

A brutal lynching in Lalmonirhat

Religious sentiments cannot be cited to justify murder

WE are speechless by the brutal death of a man at the hands of a mob that later set fire to his lifeless body as an act of rage for "hurting religious sentiment". Shahidunnabi Jewel and his friend had come from Rangpur in a motorbike and had stopped at a masjid in Lalmonirhat to apparently say their prayers. At one point Jewel, who had mental health problems according to his family, had started to look through the religious books claiming that arms of militants had been hidden amongst them. It is not clear what exactly led to his horrible murder. According to reports, people came inside the mosque accusing Jewel and his friend of violating the sanctity of holy books. A member of the union took them to the nearby Union Parishad building and kept them confined there. But an incensed mob barged into the building and dragged out Jewel beating him to death and then setting him on fire.

Here, two aspects of this incident must be pointed out. One is that the term "hurting religious sentiment" has been incorporated into the law without specifying what it means, thus giving scope for subjective interpretations that have led people to use it as justification for attacking and even killing individuals. Thus it must be clarified what this means and also that it is a violation of law to assault, let alone kill someone for allegedly "hurting religious sentiment". Here we cannot help but ask, does not hurting of religious sentiment also apply to assaults on all religious groups, their properties and places of worship?

The second aspect is this frightening trend of mob justice that has taken the lives of many individuals where the mob has acted as judge, jury and executioner. We have seen instances of mobs beating to death alleged muggers without ascertaining whether they had done any crime. We have seen a mother trying to get her child admitted to a school being beaten to death for being suspected as a kidnapper. We have seen young schoolboys being beaten to death for being suspected as robbers. And now this latest murder by a mob of a 50-year-old, a husband, a father and former librarian who was mentally stressed after losing his job during the pandemic.

The problem with such murders is that it is hard to chargesheet the hundreds of people who took part in this macabre crime. But does this mean they will go scot-free? We hope that the police will do everything in its power to arrest at least the instigators of this murder and punish them according to law. The government must make concerted efforts through all its machineries and others—the police, local administration and religious leaders—to sensitise people to reject this barbaric practice of taking the law into their own hands and taking part in this crime. Mob justice is dangerous and contravenes the legal system. It must be shunned at all costs.

Migrant workers falling victims to human trafficking

Implement strict laws to curb such recurrent miseries

THE horrific massacre that took place on May 27 in a town called Mizdah in Libya, where 26 Bangladeshi migrants were killed when a fight broke out between the human traffickers and hostages (nine survivors were brought back to Dhaka last month), revealed the grueling and gruesome route often taken by hardworking Bangladeshis, and the ordeals they face in their pursuit for a better life. Unfortunately, their woes continue. A recent report in this daily reveals how Bangladeshis are being imprisoned in camps which are run by militias all across Libya. It details the experience of a migrant worker who fell victim to human trafficking and brutal forms of torture after wanting to reach the shores of Italy having worked in Libya. Like a few others, he was fortunate enough to buy the mercy of his captors at a cost of Tk 10 lakh. But how many can afford such sums?

According to an Amnesty International report, "Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants in Libya are trapped in a vicious cycle of cruelty with little to no hope of finding safe and legal pathways out. After enduring unconscionable suffering in Libya, refugees and migrants risk their lives at sea seeking safety in Europe, only to be intercepted, transferred back to Libya and delivered to the same abuses they sought to escape." It is unfortunate that the Bangladesh mission in Tripoli is unable to keep track of our imprisoned workers who are trapped in this cycle, and thus needs to strengthen its efforts to ensure the safety of our citizens there.

While it is laudable that the CID is currently cracking down on Bangladeshi human traffickers based in Libya who were responsible for the massacre in Mizdah, at the same time, they must also identify the many duplicitous recruiting agencies who exploit the vulnerability of aspiring migrants and bring them to book. Vigilance is of utmost importance to apprehend the traffickers and eliminate their operations. We also recommend the relevant ministries to take a strong stance in this regard and be more aware of the state of our citizens in Libya. It must seek assistance from the Libyan government and other international organisations to ensure the safety of our migrant workers who face a life and death situation on a daily basis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We need jobs!

