

**Protest of Pro-Islamists against NGO operations:
a study of Brahmanbaria in Bangladesh**

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1. Introduction :

During the past year the NGOs (non governmental organisations) pursuing development activities based at Brahmanbaria of Bangladesh have experienced protest from the pro-Islamists under the guidance of hujurs therein. Over the past several years such protest also took place in several other localities of Bangladesh. It is well recognised that in traditional societies like Bangladesh religion plays one of the most important role controlling the social and economic institutions. In Bangladesh religion (i.e., Islam) is an effective tool of social protest against the process followed by NGOs in respect to development and social change. It would be useful to note that the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology have treated religion as a 'social fact' or a 'human fact' (D.A. Gilling [ed.], 1978)

1.1 *The status of Non-government Organisations (NGOs) with Reference to Brahmanbaria*

NGOs are working for a common cause to provide a better life to the poor community. They are funded by donor government or by private agencies for non-profit motives. The government grants permission to them to operate. Once a project is approved, NGOs enjoy the liberty to operate independently without government interference (Zaman, 1999).¹

At the community level in Brahmanbaria some confusion regarding aims and objectives of NGOs exist (Raza, 1999). Among them apparently there is little confusion regarding the aims and objectives of hujurs (*ibid*, p.29). During December 7 and 8, 1998 there were demonstrations of angry opposition by hujurs to the NGO operations. The protest might be the result of questionable intent of NGOs behind organising and participating in politico cultural activities like Victory Day celebration, staging *putul nac* (puppet show), *gana natak* (folk theater). In Brahmanbaria since 1984 *putul nac. jatra* (folk drama), *jua* (gambling), vulgar dance are not held (*ibid*, p.29). These activities are considered to be un-Islamic by the hujurs. The reappearance of some of these

activities especially *putul nac* through NGOs served as a provocation to hujurs for becoming sentimental. Such sentiment helped in triggering protests by pro-Islamists against the NGOs. The opposition might be the result of some failures to understand currently the operations of the NGOs at Brahmanbaria. This caused anxiety to the NGO officials as well as grassroots level parties of NGO action programmes.

The NGOs began their function in Bangladesh its independence in 1971 as voluntary organisation for relief distribution and rehabilitation. At present, NGOs are viewed as a strong force in the area of socio-economic development in Bangladesh. Around early 1990s NGOs in Bangladesh are facing many challenges as well as resistance to their development efforts aimed at the grassroots population (). The resistance apparently came from pro-Islamists. The investigators of Research and Evaluation Division of BRAC in a report (1994)² stated that since 1993, BRAC has been facing some opposition from a section of the religious elite belonging to Islam.

Since early 1990s some local enthusiasts using the banner of poverty alleviation are found to invest capital in setting up NGOs. The queries in the form of accusations by NGOs and hujurs thrown at each other in the absence of the party concerned indicate a negative attitude. The Home Ministry of the Government of Bangladesh cited allegation against the charge based on NGOs for most of their funds for religious conversion under the banner of development programmes by developing personal relations, creating job opportunity, giving financial assistance during actual monetary shortages (Ajker Kagoj, April 3, 1999). In this context the observation by Bari (1999) seems to be relevant. He pointed out that it is more important how the institution is run that determine how much successful it is in alleviating poverty. He also stated that the higher interest rate charged by NGOs can limit the impact of the well-being of the clients of micro-credit. Some member of secular and religious groups had similar view.

1.2 The Role of Islamists

in this study the Islamists include spiritual leaders, Imams, madrasah teachers and students, and supporters to any of them. At Brahmanbaria with the exclusion of these supporters all of them are commonly as *hujurs*. In the past the senior hujurs identified their respective representatives to continue the task of transmitting the message of the *Quran* and *Sunnah*. Brahmanbaria Jameya Yunusia Madrasah established a century ago had some distinguished hujurs in its teaching staff they included Allama Shamsul Huq Faripuri, Hajrat Maulana Muhammad ullah Hafejji Hujur and Fakher Banggal Maulana Tajul Islam. Maulana Tajul Islam held the position of Principle of Jameya Yunusia Madrasah. The people of Brahmanbaria addressed him as Bara Hujur. He died in 1966 and was buried at the madrasah premises, Jameya Yunusia Madrasah and the shrine (mazar) of Maulana Tajul Islam therein of increasing influence by members of the religious society there. Maulana Sirajul Islam believed to be 130 years of age is now holding the position of the head of Jameya Yunusia Madrasah and like his predecessor he is addressed by the people as Bara Hujur. He commands a great influence over the people of Brahmanbaria the working of 66 madrasahs are supervised and guided by Jameya Yunusia Madrasah. Most of the support of these madrasahs come from the members of the community. These community supported madrasahs follow *khareji* or kaomi type of syllabus approved by its own board as against *Aliya* type of syllabus approved by a board set up by the government. Unlike *Khareji* madrasahs the *Aliya* madrasahs received government support. The researcher of this study came to know about the existence of only one *Aliya* madrasah at Brahmanbaria.

