

Has the country turned into a killing ground for free thinkers?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

BARELY a month after the vicious murder of Avijit Roy, another blogger and online activist, 27-year-old Oyasiqur Rahman Babu, was hacked to death in broad daylight on March 30. The killers, caught by two transgender passersby, have confessed to the killing.

Unlike Avijit, who I knew for more than fifteen years and contributed for a long time to his widely-known Mukto-Mona blog, I did not know anything about the ill-fated Oyasiqur Rahman. A staunch critic of religious extremism, Oyasiqur was active mostly on Facebook where he used to write in the Bangla blogosphere. Immediately after this killing, the social media was abuzz with condemnation.

However, Oyasiqur was not to be the last victim of the terrifying brutality. Less than six weeks after his brutal murder, another blogger Ananta Bijoy Das of Mukto-Mona met the same fate. He was known for advocating science and secularism, and was hacked to death by masked men wielding machetes while on his way to work on the morning of May 12 in Sylhet. He died instantly in the attack.

Like in the aftermath of Avijit's and Oyasiqur's killings, the killing of Ananta Bijoy Das also captured media headlines around the globe. The New York Times wrote: "A blogger who wrote for a website that promoted secularism was hacked to death on Tuesday by a group of four men. It was the third fatal attack on a Bangladeshi blogger since February. The assailants walked away after the attack, leaving Mr. Das's body near a pond."

The Washington Post wrote, "Attacks on progressive writers and critics of Islam are happening with increasing regularity in Bangladesh, where nearly 90 percent of citizens are Muslims. The



ANANTA BIJOY DAS
MAY 12, 2015
At Subid Bazar in Sylhet city.



AHMED RAJIB HAIDER
FEBRUARY 15, 2013
Killed near his house at Palash Nagar in Mirpur, Dhaka.



AVIJIT ROY
FEBRUARY 26, 2015
On the footpath along Suhrawardy Udyan, Dhaka.



OYASIQR RAHMAN BABU
MARCH 30, 2015
At Begunbari in the capital.

country has a long tradition of official secularism — the principle was enshrined in the 1971 constitution (though that section was nullified between 1979 and 2010). But in periods of conflict, it also has a tradition of antagonism toward religion's most radical critics.

Starting with the murder of Prof. Humayan Azad, we have lost Ahmed Rajib Haider, almost lost Asif Mohiuddin, lost Avijit Roy, Oyasiqur Rahman and now Ananta Bijoy Das. Frustrated with the lack of progress in the Avijit murder case, the 32-year-old Ananta had posted a status on Facebook on March 15: "If the killers are not tried, it is understood that they will hone another machete for another

strike!" Ironically, he himself became the victim of that machete.

However, as far as public knowledge goes, none of the perpetrators of these despicable crimes have been brought to book yet. Over the last six years the country has had a government that claims to nourish the values and virtues of our liberation war; the foremost among them was the freedom of thought and belief. It is widely felt by us, and more so by outsiders, that ours is a corrupt and criminality-plagued society. However, the number of convictions for such crimes hardly reflects the validity of the perception. If one analyses why criminality and corruption are so pervasive in the society, the first and foremost answer would be the

impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. After every dreadful crime, people hear about some arrests, remand, confessions etc, but hardly the people hear about the perpetrators being convicted.

It seems our legal system is more lenient in giving them bail rather than dispensing justice. The liberal bailing of the suspected criminals has been encouraging the suspected perpetrators to carry out more dreadful crimes. Many militant leaders and activists who had been arrested on specific charges managed to walk out of jail only to assume more crucial roles in militant activities. The government of the day has created a positive impression to the outside world as the one who is bent on

continuing its crusade against religious extremism and terrorism. However, it has not made much progress in bringing the perpetrators to justice in the dreadful murders that happened over the last few years.

It seems that the investigation of Avijit and Oyasiqur's murder cases have stalled and have made no headway over the last two months or so. Obviously, the current murder was the result of past impunities. Such killings might not have happened if the previous attacks were investigated properly and the people behind those given harsh punishment. The government is really on the crossroad in bringing a quick dispensation of the cases of these dreadful killings. If the government fails to bring the culprits swiftly to justice, as it did in the past, the big question would be, who is next?

Citizens who still believe in the notion of secularism but have taken an ostrich-like stance, stating that 'they are not me, anyway', will face the eventualities as beautifully sequenced by the German resistance fighter Friedrich Gustav in Nazi Germany:

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.
When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.
When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.
When they came for the Jews,
I remained silent;
I wasn't a Jew.
When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.

