

Ms Taslima Nasreen

is a Bangladesh-born physician-poet-novelist. She has experience with conflicts relating to “intercultural communication,” writing and speaking about problems such as those of Bangladesh and India, Islam and Hinduism, Islam and atheism, fundamentalism, and the rights of women in various countries.

Some Views About Intercultural Communication

The world today is characterized by an ever-growing number of contacts resulting in communication between people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This communication takes place because of contacts within the areas of business, military cooperation, science, education, mass media, entertainment, and tourism. It also takes place because of immigration brought about by labor shortage or political conflicts.

In all these contacts, communication needs to be as constructive as possible, without misunderstandings and breakdowns. It is my view that research about the nature of linguistic and cultural similarities and differences can play a positive and constructive role.

I was born and brought up in a country, far from Barcelona. My language and culture are totally different from your language and culture. However, I am here speaking to you, speaking in a language which is not even my own. Why is this? It is because of your interest in finding out about my feelings, thoughts, and struggle. You want to communicate with me. And I want to communicate with you. But you would not understand me if I spoke to you in Bengali. So why am I speaking in English? It is because India formerly was a British colony, and English became my second language in order to communicate with individuals in the country from which my country was formed.

From the beginning of history, humans with different cultures and languages naturally needed to communicate with each other. People are not solitary animals. They developed ways to communicate in order, for example, to spread their religion, do business, and show their power. What followed was their ability to learn from other cultures, enriching their own. Culture and language, which flow like a river, cannot be stagnant. As people continue to communicate interculturally, a time may come when national boundaries will not be needed. We will all be humans, some of different colors, some with different abilities, some with different ideas. Ideally, there would be no touchables or untouchables. In the future, when frontiers have vanished, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists as well as atheists, freethinkers, and those who are not monotheists will communicate rationally without any need to argue or dislike or fight among themselves.

At one time, Bangladesh was part of India, so the people of Bangladesh shared the same history and culture. India was, of course, the homeland of people who had different languages and cultures, and, after the Aryans came with Vedas, a great civilization flourished in the Indus valleys 3000 years before the time of Jesus. In the 3rd century, Buddhism came, followed by Islam in the 7th century and Christianity in the 15th century. People in India converted into these various groups. India survives today with hundreds of cultures. Cultural give-and-take always has

been there. During the Mughal or Mogul empire, India was enriched with music, literature, and art. It is the most significant fact of Indo-Muslim history that the Muslim rule in India covered a period of almost 1,000 years, in which there were good rulers as well as bad rulers and there were also occasional wars between the Muslim power in Delhi and one or the other Hindu raja who chose to defy the central power. It was not a time of ruler versus the ruled. It is a history of mostly just and caring rulers where even an humble washerman could knock at the gate of the Emperor's fort and obtain justice against the Empress, where the state made regular benefactions to support Hindu shrines and temples, and accorded full respect to the belief and way of life of the various people. It is interesting that all 'reforms' in Hindu religion were enacted by the British, whereas the Muslims left them almost untouched, to be reformed by the society itself.

The end of British rule on the subcontinent in 1947 left behind a situation in which both Hindus and Muslims felt distrustful of each other. It was exactly these conditions that led Britain to institute their divide-and-rule policy and to create a two-nations concept as the model for partition. Pakistan came into existence in two parts: West Pakistan, coextensive with the country's present boundaries; and East Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh. The two were separated by 1,600 km (1,000 miles) of Indian territory. In 1971, Bangladesh got its independence. The war of Bangladesh proved that Muslim unity was a myth. Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan could not live with non-Bengali Muslims of West Pakistan. Even though the British long ago have gone from the subcontinent, the rulers of West Pakistan behaved like a colonial power and treated the former East Pakistan as its little colony.

In the new country of Bangladesh, the father of the nation was killed, the army took power in different times, secularism was thrown out of the Constitution, the Islamic fundamentalists gained their power, and now slowly they are trying to replace the Bengali culture with an Islamic culture. I must assume you know that under Islam no woman has the right to live as a human being. Women in Islam have a prefabricated destiny. The Qur'an is unambiguous, and in one of its chapters, "Women," the importance of the female sex is mentioned. It deemed that it was all-important to impose a sex of severe social and political restrictions that determined women's private and public conduct. While some sections of the text are open to a more generous interpretation, the foundational verse leaves no room for doubt.

