

TWO YEARS ON: REMEMBERING THE HOLEY ARTISAN TRAGEDY

An attack to cripple Bangladesh

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THE terror attack on July 1, 2016 hurt Bangladesh in a way no other incident has—it left us bare and wounded, stripping away our confidence, our image as a peaceful, hospitable nation in the eyes of the world. It crushed and devastated the families and friends of those unfortunate souls who had to face the most horrible, agonising moments of terror before their lives were brutally cut short. Those left behind are still struggling to cope with the excruciating pain through commemorations and noble endeavours to keep the names of their loved ones alive.

While Dhaka has almost bounced back from the devastation as is characteristic of this resilient city, we must not forget what happened on July 1, no matter how traumatic the recollection maybe; we must not forget what it did to our nation and national psyche. It is important to remember this day so that we do not slip into that false sense of complacency that resulted in such a petrifying mass killing carried out by a group of young men with unexpected profiles.

Yes, there have been many other terror attacks. A bomb blast in Ramna Batamul in 2001 that killed 10 people and injured many, a deadly grenade attack on August 21, 2004 on an Awami League rally that left 34 dead and 300 wounded, the systematic slaying of bloggers, publishers and progressive-minded

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teachers, to name a few. There were also bomb blasts in Sholakia, Kishoreganj, only days after the July 1 attack, on an Eid congregation that killed two constables and a woman. All these attacks pointed to the fact that there were religious fanatics who had turned to terror to get their point across. Militant outfits were identified and some successfully subdued. But the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in 2016 had another diabolical dimension—the targets were mainly foreigners. It was a sequel to the murder of an Italian national and Japanese development worker in 2015.



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PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

The brutality with which the 17 foreigners, along with Bangladeshis perceived as enemies of the attackers, were killed was unprecedented. The attackers made it clear that only non-Muslims or those not conforming to their version of religion were being "punished". Hence even a pregnant woman was not spared.

Neither was Ishrat Akhond, a bright young Bangladeshi professional, known for her effusive personality and support of Bangladeshi artists, who apparently defied her attackers—or Abinta Kabir, a Bangladeshi studying at Emory University, Oxford College, Atlanta, whose dream was to come back to her country and help underprivileged children; she had an American passport and hence was identified as an 'enemy'. And then there was Faraaz, a practicing Muslim Bangladeshi whose "crime" in the eyes of the attackers was that he refused to leave his two young friends Abinta and Tarishi, an Indian national, even when he was given the option to leave with the other hostages being freed by the terrorists.

That is a story in itself. This 20-year-old, happy-go-lucky boy seemed to have changed the narrative of this otherwise grisly tale. While Bangladesh and the world were united in their disgust at the mayhem and ruthlessness displayed by yet another group of "Islamist terrorists", Faraaz, a devoted Muslim who could definitely recite verses from the Quran if he had been asked to, who prayed

and fasted and had done Umrah several times with his parents, a patriotic Bangladeshi—this lanky young man stood up to what must have been the most fearsome attackers who claimed to be on this slaughtering rampage for the sake of religion.

What Faraaz displayed was that being a Muslim also meant being compassionate, loyal, protective of innocents. This was the side of Islam that the world had stopped seeing, that those terrorists and their ilk had been so successful in suppressing. His act of sacrifice in the name of friendship and justice has earned him unbelievable recognition all over the world. He has posthumously received the Mother Teresa Award that honours individuals and organisations that promote peace, equality and social justice. The Faraaz Hossain Courage Award from 2016 has been launched, to be awarded each year for twenty years to recognise acts of exceptional courage by individuals setting examples of empathy for fellow human beings, to encourage the spirit of bravery among Bangladeshi youth. In July 2016, the Italian Embassy in Tunis planted a tree to honour Faraaz in the Garden of the Righteous Worldwide, dedicated to righteous Arab and non-Arab Muslim individuals who saved human lives during genocides or massacres and fought against fanaticism. His alma mater Emory University in Atlanta has introduced the Faraaz Hossain Core Values award to recognise him as a symbol of bravery, friendship and humanity.

These are only some of the examples of how Faraaz's act of sacrifice and display of humanity has moved people all over the world.

