

CRUELTY'S CHILDREN

History and society in the shaping of terrorism today

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"The past is never dead. It's not even past".
William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

AMONG the anxieties, fears and confusions generated by the grisly tragedy that occurred on July 1 at the Holy Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, one refrain was fairly consistent – how could some young men, presumably from relatively affluent and educated families, not only become radicalised but also engage in the horrific, detached, surreal brutality through which they killed their victims. The sheer wickedness of some young men repeatedly, deliberately, cold-heartedly hacking, stabbing and decapitating people to death, left us traumatized. How COULD they? Their brutality became the story, and our response reflected the worldwide horror and disgust at the tactics used by terrorists of their particular ilk.

But, cruelty is not new to human history. Biblical stories and ancient texts indicate a dark and sinister side that lurks just below the surface, and can be summoned quite easily. The books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy describe entire groups of people who had been brutalised, at times, exterminated (e.g., Canaanites, the Amalekites, the Midianites, the Benjamites, the Gibeonites, the Ephraimites, and others), and refer to people being killed through smiting, stoning, burning, boiling, being trampled by horses and fed to the beasts, of little ones being "dashed against the stone", and even cannibalism involving parents and their children.

Many stories in various other sources are not much kinder. Beheadings were not very uncommon, e.g., Arjun killing Jayadratha whose severed head is made to fall on his meditating father's lap, Imam Husain's head being hoisted on a lance and carried to Yazid's court in Damascus, Saint John the Baptist's head being presented on a platter to Herod. Moreover, human beings had been most creative and nasty in devising forms of torture to punish, intimidate and kill, and violence against people perceived as "others" had been endemic throughout history.

One can suggest that we are referring to old texts and events that have little bearing today. After all, it may be argued, have we not evolved morally, learned from our mistakes, become more enlightened, more sensitive, more "human"? Surely, multiple treaties, conventions and protocols, have been formulated to establish some universal principles and regulate our conduct even in war. Surely, the message of the common humanity of man (aided by travel, technology and trade) must have gradually prevailed over the calls for bigotry and brutishness.

But the 20th century did not offer much hope in that direction. It was by far the most violent in human history, and atrocities were many, severe and relentless. War deaths in the last century totaled over 187 million (including 15-18 m in WWI and 60-70m in WWII). Brutality emerged from being mere public spectacle and political statement to being clinical and bureaucratic. This was most clearly reflected in the cold efficiency through which the "final solution" imposed on Jews was undertaken at Auschwitz, Birkenau, Dachau, Buchenwald, Sobibor, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen and other concentration camps. Stalinist purges and Mao's policies decimated millions, and localised wars and internal conflicts after WWII killed hundreds of millions more (those with more than a hundred thousand casualties included Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India-Pakistan, Philippines, Rwanda-Burundi, Cambodia, Laos, Angola, Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, Congo-Zaire, Iraq-Iran, Nigeria-Biafra and many others), and continue today.

One may get the misleading impression from

the short list above that violence was being committed in the poor, non-white, "third world" countries, while the industrial, capitalist, developed countries were more moral, refined, and peaceful. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, till 1945, more Europeans were probably killed by other Europeans than the rest of the world put together, and it was Western colonialism, racism and arrogance that was largely responsible for most of the deaths elsewhere. It was the French in Algeria, the British in South Asia, the Dutch and Germans in southern Africa, the Spanish and Portuguese in Central and Latin America, and everybody in the Middle East, that created most of the problems in those areas. They exploited the region's resources, introduced new and lethal instruments of violence, divided the people, created artificial countries with arbitrary borders, and ruled ruthlessly in order to benefit themselves and advance their colonial ambitions.

The US was late to the game of acquiring external possessions (its first formal colony was the Philippines in 1898). But it quickly became an imperialist on steroids. It carved out countries at will (e.g., Panama); engaged in assassinations of foreign leaders (e.g., Lumumba, Allende); overthrew democratic governments and established puppet dictatorships (e.g., Iran, Indonesia, Guatemala, Chile); invaded countries on flimsy grounds (Nicaragua, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Grenada) and, at times, on lies (e.g., Iraq); imposed crippling sanctions according to its interests (e.g., Cuba); destabilised entire regions (e.g., Central America, but most egregiously, the Middle East today); and became the foremost salesman of armaments in the world.

