

It's not funny

"To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize."

- Voltaire



our communities, our laws and our institutions is political in nature, then we will see that satire too is, first and foremost, a political act. So, satire is an intent; an attack. Behind its surface is a political objective. Therefore, intention of a satirist is the most logical metric to judge the merit of his work.

The developments of the past three to four days are not funny. They have the potential to delineate what can (or cannot) be said, questioned, trivialised or propagated. Those, dear readers, are the very boundaries of free speech. Defending these boundaries would be neither subversive nor traitorous. Sure, contents that threaten to slander innocents, jeopardise lives or compromise the State, must be evaluated for their merit and utility. But this must not become a way of suppressing dissent and criticism.

The modern democratic nation is designed to be balanced by the channeling of power to citizens. In this design, media, civil society, thinkers and artists are expected to ask difficult questions and challenge policies and actions taken by public servants. Otherwise, democracy does not work. Therefore, it is important that Bangladesh retains the conditions for healthy, constructive criticism and nonviolent opposition based on rationality.

It is not funny that we have to reiterate in 2015 the checks and balances inherent in democracy. It has been nearly 25 years since the last autocratic regime was toppled and democracy was finally reestablished. And as a country that has progressed by leaps and bounds in economic growth, social and infrastructure development and digital connectivity, Bangladesh must not fail to embrace the foundational tenets of democracy and freedom. Let me leave you with this story:

One day, the village mayor wrote a poem and read it to Nasiruddin. "Did you like the poem?" he asked.

"No, not really," Nasiruddin replied, "it wasn't very good."

The mayor was furious, and immediately sentenced Hodja to three days in jail. The next week, the mayor called Nasiruddin in his office to read him another poem. Again the mayor asked, "Well, what do you think of this one?"

Nasiruddin stood up in silence and began to walk away. The mayor called out from behind, "Where are you going?"

"To jail!" Nasiruddin replied.

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.

Satire can be embarrassing, irksome and even hurtful for its targets. That is because satire holds up a mirror to societies and governments, who seldom like what they see. Satire renders its targets and their actions absurd; hilarious even.

ADNAN R AMIN

ONE day, the town's new conqueror asked Nasiruddin Hodja, "If I were a slave, how much would I cost?" "Five hundred toman," Hodja responded.

"What!" the conqueror shouted in great anger. "Just the clothes I'm wearing right now are worth five hundred dollars!"

"Yes," replied Nasiruddin, "I factored the clothes into my price."

Entire generations in Bangladesh grew up on the humour of Hodja and our very own Gopal Bhar. Their stories, while funny, go beyond situational comedy. They do not merely make fun of people or things. Like any good satire, they make important (and often inconvenient) statements about societies, empires and rulers. The stories ask citizens to reflect, reconsider and recalibrate. That is why serious satirists were/are, so hounded by authorities: they are not mere 'entertainers'; they are 'thinkers', 'artists' and 'revolutionaries' in their own right. They are reformer-activists armed with irony and comedy.

In every age, in every land, citizens have used satire as a flanking tactic to circumvent restrictions placed upon them. In Athenian democracy, satirical performances by comic poets - alongside town criers - were the mainstay of public awareness. Roman Hipponax's attacks are thought to have driven their targets to self-harm. The ninth-century Arab poet Al-Jahiz once implied that if dimensions of reproductive organs had anything to do with 'honour', the mule would be a Quraysh tribesman. A millennium later, in The Emperor's New Clothes, Hans Christian Andersen was not only mocking the vain emperor, but also taking a jab at the stupefied community, which dared not believe that the emperor was naked.

Our times have been illuminated by works of fiction like Orwell's Animal Farm, which gave rise to the phrase, "all animals are equal; but some animals are more equal." Slogans from the other Orwellian masterpiece 1984 - 'Freedom is Slavery' and 'War is Peace' - still ring true in the 21st century. Joseph Heller's Catch-22 was a paradoxical government policy: it stipulated that mentally-ill pilots could apply for leave from the war, but such an application would also demonstrate rationality and thus void his claim of mental illness. In reality, there would be no reprieve from war. The state of war was indefinitely definite.

