

Neglected Liberation War sites

Disrespecting our martyrs

IT is nothing short of a tragedy that even after 46 years of independence, we have failed to preserve some of the most historic sites bearing the memories of the Liberation War. In Cox's Bazar, killing grounds, mass graves and other places have been grabbed and schools, government offices, madrasas and houses have been established on the sites. A war memorial built in 2012 in Kurigram remains neglected by authorities even four years after its completion. In Pabna, an abandoned telephone exchange building that witnessed the defeat of a Pakistani troop has turned into a safe haven for drug users.

Does this, in any way, embody the spirit of 1971? Is this what we owe to all those who put up resistance to Pakistani occupation forces and laid down their lives for the freedom that we, as a sovereign nation, enjoy today? As we already know, many such sites around the country have been grabbed by both public and private enterprises—in effect erasing their historical significance.

We must remember that preserving these sites is not just about paying respect to the courageous freedom fighters. This is also important for conducting research on the history of the Liberation War, deepening our understanding of mass violence and resistance during wartime, and documenting and archiving events related to the genocide at the hands of the Pakistani forces. As such, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs must take the lead in preserving these sites and removing the establishments that have sprung up there due to the consistent negligence of concerned authorities.

Unending road crashes

Stop the march of death

ROAD crashes have become the gravest risk to public safety, causing a large number of deaths every day. Reportedly 420 people have been killed in road crashes in the last 20 days. The latest in this long line took place when at least 13 day labourers died as the vehicle they were riding collided head-on with a speeding truck in Chuadanga. The driver of the errant truck, according to an eyewitness account, was sleepy.

Of late, the number of road accidents, particularly on highways, has reached an alarming proportion. Unfit vehicles with missing headlights, tail-lights, side-view mirrors are allowed to roam the streets. Irresponsible driving and dangerous overtaking are also some of the major reasons behind the menace that our roads have been plagued with. And motorists appear to enjoy a culture of impunity, as the number of drivers brought to book for road crashes remains markedly low.

To begin with, the authorities should enforce a zero tolerance policy on unfit vehicles, reckless driving and fake licenses. Internationally accepted road safety mechanisms need to be adopted and the legal system has to be strengthened to make sure the guilty are handed down quick and exemplary punishment. Also, the government needs to introduce inexpensive and quality public transport so that the poor do not rely on improvised vehicles, as in the case of the victims of Kushtia tragedy. A ban on these vehicles needs to be strictly enforced while the authorities replace them with safer and affordable means of public transportation. It is high time the authorities understood that enough blood has been shed and 420 deaths in 20 days is way too high a figure to remain in slumber about an issue of public safety. Wake up, please!

ISIS threats in Bangladesh

Denials and Delusions

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

IT has happened again! In the wake of the latest round of terror attacks in Bangladesh, with ISIS claiming credit for it, authorities in the country have again started resorting to the old response. Rejecting any ISIS involvement in terror attacks in Bangladesh as "propaganda", Home Minister Asaduzzaman Kamal poses the question: "Why will the ISIS come here?" One wonders if leaders in any terror-infested country would ever ask a similar question! We know ISIS is a global terrorist outfit waging a total war against everyone, Muslim or non-Muslim.

It's noteworthy that politicians and law-enforcers in Bangladesh either cry wolf about "impending terror attacks" in the country or they cry hoarse denying the existence of any international terrorist group.

After the well-publicised July attack at the Holey Artisan in Dhaka, which killed 29 people — including the five gunmen — the Government flatly denied any ISIS involvement in the attack. Interestingly, the ISIS owned the attack, and published pictures of several dead victims while the gunmen were still holding hostages inside the café, in its propaganda news website Amaq al-Akhbariyah. And despite ISIS claims, the Government again denied any ISIS involvement in the recent terror attacks in the country since March 17.

Two days after two militants had blown themselves up to evade arrest at Sitakunda in Chittagong, a suicide bomber — believed to be an ISIS activist — on March 17, blew himself up near a camp of the Rapid Action Battalion at Ashkona in Dhaka. On March 24, another suicide bomber attacked a police box and blew himself up in Uttara, near Dhaka Airport. On the same day, the army, police, and RAB began an operation at a suspected den of banned Islamist militant Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) at a house in Shibbari area of Sylhet city in northeastern Bangladesh. By March 26, six people, including two policemen, were killed in terrorist bomb blasts and grenade attacks in Sylhet; and later two terrorists blew themselves up. The ISIS has owned all these attacks.

