

## Attack on temples continues

*People's participation to prevent it crucial*

WE are outraged by a group of criminals torching a 200-year-old Hindu temple at Rajoir upazila in Madaripur. This adds to a long list of places of worship coming under assault since the pronouncement of capital sentence to Saydee on February 28. As many as 94 Hindu temples have been attacked in March alone.

Attack on temples is the worst of crimes that anyone can commit because it is a direct assault on the values of a pluralistic society whose inner strength lies in communal harmony, coexistence and peaceful pursuit of one's religion. Respect for other faiths, their places of worship and symbols is anchored in our cultural heritage and therefore is a prized object for us. The wave of violence on Hindu community has come about on a scale that is unprecedented and therefore so worrying.

It is undoubtedly the state's responsibility to protect minorities, their places of worship and ways of life. But that this government did not foresee it coming and has been somewhat caught unawares is indefensible. Also incomprehensible is the local administrations' failure to throw security rings around potentially vulnerable minority community pockets in the country. The government has 'failed to discharge its constitutional obligation to protect the minority'.

The High Court rule on April 4 directing the government to form a high powered committee to investigate recent incidents of violence and attack on religious minorities and submit a comprehensive report in three months should be acted upon in all seriousness. A part of the ruling, however, related to government having been directed to submit a report in two weeks on the initiatives taken after the attacks. Has it been complied with?

In specific terms, the incidents are a collective shame, and with the government failing to protect them, it is highly imperative for the people to come forward and stand by the minorities at their hour of need.

While it falls on the government to protect minorities, the majority community is obligated to keep tab on the local situations and foil any attempt by fanatical elements and other vested quarters who are always up to angling in troubled waters. To this end, the clarion call by the rights activists and the political leaders for building impregnable national unity to prevent recurrence of communal violence acquires a resounding relevance.

## Corruption weighs bridge down

*Independent body must make inquiries*

THERE are many tentacles to corruption. One has only to observe the goings-on at the Bangabandhu Multipurpose Bridge to understand this simple yet outrageous fact of life. The bridge, inaugurated in 1998, is now hostage to two evils. The first is the swift, subtle way in which a large segment of the money collected as toll by the authorities at the bridge disappears into the pockets of officials at various levels. And the second is the manner in which overloaded trucks are allowed a free run of the bridge in exchange of illegal money.

In the first instance, the loss of toll money is a blow to the national exchequer and by extension the public interest. In the second, there is the very real fear that not only is the nexus of corruption being widened but also that holding up overloaded trucks on the bridge could eventually affect the very durability of the bridge. The question now is again the usual, old one: who will step in to take action against the elements which have discovered in the bridge a cash cow they will not easily want to let go of? The darker reality is that the corruption at the bridge is an open secret. It is not just the toll plazas on the bridge where all this illegal gratification goes on. There are too the weighing machines which have added another dimension to the many ways in which theft-oriented officials and others have been keeping themselves happy. Yes, of course, there have been denials.

One way of checking this corruption at the Bangabandhu Bridge is to have an independent inquiry body in place. It will not do at all for a body constituted of government or semi-government officials, for such bodies, in other areas, have in the past disappointed the country. One needs not merely an independent body to ferret out corruption and those involved in it at the bridge. One must also be reassured about, through the establishment of a permanent watchdog, not just for the bridge but also for the overall transport sector, measures that will have as their remit constant watch and prompt action, in case of the slightest sign of wrongdoing, at this and other bridges



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

"Pledging that the high ideals of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah" replaced it in the preamble of our constitution. Now there is a demand by a section of people to bring back secularism as a state principle. Many citizens are therefore keen to understand what we mean by secularism. Can religion play a pivotal role in a state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What is the practice in other Muslim states? For Bangladesh what is the appropriate way to run the country?

It would be wise to first dispense with definitions, before we attempt to answer some of these questions. To begin with, let us see what secularism is.

In 1846, an English social reformer called George Jacob Holyoake coined the term secularism. He believed that any government worth its salt should work for the benefit of the working class and the poor, based on their needs here and now. He was not interested in the needs the working class may have in a future life or for their souls. But he did not place secularism in opposition to religion. Secularism, therefore, focuses on this world rather than the immaterial, the spiritual or any other world. So it is something "when it is not worshipped, and when it is open for critique, judgment and replacement."

