

When bestiality returns, sanity disappears

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FROM Chokoria in Chittagong to Chitalmari in Bagerhat district, the entire region is sliding into a morass of criminality of dastardly nature—rape, murder, abduction, extortion and you name it. Most traumatic, these sleepy villages once known as peaceful and violence-free abodes have now been rocked by gruesome incidents of sexual abuses that threaten to plunge the conservative people's paradise into identity crisis. So deep is the rot and so pervasive the cynicism, that pious proclamations of intent no longer make a difference. People are looking for action and decisive lead, but they are sceptical about the political class's ability to deliver or the bureaucracy's strength to face the challenge. Understandably, the country's law enforcement agency has failed to curb this surge of horrendous crimes. Unquestionably true, the menacing situation warrants that the P.M. has to rise up to the occasion because she has absolutely nothing to lose by triggering a much needed correction process. The country's statecraft is susceptible to public opinion and the P.M. could have used the popular disgust and existing laws to tame the offenders. An assault on the political-criminal nexus is now the obvious priority.

Precisely true, patronage of criminals by politicians and demoralised police force has pushed up the crime graph. Other than the political leadership that is to blame for such escalation, there is another hidden culprit and it is the absence of public opinion. There has not been a whisper of protest out of them against such horrendous crimes being perpetrated with such increasing impunity.

On account of the apparent weakness of our political leaders and undesirable partisan tinge of a considerable section of intellectuals and functionaries of government machinery, we find ourselves in the dangerous situation of taking orders from the criminals. Unbelievable though it may sound, but it is true that a notorious under, trial prisoner had the audacity of throwing shoes at the sessions judge in the court room. That only shows how we have yielded to the forces of vandalism. It may be too late but still we must not indulge in any further cynicism and make no distinction between the criminals who commit these acts and those who harbour them. In a country where the criminal justice system is tortuously slow and police investigation shoddy, such incidents are not unlikely. The fundamental reason why the corrupt and the criminal continue to go about their evil deeds happily is because they know that even if they

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are caught, it will take 10 to 20 years before they are found guilty and meanwhile they would be released on bail and go back to their criminal acts in a more dare-devil fashion. It is time to rectify the obvious wrongs in our criminal-justice system and shoddy police investigations that leave enough loopholes for the criminals to evade punishment. Small wonder, faced with a daunting rise in criminality, people in many parts of the country are resorting to direct action that spells danger for any democratic administration.

The country's crime graph has climbed alarmingly, for instance, with about 297 murders in the month of April this year. The figure includes 18 killed as a sequel to political infighting, 15 women killed after rape, 10 killed in mob-beating, 19 killed for dowry related cases and 102 killed through human rights violations. For a government that assumed office with soaring expectations, the deterioration has been precipitous. The euphoria that marked the beginning has been replaced with exasperation that is fast turning into anger.

Although it was said that the "uncertainty of the past has been replaced by a sense of purposefulness", but this optimism is not reflected in performance. The bestiality of some rapists, as reported in a section of the press early last month (May 3) shames every human being on earth. Biva Rani Singh, an H.S.C. examinee of Surigati village under Chitalmari Upazila in the Bagerhat district was abducted by six hoodlums at gunpoint on her way to college on April 22. For seven days she was kept in confinement at different places of Chitalmari and Khulna and brutal sexual assault by at least six hoodlums was made on her at different hours of day and night during these days. When she made attempts to flee from their den, she was subjected to brutal torture, her body was cut with blades and knives at different places and bruised by burning cigarettes. On the other hand, her father was threatened with dire consequences from mobile phones owned by some student leaders should he made any attempt to inform police. On April 27, at the behest of M. A. H. Selim, a local M.P. and a BNP leader, local police recorded a G.D. filed by Biva's father, Binoy Singh. But the main

accused in this horrid crime are still at large.

Biva Rani, it is now learnt, is mentally deranged and made several attempts to commit suicide. People are afraid she might choose the same path as Farzana Afrin Rumi of Khulna, who unable to bear with the humiliation and teasing, day in and day out, took her life. Days before the incident, Biva had reportedly been subjected to lewd comments, innuendo-filled remarks and threats. The local thana police had knowledge about it but did not come up to nab these hoodlums at the proper moment.

