

# Murder of Hindu priest

## Yet another assault on our pluralist fabric

**W**E vehemently condemn the attack on a Hindu temple and the murder of a priest, that too on a day which, for Bangladeshis, symbolises plurality, tolerance and secularism. As per our reports, unnamed miscreants attacked a Hindu temple in Debiganj upazila of Panchagarh at 6.30 am yesterday. They stabbed the 50-year-old priest to death and fired several gun shots and exploded crude bombs while fleeing the spot, leaving a devotee critically injured.

We strongly feel that the attack – the third of its kind on a minority religious leader in the last five months – cannot be brushed aside as an isolated incident but should be looked at from the broader perspective of escalating extremism and intolerance in the country. Last year, we witnessed attacks perpetrated against the minority community, including the blasts in the historic Kantaji Temple in Kaharol upazila in December, attack on a Shia mosque in Shibganj upazila in November, and bomb explosions at Hossaini Dalan in Dhaka in October. These incidents, in addition to the attacks on foreign nationals and freethinkers, have led to a regrettable scenario in which we – in particular our minority communities – feel increasingly vulnerable.

We have consistently called upon the government to address this looming threat to our inclusive, syncretic and secular fabric, and to arrest the perpetrators and masterminds of such violence. We would like to know what, if any, progress has been made on the previous investigations, and remind the authorities of the urgency with which these perpetrators ought to be apprehended. Unless we can tackle this menace of extremism head-on, we risk losing the ideals which form our national identity.

# Child domestic worker set on fire

## Law and society must provide protection

**T**HE news of 12-year-old Purnima, being set alight by her employer and then left in a warehouse without any medical treatment, fills us with horror and disgust. That the couple who did this to her worked in collusion to carry on such torture on a child is all the more shocking. The mistress of the house regularly beat her and her husband did nothing to stop her. Rather, he abetted in the torture.

Such a depraved mindset has been manifested in many other cases that have been reported where the husband, wife and even children have participated in sadistic acts against domestic workers. The younger they are, the more vulnerable they become to the violence inflicted by their employers. Despite a draft policy being approved by the government that includes giving basic rights to domestic workers as guaranteed under the labour law, we are yet to see it being implemented. In the case of child domestic workers, their work often falls in the 'hazardous jobs' category and therefore should not be allowed in the first place. Unfortunately sheer poverty and the idea that their child will at least be fed three square meals force parents to send him/her to work in households.

We must therefore have clear legal provisions whereby a child worker can report abuse and be rescued before it is too late. While horrific cases like that of Purnima, who has severe burns all over her body, make the news, there are thousands of other children working in households who are regularly being tortured by their employers. Such behaviour must be publicly shamed and punished through a stringent legal process.

## COMMENTS

**"18 years as per law, 16 years in rules"**  
 (February 18, 2016)

**Rabeya Rahman**  
 Girls must not be encouraged to marry before they start earning for themselves.

**Bushra Mollick**  
 That's disgusting. A 16-year old girl is a GIRL, not a woman. I think both girls and boys should focus on their education first and then get married (if they want to) once they're in their 20s.

**Lihan Mothin**  
 The Bangladesh government is taking a step backward not forward.

**"Under-19 is just the beginning"**  
 (February 18, 2016)

**Waziuddin Chowdhury**  
 Virat Kohli was the captain of the Indian U-19 team. Look at him now! These young men are the future. I wish them all the success.

**Chiku Sharon**  
 This U-19 team is full of confidence.

**Toufique Anam**  
 There is no doubt about their talent and they have already proved it.

**Md Anwar Khan**  
 I hope Miraz will make our country proud one day.

MD. HARUN OR RASHID

**T**HERE is hardly any need to emphasise the importance of free media for democratic functioning in Bangladesh. The essential elements for good governance include participation by as broad a section of the population as possible and the accountability and transparency of the service providers. All of these qualities require the action of free, independent and vigorous information media. A free media which actually monitors, investigates and criticises the administration's policies and actions is a fundamental enabler of good governance. Yet, in much of the world, media freedom is under increasing attack.

A long line of liberal political theorists including John Locke and James Madison argue that the existence of a free and independent media within each nation is essential to the process of democratisation. Media reflects how a society functions and thus it is often considered the "mirror of a society". It is possible to comment on the state of a country's governance, as well as its commitment to democracy and economic and social development, by looking at whether it respects its citizens and its media. Media acts as a bridge between the state and its citizens. By creating public support on different rights of citizenship and avenues of public scrutiny, it keeps governments under pressure to be more transparent and accountable. The stronger the media is in a country, the better its ability to play the role of a watchdog. The more it is able to play this role, the more the citizens are informed. Thus, in the presence of a dynamic media, the government is pushed to perform and serve its citizens better.

