

Rape, scopophilia and our collective rage



MONDAY morning, October 5—I woke up and made the mistake of checking my Facebook newsfeed. The very first post to greet me was one of my friends sharing a gruesome video of a rape. The horrifying still of the helpless, bare body jolted me wide awake, but I could not bring myself to watch the clip. The third post was of a development specialist sharing the screenshot of an Ain O Salish Kendra report on recent cases of rape and gender violence, questioning the “silence” of civil society on such issues. The irony, of course, was that she was reading a report by a leading civil society organisation. Within minutes, my Facebook feed was flooded with netizen’s posts/comments on the video, and soon a mass protest was called by several groups at 11am at Shahbagh. The reaction was perplexing to me; why now, when all the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Ain O Salish Kendra and Naripokkhko reports published in the major dailies had gone unnoticed?

As an activist and anthropologist, I feel obliged to keep track of how movements are

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formed. I had responded to the post made questioning civil society, and also put up a status to simply ask my feminist allies why we needed such a video to be outraged, but the post was misunderstood and I did not have the energy to engage any further. I got a call to expand on my comments, and so I sat down to think through the events and traced the recurring patterns of reaction: blaming “civil



A human chain was formed in front of the National Museum on September 29 to protest increasing incidents of rape and sexual violence in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

society”, blaming the “patriarchal structure”, “patriotic guilt” that places the nation’s “ijjat” (honour) in women’s vaginas, pleading with and admonishing “jair bibek” (nation’s conscience), some nuanced discourses on rape, calls for capital punishment, and only a few instances of questioning the state and law enforcement agencies. It was fascinating to watch how the onus always falls back on the women’s movement organisations and civil society, and less on the ruling party or the state (in a manner strikingly similar to how responsibility continues to be laid at the feet of the victim more often than the perpetrator(s)). We forget that it is a triad—civil society standing between the citizen and the state.

We have seen and learned from enough waves of feminism to know that ideological battles against heteropatriarchy and transversal movements on specific issues are both equally important. I love and admire our keyboard warriors who conjure up movements at moments like this, creative activists who pour their heart out for these movements for as long as they last. My problem lies elsewhere, with our increasing inability to wake up without being slammed by images of extreme, graphic violence. Are we not unknowingly becoming conscripts of this viral fever, callously

consuming this media porn, submitting to the scopophilia (voyeurism) in which rape culture thrives? I have no doubt that the friend who shared the video intended to sensitise us to fight for the cause, just like the war photos of Birangonas. Yet why do we always need representations such as this to titillate our conscience? Are we not becoming tools of the same oppressors and violators, spreading these videos to slander the survivor once more? The past month alone has seen several instances of gang rape—from that of an indigenous woman in the Hill Tracts, to MC college in Sylhet, and finally to Noakhali—where an overwhelming majority of the perpetrators have all been men somehow connected to the ruling party. Instead of finding fault with women’s movements and cursing civil society, why are we not directing our rage to the perpetrators and the party that has patronised them? Why on earth is all our rage directed at only one node of the triad, while not holding the state responsible?

The deradicalisation of civil society and the women’s movement in Bangladesh is too long a history to be recounted here, but it is also far from a linear tale of selling their souls to the devil. Women’s organisations in Bangladesh have been fighting long and hard

to retain their critical edge under successive neoliberal regimes. The price of survival has often been their radical potential, and some do appear to have acquiesced to the state. Having worked for a women’s organisation for over two decades now, however, has made me realise how difficult it is to maintain an ambivalent position, to both working against the heteropatriarchal state, while at the same time, working closely with institutions to push for reforms. It is time we open our eyes and see that we have never achieved any right or freedom without a fight. The right to formal education, the right to inherit property, the dowry prohibition acts, a family court, reproductive rights, provisions for maternity and paternity leaves, security and welfare for acid attack survivors, the road to a uniform family code, the writ against the 8th amendment, the end of the “two-finger test”, “Naree Niti”, and even toppling autocratic regimes—none of these would have been possible without the battles collectively waged by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Naripokkhko, Ain O Salish Kendra, BLAST, UBINIG, Women for Women, Nijera Kori and countless others. Turning a blind eye to all of these achievements does nothing but make women feel even more helpless

and alone, while demoralising activists who are still engaged in collective struggles, something worth remembering before we point our fingers.

