



PHOTO: NAYEM SHAAN

“What a weary time those years were -- to have the desire and the need to live but not the ability.”

— Charles Bukowski, *Ham on Rye*

SNAPSHOT

HUMAN RIGHTS

Last Saturday night, the 400-year-old Rath Mela in Dhamrai, a fair integral to the Hindu Rath Jatra Utsab and the biggest Rath Jatra festival of the country, was shut down by the police over what it called “security concerns”, the fair stalls forcibly dismantled, visibly destroyed, and their owners beaten up.

It is disconcerting that this is the first time that the fair has been forced to shut down and the first time since the ceremonial chariot was burnt down by the Pakistan Army in 1971 that an act of violence has been perpetrated at Dhamrai Rath.

The destruction at Dhamrai is simply another manifestation of the systematic persecution of minorities in Bangladesh. It is yet another reminder that the outbreak of violence against minorities is not so much an isolated incident resulting from the cultural anomaly that is religious extremism, but a prevailing attitude that it is woven into the very fabric of civilised society.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

DESTRUCTION OF SHOPS AT RATH MELA AND THE EVER-SHRINKING SPACE FOR MINORITIES

destroyed, or stolen? They are less human, more subspecies—second class citizens—given there has been no justice for the uncountable transgressions committed against them. If they were equals, would the law have not protected them equally after a hundred Hindu houses and temples were vandalised in Nasiragar last October? If they were equals, would the law have not protected them before hundreds of their houses had already burned to the ground in Longadu?

Three investigations later, the government can still find no culprit or no motive behind the destruction at Nasiragar, while at Longadu, the police lost no time arresting Runel and Junel Chakma on the basis of rumours, but are yet to make any developments on the two cases filed against 79 named culprits of the arson attack on the indigenous community.

The past two months have seen the indigenous community in the hill tracts literally hunted down and smoked out of their houses, and a vicious murder attempt on an Ahmadyiya imam. The physical space the minority 10 percent of the population take up is literally shrinking. I will not ask how we got here. Impunity, nominal case-filing, forced extermination, as well as slow, deliberate expulsion, and our collective amnesia may all be to blame, but what dark future awaits a nation where the minutest deviation from the norm is met with violence. ■

AMIYA HALDER

Even if these crimes do not have communal motivations and are a show of power resulting from intra-party conflicts between the local parliamentary member MA Maleque and Dhamrai municipal mayor Golam Kabir, as echoed by Nanda Gopal Sen, joint secretary of Shree Shree Jashomadhab Mandir committee, why choose the Rath Mela to vandalise?

In fact, there was already quite a bit of talk about “security concerns” before the Rath Jatra Utsab even began. But then there are always such concerns at large gatherings, in which case security is heightened, be it Pahela Baishakh, the Dhaka International Trade Fair, or the Ekushey Boi Mela. Instead, in a meeting at police headquarters with the organising committees, loudspeakers were banned at the Rath Jatra on the very “logical” grounds that: a) if any criminal activity were to take place in the process, the police would not be able to detect it amid the loud music, and b)

loud music also causes disturbances for old people and children. But where were the admonishing sit-downs with the police when mosque loudspeakers in Nasiragar were used to mobilise a horde to murder a man? But God forbid a Hindu makes a peep! One may wonder what the authorities will have to say about miking come Durga Puja this year.

In an act of protest for having their fair shut down, the organising committee of the Rath Jatra Utsab had decided to cancel Monday’s Ulta Rath Jatra. However, another sit-down with the police later, all was forgiven and this act of protest repealed. While celebrating in full fervour is really the biggest middle-finger one can give, it’s regrettable that they were promised the extra security they should’ve been given all along only at the last minute.

But from whom did the celebrators require protection? The local MP says that the followers of the mayor destroyed the makeshift shops, while the mayor denies such allegations and blames the police instead. The local OC says they “closed”, not destroyed, the shops, while Dhaka’s Additional Police Superintendent Asraful

Azim refutes the threat of any possible militant attacks. The only possible conclusion left is that the shops must’ve self-destructed all on their own.

