

# Hammer, remand, inaction and innuendo

## Responses to the quota reform movement



**F**OR more than two weeks in campuses across the country students demanding a review of the controversial quota system for appointments to civil bureaucracy experienced brutality of a monumental scale. On June 30, they planned a press conference at the Dhaka University premises to exert pressure for the gazette notification on quota reform. What was essentially an exercise in peaceful, orderly and democratic practice was viewed by supporters of the ruling party as "a conspiracy of nefarious quarters to destabilise campuses" and "a challenge to the government." Hence they lost no time to swoop on the organisers, successfully disrupting the press conference.

The state agencies in some instances through inaction appeared to have abetted the criminal acts, and in others, through zestful performance, inflicted immeasurable harm to the protesters, their families and friends. Instead of apprehending clearly identified perpetrators and bringing them to justice for violating the law, they hunted, detained and took leaders and participants of the quota reform movement into remand. They also wielded force to disperse protests and demonstrations of teachers, guardians and concerned citizens. Ministers, non-state cohorts of the establishment, including commentators, journalists and even vice chancellors, joined the cacophony in branding the dissenter students as "disrupters."

The extent and intensity of violence have been widely reported in the media. Images and footages of senior functionaries of the student wing of the ruling party mercilessly beating the peaceful protesters with rods, poles and even a hammer, in different parts of the country, were rife. What began as mayhem by the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) at Dhaka University was soon to be replicated in Chittagong, Rajshahi, Savar, Rangpur and many other cities



Students and teachers of Dhaka University protest at the Shaheed Minar premises, demanding release of arrested quota reform protesters and a safe campus.

PHOTO: STAR

of the country. Claiming unbridled authority in keeping the campus under control BCL openly declared its intent of freeing those of "the elements engaged in destabilising the campuses".

But all failed to draw any form of disapproval, let alone rebuke, from any responsible member of the government and the ruling party. The perpetrators enjoyed *carte blanche* in carrying on their heinous agenda of quelling dissent. On July 15, a new low was reached when two conscientious members of the social science faculty of Dhaka University expressing solidarity with the victims of violence, were manhandled.

In committing their acts of violence the perpetrators not only breached the sanctity of the University premises, they marred the inviolability of the Shaheed Minar, a monument that symbolises dissent.

In one instance several female students were assaulted at the Shaheed Minar while they were protecting fellow protesters. In another incident they dragged out a quota reform supporter from inside the library and beat him in front of the professor librarian of Dhaka University, injuring the latter. In a few

cases, the BCL forcibly detained protesting students and subsequently after rough treatment handed them over to the law enforcement agencies. Leading protesters were threatened with dire consequences at their homes and dormitories.

The responses of the university administrations were utterly disappointing. Little was done to protect and assuage the concerns of the protesters. After days of violence that rocked Dhaka University and disrupted the campus life, the Proctor went on record claiming he had no idea that such attacks had indeed taken place. He went to proclaim that he would "act only if complaints were filed." In Rajshahi University while the proctorial body failed miserably to protect students from attacks and harassment, it registered a rare success in prevailing upon the lone teacher who was expressing his disgust over campus violence by coming to campus barefooted. Jettisoning age-old tradition of offering support, sympathy and facilitating medical care to the victims of violence, irrespective of their political affiliation, the university administrations and teachers' associations appeared to

have sided with the perpetrators.

The responses of law enforcement agencies in dealing with the anti-quota movement have been revealing, if not appalling. The police and other agencies took no action against BCL activists as they announced programmes to thwart planned peaceful public events. Instead police personnel vacated the Shaheed Minar premises when the BCL activists confronted the peaceful demonstrators. After any violent episode instead of apprehending the perpetrators the law enforcement personnel went after the victims. While images and video footage of the wrong doers were made widely available in the print, electronic and social media, there has been a palpable indifference in acting against them. Several dailies have published the photos, names and designation (offices they hold in BCL) of the perpetrators. While they roamed around the campuses scot free, it was the victimised peaceful protesters (whom the police and the administration had failed to protect) who are now being chased by members of law enforcement agencies. There is little doubt if law were left to take its own course most

of the perpetrators would have been charged with criminal offences, including possession of dangerous weapons, causing serious bodily harm, unlawful detention and abduction. No less poignant was the statement of Mariam Farah who after enduring the harassment of BCL activists on her way home was taken to police custody only to go through yet another round of humiliation and mistreatment. "I thought the police station would be safe", Farah noted, "but it was like a second hell".

