

# Suicide bombing: The madrassah angle



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

**S**LOWLY, but with the cold certainty of the fog that has descended this winter, realisation has begun to dawn. Following the Jhalakathi killing of two judges, the suicide bombing attacks in the Gazipur Bar Association hall room and Chittagong Court premises, killing ten including lawyers and a police constable, have magnified a terrifying truth: driven by hate-filled ideology, they are out to set Bangladesh civil society on fire.

As the country comes to grips with the blasts, questions are being asked about the ruling party's soft approach towards the extremists. Sinister and highly motivated, the followers of JMB chief Abdur Rahman and JMB chief Bangla Bhai are raising militancy to a pan-Islamic level. Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of this terror worldwide is now a grainy message on a videotape, a prophecy of fear. The erstwhile cult has become a phantom in the wings. Al-Qaeda is no longer a static identifiable organisation; today it's an idea with many synonyms: it seems to have mutated into malignant units like JMB, JMB, and Huji in our country. The mutants are on the prowl, they are round the corner and their unifying resentment now finds expression in a Muslim majority country like Bangladesh. The suicide attacks that we now watch with horror in different parts of the country are perhaps an expression of anger, a message rather than a mission which the terrorists are willing to die for. These faceless terrorists strike wherever they choose, as we witnessed recently in the country, with virtually no strategic advantage to be gained.

It's true, as the LGRD Minister and Finance Minister said recently, that there is no way that we can stop a person when he wants to die, but surely we can strike at the root of this menacing trend if we have been able to identify the culprits masterminding such banal attacks. At the moment, with the law enforcers, having identified some of these suicide bombers, their patrons and masterminds, the first priority is to track down the associates and zero in on them.

Terrorist activities and insurgencies throughout the world generally follow a similar historical pattern. Often a minority group becomes visible with a spectacular attack. The militants and their acts are plugged into long-standing grievances and enjoy a significant degree of popular support. The administration resorts to means that are often repressive which eliminates individual terrorist leaders without healing the wounds that lie beneath the surface. In absence of the leaders, terrorist activities begin to fragment and separate groups set about their own agenda. What is worse is that these are often indiscriminate and brutal and directed against targets with no symbolic value, and thus have limited popular legitimacy. Bangladesh is now passing through this phase of the threat. Disillusioned youths, completely brain-washed while they studied in Qawmi madrassahs, and then either unemployed or dropouts are easy recruits in the suicidal war against the established law of the country.

As everyone now knows, the global strand of radical Islam relies on ideology, not organisation. So when the war on terrorism destroyed the extremist bases in Afghanistan and confined Bin Laden to a series of hiding places, it

The measures needed to be taken up are to reform and revise the curricula to include subjects other than religious studies, official registration of madrassahs and their monitoring that includes regular inspection by the high-ups, banning foreign funding, banning arms training, if any, and to integrate the madrassahs in the general education system. The government must understand that the spate of unrest, terrorism, violence, killing and lastly suicide bombing in the country has some deeper roots like inequality of opportunity.



Doctors treat a madrassah educated JMB cadre at a hospital following a blast he triggered in Gazipur.

didn't derail his ideology. In December 2001, he was reported to have said, "My life or death is unimportant; the awakening has started." In Bangladesh today we can see what this awakening entails.

Evil has an uncanny habit of blending with fantasy. Adolf Hitler was unquestionably the most evil spirit of the previous century. In his bid to create a master race in Germany, he resorted to ruthlessness that finds no analogy in living history till this date. Osama bin Laden aroused the subliminal passions of his chosen folks with the dream of an Islamic Utopian State and his instrument of salvation was a doctrine of murder as obnoxious and cruel as the Nazi "final solution." The inheritors of such evil spirit in this country have combined dogmatic certitude with total ruthlessness without even a touch of remorse. With the blasts rocking the country and killing innocent people, it appears, they have neatly hijacked a conflict-ridden and economically devastated country to make it the nerve centre of terror.

