

The challenge before us



MAHFUZ ANAM

The challenge now before all of us is to determine how deep and wide the spread of extremist ideologies is, how entrenched is the threat and, more importantly, how we can effectively fight it.

THE Indian subcontinent was partitioned in 1947 on the basis of religion. Bangladesh was born 31 years later, in 1971, on the basis of nationalism, democracy and secularism. Democracy we lost first, in the mid-seventies and then in the early eighties, and are yet to recover it fully. Secularism, which was on a gradual decline, now faces its most severe threat.

As a freedom fighter I remember, as I sat glued to a one-band radio, on the evening of December 16 1971, along with others in a guerrilla camp, listening to the surrender ceremony of the Pakistani army to the joint command in Dhaka and shouting "Joy Bangla" (Victory to Bangla), I was certain that my new country would be a place of prosperity, freedom and religious harmony. Never again would a Muslim or a Hindu lose his or her life for religion.

On the night of July 1, as most inhabitants of Dhaka stayed up all night watching the hostage tragedy on television unfold and hoping that the end would not be as tragic and gruesome as we were beginning to fear, I could hardly imagine that it was the same country to whose birth I, with millions of others, had contributed.

Bangladesh - the people, government, civil society, intelligentsia, media, etc. - is still reeling from the events of July 1 that saw the killing of

20 people; 17 foreigners and three Bangladeshis. Two police personnel also died while trying to fight the terrorists in the first rescue attempt. It was not only the act of cold blooded murder but also its bestial nature and the age of the perpetrators-between 20 and 28 years-that has raised many questions as to where the country has come in terms of values and beliefs in its post-independence period.

As a people, we firmly believed that our culture and history, especially the syncretic Islam that we practice here, and our religiosity that blended our diversity and devotion to produce a living culture of tolerance and openness, was enough to protect us from the extremism that seems to afflict so many other countries where Islam is the dominant religion.

We proved to be so thoroughly and tragically wrong.

Our government made the cardinal mistake of being in denial from the start, thinking that any admission, either of the seriousness of the initial killing of bloggers, atheists and LGBT activists, or of any outside link will provide an excuse for the international community to term us as terrorist or a terror prone country with all its paraphernalia of negative 'advisories' and other possible restrictions and actions.

This led to the initial downplaying of the gruesome murders of writers, publishers and 'free thinkers' as "isolated incidents" and not taking timely steps to galvanize serious and effective preventive measures that could have prepared us better to handle the situation that we unfortunately faced on July 1.

The ever vigilant Bengali intellectuals, known for their anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles and for being the first to raise their voice against all forms of oppression and for their uncompromising stance against extremism and for secularism, appear to have failed to fully grasp what was happening around them. Instead of making a robust call for waking

up to the fundamentalist threat they made the fatal error of allowing themselves to be sucked into partisan politics and rather than being the voice of freedom and democracy that they traditionally were, they became a tool of the two dominant political parties who, for their own narrow ends, flirted with the fundamentalist forces whenever it suited them.

Civil society, especially the grassroots based non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which were spread throughout different corners of the country, appear also to have failed to grasp the spread of extremism. For, ordinarily they should have been among the first to sense what was happening on the ground in the remote areas. Here again, the government, in its deep suspicion of the role of the NGOs and mainly considering them to be peddling a donor-driven agenda, probably ignored whatever warning they might have given, if at all.

Media must also accept its share of the blame for not going deep enough with investigative reports to challenge the government's narrative that these were "isolated" incidents, and that everything was under control with the leadership repeating for years the policy of "zero tolerance" of extremism; all the while it grew under the very feet of the administration. A few who tried to project a different story were branded as trying to damage the image of the country and for working for interests inimical to that of the country.

The challenge now before all of us is to determine how deep and wide the spread of extremist ideologies is, how entrenched is the threat and, more importantly, how we can effectively fight it.

The first question to face is where is all this extremism coming from? So far the culprit was thought to be poverty, ignorance and the Madrassa based education. The rural religious schools were generally considered to be the breeding ground of fundamentalist ideals and activists. However, the

killings at Holey Artisan Bakery showed that only one of the five kids that carried out the massacre came from a Madrassa. As we discover the identity of others it is becoming increasingly clear that most of these kids come from middle and upper middle class, have studied at expensive English medium schools and private universities, few had even studied abroad. They were the usual boisterous kids, donning T-shirts and jeans, frequenting hangouts like youngsters of that age do everywhere in the world. So what had gone wrong with these kids and at what point in their lives?

There is no denying the fact that the overall impact of religion in general has significantly risen in the country. It is more a part of our lives than ever before. More men and women are seen in religious clothing and men sporting beards. Friday prayers are far more widely participated in than ever before. Religion, no doubt, is in the air.

People of Bangladesh are traditionally religious. However, our religiosity must be clearly distinguished from extremism some signs of which we see today. It is also true that there has been an overall corrosion of secular principles in Bangladesh. It is a fact that when bloggers, atheists, so-called 'free thinkers' and LGBT activists were being murdered one after another there was a murmur that since they criticised religion and some professed not to believe in any deity, somehow, deserved to be 'punished'.

So where do we go from here?

We are still to gauge the full impact of terrorism on our lives. But the 'normal' is no longer so. Personal lives are restrained, social lives significantly narrowed and public gatherings are few and far between. Shopping malls and restaurants are almost empty and roadside shopping is down. Factories are running and our major export, the readymade garment sector, is still holding in terms of order. However,

many buyers are refusing to come to Bangladesh. Many countries and foreign businesses are considering declaring Bangladesh as a non-family post, with some having already done so. Some big international conferences - many business related ones - are being shifted away from Dhaka.

