

My Unbelief

By

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1.

I was born in a typical Muslim family at Moulvibazar, Bangladesh. In 1984, year of my birth, Bangladesh was passing a critical stage of her history. Olive colored darkness spread all over the country and everyone was living under the shadow of a terrible military dictatorship.

As a Muslim boy, I learned Quran in my early days. The local cleric used to come to our house and teach Quran. I used to recite the verses as he instructed and I managed to finish the whole Quran 2 times before I turned 12. My parents were very practicing Muslim. Although, I never felt like, I had to pray regularly to please my father. However, I can't recall whether I ever really prayed to please Allah.

This was my childhood, very typical and very ordinary until I turned 15. I was the most top ranked student of Moulvibazar Govt. High School. My parents loved me, teachers loved me, and friends admired me because I was a good student. But suddenly, something changed radically and I fall in love with poetry and books. I started to read all the classical poets, romantics, and modern poets of Bengali literature. In fact, I was always a bookworm, but my parents didn't allow me to read anything other than the boring textbooks that mostly contain artless lowly language of poetry. Despite my father's repeated warning, I started to buy books of the writers who fascinated me out of my scholarship money. My world of believes and traditions started to fall apart.

2.

In Moulvibazar, a tiny bookshop named "Utsarga" (*Offering*) changed my life significantly. Soumitra Dev, a famous and talented poet of nineties was the owner of that shop. During my study at year 8 in Moulvibazar Govt. High School, I became a frequent visitor of that shop on my lunch break. The shop was pretty close to my school. Not only the personality of Soumitra Dev, but also the books attracted me so much that I started to skip my classes to spend time with him and discuss poetry, literature, religion, politics etc. Soumitra Dev became my personal guru and I started to dislike my traditional teachers, as they couldn't fulfill my thirst of knowledge. Soumitra became my friend, philosopher and guide.

I started to write seriously since then. My poetry and literary criticism started to appear all over the country and even in India. It was too much for a small country town to digest. My parents became worried as they thought I am doing too much comparing to my age. My teachers started to complain about my absence. In the meantime, I was arranging poetry festivals, publishing and editing little magazines and above all buying and reading more and more books and enriching myself.

I first started to doubt about religion when I looked for the answer of a thousand year old question “where we have come from”? My biology book gave me the answer based on Darwinism with significant proofs, however, my Islamic studies textbook told me completely different story. To find the answer, I started to read Gita, MahaVarat, Ramayana, Bible and Quran, all in Bengali. I read Quran over and over again and couldn't believe what I am reading. I started to mark the questionable verses and wrote comments beside them. Is these filthy versus I was reciting all my childhood? Is these versus full of hates are being spread and preached every Friday in all corners of my town? I was completely dumbstruck. Initially, I thought it is the translation that to be blamed. But I collected many different translations of Quran and very reputed Islamic scholars translated some of them. My world of beautiful beliefs turned out to be full of lies, ignorance and filthy hate verses. I started to understand the true nature of Islam.

Where was the God (Whoever he his supposed to be up there) when the Nazi Army in death chambers killed millions? Or, where was our all-merciful Allah 1971 massacre. How can he ignore the cry of millions in Africa today? I realized there is no one up there, never was.

3.

I collected books of Araj Ali Matubbar, Probir Gosh, Vobaniprasad Sahu, Joyantanuj, Bertrand Russell, Ahmed Sherif, and many other writers. But it was the book “Amar Obishwas” (*My Unbelief*) by Humayun Azad that gave me the true insight of religions and how they evolved. I realized religions are not divine; they were created and proposed by humans partly because of their ignorance about the natural events, but mostly to establish a certain social system and to chain everyone within that system. There is no God or Allah, no one kicked out my ancestors from the garden of heaven. The history of religion is only 5000 years old, but human beings have developed through the passage of millions of years and we, modern humans, are the excellence of evolution and so are the other species. There is no after life. Life itself is meaningless, and life is beautiful and precious because it is meaningless. I realized Islam is the preacher of death and thus it is the enemy of life. All those verses in Holy Scriptures are completely absurd; they are the greatest example of our ancestor's ignorance and they are full of countless lies by the prophets. Nothing is divine, nothing is everlasting, and everything is meaningless; there is no judgment day, no heaven or hell. But I also realized that we can make lives ‘meaningful’, and we can make ourselves ‘humanly divine’ by practicing humanity and morality. This morality has to come from someone's instinct and common sense and certainly not from a ‘Holy Book’ proposed by a killer prophet 1400 years ago.

