

Discrimination and marginalisation of ethnic minorities

Affirmative action policy required to correct systematic flaws

THE constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for all, but in reality particular communities, especially the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh, are discriminated against and continually pushed to increasing marginalisation. This week, as we observed International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, the systematic forms of discrimination that we as a nation have failed to address were highlighted by Research Initiatives, Bangladesh.

Nation's seek to redress historic wrongs and injustices towards particularly disadvantaged communities through affirmative action. The concept of affirmative action seeks to redress systematic and structural discrimination through official policy. While Bangladesh has safety-net programmes in place, the marginalised are being deprived of them due to lack of proper implementation and monitoring. Speakers at the seminar also pointed widespread corruption and lack of accountability, and that these communities are being discriminated in public services. The very programmes that are supposed to be in place to help the disadvantaged and the marginalised are being dominated by the influential.

It has been said that the whole is as strong as its weakest part. Not only are we failing to ensure the rights of the ethnic minorities in our country, we are pushing them towards further marginalisation. It urges the government to see to it that the laudable policies that are in place are not being undone by the unscrupulous few. Of course, accountability, transparency and monitoring are key to ensure this. At the same time, we would also ask of the government to enact policy that aims to empower and give access to opportunities to ethnic minorities in particular, not only to save them from further marginalisation, but for the welfare and development of the country as a whole.

Bangladeshi workers left in limbo in Afghanistan

Government intervention needed to bring them back

TWENTY-FIVE Bangladeshis were lured with offers of fat salaries by an Indian national who had worked for 6 years in different re-rolling mills in Bangladesh. He had befriended some of those now stranded in Afghanistan and forced to stay within the confines of a factory, where they are living under inhuman conditions. The story of these men is pretty much the same as those of other Bangladeshi migrants who get trapped into near-slavery conditions when they are trafficked to foreign countries. It is not as if our countrymen have never been trafficked before. Indeed, it has been going on for years and still they continue to fall prey for offers that are very enticing but in reality too good to be true.

It is imperative at this stage for the Bangladeshi mission in Afghanistan to be instructed by the ministry of foreign affairs to expedite their return. Our nationals have suffered enough, both in terms of being cheated out of money and spending seven months in servitude.

Obviously, it is time that more proactive measures are taken by authorities to crack down on these illegal syndicates that promise the sun and the moon to unsuspecting people and send them packing to foreign jobs that are hardly rosy. This needs to be coupled with public awareness campaigns that go beyond simple announcements and advertisements and the information needs to be disseminated at grassroots level because more often than not, it is simple rural folk who fall for these ploys.

COMMENTS

"DMCH doctors examine Bayezid" (August 8, 2016)

Saiful Haque Ranju

Let us pray that the boy will be cured soon.

Shaon Sarkar

Hope he receives the best treatment available in the country.

Human rights cannot be sacrificed in fight against militants

CHAMPA PATEL

IT was an ordinary Friday afternoon in Dhaka when, on 7 August 2015, Niloy Neel and his partner Asha Moni heard a knock on their door. A man in his early 20s entered their flat, took a quick look around, and then made a call on his mobile phone. A few moments later, a group of men armed with machetes stormed into the apartment and went straight for Niloy Neel. Within minutes they viciously hacked him to death and fled – his head was almost completely severed from his body.

Niloy Neel was a known secular activist and blogger in Bangladesh who had written against religious extremism and in support of human rights on the atheist web platform, Mukto Mona ("free mind"). Ansar-al-Islam – a Bangladeshi group that purports to kill in the name of Islam, and has links to al-Qaeda – claimed responsibility for the killing soon after.

Niloy Neel was the fourth secular activist hacked to death since 2013, but he was not to be the last. Since his murder, the numbers slain in targeted killings has soared to at least 30. The victims were chiefly secular voices to begin with, but the assailants have expanded their range of targets to include LGBTI activists, members of religious minorities, and an English professor. To add to this, in early July 2016 gunmen stormed the Holey Bakery in Dhaka's upscale Gulshan neighbourhood and massacred at least 20 people, including 18 foreigners and two Bangladeshis.

Regardless of the identity of the victims, these killings have had one thing in common: the culture of impunity that surrounds their deaths. While the police have made a handful of arrests in Niloy Neel's case, no one has been produced in court yet, let alone convicted. In fact, since 2013, we are only aware of one case

– the killing of blogger Rajib Haider – where anyone has been tried and found guilty. Amnesty International and many others have highlighted this alarming absence of accountability.

