

Decrees cannot drown debates

THE SOUND & THE FURY



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

OCTOBER 7, 2020 marked the first death anniversary of second-year Buet student, Fahad Abrar, who was tortured to death by members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) for posting a criticism of an agreement signed between Bangladesh and India on the use of the Mongla port, water sharing and export of energy sources. The autopsy report said he died of "internal bleeding and excessive pain" after being beaten for at least four hours by cricket stumps, sticks and skipping rope in his dormitory.

On the same day, the Department of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) issued a circular forbidding students and teachers from writing, sharing or even "liking" anything that "ruins the image of the government or the state", or "disrespects any important person, institution or profession" on social media. It further cautioned against posting any writing, audio or video that could create "dissatisfaction among the general public".

It is no doubt a coincidence that the government chose that precise date to warn students and teachers of the repercussions of voicing dissent on social media platforms. But perhaps it was only fitting. When you foster a system where anyone who does not subscribe to your worldview is criminalised by laws and every possible state machinery—and by extension, those who do, are rewarded with a range of political and economic benefits—you not only create the conditions for such barbaric violence

as Abrar's murder, but also make it inevitable. By linking the two incidents, however subconsciously, the government has made it that much easier for us to see that censorship exists on a continuum of violence.

On October 10, Anik Sarker, the expelled information and research secretary of Buet BCL, and one of the 25 accused in the Abrar murder case, confessed to the horrific torture before the court. "They [BCL] made us so cruel. I wasn't like this when I came to Buet from Notre Dame College," he claimed in his statement. Another accused, Meftahul Islam Zion, said, "The system made us that cruel. If we could force out anyone of different opinions from Buet campus, the BCL high command would praise us." While I feel little sympathy for these young men who turned into monsters in their relentless quest to establish authority over the student body, their claims—that they, too, are victims of a ruthless system that glorifies blind loyalty and pursuit of power and discourages any forms of critical thinking and rational debates—cannot be rejected outright.

And the BCL is only part of the problem, or rather, only a manifestation of a much larger crisis. Our education system itself is held hostage by corrupt and inefficient administrations, who act less like educators and more like lackeys to the ruling party and are unfortunately rewarded for it. Very few public universities, if any, can claim to have retained any institutional commitment to truth, intellectual rigour, integrity, rational debates or critical thinking, having become hotbeds for corruption, nepotism, tender-baji, rape culture and all forms of violence. When called out by students and a handful of teachers who refuse to compromise or succumb to party politics for massive irregularities in the system, these administrators have

chosen increasingly despicable means to silence criticism, from serving show-cause notices to students for as little as sharing newspaper articles to allowing armed goons to swoop down upon peaceful protestors to facilitating arrests under the country's draconian digital security act. Despite widespread protests and irrefutable evidence of the authorities' complicity in corruption and other malpractices across campuses in the country, the government has consistently taken the side of the administrators over that of the students. And now it has given the ammunition needed by university administrators, aided and abetted by their trusted allies, BCL cadres, to target, harass and criminalise anyone they deem to be a troublemaker.

Unfortunately, legitimate demands from students for change and greater accountability both within the education system and larger society has been met with suspicion and animosity from the government's side. In the absence of a credible opposition either in the parliament or on the streets, the government seems bent on making an enemy out of anyone exercising their right to engage in civic and political processes by terming them as "anti-state" and criminalising them through arbitrary use of existing laws. We observed with trepidation how, during the road safety movement, young students' peaceful demands for safer roads turned into an unnecessarily violent witch hunt. Similarly, activists of the quota reform movement were harassed, attacked and threatened by state and non-state actors, while many of the movement's leaders were arrested and even put on remand. And now, as anti-rape protests rage on the streets, the government seems to want to read them through their usual lens of distrust and paranoia—what else explains why this decree would be issued at the height of the protests?