At Brahmanbaria it is possible to consider the relationship between religious society and civilian society. The first mentioned society had a preference in following the guidelines laid down in the *Quran* and *Sunnah*. The hujurs upheld the importance of their practice amongst the sunni Muslims of all socio-economic categories who constituted the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population of Brahmanbaria. The society mentioned here next had a preference to freedom of action subject to the law. The NGOs upheld the importance of its

practice amongst the very poor segment of the population irrespective of religious affiliation. In view of the existing conflict between the two contending groups the government on behalf of the State made an attempt to achieve a consensus over conflict by using the channels of bureaucrats and a 'committee of citizens'

(Nagarik Committee) in this respect the government obtained support from political leaders, hujurs and NGOs. The three groups such as hujurs, NGOs and government with backing form the committee of citizens had before them the conflicts of competence in interpreting religious and civil institutions. The Islamic religious institutions appeared in the scene with authority from the *Quran* and *sunnah*. Through the channel of NGOs the secular social institutions came into focus with initiatives for civil liberty. It is no wonder that the pro-Islamists registered a protest against the NGOs at Brahmanbaria.

The role of religion is well recognised in all human societies. Religion has functioned as a source of social solidarity throughout history (Biswas, 1997). Biswas quoting wewy (1987;374) stated that Maciavelli called religion "the most necessary and assured support of the civil society." The pro-Islamists always insisted that the fact of religion should stay out of the clutches of un-Islamic actions and behaviour. They set themselves against the supporters of human behaviour that are considered examples of freedom and secularism upheld by NGOs who believed in ignorance. The NGOs had no faith which could content itself with the simple reference of all things to religion.

During the past few decades at Brahmanbaria several major events centering the erosion of Islamic values attracted public attention. These events included the administrative disapproval against holding *jatra*, eviction of sex workers, and forceful occupation of Kadiyani prayer-house by Sunnis. Reza (1999) has referred to some relevant historical information about confrontation between Kadiyanis and Islamists at Brahmanbaria that occurred 50 to 60 years ago. He stated that at that time as an aftermath of clash between the Kadiyanis and

Islamists three followers of Islam lost their lives. This sensational event served as a turning point in organising the followers of Islam against the un-Islamic activities under the leadership of the Islamists based at Brahmanbaria Jameya Yunusia Madrasah.

The hujurs believed that in the religious society all anti-Islamic activities could encourage anti-Islamic ideals and actions with a prospect of deviating the Muslims in general from their prescribed religious practices. They believed that without putting up a firm resistance the spread of such un-Islamic activities could not be stopped at the mass level. Historically, the hujurs served as sentinels in preventing the erosion of Islamic values. In fulfilling such a duty they felt that the observance of *parda* by Muslim women was essential in keeping up the Islamic values. They also held the view that 'acceptance of loan with interest' (*sudi taka grahan*) was *haram* (prohibited). It is widely recognised that Maulana Sirajul Islam Bara a leadership in upholding the Islamic values during the past several decades.

The origin of the December 1998 events at Brahmanbaria is traceable to the relentless efforts put up by the spiritual leaders.

He is the Principal of a very old madrasah named Jameya Yunusia of Brahmanbaria, established by a renowned spiritual leader Maulana Yunus. Allama Shamsul Huq Faridpuri, Hajrat Maulana Muhammadullah Hafezji Hujur, and Fakhir *Banggal Hazrat Maulana* Tajul Islam were among the illustrious teachers of this madrasah. These teachers had left behind them a remarkable spiritual influence on the people of Brahmanbaria. Maulana Sirajul Islam Bara Hujur is well recognised by the people of Brahmanbaria irrespective of religious affiliation as a spiritual leader of high standing like his predecessors. In ensuring the Islamic practices as per guidance laid down in the *Quran* and *Sunnah*. The prescribed Islamic ideologies were transferred from generation to generation in the Muslim community of Brahmanbaria by the hujurs for over half a century.

1.3 Context of protest by pro-islamists

The civil society at Brahmanbaria organised its core cultural activities centering the *Jatras* or 'folk dramas'. In Maharashtra of India the annual *Jatras* (folk dramas) were organised within the sacred groves at night (Burman, 1997). Over there the value of *Jatra* provided for a yearly potluck as thousands thronged there and sacrificed goats and fowls for appeasing the deity. The occasion of *Jatra* provided the Hindus an opportunity for reinforcing their ethnic solidarity which is important in the absence of a Hindu spiritual leaders of high standing at Brahmanbaria. It had easy access by the members of the civil society irrespective of religious affiliations. In it the number of female actors varied from 10 to 20. They included two to three special dancers designated as "princess". The female actors and dancers were recruited from both Hindu and Muslim families. The male actors and directors were from all religious group. The management committee of *jatra* was constituted by the members of the civil society preferably drawn from all religious. The event of *jatra* was controlled by local influentials including the elected local government representatives.

With the event of *jatra* several other events continued simultaneously. They included *putul nac* (puppet show), circus, dice-playing (*jua khela*) suitable to all irrespective of literacy level, *hausi* (a kind of gambling) suitable to the literate people, drinking locally produced wine and taking other intoxicants. One or more dances appeared in the stage at a time. They put on trousers made of thin cloth and scanty upper garments. Until late 1970s *jatra* show attracted one to three thousands people of both sexes. The number of female being small. In early 1980s the viewers of *jatra* show went down. The viewers of *jatra* usually had the members of the civil society. In the early 1980s and earlier the muslim male adolescents and young adults attended *jatra* stealthily or in a cat-like manner. Sometimes sexual harassment of female dancers and actors took place during or after the show. Though a permission is accorded by a competent government authority in favour of holding *jatra* in a prescribed manner, various illegal activities like dice-playing, drug taking and dancing by youthful females

with scanty dress took place. In the background of such un-Islamic activities the *jatra* shows were stopped with the support from the civil administration. (Reza, 1999).

The *Jatra* and all other entertaining events were organised during the season comprising the two months of *Kartik* and *Agrahayan* of Bengali year which coincided with the autumn or cold season. This is a harvesting season and coincided with the Hindu worship of goddess Durga and Kali. The Hindus believed that holding of *jatra* and associated events pleased these deities.

In Brahmanbaria there were several *Jatra* parties. The famous *Jatra* parties there included Jay Durga Opera dedicated after the name of Hindu goddess Durga, Bholanath Opera dedicated after the name of Hindu god Mahadev who was the consort of goddess Durga and Arjya Opera in commemoration of the ancestors of high caste Hindus. The prominent well-to-do high caste Hindu landlords and financiers of Brahmanbaria who promoted *Jatra* had moved out to India after 1947. Following that the responsibility of the organising it was taken over by the interested members of civil society.

After a long *no show* of *jatra*, and simultaneously held un-Islamic activities the attempt of *trinamul janasangathan* to hold *putul nac* (puppet show) triggered the sentiments of pro-Islamists towards a protest. Prevalence of characteristics based on civil society elements of cultural event that permits freedom of joining it without any restriction provided a context for registering protest by the religious society based on the religious of Islam against un-Islamic functions and activities. The peaceful co-existence by the members of religious society represented by religious leaders and the civil society represented by NGOs are well maintained through consensus over conflicts.

1.3 Sequence of Events at Brahmanbaria

In December 7 and 8, 1998 there were confrontation between *pro-Islamists* and *trinamul janasangaathan* at Brahmanbaria on the occasion of scheduled Victory Day celebration at Neaz Stadium (Neaz Stadium). The pro-Islamists did not approved participation of the poor *trinamul* female members in the scheduled public procession and assemblage on December 7, 1998 and other days. As a mark of protest they put up a *tafsir mahfil* in the same palce and date. Apprehending branch of peach in the public domain the civil administration of the government imposed Section 144 at the Neaz Stadium. accoeding to the rtecorded police report, the trinamul janasangathan went ahed with their programmes in a modified form violating Section 144, while and the pro-Islamists dropped their programme. The protest by pro-Islamists eventually led to confrontrations between the two concerned groups. What, why and how of the confrontration between hujurs and NGOs occoured at Brahmanbaria are investigated.

2. Methodology:

Why and how the clash between hujurs and NGOs took place at Brahmanbaria were investigated. Data were collected through case study, observation, informal discussion and indepth interview. Secondly sources, such as newspapers, journals, and available documents related to the events were consulted. The informants participating in discussion and interview included males and females representing the contending groups the affected members of beneficiary households and unaffected members of different lay and professional groups. The study concentrated on what, why and how of the clash. It tried to identify the process of involvement of the leaders of the contending groups, bureaucrats and members of the committee of citizens. The types of atrocities, and human interactions related to the events were highlighted. There was a focus on the participation of women members of grossroot level organisations of NGOs in a joint male-female assemblage scheduled to be held on December 7, 1998 at the Neaz Stadium. The investigator had a free access to the community members in general a sne hailed from Brahmanbaria district.

3. Theoretical perspective

The following guidelines on group characteristics (Lowerly and Rankin, 19969)³ indicate some theoretical perspective. These may be helpful in explaining some of the behavioural aspects expressed by the contending parties. In the text references will be made to the appropriate serial numbers of the theoretical perspective as applicable.

Theoretical perspectives - A

GUIDELINES ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN GROUP
ACCORDING TO ITS BASIC TYPE

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROUP	CLASSIFICATION AND TYPE OF GROUP
A.1 FORMATION	COLLECTIVE, LESS RATIONAL, SPONTANEOUS, PERSONAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO STIMULI IN THE ENVIRONMENT
A.2 STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION	ELEMENTARY, INFORMAL AND PARTLY UNSTRUCTURED, EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT
A.3 FUNCTION AND PURPOSE	EXTREMELY LIMITED IN SCOPE
A.4 DURATION	VERY SHORT, MINUTES AND HOURS

4. What actually happened in Brahmanbaria ?

The chronology of confrontations that occurred between pro-Islamists and NGOs are presented below.

November 17, 1998 :

A written request was made to the Deputy Commissioner (DC) by the *Trinamuljanasangathan*⁴ with overall cooperation from the NGO named Proshika Manabik Unnayan Kendra. It they sought permission for holding an assemblage a focus on development activities.

November 24, 1998

D.C. accorded permission to held the assemblage as per written request of trinamuljanasangathan.

December 2, 1998 :

Preparation towards organising the event began in the stadium. On the evening of the same day the Imam of a local mosque accompanied by 8/10 people came to Proshika office at Kawtali. They inquired about the up-coming activities of Proshika at Neaz Mohammad Stadium. They were informed about the scheduled programme there. Instantly they expressed opposition to the holding of this event in the Neaz Stadium. Subsequently in the same evening the matter was brought to the attention of D.C. by the Proshika management. Following this the D.C. called the representatives of Proshika and the Imam concerned to get feed-back. In the meeting with them the D.C. inquired to the Imam about the reasons of opposition to the holding of the event. The Imam said that it was against the revealed law to have an assemblage of males and females together. D.C. requested the Imam to agree to the holding of this assemblage. The Imam the replied that he could not given any different opinion on it without consulting Maulana Shirajul Islam Bara Hujur the undisputed spiritual leader and the senior most *alem* of the religious society at Brahmanbaria.

