

This is not how Hindu devotees wanted to bid farewell to Durga



of such special significance to the Hindu community—feel ever-so-unfamiliar. But the fabricated claims of demeaning the Quran, “hurt sentiments” of the “majority,” processions which turned violent, desecrated idols and artefacts, ransacked homes, a whole community gripped by fear and insecurity, the failure of law enforcement and district administrations to bring the situation under control—some versions of these have already happened, in different places, at different times, in the not-too-distant past. They happened at Ramu in 2012, and since then, have happened with increasing frequency.

In 2016, in Nasirnagar, over 100 homes and 17 temples were damaged following a Facebook post purporting to insult Islam from an account that was later found to have been hacked. In 2017, nine Hindu homes were torched in Rangpur; in 2019, 13 homes and at least one temple were vandalised in Bhola over so-called blasphemous posts. Angry mobs also vandalised and burned several Hindu homes over rumours about an alleged Facebook post slandering Islam in Cumilla’s Muradnagar in November last year. Just this year, in March, at least 80 homes and eight temples were destroyed in Sunamganj, following a Facebook post criticising a leader of Hefazat-e-Islam. According to rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra, at least 3,710 attacks on the Hindu community have taken place over the last nine years. Swept under the carpet as “isolated” incidents, they were in fact precursors of a

the failure of the local administration and law enforcement agencies in preventing the attacks, they have all conveniently been left out of the charge sheets submitted by police.

Two people charged with vandalising and attacking Hindu houses and temples in 2016 in Nasirnagar were even nominated by the Awami League to contest in the upcoming elections. In the face of criticism following the latest incidents of communal violence, Awami League scrapped their tickets, reportedly after the prime minister took the decision herself. The party’s office secretary claimed that the two accused had hid the information on their nomination forms, even though the district Awami League general secretary said they had objected to the three controversial names on behalf of the selection committee. And even if we are to believe the Awami League office secretary, is it really any comfort to us if the selection process of public representatives is so flawed that criminals can simply get away with not disclosing their sordid pasts?

Forget the incidents that happened during the tenure of this self-proclaimed “minority-friendly” government; even the mass atrocities against the Hindu community after the 2001 elections—during which hundreds of people were killed, women raped and gang-raped, and homes looted—have not seen justice to this day. Despite a judicial inquiry concluding that more than 25,000 people—including 25 former ministers and MPs of the BNP-Jamaat-led alliance—were connected with the attacks, why did the current government take no action against them? The same can be asked of the 2014 post-election violence. Why would the regime give so much leeway to its opposition, unless, in the end, religious identity trumps party identity?

At this point, from the reports from the field, it appears that the attack in Cumilla was premeditated. Even so, the question remains whether the law enforcement officials and district administration

wanted, he could have easily brought the situation under control even before Foyez had started filming, by removing the Quran and barricading the site.

Deputy Commissioner Md Kamrul Hasan and Superintendent of Police Faruk Ahmed arrived at the spot with 40 to 50 policemen sometime between 10am and 10:30am, by which time hundreds of people had already gathered at the site, threatening to take matters into their

social media. Were local imams and powerful actors within the community engaged meaningfully in the process of dispelling the fake news and ensuring protection of the communities under threat?

One of the most compelling selling points of the Awami League government—at least for a section of Bangladeshi liberals—has been its “secular” and “anti-communal” identity, in sharp contrast to the BNP which has a notorious record

Muslims and queer communities—to go on unchallenged. After the Islamic Foundation issued guidelines against propagating hateful and communal speeches during *khutbas* and *waaz mahfils*, preachers reacted vehemently to what they called the Islamic Foundation’s curbing of their right to preach. The government then withdrew the guidelines to give them even more licence to spew hatred. If only the government had been that receptive to our demands to repeal

For far too long we have failed to hold any nuanced and constructive dialogue on the role of religion in public life, the increasing Islamisation of the nation that is fuelled by national, regional or even international interests, and the way religion is used as a ploy for more material pursuits. Things just don’t happen—there is a historical-economic-social context in which things come to be, in which extremists and micro-fascists come



For every incident of communal violence in Bangladesh, there have been protests demanding justice for the victims and punishment for the perpetrators. Yet, we see little to no action from the authorities to deliver said justice.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Things just don’t happen—there is a historical-economic-social context in which things come to be, in which extremists and micro-fascists come to be created and empowered. The ghosts of unresolved communal issues from the near and distant past have led to this familiar yet unfamiliar moment of crisis.

storm brewing in the background.