The trauma that grips the life of a teenage girl of Neamatpur village in the district of Naogaon who was raped by one Mominul in a nearby village Tanore is a night mare. Mominul befriended her while she was at Tanore for SSC examination but later betrayed the trust. Mominul accompanied her on her way back to Neamatpur after the SSC examination and at a secluded place raped her. The girl, a meritorious student, as her teachers say, went straight to Thana for recording a case. The post traumatic story in the life of the girl is more nightmarish than one can imagine. Because of a social stigma that drives most rape-

victims and their families to silence, the victim girl has been locked in a room for days in an apparent bid to save the family prestige. As usual in such situations, to escape the wrath of the angry village Matabarbar who did not take it too kindly for the girl's going to thana and who now want an out of court settlement, the girl's parents want to sweep the case under the carpet.

Incidents of such ugly nature have always had links with the political godfathers and it was such a nexus that could be as much horrific as one could imagine. Day in and day out it, has turned more ugly moving into ransom bid and violence. Predictably, it has set off a panic in the community at large. Alarm bell is ringing and individual families with grown up daughters shriek in pain and panic. People are screening telephone calls, too scared to talk because they fear they will be targeted. Criminals who are indulging in such clandestine crimes often boast of their links with the party in power and when some nabbed, stalwarts of party go out of the way to secure their release.

As newspaper reports indicate traumatic and frightening incidents of rape cases have taken place in many places of the country in the

in pain and panic at Gouripur Health Complex. The gang rape of three women in the same house including mother and daughter and subsequent looting of properties and killing of the husband of one of the raped women at Komarpur in Bagerhat district exposes the ugly face of the powerful cadre politics. A very much disturbing trend it is when a new breed of cadres professing their links with the ruling party politics consider themselves above the law and flaunt political connections both through their ill-gotten affluence and muzzle of a gun. That's the reason it took about one and a half month for a heinous crime to be recorded in the thana and some arrests made. People wonder if any other crime could be more ghastly, more traumatic and more barbaric. As if there are no devils in hell, they are all in our society now!

Changes in the high echelons of the police administration have come about, and even combing up operation by the joint forces had taken place to nab criminals of all hues in the past but one thing that hasn't changed in the country is the law and order situation. Shockingly, during the last few months, the law and order situation deteriorated so drastically that experts in statecraft remarked that the country was hurtling toward anarchy. This is borne out by the fact that outlaws in the south western zone of the country starting from the remotest part of Khulna, Jessore, Satkhira, Jhenidah, Kushtia and extending far up to Rajshahi are almost operating freely killing even police personnel and looting their rifles with hardly meeting any resistance. The administration's claim on different occa-

Image of Bangladesh abroad

The micro finance model keeps the vessel afloat

M SHAFIULLAH

"WE completed protocol formalities. Congratulations. Mr. Ambassador if you have time I would now like you to share two experiences of your country with me." The setting was the Presidential Palace at the historic city of Carthage on the bank of Mediterranean Sea in Tunis in 1995. At the end of about twenty minutes credential ceremony under rigid protocol President Zine el-Abidine ben Ali made the gesture to the new Ambassador to relax. But for the new Ambassador the atmosphere turned a bit tense as he had not the slightest inkling of which Bangladesh experiences the president of a North African Arab country had in mind. He thought it was moment to make or mar first impression on the head of state of the receiving country. Unease unto him Bangladesh envoy put a bold face.

President resumed the discussion over Gawa (cup of Arab coffee) and an array of desert dates well laid out before his guest. "What is the secret of one woman becoming Prime Minister and another woman leader of the opposition in Bangladesh which is considered to be an Islamic country?", the President asked. He added that it was just a curiosity and the envoy might come across similar query in the Arab world. He was frank enough to admit that not being very familiar with Bangladesh culture and customs if his curiosity caused unintended offence, the Ambassador was not obliged to answer. The Envoy enthusiastically seized the opportunity to briefly revisit events in Sri Lanka in the neighbourhood of Bangladesh where following the assassination of the prime minister his widow Sirimavo Bandaranayke succeeded him. The spotlight then moved on to Indira Gandhi, in closest neighbour India and the ascendancy of Benazir Bhutto in near-neighbour Pakistan provided more or less familiar setting for Begum Khaleida Zia and Sheikh Hasina to take political leaderships in Bangladesh which is a majority Muslim polity with secular outlook.