While analysing historical records we can see that suicide bombing craze was once confined to conflict-ridden parts of the world -- Israel, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and now Jammu and Kashmir in India and Iraq. Since 2001, the mentors of radical Islamic thought and ideology in our country prepared the ground and now they have successfully injected a disturbing dimension into our lives -- fear. Suddenly nothing seems safe. A vigilant police force blessed with sniffer dogs could conceivably unearth planted explosives, but no drill, no advance precaution could possibly deter fanatical terrorists willing to become human bombs. For the civilised world, this self-destructive monstrosity breeds an unreal climate of fear born of utter helplessness. The techniques of terror they have mastered in the remote forest and hilly areas are now being practiced in crowded city areas, courts, meeting venues, shrines, and fairs, where anonymity is a fact of life. In a macabre fashion, the protagonists of this quaint ethos and ideology did more than arouse the fear of invisible terror.

They have compromised the element of trust on which modern societies live and flourish. These rogue elements made us distrust our colleagues, our friends, our neighbours, our fellow passengers. In fact every stranger. They destroyed all that was left of our innocence. In a world polarised along rival power blocks and superpowers, the definition of terrorism is complex and puzzling. As we have seen one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. And the followers of non-violence being in short supply, the end was always seen to be justifying the means. What is more unfortunate, unintelligible, and sometimes uncontrollable is the flow of funds, logistics, cannon fodder, and explosives from external sources and through undefined and uncharted routes. As for example, LTTE in Sri Lanka picked up its cannon fodder from Jaffna but its support network extended to Tamil expatriates in Europe and US.

We are at such a critical juncture. It won't mean much if we only stand united against a common enemy by shedding all differences on party lines, but it would mean a lot if the government prompted by a sincere will could better take into account the allegations that the patronisers of militants exist very much within the ruling alliance, as an intelligence official, maintaining anonymity, told a section of media recently. That means a great sacrifice of power, privilege, political affiliations, and adherence to some quaint beliefs that only helped a group or party to capitalise on their power base and dragged the country to further unstable and volatile situation.

People in many countries of the world have turned away from militancy and violence when they saw what was being done in the name of their faith and what it did to their communities. It happened in Egypt where a militant campaign from 1988 to 1998 ruined its economy, in Algeria a decade-long civil war killed almost 100,000 people. Speaking more precisely, ill-served by corrupt politicians and entrenched bureaucracy, the vast cohort of youth population numbering about 35 million in this country are fuming

with rage. With such an explosive mix of unemployed population, Bangladesh at the present moment has become more a cauldron than a country.

Our biggest failing has been on the education front. Mostly struck by abysmal poverty situation and to some extent out of keen attachment to religious values, the parents chose to send their wards to madrassahs where these boys along with religious education would be provided with food and shelter. But, appallingly, most of those educated in these institutions will find themselves almost unemployable at the end of their education. That brings to the fore the question of balanced academic curriculum that includes math, science subjects, English, and Bangla. The government can no longer afford to neglect or by-pass this crucial matter of bringing about academic reform in the madrassah curriculum in the interest of peace and national prosperity. Unless the whole education system -- both school and madrassah -- is geared to function in a way that ensures quality as well as equality of opportunity, it will be difficult for the nation to avert an even bigger disaster than what we are witnessing now.

The PM in her speech in meetings at Patuakhali and Kushtia as well as in her address to the Imams of the mosques at Osmany Memorial Hall decried the rise of militancy and exhorted the Imams to inspire the Muslims in the country with the peaceful images of Islam. But at the crux of the PM's vision of a Bangladesh free of religious extremism should be the sweeping reforms of madrassah education. It is now widely acknowledged that unchecked mushrooming of these institutions, often affiliated to hard-line organisations and jihadi groups, has been the major factor in the spread of the culture of militancy. Some of the madrassahs which cater primarily to students from underprivileged economic backgrounds have been accused of propagating stilted versions of Islam and are prime recruiting grounds for extremist groups such as JMB or Huji, an altered version of Taliban in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The numbers are staggering. At the time of liberation, Bangladesh inherited about 200 madrassahs. Today it is reported that the number of Qawmi madrassahs running under private Madrassah Education Board has swelled to 15,000, in addition to about 9,000 state registered ones. As statistics reveal, the enrolment in general education between 2001-2005 rose by about 9 percent as against 10 percent in madrassah education. If smaller mosque schools dotted all over the country where religious education is imparted is included, the number swells to 30,000. According to some modest estimate, some 9 lakh students are enrolled in just the larger madrassahs. Presumably, with or without the knowledge of the government, since long some radical groups have used the impressionable madrassah students for military interest in Afghanistan and other conflict-ridden Muslim majority states in the absence, to a certain extent, of employment opportunity in the country.

