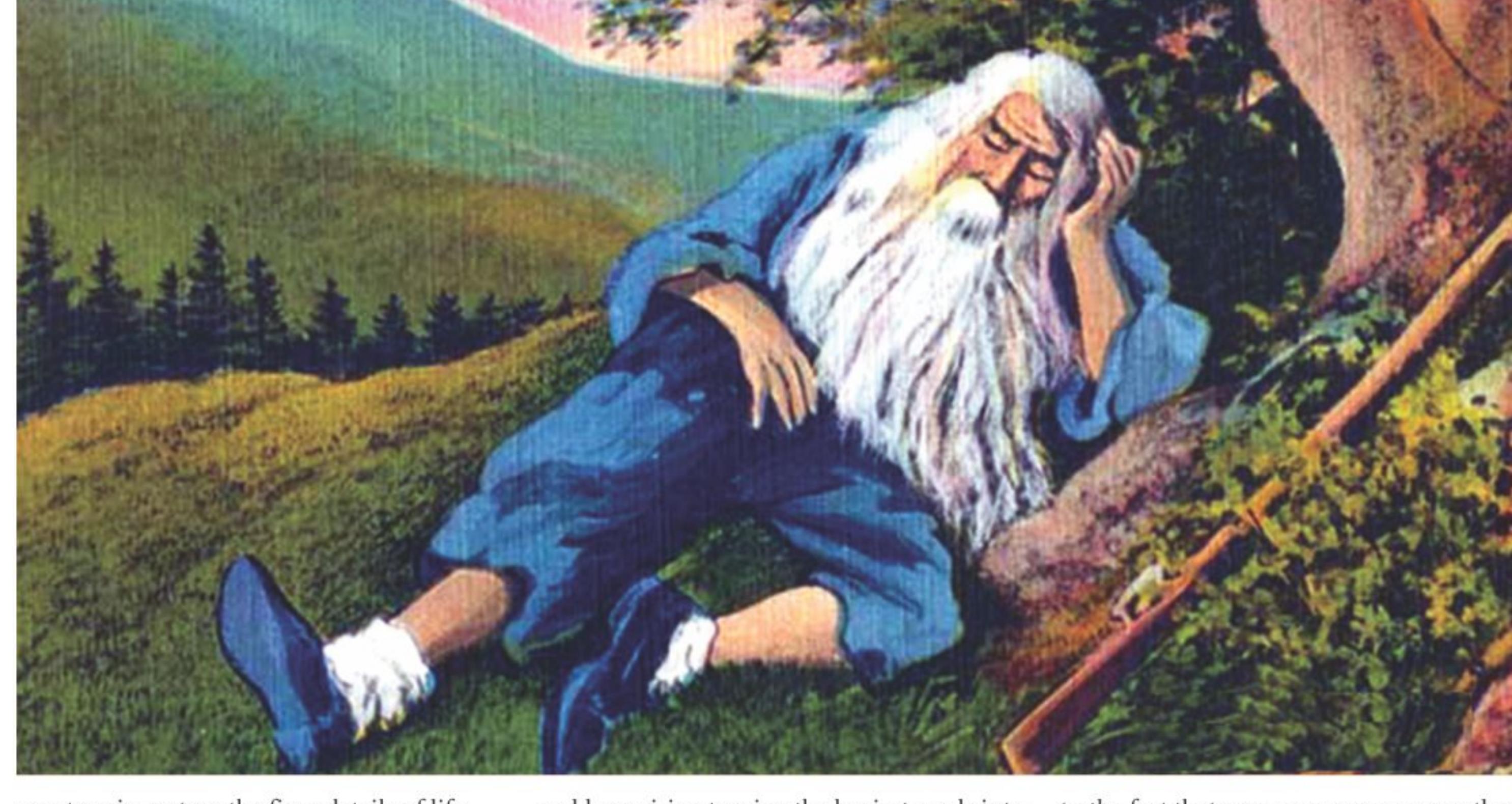


The spectre of Rip Van Winkle



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

EVERY time I go to a family dinner I am struck by a bout of Rip Van Winklism—the realisation that life has moved on much faster than I had realised. Those little cherubic, diaper-clad babies I used to cuddle now sport beards, or worse, are going to university. Some of them are even engaged or about to have a baby. People have changed their jobs and no they no longer work for that lovely bank (it closed down in 1992) and Beauty Bhabhi is no longer in the picture—having divorced Rocky Bhai, married a Middle Eastern tycoon and moved to Ontario, Canada! This bizarre feeling of cluelessness is ample proof of: a) the delightful fact that I have acquired a few decades in years and been totally oblivious of it; and b) I really need to get out more and meet folks. Being mired in the drudgery of work and finding one's cosy blanket and mindless TV to be far more attractive options than making actual contact with other human beings and pretending to be interesting, it is



by the rainy season and sends it to the river, has gone through the strangest process ever. Instead of deeper dredging which would have made the canal a better reservoir, someone of influence had the bright idea of carpeting the canal bed with a concrete floor. This has served to make the ever narrowing canal shallow, thus retarding the process of holding the flood water and interfering with the natural flow of the canal. The result: a watery Venice-like situation without the romance of gondolas and curly-haired, rugged Italian boatmen.

While Chittagong's city fathers may be waking up to a reality that has been true for the last twenty years the 'authorities' of Dhaka city—apparently there are seven of them—managing its storm-water drainage system are yet to come out of their slumber as year after year the monsoon season brings total misery to the residents. As they were basking in a semi-conscious state, so much has happened. Most of the canals have disappeared and the remaining ones have become clogged with solid waste. Greed has taken over all the wetlands, ponds, canals in the form of concrete, leaving no space for the rainwater to go, throwing the city into paralysis every time there is a heavy shower. Hence the quirky sight of a man in a purple hooded raincoat sitting in the middle of a watery street in front of an open manhole that will miraculously drain out all the water—presumably so no one falls in while wading through the muddy pool. Residents of this city, in fact, have become resigned to their watery urban existence—used to the flood level pants, the frequent abstention from work, school, social activities, the worsening of traffic, the stench of sewerage and rainwater mingling and flowing through the streets.