The South Asian scenario of political inheritance by daughters of assassinated founders of states or wives of slain presidents or prime ministers was rounded up with mentioning the epic struggle of Aung Sung Suuky, daughter of assassinated leader of Burma, the other immediate neighbouring state of Bangladesh in the east. Apparently the President was intrigued at the unfamiliar and unconventional political developments in South Asia. He seemed to be drawn in to comment that the neighbours the Ambassador mentioned had one powerful woman at the helm of affairs of state at one point of time. But in Bangladesh where two Muslim women continue to wield state authority for more than a decade at the same time either in power or in opposition, was unparalleled in the contemporary world. To him it was a unique case in political history and Bangladesh had earned a new image. He wished more and more success to the trend setting leaders in the sisterly country.

The Ambassador clearly came under spotlight in any diplomatic gathering for the emergence of a complete new kind of political leadership in Bangladesh. International hopes were high and goodwill were generous.

At the enthusiasm of the President, the envoy felt confident to face the second unknown question. After inviting to taste Tunisian dates and black olives, the President took the envoy to a different course to provide a glimpse of Tunisian basics. He stated that Islam was the state religion; Tunisia remained a fairly liberal and tolerant society. There were small Jewish community with synagogue in Djerba, a tourist resort and about 20,000 Roman Catholics in complete harmony with 10 million Islamic population who are basically Arab Berber. Arabic was the official language, but almost everybody spoke some French which is taught from age six. Founder-president Habib Bourguiba made French compulsory from primary school.

In fact, a brief encounter with the Tunisian history under founder-president reveals that Habib Bourguiba fought out independence of his country from France in 1956 and founded the polity on the ideals of socialistic and secular moulds. To modernise the newly independent country Bourguiba set about reducing the role of religion in society by removing religious leaders from traditional areas of influence, such as, education and law. Probably the most significant step was the abolition of religious schools. This deprived the religious leaders of their grassroots educational roles in shaping society. The shari'a court was abolished. Bourguiba also introduced major changes to the role of women in the society. His 1956 Personal Status Code banned polygamy and ended the practice of divorce by renunciation. His liberation of women put both man and woman on equal footing in society.

The envoy was apprised that Tunisian economy was a mixed bag in which both private and public sector participation relies heavily on tourism and on remittances from nationals working in the Gulf States. Government built the infrastructures for tourism industry and the private sector run tourism business which attract about five million visitors in good season. Living standard was generally good with per capita GDP around \$1300. In spite of this, unemployment was the main social

issue. The situation was not optimistic in view of the fact that most manufacturing units were small. To generate employment through setting up more small scale productive units President Ben Ali thought of Banque de Solidarity to extend loan facility to encourage small investors but he looked for innovative ideas.

He saw writings about Professor Yunus of Bangladesh in Western media like *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Times*, *La Monde* and couple of interviews of the Bangladesh BANKER TO THE POOR published in the *Newsweek*. He could not recall to have seen a focus so intense and in such good light on a person from the third world and the institution he built to remove poverty. The prestigious press in Americas and Europe convinced

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him that Grameen Bank must have been a success story and a viable institution for the developing countries to fall back upon. Had it not been the case, Western media would not have sustained their focus on it for more than a decade. He wished to know more about the Grameen Bank and sought the envoy's assistance to procure literatures of the Bank since Tunisia maintains no resident mission in Dhaka.