Most madrassahs sustain themselves on foreign funding largely from the Middle East. Some madrassahs do not ask for government funding only to assert their independence from official control. Making a modest beginning during Zia's rule, the politicisation of madrassahs began in earnest during Ershad's rule to counter the political forces opposed to his dictatorial rule. During this time madrassahs recorded a phenomenal rise in number. Recalling its early growth, one cannot fail to notice that Pakistan was a centre of such growth, mostly supported by CIA to utilise them for jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets.

As much as in Pakistan, so also in Bangladesh their influence on the country's body politic marked a spectacular rise because successive governments were not strong enough to take on their street power. And now some madrassah educated people have begun to play increasing roles in mainstream politics with motive to destabilise the established law and the constitution of the country. And, unfortunately, some madrassah students turned extremists are involved in murderous activities like suicide bombing.

The measures needed to be taken up are to reform and revise the curricula to include subjects other than religious studies, official registration of madrassahs and their monitoring that includes regular inspection by the high-ups, banning foreign funding, banning arms training, if any, and to integrate the madrassahs in the general education system. The government must understand that the spate of unrest, terrorism, violence, killing and lastly suicide bombing in the country has some deeper roots like inequality of opportunity, uneven distribution of wealth, lack of social consensus on the development strategy and transparency of state business. The bombs may have ended the lives of some people in Jhalakathi, Gazipur and Chittagong by one or two madrassah students, but the everyday agents of violence and killings are the country's dispossessed and disenfranchised millions who are still waiting for the equitable economic development that our national leaders promised at the country's dawn.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

# Extremism and our faltering institutions

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**W**ORRIED and concerned citizens of our fear-gripped polity may now seriously ponder whether we are failing to function in accordance with the structural imperatives needed for a free, independent, and democratic country. Some may feel that in order to correctly understand the nature of our crisis, one needs to know the nature of our governance, i.e. how the system operates and the calibre, mental make-up, character, attitude, behaviour and ways of thinking of our ruling classes. One may perhaps justifiably question whether institutional development has become anathema to the Bangladeshi mind.

## Mode of governance

One may wonder if due to the government's turning into a mammoth organisation it has been nearly impossible to get anything done, and whether instead of organising systems at the macro-level, our ruling classes relish using power at the micro-level. To our dismay, it is the reality in Bangladesh that the public's right to information is not legally guaranteed and the mode of governance is "cabalistic" in nature. Quite often major decisions are taken by a few people without a wider discussion. The cabinet, parliamentary party, and the parliament all appear redundant.

Accountability has almost disappeared from our system in both the regulatory and the so-called development segment. When the British colonial masters were at the helm of affairs they evolved a system of inspection and supervision which in present day administrative jargon is called monitoring and evaluation. Everyone was responsible to the next higher functionary and the delinquents were taken to task. That is not the way it is today. Our system is status-quo oriented, shuns new ideas, and discourages innovation. Presentation of new ideas is often instantly discredited and the political bosses are warned of dire consequences. We rest on adhocism and our system survives on a day-to-day approach. It is not proactive and simply reacts to a situation.

The lack of accountability and cabalistic nature of governance has given rise to incompetence and corruption. Only the insiders know about the lamentable level of incompetence that has seeped into our system of governance. Along with this the element of cronyism has now been almost institutionalised. In the recent past thousands of people have been recruited in education, regulatory outfits, and constitutional bodies in utter disregard of rules and regulations. The corrupt courtiers have become the link between the rulers and the ruled. In the process, we have provided space to people in the system who have abused it for promoting religious fanaticism and retrograde thoughts.

## The ruling mindset

Our ruling elite and public servants, as a class, are autocratic. Their hatred of dissent and intolerance of a different view brings in its wake arrogance. The insularity of the authority makes them more insufferable. The consequent process of arbitrariness does not permit discussion of different aspects of an issue or problem.

As against the desired institutional development we now believe in patron-client relationship. A "rentier culture" has been created where it is understood that wealth is created through political power and not by enterprise and innovation. The distinction between public property and private gain is blurred.

