

Alarming signals from Bhola

Hate crimes must be stopped with an iron fist

THE recent violence in Bhola's Borhanuddin upazila, which led to the deaths of four people and injuries of hundreds of others, is reminiscent of the sporadic episodes of communal violence that have often disturbed the religious harmony of our country in recent years. The incident, sparked by a concocted hate speech, caused unrest in other upazilas of Bhola and spread to Chattogram, where Hefazat activists brought out protests and vandalised public property.

What is disturbing is that a minority man had been framed by two local men who hacked his Facebook account and demanded extortion money from him; this resulted in the said Facebook post containing hate speech against Islam. Police have taken custody of both the culprits and victim. What is even more alarming is that although the representatives of Alems protesting the hate speech called off the protest at the Eidgah Maidan, a "vested quarter" unleashed violence on people, especially the government and law enforcement officials, who had been trying to find a peaceful solution. According to a report published by this daily on October 20, members of a vested quarter attacked the officials, and shot at them leaving a policeman seriously injured.

This incident poses multiple questions for us: how do we contain hate speeches in a fast-moving digital social space; what measures are we going to take to ensure security of the digital identity of social media users; who were the members of the "vested quarter" that perpetrated the attack; who armed them; why have we not been able to contain these incidents in the last seven years, since the Ramu incident? These are questions that the authorities must now ponder on in order to identify the gaps in the system that are exposing people to such meaningless violence.

According to the same report, multiple cases had been filed over the last few years in connection with incidents of communal violence in Ramu, Cox's Bazar (2012), Ataikula, Pabna (2013), Nasiragar, Brahmanbaria (2016) and Horkoli Thakurpara, Rangpur (2017)—episodes that have been triggered by Facebook posts; however, none of the cases have been completed. A five-member committee has been formed to probe into the Borhanuddin incident and submit its report within seven working days. We hope the government will take stringent measures and bring the culprits to book. The Prime Minister has rightly said that "if anyone tries to frame another person, meaurers will also be taken against them." In keeping with the PM's words, we hope the concerned authorities will complete all the pending cases of communal violence in our country, and in doing so, will send a very strong message to the elements that are trying to create unrest in the country—that no one can escape the long arm of the law.

DWASA under fire for poor services

To whom is it accountable?

WE would like to thank the parliamentary standing committee on public undertakings for finally taking to task the chief of the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA). The utility service provider has been under scrutiny for repeated failures to address the problems of waterlogging in the city, as well as failing miserably to supply drinkable water to the city residents. The sheer magnitude of the problem was driven home by a report by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in April that stated that 91 percent of DWASA subscribers had to boil the supply water to make it drinkable, which was also responsible for burning natural gas worth Tk 332 crore a year.

Although the utility service company challenged the report, the managing director (MD) refused to drink a lemon sherbet made with water straight from the pipe by a resident of Jurain area, after the MD had gone on record to state that water was perfectly safe for human consumption. Such theatrics were not lost on the city residents or the parliamentary standing committee members, who quizzed the MD on the endless complaints they have been receiving from their respective constituents who live in the city.

Although the MD has assured the committee that the service authority is working to improve poor infrastructure that carries water to city residents, what assurance do we have that it will be safe for city residents by 2021? In the absence of checks and balances, it is normal to be sceptical about such "assurances", and the time has surely come to set targets for DWASA to deliver on what it has promised. Without ensuring accountability, there is little possibility that the service provider will turn over a new leaf and that is an unacceptable situation for the millions of city residents.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Barbaric crimes on the rise

It has almost become a routine to open daily newspapers and come across at least a few reports of atrocious crimes being committed across the nation. From murders to rapes to robberies, the list keeps growing and so does the intensity of such crimes. The recent incident in Sunamganj surrounding the five-year-old Tuhin Miah was utterly shocking, especially because the child was brutally murdered by his own relatives to frame their rivals. How could someone be so heartless towards a child? Another recent case of a woman in Chattogram "admitting" to the murder of her daughter and husband in order to cover up her extramarital affair was equally outrageous. How come humanity is stooping so low? Good governance must be ensured and the culture of impunity shunned, in order to restore our waning faith in law and order. We must act collaboratively now before we read about more such murders in the pages of tomorrow.

Mardia Khan, Rajbari Govt College

Why this murderous rage?

Stories of children from the Other Bangladesh



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

OF MAGIC & MADNESS
MARK Twain once famously said that truth is stranger than fiction. Truth's ability to outperform fiction is limitless, not just in terms of strangeness, but also in the most outrageous, disgusting and horrifying way conceivable.

Just imagine: in Greek mythology, Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, kills his daughter Iphigenia to remove barriers put in their way by the goddess Artemis. Agamemnon angered the goddess by accidentally killing a deer in a sacred grove. And so, to appease her so that she allows the Greek fleet to sail to Troy, he is advised to sacrifice his daughter, which he does. In real life, however, some among us have taken this macabre practice to a level that there is even a term for that now: "filicide." And it happens not just under compulsion—like in the case of Agamemnon—but often purposefully and remorselessly, without any celestial provocation.

