

**ISLAMIST FUNDAMENTALISM, TRAUMA OF
DISPLACEMENT AND PERSECUTION OF RELIGIOUS
MINORITIES: A STUDY OF FARIDA KHALAF'S THE GIRL
WHO ESCAPED ISIS: FARIDA'S STORY AND TASLIMA
NASREEN'S LAJJA**

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ABSTRACT

From June 2014 onwards, the world watched helplessly the display of gruesome visuals from Iraq on television. The visuals showed the falling of one Iraqi city after another at the hands of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a newly launched terrorist group. The terrorists owing their allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS unleashed a reign of terror and atrocities that violently shattered all notions of a modern and civilized society. While the ISIS terrorists wreaked havoc upon all residents of the captured territory, by subjecting them to the code of strict and puritanical religious laws of their whims and fancies, yet the worse sufferers of this calamity were the religious minorities. However, on a close examination of the force of religious fundamentalism which drove the ISIS terrorists to indulge in such inhuman activities, we find that it wasn't an isolated incident in the contemporary times.

Within a span of less than three decades, the world has seen at least two more major events where religious fundamentalism in general and Islamist fundamentalism in particular was responsible for large scale killings, persecution and displacement of the non-Islamic minorities — the exodus and genocide of the Kashmiri Pandits in 1990 and the Hindu genocide in Bangladesh in 1992.

The latter, although occurred in 1992, but its seeds were laid a little before, from the end of 1979. This paper shall attempt to understand the traumatic impact of religious persecution upon

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religious minorities, by examining the plight of the Yazidi community in Iraq and the Hindus in Bangladesh.

The paper aims to show that the religious persecution and violence against minorities in Iraq and Bangladesh left some indelible scars of the trauma;

As such, the paper takes up two books — Farida Khalaf's *The Girl who Escaped ISIS: Farida's Story* and *Lajja* by Taslima Nasreen to make a literary analysis of the issue at hand;

The paper shall contextualize two geographically different locations to show how extremism has no geopolitical boundary.

Keywords: Fanaticism, fundamentalism, persecution, trauma, violence, displacement, Jihad

INTRODUCTION

Farida Khalaf, a girl from the Yazidi community in Iraq was among the thousands of Yazidi girls and women who were subjected to the most brutal torture and slavery for their faith. In her autobiography, she narrates in detail the idyllic life which her community enjoyed, and how it got altered permanently and for the worst in August 2014.

Farida describes that how she and her family, consisting of herself, her parents and her four brothers (Delan, Serhad, Shivan and Keniwar) lived in the Kocho village in northern Iraq, surrounded by Mount Sinjar. Her father was a soldier in the Iraqi army and had a progressive mindset. He ensured education for all his children, and even taught Farida how to use the Kalashnikov AK 47.

Taslima Nasreen is a Bangladeshi writer who was an eye witness to the persecution and atrocities being carried out against the religious minorities in general and Hindus in particular in Bangladesh.

In her novel *Lajja*, she examines the historic, political and economic dimensions of the treatment of Hindus as second class citizens in Bangladesh.

For this, she portrays a Hindu family of four members: Sudhamoy Datta, his wife Kiranmoyee Datta, their son Suronjon and daughter Neelonjona Datta (Maya).

Sudhamoy is a doctor by profession and practices atheism. He is mesmerized by the ideal concept of humanity, and strongly advocates for the same, not identifying himself as a Hindu. He even forbids his wife Kiranmoyee to perform any worship in the house. His son Suronjon grows up by embodying Sudhamoy's ideals and becomes a dedicated socialist.

EARLY LIFE AND UPBRINGING

Farida belonged to the Yazidi community, where all religious teachings were passed down through oral transmission. The Yazidis were divided into three castes — Sheikhs, Pirs and Murids; Farida's family belonged to the third caste.

As a result, they did not have any formal education before 1970's; but all this changed when Saddam Hussein made education compulsory for all. The Yazidis weren't an affluent community, but they had gathered enough resources to live a contented life, and Farida and all her siblings had a fulfilling childhood.