One cannot help but wonder whether this has dissuaded any of those other young men brainwashed and manipulated to carry out despicable murders of fellow human beings on the twisted pretext of protecting their religion. Would some of them who still have even a hint of empathy in them wonder whether an ideology that allowed for the killing of an unarmed fellow Muslim could really be one that could be endorsed under the name of religion? Would this version of Islam that evoked compassion for fellow beings regardless of their faith, that stood up to injustice, move them enough to change their self-destructive course that could only bring more misery to the world, not less?

Only time will tell. Meanwhile, it is important for us to look at the July 1 attack as separate from other terrorist attacks. The fact that the terrorists targeted mainly foreigners by releasing almost all the Bangladeshis (and Muslims) indicates that the aim was to create widespread panic among the expat community. We only have to remember the aftershocks of this attack: the largescale exodus of foreigners living in Bangladesh, the empty restaurants and hotels once regularly frequented by an expat clientele, the cheerless campuses of international schools devoid of international students, the loss of business in the RMG sector, the battle-

zone look of Gulshan that remained eerie, gloomy and bleak for months on end. Apart from the crores of dollars lost in business, Bangladesh faced the humiliation of having its name associated with religious terror, and even worse, as a country dangerous for foreigners and non-Muslims. Thus, the ulterior motive of this heinous attack may not have been the spread of a purely twisted, ISIS-influenced ideology, as suggested by the attackers (through social media posts and videos), but something more politically complex: the goal seemed to be to bring Bangladesh to its knees, economically and psychologically.

And even though the attackers picked their victims randomly, the lives lost are a loss for us all. Among the victims were Japanese nationals involved in development work in Bangladesh, Italians who worked at buying houses, Bangladeshi students studying abroad who had dreams of coming back to their motherland and contributing to its progress. Two police officers were also killed. All these people who had such important connections to this country, were lost to this mindless act of terror.

Thankfully, for a large part, Dhaka has been able to lift its head from the dark waters; the expat scene is slowly embracing normalcy, though not without caution. The series of raids of militant dens by government forces have been to a large extent successful in apprehending or killing some of the leaders of these terrorists and in containing militancy. There are, however, many questions that keep haunting the public mind regarding the Holey Artisan Bakery attack. The attackers of July 1 turned out to be young men from fairly well-off backgrounds; some had gone to well-known English medium schools and even private universities here and abroad. They had obviously been radicalised by powerful mentors, not all of whom have been caught. How many others were similarly radicalised and where are they now? There is no information on what happened to all those missing young men (and women) who were suspected to have joined ISIS in Syria. Are they back, are they still part of the death cult that is based on the killing of fellow human beings? What about the two Holey Artisan employees who died under unexplained circumstances? What did our law enforcers and intelligence agencies learn from the suspects they caught? How successful has the government been in its de-radicalisation campaign? Why the indulgence of religious zealots who continue to spew hate and bigotry?

These are uncomfortable questions for our tight-lipped authorities but they must be addressed with candour if we are to regain our sense of security and restore the confidence of the expat community. Keeping the facts in a shroud of mystery will only create a vacuum, and as we know such a vacuum, where facts are kept so blurry, almost always attracts the most unsavoury of forces.

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Surviving July 1

An expat recalls the aftermath of the Holey Artisan attack and how she, along with fellow expats, have returned to their lives in Dhaka

SANKALITA SHOME

"DON'T worry, I'm also staying put. I'll just be gone for the Eid break; once I'm back, we can sing *Akele Hum, Akele Tum* together since it'll best describe our situation," I told my friend in jest as we discussed the looming holidays ahead.

It was June 2016 and we were in Dhaka. That year, the week-long Eid holidays overlapped with the summer holidays and so most expats were heading home for the long break. But not us. I couldn't get away from work and my friend had her daughter home from the US and interning at a bank.

It was the last playful sentence that I would utter for a long time.

Things can change in a heartbeat, and for all our ability to plan ahead, we are caught unawares when disaster strikes. Our world came crashing down on July 1, 2016. Dhaka saw one of the worst terrorist attacks of all times, with the hostage crisis spiralling into brutality that chilled the international community. My friend's daughter was one of the victims, as mindless violence claimed innocent lives one after the other. A number of Japanese, Italian, American expats were killed as were the trio of friends comprising Abinta, Faraaz and Tarishi. According to reports, Faraaz, a Bangladeshi Muslim, refused to leave his friends when the terrorists offered him freedom and he had to give his life for that. Many Indians had been living here for decades, despite the various political upheavals. The situation had never seemed so bleak. Never before had the expat community felt so close to a breakdown.

