

Guarding against a communal narrative

Lessons from the Rohingya crisis

MOYUKH MAHTAB

THE outpouring of help for Rohingya refugees who have fled to Bangladesh has been heart-warming. For a country itself plagued by scarcity, people from all walks have come forward to help them in whatever capacity they have. Buddhists in this country have set up camps to donate blood to Rohingyas who need it and Muslims here have come out to help both Muslims and Hindu refugees from Rakhaine. Now, Sikh volunteers from India have arrived in Teknaf to set up a community kitchen for the refugees. And, as befits a nation that constitutionally guarantees the rights of every citizen, irrespective of race and religion, some Muslim alems have come out saying that now, it is the duty of Islamic leaders here to ensure that no one harasses minorities in this country through misappropriation of the plight of the Rohingyas.

This is timely. There have already been reports of a few isolated incidents. Last week, a woman studying in university, was forced out of a bus she was travelling in as she was a Buddhist from the Chakma community, and by some twisted logic to some people, responsible for the atrocities in Myanmar. Prothom Alo reported on September 14 how a Buddhist monk who had just arrived in Bangladesh was picked up by three youths from a shop when he went there to buy water, and threatened. On September 15, Sammlito Bouddho Somaj held a press conference, denouncing the atrocities on the Rohingyas in Myanmar, but also pointed out how a certain group was engaged in inciting communal hatred within Bangladesh. As a precaution—and the state deserves praise for this—to ensure security of Buddhists here, police has increased vigilance around monasteries in Chittagong.

We have seen before how simplistic narratives of persecution of minorities can give rise to further communal tensions. A little history of Myanmar, and how communalism works in general, is relevant. The religious nationalism that fuels the ethnic cleansing that is happening today in the Rakhaine State is not something that suddenly flared up. Communalism is the use of a supposed religious identity as the basis of a political and social ideology. It seeks to categorise human beings as distinct communities along religious lines. It's the expression of political and economic power through the use of religion. As Saskia Sassen recently highlighted in her article, the persecution of Rohingyas "might be partly generated by military-economic interests"—land grabbing and the greed for natural resources in Rakhaine. (Is Rohingya persecution caused by business interests rather than religion?, *Guardian*, 2017) As for politics, the use of religion to consolidate support against some "other" is not new to this subcontinent. In this context, how we explain and generate

public and international opinion on the Rohingya issue matters. The Rohingya issue cannot be described as an either/or: it is an entangled mess of religion, race, ultra-nationalism and business interests—to name only a few dimensions.

Myanmar is home to at least six distinct groups of Muslims including the Indian-descended Muslim community of Rangoon, the Panthay who are Burmese Chinese Muslims and Zerbadi Muslims, descended from inter-ethnic marriages between Muslim men and Burmese women. Rohingyas are one such, although they are not recognised by the Myanmar government. The official country puts the total Muslim population at around 4.3 percent, but as a 2006 US State Department report pointed out, the census

narrative—that of refusing to acknowledge Rohingyas as an ethnic group and claiming they are Bangalee immigrants.

Muslims have lived in what is Myanmar today for centuries now—and at times, the Buddhists, the majority, have coexisted peacefully with the minority population of Muslims who had started settling Myanmar from at least the ninth century. There are confirmed reports of Muslim colonies—which grew up over time from the Muslim sailors who settled in Myanmar, children of Muslim men who married Burmese women, mercenaries and migration—between the 13th to the 16th century. (Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*)

At times Indian Muslims were very important to the administrative apparatus of

God) Fund earmarked for the treatment of non-Muslim patients." When it comes to the history of Myanmar, Moshe Yegar notes that Muslim persecution during the rule of one king in the 18th century was an aberration in the "background of tolerance."

Of course, by the time Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the usual suspects of colonialism's divide and rule policy had set in. Historically, tensions existed between those who lived in Rakhaine, which was once independent from Myanmar, and the Burmese, but not along religious lines. World War II added to the discord when the two made different alliances. After Ne Win's military take-over of the country in 1962, this hardened further. The pre-coup government of U Nu had recognised the ethnic identity of

against both the Muslims and Buddhists of Rakhaine. The Rohingya sought refuge in Bangladesh, hoping for shelter from their co-religionists. Between 1978-1983, military atrocities like those of today resulted in the deaths of 1,725 and the rapes of 2,715 Rakhaine Buddhists. During the time 437 Rohingyas were killed and 1681 Rohingya women were raped.