I became particularly addicted to the books of Humayun Azad. I read all of Humayun Azad's writings in a quick succession and it influenced me so much that I even started to write and talk like him. My prose was so influenced by Dr. Azad that even Soumitra Dev sometimes got confused whether it was my work or Dr. Azad's. I became a fanatic fan of Dr. Azad and no one ever dared to say anything bad about him in my presence. My very first little magazine ‘Khatrion’ was dedicated to Humayun Azad. We first met when Humayun Azad came to Moulvibazar to inaugurate the ‘Monipuri Ras Purnima’, a yearly tribal festival for commemorating Radha-Krishna legend. Dr. Azad was surprised when I claimed that I have read all his books at this age. To further his astonishment I remember telling him, “Sir, your novel ‘*Suvhabrata, and his gospel*’ was actually based on the life of Muhammad. If you would have used Semitic names for the characters instead of the Indian ones I am sure you would become world famous like Salman Rushdie.” Humayun Azad admired my ability of understanding metaphor. That was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Although, it was Soumitra Dev who first lit the candle inside me, but it was Humayun Azad who influenced and fascinated me most.

At home, I completely stopped praying, fasting and going to mosques because all these appeared stupid and ridiculous to me. My parents noticed my change. They discovered the books I was reading and couldn't accept a year 10 student was reading all these. I refused to go to Eid prayer, and my father was so angry that he burned most of my books in the roof. He said I should not see that "Malaun" (Filthy Hindu) librarian again. I didn't listen to him and I met Soumitra Dev at the very first chance I got. I didn't realize my father was following me. He verbally insulted Soumitra for 'spoiling' me with all those infidels' books. He also went to Soumitra's home, complained and insulted his mother and accused her of intentionally driving her son to spoil a 'Muslim' student. This was the most terrible time of my life. I was locked in my home. When I was going to school, my father's spies were always following me. I couldn't see Soumitra or collect any book for the rest of the year. Later on, we used to avoid the bookshop and meet in secret places.

4.

In 1999, when I was the student of year 10, I was assigned by the Headmaster to become the editor of the School Magazine. This offer came to me as a relief on that terrible time. I seriously started to collect writings from students and teachers. The Magazine was published. It was the most enriched publication in the history of our school. Then, something happened which forever changed my life and the way of thinking. My teachers accused me of blasphemy. It was one of my poems in the magazine that raised questions among them. The poem was:

*'Moulobadi Toskorera Bostuto Nosshor
Januk tarakobi-i holenoditioisshor'*

(Bigots are basically mortal, but a poet is like the God – immortal)

All my muslim teachers became very angry. Hindu teachers remained silent for understandable reason. Teacher of Islamic Studies, Sahidullah Sir started to beat me with a cane like a mad person. In the afternoon all the teachers held a meeting. I was standing quietly in the corner of the room accused of blasphemy. Some teachers said, "You are a shame of this institution; therefore, you should be permanently expelled from the school." The mullah teacher said, "How could you write something like this, you were born in a Muslim family!" Others said, "You didn't write the poem, it was the Hindu Soumitra who wrote it for you." I just said, "If our national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam could write — '*jagadisshorishshoramipurusuttamsotto*' (I am the God of this universe, I am the man, I am the truth!)" then why can't I?" But they didn't accept my logic. The Headmaster said, "You have to buy loads of correction fluid and delete those two lines from the 10,000 copies of the magazine. We will only circulate the copies once you are done. You are not allowed to attend classes until you finish. From now on you will come to school at 10 am and continue with correction until 4pm". I did so for more than two weeks. For more than two weeks I went to school, sat in the floor of the headmaster's office and deleted my starry verses with the correction liquid.

After I finished with all 10,000 copies I was allowed to join the class just prior to my qualifying exam. The magazines were circulated all over the town. That was the most monumental events of my life. Hundreds of people who admired me for my free speech and cultural activities started to show me support. They scratched and removed the white layer of the correction liquid and read my poem. Local newspapers condemned the school authority for their action. Poet Soumitra Dev wrote his famous poem "Kalo Kobita" (Black Verse) in his book "Bon Porjotok" (Forest wonderer):

কালো কবিতা

সাদার সাথে কালো বরাবরই মিতালী পাতাতে চায়। তাইতো বালক সাদা কাগজের পাতায় কালো অক্ষরে কবিতা লিখেছিল। সেই লেখা যথারীতি আবার সাদা কাগজের উপর কালো কালিতে ছাপা হয়েছিল তাদের স্কুল বার্ষিকীতে।

কিন্তু স্কুলের ভেতর লুকিয়ে থাকা বর্ণবাদ সেটি মেনে নিতে প্রস্তুত ছিল না। হাজারেরা বলিলেন, আমরা ইহা বুঝিতে পারিতেছি না, অতএব; হে বালক, তুমি অপরাধ করিয়াছ।

অতঃপর তার উপর নাড়েল হালো শ্বেত সন্ত্রাস। ফুইডের সাদা কালি দিয়ে নিজ হাতেবার্ষিকীর প্রতিটি কপি থেকে মুছে দিকে হলো স্বরচিত অক্ষরগুলো। এরই ফাঁকে সবার অলক্ষে বালক মুছে নিল চোখ থেকে জল।

এরপরই সবার চমকে ওঠার পালা। সাদা কালিকে ঠেলে উপরে উঠে এলো সেই অপ্রতিরোধ্য কালো কবিতা। এবং সবার চোখে ধরা পড়লো সাদা পোষাকের হাজারদের মনের কালিমা।

Translation:

[“Black and white always want to stay together. That's why the boy wrote the black verse in the white page. The poem eventually appeared in his school magazine.

