



PHOTO COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

# Alex Vitale’s book asks: why do we need the police?

ERESH OMAR JAMAL

In *The End of Policing* (2017), professor of sociology Alex S Vitale journeys back to its origins to remind us that the idea behind the creation of the first police force in 1829 England was not so much to fight crime, but to “manage disorder and protect the propertied classes from the rabble.” This same model was later applied across the US and against various colonised populations, where political and economic leaders sought ways to “manage riots and the widespread social disorder associated with the working classes.” While the practice of policing has changed over time, the police force, according to Vitale, has remained a highly problematic institution—as is apparent around the world today.

The author begins by covering a recent slew of deaths of African American men at the hands of American police; but his purview for the book is wider. He delves deeper to identify some of the ‘failures’ of the police system and the social factors that cause them, and cuts through traditional reformist thinking by

The book contends that policing is a form of social control that disproportionately targets poor and ethnic minority communities. Certain sections of the society are perceived as “always-already guilty”. “This is not justice”, says Professor Vitale. “It is oppression.” Real justice would look to restore trust and social cohesion.

arguing against social and economic injustice and mass criminalisation. These, he contends, are at the heart of neoliberalism.

The “origins and function of the police are intimately tied to the management of

inequalities,” Vitale writes. Any police reform plan that doesn’t acknowledge this history will backfire. As we witnessed recently in the States and witness commonly in our own country, certain sections of the society are perceived as “always-already guilty”. “This is not justice”, says Professor Vitale. “It is oppression.” Real justice would look to restore trust and social cohesion.

He points out how mass militarisation allows the police to be more violent. Meanwhile, new technologies allow them to access evermore aspects of our private lives, putting modern societies at greater risk from poorly monitored police. This is why police harassment has become more frequent. Instead of acquiring new and more powerful weaponry for the police to suppress crime, governments would be better off investing that money in social services that automatically reduce lawbreaking, such as building better schools.

Instead, political leaders opt to use heavily armed police to suppress the population and safeguard the interests of influential quarters.

While issues of training and diversity often come up in reform discussions, Vitale argues that what we really need to rethink is the role of the police in society. Empty police reforms ultimately have always failed. Only “a robust democracy that gives people the capacity to demand of their government and themselves real, nonpunitive solutions to their problems,” can address the shared grievances that exist—and have existed—in regards to policing.

The book contends that policing is in many ways a form of social control that disproportionately targets poor and ethnic minority communities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the War on Drugs. For example, Bill Clinton’s crime bills in the early 1990s increased the number of drug offences and provided more money for the Drugs Enforcement Agency and the prison estate. It transformed policing, and led to an “explosion in SWAT teams and other militarised forms of policing [...], racial profiling and racist enforcement patterns.” Yet, some of the

changes Vitale recommends are not unique, such as the proposal that in areas such as drugs and sex work, decriminalisation would save considerable sums of money that could be better invested in communities to reduce inequality.

Vitale doesn’t just highlight problems; he offers solutions. He emphasises that in order to address the underlying issues, a political response is necessary. However, where the will for that political response would come from is not something he is clearly able to frame.

Although the book focuses almost entirely on the US police, the evils Vitale speaks of exist in almost every country. And the concerns he shares concern all. His book provides practical solutions to all these many, long-existing problems of policing, and the social ills that give rise to them.

Erish Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.  
Twitter handle: @ErishOmarJamal

## WORTH A RE-READ

# Notes on a shared history

SELIMA SARA KABIR

In the weeks following George Floyd’s death—murdered in Minneapolis by a police officer who knelt on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds—the conversation around diversity and inclusion has returned to the forefront, as has the role that persons of colour can play in challenging White supremacy. The events unfolding now merit revisiting author-filmmaker Vivek Bald’s *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (2013), to remind ourselves why we owe allyship and solidarity to the Black community.

Most scholars track the South Asian influx after The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, a law that undid the Immigration Act of 1917 that barred all immigration to USA from the Asia-Pacific zone. Bald’s investigations led him to uncover the forgotten narratives of peddlers and sailors who illegally snuck into the country while the anti-Asian immigration laws were still in place. In order to survive in an unwelcome America, South Asians assimilated and quietly became a part of some of America’s most iconic neighbourhoods of colour, from Tremé in New Orleans to Detroit’s Black Bottom, from West Baltimore to Harlem.