In the subcontinent, works like

Satyajit Roy's Hirok Rajar Deshe (1980) stood out as seminal. In Bangladesh, Unmad the satirical magazine brought into Bangladeshi homes Tk 15 doses of social and political humour. Television presenters, columnists and authors employed political satire too. Globally, The Simpsons and Southpark gained fame as masterful adaptations of the satirical plot-devices. The work of elusive street-artist Banksy, or digital illustrator Steve Cutts for example, contain strong elements of satire.

This year, the Columbia Journalism Review named entertainer-comedian John Oliver's 'Last Week Tonight' in its highlights of global journalistic endeavors. CJR said, "Oliver is no journalist, but he consistently commits acts of journalism." Today, the names of Nasiruddin Hodja and Gopal Bhar have waned. But in their place, new jesters have popped up, to coat in callous and witty irony, the bitter pill of truth.

Of course, not everyone finds satire palatable. Some think it an unnecessary trivialisation of grave matters. Others think it a silver bullet to defeat all the evils of organised religion. Some are merely entertained. But satire is not always funny. Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal discussed the

prospect of feeding poor children to the rich for a price, thereby attaining redistribution of wealth. It was a merciless jab at the Irish apathy towards the underprivileged. So, satire can be embarrassing, irksome and even hurtful for its targets. That is because satire holds up a mirror to societies and governments, who seldom like what they see. Satire renders its targets and their actions absurd; hilarious even.

Satire often fails in spectacular ways. In 2013, Pakistani journalist Nadeem Paracha got into trouble when his piece "exposing" Malala Yousufzai as Jane, the daughter of Polish Christian missionaries went viral. Sadly, no one got the joke. The article, meant to satirise Malala-conspiracists, became a weapon in their hands. Malala doubters clocked up 30,000 shares within the first 24 hours, causing outlets in Lahore and Tehran to pick up the story.

Around the same time, a news item on 'Assam's Rape Festival' started making the social media rounds, spreading into Asia, Europe, Middle-East and Africa. It contained a description of a made-up village and horrific accounts of casual rape, accompanied by images of the naked

Sadhus during the 'Kumbh Mela' festival. First when the news was transmitted as factual, there was a lot of anger in Assam. However, many subsequently saw that it was India's track record with women's security and rising rape culture that made people believe the piece of satire.

Done right, satire packs a powerful punch. But it is entirely possible for it to lose sight of the 'impetus to improve' and start resembling smear campaigns and/or hate speech. It was this fear that led Brazil to ban satire during its 2010 elections (and reverse it weeks later). During the Arab Spring, Egyptian Bassem Youssef's satire news-show 'Bernameg' became so popular that this Icarus-of-a-host was promptly jailed by the authorities. Youssef later made it into the Time's Top 100 list of influential people.

Satire is the use of irony and ridicule with the intent of shaming a person, corporation, government or society into improvement. Note that last word: improvement. Shaming and ridiculing are mere tactics. Collective improvement is satire's raison d'être; which explains why political themes occupy such a central spot in the literary genre of satire. And if we consider that every attempt to improve

Not trumped yet



MILIA ALI

A couple of days back, I was driving down a relatively quiet country road when a speeding car hit me from behind. I didn't realise the full impact of the accident until I heard the driver of the other car ask me if I was all right. As I handed my license to the policeman who arrived within five minutes, I felt myself shivering. No, it was not the cold December draught neither was it the traumatic aftermath of the accident. It was something I had never experienced before. It was a severe bout of anxiety about the policeman noticing the surname "Ali" on my license and identifying me as a Muslim. Although the other driver's offence was obvious since my vehicle was hit from the rear, I wondered if I would be accused of speeding or some other driving offense? On reflection, I have come to realise that my anxiety arose from the recent spate of anti-Muslim propaganda, following the deadly mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, by suspected followers of ISIS.

The most outrageous reaction was that of the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. He demanded a total shutdown of

Muslims entering the United States until "our country's representatives can figure out what is going on." Earlier, Trump called for establishing a surveillance database for all Muslims living in the US. These statements may violate the basic tenets of the American Constitution, but the sad truth is that Trump's proposals were met with considerable enthusiasm from many of his supporters. The more damaging impact is that Trump's outlandish comments have sowed the seeds of hatred against all American Muslims creating a guilt-by-association situation. As a consequence, peace loving Muslims are beginning to feel insecure and alien in a country they embraced as their home.