Meanwhile, the RAB had done what members of this elite force do quite frequently. RAB claims it arrested one Hanif Mridha, near the Ashkona camp soon after the suicide attack on March 17, and he died in custody the next day. But his family members claim, he was an innocent victim of extortion, picked up by RAB on February 27, three weeks before he died in custody ["Hanif picked up on Feb 27": Claims Family", *The Daily Star*].

Contrary to popular assumptions, neither the police nor armed forces are the most effective antidotes to terrorism. Since the police are mainly trained to maintain law and order, and prevent crime; and the military to defend the country from internal and external enemies, they have very limited understanding and role in counterterrorism (CT) operations. Even insurgencies, which are apparently war-like, are different from conventional warfare.

Law-enforcers can neither be the main CT operators, nor can they decide whether particular genres of terrorists are homegrown, or in cahoots with

transnational terror groups like al Qaeda and ISIS. The Inspector General of Police (IGP) AKM Shahidul Haque believes any claim about ISIS presence in Bangladesh is "baseless propaganda". "What we call militants are actually homegrown who might have been embodied with IS philosophy and ideology. But they don't have any link with the IS," he insists. Rejecting security analyst Rohan Gunaratna's claim that the ISIS was behind the Gulshan café attack last year, the IGP asserts: "Rohan is not a police officer, nor a military officer. He does not deal with any security issue. He is an academician, a professor of a university.... does not have experience of the real issue of Bangladesh" [*The Daily Star*, March 14].

However, we know security analysts and academics can be CT and COIN (counterinsurgency) experts as well; and at times, they know as much if not more about terrorism and insurgency as the brightest police or

law-enforcers, their British counterparts didn't challenge the ISIS claim. BNP's State Minister for Home Lutfozzaman Babar rejected the presence of any Islamist terror group in Bangladesh soon after the JMB had detonated 500 bombs at 300 locations in Bangladesh in 2005. He, however, later apologised for his misstatement.

Of late, various sources have revealed the strength of the JMB, which by 2007 had more than 10,000 members across Bangladesh [Adam Stahl, "Challenges Facing Bangladesh", International Institute for Counter-Terrorism]. The JMB is also closely linked with the ISIS; its support is there and, according to a Bangladeshi intelligence report, is also capable of making improvised explosive device (IED) as has been seen in Sylhet and elsewhere. In this backdrop, one wonders, if we could be as complacent as the Home Minister seems to be. He claims: "The militants are



Army personnel take a family to safety after evacuating residents from a building during the recent raid in Sylhet.

military officer. While the police deal with crime and criminals, the armed forces deal with war and war-like situations. Neither is terrorism similar to violent crimes — armed robbery, arson, or killing of victims for some personal reasons — nor is it synonymous with warfare. The so-called "War on Terror" is a grotesque, grossly misleading concept developed by George W Bush and his surrogates. And terrorism is an ideology-driven political problem, which can only be resolved politically, not merely by police or military action.

There is enough evidence to conclude that the JMB is in league with the so-called Islamic State, which is a transnational terrorist group, mainly based in war-torn Syria and Iraq. By now the ISIS has spread its tentacles in all the continents. Khalid Masood, the 52-year-old British terrorist who on March 22 killed several people in London and was killed by police, is widely believed to be an ISIS recruit. Unlike Bangladeshi politicians and

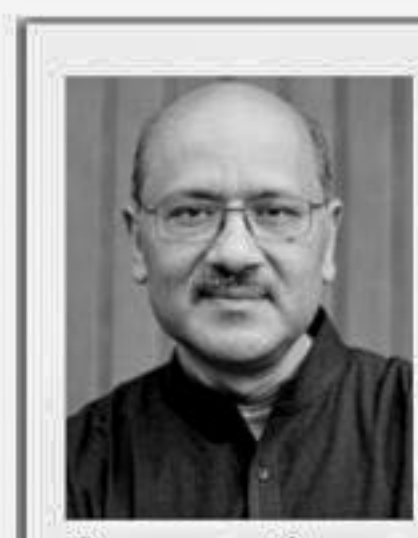
under our control" [*Bangla Tribune*, March 27].