The story of Tuhin Miah is one such case that horrifies us about truth's alarming potential and about what human beings, stripped of senses that separate us from beasts, are capable of doing. Tuhin, a child of only five, was brutally murdered on October 14, not far from his home at the Kejaura village of Derai Upazila in Sunamganj. The way he was killed—an image of his lifeless body hanging from a tree surfaced on the internet—was so shocking that it would take a herculean effort for anyone to see the picture for more than two seconds. The following day, a report by *The Daily Star* thus described the image: "Feet several inches above the ground. Both ears cut off, throat slit, genital cut off and two knives pierced deep inside the abdomen."

But the worst news was yet to come: Tuhin was killed by none other than his father, who was assisted in this despicable act by his uncle and cousin. It's hard to process information like this as it challenges our notions of family, love and the much-idolised relationship between parents and children. Subsequent newspaper reports (as well as confessional statements given by the accused) provided a context

for the gruesome murder: Tuhin was apparently killed by his family to frame their rivals in a land dispute case. He was slaughtered like a duck in a game of the grownups, by the very people who were supposed to protect him, who he had loved and trusted.

Cases like this make us wonder about the fundamental nature of human beings. But there is also a backstory to these cases which threatens to blow the lid off a country struggling to face up to its many challenges and to narrow the gap between appearance and reality: it's about two Bangladeshes, living side by side. In one, you have a soaring GDP, a robust economy, an achiever par excellence in various social indicators, a pioneer in poverty alleviation and primary education, a defender of human rights. This is the Bangladesh that you're

school as often as they are enrolled, where democracy and dictatorship are cut from the same cloth.

Stories that emerge from this Other Bangladesh are a chilling reminder of how far we have gone off our once-cherished visions—our vision for justice, for fairness, for empathy, for enlightenment, for creating a caring society. These stories disturb us. They give us sleepless nights. They also speak of a society going through a rapid, chaotic transformation in which people are growing more individualistic, self-centred, and desperate. Tuhin's murder should be seen from the prism of that societal background. It is not an isolated incident, nor a one-off freak accident. It is the inevitable outcome of our collective "derailment" as a society, our failure to read the signs of moral decadence that are fast spreading across

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ILLUSTRATION: HANNA BARCZYK

told about. This is the Bangladesh that exists as far as the official story goes.

The other Bangladesh—the one you're *not* told about—lurks somewhere behind these glossy images of success and abundance. It comes badly dressed, poorly fed, and is seething by all accounts. It's one where the soaring GDP hides the soaring inequalities, and the economy is a crumpled mess, where corruption and nepotism are rampant, where human rights are not necessarily inalienable, where women are raped every day and young girls drop out of

the board, sometimes with devastating consequences. In other words, it lends credence to fears about the increasingly dehumanised side of our society.

Around the time Tuhin was killed, there was another news of a 55-year-old man who was arrested for raping four children. The children were aged between five and nine—all of the same age as, or slightly older than, Tuhin. According to the rights body, Ain o Salish Kendra, at least 1,644 children faced violence between January and September this year, and 182 of them were murdered.

A great number of children today are working when they are supposed to study, looking after their family when they are supposed to be looked after, living under the open sky when they are supposed to be sheltered, being harassed or killed when they are supposed to be protected. The tragedy is, rarely do these incidents end with convictions, thanks to shoddy investigations, questionable trials, and so on.

It is the continuation of this situation—and the resulting climate of impunity—that emboldens the criminals, be it relatives like Tuhin's or random people taking advantage of the vulnerability of the children. As the psychologists say, children are targeted as criminals find them to be easy prey. In some cases, children become victims of attacks carried out to punish their adult family members. Also, increasingly, because of the many challenges that growing up in today's complex world entails, a large number of children are showing suicidal tendencies, or getting involved with criminal gangs.

All these illustrate the need for an urgent intervention in the way children are growing up—and in the way we treat them as a society, and in private spheres. Our society needs a fix, and it requires a deeper introspection on our part about our own culpability and responsibility to make it work for all of us, especially for children and other weaker members of the society.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com

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India's Modi Slowdown



SHASHI THAROOR

UNTIL recently, Indians had gotten used to taking economic growth for granted. After a decade of annual growth averaging over 9 percent, India's economy weathered the post-2008 worldwide recession and grew at a still impressive rate of 7 percent until 2014-15. Nothing, it seemed, could stop the gravy train from rolling on.