⁴ Trinamuljanasangathan: Very poor grassroot level males and females with membership in ADAB affiliated non-government organisations are organised as a group designated as *trinamuljanasangathan* integrated into a functional structure known as *trinamuljanasangathan*.

December 3, 1998 :

The two contending parties (NGOs and Hujurs⁵) were invited by the D.C. for a discussion about the scheduled event. A small group of hujurs was led by Mufti Nurullah and several spokesmen from Proshika attended the meeting. The meeting was held in the residence of D.C. The Hujurs expressed the opinion that as the programme included puppet-show and assemblage of both males and females together, it is not acceptable. The D.C. and Proshika representatives tried to convince the Hujurs in favour of holding the event. On the same day soon after the meeting the D.C. sent a written order postponing the programme to the Proshika office.

Again on December 3, 1998 Muhammad Ibrahim the Acting President of Thana coordinating committee of Trinamul Janasangathan, Brahmanbaria held a press conference at Brahmanbaria and distributed a Press Release. In the Press Release the postponement of the programme was resented and the organisers called for the withdrawal of the postponement order.

December 4, 1998 :

In the morning of December 4, 1998 about 2-3 thousand male and female members of *Trinamuljanasangathan* went to the residence of D.C. with a peaceful procession and handed over to him a memorandum requesting withdrawal of the postponement order. Following the delivery of the memorandum several of the processionists met the D.C. for a discussion on the issue. A long discussion was held and the D.C did not agree to cancel the issued order. The points discussed in the meeting with D.C. were reviewed in the *Thana* level coordination committee of *Trinamuljanasangathan* and NGOs.

⁵ Hujur : The madrasah students at all levels were identified as hujurs. Student of all categories of madrasah and those who were taught there were known as hujurs. They were perceived by the people as honoured persons. The madrasah education was imparted in two types of institutions. One type was known as *Kaomi* or *darse nizami*. The first one included modern subjects in its syllabus, and the second one was more legend on religious subjects. The *aliya* madrasah was guided and supported by the government. The kaomi madrasah was run by its own board and supported by the community. There were 59 kaomi madrasahs at Brahmanbaria belonged to the kaomi category. The Yunusia madrasah was of kaomi type. It was the oldest and latest madrasah in the district. Its Principal was *bara hujurs*.

In this meeting it was decided that on December 6, 1998 they will enter into the Neaz Stadium in a large number for a sit-in-occupation.

December 5, 1998

The night that followed this day was *sab-i-Barat* (night of dignity). Pro-Islamists remained engaged in observing this night. At about 10 pm Dr. Kazi Faruque Ahmed, Chairman of Proshika, and ADAB contacted D.C. of Brahmanbaria over the telephone and talked for about one and a half hour. During this telephonic talk Dr. Faruque requested the D.C. to withdraw the postponement order regarding the holding of the assemblage. The D.C. regretted the compliance to this Dr. Faruque said that if need be he can take up the matter with the government and emphatically said that the assemblage is going to be held. The D.C. said that if he comes he can come with his own responsibility.

December 6, 1998

The pro-Islamists declared a 7-day long *tafsir mahfil* on the same place and date reserved for holding a programme by *trinamuljanasangathan*. About a thousand *Trinamul* members staged a sit-in assemblage there. At about 11:30 a.m. suddenly a group of riot police resorted to *lathi* charge at the Neaz Stadium and drove away all the *Trinamul* members engaged in sit-in strike. In the afternoon of December 6, 1998 Section 144 was imposed in and around Neaz Stadium by the District Administration, Brahmanbaria apprehending deterioration of law and order situation following the scheduled meeting called by two contending groups at the same place and same time.

December 7, 1998:

From the morning the members of *Trinamul* started coming from Brahmanbaria and its surroundings. They gathered in Ghaturia located about 2 Kilometers north of the town. At about 1 p.m. a procession of *Trinamuljanasangathan* participated by both males and females was set to move. This procession of

consisting about ten thousand of its members moved forward under the leadership of ADAB Chairman and President of Proshika Dr. Kazi Faruque Ahmed along with his central leaders including leaders of national women's organizations. Dr. Kazi Faruque Ahmed decided to move forward with the procession by refusing to respect the advice of district administration for not moving to the town for the purpose of holding the assemblage. The procession moved peacefully toward the government college ground of the town. At 1:45 pm. when the procession of *Trinamul* reached near the Brahmanbaria Government College its movement was halted by the police. Then the participating people in the procession entered the college premises and assembled at the foot stand of Shahid Minar there. During the movement of the procession the participants while passing by the side of Madrasah Eunusia raised provocative slogans that included : 'The black hand of fundamentalists will be burnt by us' (maulabader kala hat pure diba amra); 'the skin of fundamentalists will be peeled off by us' (maulabadir chamra tule niba amra), and 'Ho! Ho! Where the mollas are hiding' (Hai hai rai rai, Mollara geli kai) (A.1). As an outcome of it, members of pro-madrasah group known as hujurs gathered there and soon joined in a processions and followed the NGO processionists who preceded them (A.1). In spite of the action taken by the police it failed to control the situation. Then the pro-Islamist processionist entered the college premises and put up an attack on the *Trinamul* assemblage (B.3 and 4). Following the *Trinamul* assemblage came to an abrupt end as the participants in it began to fleck halter and skelter apprehending atrocious manners from the mob. The clash between pro-Islamist group members and police continued between 2-4 pm. (A.4). During this time the former used more than 150 rounds of cocktail (A.1).