We can't be fully secure without the elimination of the root causes of terrorism. Unaccountable governance, corruption, and massive youth unemployment — around 40 percent of Bangladeshi youths don't have any regular employment — lead to social unrest, which is the mother of terrorism. In sum, living with terrorism is the "new normal" globally and Bangladesh will have to live with this reality. While some Bangladeshi youths, including girls, have joined the ISIS in Syria and Iraq — on March 16 one Neaz Morshed Raja of Bangladesh died as a suicide bomber in Tikrit, Iraq — denying any ISIS threat in Bangladesh is denial of the truth that is proving increasingly expensive.

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HINDUTVA TO HINDUTVA-PLUS

Mr Modi has changed the politics of Hindu grievance to that of Hindu resurgence, from soft secularism to hard nationalism



SHEKHAR GUPTA

IF political history could be divided into epochs, Indira Gandhi's began in 1969, when she split the Congress, and ended in 1989, when Rajiv Gandhi lost power. Two rising, political forces made this happen: Mandir and Mandal. The Congress never quite recovered its élan, despite 15 years of subsequent power (one term under PV Narasimha Rao and two under Sonia Gandhi/Manmohan Singh). The real power was shared in different phases by children of Mandir and Mandal, much in the fashion of rival teams sharing sessions in a cricket Test match. That epoch has now ended.

That post-1989 politics is over with the BJP's 325-seat victory in Uttar Pradesh and appointment of Yogi Adityanath as chief minister. It isn't just one of those swings of the pendulum, and old rivals taking turns. This change is fundamental. It sets new rules in politics. Old rules made the BJP give you Kalyan Singh and Rajnath Singh. The most diehard Left-liberals would have been greatly relieved to see one of their types in Lucknow than the Yogi. New rules will end up giving you more of the Yogis.

The old formula of aligning one or two dominant backward/scheduled castes with Muslims has been demolished by the Narendra Modi/Amit Shah electoral machine. The Hindutva that fuels this rise is neither limited, nor symbolised by the Ram Mandir. If anything, the temple is now taken en passant: A done deal, or what will become a reality soon enough with no effective — political — opposition and the Chief Justice of India offering mediation. This is as good an indication you could have of the institutions conceding that a decisive political victory is won.

The suggestions that many Muslims, particularly women, voted for the BJP

in Uttar Pradesh this time is a touching myth. The fact is, SP, BSP and Congress divided 50 percent of all votes amongst them against BJP's 39.7 percent. There is no way that number could be achieved unless Muslims still voted overwhelmingly against the BJP. It is the Hindus among middle, backward and some scheduled castes who broke away from old battle lines and moved to the BJP instead. They did not do it just because they want the temple built, cows protected, or more money for *shamshan ghats* (crematoria) than for *kabristans* (Muslim graveyards). Mr Modi wouldn't need Yogi Adityanath for any of these. Any conventional BJP leaders would have done so.

All talk that Yogi wasn't Mr Modi's choice, that it was forced on him by the RSS, etc., is just talk. Poppycock. If you buy any of these convenient New Delhi mythologies, you cannot understand this move. For seven decades, the Congress, or Congress-like Left-Centre politics was the dominant pole of our politics. Now, the BJP has replaced it. Just as in the past all challenge was built as a counterpoint to this pole, the roles have now decisively reversed in the manner they hadn't with Mr Modi's win in 2014 and the Vajpayee-Advani reign earlier. That is because all past contest was between "secular" forces representing India's minorities and some caste vote banks and the BJP trying to rouse an insecure majority while claiming to be truly secular. Today, it leads an unprecedented Hindu vote bank that is no longer driven by old insecurities, but a resurgent new confidence, even arrogance.