Another unsavoury feature is a contempt for the rule of law. There is a dislike of people who point out rules, regulations, precedents, and conventions. Sadly, there is a preference for functionaries who are

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pliable and corrupt but claim to produce results.

Our politicians are mostly rhetorical and believe in using meaningless jargon, platitudes, and slogans. Therefore, we now have a situation where there is a strange combination of a supposedly free economy but strong interventionist policies by the powerful coterie and the dominance of political leaders who are controlling levers of financial and bureaucratic power and using banks, development financing institutions, and all such other institutions to their advantage. Concentration of power in the hands of a few has taken its toll. Misgovernance and economic mismanagement has resulted in the marginalisation of weaker groups and the brutalisation and dehumanisation of our society.

It is against this frustrating politico-administrative background that one has to look at the rise of the so-called religious extremism in Bangladesh for containing and ultimately eliminating the perfidious elements from our body politic.

## Political shortsightedness

That there was a threat of violence and subversion from some religious outfits and institutions was abundantly clear from the first quarter of 1999. The attack on eminent poet Shamsur Rahman, the planting of extremely high-powered bombs at meeting place and help in Kotalipara under Gopalganj district where the then Prime Minister had official programme, the discovery of huge explosives and bomb making materials at Sonar Bangla Soap Factory at Gopalganj owned by Mufti Hannan (now in custody), the attack on Communist Party meeting at Paltan Maidan and at the Bengali New Year cultural function at Ramna Park, to mention a few, were credible evidence to the steadily growing mischief making potential of the extremist groups.

In addition, there was credible information about some apparent charitable and voluntary bodies which were receiving funds from abroad for activities that were doubtful and could not be satisfactorily explained. The fact that some such body has now been asked to close their activities in Bangladesh and that the expatriates from Middle Eastern and African countries working in those organisations have now left is clear testimony to their association with Bangladeshi elements believing in un-constitutional ways of achieving their socio-political objectives.

There are matters in connection with the above which for its sensitivity cannot be discussed in this write up, at least for the present. It would perhaps be prudent to comment that the entire government existing in several compartments, as it normally does in a democratic dispensation, could not be fully sensitised regarding the potential and actual threat scenario. This is not unusual if, in particular, one remembers that those bomb throwing miscreants gained momentum in the penultimate year of the preceding political government. In circumstances like that, most political governments in the sub-continent cannot plunge headlong into the incident

and go all the way to pursue the fugitives. There are many calculations to make and differing priorities requiring attention. Intelligence and enforcement operatives could not be effectively decisive.

It would, however, be less than correct to say, as has been reported in media, that there was no appreciation of the extremist-related violence during the previous political regime. This is evident from the banning of two extremist outfits by the present government, against whose involvement in violent activities sufficient evidence was collected in 2000-2001. This observation is further supported by the now sensational confessional disclosures of Mufti Abdul Hannan who was the principal charge-sheeted accused in the Kotalipara bomb incident and other related explosive substance cases.

It may be interesting to note that again in the penultimate year of a political government the so-called religious extremist and obscurantist elements have decided to strike.

Whether such elements flourished due to the support and encouragement of ruling parties and the establishment may be a matter of probe, but the threatening reality is that they have not been under effective surveillance. The determination and deadly attack at the state apparatus with attendant panic are adequate proof of the unhindered growth and sustenance of persons and organisations who want to upset the constitutional way of life. Our failures are manifest reality.

## The way forward

The enemy combatants are now known. So there should not be any hesitation in venturing into sensitive and emotionally aligned places and institutions when reasonable suspicion and information so dictate. This is necessary to effectively shake off the suspected ambivalence of the enforcement personnel. The directives should be very clear and explicit. This aspect assumes special significance in view of the opposition allegation that the government has a politically biased view about the threat scenario. Therefore, let not political expediency cloud the corrective action.

The so-called religious extremism has not sprouted with its ugly fangs all of a sudden. So we should not be expecting instant solutions. However, deft political management ensuring pragmatic operational handling on an urgent basis can definitely lessen the harmful impact and energise the mainstream to counter the frontal attack on our democratic polity.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary and IGP.