At the time of the incident, many expats had already left for the

holidays. The horrific incident meant that overnight, several remaining families transferred their children to schools back home. Families were split as the womenfolk stayed back with them and the men returned to continue their livelihoods.

A few decided to stick it out in Dhaka. As did my husband and I when we returned within a week. We did not have children at that time. Also, I was working full-time and could not just abruptly give up my role. However, it was the most difficult time that we had faced, with all our friends still staying away; the few who did return were not sure that they would continue here. Overnight, our carefully built life in Dhaka had collapsed and we were left floundering. Our family and well-wishers from all over the world "counselled" us to leave immediately but it is not a simple matter to just pack up and go, leaving behind a job, a business, a life...

In the aftermath of the attack, whispers relating to conspiracy theories started doing the rounds. This temporarily increased the sense of panic. However, logic and sense prevailed—such attacks have no religion and no nationality, as was borne out by terrorist attacks in other parts of the world.

It was not the first time that we were facing uncertainty in a foreign land. We were in Cairo in 2011, when the Arab Spring came to Egypt. This time around, it felt different. It was the first time that we had experienced such brutality first-hand. Losing Tarishi hit us hard—we had known her closely, had countless beautiful memories with the Jain family. The shock and horror were that much more acute. It was that much more difficult to treat violence like

something that happened to *other* people.

During the day, while at work, it was easy to forget about the trauma. Work was the solace. But the evenings and nights were a different matter—with the sense of insecurity heightened with all discussions centring almost exclusively on the incident and its fallout. A number of my friends, Indians as well as others, left abruptly and there was not even a chance to say farewells. Carefully laid out plans for post-holiday activities

into "before" and "after".

The silver lining has been the city of Dhaka and its people—the real heroes have been the "survivors" who have shown resilience and a defiant attitude in the face of adversity, bereavement and despair. The last couple of years has seen many commemorations for the martyrs; but at the same time, there has been a renewal of the pledge to fight terrorism. The bereaved families have honoured the memory of their departed ones by setting up

never-say-die attitude are frequenting the many new cafés and restaurants that have opened their doors in the city. The city now boasts of many international chains of eateries, compared to just a few earlier.

One of the perks of living in Dhaka—nay, in Bangladesh—as anyone will tell you, is the plethora of cultural events that take place during its short winters. The majority of them were not cancelled even in the months following the attack and yet others are back with a bigger canvas.

For the Indian expat community, there is the added advantage of being close to home to make a dash for all those family weddings, and likewise, family emergencies.

For us, the "after" has been salvaged by the close circle of friends that we have built over the years. Socialising for us has mostly consisted of meeting with friends and eating together, celebrating birthdays, anniversaries and festivals as a family. Though steadily improving on this front, the city still offers limited options for leisure, for families to do their own thing in the evenings and on weekends. Also, most of the expat community is concentrated in the tri-state area; hence the frequent meet-ups with friends is the only recreation, leading to intimate friendships which continue even after we are no longer physically in the same place. When many of our Indian friends relocated due to the attack, our Bangladeshi friends stepped up. The famed Bengali propensity for *adda* means that we continue to be surrounded by laughter and friendship and their innate warmth makes them the family that we don't have here.

My husband and I are still in Dhaka, together with the addition to the family—our one-year-old daughter. Bangladesh is also the place that my husband has chosen to embark on his entrepreneurial journey. These make up a lot of positives for a place that I was reluctant to move to and had seemed unappealing after Cairo, when I came for the recce visit five years ago...



From left: Abinta Kabir, Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain and Tarishi Jain

seemed to be a figment of my imagination.

Following the incident, it was reported that a large number of militants had been caught and a huge cache of arms recovered, a number of attacks averted. Security checkpoints were erected in the expat residential areas, and soon they became part of the regular drill. The exceptional soon became the new normal. Our lives seemed divided

foundations that are doing some extraordinary work with the less advantaged and the under-privileged.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, advisories were issued to avoid cafés and restaurants after dusk. The restaurateurs were seriously concerned about the future. However, it is hard to put down a rising star—the burgeoning Bangladesh economy means more disposable incomes. The Dhakaites with their

The security machinery of the city feels more responsive and proactive.

The attack had led to an exodus of the international community from Dhaka. But this last year, there has been a steady inflow again. For the newbies, there is no "before" to contend with. Rather, there is the allure of a city that offers a comfortable living for the expat community and a country that holds the promise of an economic boom.

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