

AUGUST 21 GRENADE ATTACK

When politics exposed its ominous fangs

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

FOR a blissfully long period of time, much of subcontinental politics had been kept alive and rather exciting by a mix of erudite or frothy politicians who could be credited with sustaining people's interest in public affairs. In undivided India, elections to the local bodies date back to the late 19th century. In fact, many public-spirited individuals took active interest in local body election and the union boards saw the grooming of quite a number of prospective political leaders. Common people from all faiths and denominations including those living in rural areas evinced keen interest in local politics and developmental matters. Later, when political activities expanded to the national level along with mass participation, the situation still remained relatively convivial. Major political violence was rare. Even during the time of heightened communal tension in the 1940s, there were noticeable signs of harmony at the barricade lines. Opponents certainly were treated as competitors and not enemies. The 1960s saw intense political activism but the historic election of 1970 passed off without a major disturbance. However, independent Bangladesh witnessed political convulsions and violence on a disturbing scale. In early February 2004, experts expressed concern about the then government's credibility in dealing with the crimes of political nature. It was feared that the issue of tackling political terrorism would cause a serious headache in the days to come. The continuing politics of confrontation was further aggravated by the addition of manifest ferocity and subversion. There was an ominously distinct shift in the mode of

political protests while our pluralist existence faced a serious threat. Against such a backdrop, the mayhem of August 21, 2004, while extremely shocking, did not come as a total surprise to political observers. It laid bare the perilous contours of our confrontational politics. One had to accept the fact for some quarters, extreme actions leading to the annihilation of political adversary became a strategy. Violent incidents that include murder of politicians and political activists are symptomatic of deep polarisation in a society as well as its weak political institutions. Most incidents of violence in today's Bangladesh can be linked to a political context. Overt and visible violence coexists with invisible violence that destroys the identity of human beings. The visible violence, being situational and physical, can be dealt with through law and order solutions. Cynical observers of our social scenes are of the view that violence has a functional utility for politicians. Such opinions derive legitimacy from suspected state complicity in the perpetration of organised acts of violence and the inordinate delays suffered by victims in securing justice. This delay is alarming as it sends a clear message to criminals and potential criminals that no harm will come to them in the event of a recurrence of criminal activities. The grenade assault on August 21, 2004 was clearly an attempt to wipe out the entire leadership of Bangladesh Awami League. The damage that was caused and its far-reaching ramifications cannot be ignored. The tragic deaths and crippling injuries caused by the explosions make us wonder if the state organs investigating the incident and the then



File photo of Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina and late President Zillur Rahman grieving for the victims of the August 21, 2004 attack at a rally held on October 3 that year. Rahman's wife Ivy Rahman, a Mohila Awami League leader, was also killed in the blast. PHOTO: STAR

political authority realised the enormity of the attack. We may also recollect that the investigation of the incident was not taken in the right earnest. The first indication of that was the failure to preserve the scene of the occurrence. There were allegations that physical evidence was tampered with or destroyed, and the field units did not act with the desired speed and circumspection. The question is, did this happen because of a so-called instruction from above? If then, the culpability of all concerned, high and low, needs to be

established. In Bangladesh, we need to seriously question authoritative approval or condoning of violence because such action is often construed as social approval. The so-called political circumstances have often obstructed attempts to establish accountability of the culpable individuals. There is a good reason to believe that a considerable number of officials abnegated their responsibility to protect all citizens regardless of their identity. The disturbing reality in Bangladesh is that with the change of a political regime,

the faces of the criminals and their sources of patronage change, too. At times the same criminals who had terrorised the community under the patronage of the outgoing ruling party continued their depredations with a renewed mandate from the incumbent ruling party. Another disconcerting socio-political reality is that quite often the reasons for deteriorating law and order could be traced to the continuing patronage of criminals and bullies by the incumbent ruling party. Practically speaking, what the people see is the end result of a cumulative process of criminalisation patronised by successive regimes. One may suspect that the systemic deficiency is located within the political parties and the machinery of law enforcement. The corrective action that people want to see cannot be taken unilaterally by the ruling party. It calls for a bipartisan approach with the active involvement of civil society. The remedy lies in cleaning our politics through a decriminalisation policy backed by the depoliticisation of law enforcement as well as the administration. Events that unfolded after the August 21 incident indicate that the attack on the Awami League rally was an act of supreme brinkmanship that has, at least in the immediate aftermath and for quite some time in the days to come, unalterably affected the tone of political discourse in the country. The already existing trust deficit among politicians then reached a new low. The ghastly attack of August 21, 2004 has been a turning point in the politics of our perilously polarised polity. Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP.