In 1990, the military government refused to hand over power to a democratically elected government, and had killed a few monks who were protesting. As Imtiaz Ahmed puts it: "The targeting of the Rohingyas in November 1991, therefore, fulfilled the double-task of consolidating the Buddhist majority and, at the same time, wrecking the unity of the Arakanese." This time, pandering to populist sentiments, the main targets were the Rohingya Muslims, who were made targets for being of a different religion and ethnicity. Like right-wing populist leaders we see today, demonising an "other", the military government wanted the support of Buddhists throughout Myanmar. Placating of hard-line monks meant increased tension between Buddhists and Muslims. The spectre of an "Islamisation" of the country and constant state propaganda created a narrative of the Myanmar community as distinct groups. Tun Khin, a human rights activist and president of Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, summarised to *Newsweek* recently: "Rohingyas are a different ethnic group, they have a different appearance and religion." They were easy targets.

The point of this short and incomplete summary is to show how communalism appropriates religion. The state-military promoted this until the doctrine of hate against "outsiders" had become normalised.

Hearing of the horrors the Rohingyas faced from those who survived, it is easy to fall prey to that same sentiment. Worse still, are those who intentionally use the horrors against the Rohingyas to strengthen their brand of hate. The Buddhists of Bangladesh are not complicit to the crimes of Myanmar, as all Muslims should not be targeted for the crimes of those who intentionally misrepresent Islam. After all, the same Buddhists from Bangladesh have decided to refrain from their Prabarna Purnima festivities this year protesting the atrocities in Myanmar and have decided to distribute the money for the refugees.

The background to the ethno-religious violence against the Rohingyas and the combined effort of all communities in helping the refugees should be an antidote to the hate Myanmar preaches. We must remember that what we are doing to help the Rohingyas and speak up for them stems from a shared humanity, it rises above the communal politics of Myanmar.

Moyukh Mahtab is a member of the editorial team, *The Daily Star*.



A large plume of smoke is seen on the Myanmar side of the border from Teknaf, September 15, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

may have underestimated the country's Muslim population. The Rohingya population, which is not enumerated, consists of about half of the total Muslim population of Myanmar. Myanmar on the other hand claims that the Rohingyas are ethnically Bangalees, who crossed over and so not deserving of citizenship.

To say that religion is not a factor is wrong. As it is wrong to claim that religion solely drives the hate. There is a recent historical basis for Muslim-Buddhist conflict in Myanmar, but the case of the Rohingyas is distinct. And their plight is worse, because unlike other Muslim communities, they are not officially "citizens" of the country. Ethnicity is a crucial factor which drive the Myanmar

and held key positions in the ports and the court. Of course, there was tension at times, but there was harmony and coexistence for longer. Just take two examples which Moshe Yegar writes of in his book. Firstly, that of King Mindon who built a hostel in "Mecca for the comfort of Burmese Muslim pilgrims and at his own expense sent Burmese Muslims with money to erect the building..." in the second-half of the 19th century. In 1937, we find the Muslim Free Hospital and Medical Relief Society. A significant portion of its financing came from Zakat contributions for specific care of Muslims patients. In order to cater to all religions, the hospital started levying a fee, "a symbolic sum, upon the Muslim patients for the treatment they receive, for a Lillah (to

the Rohingyas, but since 1962, their claim to citizenship has been systematically denied. If one looks beyond the official Myanmar narrative, one finds that in 1974, the government used the issues of "race and religion to consolidate its declining support." (Imtiaz Ahmed, *The Rohingyas: From Stateless to Refugee*) Imtiaz Ahmed further writes, "Although in the entire matter, the government was selectively targeting the Arakanese Muslims or Rohingyas, it was not long before that the Arakanese as a whole (both Buddhists and Muslims) realised that such activities were intended to create a wedge between the majority Arakanese Buddhists... and the minority Rohingyas."

The infamous Operation Naga Min of 1978-79 is reported to have been directed

Is television ruining the future of our kids?



JOHN PAUL SERGEANT

W HETHER or not there is any scientific basis upon which to base an answer to the above question doesn't matter; there

is no doubt in my mind that humanity is getting dumber, and the human mind dimmer, all because of the amount of time people spend staring at screens.

Don't get me wrong. The list of television shows that I personally watch—and continue to watch again and again—is huge. Doctor Who, Game of Thrones, Hannibal, Sherlock, House of Cards, Breaking Bad, Better Call Saul; it's a list that could go on and on. Those who produce those shows will undoubtedly tell you that television and film are creative artforms that deserve respect, and who am I to argue with that? They are absolutely

correct, but not everything we enjoy doing is necessarily beneficial.

Great television shows are incredibly addictive, emotional roller coasters that leave you hanging on the edge of your seat wanting more and more. When I was a kid, we were *actually* left wanting more. England in the 1990's had four "free to air" channels, including the BBC, and to me at least, most of the stuff they showed was boring. Thus, I read books or listened to talk radio to pass my time.