Fortunately for the Bangladesh envoy he was not a stranger to the Grameen Bank. With a brief stint in the media he moved to the present occupation serving formative years in the External Publicity, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On a note of positive projection of Bangladesh abroad Grameen Bank had been brought to sharp focus from the External Publicity desk. At a time when flood, famine, pestilence, political assassination, corruption, violation of human rights, deaths in custody, strikes, senseless acrimony of political leaders on personal grounds, shameless distribution of largess on political dispensation filled in the foreign media, Grameen

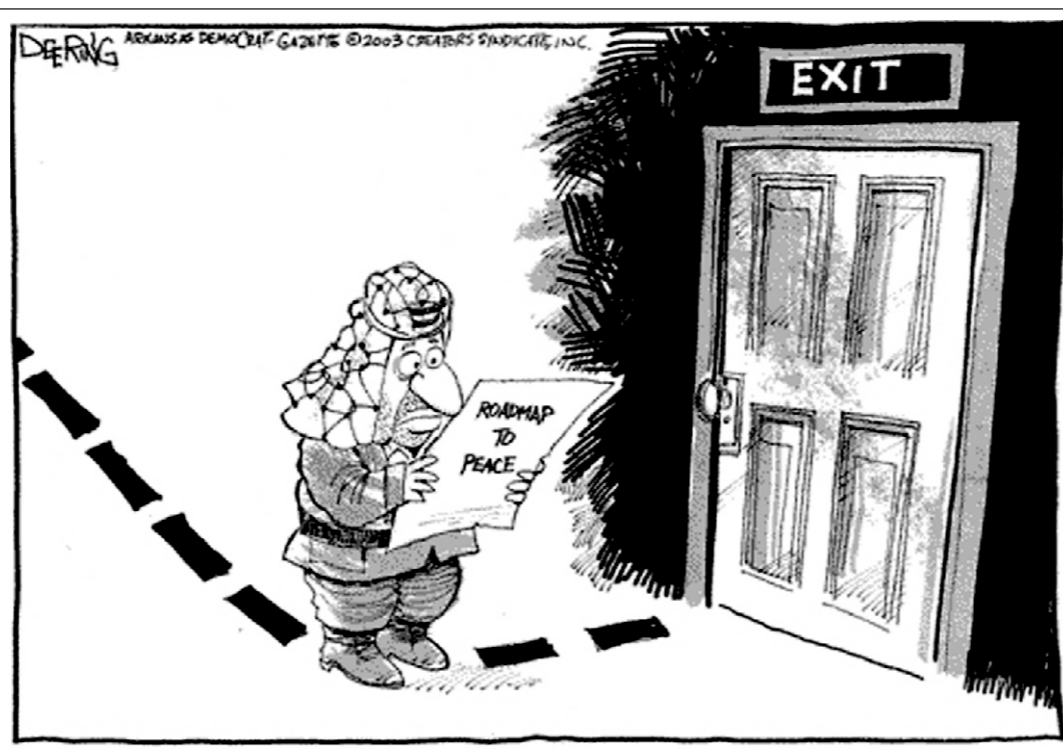
Bank was Bangladesh diplomats' flag mast to hold on to. One credible element a diplomat could write home about was Bangladesh's indigenous micro-credit concept developed through indigenous method by Dr. Yunus to answer crushing poverty of millions.

On the eve of the writer's leaving Dhaka to take up ambassadorial assignment in 1995, the then Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan, took him along with a group of diplomats to Grameen Bank for a briefing by Prof Yunus. His memory was fresh of Grameen Bank as he faced his host in Carthage palace. He explained that the Bank lends money only to the poorest—landless, assetless people. Borrowers own 93 percent of total equity and the remaining 7 percent, by the government. Only buying one share at three dollar, a poor per cent becomes a shareholder. Of the 2.4 million borrowers 95 per cent are women. Loan size is from sevenfifty dollars to one hundred eighty. The President who was listening with rapt attention was apprised that in its nine hundred branches \$3.7 billion was disbursed since inception in 1976 with repayment rate of 98 percent.

The Ambassador was profusely thanked and a meeting was arranged with president of the Banque de Solidarity on the same day for further input. In the following year, on an invitation Deputy Managing Director of Grameen Bank Khalid Shams made a substantial contribution to the Banque de Solidarity to take off in the modular of the Grameen Bank. The replication met the imagination of the policy planners.

