get their money from Saudi Arabia or Middle East, Overseas Friends of the RSS who contribute to Hindu Fundamentalist groups from UK and USA or Christian groups who get their money either from Rome or from other parts of the world depending on what denomination they belong to, all of these groups are pumping money in a battle for more converts and for militancy among their followers. As humanists, we are constantly catching up to novel methods by which this hatred is being spread. **We are positive about the long term, though, because we believe that most people are intrinsically good and decent and that we would be able to appeal to their logical faculties, even when they are unable to read and write.**

4. What do you think is contributing to a rise in religious extremism in Bangladesh ?

Jahed Ahmed : There are direct and indirect causes. One of the direct causes, **I would say is poverty and unemployment.** Hundreds of thousands of youths are unemployed in our country. They do not have a hope to live with. Fundamentalists or militant Islamists take advantage of this psychological void through mental manipulation. They lure those poorly educated youths in the name of paradise in order to get their own political ambitions fulfilled. With some sincerity from the government this vast number of youths could be turned into a great asset like they could be trained in English, IT and put on outsourcing job projects as we see in India, China and Philippines. Our youth are no less talented than their counterparts and more over, we have people in IT sectors in the West who can help us get contracts But before that, we need to ensure the quality service. Remember, to get those jobs done, one doesn't need a very big degree from a university

Second most important cause, in my opinion, is loss of the foundation of secularism from country's '72 constitution. Lifting the ban on the use of religion as a tool of politics in post '75 era is one of the worst blows to the growth of a secular democracy in Bangladesh since we know, our '72 constitution is one of the most progressive, secular and liberal constitutions in the world. Experts in constitutions from other countries also acknowledge it. Unfortunately, the craving to reach and retain power at any cost by all the mainstream political parties and ruling classes has paved the way for the inclusion of many semi, half-educated and unenlightened persons including Rajakars, Mullahs in the arena of politics. This has contributed towards the growth of religious extremism. To that has been added the rise and influence of Saudi-based Wahaabism through their appointed local agents such as Jamayati Islami et al. The notorious activity of USA government in 70's 80's and 90's is also a case in point to note. **If the USA did not sponsor the Saudi Kingship whole-heartedly since they discovered oil there (6% of US economy is controlled by Saudi money) or did not fund faith based organizations to counter "liberals", "communists" and "leftists", may be the racist and parochial 'Wahabi Movement' would not have spread in countries like Bangladesh, India or Pakistan.** May be, today Jamat e Islami, their mullahs could not also become so strong in our soil. We must not forget, in general, the people of Bangladesh are not fanatics. This is the land where Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism flourished side by side without any conflict. This is the country where people still cherish the secular songs of poet Nazrul, mystic Lalou, Hasan Raja as much as they do those of Rabindranath Tagore, Radha Raman. I think it is not only in Bangladesh; fundamentalism is on the rise all over the world. The Fundamentalist Christians are getting stronger in the USA every day; they are fighting vigorously against promoting Science, and humanism in the schools and colleges.

One of the implicit but powerful causes contributing towards the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh, in my opinion, is the lack of access for children to curriculum that promotes secular, scientific and critical thinking. In our country, a Muslim student is taught Islam only when it comes to study a subject like religion which is totally unfair and reflection of a provincial outlook. Instead, we could devise curriculum, where a student (of any religion) will study all religions side by side (comparative religion), their history, how they evolved from a sociological, anthropological and psychological perspective. Such a study will broaden a student's horizon of mind and views which are so essential to become an enlightened person. And without an enlightened new generation, a country cannot stand on its feet with dignity.

The concept of a Sharia-based theocracy is a frightening one. Yet some wicked minds continue to fool people in the name of religion. Europe and America learned the dreadful lesson from the bloodshed of several hundred years when religion controlled politics. They have separated religion from the state. Unfortunately, we have yet to realize that. Even if you look within Islam's own history, you'll see Islam reached its peak under the caliphate of secular rulers such as Caliph Al Mamun, Harun-ur-Rashid. Thus a demand for a secular democracy is the most crucial demand of our time.

5. What kind of system of government you think appropriate for the establishment of a free society?

Mehul Kamdar : Constitutional democracy is the best known means for protecting the rights of all people to form worldviews and live out their commitments in a free and mutually respectful way. A democratic and secular government should promote open societies, ensure universal human rights, and be secular, having no bias against any religious or non-religious group.

The dictionary definition of secularism is: a concept which postulates that policies, such as state, education etc should be free from religious injunctions. But the policy of the government, our ministers, bureaucrats and politicians of Bangladesh and India are roaming around mosques or temples offering worship, prostrating at Gurduwaras and demonstrating full devotion at Dargas. Statesmen are on the air and television to offer good-will on the occasions of Diwali, Eid, Christmas....etc. Money is made available to the religious organizations in the form of exemption from income tax. Governments are least concerned in protecting the rights of freethinkers and non-religious people. The fate of late Prof. Humayun Azad, Taslima Nasrin and harassment of late Prof Ahmed Sharif show the unfortunate state of affairs in Bangladesh as do the threats of murder against renowned secular writers like Hassan Azizul Huq and Dr Zafar Iqbal. In India, among others, the renowned artist M F Hussain has been targeted and his exhibitions even in the UK were disrupted. Academicians like Prof Wendy Doniger of Chicago University have been physically attacked while lecturing in India. In Pakistan, the horrible "punishment" meted out to Mukhtaran Mai and many other women who do not even come out to talk about their plight has been dismissed by President Musharraf as a way of getting political asylum in foreign countries.