Putting to shame the excesses committed by the British colonial and Pakistani police against student activists at least two severely injured quota reformist students were denied treatment in public hospitals. In one instance, the parents of the injured claimed that the victim was forcibly discharged from a private medical facility.

The law enforcement agencies lost no time in pressing charges against innocent activists and even successfully lodged petition for taking some injured ones to remand. One wonders on what grounds the hon'ble magistrates granted such petitions. The poor students were only exercising their constitutional right to voice concern on a matter of public policy that affects their future and also of the nation. They were victims of mindless violence, not the perpetrators.

The frustration of the agitating students is understandable. Almost no action was taken despite the prime ministerial commitment for "abolishing the quota system", something that the quota reformers did not ask for. Prolonged silence and near inaction was intermittently interjected with confusing statements from responsible functionaries: "not aware", "no instruction", "no progress", "decision after PM's return", "gazette after Eid" and the like. Months ago during negotiations agitating students were promised immediate formation of a high level committee, a position reiterated by the Cabinet Secretary. It was the latest round of agitation that forced the administration to form the committee only on July 3.

The moral bankruptcy of the ruling quarters to face legitimate

challenge politically leads them to resort to unfair and false insinuation and innuendoes. This prompted even the erudite law minister to state that BNP and Jamaat are provoking the quota reform movement. The powerful general secretary of the Awami League shared the view. While negating the claim that BCL was responsible for the campus mayhem he argued that the BCL committee does not exist now and thus the organisation would not take any blame. Does the minister really want the public to believe that members of BCL wither away when committees stand dissolved? Readers may recall that protesters were labelled as Razakars in April by a senior minister, known for her fire-brand student activism. Without any shred of evidence the blame of ransacking the DU VC's residence has been conveniently passed on to the quota reform activists. If that be the case, doesn't the onus lie on the administration to publish the report of the investigations and prosecute the perpetrators?

Donning the invisible mantle of police, if not of a detective, the Vice Chancellor of Rajshahi University drew the conclusion that the quota reform struggle is essentially "an anti-government movement to carry out sabotage." His counterpart in Dhaka University concurred terming it as "machination of evil power." Quite candidly he shared with journalists that video footages of protesters reminded him of "provocative video messages of Taliban, Al Shabaab and Boko Haram."

The reactions of the government, the ruling party and their cohorts to the legitimate demands of the quota reform activists lay bare their deep alienation from the masses and their concerns. It reflects their vulnerability to any form of collective resistance. It also reveals the partisan bias of the state institutions that not only fail to protect the victims of criminal wrongdoings but also condones acts that are inhumane, illegal and contrary to the provisions of the constitution of the republic.

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**P**ALLAB BHATTACHARYA

INDIAN Home Minister Rajnath Singh's first official visit to Bangladesh was meant for the sixth edition of the home minister-level meeting. This was the second such meeting in two years. But the event went beyond the trappings of a routine high-level bilateral event primarily for three reasons. First, security cooperation has become a key pillar of India-Bangladesh relations since Sheikh Hasina government came to power. Secondly, the visit sent a strong political signal by the visit of someone who is widely considered the number two in the cabinet of Prime Minister Narendra Modi just five months before fresh general elections in Bangladesh. And thirdly, it produced some citizenship-centric measures for Bangladesh across a cross-section of people wanting to visit India for various purposes.

## A visit beyond usual trappings



Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh (left) is welcomed by his Bangladeshi counterpart Asaduzzaman Khan in Dhaka on July 13, 2018.