It is encouraging to see our economy bouncing back so quickly. Economists and even the general public were quite pessimistic and worried that we would enter a terrible economic depression, which we seemed to have avoided.

But people are still suffering. The job market has been badly destabilised, and many people, who lost their jobs during the pandemic, have no hope of finding another. Under the circumstances, policymakers must take steps to create employment and they must do so quickly.

Shafkat Munir, Dhaka

The burning man, and our national addiction to violence

SEUTY SABUR and SHEHZAD M ARIFFEN

BARELY a month had passed since one of us wrote about rape, scopophilia and collective rage, and barely a day since we began an intergenerational dialogue on gender, rage and violence, full of hope at the emergence of passionate and resourceful young allies, when the world dutifully punched back. Social media was suddenly ablaze with the news of a man who had been lynched by a mob and set on fire. The sight should have provoked rage and indignation; instead it produced a deep sense of loss. Only hours before, during that same discussion on feminine rage, veteran activist Shireen Huq had spoken of the sheer indignity at the heart of our social existence. Tragedy certainly has timing.

On October 29, two men went inside the Burimari Jam-e-Masjid after Asr prayers (some reports suggest that they had prayed). According to a Union Parishad member, "One of the men went inside the mosque with the khadim, Zubed Ali, before searching the bookshelf at the prayer hall claiming that firearms were hidden behind Quran and Hadith books." Zubed Ali himself stated: "At one point, five or six worshippers, who were outside the mosque, entered and dragged the man to the stairs outside before starting to beat him and the other man was waiting outside the hall... Soon after [UP] Member Hafizul Islam intervened and took the men away from there. I don't know what happened to them after that." As it is, we do. We know that Hafizul Islam could not protect the man. That a mob broke into the UP office, snatched one of the men, lynched him right outside, and eventually set him on fire. We know that thousands of spectators gathered to witness this "rapid action" trial and execution. That police and local administration rushed to the scene but could not stop the carnage.

So here we go again: collective violence as discipline and punishment, theatre and spectacle, captured on video and "viral" in a matter of hours. In the aftermath, we see more of the same—one camp justifying the lynching, and another searching for the "real" Islam and cursing humanity. We are not interested in either—instead, we would like to direct some attention towards this all-consuming rage and insatiable appetite for violence within us. Our fragile "honour" is easily hurt, our entitlements are many, and our only medium of expression appears to be vengeful and misplaced rage—our national language. A report by *The Daily Star* tells us that 63 percent of men in Bangladesh think it justified to beat women if denied sex, while we are awash in endless rape cases flooding the country. Meanwhile people parade with severed hands,

vandalise Durga temples, set pagodas on fire, and perish in extra-judicial killings. No, the mob is not "the poor", not "illiterate brutes"; the mob is all of us. Our impotent rage on social media makes us collaborators—we choose not to speak up or hold anyone accountable. The "culture of impunity" is also a culture of apathy, while even our aspirations for justice have become trapped in the language of violence, a perpetual "fanshi chai".

Somewhere along the way we have decided that all human beings are not born with a right to be, to live with dignity and without perpetual fear. Instead we have turned the right to exist and prosper into a privilege, and declared: "Take it if you can! Prove your worth!" It matters little who we trample, whose *houq* we deny. There is an old name for this "ethic": *might*



is right, once used by our former colonisers to justify their own dominion; and here we thought we had "decolonised"! We have forgotten that to be born into a world of others is to be answerable for our actions. We do not recognise this mutual obligation, instead retreating inwards and treating the world as a stage to enact our performances. It is no surprise, then, that our sense of self comes from self-gratification. Whether it is a thirst for prestige or vengeance—it must be gratified and "televised".

What these repeated bursts of collective rage suggest to us is a world of abandonment, something we have stressed before. Why we rage is also why the "official health guidelines" for Covid-19 could not be enforced, triggering much talk-show frustration—we simply do not believe that we live in a society that takes care of itself, nor indeed that such a society

can even exist. And who can blame us, in this land of lynching and gang rape? The man who died, Abu Yunus Muhammad Shahidunnabi "Jewel", was a teacher and a librarian at Rangpur Cantonment Public School and College. He had lost his job due to the pandemic and was possibly mentally unstable. At least two of his students have come out in his defence—both their testimonies and his Facebook page suggests that he was a practicing Muslim with two young children. He was not a local in Burimari and had gone there to visit. He had obviously become triggered by something, and was reportedly incoherent at the mosque; he ended up paying for that with this life.