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them, forsake them in beds apart, and beat them. Then, if they obey you, take no further action against them. Surely Allah is all-knowing and wise.

Several chapter later, Allah's limitless generosity recognises the exclusive needs of the Prophet in this department and thoughtfully provides him with a blank cheque.

Prophet, we have made lawful for you the wives to whom you have granted dowries and the slave girls whom Allah has given you as booty, the daughters of your parental and maternal uncles and of your of your paternal and maternal aunts who fled with you; and any believing women who gives herself to the prophet and whom prophet wishes to take in marriage. This privilege is yours alone, being granted to no other believer.

The Qur'an permits men an unlimited number of women, saying

your women are as your field, go unto them as your will.

The Prophet Muhammad also said,

the women should never refuse her husband even on the top of a burning oven. Two prayers that never reach the heavens are that of the escaping slave and that of the reluctant woman who frustrates her husband at night.

Islam is the fundamental cause of the repression of Muslim women and remains the major obstacle to the evolution of their position. Islam has always considered women as creatures inferior in every way, physically, intellectually, and morally. In Islam women's testimony is not accepted. In cases in which one man's testimony is enough, two women's testimony is needed. It is said that the Prophet did not accept the testimony of women in matters of marriage, divorce, and child custody. In the question of heritage, the Qur'an tells us that male children should inherit twice the portion of the female children.

When I began to study the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, I was surprised to see that "the sun revolves around the earth." I found lots of other unreasonable ideas. Certainly it discriminated against women. Women in the Qur'an are treated as slaves, nothing but sexual objects. Naturally I set aside the Qur'an and looked around me. I found religion equally oppressive in real life. So one day I took up my pen and started writing about the various misdeeds performed in the name of religion. I wrote against all the injustice, un-reason, and prejudice sanctioned and promoted by religious institutions. I began to try to expose the crimes of religion, particularly the injustice and oppression against women. In my writing I began to speak out against all this. What happened? Can a woman be allowed to talk like this? Well, the fundamentalists demanded my execution by hanging. They set a price on my head. The government banned my books. I was guilty of questioning patriarchy, the idea that males are supreme over females, an idea found in the so-called "holy" books of the monotheists.

There are some other reasons why I am against religion. Its adherents may say we should love one another. But in practice, they often teach them to look down upon, even hate, people of a different faith. Religion also leads people to depend on fate, and this leads them not to be self-confident. It unnecessarily glorifies poverty and sacrifice, which serves the vested interests of the wealthy few. In all countries and through all ages, conscientious people have exposed these unethical aspects of monotheistic religion and educated others to see religion through the eyes of reason and logic.

Even though I came from a majority community, the Muslim, I defended the minority Hindus in my country because they were being oppressed by Muslim fundamentalists. As a humanist, I see all people as equals, irrespective of their religious beliefs, ethnic background, gender, or caste. And I am mortified when I see such things as Muslim women being stoned to death by Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh. Or seeing Hindu women who are not allowed to live as human beings under the Hindu religion. So it was only natural that I should work toward a uniform civil code in which women everywhere would get justice and equality. No Muslim law, no Hindu law,

no Christian law. Period. And what happened? Well, the Muslim fundamentalists called me an apostate. According to Muslim law, an apostate must be killed.

So why am I alive and standing here? Can you guess the answer? It's simply because I have been able to hide from all such people. I have a question for you: Would you enjoy being a person who hides from the world, who must flee from his or her country, must move around to make sure you are not being followed, must go to sleep at night wondering if you might be killed in your sleep by some believer in Allah or God?