The writer is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

If one analyses why criminality and corruption are so pervasive in the society, the first and foremost answer would be the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators.

Why inequality still matters

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

WHY do we discuss income inequality once again? For three reasons: 1) Income inequality in Bangladesh is very stark and socially unacceptable; 2) The trend for income inequality, as measured by Gini coefficients, indicates that it is increasing even if moderately; and 3) The share of income of the lowest rung of the income ladder is very meagre and has remained stagnant over the last two decades. For a nation that is experiencing income and employment growth, when the largesse brought about by globalisation and industrialisation is distributed quite unevenly or there is extreme poverty coexisting with conspicuous consumption, economic growth cannot be a goal or an end in itself.

Studies done by Unnayan Onneshan and other institutions indicate that the growing numbers of people living below the poverty line and a lack of income growth in the lowest 20 percent of the population have given rise to widespread hunger, destitution, and deterioration in the quality of life in rural areas. Furthermore, inflation, particularly food inflation is known to be associated with increase in income inequality. In the last decade, inflation in Bangladesh has been 6-8 percent with a stagnant nominal wage in the urban informal and rural markets.

Various indicators have pointed to a worsening trend in income and wealth inequality in Bangladesh, particularly in rural Bangladesh. For almost a century, the Gini coefficient, a simple statistical summary, has been used to measure income inequality. According to one study, income inequality in the country has increased in the last decades, as measured by the Gini coefficient which has increased from 0.451 in 2000 to 0.458 in 2010 at the national level. Income inequality has widened at a faster rate in the rural areas, with Gini coefficient increasing



from 0.393 to 0.430 during the same period. Other measures of income inequality in the country present a sharper contrast between the top and the bottom categories in the income ladder. If we compare the income accrued to the richest five percent of our population with the lowest five percent, the trends show that while the national income of the country has been growing at 5 percent since 1987, the share of the bottom 5 percent has declined from 1.03 percent to 0.77 percent and this is in sharp contrast to the income of the top 5 percent who have increased their share and now have almost 30 percent of the total income.

If we were to posit this trend against another widely used indicator of social well-being of the poor, we have corroborating evidence to indicate that the grip of poverty and inequality is very strong and alarming. According to the most recent Human Development Report, Bangladesh ranks 142nd out of 187 countries as measured by the Human Development Index. This is not as bad as it appears in view of the fact that we moved up four notches since 2013, and if we were comparing per capita only. However, strictly in terms of HDI—an index based on life expectancy at birth, mean years of

schooling, expected years of schooling, and gross national income per capita— we still rank just below both our largest and smallest neighbours, with India and Bhutan being ranked at 135 and 136 respectively.

Now if we turn to some of the richest countries, income inequality is increasingly coming under scrutiny for the destructive forces it unleashes. When Janet Yellen, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors of the US spoke before the House of Representatives earlier this year, she brought up the issue of income inequality in the US. Her remarks might be dismissed as a casual observation or just a flight of imagination for the Fed chief. But it is hardly so. Income inequality is a serious matter around the globe and not only academics but also political leaders, central bankers, and multi-governmental donors are taking notice.

Nobel Prize winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz in an Op-Ed piece for the New York Times on June 27 last year wrote that the argument for inequality cannot be made as a necessary condition for faster growth of GDP. Nor is it the by-product of growth. According to him, and research confirms that, greater inequality is a result of policy and politics.

One might argue that since income inequality is on the rise globally, why rail against it? Because it is ugly and like environmental degradation, it is an unmitigated evil. It is an eyesore, not only because it pricks our conscience, but also because it saps the energy of our people. And you don't have to be a radical or idealist to fight it. Finally, in order to reduce inequality in Bangladesh, much more needs to be done to improve access to employment, health and education for the bottom half of the population. We must rise to the challenge of both reducing inequality and improving education and welfare, whilst building the country's economy. There is no room for complacency.

The writer is an economist and often writes on public policy issues.

In order to reduce inequality in Bangladesh, much more needs to be done to improve access to employment, health and education for the bottom half of the population.