As the death toll has risen over the past year, the response from Bangladeshi authorities has also changed. When secular activists were being attacked, high-level government officials seemed more interested in blaming the victims for their own killing. Instead of offering protection to secularists, they told them to stop exercising their freedom of expression and adopt silence as their only line of

violent groups. The others appear to be suspects of a range of crimes – thefts, drug dealing, or violence – or simply lived nearby militant groups. Rights groups have raised concerns about the arbitrariness of the arrests. There were reports of the police blackmailing the families of those detained to ensure they were released. Many opposition supporters were also among those arrested, which fits a well-established pattern in Bangladesh where thousands of BNP activists have been jailed since the last election in 2014. Other suspects have been killed in so-called "crossfire" shoot-

rights to promote their own style of security.

There are immediate steps Bangladesh can, and must, take to improve the situation. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people in the country now fear they could become the next target for violent groups. These include free thinkers like Niloy Neel, members of Bangladesh's beleaguered LGBTI community, or minority religious groups like the Hindus. Far too often, they have been rebuffed or harassed when they approach the police for protection – or even charged with a crime themselves. Indeed, Niloy Neel's appeals to the police for security were recklessly spurned mere weeks before his killing. Their only suggestion was that he leave the country.

Bangladesh has a range of laws on the books – such as the Information and Communications Technology Act – that criminalise freedom of expression. These are often used against critics or others the government find inconvenient. In 2014, for example, four secular activists were charged under this law for "offending religious sentiments", one of whom had just barely escaped alive from a machete attack.

On the anniversary of Niloy Neel's murder, Bangladesh must honour his memory by making a genuine effort to hold those responsible to account, and to protect others exercising their right to freedom of expression. Those responsible must be brought to justice, but only after fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty. And those brave enough to speak their minds should be protected and encouraged, and not told to stop writing or themselves be charged with a crime.

The writer is Director, South Asia Amnesty International.

When secular activists were being attacked, high-level government officials seemed more interested in blaming the victims for their own killing. Instead of offering protection to secularists, they told them to stop exercising their freedom of expression and adopt silence as their only line of defence.

defence. Many government officials also sought to make political capital out of the tragedies, darkly suggesting that it was the opposition Bangladesh National Party and its allies that were behind the violence, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

But recently – prompted, perhaps, by the killing of a senior police officer's wife in early June – the authorities have suddenly spurred into action.

In June, as many as 15,000 people across the country were arrested in a huge swoop, although the authorities conceded that only some 150 of them were actually confirmed members of

with the police, with minimal to no accountability or details made public.

No less concerning is that after the Holey Bakery attack, two of the surviving hostages, who were kept by gunmen in the restaurant during the siege, were held incommunicado for weeks without access to lawyers or family members. It was only a month after the attack, on 4 August, that they were finally produced in court and officially arrested.

This speaks to the heart of the issue. While it is encouraging that the authorities are finally paying attention to the wave of violence, it is dismaying that they seem prepared to sacrifice human

The partition



BETWEEN THE LINES

KULDEEP NAYAR

THE British have the reputation of leaving their colonies in a mess when they have to withdraw by force or otherwise. One method they

have adopted is to partition the country they have ruled. They did this in Ireland, Palestine-Israel and, of course, India.

This is mid-August 2016 and I recall the conversation I had with Lord Radcliffe who drew the line to divide India into two countries, India and Pakistan. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, picked him up from the British Bar and had him flown to India to divide the subcontinent into two countries.

Radcliffe had never set his foot inside India before, nor did he know much about the country. Radcliffe told me that when Mountbatten spelt out what he wanted, he warned him that it was a difficult job which he could not undertake. Mountbatten offered him Rs. 40,000, which was a lot of money at that time. But what ultimately tempted him—as he said to me—was the responsibility which had been thrown on his shoulders to create two new countries.

For a well-known London lawyer, the thought of becoming an international statesman overnight was too attractive a proposition to reject. Radcliffe asked for district maps, but none was available. All that he was given was the ordinary map which hung on the wall of all government offices and educational institutions.