During these times I find myself vindicated for all the times I cannot recall the name of a nephew or how in fact he is related to me. This is a city where even the most important people fall victim of the Rip Van Winkle syndrome. They lie in the blissful sleep of negligence and apathy while their city's vitality, strength and resilience are washed away in the dirty waters.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Op-ed, *The Daily Star*.

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easy to miss out on the finer details of life that tend to pick up speed while passing by. Hence the Rip Van Winkle syndrome.

For those uninitiated in this morbid fairy tale Rip Van Winkle was a kind hearted but lazy Dutch Villager who has a drink from a stranger on top of a hill and falls asleep for twenty years. He wakes up to find, not surprisingly, everything has changed, the government, the people, his youthful face, the kids . . .

Coming back to the present time, it's not just me who has been infected by this affliction. Governments tend to be just as vulnerable, manifested in their surprisingly lethargic responses to various natural and manmade crises. From time immemorial we have known—you can even ask a two-year-old resident of this country—that during the monsoon season the incessant rains cause water to accumulate very fast in enclosed areas. Of course it will stagnate if there is no drainage. Do we need feasibility studies to know that unless you have proper functioning drains, the water will just stay put

and keep rising turning the busiest roads into dirty, muddy, swimming pools? No we don't. But the latest statements by none other than the Mayor of Chittagong certainly makes one think whether he and his colleagues have been struck by a strain of Rip Van Winklism. While ordinary Chittagonians are wading through the mini rivers that were once the city streets, trying to go to school, work or home in waist deep water, the city father says that water logging cannot be solved by doing just 'one thing' and that "the major problem of the city is that there is no sewerage and drainage system". Say what? You may wonder, did he really say there is no sewerage or drainage system in a mega city like Chittagong? So how long has this water logging been going on? Oh says the stoical ordinary Chittagonian, this is old news—around twenty odd years or so. And every mayoral election year the weary residents of this beautiful city must hear the refrain: "this time I will solve the water logging problem of Chittagong city". The current mayor, it seems has suddenly awoken