In a 1995 monograph for London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (Adelphi Paper Series) anticipating the BJP's ascent to power, I had argued that India is entering a unique phase where the vastly numerous majority has acquired a minority complex. Mr Advani and the RSS then built their campaign on these. Ayodhya symbolised these. The Hindus were persuaded to believe that minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, were given privileged

treatment in Congress-style secularism. Hajj subsidy, ministers' lavish iftaar parties, immunity from laws (including the Right to Education Act) for minority institutions, rising Pakistani terror and its pan-Islamisation all added to it. A couple of times, it all came together for the BJP and it enjoyed power in the six years during 1998-2004 although most of the "secular" forces still remained united against it. But there were limitations to this strategy. Two decades of post-reform growth had created greater opportunity for all in the private sector, particularly the Hindu urban and rural elites.

Mr Vajpayee and Mr Advani in 2004 sought re-election on the slogan of "India Shining". The contradiction of the claim of a shining India and still hoping to ride Hindu anti-minorityism was obvious. That upbeat, growth-fuelled mood made its marginal, including many upper caste, Hindu voters comfortable enough to go back to their old dugouts of caste or vote for a calmer alternative. That's why the UPA succeeded in pushing through the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and BJP protests were wasted. The same, optimistic sense of growth and opportunity gave the UPA its second term.

Probably sitting far from New Delhi, Mr Modi was able to understand that the BJP's old formula of the majority's minority complex had run its course. In any case, victimhood didn't go with his muscular political style. He was seen increasingly not complaining about minorityism but taking on "terror" in his own way — an encounter would do just fine if POTA wasn't available. If you analyse from 2007 onwards (when his second full term began), every move he made, everything he said, was directed single-mindedly at the idea of changing Hindu grievance to Hindu resurgence. It's also a reasonable presumption that 2007 onwards he became confident that growth and development under a strong, nationalist Hindu leader made for more relevant politics now.

He hasn't been rude to the minorities since. Nor has he been apologetic. That is why his new actions, refusing a skull-cap, cancelling the old annual tradition of iftaar at the prime minister's house, not bringing a Muslim or Christian in any more than a marginal position in his Cabinet and now not fielding one Muslim candidate among his 403 in Uttar Pradesh, were all deliberate. These were drawn not by cussedness or prejudice but a conscious redefining of political secularism and Hindu-ised Indian nationalism. Yogi's appointment fits the same pattern. The Modi-Shah definition of secularism is, India is a confident, resurgent Hindu, and therefore secular, country. Minorities will be safe if they know their place. They won't henceforth be allowed to have a veto on who does or doesn't govern India. The Hindu majority has taken over, feels more dominant than ever, and realises that this is how it should have always been. The days of being apologetic are over. Yogi Adityanath is a choice as deliberate as declining the skull-cap.

No opposition, least of all the Congress, can counter this with old slogans or formulae. In Uttar Pradesh this time, they strung the Muslims along as the flag-bearers of their idea of secularism, and were defeated. Not so much because they were up against Hindu bigotry, but because Mr Modi employed a much stronger weapon, macho nationalism rather than grievances and insecurity to rally the majority. Until now, Congress-Left secularism determined the political debate. Mr Modi has now shifted the debate to nationalism, helped along by JNU-style ultra-Left distortion of liberalism. This India has no place in its heart for the kind of border-less, nation-less world John Lennon imagined. Nor does the rest of the world, as seen in the rise of nationalism. Until opposition throws up a leader willing to accept this and fight nationalism with nationalism, Mr Modi will be unassailable.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is our Central Bank duly fortified?

First, there was the electronic system failure leading to huge amounts of losses in foreign currency. And now we have the fire incident of March 23, causing damage to electronics and valuable documents.

The Bangladesh Bank stores invaluable assets like gold, foreign currency, and transaction documents of national and international importance. This raises the question of whether they are duly equipped with a modern firefighting team. More importantly, why are these documents kept in wooden shelves vulnerable to damage by fire or other accidents? It is imperative that the Bangladesh Bank be armed with state-of-the-art security features before such dangerous incidents occur, not after the damage has been done.

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Two articles in *The Daily Star's* "Independence Day Special 2017", i.e. "Remembering the year of war" and "Those dark days" were erroneously attributed to Shimul (Billah) Youssuff and Shafiqur Rahman as being their authors.

Those pieces were interviews of the aforementioned individuals by Ishrat Firdousi and first appeared in his book *The Year That Was* published in 1996.

We sincerely apologise for this unintended error.