Radcliffe made calculations on that and drew a tentative line on the map itself. He told me that on this premise the line he drew gave Lahore to India. Then he realised that by doing so, he would deprive Pakistan of any important city. So, taking this into consideration, he transferred Lahore to Pakistan. To this day the people of the then East Punjab have never forgiven him for the loss of

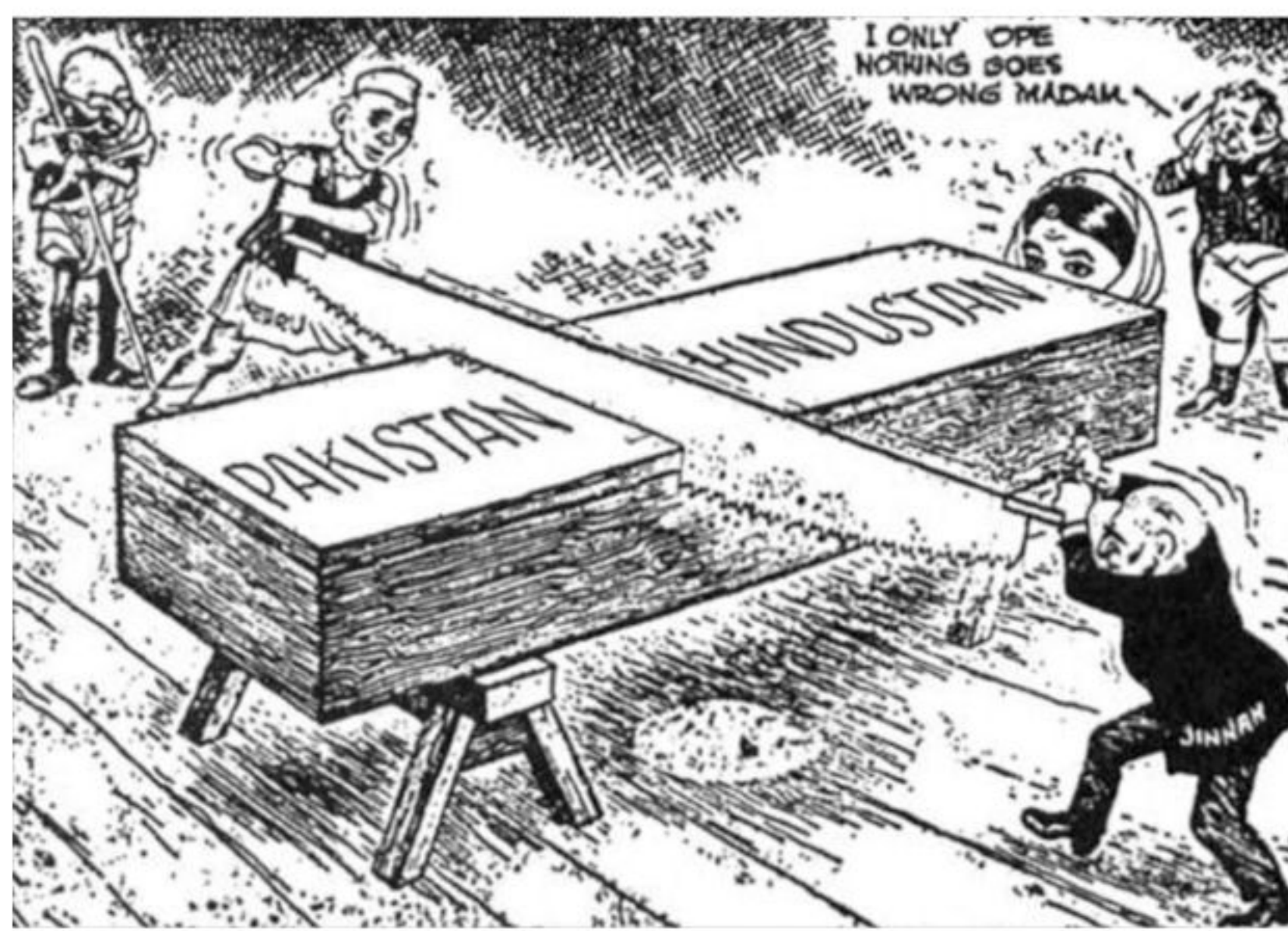
their prize.

Radcliffe never collected his Rs. 40,000 fee that the Viceroy had promised because he felt that the blood of 10 million people who lost their lives in the migration rested on his conscience. Nor did he visit India after Partition. He died in London and Indian newspapers only picked up the story of his death from The Times, London.