In the process of democratisation, one of the first stages in the transition to democracy is deregulation of the state's control over the media. The public, thereby, receives greater exposure to a wider variety of cultural information products and ideas through access to independent media. In the second stage of democratic consolidation and human development, journalists play a greater role in ensuring transparency and accountability in governance by playing the role of a watchdog. Thus, freedom of media is considered one of the most important instruments of democracy and governance, and is given due importance

by different national and international agencies, including the World Bank governance report under its Voice and Accountability component.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the freedom of speech and expression under Article 39. The history of the media in Bangladesh is also embedded in the birth of the country. Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, the radio-

of media in Bangladesh is impressive. Over the last decade, both print and broadcast media have experienced remarkable advancement in terms of number. But, despite its growth in numbers, the question arises whether the media in Bangladesh can enjoy a constructive and favourable environment. During authoritarian regimes, governments introduced several

in Bangladesh is "partly free". The World Press Freedom Index 2014 of Reporters without Borders ranked Bangladesh as 146th out of 180 countries. Besides, Amnesty International also stated that Bangladeshi journalists, who write about corruption, judicial irregularities, and human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, rape in custody and other gender-based violence, are particularly at risk of being harassed by police or security agencies, detained on politically motivated charges and tortured or otherwise ill-treated. Journalists in Bangladesh face various legal restrictions on free expression, some of which seem incompatible with democratic values, and these restrictions, to various degrees, deter media freedom in the country. In the last decade, successive democratically elected governments enacted a number of polices and ordinances including the recent National Broadcasting Policy 2014. Under this new broadcast policy, the government intends to establish a National Broadcasting Commission. The objectives behind this initiative, according to the government policy statement, are to bring all the media outlets into one integrated structure and to help build up an independent, pluralistic, accountable and responsive broadcasting system in Bangladesh. However, national and international journalists and media activists have already expressed reservations about specific aspects of the National Broadcasting Policy 2014.

Moreover, the state of freedom of media in Bangladesh is still a matter of concern, in spite of its huge growth in terms of quantity, as also evident by the State of Governance in Bangladesh report 2014-2015 of the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. Most perceptible deterioration has been observed in the areas of regulatory impediments and political environment faced by journalists for media performance. The environment in which media representatives and journalists operate leaves much room for improvement, which may contribute to the overall improvement in the process of democratic governance and accountability in Bangladesh.

The writer is a senior researcher at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University.



broadcasting centre of Bengali nationalist forces during the Bangladesh Liberation War, played a vital role in the liberation struggle, including broadcasting the declaration of Independence and providing vital moral boost to Bangladeshis during the war. International media also played a very positive role during the war to attract global attention. The recent development

measures to crack down on media critics. However, since the rebirth of democracy in 1991, despite a less restricted environment and more media activity, even democratically elected governments continued a policy of media clampdown when faced with critical voices from them.

According to the recent Freedom House Index, the environment for media

# Vemula and Afzal Guru

PRASENJIT CHOWDHURY

**D**EATH does always make a statement, carrying upon itself the testament of finality. It evokes strong emotions and multiple narratives. A secessionist and insurgent might be worshipped as a revolutionary or a freedom fighter. But when one draws upon cosmic or millenarian tales of victimhood, say in the instance of Rohith Vemula's suicide, or Afzal Guru's hanging, the larger picture subsumes the immediate. Which narrative would occupy the broadest mindscape militates against what we perceive as right and wrong.

Let's take the instance of Rohith Vemula first. On the face of it, he died not of a cosmic cause but due to a student brawl gone dangerously awry. Or due to a poor control mechanism of the self, or a sudden rush of self-pity. Arguably, Rohith would not have died had he not been sucked into the cesspool of student politics, had the Hyderabad Central University authorities not pushed him to take the extreme step, had the charges of 'manhandling' ABVP leader N Susheel by ASA activists in August 2015 not surfaced, had not the HRD ministry, under a far-right government, letter-bombed the university authorities, or more remotely, had not Yakub Menon been hanged, and had not the Modi government been in power.

On a cosmic plane, he would not have died had he not been frustrated over a lonely childhood, and possibly, had he not been born a Dalit, though one needs to reflect on Rohith's caveat that our birth is "a fatal accident". His caste identity becomes important when we try to ascribe tales of Dalit deprivation to his death. When the government of the day tried to broaden the definition of the

term "Dalit" and extend reservations for them in the 1990s, many students opposed the move and committed suicide.

If caste was to be destroyed, as Ambedkar once remarked, its religious foundation in the Vedas and Shastras also needed to be destroyed. Hinduism, in his reckoning, had neither morality nor revolutionary force nor social utility; instead, it promoted the interests of a particular class. To Ambedkar, his revolutionary movement for the liberation and advancement of the Dalits was a battle for the reclamation of human "respectability" which has been "suppressed and mutilated" by the Hindu social system and "will continue to be suppressed and mutilated if in the political struggle the Hindus win and we [the Dalits] lose". Dalits number about 250 million and constitute over 20 percent of the country's population. Hindu nationalists today include them in the Hindu fold, but there is no general acceptance of this embrace by the Dalits.