At around 3:30pm the pro-Islamist group attempted to attack the sadar police station (A.1). Then the Police fired gun shots and as a result several members of a crowd consisting of pro-Islamist members were severely wounded (A.1). Following this the mob constituted by them attacked the Proshika office at Kawtali and set fire on several motor-cycles (A.1). Subsequently they damaged

the residences of D.C., S.P. and District Judge by throwing brickbat as missiles (A.1, 3 and 4) under such circumstances, BDR was deployed in the town A.3). In the evening the Chairman of the Madrasah Committee gave call for a dawn-to-dusk hartal on December 8, 1998 in protest of the police oppression upon the madrasah students and their supporters (A.1).

On the evening of December 7, 1998 the Proshika office at Kawtali and Radhika situated several kilometers away from the town were torched (A.1 and 4). Two Offices of Grameen Bank at Tanker Para and Austragram also came under attack on the same day.

December 8, 1998 :

During hartal the madrasah students and teachers brought out several processions. Movements of road transport and train were interrupted (A.1 and 4). Shops and schools remained closed. Police presence in the street was thin. Twenty-one houses of BRAC VO (village organisations) members including two BRAC schools were burnt at the Chaybaria area of the town (A1 and 4).

In the evening Madrasah students and teachers including their supporters held a rally and it was addressed by religious personalities and local MP. A 5-point demand made in the rally was as follows : (1) removal of ADAB President, (2) removal of the President *Trinamuljanasangathan*, (3) punishment of armed terrorists, (4) ban on meeting and anti-social activities of NGO's, and (5) medicare of the injured during clash on the previous day December 7, 1998. Following the rally a mob attacked and ransacked the office of DC and residences of DC, SP, and judges, TV relay station and police vehicles.

5. Why it happened ?

Holding of assemblage and its 5-day programme effectively organised by *trinamuljanasangathan* December 7, 1998 at the Neaz Stadium of Brahmanbaria were termed as anti-Islamic by the Islamists. The use of this term was justified by

making direct reference to joint male-female gathering, puppet show (*putul nac*) and folk theatre (*gana natak*). It is observed that Proshika Manabik Unnayan Kendra used the name of one of *Trinamul janasangathan*, Brahmanbaria its own grass root level organisation as the organizer of the programme. Proshika along with the ADAB enlisted NGOs working in Brahmanbaria were named as collaborating agencies according to the printed invitation letter (see Annex 1) sent to the invited guests. The printed invitation letter included the programme of the event. Announcing this programme a colourful big size poster (see Annex 2) was printed for information to the public. The poster recorded Proshika Manabik Unnayan Kendra in two capacities. In it the 'organiser' was noted to be *trinamuljanasangathan*, Brahmanbaria and 'overall cooperation' was noted to be from Proshika Manabik Unnayan Kendra. Contradicting the information printed in the invitation letter the poster did not acknowledge the role of cooperation by ADAB affiliated NOGs working in Brahmanbaria.

The hujurs believed that all Muslim males and females irrespective of the status of wealth must abide by the principles laid down in the *Quran* and *Sunna*. The hujurs stated that according to the Islamic principles members of the female *trinamul* cannot go announced by Proshika. BRAC interventions in sensitive religious prescription like divorce (*talaaq*) was resented by the Islamists (Bhorer kagoj, December 11, 1998). According to a poster published by BRAC verbal expression of the word divorce cannot be used in finalising divorce. The *Islamists* of Brahmanbaria did not agree to this. This opinion held by the them was support M. Hidayatullah, Chief Justice of India and his co-author refered to in Mulla Principles of Mohamedan Law (19981:330). According to him, "Talak-ul-bidaat or talak-i-badai' --this consist of-- (i) three pronouncement made during a single *tuhr* either in one sentence, e.g. "I divorce thee thrice," or in separate sentence, e.g., "I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee" (e) or (ii) a *single* pronouncement made during a *tuhr* clearly indicating an intention *irrevocably* to dissolve the marriage (a), e.g., "I divorce thee irrvocably" *Hadaya*, 72, 73, 83; Bailline 206, 207, 228. The D.C. of Brahmanbaria said that such ruling on divorce has been in force in the state law since the British time until now, the

general members of the community favored the view that the issue on divorce among Muslims could be addressed better by the ulamas among Islamists who are known to be qualified in the subject.

The Islamists opposed the practice of. This was considered as *haram* (strictly prohibited). They said that '*halal ruji*' taking credit on interest (religiously prescribed earning) is a pre-condition to the acceptance of 'religious exercises' (*ebadat*). This idea was widely believed by the Muslims. Thus, the credit programme of NGOs is viewed as *haram* by the Islamists.

