

OPINION

# OUR SILENCE ON POLICE BRUTALITY



PHOTOS: STAR FILE

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On 26th January, 2017, different socio-political organisations -- mostly backed by the left wing political parties -- called upon a strike in protest of the construction of the Rampal power plant. Their united voice demanded for Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company to stop construction of the coal based power plant which, if constructed, would prove fatal to the world's largest mangrove forest and its ecosystem. On the day of the strike, several hundred protesters under the banner of National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports faced brutal police attack while bringing out a procession at Shahbagh.

All of a sudden, demonstrators were attacked by the police with water cannons, followed by baton charges and tear shells. One of the protesters even claimed that he heard a cop ordering a bus driver to plough his bus on the demonstration. During the chaos, a sexagenarian protester named Mizanur Rahman was seen climbing an armoured police van to prevent it from using water cannon against his fellow activists. At that moment, some policemen started to kick him mercilessly, tore apart his clothes, dragged him away and threw him in the van. Many other protesters and journalists covering the demonstration were seriously wounded by the crude use of force by the police.

Such violent use of force by Bangladesh police is not at all unique to



these protesters. Five years ago, on May 15, 2012, police fired water cannons and sprayed pepper powder on a peaceful hunger strike of the non-government primary school teachers at the Central Shahid Minar. It was an appalling picture. The teachers were already exhausted due to their day-long hunger strike beneath the scorching summer sun. Their demand was to nationalise their job which would ensure them of a regular salary and pension. They were suddenly attacked by heavily armoured cops holding pepper canisters, spraying inflammatory pepper powder that suffocated and blinded the helpless teachers.

However, it was only the beginning. Immediately after this violent action,

which was supposed to be used for riot control, the surrounded, suffocated teachers had to take the full brunt of the water cannon blasting them with boiling water from point blank range. Many starving and elderly teachers became seriously injured and had to withdraw their protest in the face of such vicious attacks. Their demand is still unfulfilled and completely unaddressed. At that time, very few people raised their voice in protest of such heinous use of force against the poorly paid, helpless and apolitical primary school teachers.

If we look at the recent pattern of police action against any crowd or demonstration, it is not difficult to comprehend that the action against the

school teachers was just the prototype of the recent actions. During the countrywide political violence in 2013, more than hundred people were killed within the first half of the year by the law enforcing agencies (The Daily Star, May 10, 2013). However, police officials never had to explain to the public about why they had failed to control the agitation and why so many unarmed people were killed on the streets.

Likewise, there is still no explanation regarding the atrocities committed by the police on January 26<sup>th</sup>. Although an official has been suspended in connection to the incident, according to the officer in charge of Shahbagh police station, the chances are high that like his predecessors, he will also be spared. This prediction became stronger when our home minister, defying all the evidences and protests by the victims of the incident that included journalists, claimed that it was a normal collision; there was no incident of torture by the police.

The incident of 26th January is nothing but the consequence of our silence over many such incidents that have been occurring in the last five years. We should remember that the tendency of selective outrage is counter-productive and only intensifies oppression and injustice by weakening national solidarity. It is a lesson for Bangladesh's civil society and people en masse -- urging us to speak up against any oppression, regardless of the victim's race, religion, ethnicity, social and political identity.




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