Would the present dispensation at the Centre seek to arrest Ambedkar, posthumously, for his alleged act of apostasy and anti-nationalism? If we spare Ambedkar, we had no dearth of narratives that run counter to the 'mainstream' ideas. Should we arrest every 'renegade' cheerleader for shedding unedifying light on how Hindu nationalism and neo-liberal economic reforms are currently transforming India into a police state? Or for showing how the deliberate and systematic marginalisation of religious and ethnic minorities and the increased power of predatory corporations that engineer the displacement of the poor on a gigantic scale remain hidden under the surface of a country that projects itself as the world's

largest democracy?

Take the hanging of Afzal Guru, which the far right wants the nation to consider as just dessert for a traitor to the nation who must not be glorified; and those who oppose that view have made themselves vulnerable to the charge of treason. In the aftermath of the arrest of the JNU Students' Union (JNUSU) president Kanhaiya Kumar on a charge of sedition, the State as an entity of governance seems determined to force people to believe its viewpoint, if it fails to convince them.

The 'mainstream' narrative of the State was evident from the way in which the execution of Afzal Guru on February 9, 2013, was thought to have mollified the 'collective conscience' of the nation. The nationalists, represented by the BJP, were happy because Afzal's hanging was their imprimatur of patriotism. Our foreign policy mandarins as well as the Congress were happy that the hanging helped them score brownie points in their battle against terror.

But there were other 'anti-national' narratives as well. Consequent to Afzal's hanging, there were narratives of the putative high-handedness of the Indian Army and the STF (Special Task Force) - spells of detention, intimidation and torture. What was worse was Afzal's implication about the involvement of some STF officers in the chain of events that led to the orchestration of the Parliament attack - a charge which, even if probed, never came to the public domain - because it is a question of our national security. Our nationalist and 'patriotic' press and majoritarian voices chose to ignore the atrocities in Kashmir where tens of thousands have been killed, many more tortured, raped or were reported missing, not to forget the numerous deaths of

Indian soldiers. And when it comes to Kashmir, many versions of the truth and narratives are bandied about, and it is exceedingly difficult to separate the grain from the chaff. While wondering why Afzal is considered a "martyr" in Kashmir, we must remember that his family in Kashmir was not informed of his imminent execution, in violation of international standards on the use of the death penalty. Furthermore, his body was also not returned to the family for last rites and burial, once again in violation of rules. The unsavoury narrative is that Afzal was sentenced to a rigorous "trial by media" and that the trial court denied him a lawyer.

Noam Chomsky was a brutal critic of 'mainstream' America. Arundhati Roy is known for her 'anti-national' perceptions. Kanhaiya Kumar might be guilty of misplaced priorities. Multiple narratives also record that on December 13, 2001, in the course of an attack on Parliament, six policemen and an employee of the legislature had died... and this could well deserve an 'event'. On December 24, 1999, one of the passengers and crew of the Indian Airlines flight IC 814 was taken hostage by a group of five hijackers. Ripan Katyal succumbed while his assailants were released. Nathuram Godse could be defended or etched in stone in a memorial. As a democracy, we must learn to pay attention to all the narratives even when strongly opposed to them. As for the arrests or hangings, there are "worthier" persons like the underworld don Dawood Ibrahim, the 26/11 mastermind and LeT founder, Hafiz Saeed, and the dreaded terrorist Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi.

**-ANN/The Statesman**  
 The writer is a freelance contributor.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

**Aussies' lame excuse**  
 Despite assurance of top level security by the Bangladesh government, the Australian cricket board has once again decided not to send their team to Bangladesh in the U19 WC match. Our nation has hosted numerous ICC events in the past, not to forget the recently concluded BPL T20 and the Under-19 World Cup. Bangladesh is in top form now; some may assume that they are not willing to visit Bangladesh in fear of being Banglashed!  
**Nasif Ferdaus**  
 On e-mail

**Apologise and compensate before advising**  
 This has reference to the letter by Mr. Kajal Chatterjee ("Open your eyes", TDS, Feb. 16) in response to my letter on prejudice of western democracies in preaching human rights to developing and under developed nations. How else can we describe the incessant bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria by the so called pro-human rights and value-based western democracies killing hundreds and thousands of people and displacing millions? We should certainly keep our eyes open and appreciate

the dedicated worship of western democracies and their false standard of human rights that impressed Mr. Chatterjee so much. Western nations should first apologise and pay compensation for the brutal crimes and violent human rights abuses they indiscriminately committed over centuries against Third World nations before giving them advice.  
**Saikat Kumar Basu**  
 Lethbridge, AB, Canada