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## Bangladesh: JEI Revisited:

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In my paper 6496 dated 19<sup>th</sup> Feb., I had referred to the attempts by the JEI of Bangladesh to refurbish its image and get a new identity to join mainstream politics. The party had in fact formed a five-member committee to work out a strategy for emerging as a new party with a different name. It was also known that serious differences have arisen between the older pre-liberation cadres and the younger ones in deciding the future of the party. The younger leaders want to get out of their “underground” mentality and come clean by apologizing to the nation for going against the liberation movement of 1971.

The Ruling party-the Awami League has looked at this strategy with derision and had called it as “old wine in new bottle”. But certainly there is an opportunity here for the JEI to reform itself and being led by younger elements who are in a sense being held in a “strangle hold” by senior extremists. The Elders had brought a bad name to the party by instigating violence and supporting the Pakistani Forces in killing en masse innocent people in 1971. If the majority of those in the Party who had nothing to do with the violence instigated during the liberation movement wish to apologise and move on, it should be encouraged to do so.

It is necessary to revisit the JEI of Bangladesh and see how it came about in Bangladesh. The JEI predates the partition of India and was started by Maudoodi whose objective was, as in all Muslim Organisations to create an Islamic State governed by Shariat. It was because of this objective and on the guidance of fanatic elders that the JEI did not participate in the liberation of Bangladesh. On the other hand, they took a very active part in putting down the freedom fighters and in joining hands with the Pakistani Army to commit atrocities on a very large scale. To this day some of the seniors who participated in the killings are still facing trial while some have gone to the gallows already.

In JEI's view, there is no place for a minority in a Muslim State. Secularism is a bad word and not acceptable in a Muslim State. The attacks

on the temples and on minorities by the radical elements (not by the main body) which occur frequently should be seen in this context.

In theory, the JEI stands for social service, social reform and spirituality- In practice, these get subsumed by an overlapping objective that "Islam cannot be enforced without political force".

In a landmark judgement of August 1, 2013, the Bangladesh Court ruled that the JEI in view of its declared ideology cannot participate in the elections. Since then the JEI with its large number of cadres had aligned itself with the BNP. The latter had no compunction in making use of the JEI for employing them as foot soldiers in any demonstration against the Government and indulging in arson, attacks on security forces, rival political leaders and cadres. It also helped them in garnering more votes from the voters who had an empathy for a political party with a religious bent.

The BNP used the JEI cadres in full measure in trying to bring the Awami League Government to a stop by indulging in unbelievable violence and attacks on innocent civilians in the aftermath of 2014 elections. A whole Bus with its passengers was burnt by hooligans belonging to the BNP and the JEI. Many of the leaders of the JEI are still underground and many more are visiting the courts regularly in cases filed by the security forces after the violence in 2014. Hence the feeling among the younger cadres of the JEI being seen as an "underground party"

The BNP had fielded 25 candidates from the JEI as proxies thus circumventing the Court orders in the current election of 2018. Some of the JEI candidate did the electioneering openly with the BNP cadres accompanying them to solicit votes!

The Student wing of the JEI- the Islamic Chaatra Shabir is a very potent force and capable of mischief. It is believed that most of the recent incidents of killings since 2014 though owned up by many other extremists were actually perpetrated by the students wing - ICS.

Although electorally the strength of JEI has been around 8 percent, another 15 percent could be their sympathisers as the JEI is somehow seen by many as a liberal, profound religious organisation. Leaving aside the seniors and the Mullahs, the main body of the followers are educated. It is perhaps this part that wants to make a complete departure from its past identity and move on as part of the main political mainstream. The issue is whether they should be encouraged and start a new leaf after dumping the senior die-hards who do not deserve to be in the party anymore or not let them change and get subsumed by senior religious bigots.

The JEI should also try to get rid of its image as an appendage of the BNP.

The JEI will continue to stay alive and kicking in either form. It has the cadres, the muscle and the cash. It cannot be taken lightly. Nothing is gained by treating the attempts by the younger elements to have a complete 'make over' as old wine in a new bottle. Now that Sheikh Hasina has an overwhelming majority in running the government for the next five years, could she not devise some strategy to get the

younger educated elements out from the stranglehold of the senior extremist religious ones? It could be tried.

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