It perfected sophisticated weapons of mass destruction and was the only country to use nuclear weapons in August 1945, immediately incinerating thousands, and affecting millions later. It used chemical weapons in Vietnam (the iconic picture of that war was the naked girl fleeing her burning village), and dropped almost 7 million tons of bombs on it (with some in Laos and Cambodia) which was twice the tonnage used in the European and Asian theaters in WWII. It has used CIA "dark sites", rendered detainees without trial for months, tortured prisoners. It uses drone attacks in undeclared wars to kill people at a distance where civilian casualties are many and mostly uncouneted.

Internally, it forcibly annexed about half the territory of Mexico in 1848, Native Americans were often massacred, dispossessed and ushered into reservations in violation of treaty obligations, and African-Americans were treated with unspeakable inhumanity. Even in the middle of the 20th century Black people had been lynched (often in festive, picnic environments), and Black kids accused of "crimes", such as whistling at a white woman, had been beaten to death so badly that their own mothers could not recognise their faces (e.g., the 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955).

For America and the Western countries today to shake their heads, wag their fingers, and lecture the world on how terrible today's "others" are, is an exercise in historical amnesia and self-righteous hypocrisy of rather spectacular proportions. This is all the more ironic because it is obvious that, in many ways, they have been complicit in creating the very Frankensteins they battle today.

The realities in our own country are similarly not entirely consistent with our professed self-image as a tolerant and tender-hearted people. We have engaged in communal frenzy; poured acid on women's faces; fire-bombed passenger-carrying buses; assassinated leaders; tied a boy to a pole and mercilessly beaten him to death (with spectators milling around); made people disappear, perish in cross-fire, or die in police custody; murdered children by pumping air

through their rectum; gouged out the eyes of a university student studying abroad because her husband suspected her of infidelity; killed student leaders because of factional in-fighting over turf and resources; attacked, sometimes burned, ashrams, baul akhras, and temples; wrongfully occupied properties owned by religious minorities and indigenous peoples; treated the poor with contempt and subjected them to persistent micro-aggressions; and took almost two months and two autopsies even to determine if a young woman had been raped by three criminals. Our outrage, in most cases, was only selective and fleeting, our system of justice not very reassuring, our callousness increasingly palpable.

This essay is not meant to minimise either the horrors or the dangers that terrorists acting in the name of Islam currently represent. NONE of their heinous acts – the murder of innocents in San Bernardino, Orlando, Nice, Paris, Moscow, Mumbai, London, Madrid, Brussels, Frankfurt, the

corruption and alienation are not necessarily reacting in the same manner; their willingness, at times their eagerness, to die for a cause that is neither well-articulated nor seemingly realistic; and their fierce impatience with free speech, their anti-historicism (which leads them to destroy vestiges of their own glorious past), and their pronounced misogyny, all complicate simplistic explanations of this complex and daunting phenomenon.

Recoiling at their "barbarism" is naïve at best. Human cruelty is nothing new, or novel, or alien, or atypical. It is part of the "human condition" and implicit in our texts, traditions, narratives and practices. Let us not distract ourselves with the revulsion at the macabre and the ghoulish, and allow it to confound the essential questions that we must ask today – why is this happening now, what is the appeal of these extremists, how best do we counter it? The rest is just theatre, an epiphenomenon, perhaps a freak-



targeting of students at Garissa University in Kenya, tourists in Tunisia, a boy's school in Peshawar, a Russian plane over Egypt, girls in northern Nigeria, Christians celebrating Easter in Lahore, cartoonists in Paris, film-makers in Amsterdam, bloggers in Bangladesh, a Sufi qawwal in Pakistan, a priest in Saint-Etienne, an archivist in Palmyra, enslaved Yazidi women in Iraq, and many more, can EVER be excused. Every single one is an ugly reminder of their bloody-mindedness, totalitarian sentiments, and cowardice.

These self-proclaimed jihadists are criminals thrice over – in defaming and perverting their faith, in seducing some vulnerable and impressionable youth to their vision of nihilist despair, and in inspiring, sometimes directing, terrible offenses against humanity. They must be condemned and neutralised.

However, it must also be pointed out that, from a scholar's perspective, the fact that the vast majority of people victimised by them are other Muslims; that other people experiencing relatively similar pressures of inequity, instability,

show. We must explore the underlying causes. We must accept responsibility.