And then came Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and his biggest economic blunder, demonetisation, which took 86 percent of India's currency abruptly out of circulation (in an effort, Modi claimed, to flush out undeclared wealth). The economy is yet to recover. Millions of jobs were lost and hundreds of thousands of small and micro enterprises—employing 2-7 workers and dependent on daily cash flow to sustain themselves—went under. All that was achieved was that Modi, who prizes appearances above actual results, managed to look bold and decisive.

If demonetisation was a bad idea badly implemented, next came a *good* idea badly implemented: a nationwide Goods and Services Tax (GST). Instead of a simple, flat and all-inclusive GST—as applied in every country where the concept has worked well—the government unveiled a multi-tier GST. Despite having five different rates and a luxury tax on top, the government's hasty and botched rollout retained a number of key exclusions

(including alcohol and petrol) and continues to confuse all who are subject to it. These two initiatives derailed economic growth, which is now expected to slow down to 5 percent this fiscal year.

Bad news is everywhere: unemployment is at a 45-year high of 8.4 percent and rising; the distressed agriculture sector was driving record numbers of farmers to suicide (which is why the government now suppresses the figures); and manufacturing, exports, and the index of industrial production are all down. Output in India's eight core industrial sectors—coal, crude oil, natural gas, refined petroleum products, fertilizer, steel, cement, and electricity—declined 0.5 percent in August.

month in September, when sales fell 23.7 percent, and persisted in October, when three back-to-back Hindu festivals normally loosen consumers' purse strings. A major wave of layoffs by carmakers has followed, with Ford announcing factory closures and an estimated one million jobs in jeopardy.

As with other economic setbacks, policy decisions by India's central and state governments are principally responsible for this outcome. Higher car prices reflect not only luxury taxes on higher-end models and the effects of higher safety and emissions standards, but also hikes in sales taxes on cars in nine states. And the large volume of NPAs means the banks and finance companies

industry in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

The recent increase in oil prices has compounded India's problems in the short term. Advances in robotisation and artificial intelligence represent a longer-term drag on growth, because they have reduced many Western countries' dependence on outsourced Indian skills in such areas as code-writing, medical transcription, and business-process offshore call-centres. And with the Indian rupee plumbing record lows against the US dollar, essential imports have become more expensive.

It hasn't helped that in the midst of all this, US President Donald Trump has made India a target of his increasingly acrimonious approach to trading partners. The bonhomie Trump and Modi recently displayed in Houston did not translate into a resolution of the issues the United States has been griping about.

Through it all, the government has appeared clueless. Its proposed budget has prompted despair in the business community, with an unexpected tax increase on foreign investors leading many of them to sell their Indian holdings and leave. Then, as its negative impact became increasingly evident, the government announced a series of U-turns on tax increases and business incentives.

After Modi was overwhelmingly re-elected in May with an even larger majority for his party, many economists expected him to take bold steps to remove the many bottlenecks that have discouraged investors, both Indian and foreign. There have been none, and no short-term stimulus, either. Longstanding issues such as agricultural stagnation, rigid labour laws, and prohibitive land costs are simply absent from the government's agenda.

With the economic downturn leaving revenues well short of projections, pressure on India's tax officials to catch evaders has mounted, prompting intrusive investigations that have been decried as "tax terrorism." Many Indian millionaires are voting with their feet: 5,000 migrated last year, and the number this year is likely to be much higher.

The conclusion is inescapable: the Great Indian Growth Story is on hold. And no one should expect the Modi government to get the gravy train back on track.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi gestures as he addresses a gathering in New Delhi, India, on September 7, 2018.

REUTERS FILE PHOTO

Meanwhile, India's banks are reeling under a huge burden of non-performing assets (NPAs), with debts exceeding USD 150 billion and one financial institution after another coming under the scrutiny of regulators and law-enforcement authorities. Loans have dried up, owing to banks' leanness of piling up more NPAs; investment has slowed to a trickle as a result. With sinking demand for new housing causing a slump in the residential property market, many builders are struggling to repay their loans to banks, worsening the crisis. With consumers lacking resources, banks unwilling to lend, and investors afraid to borrow, it is unclear where the much-needed filip to economic growth will come from.

Car sales have collapsed, plummeting 32 percent in August, the largest annual drop in two decades. The decline continued for an eleventh straight

that dealers rely on to provide car loans to many purchasers are pulling back. The automobile sector is proof of the extent to which India's economic downturn is the result of policy ineptitude.

The signs of the downturn are everywhere, affecting ordinary Indians' daily lives. Indians are fond of cookies (which we call "biscuits") with our omnipresent cups of tea, but even biscuit sales are down by 8 percent, prompting the popular biscuit manufacturer Parle to announce thousands of layoffs. And the famous "underwear index" proposed by Alan Greenspan, the former US Federal Reserve chairman, confirms the extent of India's slump. Greenspan posited that declining sales of men's underwear was an accurate indication of consumer distress. According to some reports, men's underwear sales are down by 50 percent in Tirupur, the capital of the garment

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