In the perspective of the noted information the following rules were referred to by some informants who had general education and were not a party to the conflicts between hujurs and NGOs. The rules ; Lending and accepting money on interest is *haram* (strictly prohibited). NGOs provide credit by taking compound interest. Earning profit by using money with interest is not consider exceptable from the religious point of view. Without the earnings based on religious approval the religious practices are not granted (admissible) by the Allah.

The conflict between NGOs and Islamists on these issues goes in favour of the moneylending businessmen. According to a few pro-NGO informants the moneylenders provided a silent support to keep this conflict alive. One of them said that there is a group of moneylenders at Brahmanbaria. As a result of the credit programme of the NGOs their moneylending business is on the verge of closure. They inspire the anti-NGO activities by providing finance, and by attending the processions and meetings organised by the Islamists.

The Islamists said that in the primary level textbook published by NGOs some anti-Islamic ststement brought in while introducing Bengali alphabet to the students. This viewpoint in the form of complaint was also received by the D. C. Of Brahmanbaria.

The Islamists objected to the western dress like short sleeve shirt and full pant worn by some of the participants in the *trinamul* procession of December 7, 1998.

The use of provocative slogans (referred in the text) directed to the students and teachers of the most renowned Madrasah known as Yunusia Madrasah served as an instigation to the madrasah students in taking up a anti-NGO role.

In September 1998 the Area Coordinator of Proshika, Brahmanbaria during personal communication with the representatives of the functioning NGOs at Brahmanbaria informed that he Proshika and ADAB president Dr. Kazi Faruque Ahmed would like to initiate a programme (karmasuci) at Brahmanbaria in cooperation with ADAB affiliated NGOs. In November, 1998 one of the central coordinators of Proshika arrived at Brahmanbaria from Dhaka. He announced that on the occasion of liberation day (Mukta Dibash) of Brahmanbaria and Victory Day the President of Proshika would like to come for attending the celebrations about which discussion were made earlier. As a follow-up of these efforts a plan was chalked out to celebrate the Victory Day with Dr. Kazi Faruque Ahmed as the chief guest.

The Islamists considered Dr. Kazi Faruque Ahmed, as the initiator of anti-Islamic action programmes in the name of holding an assemblage of grassroot level men and women on the occasion of Victory Day. The Islamists considered the puppet-show and folk theater scheduled to held on this day as anti-Islamic. Consequently the Islamists put up resistance against the programme. They identified Dr. Faruque as the key mover of the scheduled celebrations.

Non-compliance to the advice of district administration by Dr. Faruque in holding the assemblage inside the town directly contributed to the escalation of the conflict. By complying to the guideline of the district authority, Dr. Faruque could hold the assemblage at the Ghaturia site instead of moving inside the town. This

action by him could lessen the tension centering the conflict between Islamists and NGOs from becoming more intense at successive stages.

Violation of the postponement order of the district administration by the *trinamul janasangathan* by occupying space in a body inside the Neaz Stadium on December 6, 1998.

Anti-hujur (Islamists) and anti-bara hujur mentality exists among some NGO officials. Such feelings probably functions as a prejudice in holding a negative attitude to the Islamists. A few of the informal discussions with some of the NGO staff members revealed that they considered the Islamists to be barbaric and ignorant. This view was similar to the opinion of a householders whose house was torched by the Islamists. This householders said that the future would no longer serve food on the plate of 'mullas' (meaning hujurs). In the context of the December 1998 events these feelings and observations look justified. Similar to the allegations of being barbaric and ignorant on the point of the Islamists another author Aftab Ahmed, (Inquilab October 31, 1999) made reference to such allegation made upon the *hujurs* (Islamists) which on he termed as unscientific and devoid of facts.

The ruling and the leading opposition political parties and committee of citizens (see Annex 3) did not play any effective role in solving the conflict apprehending a negative reaction in the upcoming polls. Apparently the bureaucrats and politicians had a realisation that religious sentiments expressed by the pro-Islmists have to be dealt with a sprit of consensus rather than use of force. Opposition party M.P. Harun-ur-Rashid said that like the past years in 1998 also the Victory Day at Brahmanbaria ws observed near the 'big mosque' (bara masjid). On the following day of hartal (December 9, 1998) numerous women joined in a public procession on the occasion of Rokya Day. It took place peacefully at the primises of th eIndustrial school of Brahmanbaria. Public occasions like Victory Day celebration, Rokeya Day and Bengali New Year's

Day are primarily organised by the civil society as it served as a reservoir of political and cultural resources.

6. How the confrontation at Chaybaria originated?

This study had a focus on panic and collective behaviour related to violent events that occurred at Brahmanbaria during December 7 and 8, 1998. In some small pockets of Brahmanbaria including a community named Chaybaria the attacking crowd acted in unison, guided by collective emotion. The outcome of the attack indicated that the attacking group did not demonstrate rational behaviour. The attacks lasted for a limited period only (A.4). At Chaybaria the set of atrocious events included torching, pounding of roof, wall, furniture, utensils, and looting of moveable household materials. These events occurred at a height of emotions expressed by the angry crowds consisting of hujurs and opportunists who had little regard for principles or consequences. The first set of atrocious actions was organised aiming at the privately owned BRAC school house. The atrocious events were very shocking.