Both the West, and we (including Bangladeshis, and the larger Muslim world), must realise that the awkward and perilous situation we face today came about because we have all contributed to creating the enabling conditions that made it possible and, perhaps in some ways, inevitable. Before we blame others we must subject ourselves to some self-interrogation that is open-minded, honest, and unflinching. It is entirely possible for us to climb out of this dismal situation. After all, the mischief mongers are few, their message is hateful and ignorant, and their frustrations, resentments and desperations have proximate causes that may be identified and addressed. But, the response has to be measured, informed and sensitive to civil liberties and human rights, and not be spasmodic, intellectually lazy, or driven by partisan agendas. That, ultimately, is both our challenge and our opportunity.

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Off the Cuff



AHMEDE HUSSAIN

There is no denying that Bangladesh's standing in the world as a nation is at stake, also in question is its economic growth, especially the much sought after foreign investments.

WORDS, wrongly used, can demolish the good name of a force built over the years, and can make an operation, based on days of intelligence, look incongruous. The Gulshan Attack has indeed taught us so.

From giving operational details live on television to calling a chef a terrorist, we come across serious flaws in the way the law enforcers have disbursed information through the media during the Gulshan tragedy. On several occasions, we have come across newspaper reports attributed to the law enforcers that are littered with inconsistency. Not only the police but our politicians also at times commit such faux pas. The most recent of its kind has been committed by two government functionaries. One of them has reportedly said that there could be a string of terrorist attacks in the country soon (jugantor.com, July 31, 2016), while another functionary had stated that in a few days there would be no terrorist in the country, to which he later added that there would be more attacks

in this month (ittefaq.com, July 30, 2016).

Both of them should have kept the information, even more so if it was obtained as a part of an intelligence report, to themselves and shared it with only the law enforcing agencies, if they were not already privy to it, instead of taking a path of action that is likely to foment a sense of uncertainty in the public. We hope they have disclosed the reason for their apprehension to the law enforcers, this is especially so when the country is still reeling from the shock of the Gulshan tragedy and are in desperate search for news that will quell their fear.

Then there are politicians who routinely blame the opposition for funding terrorists or ideologically supporting them. This is injudicious to say the least, for at a time of crisis like this, we need to be united and cut across party lines and predilections to successfully combat the menace of terrorism. If one has credible information on someone's link with terrorists, is it not natural that one should contact the law enforcers so that the militants are caught and their network is destroyed? We must not forget that division in our polity will work as the biggest headhunter for terrorists. Moreover, such baseless comments deflect focus

from the issue of identifying the terrorists. Also, it runs the risk of influencing the course of the investigation process. When individuals holding important portfolios make use of a serious issue such as terrorism for political mileage, we get the impression that the issue is being made light of.

It also needs to be pointed out that the media has to be careful of the way it covers terrorist attacks and terrorism. This is especially important for the online news outlets where names of 'masterminds' and 'financiers' of different local terror outfits regularly surface, quoting unnamed police officials. In most of the cases, these are fabricated stories. To make matters even more grievous, some newspapers tend to rely on gossips and rumours circulating in the social media to make reports that are shoddy to say the least and are also harmful for the country's anti-terrorism efforts. The false report of a supposed terror attack on a shopping mall in the capital that was circulating on Facebook is a case in point. We are still in the dark as to how the fictitious news had spread its wings, but it found an eager audience in some newspapers, who added fuel to panic by running reports without corroborating those with any credible sources. Any such news must

be cross-checked and highest ethical standards of journalism need to be maintained.

There is no denying that Bangladesh's standing in the world as a nation is at stake, also in question is its economic growth, especially the much sought after foreign investments. When it comes to terror attacks, every official concerned need not comment on it. The job of talking to the media or informing the public can be delegated to certain individuals in the force and it is advisable that information on terrorist activities and warnings be disbursed through one official source.

It is time we formed a response team with a tactical commander and a spokesperson who would brief the media at a reasonable interval about the progress of a certain operation. A counter-terrorism strategy needs to be devised, delegating responsibilities to different law enforcing agencies. A committee can be formed to oversee and coordinate our counter-terrorism efforts. Our way of life has never been threatened like this. It is time to forge national unity and stand united as a nation.

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