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Religion used as tool for political gains

Says Indian actress and rights activists Shabana Azmi

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Expressing grave concern over growing religious fundamentalism in the subcontinent, internationally acclaimed Indian actress and social activist Shabana Azmi yesterday said religion was being used as a tool for political gains. She urged everyone to oppose religious fundamentalism, which was causing immense harm to humanity. “Religious fundamentalism does not come from religion. It comes from the use of religion as a tool for political games. No religion teaches you violence against the other. We must stand up and say that we are not going to accept this. Religious fundamentalism of any sort—whether majority or minority—is dangerous,” she said.

Azmi said this in her address as the main speaker at the 11th convocation of BRAC University, held at the International Convention City Bashundhara in the capital. Recalling the courage of Faraz Hossain, who was killed in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July, she said, “In recent times, we have had many tragedies in the subcontinent. Most recently, we know the very, very unfortunate incident happened with Faraz, son of our advisory board. I salute to him for his

spirit. The little boy stood up and said, ‘No, I am not going away, leaving my friends in danger’. Truly, that is a spirit we salute. But why should this happen at all? Why does religion become the cause for people to divide?” Azmi, who is a member of the Upper House of India’s Parliament, said religious fundamentalism was working against human beings and all had to take a call to counter it.

She urged the young graduates of BRAC University to work as catalysts of social change. “I have many expectations of the youth. Revolution and change have come because it is the young who stood at the helm. You have the capacity to act as a catalyst to bring change in society,” she said. “We are a deeply patriarchal society in the subcontinent. In our society boys get all the facilities but girls are often denied access to equality, education, and the decision-making process. This must change. Our world cannot be a better place, if 50 per cent of the society is kept away from the fruits of progress. We need to revisit the notions of femininity and masculinity,” she said. “We need to demand that parents treat their boys and girls equally. We need to demand that society treat boys and girls equally. We need to demand of ourselves that we will treat our brothers and sisters equally. Only then is a civilised society possible. Violence against women cannot be acceptable under any circumstances,” she stressed. She also urged parents to act vigorously if their daughters were tortured by their in-laws. Citing her own example, the renowned actress said her parents gave her complete freedom to choose her own career and she did what she wanted to do,

but many children choose the career decided by their parents. “The time has come to choose what you want. You can google for a career but you can’t google what’s in your heart. Time is limited. Don’t waste it. Don’t be trapped by dogma,” she told the graduates. The ‘Padma Bhushan’ winner urged everyone to use their imagination and creativity to venture into unexplored territory. The convocation was attended by education minister Nurul Islam Nahid as the chief guest, University Grants Commission (UGC) chairman Prof. Abdul Mannan, chairperson of the board of trustees of BRAC University, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, and vice-chancellor of BRAC University, Prof. Syed Saad Andaleeb. Nahid said a section was pushing young and meritorious students to the path of militancy by giving wrong interpretations of religion. “We have to be aware so that students are not trapped in terrorism. We have to take care of that,” he said. Prof. Abdul Mannan said the UGC had strengthened the monitoring of universities to ensure their proper functioning. Sir Fazle Hasan said while young graduates would pursue their careers, but they also have some obligations—they have to repay their debts to society.

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