The good news is that our government appears to have moved away from the denial mode and by the large-scale anti-militancy operation that we are seeing it appears we have taken the threat seriously. However, so far the moves have been by the police and other law enforcers. Those familiar with religion based extremist movements say that these are not mere law and order problems that can be solved simply by use of force. The challenge here is to "win the hearts and minds" for which there must be motivational campaigns alongside the use of force. The campaign at Dhaka University launched last Monday, is a step in the right direction but needs to be replicated all over the country.

Bangladesh has a long history of resilience and of beating the odds. From a country of disasters we are now a country of doers and achievers, almost always proving our skeptics wrong. It is my deeply held belief that in fighting back extremism we can prove to be equally successful. The balance between religion and culture ingrained in our tradition, the hospitality inherent in our society, our unique blend of Islamic heritage and Bengali heritage, our fundamental nature of tolerance, our tradition of openness and acceptance of the 'other', our rich heritage of political struggle have prepared us well to resist a fundamentalist and extremist thrust.

It is what makes us unique as Bangladeshis that will, in the end, help us win in this battle against extremism.

The writer is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*, Bangladesh. This is part of a series of columns by editors from the *Asian News Network (ANN)* and published in member newspapers across the region.

Post hoc ergo propter hoc

The dangers of being judgemental

ZUBIER ABDULLAH

THERE is a tendency for people from all walks of life, be it in the West or in Bangladesh, to opt for the easy answers - however erroneous those answers may be. It's a common human trait and we all do it - we jump to the conclusion that just because of one bad apple, the whole bunch is considered spoilt and rotten.

It is fundamentally the difference between correlation and causation. What do I mean by this? For those of us who have never taken a class in statistics, this might seem a tricky concept to grasp. Basically, it means that just because two things happen together does not mean that they are in anyway related to each other. That is correlation. My favourite example is that of a man known as Bobby Henderson. Mr. Henderson argues that the recent effects of global warming can be attributed to the global decline in pirate populations throughout the world. He further goes on to say that Somalia, which has the largest concentration of pirates throughout the world, is the country with the lowest carbon emissions per person.

While his claim is absurd, it is absurd to prove a point - that some things do not have anything to do with each other.

This brings me to my point in this article. Recently, on most media outlets, there has been a vilification of my alma mater. Statements from such esteemed people like the Home Minister and others have portrayed my university as a hotbed for terrorism and extremism. The Pro-VC of the university has been arrested, and in the due course of time, it will be established whether he indeed was complicit in the attacks or whether he was an unknowing abettor. Nibras Islam, a student of North South for three semesters, was also involved in the attack. Abir Rahman, the perpetrator of the Sholakia attack was purportedly a student of North South as well.



ILLUSTRATION: GARY WATERS

As were the killers of the secular blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider in 2013.

Yet, if we dig a bit deeper and not fall to the rhetoric of because-X-then-Y, we would find more clues as to why these students, all comparable to myself, would choose the path of extremism.

In Bangladesh, there is something which we do not talk about. It is not a subject easily communicated with our friends, family or teachers. It is a subject treated with denial in this country. It is alienation. It is depression. In Bangladesh, it is almost impossible to communicate with your parents that you are having a tough time. In our dog-eat-dog society, the value that society places on us is determined by only a few things - how good your grades are and how much money you are making at your job. Tell your friends that you are depressed and they will most likely respond with "Arey dost, thik hoe jabe. Tension korish nah" (Oh, don't worry dude, it's going to be alright!), which does almost nothing. It matters not if you are enjoying the work you are doing, if you are having difficulty in your studies or whether you are even enjoying what

you are studying at all. There is always the immense pressure from all around us to do well in them. Whatever the cost to our sanity and health.

And if we don't, we are considered failures. We are the dregs of society and burdened by this guilt, we are unable to communicate this sense of failure to our loved ones. We become isolated. In doing so, we become easy pickings to those willing to turn our minds over to darker possibilities.

The media likes to jump at easy conclusions and run their headlines with them, and to most people, the headline is the story. Yet, the complexities of real life cannot be summed up in six words or less. They say that many students of North South University are potential terrorists. They say that all Madrassa students are likely to be extremists. They say that because Nibras was jilted in 2014, he became a terrorist.

Yet, none of those are completely true - they are not the sole factors. Do all people who suffer heartbreak turn to extremism? No - billions and billions of people throughout human history can support that.

What about all private university students? Once again - no. Thousands of students from North South University, from BRAC University and other private universities in Bangladesh are working and studying throughout the world, toiling namelessly to make a positive impact in it.

Their contributions should not be besmirched. After all, by making these statements, how are we any different from demagogues like Donald Trump. We are making the same leaps in logic as the man who believes that all Mexicans are rapists and that all Muslims are terrorists.

If we as a society continue to keep

doing this, to alienate members of our own with our words and our actions, as we have alienated people who have studied in madrasas for years past, we will pay the price. Whether it will be through more suicides or, Heaven forbid, more attacks like Holey, we will all pay the price.

All of this should be considered as a wake-up call to all strata of Bangladesh. They are among us and it is only through greater communication and greater willingness to find the difficult answers can we, as a society, grow stronger.

The writer is an engineer.

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Request for Proposal

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Katalyst is looking to conduct a research on the following topic: **THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS ON THE AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES OF FARMERS.**

Katalyst wants to work with a research organization that can carry forward the work on above mentioned topic.

Details regarding the Request for Proposal and the templates for submitting the proposals are available at: <http://katalyst.com.bd/procurement-of-services/>

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