On the other hand, the definition of religion is that "it is an organised collection of belief systems, culture systems and world views that relates humanity to spirituality and to moral values." The origin of religion is uncertain. But according to anthropologists, "many of the great world religions appear to have begun as a revitalisation movement, as the vision of a charismatic prophet fires the imagination of people seeking a more comprehensive answer to their problems than they feel is provided by everyday beliefs." Research suggests that religious people are often happier and less stressed.

So as things stand, do we find contradiction between secularism and religion? In broad terms

# Are religion and secularism incompatible? Think ...

both attempt to solve human problems. But religion works further and attempts to improve human situation in the Hereafter. Like in other religions, in Islam too, there is a strong perception that secularism is anti religion. Orthodox Muslims feel that Islam is not compatible with secularism. This is because in a secular state there is no place for divine law. Therefore, secular laws are also unacceptable to Islam. Further, in Islam, religion and politics cannot be separated.

But if we are to understand whether Islam is compatible with secularism, we should first make a distinction between what is theological and what is historical. The concept that religion and politics cannot be separated is indeed more historical than theological. The Holy Quran emphasises repeatedly on values such as justice, truth, benevolence, human dignity, compassion, which apply to the Ummah.

**Islam accepts religious pluralism. The Holy Prophet (pbuh) had provided equal social and religious space to all religions present in Medina. Again, secularism has respect for human rights and human dignity. The Holy Quran expressly agrees to both.**

The Islamic Ulema and jurists from the earlier days were also concerned that if religion and politics were separated, rulers would deliberately neglect these fundamental values. They would start behaving in a way that would satisfy their greed for power. There would be no check on the conduct of the rulers. Hence, the insistence that politics be conducted along strict religious lines.

When our beloved Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) went on Hijrat to Medina he laid a framework of governance through the "Covenant of Medina" there. In it he respected the tribal customs adhered to by the non-Muslims, the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims. Ibn Ishaque, the first biographer of our Prophet (pbuh) recorded that each tribe along with its religious tradition was termed as an autonomous unit in the Covenant. At that time, the Shariah as a body of laws was just evolving. The Prophet of Islam (pbuh) did not compel the different tribes to follow Islamic law. However, after the death of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) and as Muslims conquered large territories the Ummah

faced new problems. In the early days of Islam it was day-to-day problems like theft, robbery, murder, as well as marriage, divorce, and inheritance that troubled the Ummah. The Holy Quran and the Prophet (pbuh) were solid sources of guidance in these matters. The Prophet (pbuh) himself was a legislator, an enforcer of laws and also a judge. His unique personality could combine all these functions for judicious governance. But with his demise there rose the need to enforce laws as people in far-off territories with no commitment to Islam would not follow the Islamic laws voluntarily as they did in Medina. So the jurists had to look for verses in the Holy Quran and in the Hadith, which the Prophet's (pbuh) companions remembered, or resort to analogy keeping analogous situation in mind for answers. The corpus of Shariah law therefore evolved.

In a secular state there is opportunity for discussion and questioning of moral precepts. But there are also limitations of secularism. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century secularists almost began to worship reason. They dismissed religion with a degree of contempt. But there has to be a balance between reason and faith. Just because some people use reason as a tool to achieve their goals, it can never be absolute. Faith is not a tool but belief in higher values. These are fundamental to a meaningful life. Thus, there is scope to have a creative synthesis between reason and faith.

Take the case of freedom of conscience and democratic rights. Islam accepts religious pluralism. The Holy Prophet (pbuh) had provided equal social and religious space to all religions present in Medina. Again, secularism has respect for human rights and human dignity. The Holy Quran expressly agrees to both.

So in many ways, secularism and Islam are compatible. Indonesia, the largest Muslim majority state, has incorporated Islamic and secular elements and uses them in running the country successfully. In Bangladesh too we have strong practice of rooting our faith in Allah the Almighty and working out problems by seeking guidance from the Holy Quran and the Hadith. On secular matters we use reason too, which is also a gift from Allah to humankind. Why should we change one way or the other? Are we not better endowed? Let us resolve to think deeply.

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# The Boston marathon bombing: Terror

CONRADO DE QUIROS

THE first thing I thought of was not 9/11 but the Munich massacre. That was after I saw the images of the Boston explosions in the Internet and CNN.

