

**SPOTLIGHT**

The puppet show starts with a group rehearsing “*Aguner Poroshmoni*” for *Noboborsho* celebrations. Safat stands aside, not participating. Turns out Safat has been getting flak from his father for “wasting” time with music. The scene shifts to the landlord of the building walking in on them and telling them that cultural activities are not important. In the middle of all this, Safat is befriended by a guy who later on in the play is caught bombing a *Noboborsho* event in another village. Meanwhile, Safat disappears before *Noboborsho* and is not found for days. When he finally turns up, he is much changed—he now believes in radical religious views.

It is a puppet show with brightly coloured, almost adorable cloth dolls, so of course the play ends on a positive note—Safat returns to his musical family. What stands out however is that themes that deal with intense topics like militancy and radicalisation are now appearing in folk art forms like puppet dances. The show was staged targeting a large cultural programme in Chittagong, quite clearly, catering to a mass audience.

While not touting the banner of being a deradicalisation programme, this is one of the many ways that people are trying to build resistance against violent extremism. In another such instance, a coalition of five organisations from Satkhira and Chapainawabganj are silently working to counter violent extremism. Their range of activities include community radio programmes that introduce topics of religious plurality, organising extra-curricular activities at school and perhaps most importantly, getting religious leaders to preach tolerance.

A trainer from Chapainawabganj describes how he gets religious leaders involved. “We organise workshops led by an Islamic leader from the community. Discussions about Islamic text and the concept of *jihaad* are encouraged. The participants are also asked to include these ideas into their sermons following Friday prayers,” he says.

“What is the response like?” I ask. “At first it was difficult to convince them but the discussions seem to be making them think at least. I’d say we are halfway there,” he adds.

This group has been in operation since July 2016. Yet very little is known about groups like these which are trying to build community resilience.

“They do not necessarily want to publicise their activities under the banner of deradicalisation or counter-terrorism, for fear of being targeted by the forces they are advocating against,” explains a spokesperson for the organisations.

It is also important to steer clear of labels such as “counter-terrorism” so as

not to exclude communities who have traditionally been vilified for their religious views, adds the spokesperson.

Moving back to Dhaka, a tech startup called Preneur Labs made three Android applications for the same purpose of countering violence. Produced under a banner called TechforPeace, the applications came out of a competition held among 500 students of five universities.

The app Mesut, for example, targets mental health. The login screen leads to tests for depression, anxiety and anger levels. Users are then given tasks that improve the psychological aspects of life—like patching up with someone who the user is conflicting with.

“Focusing on mental health as an intervention for countering violence is important,” says Arif Nezami, the foreman behind Preneur Labs which incubated this app among others. A similar app they produced called Valo Thakun creates university-based online

cell, describing how the idea of the book started. “So we decided to take out the verses from that diary and have established Islamic scholars put them in context.”

Over 4000 copies of the book were distributed to places, including local madrasas, he states. “This book also helped me connect with militants during interrogation, since the religious logic is foolproof,” he adds.

Some steps are being taken in the prisons. “When a prisoner is booked we

give them motivational speeches and later on take classes. Our work training programmes also work as rehabilitation for those who could venture into the path of extremism,” says Mohammed Jahangir Kabir, the senior superintendent of Dhaka Central Jail. There is however a catch—the prisoners booked under militancy cases are not provided many of these programmes because they cannot be let out of their confined spaces for security reasons. The CTTCU themselves found out

that prisons are breeding grounds for terrorists. In a rather unusual event held in January, the counter-terrorism forces organised a sharing session with people booked in militancy cases and their families. Participants shared their experiences of radicalisation within prisons and described how hardened extremists recruit younger radicals to become violent too.

By comparison, Singapore’s deradicalisation programme for detainees has gained world fame. They

But these are just the ones which are publicised. Scores of cases are filed against alleged militants out of the public eye. According to numbers obtained from the police headquarters by *The Daily Star*, the number of people being booked in these cases hit a spike in 2015 with 597 people being sued. That is more than twice that of previous years. In comparison, from the beginning of the 90s till 2005, the number of people taken in as militants was only 182.

Taking into account the human cost of the spreading militant ideology, there is one thing that experts locally agree on—combat operations will only go so far in dealing with the problem.