Students and teachers are being criminalised at greater frequency for expressing their opinions on social media, and the criterion of what counts as "disrespectful" to the state and important persons is being pushed further and further to the right with each passing day and each passing decree. Earlier in the year, on June 18, two teachers from Rajshahi university and Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur were picked up in the middle of the night for making "derogatory

education minister, upazila nirbahi officer and others". In all these cases, arrests took place within 24-48 hours of the social media post, and the plaintiffs were people affiliated with the ruling party in some capacity or another. In fact, an overview of cases filed under the DSA over the last two years suggest the same trend for an overwhelming majority of the cases. Filing a case under the DSA is apparently now used as proof of a member's or enthusiast's loyalty to

media or in the opinion pages of major newspapers. It is possible that at this point we have lost count of the number of times we have been told to keep our mouths shut and our social media platforms free of anything but party propaganda and apolitical cat memes. Shortly after this decree was passed, the government issued another statement forbidding people from spreading "false, fabricated, confusing, and inciting statements" on social media about government, military, police officials and members of other law enforcement agencies. These statements, issued in such close proximity to one another, signal a far more dangerous turn in the near future for a nation that has long bid farewell to constitutional guarantees of freedom of thought and conscience.

What the government is forgetting in its zeal to censor free thought is that, in the process, it is creating an enemy out of ordinary citizens, particularly young people, who simply want a fairer and just Bangladesh. It is also making a mockery of the education system itself, which is supposed to teach students to interrogate the world they live in so that they can come up with more nuanced explanations of the past, and better solutions for the present and the future. What sort of future leaders can we hope for when we systematically criminalise critical thought and engagement in civic and political processes in constructive and non-violent means, but reward violent exercise of power, rapacity, and corruption?

The only hope lies in what our own history teaches us: that decrees cannot silence debates, restrictions cannot muzzle rational thought and revolutionary fervour, and the youth cannot be threatened into submission. At least, not for long.

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PHOTO: STAR

remarks" against former health minister Mohammad Nasim on social media. On June 20, a ninth grader was arrested for allegedly "defaming" the prime minister and placed in a child detention centre at the height of the coronavirus pandemic. On July 20, two teachers from Farakkabad College campus were arrested for their "derogatory Facebook posts against

party leaders or party ideologies, and circulation of increasingly repressive decrees that seeks to criminalise even sharing or "liking" news reports, much less opinions and commentaries that are open to interpretation, will only fuel such eagerness.

Despite the dangerous implications of the decree from DSHE, it did not create much of a ripple in social

Rage Against Rape

How you can actually fight rape culture



RAMISA ROB

MANY have welcomed the government's introduction of the death penalty, misconceiving Bangladesh's rape problem as a quick-fix punishment

problem. Reckless rape reporting concentrating on graphic details, sensationalising disturbing rape cases, and the new fashion of sharing trauma porn to raise awareness on social media have all contributed to misdirecting collective outrage against sexual violence.

But let's get one thing straight: death penalty is not a solution to gender-based sexual violence—which is a much larger systemic problem deeply rooted in the fabric of our society.

The Indian government had also responded to the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case by introducing the death penalty and what has that done for India? This March, after seven years, four perpetrators of the case were executed, while according to recently-released figures from the National Crime Records Bureau, the police registered 33,977 cases of rape in 2018. The numbers have been consistently rising over the years.

As for Bangladesh, what positive change in favour of rape victims will the Women and Children Repression Act Ordinance 2020—replacing life imprisonment as the maximum sentence for rape with the death penalty—accomplish? Most of us overlook the fact that the death penalty already exists in Bangladesh

for certain cases of rape, under Section 9 of the 2000 Act which include gang-rape and rape leading to death. In other words, the ordinance isn't bringing any new form of "justice" for the victim in the Noakhali gang-rape case, which has galvanised the series of protests last week.