The damage and destruction of the school property was resisted by the owner of the school house through brickbattling. Such action caused injuries to some of the attackers requiring hospitalisation. As a follow-up to this, there was a quick retaliation upon the Chaybaria BRAC VO members who were recognised as members of the group of assailants of the hospitalised Islamists. This retaliation was undertaken by the Islamists and their sympathisers. After seeing the hospitalised fellow hujurs they became highly emotional and immediately went to Chaibaria and initiated a set of atrocious activities including torching of houses. The attack on houses in the form of torching and pounding had a contagious build up of emotional reaction among the panic stricken members of the Chaybaria community. The emotional reaction moved fast in the households of the community. The outcome was a series of sub-panic situations that facilitated the various acts of atrocities. Nineteen houses standing all over the community were torched, pounded and looted. Only the BRAC VO members

were targeted here as in this community other than BRAC no other NGO had any development programme at the grassroots level.

During the occurrence of torching and looting most of the adult male members of the households at Chaybaria were not present and as a result the attackers had easier access to the community. At the time of attack the male earning members were outside the home to attend daily work and remained busy for routine earning to meet the cost of daily domestic needs.

7. Justification of actions by the Islamists

It appeared that the main objective of the attack launched by the Islamists was to create sufferings to the victims. According to the Islamists the act of torching and pounding represented an appropriate lesson to the NGO (BRAC) VO members. It was said that these lessons were imparted to them for their participation in the NGO organized joint male-female processions and assemblage in the public domain including street and other public places; and their participation in NGO initiated credit programme with an interest charged for the credited money. Through the atrocities the Islamists wanted to demonstrate the consequence to participation in un-Islamic programme of NGOs.

8. Absence of preventive measures from the institutionalised sources

Chaybaria was a scene of atrocities at the community level unleashed by hujurs and some opportunists who took advantage of the vulnerable situation that prevailed in the absence of interventions from the policemen and firemen. Though the atrocities continued for several hours no help from the institutionalised agencies of the government came forth. These services were also not available during similar atrocities at the schools and offices run by the NGOs. The scope of delivery of the services was limited in these places as the events occurred suddenly. The vulnerability of such atrocities to these institutions was well recognised. In spite of such apprehensions, the services referred to here could not be provided. Also there was no visible effort to identify the law breakers.

Refraining from feeling by the owners and relatives of the torched houses and their neighbours from the scene of occurrence prevented large-scale looting of moveable property from the BRAC VO member owned houses at Chaybaria. The presence of unaffected community members by the side of the affected ones helped in preventing the complete destruction and looting in some cases. On the other hand total absence of NGO personnel from the scenes of attack in the NGO office offered comparatively more opportunities of destruction of houses and properties including looting. This probably saved them from possible physical assault which could not be entirely avoided by the affected households of the community.

Campaign against NGO micro-credit program by the hujurs

In Brahmanbaria several reknowned *alems* including Mufti Nurullah appraised their audiences in several waz mahfils about the comparatively much higher rate of interest by the NGOs than the Bangladesh Bank. In these mahfils they resolved to undertake a campaign against this practice by bringing an awareness about the NGOs. Mufti Nurullah in his deliberations identified a large gap between exception and reality. He pointed out that the rate of interest realised from the very poor propel did not conform to the principle of right judgement.

***Level of cooperation and coordination among the NGOs of Brahmanbaria :
Thefunction of an Islamic NGO versus other NGOs with reference to the events
that led to confrontation***

There are 21 NGOs in Brahmanbaria including one Islamic NGO. A difference was observed in the functioning of the Islamic NGO. The Islamic NGO enlist their own members. Each of the member deposits money with them. In exchanger of money they are supplied with household articles and agricultural equipments including house building materials. Against every material a valuation id fixed which is somewhat higher than the market rate. This fixed amount is realised by a agreed upon installment. The membership subscription

money and a caution money equivalent to about one third of the price of the material to be supplied serve as a basis of the deal. Thus this NGO does not do business on money. It claims that this transaction based on material cannot be termed as a business with interest. During the confrontations in Brahmanbaria this Islamic NGO remained unaffected. Another NGO named Marie Stopes devoted to family planning and MCH services also remained unaffected. Probably this was spared as it was considered to be devoted to humanitarian services. The remaining NGOs were affected in certain ways during the confrontations. Until the third week of September, 1999 the NGOs and other than the Islamic NGO and Marie Stopes kept their activities ongoing at a small-scale with a lot of caution against any possible intervention by the Islamists. In the third week of the September, 1999 the executive officers of three small scale NGOs blamed Proshika for the long standing deadlock over the active functioning of NGOs. There are imputations that that confrontations on December 7 and 8, 1998 that occurred at Brahmanbaria due to the arrogant attitude of the officials of NGOs (Bhorer Kagoj, December 11, 1998).

The NGO named Proshika always played a dominant role with the objective of getting recognition as the top-most organizer of the Victory Day celebration. Under the circumstances the remaining NGOs only offered a half hearted participation with a minimal interest in many aspects of the celebration.

