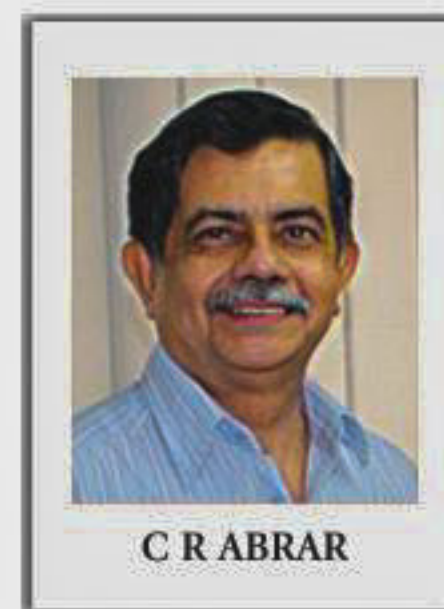


Felani, the BSF and the elusive zero target



C R ABRAR

THIS week marks the sixth anniversary of the killing of Felani by the Border Security Force (BSF) of India. Felani, a 15-year-old girl, was shot dead

by the BSF at a close range while crossing the 2.5 metre high barbed wire fence in the early hours of January 7, 2011. Little Felani's red and purple dress got entangled with the fence when she was following her father who barely managed to get across. No warning was given to unarmed Felani. Her body was kept hanging in full public view for about five hours. Villagers claimed she cried out for water and help, but no one dared to come close. Slowly, Felani bled to death. After 30 hours, her body was returned with hands and feet tied to a bamboo pole.

Amidst huge outcry in Bangladesh, charges were finally laid against Amiya Ghosh, the BSF jawan. The Special BSF Court tried Ghosh. But it exonerated him on September 6, 2013 on the grounds that evidence was 'inconclusive and insufficient'. A retrial on appeal produced the same result. Felani's father termed the BSF Court's decision as "mockery of justice".

Outraged at the BSF court's verdict, a Kolkata based human rights organisation Manabdhikar Shurokha Mancha (MASUM) moved the National Human Rights Commission in India for compensation. The commission directed the Indian government to pay half a million Indian rupees as compensation to Felani's family as the commission "was satisfied that there could be no justification for shooting at an unarmed girl". The NHRC turned down the Indian Home Ministry's plea

to keep in abeyance the issue of compensation. The family of Felani is yet to receive the compensation money.

Exactly six years later, on January 7 this year, on the anniversary of Felani's killing, the BSF beat to death Mohammad Bakuluddin (25) of Chuadanga. Bokul and his associates were returning after collecting cattle from India. The group was chased by a BSF patrol. While others managed to escape, Bokul was apprehended by the border agency. Later, he was dropped on the Bangladeshi side of the border and died on his way to a medical facility. Marks of torture were evident on his body. The local Union Parishad member alleged that Bokul's hands and feet were beaten with rod and his face was poked with bayonets (Prothom Alo, January 8, 2017).

The barbed wire fence, built by India, presumably taking cue from what Israel set up in West Bank, has not been very effective in deterring residents along the border, who, from time immemorial, regularly move across the border for livelihood, social, medical and a host of other reasons. It has been much less effective for those who are engaged in lucrative cattle trading. An overwhelming number of those who get killed are either farmers working in the fields in close vicinity of the border or cattle traders. Torture of those apprehended by the BSF and abduction of border residents have also been alleged.

For pursuing the shoot-to-kill policy of unarmed civilians, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) has accused the BSF of turning the border areas into "South Asian killing fields". It notes with grave concern the endorsement of these acts by some Indian officials on the grounds that the victims were attempting to cross the border illegally, even if they were unarmed. In the not-so-recent past, Raman Srivastava, the former head of BSE, was reported to have observed that since these individuals were illegally

entering Indian territory, often at night, they were "not innocent" and therefore legitimate targets. It is this mindset that makes the BSF the judge, jury and executioner undermining the functional penal system that India is so proud of.

HRW also criticised foreign governments for not condemning what it terms "killings...in cold blood" of "unarmed and defenceless

would no longer shoot any civilian under any circumstances, and that the agency would only use non-lethal weapons. Bangladesh's Home Minister subsequently echoed his position when he explained that rubber bullets and sound grenades would replace live ammunition. The Bangladesh Minister further informed the lawmakers that at a meeting of the Director Generals of BSF and Bangladesh Border Guards,

on April 24, 2016, the Home Minister of Bangladesh informed the Parliament that 146 Bangladeshis were killed along the borders by the BSF during the preceding four-year period.

The 4,000 km long Indo-Bangladesh border is perhaps one of the most volatile peacetime borders of the world. Successive governments in India have failed to live up to their commitments in bringing down border killings of unarmed civilians to zero. The BSF



Indian BSF patrolling the India-Bangladesh border.

PHOTO: AFP

local residents". In no uncertain terms, the organisation noted: "India has the right to impose border controls. But India does not have the right to use lethal force except where strictly necessary to protect life".

Within months of Felani's murder, Mr. P. Chidambaram, then Home Minister of India, expressed deep regret on the matter during a visit to Dhaka. He declared that the BSF

both sides agreed to bring down the number of border killings "to zero".

Despite such lofty commitments and their reiterations, killings, abduction and torture have become integral features of the border management strategy of India. Ain O Salish Kendra reports that in the last five years (2012-2016) 188 Bangladeshis were killed at the border by the BSF. According to news reports,

ought to respect the sentiments of Bangladeshis by establishing accountability. Felani's death anniversary is a stark reminder to all concerned, particularly the Indian political leadership, that good neighbourliness demands a total halt to such dastardly acts by its border security agency.

The writer teaches International Relations at the University of Dhaka.

