



PHOTOS: STAR

Local Voices: Life as a minority

JIBEN ROY

EVER heard of Yazidi, a very small community in Northern Iraq? Probably not. We never heard of them until ISIS started massacring Yazidi residents in 2014. A peaceful community was all of a sudden under attack by ISIS. The concept of live, laugh and love had been shattered for so many Yazidi children, women and men.

During World War II, Jews in different European countries were forcibly sent to the gas chambers by the Nazis. Why? Because they were Jews.

Anne Frank was one of six million innocents "exterminated" by the Nazis. The civilised world thought that would be the end of minority killing around the world. However, history repeats itself. One Hitler goes, another comes. We have the memory of goldfish.

More than two decades ago, the Bosnian Serbs killed almost 100,000 minority Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the name of ethnic cleansing. In one particular area of Srebrenica, 8,000 people were killed.

Far away from Bosnia, in 1994, Rwandan Hutu militias killed 800,000 of the minority Tutsi community.

That genocide story was documented in the movie Hotel Rwanda. There are more occurrences of this type of ethnic and religious cleansing around the world. In fact, minorities in most countries are being harassed or oppressed in some forms, if not killed.

What about living in a communist country where religion or ethnicity doesn't or shouldn't matter? During the years from 1975 to 1978, the communist Khmer Rouge was in power in Cambodia. Look what happened there. Almost 1.5 million people were killed. They didn't kill minorities only; they killed the educated and wealthy people of their own too.

It is still a nightmare to be a minority in certain countries. This is no better than living in an earthquake zone or a hurricane-prone area. You never know when you will be run. You never know if you will enjoy the glory of the next morning sun.

One can argue that dictators initiate the killing of minorities. Iraq was once ruled by Saddam Hussein, a minority Sunni dictator. He also killed many people, though maybe not on such a massive scale. But when he was gone and the majority Shia was put in power by the US, killing of minorities increased dramatically.

My story is as follows: I first lived in Canada and the US from 1979 to 1985. The 80s were a period of Cold War and the breaking of the Berlin Wall. Freedom bells were ringing around the world. President Ronald Reagan said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." It was a golden time for the US.

A friend of mine once asked me, "You were a minority in your native country and you are still a minority in the US. Any difference?"

I loved living in these two countries during that time; however, I had to return to my native land. The second time I came to the US, I came with my family in 2001, right after 9/11. As a foreigner, we had to give interviews as well as fill up a number of official forms in different places. One thing I was never asked was what my religion was. It's good that there is no machine that can detect religion from one's accent. Did you get my answer, my friend?

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Sundarban doesn't belong to Bangladesh

It belongs to the planet and its peoples

AWRUP SANYAL

I too have thought of posting a profile picture on Facebook, of me saluting the Bangladesh cricket team on its splendid Test match victory over England. But, I surmised that my salute has to stand for something more substantial. When can I put a picture saluting the victories over oppressions against minorities – the Chittagong Hill Tracts people, or the Kashmiri people, or the Dalit people, or the stoppage of environmentally disastrous projects like the Dakota Access Pipeline, or the thermal power project smack inside Sundarban?

This article, as the title suggests, is about the Rampal project.

Let me start with the most unlikely of quotes, one from Zadie Smith, from her article "Dance lessons for writers", and this is what she writes:

"...the aristocrat and the proletariat have different relations to the ground beneath their feet, the first moving fluidly across the surface of the world, the second specifically tethered to a certain spot: a city block, a village, a factory, a stretch of fields."

When we talk about activists and activism in the context of Rampal, or any such protests, a similar dynamic is at play, to my mind. I shall talk about two things – the importance of staking out a space at ground zero, and internalisation of the environmental justice movement.

But first, a premise needs to be set. This green and brown earth of ours predates the advent of humans, tribes, kingdoms, empires, and, indeed, nation states. Thus, this planet's ecology, which is gravely threatened by the Anthropocene age we live in, belongs not to any nation-state, or its peoples exclusively – it belongs to the planet and all its people, because we, whether we like it or not, are connected organically under the superficial national and political boundaries that we have etched over its cartographic surface. Irrespective of our political motives, this planet has its own rhythm, its own celestial beats to dance to.

For many this idea might ring naïve, but inherited within this premise is a very post-national argument which allows us to transcend the limits that the discourses of nationalism impinge on us – going round and round the mulberry bush of "national growth and development" parley and its banal logic.

Picketing at ground zero
Typically, the central part of the activism around Rampal is what some might call bourgeois activism, which must also be problematised. The narratives that such activism produces tend to be confined within the narrow corridors of nationalism, patriotism, where the regime and the

protestors both claim to be "defending the nation and its people." It then becomes easier for national governments, especially authoritarian ones, to trip these discourses by producing contentious arguments that challenge the very nationalism of the protestors, and any contrarian arguments are flagged as anti-national, even seditious.