In 2001 it was time for the envoy to pull out his tent marking an end to his well fed and well paid gypsy life. Bangladesh too had completed one of its many full circles putting the opposition lady leader to the pedestal of power and put the one in power to the opposition chamber. Hardly any mention was made of high hopes that had been pinned at the beginning of the decade on the unique political leaderships and the fairer image the international community cherished to behold under the rare combination of rotational women premierships. But the peeping billboard of the Banque de Solidarity in between the rows of date trees on the Mohammed V avenue flashing in the neon light under the twilight of Tunisian blue sky carries a message of hope to come out of poverty trap. It speaks of Grameen Bank and the fair image it bears out for Bangladesh.

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last two months and even when these incidents were reported to the police, no action was taken. Newspaper report indicates that the officer in charge of Bagha Thana in Rajshahi recorded a rape case after 51 days of the incident and that too under directive of the S.P., Rajshahi. It was reportedly learnt that influenced by some stalwarts of the local political party, the O.C. dithered in recording the case even when the victim and her relations appeared personally. The country has in recent times been stirred by a spate of abduction and rape incidents. In recent times rape, molestation and violence on women have taken new dimension, perhaps dirtiest and most heinous that people could have ever imagined. Lastly the rape victim is done to death either by burning or acid throwing or slaughtering by a sharp knife to eliminate culpability.

Report printed in local dailies on 9 May indicates that in the Shahjahanpur Railway colony under Motijheel Thana in the Dhaka city, Halima (16), a maid was slaughtered in the house of her employer allegedly after sexual assault. According to the police, the master of the house, a railway official and his wife were out on their jobs in the morning hour and their son, the law enforcement people allege, might have committed this gruesome act. Mentionably, their son Epok who had been missing from the house after detection of the crime has now been handed over to the police by his parents, newspaper reports say.

The horror of crime, violence and sexual abuse on women sometimes ending up in murder has been there in the country, a persistent secret, although brutal because the incidents were few and far between. But today it is spreading like an epidemic to more and more homes, the secret becoming more public. Statistics are damning and numbers are horrifying. This disgraceful incidents are coming to light as more and more women muster courage to walk up to the protection agencies for seeking justice. Report published in a local daily on 26 April last indicates that in consequence of a political feud, five hoodlums in Gouripur upazila of Comilla district gangraped the wife of a rival party member. When a case was registered against the alleged rapists, they retaliated by throwing acid on her. It did not end there. When the alleged hoodlums were arrested in the acid throwing case, the accomplices this time picked up her minor girl, a student of class V and committed barbaric sexual assault on her. The hapless child now shrieks

sions of the "good work" done by the police and multipronged strategy launched to combat crime draws only jeers from an unconvinced citizenry.

The situation has gone beyond control because many of the law enforcement agency personnel allegedly have overt and covert links with the criminal gangs. The heinous crimes committed by these hoodlums make us wonder if we can really call ourselves cultured and civilized and if there exists a semblance of governance in the country. Such dastardly crimes are a sort of collective blot on the conscience of the society. But where indeed is the conscience? On the other hand, the attitude of the administration in apparently condoning the acts is more appalling than the brutal activities themselves. It is time the administration woke up from their deep slumber.

It is the most ominous trend that people either in the city or villages should take law in their own hands as they did at Bhaluka in the Mymensingh district. Bhaluka people were sick to death when the dacoits in the last four months made at least 50 raids on their houses, shops and properties and took away valuables. The local thana people remained blissfully indifferent and did neither record any case nor tried to book the known culprits. Fed up with such gangsterism, the people formed a resistance committee and hit the dacoits back with whatever they had. In consequence, 13 of the dacoits were beaten to death on April 30 last. Bhaluka incident is a reflection of what is wrong with our police administration.

Faced with a daunting rise in criminality people at the helm of administration often talk about formulating draconian laws to cover up their inefficiency, and loopholes creeping in the system. The criminal laws of the land, experts say, are not inadequate to secure proper punishment of murderers, rapists and mafia gangs. What are actually lacking are proper police investigation, judicial administration and resolve. It is ironic that the police administration has never addressed this problem nor demonstrated its concern for ordinary people's security. Getting tough on crime requires the active participation of both judiciary and law enforcement agency. Without that helping hand, the rule of law and governance have to suffer in effectiveness.

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