Trump's extreme views were immediately disavowed by leading members of the Republican Party, as well as all Democratic Presidential candidates. But the moral damage has already been done. Trump's statements have in some ways set the trend for a national discourse about Muslims. More seriously, it has inflamed the hitherto latent anti-Muslim prejudice. Trump has managed to tap into the hatred, racism and xenophobia of the prejudiced right. Just as Hitler kindled resentment and hatred against the Jews. However, the only saving grace may be that we are not living in Germany in 1939 but in the United States in 2015. Hence there is very little to fear -

or so they say!

Yet I must confess that I am scared. Because these are not easy days for Muslims who live in the US and elsewhere. The horrid criminal acts in San Bernardino or Paris are not solely responsible for the rising Islamophobia. Resentment has been building up since 9/11. Today, Muslims face not one, but two, dangerous fronts. Internally they are being attacked, persecuted and killed by ruthless extremists who have hijacked the Islamic identity. On the external front, they are subjected to incantant demonisation by Conservatives and Liberals alike, aided and abetted by the anti-Islamic media. Hence, the peaceful Muslims, who are the majority, have been pushed into a defensive position where they are forced to explain to the rest of the world that the criminals who call themselves Al Qaeda, ISIL or Boko Haram are not guided by Islamic principles but by their misguided ideologies and agendas.

Fortunately, President Obama's administration reacted to Trump by terming his demand as "totally contrary to our values as Americans", pointing to the Bill of Rights' protection of freedom of religion, and noted the "extraordinary contributions" Muslim Americans have made to the United States. It also emphasised the fact that the leaders of the

ISIL want to portray the current violence as a war between the world and Islam, and people like Trump are helping their cause by alienating the majority of Muslims who are against the ISIL ideology. In the process, they are destroying the trust base between communities in the country.

I digressed from my initial story about the accident into a somewhat controversial trajectory. However, the digression was relevant, since I feared that the media hype against Muslims may result in some form of discriminatory behavior by the police toward me. For a few fleeting moments, I felt vulnerable and disempowered. In case you are wondering how the story ended - to my surprise, the policeman smiled and asked me if I was hurt and needed medical attention. When I reassured him I did not, he returned my license adding, "Ma'am, the other driver has admitted his fault. His insurance will take care of your car. Your driving record will not be affected."

As I heaved a sigh of relief, I wondered if it was just my lucky day. Or is there still fairness and humanity left in this world to make it worthwhile for ordinary people like us to give a tough fight against Trump's intolerance and bigotry and also the radicalism crippling our faith?

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Trump's statements have in some ways set the trend for a national discourse about Muslims. More seriously, it has inflamed the hitherto latent anti-Muslim prejudice. Trump has managed to tap into the hatred, racism and xenophobia of the prejudiced right.

QUOTABLE Quote

ELLA BAKER
(Civil rights and human rights activist)

In order to see where we are going, we not only must remember where we have been, but we must understand where we have been.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Lunar sight
7 Food writer Sheraton
11 Take out
12 Shortly
13 One
14 Pony's pull
15 Wizards
16 Art class staple
17 Amorphous mass
18 Force unit
19 Aid in crime
21 Put a stop to
22 Web master's figure
25 Relieve
26 Chicken tenders
27 Pencil part
29 Moolah
33 Jacket flap
34 Unbilled role
35 Pay to play
36 Official documents
37 Those people
38 Pay back
39 Dumbo's wings

DOWN
1 Cake bit
2 Kidney-related
3 Pedro's pal
4 Pledge drive reward
5 Nights before
6 Spectrum end
7 Showy parrot
8 Highly worried
9 Joe and Jelly Roll
10 Mean
16 Small, to Simone
18 Not in a million years
20 Angled edge
22 Voracious fish
23 Travel kit plug
24 Manhunt target
25 Tell
28 Appears
30 Add a change to
31 Suit fabric
32 Cheated, in slang
34 Spelunking site
36 Skillet

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

THE GENERAL CHOSE THIS CAMPSITE FOR ITS BEAUTIFUL VIEW. HE HOPES YOU ENJOY IT.

SO ENJOY IT, YOU @###*!!

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

ZOE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN OUR BED?

I HAD A BAD DREAM.

POOR THING! WHAT WAS IT ABOUT?

SLEEPING IN MY OWN BED.