The reintroduction of the death penalty essentially means rapists in all rape cases will receive death sentence as maximum punishment. But the rape law—section 375 of the penal code 1860—still hasn't changed its narrow definition of rape, so it's rather hard to imagine the authorities holding speedy trials, prosecuting and executing all rapists in the 975 cases from January to September, 208 of which were gang-rape, per Ain o Salish Kendra. And even if that were to happen, does it realistically counter rape culture and the culture of impunity? Can we really imagine a future where husbands won't rape their wives because they're afraid that the wife reporting on them would lead to their death? It seems far-fetched to even imagine all these scenarios of "justice."

We must not be satisfied with this death penalty announcement that we know all too well will accomplish no such justice for rape victims. We must not fall for this punishment debate trap either, which essentially trivialises sexual violence as an exceptional problem that can be solved by addressing those few exceptions.

Addressing the recent introduction of the death penalty, a panel discussion organised by Feminist Across Generations—an alliance established by a group of young and experienced feminists who have been fighting gender-based violence for decades through legal and social advocacy—asserted that "legal reforms

is one part of the puzzle, an extremely crucial part, but it needs to go hand in hand with bold ambitious plans to bring societal change."

Moderating the conversation, Umama Zillur, founder of KOTHA, added that, "even if we were able to pass every single law and reform that has been put forward over the last couple of years and decades, and if we were able to have the most airtight strong legal framework," we would

amongst us, in our communities. It's high time to put a stop to all these counterproductive and harmful practices we have normalised in society. We must use our anger and pain productively and strategically to dismantle the system that upholds a culture of impunity and holds so much space for men to rape women.

The Rage Against Rape movement spearheaded by Feminist Across Generations has declared gender-based

(structural, institutional, societal and individual); that families hold their boys and men accountable for any and all violence they perpetuate; that rapists are no longer sheltered in our homes, schools and workplaces; that women have the right to occupy public spaces without fear of violence, at any time or for any purpose; rejection of the idea that women's bodies hold their and their family's honour; that comprehensive sex education, including consent, is made mandatory in school curricula; that swift action is taken against all those weaponising cyber tools to commit violence against women; that existing rape laws are reformed to recognise and criminalise marital rape regardless of the age of the victim; urgent and immediate adoption of 10-point demand issues by the Rape Law Reform Coalition, including: i) redefining rape to ensure that it covers all forms of non-consensual penetration, irrespective of gender; ii) reviewing Evidence Act of 1872 to remove scope for institutional victim-blaming; iii) ensuring protection and access to justice without discrimination for all rape victim/survivors (irrespective of gender, religion, race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexuality); conducting sensitisation trainings for police, lawyers, judges and social workers so rape survivors are treated with respect and due responsiveness during reporting, investigation and prosecution.

Fighting systemic sexual violence requires us as a society to start questioning all the harmful sexist myths we have accepted as normal in our everyday lives. Cholo Kotha Boli has envisioned a pyramid to explain how the culture of sexual violence functions like a toxic system in Bangladesh. At the bottom of the



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PHOTO COURTESY: SUDESHNA BISWAS (BEYONDPARAMETERS)

not feel safe because at the end of the day we would be coming back to our "homes and our families and our schools and our friends who would continue to inflict violence on."

More often than not, we tend to other rapists as psychopaths and monsters and not men who live

violence a national emergency and put forth 10 demands to the society and to the state which must complement each other to holistically fight rape culture. Their demands include: an end to all gender-based violence by private and state actors; zero tolerance for victim-blaming at all levels of society

pyramid, you have attitudes and beliefs that normalise sexual violence. This leads to degradation which leads to assault. According to Kotha, "the tolerance of the behaviours at the bottom supports or excuses those higher up."

So for example, everytime we say "orna koi"—no matter how "well-intentioned" the phrase may seem—we perpetuate victim-blaming and recycle the harmful myth that victims can prevent rape. Every single time we invoke a woman's modesty to slut-shame her—even if we do it as harmless gossip—we ensure that women in this nation feel unsafe, we sustain the toxic system that allows men to rape women every day. Every time we excuse wolf-whistling, groping and inappropriate advances on Facebook, citing "boys will be boys," we as a society take one step backwards from fighting towards a society where every single woman wouldn't feel unsafe in one way or another.

