

## **Kali Cuts across both Hindu and Muslim Cultures**

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There are many problems in Faridpur town in Faridpur district, but Muslim and Hindu fundamentalism is not one of them. Recently there has been a tempered debate in the newspapers against the Far Eastern Economic Review's article on Muslim fundamentalism and Bangladesh as the forthcoming cradle for terrorism in the world. In general, the criticism has emphasised the multiple aspects of Islam, the historical origins for Taliban and the conflicts in Gujarat and Ayodya, the democratic foundation of Bangladesh's constitution and the political tradition in this country. This criticism is important because it aims to break the categorical thinking in terms of either black or white – the way of thinking which nourishes fundamentalism. With a population of almost 130 million people living in Bangladesh, the terms “Muslims” and “Hindus” are not self-explanatory. In a country where the majority is poor and illiteracy is widely spread, what does it actually mean to be a Muslim or a Hindu, and what kinds of rituals do they observe? There is a huge variation within both Islam and Hinduism, and there might be a tremendous similarity in ways of thinking, praying and believing within the two religions. Hinduism is not necessarily opposed to Islam, and vice-versa – the religions may co-exist in harmony and even give contributions to each other – and Faridpur is such a place where Muslims and Hindus live peacefully together in harmony.

Faridpur is located a few kilometres southwest of Padma – the mighty Ganga which gives and takes life. According to the 1991 Population Census, the total population of Faridpur Municipality was 68,938 of which 54,695 were Muslims and 13,714 were Hindus. Even though the actual population has increased since then, the Hindu population comprises approximately 20 % of the town's population. There are some few Brahmans but the majority of the Hindus belong to the so-called low castes. The high religion is what the priests preach and what is written in the Scriptures. The Brahmans and the ashrams are mainly directed towards Krishna in various forms, although the Brahmans also pray to Kali on certain occasions. The importance in this case is the religion of the so-called low castes and the poor people in general. They cannot read the holy books, and they follow their tradition and folk religion.

The common people pray to Kali. She is the supreme goddess, the Mother of the World. Ganga is also a Mother, and Kali and Ganga are often seen as sisters, but Kali is always the most powerful of them, and Ganga may even be seen as a daughter of Kali. Many Muslims and Hindus agreed that Fatima is the Mother of the World for the Muslims, and Kali is the Mother of the World for Hindus. Allah is identical with Narayan or Krishna, Ali is identical with Shiva or Mahadev; the gods and goddess are the similar. Since there are two religions, the paths are different. Nevertheless, the content of the paths or the religions is identical, and there is only one God in the world although the names differ. One prays to Fatima in mosques and Kali in temples. Among the Hindus in Faridpur, Kali is the most powerful of all gods and goddess. As one Kali devoted Muslim woman said, “I am on my dharma”, meaning that she follows and obeys the Muslims' rules and regulations, “but Kali is on my Karma”, meaning that Kali is her path in this life. Kali is the only goddess which has enough power to save the World from the evilness, the sins, the disaster and the calamities that constantly threaten and kill the common people. Even Muslims in their poverty and helpless state of despair seek to Kali when their lives are in danger, and if Kali saves them, they may sacrifice a goat in one of her temples. This does not mean that Kali is more powerful than Fatima, but only that in this particular case Kali was more sufficient and efficient as a problem solver.

The Hindu religion has to a certain extent adapted more sufficiently than Islam to the environment of Bangladesh. The annual floods are a re-occurring problem which is incorporated into the low-religion of common people. Each year the river will kill people and destroy land. The Hindus pray to Ganga to save them, but the dangers of the floods threaten Muslims too, which may also pray to the mighty river to save them. Even at the Hindu cemetery there is a co-existence of Muslims and Hindus. The Kali devoted caretaker is a Muslim woman which assists the descendants during their rituals, and both the Municipality and Hindus regardless of castes, are highly satisfied with her work. Both Hindus and Muslims pray at the Shashan Kali temple. The local Cremation Committee in Faridpur, which is responsible for the Hindu funerals, also bury Muslim prostitutes at the cemetery, and the committee located the cemetery according to Muslim rules so nobody would become offended. Muslims and Hindus live religiously in a peaceful co-existence, and the differences between the religions are not a problem but a strength.

One of the reasons for this co-existence and syncretism of two religious paths might be found in the history of Faridpur. Mythological, Shah Farid was a Muslim *dhorbesh/auliya* (saint), and the town is named after him. He is reckoned as the most important saint in Faridpur, and both Muslims and Hindus worship his allegedly burial place. The other path is Jagadbandhu; a Hindu Godhead which the devotees claim is Krishna and a direct incarnation and manifestation of God himself. The teaching of Jagadbandhu emphasises that all are equal for God and there are no castes. Jagadbandhu himself has taught and helped outcastes into society, and they are now enjoying social benefits within society as respected members of the community. The disciples of Jagadbandhu are continuously helping deprived people in the town.

Since the Hindus and the Muslims face the same problems and the divine goals are identical, it is of minor importance that the paths and names of the gods are different. They share both the same human ideal, which is also their religious ideal since humans are a part of God. This syncretism is also evident in a Hindu sadhu named Mohadheb Chakrabarti, which got his spiritual powers a decade ago. Each Tuesday and Saturday he sits in the Hare Krishna ashram and heals and blesses both Hindus and Muslims alike. Religion works, and that is what devotees are concerned about, not the names of the gods and goddess.

These minor comments on Muslims and Hindus are based on a small town in rural Bangladesh, a town where the total population today might have increased to more than 100,000 people. There are almost 130 million other Muslims, Hindus and other minority groups and religions in Bangladesh. There are fundamentalists in every country, and Faridpur might be exceptional regarding the integration of Muslims and Hindus. Fundamentalism, whether this is Islam or Hinduism, is mainly a threat if we continue to think in categories such as black and white. There are differences within both religions. Tensions and hate between people and religions can be created in discourses if people are categorised in terms of black and white without any nuances. On the other hand, by seeing and learning from how people actually cope with their daily lives and struggles may add some dimensions to the debate of the origin and the actual religious roots of fundamentalisms. It is dangerous to generalise from a small case study such as Faridpur to the nation as a whole, but I nevertheless dare to do so: The commoners and the poor people are not fundamentalists, but they might become extremists if some leaders use religion as a weapon and an excuse for creating social differences – in Faridpur there is a communal harmony between the religions.