

Attack on bookstall: Revisiting the Taslima Nasrin affair

Md Mahmudul Hasan 🔽 21 February, 2025, 00:00



IN 2009-2010, I was on research leave from the University of Dhaka to do a postdoctoral stint at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. I was going to work on a project titled 'From Rokeya to Taslima: Trends in Muslim Feminism in South Asia' — a topic related to my doctoral research completed at the University of Portsmouth, UK, in 2007 under the supervision of Dr Bronwen Price and Dr Alex Tickell (now Professor of Global Literatures in English at the Open University, UK).

I arrived in Heidelberg in late July 2009 and in about a month received an email from Professor Tickell. He asked me if I would be interested in presenting a paper on Taslima Nasrin's work at my alma mater. I was delighted by this opportunity. Finally, the Centre for Studies in Literature at Portsmouth organised a seminar (scheduled for November 10, 2009) at which I spoke on Taslima Nasrin's feminism.

As I was preparing for the Portsmouth seminar, on October 3, 2009, Professor Tickell informed me that he was editing a special issue of the prestigious *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and that its theme was literature and the law. He asked me if I would be able to contribute an article to it on the censorship of Taslima Nasrin's books.

I felt honoured that my PhD supervisor trusted me with this important writing project. I was thrilled about the prospect of publishing in such a reputed journal; I also knew very well that my essay would make it to the special issue only if it reached the quality expected by the journal.

I kept reading Taslima Nasirn's work and went to great lengths to explore censorship and other issues in relation to her writings. I spent months researching censorship laws in Bangladesh and how they played out in the case of Taslima Nasrin. I finally wrote 'Free speech, ban and "fatwa": A study of the Taslima Nasrin affair' (*Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.5: 2010, 540-552). I was in the early phase of my publication career, and it took me an enormous amount of time and effort to produce the article.

I continued researching Nasrin's work intermittently for years. In May 2011, thanks to a travel grant from International Islamic University Malaysia, I presented a paper on Nasrin's criticisms of Islam at a conference in Osaka, Japan. I worked more on the topic and later published my second journal article on Nasrin's work: 'Nasrin gone global: A critique of Taslima Nasrin's criticism of Islam and her feminist strategy' (*South Asia Research* 36.2: 2016, 167-185).

At the Ekushey Boi Mela in Dhaka this year, a group of people sought to take the law into their own hands by attempting to prevent a bookstall from selling a book by Nasrin. An altercation that ensued needed police intervention, which eventually led to the closure of the bookstall. It received considerable media attention.

The unfortunate Boi Mela incident brought my research on Nasrin's work to my recollection. I have mentioned the anecdotes of my research on her writing partly to assure readers that the deliberation that follows comes from an informed source. I am familiar with controversies and public debates about Nasrin's work.

The Taslima Nasrin affair came to the fore after her fictional work Lajja was published in 1993, whilst the historic Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India was demolished on December 6, 1992. Was there a link between the levelling of the historic mosque and the publication of the book? The following discussion will shed some light on the question.

In the novel, Nasrin exaggerated — though fictionally — the oppression of Hindus in Bangladesh. However, commentators do not regard the novel purely as an artistic endeavour. Many consider it a political ploy to distract global attention from India's horrendous communal violence against Muslims epitomised by the destruction of the Babri Masjid. The ban on the book, lawsuit against its author, her flight from Bangladesh and other incidents that followed presented Bangladesh — not India — as a country plagued by religious animosities and intolerance.

Nasrin's *Lajja* had six chapters but Indian publishers expanded it to thirteen. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) distributed free of charge its Hindi version that contained 'sections not in the original novel.' The entire affair was optimally used to put Bangladesh under a negative media spotlight. *Lajja* and subsequently some other books by Nasrin were banned in Bangladesh. As a result, Bangladesh and Bangladeshis — majority of whom are Muslim — as well as their religion came to be portrayed as antagonistic to freedom of expression.

There are a couple of aspects that need to be considered in this respect. First, censorship and proscription of books are generally unnecessary and counterproductive and can also work as a promotion tool. They increase the curiosity of readers who somehow find ways to get access to banned books, as one observer says that 'nothing sparks more interest in a book than mentioning it's been banned.'