to the fact that every monsoon season the story of water logging repeats itself like a recurring nightmare in which you are drowning in grimy water (oh wait that's a real situation). He has stated that Wasa (Water and Sewerage Authority) has recently done a feasibility study with support of the World Bank and sent a master plan to the concerned ministry. The Wasa folks are saying that the plan is expected to be approved by the ministry in a matter of two months. Oh, and meanwhile says the mayor, there are ongoing projects that promise to clear the canals and drains. But one cannot help but ask: What have the authorities been waiting for the last twenty years? Were they asleep like RVW?

Actually it seems that they were. In fact, while they were in a perpetual somnambulist state, the seventeen canals that would have handled all the drainage, were being continuously encroached upon, making them thinner and thinner and thinner. On top of that the Chaktai canal, the main canal that connects to the Karnaphuli river and generally catches all the extra water brought

local militant groups carry out such attacks in the past.

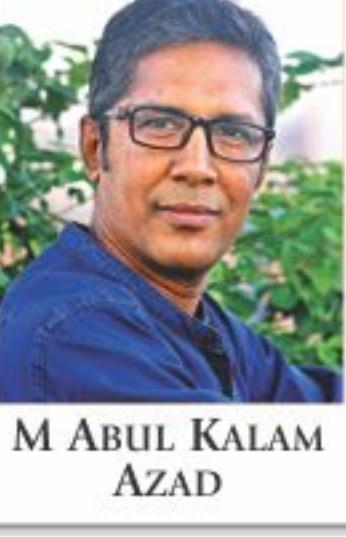
The authorities' total denial of IS presence will not help. Whatever the reason behind the refusal—political or tactical—it is undermining gravity of the problem. The denial coupled with the complacency may again create ground for re-emergence of extremism.

In a new development, recently Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told parliament that Bangladesh has become a role model in successfully tackling militancy. Only a few countries have been able to curb radical Islamists and the reason behind their success was not only using force to destroy them but launching a multi-pronged counter-radicalisation strategy—community involvement, social awareness about the scourge of extremism, campaign against misinterpretation of religion, de-radicalisation of radicals and integrating them in society. Singapore is doing this successfully, yet the country does not claim to be a role model. Bangladesh is far behind from what Singapore is doing. In absence of such a counter-radicalisation strategy, radicals continue to grow in the society and remain as a big threat. Killing extremists will not kill their ideology. So, instead of being complacent, the authorities should successfully launch a comprehensive counter-radicalisation campaign to check recurrence of what the country saw from February 2013 to July 2016.

The writer is Chief Reporter, *The Daily Star*.

MILITANCY IN BANGLADESH

The price of complacency



M ABUL KALAM AZAD

FOR about four years, from 2009, we have often heard government and police officials saying that religious extremism was under control, that its networks were destroyed and that the militants would not be able to regain capacity to carry out attacks. The complacency came for two reasons. One was the capture of the most top-ranking militants, who were sentenced to death in 2007; the other was that there were no attacks during those years.

The extremists did not take much time to prove this conclusion wrong. The misplaced complacency in fact went in favour of the extremists, who silently grew in strength and re-emerged with a more, frightening, brutal face.

After the August 17, 2005 countrywide bomb blasts, carried out by banned outfit Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an anti-militancy drive began in which the group's top leaders were captured. They were executed in 2007. Yet, some leaders and many activists escaped the dragnet. The drive began to lose momentum, although a good initiative was taken by the Awami League government in 2009 to fight extremism. A national committee involving different ministries, police

department, intelligence agencies, imams and schoolteachers was formed to fight radical Islamists through launching a socio-cultural and religious campaign. But by the end of 2010, the multi-pronged anti-militancy campaign fizzled out due to lack of political will. The fugitive militants were then regrouping in the Bangladesh-India borders, taking training on arms and explosives, and eventually gaining capacity to launch attacks.