Since the outbreak of this pandemic, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) has been distributing relief as well as documenting cases of violence against women and children, publishing reports on the latter across national dailies and TV channels. At least 788 women and (female) children have been victims of such violence between March and June of this year; among them, 307 were raped. Decades of experience led them to anticipate a spike in cases of violence and launch a hotline to report such incidents. Both the central committee and local branches across the country have been providing legal aid to survivors, sending some of them to one-stop crisis centres, victim support centres or to shelters, monitoring incidents of violence in coordination with police stations and local administration. They have also taken initiatives to resist attempts to use the lockdown to enforce early marriages. I have no doubt that all the other organisations have also been doing their part. This is tedious work when you are doing it for five decades, and none of us are waiting for a pat on the back; but activists’ fatigue is all too real.

Let us accept the fact that after 50 glorious years of independence and despite the efforts of generations of activists, even as privileged a woman as I am can find myself shackled, unable to lose my chains and run free without “inviting” assault; I shudder to think about the fate of women in the Hill Tracts, or of a wage labourer or a trans-person. I could not protect my beloved friend from being violated by her partner, despite mobilising OCC and VSC, because she feared the consequences of taking action. I continue to witness numerous cases of my students enduring domestic violence, unable to leave because their education was at stake. I do not need more violent footage to remind me that we are at war, an invisible war that every woman and child is fighting 24/7. It is time to take account of how the state has systematically neutered any dissident voice or radical political possibility that has emerged over the years. It is time to hold the authorities responsible for rearing rapists, providing them with shelter and evading the consequences. It is time that we find our allies, organise, and claim our state for ourselves. It is a long, hard battle, and we have nothing to lose, not even our honour.

Seuty Sabur is an activist and academic, teaching at Brac University.

TRIBUTE

Ziauddin Tariq Ali: A man who lived and gave as fully as his heart would allow

IRESH ZAKER

ZIAUDDIN Tariq Ali was known to others as a freedom fighter, a cultural activist and a founder trustee of the Liberation War Museum. Many of the younger generations knew him as the young patriot with the thick glasses from the Liberation War film *Muktir Gaan*. To me, he was simply Tariq Chacha, a person I had known my whole life. He left us exactly one month ago today, on September 7, 2020.

Tariq Chacha was one of my favourite people in the whole world, yet I knew very little about him. As I started writing this, I realised that I did not know his birthday, which I later found out was on February 1. I had never been to his apartment. I wasn’t even friends with him on Facebook. The last fact I keep getting reminded of everyday, as the social media platform in its AI driven wisdom keeps sending me friend suggestions for a certain Tariq Ali. As far as I can recall, I did not have many one-on-one conversations with Tariq Chacha. We met exclusively in social gatherings, big and small. Memories of specific incidents concerning him are few if precious. Yet he remains one of my favourite people of all time.

I wondered whether I was alone in feeling this way. So I called up some people who I knew felt similarly attached to Tariq Chacha. In almost every instance, I found that their experiences were similar to mine. Their relationship with and fondness for Tariq



Ziauddin Tariq Ali (1945-2020)

PHOTO: IRESH ZAKER

Chacha was not based on specifics, but rather an aura. A certain *je ne sais quoi* of kindness. A feeling of openness. An air of unreserved affection and love. Of course there were specific incidents that were remembered. My friend Srabanti (not Tariq Chacha’s daughter, though inevitably for him the homonymity was just another reason for avuncular affection) recalled a recital of devotional music where she found Tariq Chacha giving vociferous voice (he could sing in no other way) to the principal performers, and weeping uncontrollably. Had it been anyone else, the

whole affair would have seemed odd and pretentious. But not so with Tariq Chacha. Nothing that we had ever experienced about him made us feel that his actions could be contrived. If he was singing loudly and weeping without control then it was exactly what he felt in his heart. He could act in no other way.

For me and many others, music was an integral part of who Tariq Chacha was. I suppose that it is fitting that he was immortalised in *Muktir Gaan*. My earliest memory of him is from musical soires at

our place. Clapping with possessed vigour, singing with gusto, and swinging his head to the rhythm with such force that it rendered his face ruddy, and made me think that the noggin would be separated from the neck. My sister, Sriya, has done the wonderful service of recording and preserving videos of Tariq Chacha in recent gatherings. In almost all of them, he is singing and exhorting others into song. Once again, there is nothing imposed, nothing obnoxious. It was Tariq Chacha being Tariq Chacha, doing what he did. And he doing it all with so much love that it seemed just right.