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Paths taken by three protagonists of the Manhattan Project

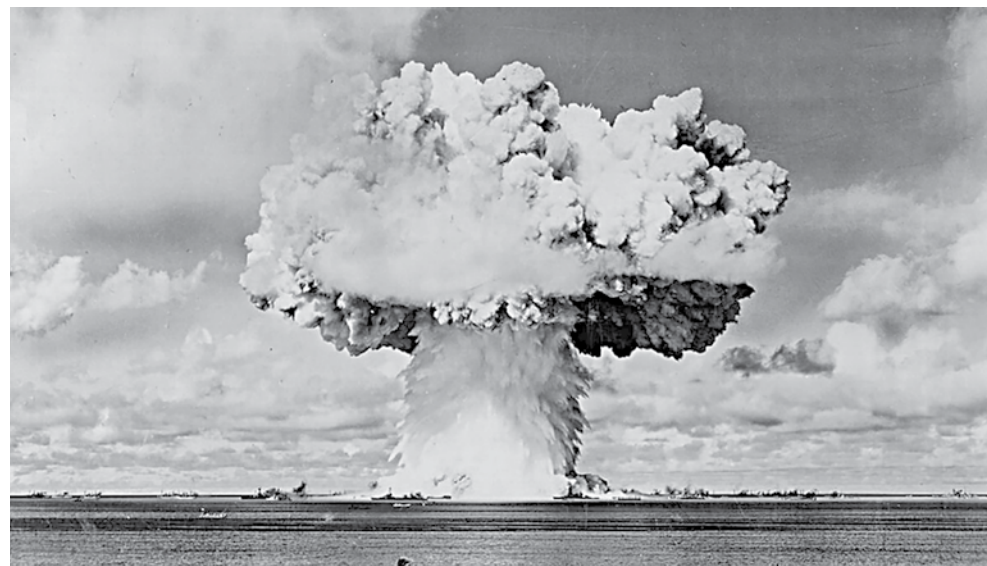


THE 6th and 9th of this month marked the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively, that killed an estimated 120,000 people instantly. Radiation exposure would kill tens of thousands more. Much of the work toward building the bombs was done by the elite scientists and engineers at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. After three years of intensive research, calculations and brainstorming by them, the test bomb of the Manhattan Project—code name of the bomb-making effort—was detonated just before sunrise at the Trinity Site located in a parched landscape near Alamogordo, 400 kilometres south of Los Alamos. It created an enormous mushroom cloud some twelve kilometers high and ushered in the Atomic Age. Since then, our life became inextricably linked forever to the awesome power stored in the nucleus of an atom.

"Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." These words from the Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita were chanted by a despondent Robert Oppenheimer, scientific director of the Manhattan Project, after witnessing the mind-boggling destructive power of his creation. The energy released by the bomb was compared by him "to the radiance of a thousand Suns." The fireworks from the explosion stood out in the minds of everyone within hundreds of miles of the site that morning. According to residents in faraway neighbourhoods, the Sun rose twice on that day. The Trinity test was only a hint of the raw power of the bomb that was to come. Less than a month later, as the news of death and destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki

reached Los Alamos, earlier exuberance of the scientists and engineers turned introspective. Some even questioned the morality of dropping the bombs without warning "against an enemy which was essentially defeated." Three months later, with an overwhelming feeling of guilt, Oppenheimer told President Harry Truman, "Mr. President, I have blood on my hands." Oppenheimer had roped in some of the best minds of the scientific community

Soon after the war, Oppenheimer left Los Alamos and became director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He also became a peace activist and vehemently opposed further proliferation of nuclear weapons on the grounds that they are more destructive than mankind could responsibly control and, thus, is a threat to civilisation. Furthermore, as an advisor to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), he became an "apostle" for nuclear arms disarmament.



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including two internationally renowned émigré physicists—Hans Bethe and Edward Teller—to work on the Manhattan Project. Interestingly, because of his left-leaning political beliefs, Albert Einstein, who wrote a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt in 1939 urging that the United States should start its own nuclear programme to beat the Nazis in the race to build the bomb, was denied the security clearance needed to work on the project.

Oppenheimer reviled at the thought that history will remember him as one who gave mankind the means for its own destruction. At the farewell ceremony held in his honour at Los Alamos, he said, "If atomic bombs are to be added as new weapons to the arsenals of a warring world, or to the arsenals of nations preparing for war, then the time will come when mankind will curse the names of Los Alamos and of Hiroshima." Because of his anti-nuclear stand,

Oppenheimer made a number of personal enemies, among them Edward Teller, who was instrumental in scuttling his career. Their relationship had been rocky for a long time, but it came to a head in 1954. Miffed at his opposition to the development of the even more powerful hydrogen bomb, Teller convinced the AEC to try Oppenheimer before a tribunal of the commission for his past involvement with communist organisations and the possibility that he was a Soviet spy. At the hearing, Teller delivered the knockout blow by asserting, "I would like to see the vital interests of this country in hands which I understand better, and therefore trust more." The trial ended with the revocation of Oppenheimer's security clearance, leaving his reputation in tatters. He was vindicated, albeit posthumously, after the transcript of the hearings, declassified in 2014, confirmed that he was never a security risk. Teller may have won then, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. He was immediately declared a *persona non grata* at Los Alamos and became a pariah among the scientists who respected Oppenheimer. In the last years of his life, Oppenheimer wrote about the problems of intellectual ethics and morality, particularly the dilemma he had faced when the interests of the nation and his own conscience collided during the war. Until his death from throat cancer in 1967, he lectured around the world, and was awarded the Enrico Fermi Award in 1963. Hans Bethe returned to Cornell to resume his teaching career. However, the appalling images of death caused by the atomic bombs made him realise that he carried a heavier share of responsibility than most of his colleagues for contributing to the development of the fearful weapon of mass destruction. To extirpate his feeling of guilt, he made a deal with his conscience to work for a happy outcome of the "nuclear gamble" and to show to mankind the practical benefits of nuclear energy. Indeed, after the war, he vigorously pushed for peaceful use of nuclear