Every single time, we entertain or allow microaggressions that don't outright seem harmful, we recharge the system that allowed the vile Noakhali gang-rape case to happen in the first place. It's difficult to lessen the distance between our "normal" lives and face that our mindsets have contributed to the crime that continues to plague this nation year after year. But this fight isn't supposed to be comfortable. It's time to start these uncomfortable conversations with family members and friends and face each and every one of our complicities. It's time to challenge ourselves to change the attitudes and beliefs starting from our own homes.

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QUOTABLE Quote



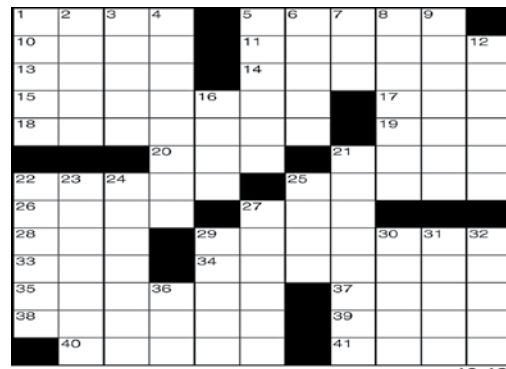
WILLIAM O DOUGLAS (1898-1980) Former Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court.

The liberties of none are safe unless the liberties of all are protected.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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|---------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| ACROSS | 1 FBI agent, informally | 27 Baseball's Gehrige | 5 Nook's partner |
| | 5 Allure | 28 Poker prize | 6 Grazing groups |
| | 10 Nonpayment result, for short | 29 Kodak founder | 7 Rainbow shape |
| | 11 Enjoy a favourite book, say | 33 Paid player | 8 House tour giver |
| | 13 Smell | 34 Mouth, in slang | 9 Amber dessert wine |
| | 14 Gaming center | 35 Green-eyed person | 12 Judged |
| | 15 London theater area | 37 Warsaw native | 16 Has dinner |
| | 17 Director Spike | 38 Staggered | 21 Lefty |
| | 18 Hale and Lane | 39 Yankee great, familiarly | 22 Terror of 1888 London |
| | 19 Singer McGraw | 40 Attire | 23 Decorated |
| | 20 Pig's pen | 41 Moistens | 24 Recover from |
| | 21 In need of a massage | | 25 Face feature |
| | 22 Is furious | DOWN | 27 Scottish landowners |
| | 25 Org. that tracks Santa | 1 Gotten bigger | 29 Fencing swords |
| | 26 Notion | 2 Sorceress of Greek myth | 30 Demi or Julianne |
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| | | 4 Outlet for the Thames | 32 Must have |
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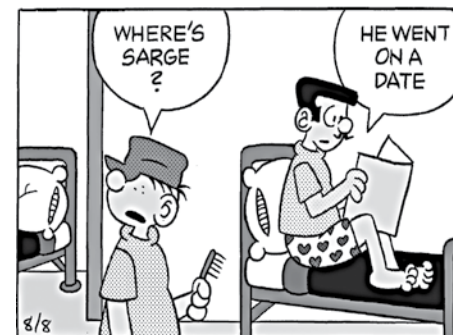
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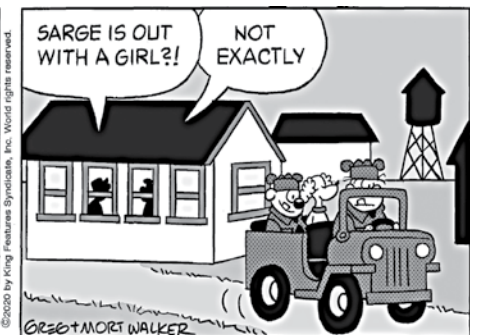
YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