Here was a person who constituted two countries but never got any recognition. He was ultimately denied the status of an international statesman. Many years later Qaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, was angrily asked by his naval

Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel that they should offer the prime ministership of a United India to Jinnah. Both were horrified because each, for many years, had their eyes on the top job. This indicates that even though they had gone through the fire of the independence struggle, they were not above the greed of office.

In fact, the Partition formula was accepted by Nehru and Patel, not Mahatma Gandhi. When Mountbatten was ready with the Partition formula, he invited Mahatma Gandhi first. Gandhi did not want to hear the word "Partition" and walked out of the room when Mountbatten mentioned it. But



aide, who had lost his parents in the migration, "Was Pakistan a good thing to have?" The old man kept quiet for a while and replied: "I don't know young man, only posterity will tell."

Probably, it is too early to pronounce any judgment, but one thing is clear that Qaid-e-Azam drew the line dividing the two countries on the basis of religion. This is ironic considering that Jinnah was a man who did not care what he ate or drank. Even though he made Urdu the official language of Pakistan, he himself spoke a few words only haltingly.

When events were developing in a way where there was no option except Partition, Mahatma Gandhi suggested to

Patel and Nehru accepted the Partition because they argued with themselves that they were not left with many years of life and if they wanted to build the country, they should accept what Mountbatten offered.

The much-demonised Jinnah was not happy with what he called a "moth eaten" Pakistan because the Pakistan of his dream would at least stretch from Peshawar to Delhi. But he was left with no choice. This was all that the British offered. He was inevitably so bitter that when Mountbatten suggested at the instance of British Prime Minister Clement Attlee that he would accept some linkage between the two newly

independent states, Jinnah replied, "I do not trust them. (Indians)." Nor did Jinnah accept the suggestion to have Mountbatten as the common Governor General.

Some people to this day say Jinnah would have made a good Prime Minister and this way India could have stayed united. Till then nobody knew that he had malignant cancer. It is suspected that the British knew and only had to wait for some time for him to quit the scene. Since Pakistan was a one person show, probably the idea of the country would have died with him. Jinnah's hidden illness was not the reason why Nehru predicted that Pakistan would not last long. His calculation and that of other top Congress leaders was that Pakistan was simply not economically viable.

Never did Nehru and any other Congress leader know how Winston Churchill had promised Jinnah that he personally would see to it that Jinnah would succeed and Pakistan would come into creation. Churchill had a pathological hatred for Hindus and he said he could not understand this polyglot religion. Compared to that Islam was so simple and easy to understand. At the back of his mind were also strategic considerations. Pakistan was geographically so placed that it gave an opening to the oil-rich Islamic world on the one hand and the vast Soviet Union on the other. To have a grateful client state like Pakistan was an irresistible attraction.

When I met Radcliffe in London many years later, he was living in a flat in the highly desirable location of Bond Street. Therefore, it was natural for me to expect some retainers around him. I was surprised when he opened the door himself and put the kettle on the boil to make a cup of tea. He was very reluctant to talk about Partition and his responsibility. But he had to reply to questions when I was face-to-face with him. Regret was written all over his face and he seemed like a person who felt that the killings during Partition were still on his conscience.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Nationalise Sreekail College

Sreekail College, established in 1947, is one of the oldest colleges in Comilla with an impressive and large campus. But the college has always been the subject of negligence whenever the question of nationalisation arises. The present government has nationalised many colleges during its tenure. We request the authorities to nationalise this long-neglected college and thus help the young people of this area to have higher education at an affordable cost.
Ashok Sarker
Comilla

Meter-run CNG – a mirage

CNG-run auto rickshaw drivers are once again compelling passengers to pay them much more than the actual fair. The authorities should ensure that CNG drivers comply with the government rule of charging passengers by the meter.
Mahbuba Sarker Shama
Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR

Ban skin bleaching products

Recently, Ghana has planned to ban the import of all types of skin bleaching products as they can cause serious harm to the skin. Skin bleaching is very popular among people in many Asian, African and Caribbean countries. Surprisingly, it is a 10 billion dollars industry. It is time Bangladesh did the exact same thing like Ghana. People need to understand that we are a mixed race and we need to accept the colour of our skin. Being white is not the only measurement of being beautiful.
MD. Toufique Imam Chowdhury
Islamic University
Kushtia