It is alleged that many writers and (visual) content producers include offensive or objectionable materials or images as 'publicity stunts.' As William Mazzarella and Rabinder Kaur state in an essay titled 'Between Sedition and Seduction: Thinking censorship in South Asia' (2009):

'We are all familiar with this compulsive dependency from the drama of legal process, in which the forbidden word must be spoken again and again precisely to establish its unspeakability. We recognise it in marketing strategies: court bans often heighten the desirability of a product by marking it as controversial.'

Second, the genealogy of censorship laws in Bangladesh shows that section 295-A of the Penal Code of 1860 that was used to proscribe Nasrin's books was introduced in this region by British colonial rulers. In other words, books are censored in our country in light of the (colonial) British government strategy and administrative practice.

It should also be noted that while the ban on *Lajja* was sparked by people who often present themselves as custodians of Islam, the ban on Nasrin's *Ka* (2003) in Bangladesh and on its West Bengal version *Dwikhandita* in India was instigated by secularly oriented people the likes of whom were opposed to the ban on *Lajja*. Even though Nasrin's offensive remarks about Islam and its prophet were harped on to ban her books, religion was not always the reason for proscribing her work.

The West Bengal authorities banned *Dwikhandita* stating that the book made distasteful remarks about the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. But they had not banned an earlier book by Nasrin — *Aamar Meyebela* (My Girlhood, 1999) — which made more virulent attacks on Islam and Muslims. On the contrary, the literary establishment in West Bengal gave Nasrin the Ananda Award in 2000 for the book. What is more, many of those commentators and media outlets that were critical of the ban on *Lajja* maintained a strategic silence after the ban on *Ka/Dwikhandita* in both Bangladesh and India.

What I have attempted to highlight through the above discussion is that Nasrin's literary career and controversies about her writings are complex, and many players — local and international — are involved in highlighting them. Religious considerations or the putative Islam-free speech dualism were not the principal reason for banning her books. In many cases, writers and artists caricature Islam and its prophet (peace be upon him) for reasons that go beyond freedom of expression.

However, attacks on bookstalls/bookshops for what they sell or shouting and burning books in the streets are a sign of poor taste and intellectual impotence of the protesters. That is a topic for a separate investigation, which I have addressed in 'What's wrong with Muslim response to Rushdie affair?' (2009).

Dr Md Mahmudul Hasan is professor in the department of English Language and Literature,
International Islamic University Malaysia.



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Hamid Plaza (4th floor), 300/5/A/1, Bir Uttam CR Datta Road, Hatirpool, Dhaka-1205
 PABX: +8802 41062247-50, Fax: +8802-41062245

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Into the land of Esperanto

Y JOURNEY into the land of Esperanto, the most famous planned language that the Polish ophthalmologist Ludwik Leizar Zamenhof — the Polish name spells Ludwik Łazarz Zamenhof and pronounces something like 'ludvik wazash zamenxsomething like Indivik wazash zamennof with the first two vowels in the last
name being nasal — created in 1887,
began on a serious note in the first week
of February 2023. It was in the early
1980s when I first knew of Esperanto,
intended to be an international auxiliary language, when I read Golpa Yakhan
Blassko Niye (Stories of languages), the
second, ordinary edition, in paperback
published by Muktadhara in April 1980
that I bought at Shahnewaz Library at
Munshipara, where a number of bookshops then almost limed along a road in
Dinajpur.

The book also had a deluxe edition

Dinajpur.

The book also had a deluxe edition in white print, hardbound. But it was easy for me to buy the paperback edition, in newspirit, which sold for Tk 18 while the hardbound one sold for Tk 18. When the book first came out in October 1976, only hardbound in white print, he price was Tk 18. A chapter that dealt with moves to overcome linguistic barriers devoted the last paragraph entirely to Esperanto, the chapter gave Zamenhof's name as Li Zamenhof though.

