

# What's in a frame?

**THE MIDDLE PATH**  
ADNAN R AMIN

It was always destined to become iconic: an image of blood-red streams flowing through a cityscape. The city was Dhaka and the liquid flowing through its thoroughfares sure looked like blood. Plug in the words 'Qurbani Eid' – and what becomes evident to unfamiliar readers is ritualised sacrifice of animals in an unimaginable scale.

So, while Bangladeshi media bemoaned the waterlogging and lack of drainage, especially around the Shantinagar area, many international outlets concentrated on the portentous imagery. And let's be fair: without context, the photos are quite striking and open to wild interpretations. In fact, the images are more striking than the actual story. Add a little sensationalist editorialising, and we have a spectacle. "Rivers of Blood," international media outlets christened the phenomenon. And what a story it made! So primitive, so Biblical, so photogenic! There was definitely something in that phrase that harkened one back to Biblical times. Magical, mythical times when the Nile could turn red, seas could part and divine signs were common.

International readers had little way – looking at the 'rivers of blood' photos – of concluding that the phenomenon was localised, that the neighbourhood had struggled with waterlogging for decades and that the 'rivers' would be drained out and the streets cleaned within 24 hours. They only saw the prophetic photos and those ominous words 'rivers of blood'.

Some of the ensuing comments were harsh and viewed the incident solely through the lens of faith. The religion is condemned as barbaric, uncivilised and backward. Animal sacrifice is framed as a precursor to violent extremism. One commenter blamed the Pope for 'bowing to the enemies'. Others zeroed in on Bangladesh – in an exercise in Orientalism – theorising that her people lived in filth or advocating that development aid to such countries be stopped.

Bangladeshi conversations, as judged through social media reactions, have been varied. Waste disposal and hygiene formed the core. Belief, morality and kindness formed the pith. Commentators have taken to questioning and defending the *raison d'être* and manner of animal sacrifice. Resistance has come in the form of accusations of Islamophobia and selective targeting of Qurbani Eid. Some have felt an unfortunate dysfunction had been turned into a chance to shame a developing and/or Muslim (majority) country. There are now doctored photos with rainbow colored rivers through Dhaka streets, insinuating that the original photos too



were manipulated. Why do certain images create such ripples? Well, striking photographs have high potential to become a vessel for meaning / ideology and for becoming embedded in the viewers' psyche. Gandhi and his spinning wheel (Margaret Bourke-White), child protester from 1969 Revolt (Rashid Talukdar), grenade throwing boy, 1971 (Naib Uddin Ahmed), last embrace at Rana Plaza (Taslima Akhtar) – are just some iconic photographs that convey more than what they contain. The amount of interest, reactions and arguments generated by the 'river of blood' photos make them symbolic too. That is to say, they possess the capacity to

embody ideas and events. What the images mean depends on what readers (want to) believe: Dhaka has a serious waterlogging problem? Certain quarters are out to undermine the institution of animal sacrifice? Muslims are a backward group? Journalists unnecessarily sensationalise waste stories for higher readership? Each of those points-of-view can be raised and advanced with the help of the 'river of blood' photos. Of course, the use of images, natural, staged or manipulated, in advancing political motives is not new, and happens in every country. Photojournalist Michael Kamber, on his website Altered Images (alteredimagesbdc.org/), has been exposing edited and

doctored photos, many of them iconic and moving. An innocuous example is a photo of President Obama, distracted, dejected and resigned at the beach. In the distance, oil derricks and tankers are seen. The photo is on the cover of *The Economist*, and the story is about a BP oil spill. It is soon revealed that two colleagues talking to the president had been digitally cropped out or removed – leaving Obama to radiate an air of isolation, burden of rule and exhaustion. A deputy editor later defended this manipulation, because she wanted to "focus on Obama."

In January 2015, world leaders gathered in France to lead the rally against terrorism and honour the dead in the Charlie Hebdo massacre. There were some four million protesters and at the forefront, the news showed, were leaders from Asia, Europe and Africa. It was on its way to become an iconic image in world politics, when a wider shot revealed that the photograph was staged on an empty street, away from the actual rally and under tight security blanket. The impression of unity and courage in the face of attack was instantly shattered and the photo-op started garnering widespread ridicule.