At first blush, that doesn't seem comparable in scale and ferocity. The Munich massacre for those who hadn't been born then, or have not heard of it, was the bloodbath carried out on Israeli athletes in the 1972 Olympics by a group of Palestinian terrorists called Black September. The gunmen raided the Israeli team's quarters, took 11 of them hostage and eventually killed them. It shocked a world that had already seen some pretty shocking sights, not least courtesy of the Vietnam War.

What did so -- and which is why the Boston explosions reminded me of it -- was that it happened during a sports event. Specifically the Olympics, an event that was meant to, and had, brought out the best in human beings. The seeming incompatibility of baseness and viciousness with a world that was pure and lofty, the seeming incongruity of a lapse into savageness and barbarity amid the striving toward transcendence and perfection, drove home the horror of it.

I remembered it after a young man who had joined the marathon and missed becoming a victim by seconds wondered how something like that could happen. It was beyond comprehension, he said in a daze. The Boston marathon was a show of camaraderie and solidarity, of goodness and kindness, of being the best that one could be. It had drawn in people from all walks of life and from all nationalities. Who could possibly wish it ill? Who could possibly want to do something like that?

As he said that, CNN showed footage of the runners dashing toward the finish line and an orange light suddenly flashing and smoke billowing from the bushes. One runner staggered and fell, the news reporter not knowing whether he had been hit by shrapnel or had just buckled under from the force of the explosions -- there were two of them, one following the other. As I write this, some 150 people have been rushed to hospitals, some of them in critical condition. Three have died, one of

them an eight-year-old boy. The bombs were probably lying on the ground, said the authorities, the victims' injuries being largely in the limbs. Many would not be able to walk again, let alone run.

The second thing I thought of was still not 9/11, it was the Oklahoma bombing. Who would do such a thing? That was the question Americans asked in April 1995 when a huge blast turned to rubble the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City and damaged 324 buildings within a 16-block radius. It killed 168 people. It was the most destructive act of terrorism before 9/11. Americans asked who would do such a thing, and answered that it must have been Arab terrorists.

**It makes you wonder why, when the same thing, or far, far worse, happens elsewhere, those who perish are not just not remembered, they are not even seen, there are no cameras rolling to record the scale of destruction, there are no pens scribbling to try to capture the depth of the despair.**

As it turned out, it was an American one. Timothy McVeigh, a disgruntled and unhinged veteran of the Gulf War, had detonated explosives from a truck he had parked in front of the building with that catastrophic result. It was an enterprising reporter from InterPress, a Third World wire agency, who led to McVeigh being identified, tracked down and taken in custody. But not before life became a little miserable for foreigners in the United States, especially those of Arabic descent, especially those who wore flowing robes and spoke in strange accents.

Armed with hindsight, Americans have become a lot more circumspect or cautious about pointing fingers. Barack Obama spoke tersely, saying only that the perpetrators would be ferreted out and bear the full weight of justice. Congress has called

the bombing a terrorist act and has been vociferous in condemning it, but has refrained from saying whether it was foreign or homegrown in origin. Fox, though, was not loath to look outside for its source. An American airport is not the best place to be at right now.

We'll have to wait for the next few days or weeks to know at all. But you have to wonder what it will do to the American psyche at this point if the perpetrator turns out to be a local one. As I write this, investigators have just noted that the bombs were "not sophisticated," though the fact that two other unexploded bombs were found suggests some planning. Can it be so hard to imagine that this is a continuation, albeit a far more murderous kind, of the explosion of violence and mayhem that has been gripping the United States of late? And with the National Rifle Association leading a belligerent campaign to shoot down -- pun fully intended the government's gun control bills? A bomb is just an extension of a handgun, it's just a weapon of more mass, or massive, destruction. But the motivation, or lack of it, could be the same.

The third thing I thought of was 9/11. And how, more than a decade after the atrocity, the United States continues to feel its pain as freshly as it did 12 years ago and to bid the world share its grief. Which is as it should be: The lives of those who perished ought to be remembered, the horror of the deed ought to be remembered.

The death of any person, black or white, man or woman, rich or poor, diminishes us all. But which makes you wonder why, when the same thing, or far, far worse, happens elsewhere, those who perish are not just not remembered, they are not even seen, there are no cameras rolling to record the scale of destruction, there are no pens scribbling to try to capture the depth of the despair. Who are there to share their anguish? Who are there to help carry their grief? "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" as Shylock asks. "If you poison us, do we not die?" Seeing the horror of one but not another, hearing the cries of one but not another, seething with rage at the one but not at the other: That is terror too.