We go on acting like these so-called “security concerns” are not just an excuse to stifle minorities, as if their numbers have not been dwindling, as if at the rate at which Hindus have been fleeing Bangladesh today is not similar to 1971, as if over 50 indigenous groups are not on the verge of extinction.

Coincidentally, last year Mayor Kabir had allegedly forced the Hindu community at Dhamrai to allow him to set up a cattle market on the temple’s land during Qurbani Eid last year. Was there no other place in all of Dhamrai municipality for a cattle market? Of course we are way past the point of expecting the religious sentiments of minorities to be taken into consideration in a country where co-existing has become quite impossible.

The local government and police seem to wear disregard like a badge of entitlement, power, and control. Who really cares if the possessions of a minority community are seized,

MAILBOX

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IMAGE: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

Violation of Fundamental Rights

The article “Digital Repression in Digital Bangladesh” published in the *Star Weekend* on 16 July demonstrates that section 57 of the ICT Act has become a draconian law as it poses a big threat to freedom of expression. Earlier, several rights bodies and online activists termed the ICT (Amendment) Act, 2013 as a repressive law and expressed deep concerns over the amendment from the very beginning. These concerns of misuse of this act are fast becoming true with a rising number of cases filed under this section.

Article 39 of our constitution guarantees fundamental rights to citizens—freedom of thought, conscience, and of speech. Besides the Right to Information Act, 2009 has recognized the freedom of expression as an important fundamental right of citizens. In very similar terms, the right to freedom of expression is also guaranteed by both Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 19(2) of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Fundamental rights are being violated under the act

because in this context, before writing anything on social media or in the mainstream media, a person remains in fear, hampering free thinking and expression of thought.

Given that free speech is the core of a progressive society as uncensored and free discussions eventually allow for the establishment of truth in a society. Citizens of a democratic country do not directly dictate or decide on laws and public policies but have a say by electing representatives. Through electronic, print media, and social media, citizens interface with their representatives. But in the name of the state entity otherwise the nation-state will lose all credibility and we as a nation will be evolutionarily stunted. We urge that the government address the right to freedom of expression in the new Digital Security Act.

Free speech needs to be protected by the state entity otherwise the nation-state will lose all credibility and we as a nation will be evolutionarily stunted. We urge that the government address the right to freedom of expression in the new Digital Security Act.
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No longer a burden

For years, our society has considered physically and mentally challenged people as nothing but humps on their backs. They have cornered and alienated these people as if they were different from us. But times are changing. Thanks to the government and supporting NGOs which are bringing to the limelight these long-forgotten groups of people.

I would like to show my gratitude towards *The Daily Star* for sharing the story of Humayun Kabir (a physically-challenged man) who made his life overcoming all these hurdles. His story was really encouraging. There are many such Humayuns in our society that we can feel proud of. However, there are also many of them who are equally competent but are still living in a dark world. If they are provided with the right opportunities, they can also contribute to the development of our country.

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Diary of Kalpana Chakma: Insight of a Fearless Woman

I was marveled by reading the thoughts of Kalpana Chakma in the article named “We will be soldiers in a battlefield” published in the *Star Weekend* on June 16. It showed the insight of a strong Jamma woman with progressive thoughts and willing to form a society free of oppression and gender discrimination. Her speeches and notes in her diary express herself quite well. The extract

from her diary titled ‘Do not keep me in the dark any more, let me see’, beautifully explains that though men and women are different it does not make either sex worthy or unworthy. These notions of worthiness are social constructs.

It shows her feminist thoughts with a determination of freeing society from gender discrimination. It is very

unfortunate for us as we could not ensure the safety of this fearless woman. 21 years have passed, but still nothing has been traced about her. But her letters, speeches and diaries will keep her alive for centuries. These will encourage women by giving them strength and courage.

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