Law suits filed by Islamists and NGOs

With reference to the atrocities at Brahmanbaria that took place on December 7 and 8, 1998 on behalf of Jameya Yunusia Madrasah a law suit was filed by Maulana Abdur Rahim. In it 28 wounded persons were listed and 10 persons were noted as accused, including ADAB President Dr. Faruque, Tranamul President Muhammad Ibrahi, ADAB Vice-President Maleka Begum, barister Tania Amir of Dhaka and others. This law suit mentioned that due to NGO atrocities over one hundred students and members of the public were wounded and some have been hospitalised in hospitals. In the law suit it was noted that on December 7,

1998 at around 1pm under the leadership of ADAB President Dr. Faruque and others from Dhaka led a procession of 5 to 6 thousand people of both sexes wearing jeans halfpant and sando genji (a kind of undet shirt) illegally entered the area that had imposition of Section 144 (for detail see Reza, 1999). On December 20, 1999 Muhammad Idris Mia central coordinator of Prishika Manabik Unnayan kendra filed a petition to Brahmanbariacourt for the acceptance of a law suit. There was a 12-day delay in filing this petition. In it 15 Imams and madrasah teachers were accused. It was alleged that about 300 madrasah teachers and students under the leadership of Abdur Rahim a teacher of Jameya Yunusia Madrasah and Imam Silaur Jame Mosque attacked the Proshika MUK and *trinamul janasangathan* organised assemblage in a session that consisted of thousands of male-female and children. The attackers were armed with various types of sharp native weapons. They raised slogans like 'marle shahid, bacle gazi' (on death to be a martyr and if alive to be gazi or equivalent to a hero), 'NGO afis bandha kara, dhangsa kara' (close down and destroy the NGO office), 'NGO der astana guriya dao, jvaliye dao' (burn and powder the NGO centers), 'samabes narir angsagrahan calbe na' (participation of women in the assemblage is not allowed). The atrocities committed by them included attack on the assemblage and sexual abuse of women. The accused persons torched and looted NGO offices including that of Proshik. It was mentioned that the aforementioned two accused persons gave a leadership in torching 30 to 40 *baris* (households) at a village named Bhadughar about 3 to 4 years back (for detail see Reza, 1999).

The researchers of this study had no information on wearing of jeans half pant and sando genji by women as mentioned in the law suit filed by the Islamists, and sexual abuse of woman as mentioned in the law suit petition filed by Proshika and *trinamul janasangathan*. The issues of short dress and sexual abuse appear to have no basis.

11. Recommendations

For the smooth running of the NGO activities its service providers could benefit by discussing more with motable persons like retired and existing teachers and government of the locality, recognised community leaders religious leaders, Imams of the mosque youth leaders and elected public representatives. A network of these contact persons could stand in favour of NGOs at times of need.

Expansion of BRAC VO membership could be attempted with a special emphasis on consanguine and kin networks that have hujurs. The genealogical position with the selected grass root level group member with reference to the identified hujur could be considered as an achievement. With more and more VO members of BRAC in the kin network of hujurs, it might be easy to minimise the conflict between hujurs and NGOs in many respects including joining of the credit programme.

NGO could establish vocational training centers specialised in training, welding, repairing of electrical equipments, and the like in which Islamists can be motivated to seek admission. On completion of training they can be supplied with equipments to practice the relevant trade. By fixing a price to the equipment it can be delivered to the Islamists concerned for paying the price on an installment basis. According to the Islamic principles this system of transaction is acceptable to all Muslims. The NGO trained Islamists are likely to be more favourable to the NGO programmes at the community level.

In *waz mahfil* the hujurs sometimes make an attempt to impress the audience by making statements not favourable to NGOs. An exhaustive collection of such statements made in the *waz mahfils* could be done. Based on these statements, the prevailing disagreements could be identified and interpretations could be prepared for dissemination.

In offering guidelines to alleviate poverty NGO must continue to look for fresh

combinations of old and new orders of life. NGO can engage researchers to examine religious texts and practices to identify promising approaches to gender issues. They can through light on the issues like appropriate education and lack of freedom. In this context it can be worthwhile to seek knowledge about religious traditions that can provide guidelines in reducing poverty and injustice.

The NGOs can explore the ways of reducing operational cost in running the micro-credit system in order to lower the service charge of interest rate. The mainstream banks serve their clients on a competitive basis in offering credit service. It was observed that at the same point of time because of management efficiency two main stream bank can offer same service at two different terms and conditions. It was apparent that such variation in service charge was possible due to varying level of operational cost.

A greater coordination among the NGOs working in Brahmanbaria appears to be helpful in the smooth running of the on-going programmes of the respective NGOs.

Forecast

The involvement of poor women in gainful activities through NGO initiatives beyond the homestead will continue its progress in the days to come. It leads to poverty alleviation, changes in power relations within and across the households, neighbourhoods and communities.

The Islamists have a deeper grip on the members of the community across the social classes. This imbalance is likely to keep alive the strained relationship between the Islamists and NGO groups for some time.

Conclusion

In offering guidelines to alleviate poverty NGOs are likely to gain by considering fresh combinations of old and new orders of life in their programmes. This could

offer a cafeteria method. In it the prospective participants could make their own choice to pick and choose. Freedom of choice in choosing terms of credit (i.e., credit with interest or credit with profit and loss basis) for investment in poverty alleviation enterprise could encourage wider participation including the participation of pro-hujur families.

The access to micro-credit can serve as a boost to women's empowerment. Jahangir (1999) cautioned that enlarging empowerment may generate 'conflict'. The Islamists also believe that women's large scale empowerment may lead to conflict by generating a non-complying attitude to traditional norms of behaviour. The possibility of such conflict is well recognized and reflected in the confrontations between Islamists and NGOs in various places of Bangladesh. It is essential to identify the ways to avoid it.

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