A nation that fails to protect its most vulnerable citizens needs to search its soul. Who are we at war with, that we resort to

us that sitting MPs should recommend "crossfire" to eliminate rapists, since they already use it for "drug dealers"—why not simply lock up our courts and throw away the keys?

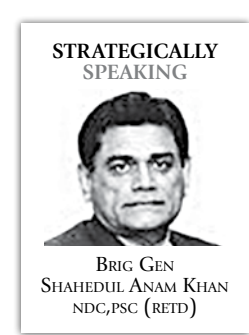
"The Third World was not a place. It was a project," wrote Vijay Prashad. We were born through struggle, fed by the aspirations of millions for a more equal, just and caring world, where we could come together to become "masters of our own destinies." Certainly, there were gaps and violent contradictions; yet instead of pushing and expanding, we have abandoned the project altogether. It is time to reclaim our state, and begin again the work of transforming it into an instrument of self-determination and *nurture*. For too long we have been "outsourcing" our responsibilities—poverty? Microfinance!

violence with such ease? This is neither 1947 nor 1971, nor indeed do we answer to a military autocrat. We are citizens of a sovereign state, a parliamentary democracy, but one where we can rob each other of life and dignity without being held accountable. Let us remind ourselves that there is a difference between a "monarchy" and a modern state; the sovereign is not supposed to hold the power to "grant" life or death anymore. Chest-thumping over having outperformed our neighbour is easier than confronting this blinding whirlpool of helplessness and rage, where everyone is left to fend for themselves. Abandonment is the general condition of our being, breeding this ethic of vengeance and vigilantism. We have normalised violence in our politics and in our everyday lives, enabling this culture of rage and impunity—our very own "How to Get Away with Murder." It does not even shock

Social justice? NGOs! Justice? Up for grabs! A nurturing state must uphold our collective responsibility to ensure each other's well-being, to protect each other, and to create the conditions where each one of us can flourish and live with dignity. Our 50th year is on the horizon; it is time now to confront ourselves, with honesty and purpose, and ask if this is who we want to be. Make no mistake, to call for a nurturing state is not a call for "turning the other cheek"; it is to struggle relentlessly against all structures, practices and institutions that allow some to diminish, reduce and exploit others for gain, power or prestige. We of all people should know that liberation is inevitable; it is always a question of time.

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BECA, the Indo-Pacific bandwagon and Bangladesh



scenario in so far as the Indo-Pacific is concerned. Domination of this region will determine who will dictate the future world order. And in jockeying for control, India has been made an integral part of the mechanism.

The much needed boost for India, both moral and in bilateral defence and military ties in the wake of the recent Indo-Chinese border confrontation has come in the form of BECA or the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, signed on October 27 in New Delhi, which will allow India and US to share geospatial information and enable interoperability of forces. The agreement will give India access to classified geospatial data as well as critical information having significant military applications from the US including use of drones. But apart from the moral aspect of it, the military intelligence that India will receive will be a force multiplier and add to the warning and standoff capability of its forces. Add to this the cooperation under the Five Eyes group for joint signal intelligence cooperation, that India hopes would accord it a military edge over China.

BECA, however, should be put in the context of the Indo-US strategy to counter China's increasing assertive posture in the Indo-Pacific region, in particular its naval expansion and establishing of naval bases in many of the 24 nations of the Indo-Pacific. The motivation is amply defined by India's foreign minister who said before the signing of the agreement, "Together, we can make a real difference when it comes to regional and global challenges, whether it is in respecting territorial integrity, promoting maritime domain awareness, countering terrorism or ensuring prosperity." No credit for guessing who the threat is from, and whose and what kind of interests might be threatened.

The professed intention is to ensure a FOIP or a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

India has already joined the quasi-military arrangement led by the US and which goes by the apt mnemonic QUAD of which Japan, Australia are the other two members—and it might be enlarged. Mahan has trumped over Mackinder in the US' and west's scheme of things, the focus shifting from Europe to the seas demonstrated by the declared intentions narrated in the US Indo-Pacific Policy and

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manifested both by the diplomatic forays and the joint naval exercises in the region.