“There is no denial that operational measures are important in counter-terrorism; however, the longer-term challenge in Bangladesh is to counter the trends of radicalisation,” states Shafqat Munir, a research fellow with Bangladesh Institute of Peace and

# DERADICALISATION IS MORE THAN JUST COMBAT

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groups that build good habits together. These include small things, like committing as a group to not use slang words.

While these mushrooming initiatives are much-needed, they are not national projects. The government too is not planning anything in that department as of yet.

Background conversations with law enforcers from all units point to the fact that for most cases, combat operations are their only go-to method. There is no centralised plan in sight.

“Different agencies of the government as well as security forces are working on taking steps to counter radicalisation but there is no one platform to do it from. We need coordination,” says Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit’s (CTTCU) Deputy Police Commissioner Abdul Mannan.

There are fragmented examples of deradicalisation measures. The CTTCU for example released a television commercial. The Research and Development division of RAB published a book countering popular *jihadi* ideologies titled “*Jongibadider Opobyakkhya*”. “We confiscated a diary from a young militant with Quranic verses written in it. The verses were being used to justify violent *jihadi* ideologies,” says Selim Mohammed Jahangir, the former director of the R&D

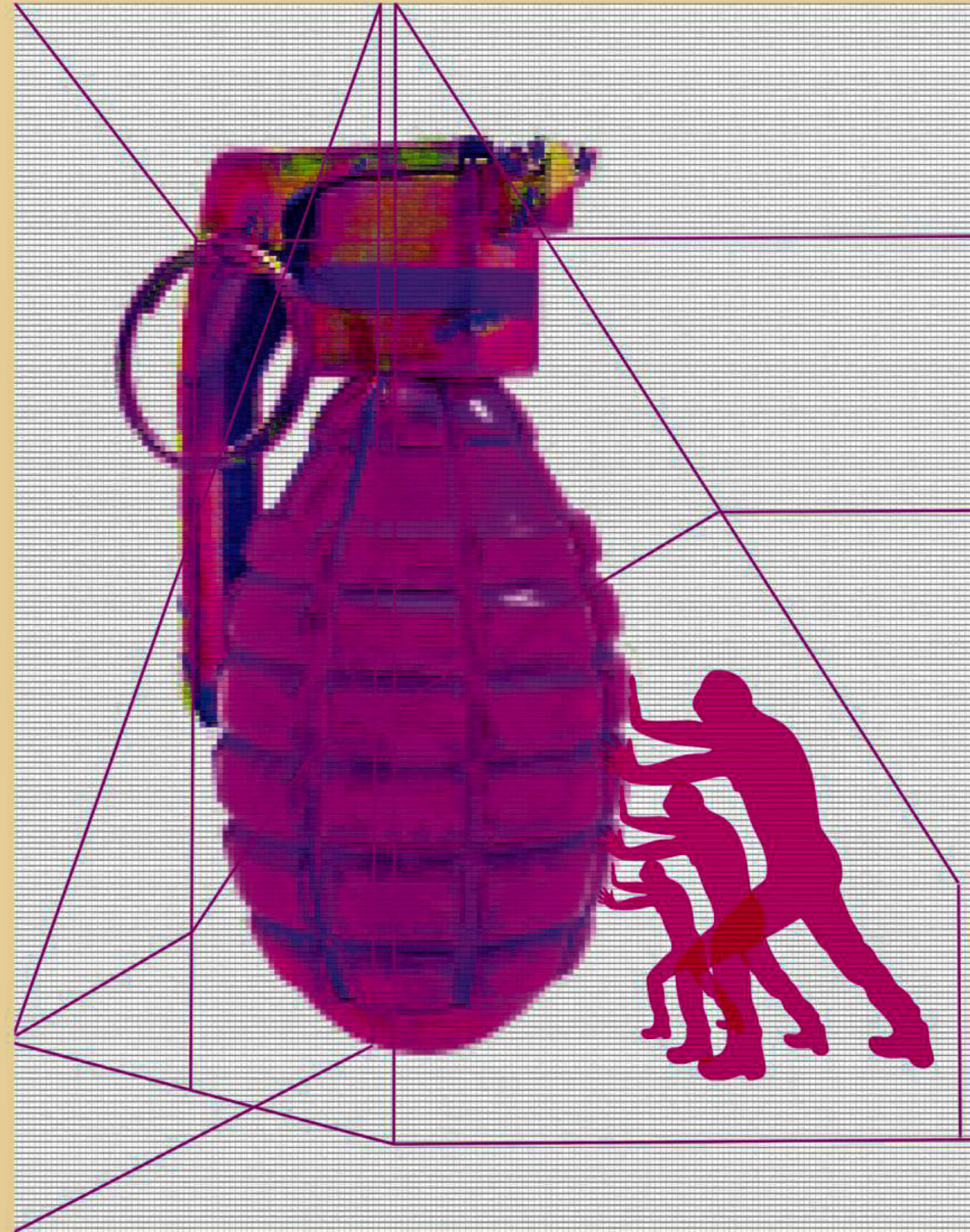


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

are known for recruiting religious leaders to mentor detainees, the same way an extremist would rope in new recruits. Detainees are not released unless they get a clearance from a mental health specialist—the focus is clearly on rehabilitation.

## We need to talk about deradicalisation

Last year there were several high-profile raids of militant dens across the country that sent shockwaves of horror among the general public and captivated the media. This included the incident where a mother blew herself up in a suicide attack injuring her 4-year-old daughter in the process. At the same incident a 14-year-old boy denoted a suicide vest. In fact, all the raids had casualties, where the militants either committed suicide or were killed by the security forces, showing exactly how dark the world of radicalisation is. The latest such incident happened on a remote char in Chapainawabganj towards the end of November, where three cornered men accused of being militants, allegedly committed suicide instead of surrendering.

The number of prominent militants being arrested and introduced to the general public has also gone up since 2014. More and more accused militants, including major leaders of the Islamic militancy groups, are being paraded on television since then.