Another deadly development during this period—one that escaped the attention of the authorities—was the rise of a new brand of militants. The Chief of Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) Moulana Jasimuddin Rahmania was then playing a key role, giving radical sermons in mosques and madrasahs. Audio and video clips of the sermons went viral, attracting a large number of people, particularly youths, to take up the radical path of religion. Hizb ut Tahrir was the other radical group spreading dangerously as its leaders were brainwashing youths in universities to take up the destructive path with a goal to overthrow the democratic government and establish a *khelafat* state. Authorities banned both groups.

In this scenario, the movement of secular bloggers, online activists and pro-liberation people began at the capital's Shahbagh square on February 2013, demanding the death penalty for all war criminals and a ban on religious-based politics. The reorganised militants took this as an

opportunity to prove their strength. They hacked to death blogger Rajib Haider near his house on February 16 for, what they claimed, "making derogatory comments about Islam". The murder was the beginning of a new phase of terrorism as secular teachers, religious minorities, foreigners and LGBT activists were targeted in different places of the country. Law-enforcing agencies had no clue about the attackers and their

plan for attacks, credit of which was claimed by al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic State (IS), which emerged in 2014 as a deadly terror organisation and attracted thousands in many countries, including Bangladesh. Youths, belonging to the poor and well-off families, whether they were from madrasahs or English-medium backgrounds, became IS followers.

Some members of JMB, Hizb ut Tahrir and ABT also took it up. Many of them left houses, got brainwashed, got training on arms and ammunitions, and prepared for launching high-profile attacks. Law-enforcing agencies had little idea about the developments and the imminent danger. It was only after the Holey Artisan attack by the IS-inspired radicals that they understood the capacity of the evil

force and finally woke to dismantle its networks. The government also acknowledged that militancy was a real problem and posed a serious threat to the country's security. A crackdown began in which a large number of militants were either killed or arrested in the last one year. And then there was a pause in militant attacks. Apparently, it appears that the extremists have lost

their capacity and are unable to carry on. It also seems that our police and intelligence agencies are better equipped and more capable in preventing attacks.

Again we have a pre-2013 situation and the same dangerous tendency of showing self-satisfaction. Some police officers and ruling party leaders have again started saying that the strength of the militants had been destroyed and that they would not be able to attack. The latest of such comments came from the Inspector General of Police at a post-Eid gathering of journalists at the Police Headquarters on Sunday.

But we can't afford to be complacent about the militants who are following a wrong and destructive ideology and are ready to die for it. Surely, the militant networks have been dismantled but not uprooted completely. In the face of crackdown, they may have adopted a different tactic to lie low for some time to regain capacity.

The government and police have played down the influence of IS in the country, which may turn out to be counterproductive in the near future. Since emergence, this terror organisation has been able to transport its brutal ideology to Bangladesh. A significant number of people, particularly young men are still nurturing the ideology while many others are becoming its new followers. The Holey Artisan café attack, carried out by five youths (brainwashed with IS ideology), is an example of how brutal IS could be. We have never seen any



local militant groups carry out such attacks in the past.

The authorities' total denial of IS presence will not help. Whatever the reason behind the refusal—political or tactical—it is undermining gravity of the problem. The denial coupled with the complacency may again create ground for re-emergence of extremism.

In a new development, recently Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told parliament that Bangladesh has become a role model in successfully tackling militancy. Only a few countries have been able to curb radical Islamists and the reason behind their success was not only using force to destroy them but launching a multi-pronged counter-radicalisation strategy—community involvement, social awareness about the scourge of extremism, campaign against misinterpretation of religion, de-radicalisation of radicals and integrating them in society. Singapore is doing this successfully, yet the country does not claim to be a role model. Bangladesh is far behind from what Singapore is doing. In absence of such a counter-radicalisation strategy, radicals continue to grow in the society and remain as a big threat. Killing extremists will not kill their ideology. So, instead of being complacent, the authorities should successfully launch a comprehensive counter-radicalisation campaign to check recurrence of what the country saw from February 2013 to July 2016.

The writer is Chief Reporter, *The Daily Star*.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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