PHOTO: BSS

The institutionalisation of cooperation between India and Bangladesh in security matters reached newer heights in the last eight years. New Delhi knows that Sheikh Hasina has delivered on the promises beginning with handing over of top United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) leaders to Indian authorities. This has helped restore and sustain the peace process in Assam. For his part, Singh once again acknowledged India's appreciation of the help and Sheikh Hasina government's zero-tolerance policy towards terrorism.

The security agencies of India and Bangladesh enhanced cooperation between them by way of exchange of

information about movement of

terrorists across the porous border and exchanged visits in connection with

the drive against terror groups. This

has resulted in the arrests of many of

their leading operatives on both sides

of the border. The October 2014 bomb

blast in Burdwan involving JMB

operatives proved to be a turning point

as India's elite anti-terror probe body

National Investigation Agency brought

out some disturbing findings. This had

alarmed security agencies in both the

countries which then enhanced their

coordination in pursuit of JMB and

other terror groups.

During Rajnath Singh's visit, India's

promise of adding to Bangladesh's capacity-building in tackling terror was manifest in the inauguration of Bangladesh-India Friendship Building in Bangladesh Police Academy complex in Sardah, Rajshahi, equipped with state-of-the-art forensic laboratories, mock crime scenes, mock police station and an IT centre with computer labs. There is also a Memorandum of Cooperation between Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy in Hyderabad, which trains Indian police

service officers, and the Bangladesh

Police Academy in Rajshahi in the

sphere of training, management and

exchange of trainers and trainees

between the two academies.

The repatriation of Rohingya

refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar's

Rakhine state, which has failed to take

off even eight months after the signing

of an agreement between the two

countries, figured prominently in the

meeting between Sheikh Hasina and

Rajnath Singh. The essence of the

Indian home minister's view in the

meeting with the Prime Minister was that New Delhi is working on two fronts at the same time: first, constructing prefabricated houses in Rakhine for Rohingya returnees and second, continuing to provide relief materials to help Bangladesh deal with the needs of the refugees in relief camps. India is concerned that if the repatriation process hangs fire, it would increase the risk of the refugees finding their way across Bangladesh's western frontier.

A big takeaway from Rajnath Singh's visit was the move that touched the lives of the common people of Bangladesh: opening of a new visa centre in Dhaka, India's largest facility anywhere in the world, that seeks to further ease procuring visa for Bangladeshis and the signing of a Revised Travel Arrangement for liberalising the visa regime including enhanced duration for employment, student and medical visas and five-year multiple entry visa for freedom fighters and senior citizens of Bangladesh. The setting up of the integrated visa centre could not have been timelier because Bangladeshis make up the largest number of foreigners visiting India.