An analysis of press releases shows that for RAB, this number jumped from nine militants showcased to the media in 2014, to 88 at least towards the end of 2017. The police, too, had 34 prominent arrests to boast of in 2014—the very next year it jumped to 108.

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Security Studies. “Hence a softer, more strategic approach is the need of the hour.”

“Tackling radicalisation is not just the police’s job. The problem has to be dealt with from the society level by reaching out to the community and everyone should step up, not just the law enforcers,” explains CTTCU official Abdul Mannan.

Foreign assistance too is making a turn towards this. In 2018 Bangladesh is slated to receive a fresh injection of USD 10.3 million from the United States for its counter-terrorism efforts, one of the highest-ever amounts in recent years. The only country in the sub-region that seems to have greater counter-terrorism needs than us is Afghanistan, which is on the table for USD 16 million. These figures were obtained from the US government foreign aid open data



portal. The budget is now on the wait-list for approval by Congress. To compare, the budget for Bangladesh last year aimed to put out three million dollars only for countering terrorism.

“In calendar year 2018 we plan to spend over USD 22 million dollars towards building Bangladesh’s counterterrorism and law-enforcement capability, which is mostly comprised of funding that was granted during the 2016-17 fiscal year. The proposed Foreign Assistance Budget [...] does include a planned \$10.3 mil for security assistance to Bangladesh for the 2017-2018 fiscal year. But it is important to note that the budget has not yet been approved by Congress,” states a spokesperson at the U.S. Embassy of Dhaka.

“CT and CVE assistance to Bangladesh is designed to help the government address terrorism threats from domestic and transnational terrorist organisations in a manner that is consistent with human rights. US assistance builds the government’s

capacity to impede these groups’ efforts to plan and conduct attacks by cutting off important sources of support to these groups, such as funding and recruiting,” adds the spokesperson.

When asked how much money is going towards bolstering the law enforcement agencies and how much will be directed towards deradicalisation programmes, there was no clear answer.

This, however, we know—a global CVE organisation called Management Systems International has also been awarded USD 21 million for a project called “Obirodh” in 2017. The group has in the past worked on similar projects in Mali, Morocco, Syria and Lebanon among others.

Many countries with a longer history of terrorism have benefited from deradicalisation programmes, viewing it as a necessary parallel to combat. There is consensus among law enforcers and security personnel that soft measures are the new go-to. All that is left is the wait for change. ■