But, more importantly, when bourgeois activists take centre stage, they push away the real faces of the displaced people who are directly affected by such a project. It is, then, easier for those with vested interests to derail them by issuing veiled threats, or arresting them on some trumped up charges, or in extreme cases, through "disappearances." Most of these kinds of targeting happen to individuals who are deemed to be the central voices of dissent. It has happened in the context of Rampal too. Such manoeuvres throw off the activists in two ways – one, they become embroiled in a new fight for their

question: "development" at what cost? Thus challenging the national government's right to take a decision unitarily on the thermal power plant in Sundarban, as it affects the whole planet, and all its peoples, is a very critical demand. The Sundarban is more than just a mangrove forest that happens to lie within the national boundaries of Bangladesh and India, it is a bio-shield against natural disasters, and a carbon sink absorbing more than four billion tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, as per a recent study. It is also the home of one the most amazing biodiversity that keeps our planet safe.

Internationalisation of environmental justice

The aforementioned premise also allows us to argue that a decision regarding environmental issues – that puts the whole planet at peril – is beyond the pomposity of nationalistic ardour. It allows for global alliances on environmental or climate justice, transcends global neo-liberal clientelistic arguments, and avoids getting trapped in the non-productive discourses of

question: "development" at what cost?

Thus challenging the national government's right to take a decision unitarily on the thermal power plant in Sundarban, as it affects the whole planet, and all its peoples, is a very critical demand. The Sundarban is more than just a mangrove forest that happens to lie within the national boundaries of Bangladesh and India, it is a bio-shield against natural disasters, and a carbon sink absorbing more than four billion tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, as per a recent study. It is also the home of one the most amazing biodiversity that keeps our planet safe.

Renuka Saroha, of 350.org, makes a compelling argument about the mammoth costs that we will continue to pay when the coal-fired power plant is in operation.

"It is inevitable this entire area will become an industrial hub. The cumulative damage to the entire ecosystem is going to be irreversible."

Once such an argument is deployed, a concentric circle of supranational resistance could be shored up, asking for supranational legislations. The protest can then transcend national boundaries.

The role of the bourgeois activists should be to create alliances with all ongoing global climate justice movements, a conflation with the likes of DAPL, Flint, anti-fracking protests. Other movements should also stand up for the Rampal protests, as should Rampal for others. Such solidarities make all local protests more powerful. When like-minded movements are in solidarity, it helps create a much-needed global discourse, where the international community's hand is forced; they are not allowed to wash their hands off citing these as "a nation's internal matter," in typical diplo-speak.

While the current protest has garnered some international attention and a handful of environmental groups like the Friends of the Earth, the Sierra Club, and 350.org have come forward, there still needs to be a show of solidarity across the global protests for environmental justice – a people to people solidarity, a movement to movement solidarity, where slogans and graffiti across movements bring attention to all the concurrent movements, so that the local people who are putting their bodies and wellbeing on the line know that they are not alone. That, like them, there are bodies in the line of fire, fighting the same fight.

And, as grave as it might be, this is how Hegel puts it:

"It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained."

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fellow-activist thus threatened, ergo derailing the main discourse. And, two, they inject an aura of fear resulting in self-censorship. The language of dissent is affected. This affectation weakens the whole movement.

Whereas, when the people who are at risk lead such movements, some of these problems can be avoided. For example, in the case of the Dakota Access Pipeline project, through the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, it is the Native American people who are at forefront of the protests, as it should be. Since they live on those lands, it helps the protest to occupy a geographical space at the heart of the problem, which is critical. Bourgeois activists, on the other hand, typically fight from 'faraway' spaces. In Zadie Smith's words, "the aristocrat and the proletariat have different relations to the ground beneath their feet," which is why such alienation doesn't help centring it where it should be centred at – ground zero.

diplomacy and its tired rhetoric.

Frantz Fanon puts it succinctly in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*:

"When such parties [nationalistic parties] are questioned on the economic programme of the state that they are clamouring for...they are incapable of replying, because, precisely, they are completely ignorant of the economy of their own country."

"This economy has always developed outside the limits of their knowledge. They have nothing more than an approximate, bookish acquaintance with the actual and potential resources of their country's soil and mineral deposits; and therefore they can only speak of these resources on a general and abstract plane."

This rings very true in the case of Rampal and all the explanations and excuses that have been forwarded, which are primarily "outside the limits of their knowledge." These narratives fail to answer the simple

QUOTABLE Quote

ROGER ROSENBLATT

Death is something that happens to others, you think, until it happens to you.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Benders
- Penn, for one
- Parcel of land
- Burning the midnight oil
- A question of time
- Approved
- Mariner's place
- Binds
- Hack-neyed
- Break
- Thoroughly disgusted
- Winter coat
- Currier's partner
- Island souvenirs
- Decreases
- Intended
- Ailing
- Between
- "How droll!"
- Bottomline figure
- Singer Dion
- Binary digit
- Third place medal
- Othello's betrayer
- Open shoe
- Secluded place

DOWN

- Spielberg movie
- Ibuprofen target
- Lot
- Capital Bldg. worker
- Ring tossed at a peg
- Maintenance nance
- "Woe is me!"
- Singer Starr
- Seine season
- Checkers side
- Painter
- Underbody problem
- Dollar bill feature
- Related
- Days gone by
- Name for a poodle
- Malevolent
- TV's Trebek
- Poem part
- Farrow of films
- Roulette need
- Hart's mate
- Egg on
- Apollo goal
- "60 Minutes" airer
- History span
- Horror's Chaney
- Make a sharp turn

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	M	I	D	A	D	M	I	T		
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott