Ugly Hometruths

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The scenario is chillingly familiar. Homes burnt down to ashes, possessions looted, places of worship desecrated – women raped. And finally the scene of devastated, disillusioned figures with meagre bundles in their arms, fleeing the terror. It could easily be a clip from 1971. Racism, bigotry and brutality had been rolled into one then, to form a terrifying monster, bulldozing the spirit of a people. We thought the monster had been destroyed, replaced by the sweetest scent of all, the fragrance of freedom, freedom from prejudice, discrimination and oppression. But these images are of the present times, a time when Bangladesh is in its forties as an independent, free country. How could this happen, we ask, in shame and bewilderment? Why now?



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The tentacles of that defeated monster, have resurfaced, reaching into the corners of this country, gripping and polluting the hearts of the young and impressionable. That horrible harpy has been resurrected and now it threatens to gobble up our very identity all over again. And we have allowed this creature to grow back and consolidate its powers, we have cast a blind eye when there were clear signs of a deadly comeback and turned a deaf ear to the screeches of hatred.

The most important strength of a citizen of a free, independent country, is the sense of belonging which is the basis of patriotism. When we are treated as second class citizens abroad or sent back humiliated, we know that there is one thing that will never be taken from us – our right to live without fear or intimidation in our own motherland. But for a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Chakma, a Marma or any one from a non-Muslim community this right is not guaranteed, it seems. It may contradict the very ideal on which this country was born but this is the reality that we must now face.

For Bangladeshis, this is mortifying and shameful. This is not the kind of country we would want to live in. It is certainly not the image we want to present to the world.

It is sickening that the recent attacks on Hindu communities have included the rapes of countless women and girls. Fearing social ostracism and further repression most of these rapes have not been reported. But they did take place. The trauma of rape continues long after the rapist leaves – lives are destroyed forever.

The majority of these attacks have been carried out by Jamaat-Shibir members as part of their violent 'political' movement in protest of the trial of war criminals and to assist the BNP in its attempts to oust the government. What is baffling is why they have been allowed to prolong their terrorism. There are allegations of blatant apathy from law enforcers towards the victims in terms of not catching the culprits and setting them free after cursory arrests. There are reports of ruling party aficionados being involved in some of the attacks. The crimes are explained as post-polls violence, land-grabbing strategies and part of opposition-led movements. But they all boil down to an underlying communal element that seems to be spreading like the vilest of venoms. The poison is being administered not by foreign occupiers but by our own people. They are individuals who use religion to spread lies, bigotry and hatred for fellow citizens. They are facilitated by opportunists greedy to take advantage of an exodus, ready to grab land that is not their own.

As ordinary citizens we demand that our lives and possessions be safeguarded by the State, irrespective of our faith, social status or political affiliation. We demand punishment of all the attackers irrespective of their faith, social status or political affiliation. We demand justice for those people who have lost everything to racial and political violence. We demand the country that was liberated from repression, racial discrimination and bigotry, be returned to us.