A clear testament to the power of photography in modern, public discourse is a recent, unfortunate decision by the young billionaire prodigy Mark Zuckerberg and his media site, Facebook. Zuckerberg was accused of removing a photo posted by a Norwegian author. It was the Pulitzer winning 'Napalm girl' photo by Nick Ut, which shows children, including a naked, young girl, running away from Napalm bombs. The photo is a veritable testament to American atrocities during the Vietnam War.

Facebook, on the other hand, argued that it did not allow child nudity on its site and demanded that the photo be taken down, or the girl's genitals and breasts pixelated. This drew allegations of censoring criticism (of the USA) and misuse of power by the 'most powerful editor'. After a high-profile open letter addressed to Mark Zuckerberg, the photograph was restored to its place.

More and more striking photos are characterising and describing our world. At the same time, more and more quarters are vying for control over interpretations and meanings. You see, the power of photographic narratives is also their greatest weakness: they represent a partial perspective at a specific point in time. Photographic context and degree of essentialisation are treated as artistic or journalistic choice, and not a fundamental, discursive act. So, especially in the case of publicly circulated and/or shared photos, meaning is often interpreted or imposed by different narrators. This, and ease of digital manipulation, makes photographs a potent but vulnerable source of public discourse.

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## The hanging of Mir Quasem Ali

PERVEZ HOODBHOY

PAKISTAN'S Foreign Office says Pakistan is "deeply saddened" by the execution in Bangladesh of Mir Quasem Ali. Mir Quasem was found guilty in 2014 by a Bangladeshi court of torture, multiple murders and arson. He was sentenced to death after what Pakistan describes as "a flawed judicial process".

But why is Pakistan so worried about the integrity of Bangladesh's judicial process? And why does our government care so greatly about the death of another country's citizen — one accused of heinous crimes? The answer: when it comes to Bangladesh, Pakistan remains chained to its past. Abstract concern for human life cannot explain why the FO expressed such strong feelings. Certainly, the death sentences passed on countless people around the world meet with complete indifference. Those horrors have not elicited even a murmur of protest from Pakistan's civil and military establishments. In fact, the killing of Pakistan's own citizens in foreign lands meets with silence. Think of the long list of Pakistanis beheaded in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for drug smuggling after being tried there by kangaroo courts.

As for the fairness of the judicial process in Bangladesh, Amnesty International and other leading human rights organisations had already raised serious concerns about the process under which war crimes are being handled. But Pakistan can scarcely accuse Bangladesh of unfair trials because its own judicial system has even shakier legs.

In contrast to Bangladesh's — where the war crimes trials are held before a civilian court — Pakistani civilians accused of waging war against the state are tried behind closed doors by military courts. Further, they are not allowed to engage a lawyer of choice, nor allowed access to military court records. This is entirely inconsistent with modern ideas of judicial propriety.

Mir Quasem's trial and subsequent death sentence matter to Pakistan only because he was formerly the head of the pro-Pakistan Islamist militia Al Badr. Together with Al Shams and Razakar, Al Badr worked closely with the Pakistan Army in its futile but brutal effort to suppress the 1971 rebellion that shattered a united Pakistan, turning East Pakistan into a free Bangladesh.

Mir Quasem was not alone. Since December 2013, five prominent Bangladeshi Islamists have been hanged for war crimes. Irrespective of what these militia leaders may have actually done in 1971, Pakistan's establishment feels it must stand by them because of its ideological fixation on the two-nation theory.

The two-nation theory — as I was taught in school — was, of course, critical to creating Pakistan. Let us look at its two key premises: First, that Muslims and Hindus are fundamentally incompatible and must therefore live apart from each other with Pakistan as the homeland for Muslims. Second, that Muslims form a single nation — the ummah — one that is robust enough to withstand local variations of sect, language, culture, and tribe.

The first premise does not need debate or further evaluation now that Pakistan and India are separate nations and have gone their own respective ways. The population of Hindus left in Pakistan has dwindled to about one or two percent and continues to decrease. Being a tiny, oppressed and scared minority, they have no role in public life.