The aftermath of the violence feels familiar too. There’s the inevitable blame game, with the ruling party pointing fingers at the opposition and vice versa, despite the fact that each of them, in various degrees, have played the religion card and appeased extremists to either hold on to power or to get to it. Then there’s the predictable promise of justice, even though justice for past communal crimes ended with arrests that might have helped serve PR purposes, but brought no comfort to the aggrieved communities. Even the perpetrators who carried out the attacks in March are already out on bail, having served less time than Jhumon Das, who was unjustly charged under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for “hurting religious sentiments.” Nine years have passed since Ramu, and there’s still no notable progress on the criminal cases filed with the lower courts, and although multiple probes confirmed

discharged their duties to the best of their abilities to ensure the safety and security of citizens under their jurisdiction. Investigation by *The Daily Star* reveals that the first person to have allegedly seen the blasphemous act called 999 at 7am, and the officer-in-charge (OC) of Kotwali police station appeared at the mandap in plainclothes shortly after. A little later, a man named Foyez Ahmed went live on Facebook. Directing the camera towards the OC, who was supposedly clutching the copy of Quran in question, he exclaimed that the OC himself was a witness to the blasphemy, that he had confirmed the incident, that it was all “fact” and not “fake,” before he called upon all believers to “wake up” and “take action.” The OC, who clearly saw that he was being filmed, and could hear the inciting words being used, made no attempts to stop the video or clarify the situation. In fact, one could even argue that, had he so

own hands. Yet, the SP did not call for additional backup until after the attack was already underway at 11 am. What explains the four-hour delay? Did they fail to read the gravity of the situation or did they simply not care? The mayor, too, could not be bothered, it appears. Although he lives a few paces from the mandap and was called by the OC early in the morning to come and diffuse the situation, it took him three hours to get ready and arrive at the site. When asked the reason for such delay, alas, he had no reasonable answer to offer.

Let us, for argument’s sake, give the administration of Cumilla the benefit of doubt; maybe they were caught unawares. But how to explain the failure of local administration in the other districts to take adequate steps to ensure protection of puja mandaps and Hindu neighbourhoods? As the timeline of the mayhem shows, attacks, which began on the morning of October 13, spread across the country in the next four days—puja mandaps were destroyed in Feni and entire villages torched in Rangpur as late as October 17. Are we to believe that our local administration and law enforcement simply lack the capacity to maintain peace in their locales, even when they have enough warning? Besides, beyond the deployment of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and cutting off mobile data access, it is unclear what action was taken to assuage “aggrieved Muslims” about the misinformation being shared through

of violation of minority rights. And yet, we have seen how the current regime has pandered to communal forces over the past decade, from arbitrarily removing non-Muslim writers from the school curriculum, to recognising Qawmi madrasa degree as equivalent to Master’s, to essentially instituting blasphemy laws for “hurting religious sentiments” in the guise of the Digital Security Act. While it has cracked down on people like Baul singer Rita Dewan or Shariat (Sarker) Bayati for their spiritual performances, it has allowed religious sermons—many of which constitute hate speech against women, non-

the DSA and protect freedom of speech!

It may not be an overstatement to say we have institutionalised hate and intolerance for other ideas and beliefs, and have created micro-fascists who feel entitled to not only tell others how to live their lives, but take increasingly violent means to impose their views on others. We have normalised the privilege of the powerful such that, rather than protecting minority groups from hate speech, we empower the already entitled majoritarians to spew hate speech—and even act on that hate—with impunity.

to be created and empowered. The ghosts of unresolved communal issues from the near and distant past—an existential crisis that has deepened with the decades, increasing economic and social disparities, erosion of cultural values, wholesale adoption of Wahhabism from the Middle East, shrinking space for nuanced debates, and an institutionalised culture of intolerance—have led to this familiar yet unfamiliar moment of crisis. If we don’t hear the warning signs yet, there’s no recovering from it.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Part of A.D.

5 Not live

10 Spring

11 Phone feature

12 Move slowly

13 Voiced a view

14 Resist change

16 Softie

20 Pixie

23 Vein yield

24 Clergy's counterpart

25 Stares stupidly

27 Trickery

28 Most adorable

29 Military

bigwig

32 Table protector

36 Lowly despot

39 Niger neighbor

DOWN

40 Looks forward to

41 Scheme

42 Come together

43 Circus setting

1 Pub quaffs

2 Dapper

3 Curiosity org.

4 Mine, of a sort

5 Spanish snacks

6 Friendship

7 Stock holder

8 Before, to bards

9 Pop

11 Small grove

15 Obligation

17 Get by

18 God of war

19 Final, for one

20 Thick slice

21 Katherine — (Henry VIII's last wife)

22 Poet Dove

25 Avocado dip, casually

26 Try

28 Cowboy wear

30 Parsley unit

31 Roofing material

33 Like bulls

34 Arkin of "Argo"

35 Shade

36 Texas's

Houston

37 Really impress

38 Pitch's kin

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