It said that grammatical rules of the language are extremely regular, and there are only 16 of them, with all nouns ending in -o and plurals with an added -j, as in -oj, and all accusatives ending in -n. Later, I knew that all adjectives end in -a and they match with nouns in number and case. All adverbs end in -e. There are three tenses and, effectively, two moods of verbs but for the infinitive. And, words are pronounced as they are written.

After bumping into the language quite a few times, I downloaded off the Archive site lyx Kellstman Reed's A Complete Grammar of Esperanto. The enthusiasm died down within a week. I najpur. The book also had a deluxe edition

platform that Luis von Ahn and Severin Hacker founded in 2011 as a free way to learn languages. A beta version of the Esperanto course was opened to all by the end of May 2015. The 'stable' course

to learn languages. A beta version of the Esperanto course was opened to all by the end of May 2015. The 'stable' course finally opened on March 25, 2016 with 61 skills and more than 240 lessons. But I had never tried it before the first week of February 2023 when I decided to spend at best six months on learning the language. Esperanto is a good, arguably not the perfect, example of an aggiutnative language, which employs a morphological process where words are formed by morphenes, or smallest part of words, stringed together.

The gamified Duolingo Esperanto course offers streaks of continuous learning for days, with XFs, or experience points, on practice, a virtual currency called the lingot that can buy some privileges and hearts that encourage learners to pay more attention to lessons as five hearts a day can be assily lost on each wrong answer. This leaves the learners to wait for 24 hours for the heart bucket to replemish. Whilst the loss of hearts on mistake forces learners to pay rapt attention to learning the language, the streak, which requires learners to continue with lessons, at least one of them, every day, tempts learners inton to breaking the continuous efforts. The course also offers a daily goal of NFs, depending on the situation of the learners, along with a daily goal of learning time. I completed the Duolingo course of 45 units in 151 days.

Learning Esperanto takes, it is generally viewed, less time than learning natural languages. It is said that the length of training should roughly be around 7,00 hours to learn languages such as French, Spanish or Fortuguese, around 1,300 hours to learn languages such as French, Spanish or Fortuguese, around 1,500 hours to learn languages such as French, Spanish or Fortuguese, around 1,500 hours to learn languages such as French spanish or Fortuguese, around 2,500 hours to learn languages such as French spanish or Fortuguese, around 2,500 hours to learn languages such as French spanish or Fortuguese, around 2,500 hours to learn languages such as French

IPB SCHEPAHTO.

МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ языкъ.

ПРЕДИСЛОВІЕ

понный учевникь.

Fpor Rused 1

Чтобы взикъ быль всенірнымъ, не достаточно назвать его таковынъ.

Цена 15 кольскъ

ВАРШАВА.

Типо-Литографія Х. Кельтера, ул. Новолипье № 11.

Mezhdunarodnij Yazyk, referred to as Unua Libro, the pamphlet that LL Zamenhof published in 1897, introducing the language Esperanto for the first time.

ured. Yet, some estimates say that the learning for Esperanto should be around 200 hours. This breaks down to more or less 57 weeks with half an hour's study a day. Duolingo has also segmented the learning sessions into leagues such as brouze, silver, gold, sapphire, ruby, emerald, amethyst, pearl, obsidian and diamond, with a provi-

ed a single, simple language that would get past the barriers of religion or ethnic-ity. The 'internal idea', or *interna ideo*, of Esperanto, in Zamenhof's words, is: Sur neŭtrala lingva fundamento forigi la murojn inter la gentoj kaj alkutimigadi la homojn, ke ĉiu el ili vidu en sia prok-

'Sur nestrale lingua fundamento forigi la munojn inter la gentol kaj dilatiningadi la humojn, ke ĉiut el ili vidut en sia prokisimulo run humon kaj futon', lin modern English, 'On the basis of a neutral constructed language, to eliminato barriers between people of different language and cultural identitius, and to accustom people to recognise that 'others' are both human beings and siblings.']