This book was a truly introspective journey for me. Bald is an expert researcher and story-teller—he critically analyses historic documents, reports and census records, yet no chapter feels flat or ‘academic’. Through vignettes of stories and historical assumptions, Bald paints a picture of what life was like for the illegal Bengali salesman. He tells us, for example, of South Asians who negotiated boundaries and travelled into traditionally ‘White’ areas by performing ‘Orientalist caricatures’, crafting tales of ‘magic’ and ‘mysticism’ to sell their wares—think along the lines of the merchant at the beginning of Disney’s 1992 *Aladdin*. However, ultimately, they



PHOTO COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

were bound to the areas segregated for Blacks and coloured people by Jim Crow laws. As such, much of the Hooghly peddlers’ network was based in Tremé, where they married into Creole communities. Their New Orleans native wives helped develop their local knowledge and connections, which in turn helped create space for the Bengali Muslim trader’s businesses.

Bald’s use of photographs helps us visualise and familiarise ourselves with these characters, and learning their names—Sofur Ally, Abdul Hamid, the many Monduls, and Habib Ullah who inspired the book—keeps us thoroughly invested in their lives. It’s a difficult task to effectively share the story

of another person, another family, capturing their experiences and voices while being factually accurate. This is Vivek Bald’s greatest achievement in *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*.

Indians, despite their performances and negotiations, lacked the one thing that would truly welcome them into America: the ‘right’ skin colour. The discriminatory laws in place affected our ancestors just as much as it did the Black community. Bald notes that this binary caused problems for census takers and other officers, as South Asians were considered as dark as the Black nationals, even though their features and hairs shared Caucasian characteristics. In an interview with *CityLab*, Bald acknowledged, “There was a lot in the lives of this particular group of South Asian immigrants to counteract anti-Blackness—the experience of living and working side-by-side [...], of becoming part of African American and Puerto Rican extended families, [...] of recognizing shared daily struggles.”

As the world amplifies an existing ‘us versus them’ rhetoric, Bald’s book teaches us the need for community-building to support the marginalised. In 1917, and until 1965, the Black community could have chosen to turn in the illegal South Asian immigrants who entered America through the seas, to protect their own at-risk community. Instead, they welcomed our ancestors and fostered safe spaces that paved the way for naturalisation and opening of the borders.

Now, we have a choice—and chance—to return that solidarity and support.

Selima Sara Kabir is a research associate at the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, where she combines her love for reading, writing, and anthropological research.

# ‘Masud Rana’ goes to court

EMRAN MAHFUZ

Among the most iconic characters of popular Bangla literature, Masud Rana’s name is synonymous with that of its author, Kazi Anwar Hossain. Now, following a verdict passed by the Bangladesh Copyright Office on June 14, 2020, it will also have to be associated with that of Sheikh Abdul Hakim. A published author who writes frequently for *Prothom Alo*’s thriller supplements, Hakim has been recognised as the actual author of 50 books from the *Kuwasha* series, and 260 installments of the Masud Rana series released after the first 11 books. He filed the case on July 29, 2019, as did Iftekhar Amin, who also claims to have ghostwritten some of the stories. The latter’s case is still ongoing as per the copyright office.

Kazi Anwar Hossain wrote the first Masud Rana story—*Dhonsho Pahar*—in the 1960s in his Shegunbagicha residence. Once it gained popularity, Hossain started ‘borrowing’ from thriller stories published abroad, until the series gained iconicity. That is when he brought Sheikh Abdul Hakim into the project. Deprived of payment for many of the stories he wrote, Hakim decided to take legal action. Writer Bulbul Chowdhury, translator Shawkat Hossain, cover illustrator Hashem Khan, and former Sheba Prokashoni sales manager Israil Hossain Khan all spoke as witnesses in the case.

“I was 18 when I started writing for the series. I didn’t understand matters of copyright and the law,” Abdul Hakim has told the media. “I wrote because I needed the money. I did receive some royalties, but not all of what I deserved. That is why I’m now seeking this legal reform.” This latest is an intriguing development in a series that has, infamously, long borrowed from the works of Ian Flemming, Robert Ludlum, Alistair MacLean and more—both for its text and book covers.