An example of the same is found in Farida's description of her life at home:

We had a very beautiful garden in which mulberry, almond, and apricot trees grew. And in their shade the vegetables that my mother planted thrived too: zucchinis, leeks, eggplants, potatoes, onions, salad, and heads of cabbage. Around the terrace a variety of roses flowered, giving off a beguiling aroma, especially in the evenings. In the hot season my mother, my younger brothers, Serhad, Shivan, Keniwar, and I would spend almost our entire time in this little paradise. My father and my elder brother, Delan, enjoyed the peace and fresh air here too, when they weren't working. (Khalaf, 2)

Suronjon and Neelonjona were also born into prosperity. Sudhamoy was an assistant professor in a medical college, and also had ancestral property. They lived happily in a big house in Mymensingh, and had a contented life.

Like Farida's family, Sudhamoy had his own garden too, which made the childhood of Suronjon and Neelonjona quite enjoyable. Suronjon's feelings of nostalgia about his childhood memories are described in the following words:

As he sipped his tea, Suronjon remembered the man who would climb the tall date palm to fetch the khejurer ras that had collected in the pots tied on top, as Maya and he stood trembling, below. In the cold weather, clouds of steam would escape when they opened their mouths to speak. The playing fields, the garden with its mango, jaam, guava and jackfruit trees, betel nut and coconut palms— where did they go? (Nasreen, 5).

MINORITY IDENTITY

In spite of living peaceful and simple lives, both the Yazidis of Iraq and the Hindus of Bangladesh were never allowed to fully integrate into their homeland.

Farida mentions that how the Muslim traders who came to their village never accepted the latter's hospitality owing to religious differences. This was the situation despite the fact that a Muslim man became the godfather of a Yazidi boy after circumcision and provided him help and care throughout life. The religious difference between the Yazidis and the Muslims was only an interpretation of a mythological story, but the Muslims regarded the former as infidels who performed heretical acts of Satan worship. This is corroborated from Farida's grandfather's advice to her: "Beware these people, my little one," he said, "for they call us Ibadat al-Shaytan: those who worship the lord of hell." (Khalaf, 3)

According to the story, when God created earth and man, he ordered all angels to kneel before Adam, and all angels except Melek Taus did as instructed.

According to the Yazidi belief, Melek Taus did not do the same as this command was a test from God to see whom did the angels love more, and Melek Taus was the only one who passed the test.

However, according to Islamic belief, this was a sign of insolence and therefore God became extremely angry with Melek Taus and the latter became a fallen angel.

Sudhamoy belonged to a Hindu Bengali family, but he did not go to India after partition, even though Mymensingh became a part of east Pakistan. He actively participated in the language movement in 1952 and continued to play a proactive role in the freedom movement against west Pakistan.

However, his identity as a Hindu always brought discrimination and second class treatment for him and his family. When Suronjon was in class vi, he was tricked into eating beef and also abused by being called a Hindu and his pocket was filled with dead cockroaches.

Suronjon's sister Neelonjona also suffered the same fate and it is reflected through an incident of her childhood:

When she was little, Maya had wept uncontrollably one day. The girls in her school had been chanting 'Hindus, O Hindus of the holy basil leaves / Hindus,

O Hindus who feast on cows'. Maya came home and cried to her brother. 'It seems I am a Hindu. Dada, am I a Hindu?' 'Yes,' Suronjon had replied. 'I don't want to be a Hindu any more. They make fun of me because I'm a Hindu.' (Nasreen, 108)

Sudhamoy fought for the liberation of east Pakistan from west Pakistan as he believed that the liberated nation will be based on the principles of secularism and equality. Initially, these ideals were also enshrined in the constitution, but they got reversed within a short span of time.

While Sudhamoy strongly argued for a Bengali identity, but the state of Bangladesh continued to discriminate on the basis of religion, hence Bengali Muslims were more privileged than Bengali Hindus.

This discrimination was observed in all spheres of the state institutions and enjoyed a constitutional legitimacy.