The second premise must be judged in the light of events during 1971. There is also the ongoing bloody conflict between the Pakistani state and jihadist groups like TTP, Al Qaeda and Islamic State. Further afield, Pakistan's poor relations with both its Muslim neighbours — Afghanistan and Iran — shows that Islamic solidarity just isn't enough. Fratricidal wars across the Middle East, the recent declaration by

Saudi Arabia's head mufti that Iranians are not Muslims, and the growing Saudi-Israeli alliance, suggest that the ummah is a doubtful concept.

Nevertheless, even after the two-nation theory became defunct after 1971, it goes to Pakistan's credit that it was able to rapidly reinvent itself. While doing so, it discovered to its surprise that it could exist — and even thrive — without taking recourse to the ideas that had brought it into existence.

Present-day Pakistan continues to pay lip service to pan-Islamism. But in fact, pure pragmatism and the priorities of nation-building are shaping its behaviour more and more, making it a more normal nation. Example: CPEC enthuses the Pakistani establishment enormously in spite of China being a communist state with a clear aversion to Muslim practices.

It is time to put the two-nation theory behind us. While it created Pakistan, no harm can come if it is dispensed with now. Nation states do not need theories in order to exist. Argentina or the Netherlands, for example, have no national ideologies. However, in their own ways, both are prosperous and stable countries.

Pakistan needs to escape a time warp. It must understand that India was not responsible for the differences of race, language, and culture between East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Like incompatible twins born within the same womb, we had little chance of staying together for very long. Under the additional stress of misgovernance, the relationship broke down. India midwifed Bangladesh's birth by cutting the cord that joined us; it did not create the incompatibility. The union had already disintegrated by the time of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's reported remark where he famously said: *idhur hum, udhur tum*.

Looking to the future, for Bangladesh it is important not to be locked into the particularities of its birth circumstances. Hanging aging war

criminals may bring satisfaction but cannot bring peace, stability and democracy. Instead, it is time to close a chapter filled with pain and sorrow, and then move on.

Pakistan needs to do far more than Bangladesh. As a starter, it must no longer allow young Pakistanis in schools to be filled with wildly distorted versions of history. These ignore the horrors West

Pakistan inflicted upon the Bengalis. Rather than defend war criminals or deny what happened in 1971, Pakistan should seek to normalise relations with Bangladesh. Truth and reconciliation is what is needed.

The writer teaches physics in Lahore and Islamabad. Copy © DAWN (Pakistan), reprinted with permission.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**SIGMUND FREUD**

*From error to error, one discovers the entire truth.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

|                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>          | <b>DOWN</b>           |
| 1 Hom Sound            | 1 Ceased              |
| 5 Put up on ohe wall   | 2 Burger toppers      |
| 9 Comic Strip          | 3 Bottle parts        |
| 10 Sung drama          | 4 Painter Paul        |
| 12 Wonderland visitor  | 5 Bunny move          |
| 13 Praline nut         | 6 Corilla or gibbon   |
| 14 Feeds the furnace   | 7 Sweet drink         |
| 16 Blasting stuff      | 8 Mom's mom           |
| 17 Coop group          | 9 Turkish bigwig      |
| 18 Tennessee team      | 11 Picnic pests       |
| 21 Commercials         | 15 Golf score units   |
| 22 Cantankerous        | 19 Black as night     |
| 23 Chimney output      | 20 Golf peg           |
| 24 Furtive             | 22 Poet Khayyam       |
| 26 Finger count        | 23 Shark's home       |
| 29 Cube side           | 24 Knight's attendant |
| 30 Humorist Barry      | 25 Baking spice       |
| 31 Not at home         | 26 Swindle            |
| 32 Bike wheel parts    | 27 Calendar items     |
| 34 Uncertain state     | 28 Bird abodes        |
| 37 Deal maker          | 29 Hawked             |
| 38 Intense fear        | 30 Church doctrine    |
| 39 Jimmy of "NYPDBLue" | 33 Years gone by      |
| 40 Omelet start        | 35 Sack               |
| 41 Works leather       | 36 "-- bodknis!"      |

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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