If Muslim fundamentalism rises, Hindu fundamentalism will rise too on the Indian subcontinent. Muslim and Hindu conflicts are not new in this part of the world. But is it really a conflict between Hindus and Muslims? I think not. I think the conflict that exists is between secularism and fundamentalism. We, the secular people, are in the fight against unreason and prejudice. The rise of fundamentalism all over the world shows that the battle we are fighting is both dangerous and desperate. Now, with the end of the "cold war," the world faces a new battle, one between secularism and fundamentalism. I don't agree with those in the West who think that the conflict is simply between two religions—namely, Christianity and Islam. After all, there are fundamentalists in every religious community. Likewise, I do not agree with those people who think that the Crusades of the Middle Ages are going to be repeated soon. Nor do I think that this is a conflict between East and West. To me this conflict is basically between irrational, blind faith and rational, logical thinking. While some people want to go forward, others are eager to go backwards. It is a conflict between the future and the past, between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who do not.

Why has religious fundamentalism attracted so many people? I think it is because of the failure of secular democracy, on the one hand, and of communism on the other, to solve the problem of an ideology, that of fundamentalism, that diverts people from the path of their natural conscious development and which undermines their personal rights. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism can be traced to problems of underdevelopment and inequity. Disillusioned and hopeless people, as a result, have tried to find salvation by accepting the blind forces provided by faith. They have chosen to place a trust in beliefs for which there are no proofs. Because Islam has been beaten by science and overwhelmed by other civilizations, it is now in search of its "roots." Blame does not lie solely upon the so-called secular leaders of the ex-Colonies who have used fundamentalism to serve their own interests. However, the responsibility should be shared by the democratic and secular states of the developed world who have made compromises with the fundamentalists. In Bangladesh, we have seen how the so-called secular political parties use the religious sentiments of people in order to get votes. But, similarly, rank opportunism is found in India and elsewhere, too. Powerful Western states have declared as one of the supreme objectives that of protecting human rights—but examples are numerous to show that democratic governments have recognized military dictatorships for their own short-run political interests. Secular states have made friends with autocracies as well as with theocracies, shamelessly patronizing fundamentalism overtly or covertly despite knowing about the many cases of inhuman behaviour which thereby is encouraged. Such double standards practised by so-called democratic and secular states at home and abroad give the fundamentalists a sort of legitimacy. Governments then succumb to the fundamentalists' pressure, followed by the fundamentalists being able to proscribe books, make arrangements to send authors or others to prison, to plan people's lives.

Some authors in the West are coming forward in support of fundamentalists. They argue that not all the customs in vogue in Third World countries are harmful for women. They find a sort of stability and social peace in the Oriental world. They think that even *harems* are not necessarily bad for women, because they provide a degree of autonomy and independence! May I humbly observe that all this is plain hoax. If I were a matador in Barcelona, I would say, "*Eso es mierda!*" For me, there can be no difference in the concept of human rights between the East and the West. If the veil is bad for Western women then it is bad for their Eastern sisters as well. If patriarchy is to be fought against in the West, it should be equally fought against in the East. In fact the fight is more urgent there because most of the women have neither any education nor any economic independence. If modern secular education is good for Western women, why should Eastern women be deprived of it? The peace that some authors visualize in the Eastern countries is, clearly, the peace of the graveyard.

The point is, fundamentalists cannot be stopped without a relentless and uncompromising fight. The struggle should be both theoretical and tactical. Democracy and secularism should be applied in practice, not remain a mere play of words. Fundamentalism is an ideology that diverts people from the path of natural development of consciousness and undermines their personal rights. I find it impossible to accept fundamentalism as an alternative to secular ideas. My reasons are as follows: first, the insistence of the fundamentalists on divine justification for human laws; second, the insistence of fundamentalists upon the superior authority of faith, as opposed to reason; third, the insistence of fundamentalists that the individual does not count, that the individual is immaterial. Group loyalty over individual rights and personal achievements is a peculiar feature of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe in a particular way of life; they want to put everybody in their particular strait jacket and dictate what an individual should eat, what an individual should wear, how an individual should live everyday life—everything would be determined by fundamentalist authority. Fundamentalists do not believe in individualism, liberty of personal choice, or plurality of thought. Moreover, as they are believers in a particular faith, they believe in propagating only their own ideas (the same as autocrats generally do). They do not encourage or entertain free debate, they deny others the right to express their own views freely and they cannot tolerate anything which they perceive as going against their faith. They do not believe in an open society, and although they proclaim themselves a moral force, their language is about hatred and violence. As true believers, they are out to "save the soul" of the people of their country by force of arms. Is it possible for a rationalist and humanist to accept this sort of terrible repression? The fight between obscurantism and enlightenment, between rationality and faith, is therefore inevitable. But it is to be fought in the realm of ideology, in the field of education, on political platforms, and in all spheres of daily life.