Zamenhof published his book called huternational Language, originally Mezhdunaroduj 'Margk' in Russian which is commonly referred to as Unua Libro (First Book), under the pseudonym of Dr Esperanto in 1887. The book, with 16 basic rules and a lexicon of nine humdred words, marks the beginning of the Esperanto did not arise until 1889, when people began to call the language by Zamenhof's pseudonym. The name of Unia Libro was also retroactively applied when Zamenhof published Dua Libro (Second Book) in 1988. Zamenhof's pseudonym of the Unia Libro content as Fundamento de Esperanto in 1905. He established Pundamento as the only obligatory authority over Esperanto. Since then, Esperanto has come to have an estimated two million users in Esperantujo, not the physical land but a community of speakers of the language spanning over 120 countries considered a single country; and 2,000 of them are said to be native speakers. And, it is assumed that since 1887, 10,000 titlee have been published in Esperanto. Esperanto has boasts of a Witipedia site, or Vikipedia in Esperanto, with more than 230,000 articles. Duolingo now has 428,000 signups for Esperanto, based on an idea broached around 1930. Esperanto, in fact, has a Esperanto. Esperanta al old Esperanto fo cam Esperanto wh Esperanto wh Esperanto, based around 1930. Esperanto

proto form, or an early version of the language, dating back to 1878. The sociolect is different in grammar and spelling from the standard Esperanto but well serves to show texts written in the assumed old form of the language. Esperanto is not the first invented.

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perior Esperanto, a Cernian transported to the priest made Volapuk, but if died out as people say that he did not want anyone else to make any changes in it. Arika Ckrent, a linguist, in her In the Land of Invented Languages says that Zamenhoft did not meddle with what people started doing with Esperanto, which she thinks is a reason for Esperanto's success. She thinks that Esperanto's pie in-the-sky aims had immediate and broad appeal.

Noam Chomsky, widely believed to be against planned languages, said, the concept of inventing a language is very misteading. 'Okrent, who lists five hundred planmed languages having been invented in nine hundred years. Esperantists believe that Chomsky said this about the language project of 1887. He later said that Esperanto had a couple of hints that people who knew the language could use based on their linguist knowledge to make a language out of it. Esperantists with all the people should not say that Zamenhof created the basis of the language Esperanto.

Okrent says that the appeal that Esperanto holds has endured even as it failed to become a widely spoken language. She believes that Esperantist are drawn to this vision of world harmony. People began to make a language or of what Zamenhof created not be seen and the people should rather say that Zamenhof created the basis of the language Esperanto.

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Abu Jar M Akkas is deputy editor at New Ase

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Bangladesh's democracy at turning point

HE recent meeting of the National Consensus Commission, chaired by chief adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus, represents a crucial step to wards political reform in Bangladesh. This meeting convened leaders from six reform commissions alongside approximately 100 representatives from 27 political parties and alliances, including BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Nagorik Committee, LDP, Islami Andolon, and Nagorik Collya. The interim government's decision to establish 11 reform commissions underscores its dedication to reshaping the country's political, administrative, underscores its dedication to reshaping the country's political administrative, and electoral frameworks. Significantly, the six commissions' reports discussed during the meeting encountered no substantial opposition from the partici-pating political entities. Perhaps the most encouraging out-

pating political entities. Perhaps the most encouraging out-come of this meeting was the apparent consensus among political parties re-garding the necessity of reforms. This unanimity signals a shared understanding that the prevailing political and ad-ministrative structures — long weakministrative structures — long weak-ened by years of autocratic misrule — urgently require restructuring. The chief adviser acknowledged that the

is divided into two distinct phases. The first phase, focused on preparation, has now concluded, giving way to a second phase centred on implementation and political engagement. Engaging in dislogue with political parties will be instrumental in shaping the final reform decisions, ensuring a participatory and inclusive process.

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Reform is an ongoing endeavour, leaving no room for stagnation or complacency. The previous autocratic regime bequeathed a deeply flawed political system, which includes a compromised constitution, a politicised administration, a biased judiciary, a weakened Election Commission and an ineffective anti-corruption mechanism. Addressing these issues is paramount to upholding democracy, ensuring voting rights, fostering good governance, protecting human rights, and promoting justice and accountability. Without substantive reforms, the prospect of a free, fair, and credible election remains unattainable.

A crucial debate in this process is A crucial debate in this process is the extent to which reforms should be enacted before elections. Some advo-cate for a 'reforms first, then elections' approach, while others argue for prior-

itising elections without excessive preconditions. However, taking an extreme
stance on either side is neither pragmatic nor sustainable. Delaying elections
in pursuit of extensive reforms could
breed political instability and governance paralysis. Conversely, rushing into
elections without implementing essential reforms risks undermining their
credibility. A balanced approach —
where urgent reforms are implemented
before elections while broader structural reforms continue post-election — is
the most prudent course of action.

Notably, key political parties have
exhibited a degree of flexibility. BNP,
despite its insistence on early elections,
has not dismissed the importance of
reforms. It has emphasised that elections should be conducted on the basis
of a consensus regarding necessary re-

tions should be conducted on the basis of a consensus regarding necessary re-forms. Similarly, Jamast-e-Islami sup-ports elections but insists on a prior agreement on reforms. The willingness of these two major parties to negoti-ate suggests that a middle ground can be reached. Other participating parties have also expressed support for both re-forms and timely elections, indicating a notential pathway forward.

potential pathway forward.

Despite the broad consensus, some disagreements persist among political

parties. One contentious issue is the sequencing of national and local government elections. BNP contends that the national election should take precedence, whereas Jamaat-s-Islami believes that local government elections should be held first. While opinions diverge, many analysts argue that principations that might impact the credibility of the general election.

Another debate centres on the voting system. BNP supports the existing

ing system. BNP supports the existing electoral model, whereas Iamaat advo electoral model, whereas Jamaat advo-cates for a proportional representation system. Observers suggest that, given the current political landscape, main-taining the scisting system is preferable. A shift to proportional representation could enable remnants of the auto-cratic regime to secure parliamentary seats, contradicting the spirit of the July Revolution and the broader objectives of democratic consolidation. However, Revolution and the broader objectives of democratic consolidation. However, this assertion by BNP warrants scrutiny. A proportional representation system has the potential to foster greater politi-cal inclusivity and safeguard the elec-torate's will by ensuring broader repre-

The meeting also highlighted calls for barming the Awami League. According to media reports, Hasnat Abdullah, the convener of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, claimed that all parties verbally agreed to revoking the party's registration. If accurate, this development could radically alter the political landscape. However, such drastic measures require careful legal and political consideration to avoid deepening divisions and exacerbating unrest. While political consensus on reforms and elections has been reaffirmed, significant challenges persist. Despite six.

While political consensus on reforms and elections has been reaffirmed, significant challenges persist. Despite six months in power, the interim government has yet to establish full control over key sectors, including the administration, polices, and economic structures. Many figures associated with the previous regime continue to wield substantial influence and economic power than the properties of the p remains concentrated in the hands of remains concentrated in the hands of oligarchic business elites. The contin-ued rise in commodity prices, market syndicates, governance inefficiencies and deteriorating public security are eroding the government's credibility. eroding the government's credibility.

If decisive action is not taken, public dissatisfaction could escalate, further

weakening the government's authority.

The chief adviser has iterated that

the national election could be held by December this year. However, this raises critical questions: Is the government adequately prepared for such a significant undertaking? Can the Election Commission complete the necessary preparations within the allotted time-frame? The second phase of the intering government's tenure has begun, but ensuring its successful execution remains a formidable challenge.

In conclusion, the recent meeting of the National Consensus Commission has reinforced the urgency of both reforms and elections, yet the road to democratic stability remains fraught with complexities. The government must strike a delicate balance between implementing critical reforms and preparing for elections while strengthening governance mechanisms. Political parties, for their part, must engage with the government in good faith to facilitate a free, fair, and credible electroal process. Only through collaborative effort can Bangladesh avalgate this transitional phase and lay the groundwork for lasting democratic progress. phase and lay the groundwork for lasting democratic progress.

Mrl Morntazur Rahman is a professor of English at the International University of Business Agriculture and Technology.