Here in 2017, there are hundreds of channels, with event TV on a weekly basis. Then there's the sport—last year I remember scheduling a full two days of sport taking in non-stop football and cricket because it's now possible to watch everything from every time zone, and we're made to want to watch because each and every match is hyped as "the greatest match you will ever see!"

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Television has become the default option for almost all of us. Who among us hasn't been guilty of dropping down in front of the TV, often without anything specific to watch? This is followed by a mindless flicking of channels, one by one by one to see if there's anything on. And most of the time it doesn't have to be something remotely invigorating—just something to justify sitting vegetative for hours, requiring minimum thinking effort (Hello, Star Plus).

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Lazing about in front of the TV is the root cause of a very real and dangerous trend happening in our schools as reading, which is so important especially in early years, is

becoming a forgotten and neglected pastime.

Think of reading as gym work for a child's brain. Contrast that with television as the equivalent of sitting in a McDonald's, ordering every burger on the menu twice over and eating each one with a triple helping of fries. Kids who don't read end up with a metaphorical lump of useless fat between their ears.

Since coming back to Bangladesh, it has been a shock to see the declining ability of students when it comes to English writing and comprehension skills. Going through

school, each batch seems to have deteriorated a little more than the last, with successive Grade 10's regressing in both their ability to think logically and critically by the time they get to International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). Does this failing come from our own inability to promote reading as the best pastime for our kids?

Telling parents how to raise their children has never been my thing, even though sometimes it seems they hand over a bag of rotten vegetables and demand instant production of a 5-star dish. We all try our best with what we're given, right?

But very soon I am going to be a father and with my own kid on the way, I don't want him to fall into the bad habit of sitting in front of the TV with me, thinking that is spending quality time with his dad. So, I'm selling the TV and buying a bookshelf because we are going to read together every day.

Reading is going to become the default relaxation activity—not

reading with any academic purpose, just reading because it's fun. There will be books, magazines and newspapers in abundance! That doesn't mean there will be no screen time. Clearly, there are educational elements on television, and a total ban is probably excessive.

Laptops and computers can show TV shows, and the Internet is abundant with videos and streaming sites that can be watched anytime someone wishes. Without a TV in the house, I can control what is watched and when it is watched. The focus can be put on reading first, TV shows second; reading because it's the gateway to a successful future, over watching TV simply because it is there.

If I can set an example with my own children, perhaps it will help to influence others to read so much more in the future.

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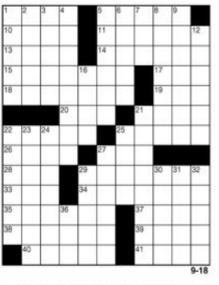


LUDWIG VON MISES
AUSTRIAN-AMERICAN ECONOMIST

Repression by brute force is always a confession of the inability to make use of the better weapons of the intellect—better because they alone give promise of final success.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 28 Swindle | 6 Sneaker features |
| 1 Shoe part | 28 Little rascal | 7 Suitable |
| 5 Strikes, in a way | 29 Curly-haired dogs | 8 Test monitor |
| 10 Exile spot for Napoleon | 33 Baseball's Ripken | 9 Winding |
| 11 Short pants | 34 Collapse inward | 12 Calm |
| 13 Safari sight | 35 Galahad's mother | 16 "— No Sunshine" |
| 14 Start of a play | 37 "Bus Stop" playwright | 21 Cell alternative |
| 15 Carter's weep | 38 Confidential | 22 Cook's collection |
| 17 Cow's chew | 39 Close by | 23 Mexican snacks |
| 18 Thwarts | 40 Future flowers | 24 Properly positioned |
| 19 Start of an ode | 41 Blunders | 25 Inside info |
| 20 They hold power | | 27 Astronomical sightings |
| 21 Brutish one | DOWN | 29 Longed |
| 22 Brief job | 1 Ship steers | 30 Solitary sort |
| 25 Analyze sentences | 2 "Cats" poet | 31 Painter Degas |
| 26 Glass section | 3 Dark wood | 32 Prophets |
| | 4 Battlefield worry | 36 Rage |
| | 5 Justice symbol | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER
 SLATES TERM
 PAPAAYA IDEA
 EVOKED PASS
 WIRES LISTS
 SETS WINNIE
 TEAM END
 BJORNBORG
 PRO IDOL
 LOUSES DREW
 ACRES STAVE
 NANA CAIMAN
 EDAM ALMOND
 RELY TEENSY

BEETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES



BY MORT WALKER



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