Being a Hindu, Sudhamoy never got his well deserved promotion of an associate professor, but all Muslims, including many of his junior colleagues and those who were less qualified were easily promoted.

On the day of his retirement, Sudhamoy was garlanded by Madhob Chondro Pal, his Hindu colleague who also did not get his promotion. While bidding a farewell to Sudhamoy, Madhob summed up the plight of the Hindus in the following words: "In a country of Muslims, we should not expect too many opportunities for ourselves. Even what we're getting now is a favour." (Nasreen, 25)

Suronjon too suffered from the same discrimination, he was never selected for a job, even though he possessed the requisite qualification. Those who were less competent and those who often said that their job interview did not go well were selected.

While there is written documentation of the discrimination and atrocities committed against Hindus in Bangladesh by both state and non state actors, the Yazidis have preserved their history of persecution in oral memory.

Farida quotes her paternal grandfather who told her about the seventy-two persecutions of the Yazidis:

“Our history is one of persecution and suffering,” my grandfather told me. They’ve all persecuted us: the Muslim Kurds, the Iranian shah’s governors, and the Ottoman sultans. They massacred and butchered us on seventy-two occasions. How many times have they stolen our women, driven us from our homeland, forced us with raised swords to renounce our religion? (Khalaf, 5).

PEAK OF PERSECUTION

While the Yazidis of Iraq and Hindus of Bangladesh have been historically discriminated against, yet the persecution reached its crescendo in 2014 for the former and in 1992 for the latter.

Al-Dawla al-Islamyia fil Iraq wa’al Sham — The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a terrorist group who believed in a radical sharia interpretation of Islam started jihad by annexing Iraqi and Syrian cities in rapid succession from 2014. The Iraqi army and security forces were poorly equipped to deal with the advancing militants, who were armed with sophisticated weaponry and combat training.

As a result, the ISIS kept on advancing without any resistance, and wherever they went, the minorities became their first target for massacre and torture.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the chief of ISIS declared himself as the caliph, not just of Muslims in Iraq and Syria, but all over the world.

In the beginning of August 2014, ISIS advanced into the Kurdish autonomous region and attacked the military post in Zumar, which was guarded by peshmerga, an army of the Kurdish fighters.

The Peshmerga fighters also came to patrol in the Yazidi villages, but soon abandoned them as they had to go to fight the ISIS in Kurdish heartland.

The news soon spread that ISIS had arrived in Sinjar, the capital city of the Yazidis. People panicked, and started moving to safer areas. However, they were encircled by the militants on all sides, and so they were captured or killed.

Soon, the ISIS through the arabs of the neighbouring villages got all people of Kocho to surrender their arms in exchange for safety. And after that, they were given a choice: either convert to Islam, or the Caliph shall deal with you like infidels.

On August fifteenth 2014, ISIS fighters arrived in Kocho and told all members of the village to assemble in the school playgrounds with all their possessions.

The men and young male adults were separated from women and girls. The former were loaded into several vehicles, taken to a secluded spot and killed mercilessly with bullets.

But the plight of the latter was worse than that of the former. All women and girls were taken to ISIS slave market, to be sold as sex slaves or to be given away as a gift to the fighters. Farida and her friend Evin were first taken to Raqqa, a city in Syria. There, they were kept confined in a harem like structure with many other captured Yazidi girls. The rations over there were bear minimum and were given because the girls had to be kept alive for sale. Farida, her friend Evin and two other girls were bought by Abu Haitham and Eleas, two ISIS fighters. The motive of ISIS behind sexual exploitation of the Yazidi girls was two fold; on one hand they wanted to assert their religious masculinity, while on the other hand they wanted to destroy the notion of premarital virginity which was held to be very sacred in the Yazidi faith. Farida couldn't compromise with her faith, so she attempted suicide. She was taken to a doctor for treatment, and then given to Abu Arram, another woman trafficker who treated the girls like caged animals. Farida and Evin made two unsuccessful attempts of escape at Arram's house, which infuriated him so much that he sold both of them to Omar Zeyad, the ISIS commander of the bater range of the Syrian desert. Omar and his men were infamous for brutality against women

and had earned the title of ‘the beasts’. Farida and Evin were brought to the city of Deir ez-zor and were subjected to brutal rape and sexual torture. Farida once again made a failed suicide attempt, which invited Zeyad’s wrath. She was severely beaten and her left eye was damaged. Then she was shifted to an ISIS military camp near Omar gas field. The girls over there were required to take part in the Islamic prayers and they were to serve their owners whenever they desired to have them.