The US' interest in the Indo-Pacific predated the US administration's current reinvigorated thrust in the region, South Asia in particular, going back to 2010 when Obama announced a "pivot" to Asia and two years later Hilary Clinton touted, "America's Pacific Century". The US Pacific Command (PACOM) has been renamed the Indo-Pacific Command (IPCOM). From mere promotion of an economic concept—the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC), there is now a newly crafted US policy calling not only for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) but also leaving no doubt that force may be an option if that cannot be ensured through peaceful means.

The concept of the "Pacific Century" is compelled also by the forecast of the "Asian Century" where global geo-politics and economy would be driven by the three Asian powers, namely China, India

and Japan. While the US has reconciled to the inevitability of the Asian Century, it hasn't as yet come to accept the idea of a US-dictated world order challenged by the aspiring world power—China. What thus far was a nebulous concept till June 2019, has been made very distinct, and one must read the fine print of the State Department's "US Policy on Indo-Pacific-2019" to get a clear impression of US motives and the likely measures it would employ to deny China the freedom of strategic and diplomatic manoeuvre in the region.

The Indo-Pacific has two important components that have motivated the shift of the centre of gravity of international geopolitics to the Indo-Pacific region. The two—economic and security—cannot be delinked since the former has been always the driver of foreign and security policy. The economic and commercial forecast about the region would attract any power disposed towards implementing a policy of domination to seek influence and control of the region's resources, through creating newer blocks of countries with similar geopolitical and economic interests. The newly formulated US plans do exactly that.

As for the geopolitical compulsions—between China's shedding of its self-imposed restraints as a part of Deng Xiaoping's policy of keeping a low international profile while weaving through the path of China's economic modernisation—and Xi Jin Ping's assertive policy well beyond its region, backed by China's newly acquired economic and military clout and compelled by the need to keep the vital sea lanes open, has raised the hackles of the US and its close allies. Economically, China has already surpassed the US in terms of GDP based on purchasing power parity. And although, China's military potency is far behind that of US, China is the world's second-largest military spender, with a share of 14 per cent of global military expenditure. Its military spending in 2019 was 5.1 per cent higher than in 2018 and 85 per cent higher than in 2010 (SIPRI Fact Sheet April 2020). Its aspirations have gone beyond the immediate region and its footprints have reached beyond the continent of Asia. And in the greatest show of exercise of soft power, China has brought into its economic orbit 138 countries spread across all continents through its Belt and Road Initiative, thus

challenging the lone global power status of the US. China's policy has drawn the US wrath which describe it as predatory economics. Thus the Indo-Pacific Policy and the reinvigorated US thrust in the Indo-Pacific region, to counter China.

Consequently, "In a major foreign policy shift, the Donald Trump administration is now looking at countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives among others, not just for the purpose of business, but as key strategic partners under the Indo-Pacific construct, which is largely aimed at containing China", according to an Indian columnist. Inevitably, these developments have projected South Asia, Bangladesh in particular, at the forefront of big power contention for influence, with world and regional powers coming calling at its door in an attempt to get it on board in their contest to gain dominance on what will be the region of future geopolitical maelstrom and international competition, by reducing China's ever-growing influence. In South Asia India will exploit the US focus to reduce China's domination of the region.

The scramble for Bangladesh betrays the Indo-US strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific and demonstrates the enhanced and renewed geopolitical salience of a country that was once considered an insignificant speck in the backwaters of the Bay of Bengal. Interestingly, the strategic reorientation of the US, from the Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, has thrust not only Bangladesh but also the Bay of Bengal into the centre of attention, both being links between the west and the east, the former between South and South East Asia by land and the latter linking the two largest oceans, the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

Although Bangladesh has expressed its disinclination to join any formal or pseudo military alliance, Bangladesh nevertheless is under pressure for joining the Indo-Pacific bandwagon. It will be a test of our diplomacy to chart a course that would keep us away from the power game through deft handling and judicious modulation of our policy in our effort to exist in the changed milieu allowing us the space for diplomatic manoeuvre, distancing from the ensuing power game yet deriving benefits from the economic component of the Indo-Pacific policy.

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