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## A WORD A DAY



**D ECLIVITY**  
NOUN  
A downward slope

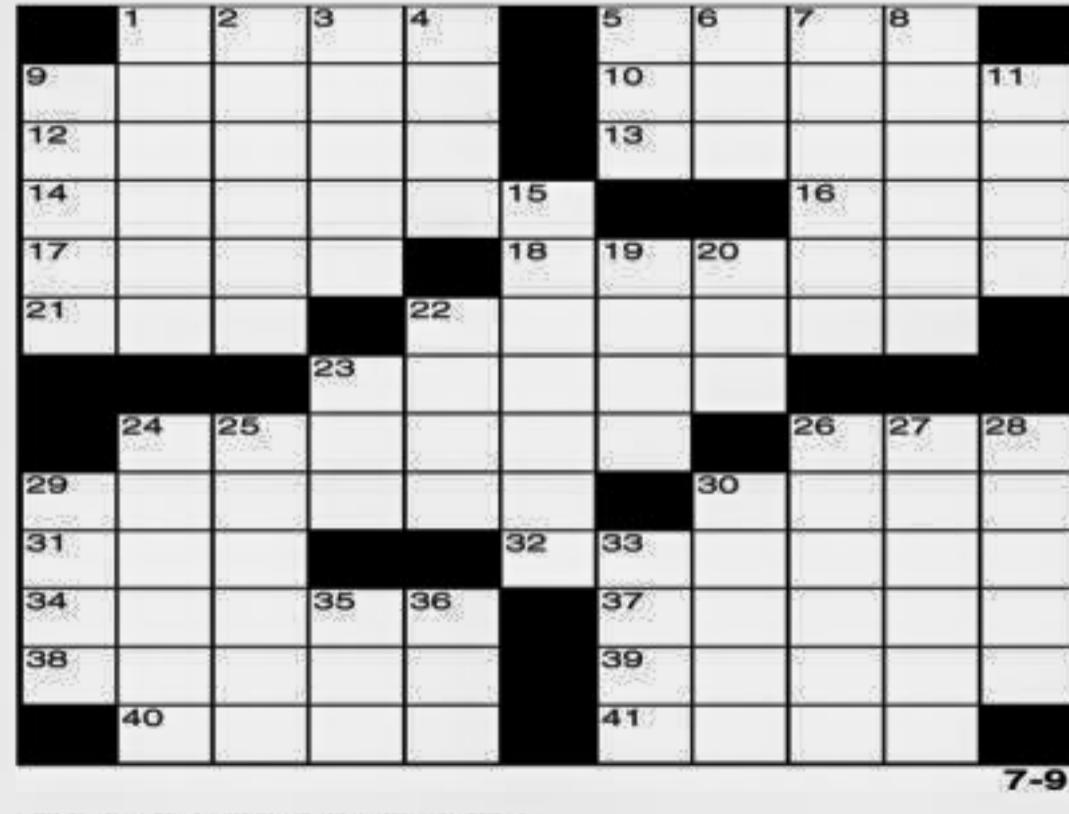
### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- 1 Showy flowers, for short
- 5 Pronto, in memos
- 9 Kind of boom
- 10 Kitchen girl of song
- 12 Sports setting
- 13 Kitchen appliance
- 14 Dance party crowd
- 14 Grass coating
- 17 Pub brews
- 18 Out-of-the-park hits
- 21 Chick's mother
- 22 Pester
- 23 Spelunking enthusiast
- 24 Makes rugs
- 25 "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-
- 26 Therefore
- 27 Eden resident
- 28 Frugal fellows
- 29 Start a tennis game
- 30 West Point student
- 31 Heart or liver
- 32 Borders
- 33 High cards
- 34 A tennis player
- 35 Big truck
- 36 Use a stool
- 37 Lode settings
- 38 Wound reminder
- 39 Borders
- 40 Transmit
- 41 Canary snack

**DOWN**

- 1 Esprit de corps
- 2 Bumpy
- 3 Lode settings
- 4 Wound reminder
- 5 TV spots
- 6 Use a stool
- 7 Battery ends
- 8 Patio stones
- 9 Isaac's mother
- 10 Chops down
- 11 Young lads
- 12 Valuable rocks
- 13 Start a tennis game
- 14 Impair
- 15 Possess
- 16 Topper
- 17 Hesitates
- 18 Come into view
- 19 Steer clear of
- 20 Search the riverbed
- 21 In unison
- 22 Party throwers
- 23 Topper
- 24 Hesitates
- 25 Search the riverbed
- 26 Impair
- 27 Lode settings
- 28 Party throwers
- 29 Wound reminder
- 30 High cards
- 31 Big truck
- 32 Borders
- 33 Lode settings
- 34 A tennis player
- 35 Big truck
- 36 Use a stool
- 37 Lode settings
- 38 Wound reminder
- 39 Borders
- 40 Transmit
- 41 Canary snack



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	H	I	P	T	S	C	A	R	S
T	A	C	I	T	P	U	R	E	E
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M	E	L	O	N	S	E	D	E	R
S	T	E	E	D	O	L	E	S	T

### BEETLE BAILEY



### BABY BLUES



### BY MORT WALKER



### BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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