But the fanatics at school were not ready for this. The cleric said, “ We do not understand the meaning of your poem. Therefore, O boy, you are guilty of blasphemy!”

Then the White terrorism came down on him. With the help of the correction liquid, He had to wipe out the starry verses he wrote. In the meantime, as none noticed, the boy wiped tears from his eyes.

Surprise! Defeating the barriers of white fluid, those unbeatable verses started to appear everywhere. And, everyone saw the black minds of the white clad clerics.”]

[*Black Verse* by Soumitra Dev]

During the farewell ceremony of SSC students I delivered a fiery speech in front of all the teachers. At the end of the ceremony, I refused to join the prayer led by one of the fundamentalist teacher. When everyone stood up to join the prayer I remained seated.

Although this event made me instantly famous, it affected my traditional studies. I was expected to achieve a place in the merit list; but I only managed to get 76% mark in my SSC exam at year 2000. Ironically, my first collection of poetry got published by Sarabanjon, Aziz market Dhaka on the very day (11 June 2000) when my SSC results were published. The book was titled “aai pakhir probaha, aai rituboti megh” (This flow of birds, this seasonal cloud). An Islamic organization named ‘ Hilful Fujul Poronjoy’ declared few freethinkers of the town including Soumitra Dev and me as ‘Nastik-Murtad’ (Apostate-infidel) and demanded exemplary punishment. They particularly pointed out one of the poems from my books:

● *Murkhotar Dhormo Tontrokonokalehobenakojoi*
Mohabisshochirokalikobiderprotimuhamoii

(“The stupidity of the religion will never win over us,
As the poets are blessed in this universe”)

● E metal jane feraun chilo thik
Meyemosader kore ene tai vara
Sinai pahare allahr protirudh
Sob matha noto sudhu ekjon chara
Bidrohi field marshal nomrud.
Solomon ar Judaser moto Dugdho
Pan kore nil, amio korchi ukti
Tomar viruta dekhei hoechi mughdo
Please Allah eibar dao mukti

(“This drunker knows, The Pharaoh was the man!
So Allah hired the female mosquitoes
And faced his enemies in Sinai Mountain
Everyone have collapsed, except one
The field Marshal himself, rebel Nimrod.
I drank just like Solomon and Judas
And I am saying in cool brain
I am sick of your coward ness
For God’s sake, O God, Give us a break!”)

A vicious attack was followed by the death threat. A group of young fundamentalists in Motorbike attacked me in one dark night behind the quiet street of Moulvibazar Govt. College as I was returning home after visiting a friend. The three attackers laid me on the ground and tried to cut my vein of the left hand with a sharp paper-cutting knife (Anti- cutter). As I managed to shout, students from the College Boarding ran towards me to rescue. The attackers eventually fled and the rescuers took me to their hostel and gave me first aid. No serious damage was done. I am still not sure why they attacked my left hand first, as I am right-handed writer. However, The marks in my left hand are still visible.

After the incident, I realized that it is not safe for me to stay in the town. Since passing the SSC, I was thinking about going to India for HSC as I disliked Dhaka and didn’t want to go there. I got admitted in St. Edmund’s College in Shillong, India. Even in Shillong, Bangladeshi student beat me inside my hostel for calling Muhammad a ‘ liar’. They beat me with chairs and cricket stumps. I didn’t share this horrifying experience with anyone except, Dilip Lahiri, my Bengali teacher in St. Edmund’s College. However, I managed to pass my HSC in 2002 and in 2003 came to Australia. Last year I went to Bangladesh in order to marry my childhood sweetheart, a girl from Kushtia. She eloped with me and we eventually got married in 5 December 2005. Our parents didn’t accept our union for no apparent reason. (Probably I shouldn’t have told them that I didn’t recite those meaningless Arabic verses during my marriage!).

5.

Life is not easy for freethinker and for someone who breaks the tradition. But somebody has to stand up and point out the cruelty and ignorance religions have offered us. One doesn't have to be a scholar to become a believer. Any idiot can follow tradition. But it takes knowledge and courage to ask the questions and find and accept the answers. I left Islam because it is the most violent and aggressive of all religions. I consider myself as a human being and I choose 'humanism' as my one and only virtue. I am grateful to all those freethinkers and writers who helped to make my decision of leaving Islam. Now I know I am a human being, I was born due to one course of natural activities and I will die due to another course of natural activities. I found all my answers in science and rationalism, not in a 1400 years old so-called holy book, full of ignorance and violence. Darkness and religious believes goes hand by hand. But it is my unbelief, which led me to the path of brightness, knowledge, and humanity.

This Article was originally published in www.mukto-mona.com, the largest online forum of Bengali freethinkers.

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