Forget about freethinkers' rights, even minority religious peoples' rights get violated. Just after the infamous election of 2001 in Bangladesh, dozens of people were killed, more than 1,000 women from minority groups were raped and several thousand people lost their land in the three months around the elections. The situation in India and Pakistan is also no better. From the massacre of Bengalis in Assam at Nellie and the subsequent massacres of Sikhs in 1984 to the recent massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, India has shown the same blatant disregard for its minorities. In Pakistan, churches have been attacked and Christians killed on several occasions as have Qadiyanis and other Muslim minorities who were declared as apostates under the Zia Ul Haq regime. Qadiyanis can be out to death in theory in Pakistan for saying "Allahu Akbar." There is the sad fact that all three major nations of South Asia, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan were founded as secular nations but have become hot beds of religious hatred. We believe that with proper democracies in all of these nations and a EU style union, South Asia could become one of the best regions to live in the world.

6. In a region where a majority of the people live in abject poverty and do not have access to the Internet, how can Mukto-mona help establish a secular society?

Avijit Roy : As said earlier, it has been always our aim not to limit ourselves just within the internet but to reach out people on the land. But this is not an easy task given the type of problems our people are engulfed by in their daily lives: poverty, corruption, terrorism, poor health system, poor status of women, illiteracy and superstitions. Speaking practically, we don't expect to solve every problem. Our goal is rather a specific one i.e. to encourage people, especially the younger generation, not only toward literacy but also toward a point where they learn to think for themselves in a rational way instead of depending on any superstitious doctrine or myths. We think practicing fatwa, declaring someone 'murtad' just because the person freely expressed his/her views about a particular issue is unlawful. Achieving a goal of enlightening such a vast number of people is a highly challenging issue. But again, somewhere someone has to take the initiative as was beautifully expressed by Edward Everett: "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." As lot of us live abroad we thought Internet would be the best medium to start our initiative and it looks like accessibility of internet in the common mass of Bangladesh is also getting popular day by day.

Despite our limited resources, mind you, Mukto-Mona is not an NGO run by donations from foreign countries, we carry out activities with our own funds i.e. donations collected from our members of advisory and editorial board (who are mostly expatriate Bangladeshis such as researchers, activists, students, etc) we are trying to target the most neglected areas. For example, as our 1st project, we undertook the reconstruction of a primary school in remote Roumari in Bangladesh. We have additionally promised to continue our support for more years provided the school authority promote secular and rational thinking among the students. We undertook that project for many reasons: that was a place of poor rural people and thus was neglected by the rich class/government. Secondly, the most important stage of life when we can instill a value/lesson in the minds of our children is when they are in primary school.

We have started publishing books on science and rationalism. In a few remote areas, our activists have formed Rationalist Forums drawing likeminded youth and students. Such forums or associations provide a sense of cohesiveness in the mind of young humanists and they do not feel they are isolated. In the future, we plan to work on mobilizing and uniting youth toward rationalism and humanism in every part of Bangladesh.

Fortunately, we are not alone. There exist vast number of like-minded people in the world and nothing can beat the internet in making friends with such people. For example, we have humanists of Bangladesh and other South Asian origin in our group from virtually from every corner of the world. Lots of people are showing eagerness to help Mukto-Mona in every possible way but we have been cautious in our response because we

simply don't want to turn into yet another NGO. Ours is not just an organization, it symbolizes a movement, an ideal.

Avijit Roy is author, "Alo Hate Choliyachhe Adharer Yatee" (a Bangla book on the origin of universe); he is also the founding Moderator, Mukto-Mona.

Jahed Ahmed is a humanism activist and writer; he is also co-moderator of Mukto-Mona.

Mehul Kamdar is former Assistant Editor (with MD Gopalkrishnan as editor), the Modern Rationalist, India; he is also freelance writer and co-moderator of Mukto-Mona. Originally from Tamilnadu, India, currently settled in Chicago.

Mukto-Mona (www.mukto-mona.com) is an Internet congregation of freethinkers, rationalists, skeptics, atheists & humanists of mainly Bengali and South Asian descent who are scattered across the globe. [Mukto-Mona forum](#) is currently moderated by Farid Ahmed, Mehul Kamdar, Jahed Ahmed, Tanbira Talukder & Avijit Roy. [Mukto-Mona website](#) is maintained by Avijit Roy, Farid Ahmed, Jahed Ahmed and Bonna Ahmed.

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