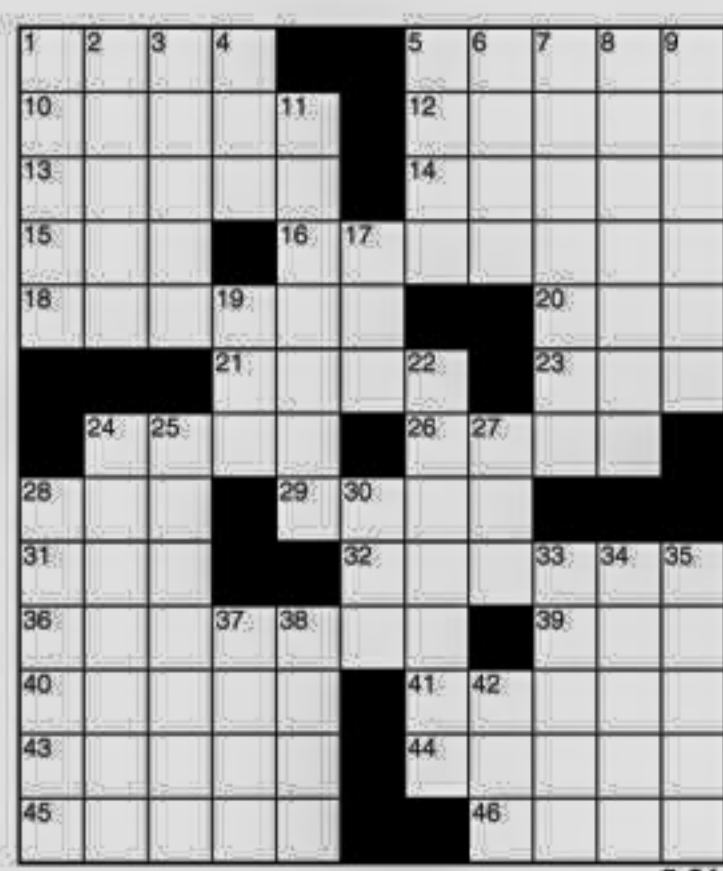
QUOTABLE Quote

I am not a liberator. Liberators do not exist. The people liberate themselves.

Che Guevara

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- "Brian's Song" star
 - VCR inserts
 - Boxing ring border
 - Clearly stunned
 - Quiver item
 - Daughter of Lear
 - Skater Midori
 - Best Picture of 1984
 - Best Picture of 1982
 - Pub pint
 - Stream sediment
 - Outlaw Kelly
 - Phone pioneer
 - Power unit
 - Young fellow
 - Pop star
 - Tennis feat
 - Best Picture of 1968
 - Best Picture of 1940
 - Peyton's brother
 - Nurse Barton
 - Low cards in pinochle
 - Bold poker bet
 - Draw out
 - Annoys
 - Soup buys
 - Jazz club units
- DOWN**
- Bond Portrayer
 - Main artery
 - Cook's wear
 - "The Matrix" hero
 - Scarlett's home
 - Like some wines
 - Beauty context
 - Shoulder ornament
 - Detected
 - African tongue
 - Wire measure
 - Cable modern alternative
 - Like many roads
 - Tenor Andrea
 - Look over
 - Boxing great
 - Spot for commuter cocktails
 - Clinic nickname
 - Place
 - Choose
 - Gets up
 - Lake near Buffalo
 - Soup buys
 - Check-cashing needs



Yesterday's answer

S	U	I	T	E	D	S	P	E	W		
U	S	N	A	V	Y	A	L	T	O		
M	A	D	M	E	N	H	A	C	K		
		P	R	E	P	A	R				
T	O	W	S		C	H	I	A	N	T	I
I	P	O		C	H	I	A	N	T	I	
P	E	R		L	E	G		G	O	T	
I	R	K	S	O	M	E		U	N	O	
N	A	I	L	S		O	P	E	N		
N	E	E	S	O	N						
E	D	G	E		O	B	I	W	A	N	
T	A	U	T		L	O	C	A	L	E	
A	M	P	S		D	E	E	D	E	D	

CRYPTOQUOTE
QF QU ISYSJBKVK BEXQFFSE FNBF XRUF IJRGY-TZ ZSRZKS, NRGASJ JSJSFFBCKV, GQKK FJV FR NBAS B IRRE FOXS.
-- CSJFJBYE JTUUSKK

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: THOUGH A GOOD DEAL IS TOO STRANGE TO BE BELIEVED, NOTHING IS TOO STRANGE TO HAVE HAPPENED.
-- THOMAS HARDY

BEETLE BAILEY



HENRY