Farida tried to argue about the freedom of religious belief with the preachers who came to teach them Quran, but they were caned for showing disobedience.

By sheer luck and clever planning, Farida and five other girls managed to run from the camp on one rainy night when majority of the ISIS fighters had gone to fight. Evin’s uncle then helped the girls to come to the refugee camp for Yazidis in Iraq with the help of smugglers.

Sudhamoy and his family were extremely frightened in December 1992 as the entire country of Bangladesh had been gripped by a communal frenzy. The fundamentalists were targeting the innocent Hindus to avenge the destruction of the Babri Mosque in India on sixth December 1992. The temples and ashrams were being destroyed, girls and women were being abducted, raped and killed and Hindu families were being forcefully evicted from their homes and robbed of all valuables.

As per an estimate given by Kajol Nath, ‘Twenty-eight thousand homes, two thousand seven hundred businesses and three thousand six hundred temples have been damaged and devastated. Twelve people are dead and there have been losses of 2 billion takas. Countless villages have been destroyed. A frenzy of destruction has affected forty-three districts.

Two thousand six hundred women have been tortured. Some temples have been damaged very badly. The five-hundred-year-old temple of Gourango Mohaprobhu to the south of Sylhet, the Kali temple in Baniachong that was several centuries old, Koibolyodham and Tulsidham in Chittagong, Modonmohon Akhara in Bhola and the Ramakrishna Mission in Sunamganj and Foridpur.’ (Nasreen, 160)

Here, Nasreen highlights two important points:

First, all the people who were found responsible for the demolition of Babri mosque had been arrested in India, where as in Bangladesh, there was complete lawlessness because all political parties, be it the ruling party or the opposition were hand in glove with the communal forces.

Second, Babri mosque demolition was just a façade, the genocide and systematic persecution of Hindus had begun much earlier and continued unabated for more than fifteen years.

The four important years are mentioned in this regard — 1979, 1988, 1990 and 1992.

In 1979, Sudhamoy had to sell his ancestral property in Mymensingh worth a million takas to a Muslim for just two hundred and fifty thousand takas, as fundamentalists had made life difficult for him and his family. Maya was six years old when she was kidnapped and she returned after two days, and the trauma of the kidnapping stayed with her for a long time. Sudhamoy's garden was regularly destroyed and there were also anonymous threat letters.

In 1988, police colluded with the fundamentalists to make the existence of Hindus a living hell.

In 1990, during communal tension Suronjon's friends Kemal, Belal and Hyder had volunteered to give them shelter in their home, but the same gesture wasn't repeated in 1992 as all of them had now turned communal.

The minorities were also systematically cleansed out of all government institutions, bureaucracy, defense forces and even judiciary.

Even the census criterion was changed to hide the figures of continuously depleting Hindu population.

In the end, both Farida and her family and Sudhamoy and his family are forced to leave their homeland against will and take shelter in a new country. Farida gets a scholarship to study and settle in Germany with her family, but the future of Sudhamoy's family remains bleak even though they finally decide to move to India after Maya is kidnapped and doesn't return. However, by writing her autobiography, Farida documents the struggle of the Yazidi community and is well recognized in the world, but the same is not true for Taslima Nasreen. Lajja is still banned in Bangladesh, and many fanatics have issued a fatva against her both in India and in Bangladesh. She has also been attacked on some occasions and lives in exile at an undisclosed location.

Farida's claims have also been validated by an investigation carried out by the United Nations.

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