# The Bill Gates nobody knows



HARUN UR RASHID

**B**ILL Gates -- Microsoft Chairman and Chief Architect -- during his short visit to Bangladesh on Monday, December 5, announced that Microsoft will train over 10,000 teachers and 200,000 students in information technology in Bangladesh in the next three years, and he has already donated \$100,000 to this end. He and his wife Melinda Gates were on their first visit to Bangladesh as part of their weeklong visit to the region.

Bill Gates set up Microsoft in 1975 and since then both Microsoft

## BOTTOM LINE

Despite being one of the biggest believers in capitalism, Gates does not believe that answer to every problem is the market. "One thing that it does not work well on is if you have diseases that only exist in countries that are very poor," he said.

and Bill Gates became astonishingly wealthy. He is the richest person in the world according to Forbes magazine and has about \$56 billion. He is the owner of Microsoft that has captured 94 per cent of software business in personal computers sold around the globe. Microsoft has market capitalisation of \$227 billion (nearly five times the GDP of Bangladesh).

## In the league of philanthropists

Very few know of Bill Gates' humanitarian side. He is the biggest philanthropist in the world. He and his wife Melinda established a foundation

that donates money to many research organisations in the developing world.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has an endowment of \$28.8 billion. By comparison, the Ford Foundation -- the next biggest -- has assets of about \$10 billion.

Since 2000, the Gates Foundation has donated \$7.5 billion.

Bill Gates joins other philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, and Ted Turner.

Andrew Carnegie (born in Scotland and settled in America) was the 19th and 20th century steel tycoon. He gave away, during his

time, \$500 million (more than \$10 billion in today's money) and was particularly interested in libraries, adult education, and research on peace. "A man who dies rich dies disgraced. You can't take it with you," he once said.

The oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller was such a great philanthropist that he gave away about \$900 million. He established the University of Chicago, Rockefeller University in New York, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Planetarium in India for the Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, pledged \$1 billion in five years to the UN. He has now turned his attention towards the environment.

## Donations by Bill Gates

The Gates Foundation spends most money in the developing world, especially in Africa, fighting diseases, such as Aids, tuberculosis, and malaria. In July this year, Gates gave \$450 million for funding research projects such as childhood vaccines that do not require refrigeration, needles, or multiple doses, and finding new ways of preventing insects transmitting malaria that infects 500 million people each year.

In October this year, the Gates Foundation gave a further \$258 million to fight malaria, making this grant equivalent to more than three-quarters of the total global spending on research into the disease. In essence he has been funding into areas that big pharmaceutical companies should do.

In America, he pours money into Internet access for libraries and an

education programme that has funded about 750 new high schools, as well as a similar number of existing schools.

Despite being one of the biggest believers in capitalism, Gates does not believe that answer to every problem is the market. "One thing that it does not work well on is if you have diseases that only exist in countries that are very poor," he said.

Gates has spoken often about inequality and lack of opportunity, which underline both his health and education initiatives.

It has been reported that Gates donated \$1 million to Brac a few years ago, and with that money Brac has established the School of Public Health within the Brac University. It awards MPH (Masters of Public Health) degrees to students, both foreign and Bangladeshi nationals. Students who are eligible for admission get full scholarship.

## Why do some rich men give away money?

Individuals ordinarily become

successful and rich through cut-throat competition. They are determined to ensure their competitors do not have a chance against them. Such people are driven by sheer motivation of getting rich and making millions.

Again, these very people who are able to take harsh decisions in relation to their business interests, have a softer side towards humanity. Andrew Carnegie once said, "It is the mind that makes the body rich. There is no class so pitifully wretched as that which possesses money and nothing else."

Others have said that it is the social conscience that pricks them when they see so much disparity between rich and poor. Bill Gates once said, "I decided at a very early stage that whatever wealth I had I would want to give back to society."

There are fewer prominent humanitarians than there once were. Certainly, there are far fewer philanthropists on the grand scale, not because there is less money or need but because the world has changed, people have become



Bill Gates

individualist and greedy.

There is a saying that you do not judge a book by its cover, so do not judge a person by the public face that the media publishes. A humanitarian or philanthropist is one who is devoted to promoting human welfare. Bill Gates certainly comes within that definition.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladeshi Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.