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A lexicon for ugliness

IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

EVERY society has its articles of faith. The strength of a society depends on the extent to which its articles of faith match the realities on the ground. In

the Bangladesh I grew up in, one such article of faith was: "There is no country more beautiful than ours." It was what we said about ourselves; it was what poets wrote and singers sang. It seemed unassailable.

But it was not true. The Bangladeshi landscape of the 1980s started to become uglier every day. It became a place where the very elements of life - earth, water, air - are poisoned. The land is strewn with garbage, the rivers and urban waterways are choked with plastic bags and industrial waste. The streets are buckled, the footpaths broken, the air unbreathable, thick with dust. To look at Dhaka is to be greeted with an apocalyptic landscape with no underlying design save for an ever more urgent need to accommodate greater numbers of people.

There were beautiful things here and there but beauty was in retreat; it was ugliness on the march, and very little of what was new was beautiful.

And yet, the article of faith endured: Bangladesh was a beautiful country, we told ourselves, and others did too, almost from habit. Very few writers I grew up reading wrote about the squalor of our towns and cities; they either edged it out, or they emphasised those aspects of Bangladeshi life that would make us feel good about ourselves, depicting a country that had very little to do with the place we lived in.

They wrote about rivers and the

skies, and the idiosyncrasies of their families. The television was state-owned those days, and gave a very restricted view of life. News on TV, prone to fantasy at the best of times, was never more fantastical than when it came to filth: The Bangladesh of nationalised television was a clean and happy country.

Art, when it's good, shows you what you always knew was there, but never

mirror to our world. In its unforgiving light, we saw Bangladesh as we had never seen it before: a country of open drains and hillocks of filth, of black ponds beaded with mysterious bubbles and edged with bright clumps of grass.

Today, our environmental problems are among the worst in the world. They relate to raw sewage, waste and polluted water bodies, which exacerbate childhood malnourishment,

letting their children out to play.

One father I spoke to last week in Dhanmondi inferred that the air his children were breathing was perhaps the most polluted in the history of mankind. He may be wrong; across the border in New Delhi, India's capital, the air is said to be even worse. But pollution, like poverty, is one of those phenomena whose meaning is lost in the abstract; television gives it a

foamed out into the street, causing nearby residents to react with rage.

The rage is new. It is what can happen when articles of faith are violated. The Bangladesh I live in today is more aware than ever before of the environmental horrors of its cities and towns. It is part of a new spirit of activism that has crept into the discourse. City corporations are continuously reminding residents not to throw garbage in undesignated spots; even a group of foreign students launched a campaign to make the city cleaner, sweeping streets and collecting garbage from door to door.

It is too early to say how effective these efforts will be: Countries as polluted as ours cannot be cleaned by isolated private acts of goodwill, and we have yet to see what systems of waste management authorities will put in place. Nonetheless, one has to recognise a good initiative when one sees it.

For the journalist and the writer, Bangladesh presents a unique challenge. They must look unflinchingly at their country while, at the same time, never giving up on beauty. It is a continuous juggle, because ugliness offends; it desensitises. What aesthetic idea can come from ugliness? And yet we must not forget the true meaning of that word, "aesthetic." It has everything to do with art, but nothing to do with beauty. Aesthetics - Kant the German worked hard to restore its true meaning - is simply all that is sensory and perceptible and arises from a faculty of disinterested judgment. The greatest aesthetic discovery of my life, as a Bangladeshi journalist, has been the ability to first see our ugliness, find a way to write about it, and then perhaps bump into something beautiful.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team at The Daily Star.



The dark, murky water of the Turag River near Tongi-Abdullahpur.

PHOTO: STAR

took notice of. Art in Bangladesh didn't do that. It, in fact, falsified the reality of Bangladesh. Strange as it must sound, it was 24-hour news television, which was introduced in the '90s and free of state control, that began to do the work of art in Bangladesh, to hold up the

and cause diseases like hepatitis and typhoid fever. The air in the cities is so dirty from factories and cars that it won't be long before people will check the levels of airborne particulate matter, on their smartphones, as people in other countries do the weather, before

concrete reality. Earlier this month I watched an investigative report where the journalist took his camera behind neatly kept factories - the screen showed a canal where toxic chemicals were being spewed into; a poisonous white froth had broken its banks and

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QUOTABLE Quote

FREDERIC BASTIAT
FRENCH ECONOMIST AND AUTHOR

The most urgent necessity is, not that the state should teach, but that it should allow education. All monopolies are detestable, but the worst of all is the monopoly of education.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Spill the beans
- 5 Goof
- 10 Wise saying
- 12 "Superman" star
- 13 "The Lion King" hero
- 14 Airport areas
- 15 Yale rooter
- 16 Breathe
- 118 Stop working
- 20 Fruitcake bit
- 21 Metal boxes
- 23 Wagon puller
- 24 Artist's inspiration
- 26 Apple or pear
- 28 Take the prize
- 29 Explorer of kids' TV
- 31 Saloon supply
- 32 Do electrical work
- 36 Call for
- 39 Writer Stout
- 40 Hot spot
- 41 The ones here
- 43 Once more
- 44 Boom type
- 45 Leather strips

46 Signing needs

DOWN

- 1 Stun gun
- 2 Banish
- 3 Put a cap on
- 4 High hit
- 5 Work measures
- 6 Gather
- 7 Eye parts
- 8 Make hackneyed
- 9 Fixes, as a clock
- 11 Single no more
- 17 Poet's contraction
- 19 "— a deal!"
- 22 City routes
- 24 Odometer reading
- 25 Disparate
- 27 Unrefined
- 28 Polish city
- 30 Bruin Bobby
- 33 Singer Cara
- 34 Pine product
- 35 Suits
- 37 Mile or meter
- 38 Holm and McKellen
- 42 Bunny move

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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