The self-assertion of various ethnic groups is, of course, of a different nature. There may be religious elements in ethnic struggles. But there can be many other reasons behind struggles against nation states. In the first place we must remember that the ideal of forming a "nation" from different ethnic groups was often imposed by the Colonial rulers, particularly in the Asian world. They were motivated in this partly by administrative considerations. But there was also a failure to build the necessary ideological movement for creating a truly nationalist ethos, a movement in which various groups of people could participate with dignity. Naturally, all these groups could not attain adequate representation in the nationalistic whole. I think the attempt to build a "nation" in the former Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia or Soviet Union was, at least to some extent, imposed from above. Their nationalism was consequently faulty. Secessionist

movements could spread easily, at the first chance indeed, through these faults in the nationalist structure. And naturally, these movements grew around the aspirations of different ethnic groups. There can be many reasons behind the sense of alienation of these groups, for example the step-motherly behaviour of the centre, the dominance of the main ruling groups, uneven development, continuous neglect, or attempts to impose cultural hegemony. All these, of course, mark a failure of the democratic process.

Again, the rulers commit a grave mistake when they try to bring the defiant ethnic groups back to the mainstream by treating their agitation as "law and order problems" and tackling them as such. These movements can be dealt with only on the basis of equality, justice, equal respect, and true independence. It does not mean that the attempt to build nations should be forsaken and the nation states should be broken up into sovereign ethnic units. If we accept the principle of such divisions generally, very few states of the world will remain undivided. Nation states will break up with sub-national and tribal units. The world will go back into a primitive state. This is why the question should be seen sensibly and with consideration and empathy. The ethnic groups should be given the economic and administrative autonomy they deserve. But, also, their cultural identity should be carefully preserved. In this age of the onslaught of the so-called global market and the global village, the question of cultural hegemony has become extremely important in the context of fighting fundamentalism. It is equally important for the dominant culture in a country to be conscious of the cultural rights of others. When fundamentalists loom large, the West should be very careful in handling the culture of Asian, African, and Latin American peoples. There is no such thing as a superior or inferior culture, there are only various cultural patterns which make up this beautiful, multi-coloured mosaic. Those who are trying to form a nation with different ethnic groups should remember this truth as well. I have been amused because where I grew up friends held hands in the street. I used to invite girls my age to visit me, meet my family, and share my bed—my Western friends, surprised at my behavior, thought I was a lesbian until I was able to communicate to them about our interesting differences.

How is cultural communication possible? Is it very hard? I don't think so. I have had no difficulties communicating with people of different ethnic, religious, cultural groups. I find that I start by respecting other people. Respect for other cultures is very important if I want to communicate with others. If I don't know anything about their cultures, I will misunderstand them. Then the conflict will start. Is there any secret to this? My own secret is that I have empathy, not just sympathy, for people. I do not look down upon those with different customs—instead, I try to look through their eyes and try to understand what they are seeing. I am not sorry when I see or hear different people and different ideas.

Women are oppressed, for sure. Through education, women will learn how to become economically independent. The shackles that have made women the slaves of men must be broken. Human rights are more important than all the traditions, cultures, and religions, and this is why we have to value humanism, which should be our religion or culture.

Respect for other cultures does not mean that I have to respect cultures which are inhumane. I certainly do not respect female genital mutilation. That involves torture. But I have no inhibition about accepting the good side of different cultures. Actually we all do. Nobody could say they are practising only their own culture. Nothing is solely one's own anymore. We all have followed the different cultures that came to us in different times. To respect culture means to respect human

beings. I am for humanity. Let's work for humanity. We are human beings—it should be our main identity. Let's make this world colorful with its different cultures. We have much to learn from others. We can enrich ourselves with other ideas, views, and thoughts. What is the use of living in a stagnant pool like a little frog!