energy. In his later life, he opposed President Ronald Reagan's space-based Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) missile system. His post-war work on the discovery of nuclear fusion, which fuels the Sun and the stars, earned him the Nobel Prize in 1967. The remorseless Edward Teller instead became personification of Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove. He made a deal not with his conscience but, as his critics would say, with Mephistopheles, and invested his entire post-war professional life working to keep the United States ahead of the Soviet Union in the nuclear arms race. Teller was fiercely anti-Communist and strongly believed that scientists at Los Alamos were too ambivalent about developing the next generation of nuclear weapons. Hence, he embarked on a forceful campaign to convince President Truman that an independent facility was needed for developing thermonuclear weapons. Consequently, in 1952, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory was established in California's Bay Area, which was used by Teller to develop the first hydrogen bomb. In the 1980s, he was a staunch advocate of SDI, aka Star Wars programme, at times overselling the feasibility of the programme. And what about the scientists whose moral qualms deepened after the bombs were dropped? They left the weapons lab for the sanctuary of university labs and classrooms. Seventy-five years after the carnage at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we still shudder at the images of extraordinary destruction and grotesque form of collective dying of innocent civilians. Peace-loving people all over the world marked the anniversary by expressing their amorphous fear of a full-scale nuclear war. They highlighted the threat of a world that continues to produce nuclear weapons, and appealed to everyone to wage a nuclear "moral revolution." Quamrul Haider is a professor of physics at Fordham University, New York.

QUOTABLE Quote



KHALIL GIBRAN
(1883-1931)
Lebanese-American philosophical essayist, novelist, poet, and artist.

You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Burn with water
- 6 A lot of
- 10 Broadcast sound
- 11 Underway, to Holmes
- 13 Used a crowbar
- 14 List separator
- 15 Diner dessert
- 16 "Well, that's obvious!"
- 18 Fellows
- 19 Carly Simon song
- 22 Mine rock
- 23 Formerly
- 24 Accords
- 27 Helped
- 28 Singer Guthrie
- 29 PC key
- 30 Cole Porter song
- 35 Merriment

DOWN

- 1 Overly sentimental
- 2 Knick
- 3 French farewell
- 4 Tell whoppers
- 5 Walks unsteadily
- 6 Overly virile
- 7 X-file topic
- 8 Order

9 Advantage in a hockey game

12 Like some lifeguards

17 Take advantage of

20 Engine part

21 Tenor's pride

24 Cover the cost of

25 Woke up

26 Dilapidated car

27 Smoker's need

29 Seventh Greek letter

31 Snowy bird

32 Lesson leader

33 Without break

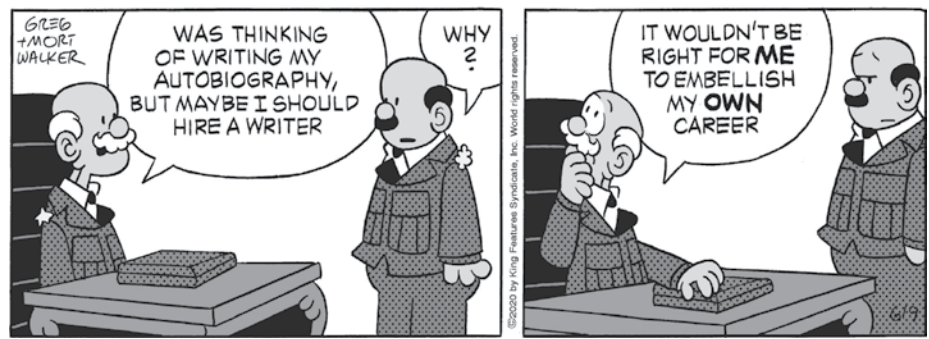
34 Does some modeling

39 Dry - bone


41 In the style

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

A	L	T	O	B	A	H	S		
C	L	E	A	N	A	D	E	P	
A	B	A	F	T	S	O	L	A	R
R	E	D	T	A	P	E	I	R	E
D	I	E	R	E	D	R	O	S	E
S	T	R	A	I	N	U	S	E	D
F	R	E	E	L	O	A	N	S	
F	R	E	E	N	E	T	T	L	E
R	E	D	F	A	C	E	R	I	M
E	L	I	R	E	D	W	I	N	E
T	I	B	E	T	L	O	V	E	R
S	E	L	E	S	E	V	E	R	Y
D	E	N	Y	S	E	T	S		