As memorable as his love for music was Tariq Chacha’s laugh. There is a picture I made in 2011 of the Liberation War Museum Trustees. When they lined up for the picture, there were the usual formal smiles. I felt that something was missing. What I was getting on my camera didn’t adequately capture the camaraderie and bonhomie that I observed off camera. So I told a joke, which cannot be repeated here, and the picture was made in the immediate aftermath. You can see everyone laughing with various levels of enthusiasm, but maintaining some level of composure and direction for the picture. Only Tariq Chacha has his head tilted straight back in rapturous glee to the point you can barely make out his face. Sharing a joke with him was a treat. His delight a prize. He was as engaging as a raconteur as he was audience. Not surprisingly, most of his anecdotes were self-deprecating. For all his achievements,

I don’t recall him telling any stories of self-glorification. His were tales of gaffes, embarrassments, and mishaps. The laughter they generated was as heartfelt as his own.

There are many other such gestures and characteristics. The way he touched your shoulder in greeting and goodbye. Conveying care and affection. The way he invariably chose to focus on the positive among those he loved. Sometimes showing more faith in them than they had in themselves, and in the process inspiring them to strive for more than they otherwise would have. It all paints a picture of a person unrestrained by pretension. Unbound by convention. Living and giving as fully as his heart would allow.

In a post on Facebook immediately after his passing, I wrote that “for me, he was sunshine.” Upon further reflection, I would liken him to a cool breeze on a hot summer day. When the breeze blows, we don’t question where it has come from. The source could be a far-off depression, a blizzard in the distant mountains, a raging storm somewhere unseen. It does not matter. That is perhaps why we were happy not knowing many specifics about Tariq Chacha. What was important was that we felt soothed in his presence. We missed him when he was gone. We were comforted by the knowledge that we would see him again. He made the stifling heat of existence worth bearing. That breeze, though, has, heartbreakingly, stopped forever.

Iresh Zaker is a marketing professional and actor.

QUOTABLE Quote



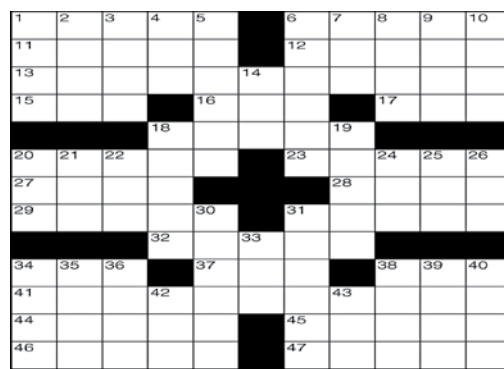
ROBERT FROST
(1874-1963)
American poet.

Two roads diverged in a wood and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| ACROSS | 37 Snapshot | 14 Writer Stout |
| 1 Flock members | 38 Court org. | 18 Troop member |
| 6 Squander | 41 Battling aces | 19 Tears down |
| 11 Anticipate | 44 Brat’s opposite | 20 Like go-go boots |
| 12 Greek vowel | 45 Temple scroll | 21 Cry of insight |
| 13 Sneaky thieves | 46 Exodus figure | 22 Brink |
| 15 Storm center | 47 Unfeeling | 24 Stew sphere |
| 16 Bear’s lair | DOWN | 25 Tax agcy. |
| 17 Fruitcake bit | 1 Doily stuff | 26 Period |
| 18 Philly cager | 2 Not at home | 30 School students |
| 20 Senator Rubio | 3 Chess win | 31 Marina boats |
| 23 Swift | 4 Feeding-time need | 33 Massive |
| 27 Toledo setting | 5 Painter’s place | 34 Eden name |
| 28 Goose egg | 6 “Siegfried” composer | 35 U2’s lead singer |
| 29 Block, as a river | 7 Maximum amount | 36 Quiche base |
| 31 Bread-making need | 8 Reach across | 38 Infamous emperor |
| 32 Brass band members | 9 By way of, informally | 39 Fiber source |
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| | | 42 Clinic cost |
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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



BETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT