

Justice is key to ending communal violence

But equally important is to end the culture of intolerance against minorities

IN an unexpected twist—or is it, really?—in the ongoing saga of communal violence, police have reportedly identified, from CCTV footage, the person who had placed a copy of the Quran at the Nanua Dighir Par puja mandap in Cumilla, triggering a series of attacks on the Hindu community over the last week. The man alleged to have been responsible for this act is Iqbal Hossain—a Muslim, not a Hindu. Yet, like in many previous cases, it is the innocent Hindu people who have been made a scapegoat for this act, as their homes, shops, and temples were vandalised in at least 13 districts. This, more than anything, illustrates the vulnerabilities of minority communities in Bangladesh.

The role of law enforcement during some of these attacks is one that we must investigate, but the bigger question is: how did we get to this point? The fact is, over the last decade, communal attacks on minority groups have reached a new height. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), as many as 3,710 attacks on the Hindu community took place between January 2013 and September 2021. A fundamental reason for this and the culture of intolerance ripping through the country is the use—or abuse—of religion and identity politics. The incendiary rhetoric of political and faith actors promoting hatred and intolerance has been a major problem for many years. Unfortunately, none of our major political parties are innocent of this. This has naturally emboldened different interest groups to launch attacks against minority communities at every opportunity they get, for their own twisted reasons.

Despite similar attacks on Hindus following fake and manipulated social media posts in the past, the government has failed to tone down hateful language against minority groups. Not only that, even when people responsible for the violence were apprehended in some cases—such as the 2016 attacks in Nasiragar or the attacks on 80 Hindu homes and eight temples in Sunamganj in March this year—they were allowed to get out on bail or even nominated by the ruling party to contest elections. What this shows is that the arrests made after such attacks may serve some PR purposes, but justice, more often than not, remains elusive.

The only way to bring an end to communal attacks is to match what politicians promise following such attacks with actions. Every time such attacks occur, we hear our politicians claim that they stand by the victims. But do they, really? The answer must be given through actions, not words. Moreover, those responsible for the attacks—and particularly for instigating them—must be held to account. Justice is still the best antidote to such mindless crimes, and we have been awfully falling behind on this. Equally importantly, the use of divisive rhetoric against minority groups as a political football must end.

Will our roads ever be safe?

Implement road transport law, fix the damaged roads to ensure safe commute

THE state of the road safety in Bangladesh is dismal at the moment, to say the least. And it includes the state of the roads too. Take, for instance, the Postogola-Chashara road. As reported by this daily, it's riddled with potholes—no big surprise there. But the real danger is when it rains and the road gets submerged in knee-deep water, making it impossible for vehicles to travel on it safely. As a result, as recently as last Tuesday morning, at least eight accidents occurred within the space of hours after autorickshaws, rickshaws and rickshaw vans slipped into the potholes. Not only do these accidents cause nuisance for vehicle owners in the form of repair costs, but they also leave passengers and drivers severely injured.

This is but one example of the state of road safety in Dhaka division. According to police data, there has been an increase of at least 40 percent in both accidents and deaths on the country's roads till July this year, compared to the same period last year. The highest number of accidents in a single month was 543 in May. This was when public transport was hard to come by due to Covid-19-related restrictions from the government, and people depended on unsafe modes of transportation (such as easy bikes and motorcycles) to rush home for Eid. But even during regular times, accidents on our roads remain a common phenomenon.

For those expecting safer roads, the introduction of the Road Transport Act in 2018 offered momentary hope, but even after three years, it remains largely ineffective, and still in a draft form being ping-ponged between the BRTA and the law ministry. Besides non-implementation of the act, the pending amendments signal the authorities' prioritisation of transport owners and associations over the lives of people on the roads. The current draft of the law, if amendments take place along that line, shows that punishment or fine under at least 14 sections would be reduced. The law will also lose its jurisdiction to hold a driver responsible for causing injuries by reckless and negligent driving; it will only have the jurisdiction if someone dies. If the purpose of the law is to reduce the number of accidents, why make such concessions that do nothing to hold the drivers accountable?

As if such concessions are not enough, the government has recently waived late fines for vehicles failing to update documents on time. Such waivers, coupled with the delays in forming rules under the Road Transport Act, cannot help but be seen as the results of the influence that transport associations have over the government. Today, on the National Road Safety Day, authorities must realise that their duty is to keep the roads safe for the public. We would urge the government to be strict about the speedy finalisation of the Road Transport Act and to ensure its effective implementation. The whims of transport association owners must not prevent the safe travelling of the general people.

Imbibing 1971 values in our post-liberation generation

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

NEVER on the soil of independent Bangladesh would anyone ever have to suffer because of his or her religion. That was the resolve of every freedom fighter, along with their firm commitment to democracy and equality, as we emerged as an independent nation from the ashes of a most brutal genocide.

It was clear in my mind, as in the minds of thousands of *Muktijoddhas*, that what Pakistan denied to our minorities, especially the Hindus—an ownership of the country the latter chose to call their own in 1947—we, in free Bangladesh, will embrace as a matter of belief, principle and practice. So many of my fellow *Mukti Bahini* members were Hindus; their sacrifice, patriotism, and love for our freedom struggle and for Bangladesh were no less than any of ours—if not more.

We seem to have failed to fulfil that pledge. To see the ugly face of communalism rise in 13 separate districts over a period of only a few days—and that, too, during the period of the 50th anniversary of our independence—is sad, shameful, and indicative of our catastrophic failure to establish the principles of our Liberation War in the hearts and minds of the post-liberation generation, especially the youth.

Secularism, as one of the founding pillars of our state and a deeply-held belief of our freedom struggle, was dealt a body blow with the assassination of Bangabandhu and the capture of our state power by the military. That started the process of amendments and gradual dilution of the constitutional provisions guaranteeing secularism and religious freedom for all.

As secularism was sent into exile through one door, religion-based politics was welcomed through the other. BNP's alliance with Jamaat and Awami League's deal with and concessions for Hefazat-e-Islam demonstrate this point most succinctly.

By the time a mass uprising was able to dislodge the military and quasi-military dictatorships and restore democracy in 1991, great damage had already been done to our constitution.

Though it was a proud moment in the nation's history that we were able to bring back democracy through a peaceful mass struggle, it must also be said that none of the amendments brought about by the governments of General Ziaur Rahman and his successor General Ershad—which greatly compromised our secular constitution—was ever touched by the

succeeding elected governments. This sad story of our gradual but certain retreat from this fundamental principle of state-building craft explains the underlying causes of what we can call "several steps forward towards modernity and several steps backward towards medievalism." It was as if one foot was marching forward, and the other backwards, with the body being gradually torn in the process.

It is my strong belief that the restoration of democracy in 1991, through mass uprising and not through any bloody revolution, truly gave us a second chance to bring Bangladesh back into the mould of democracy and secularism. However, that was not to happen because, immediately after the fall of President Ershad, the principal allies of the anti-autocracy struggle—Awami League and the BNP—became bitter enemies. It was like the parting of ways of the US and the

alliance with Jamaat and Awami League's deal with and concessions for Hefazat-e-Islam demonstrate this point most succinctly.

Today's rise of fundamentalism and intolerance is the direct result of the anti-democratic and anti-dissent politics of the day that demonises everything and everyone who fall foul of those in power. This has gradually and effectively isolated the government from all its allies, and made it more and more dependent on bureaucracy, police, intelligence agencies, and street-level thugs, none of whom had—not in Bangladesh, nor anywhere in the world—the slightest of commitment to democratic ideals or public participation in the decision-making process. This led to the failure to build a democratic culture and caused hate speech and alternative facts to enter our lexicon.

We must understand that the forces



PHOTO: STAR

Protests erupted all over the country after communal attacks were carried out against the Hindu community recently. In this photo, a girl is making a painting of the Goddess Durga as a symbol of power and protest in the capital's Shahbagh area.

USSR after the fall of fascism in Europe at the end of the Second World War. Allies that defeated Hitler became the deadliest of enemies, each embracing the most notorious and dictatorial of governments of the day only if they pledged "your enemy is my enemy." In our case, with each successive election as power swung between the two rivals, their competition to maintain it or regain it became more and more devoid of principles, ethics, vision, and morality of any sort. The politics of immediate gain regardless of its future cost ruled the actions of our two principal political parties. As a result, both parties vied for the support of forces that were inimical to the birth of Bangladesh, propagating ideologies that directly contradicted the values of our Liberation War.

It was the fight between the Awami League and the BNP for the so-called "Islamic vote" that blurred the lines between democracy and secularism on the one hand, and precipitated shameless and unprincipled play for power on the other, creating the opening for the rise of religion-based politics whose door was earlier opened during the period of military dictatorships. As a result, secularism—which the BNP did not ideologically adhere to and the Awami League formally lent support to but practically did otherwise—fell by the wayside. As secularism was sent into exile through one door, religion-based politics was welcomed through the other. BNP's

of communalism that has established its hydra-headed presence in Bangladesh today are not the result of our recent failures, but failures that have been occurring over many years—ones that we have deliberately ignored due to our lack of courage to confront forces that were taking us away from the values of our Liberation War. Or it was because we were so blinded by the politics of power and wealth that we did not care. The present ruling party did not see that they were cutting the very tree on which they were sitting.

The challenge today is that Bangladesh needs to rediscover 1971 in all its glory and the deeper meaning of what our independence struggle stood for. We prefer to call our freedom struggle "*Mukti Juddho*" or "Liberation War," instead of the "War of Independence." There is, of course, a reason for it. (Recall Bangabandhu's famous speech of March 7, 1971, where he said, "*Ebarer sangram amader muktir sangram; ebarer sangram amader shadhinatar sangram.*" He uses the words "*mukti*" and "*shadhinata*" together.) By using the term "*Mukti Juddho*," we want to emphasise that our struggle in 1971 was about far more than just political independence. We struggled for a fundamental reform of our society that was to liberate us from all our backwardness, prejudice, hatred, incapacities, narrow mindedness, etc on the one side, and eliminate poverty and all sorts of discrimination on the other. If we juxtapose the concept of "*Mukti Juddho*"

Reinvigorate efforts to end TB



POONAM KHETRAPAL SINGH

THE year 2020 marked a watershed in global efforts to end tuberculosis (TB) by 2030. First, it was because, by 2020, the TB-affected countries aimed to achieve the first set of "End TB" milestones: a 35 percent reduction in TB deaths, a 20 percent reduction in TB incidence, and zero catastrophic costs for TB-affected families. And second, it was because throughout 2020 and into 2021, the direct and indirect impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic challenged healthcare systems and TB programmes like never before.

Both globally and in the Southeast Asia region, TB case notifications and treatment have been disrupted. Data from World Health Organization (WHO) shows that several high-burden countries globally witnessed a decline of more than 50 percent in the number of cases reported between January and June 2020, compared with the same period the previous year.

The social and economic impacts of the pandemic have been immense. Tens of millions of people have been pushed into extreme poverty. Undernutrition—a key driver of TB morbidity and mortality—has been greatly exacerbated. WHO modelling suggests that these and other gaps could result in a level of global mortality last seen in 2012, leading to an additional 1.4 million TB deaths by 2025.

Such an outcome would be catastrophic, especially in the Southeast Asia Region, which is the world's most TB-affected region. WHO's recently released Global Tuberculosis Report highlights that in 2020, the region accounted for 43 percent of the 9.9 million patients who fell ill with TB globally. This is despite making up just over a quarter of the world's population. The region accounted for almost half of global TB deaths.

However, amid crisis there is

opportunity. The region has in recent years mobilised unprecedented political commitment towards ending TB, which is one of the eight Flagship Priorities. Ministerial-level commitments made in 2017 and 2018 have catalysed increased and much-needed investments in ending TB, in line with the region's Statement of Action, the UN Political Declaration on the Fight against TB, and the End TB and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets.

In all countries of the Southeast Asia region, pandemic-related disruptions have raised the stakes, highlighting the need

to ensure that all TB patients complete TB treatment, it is imperative that sensitive and accountable social protection services—including nutrition and financial support—are not only integrated into TB programmes, but provided additional funding.

technical and funding partners, the private sector, and civil society. They must include members of TB-affected communities, ensuring that patient perspectives are not only represented, but acted upon.

The second issue that needs attention is increasing resource allocations to catch up on lost ground. Regionally, it is estimated that up to USD 3 billion may be required annually to achieve the End TB targets. For every dollar spent on TB, an estimated 43 dollars are returned.

Several priorities require targeted attention. First is strengthening multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary action, for which accountability frameworks are vital. Such frameworks should define the contributions of government departments,

must provide the full spectrum of care—from preventive, diagnostic and treatment care, to rehabilitative and palliative care—with a focus on reaching marginalised and vulnerable groups. If appropriately leveraged, key technologies such as artificial intelligence-based screening can not only increase efficiency, but also access and equity.

Fourth, strengthening the provision of socioeconomic support. People who are undernourished are more prone to develop TB. They have a higher likelihood of dropping out of TB treatment. TB treatment interruptions are challenging for patients and communities, increasing the likelihood of TB spread and drug resistance. To ensure that all TB patients complete TB treatment, it is imperative that sensitive and accountable social protection services—including nutrition and financial support—are not only integrated into TB programmes, but provided additional funding.

Our challenges are immense, but each of them can be overcome. In just a few short years, the Southeast Asia region has come so far in its efforts to address TB, mobilising unprecedented investments that have achieved real progress at the grassroots and in the lives of the most vulnerable. That progress is increasingly at risk. Through urgent and synergistic action, together we must right the course, ensuring that all countries of the region reinvigorate the TB response and accelerate towards the End TB targets, and achieve a fairer, healthier, more health-secure region.

along with that of "*Sonar Bangla*," then the true meaning of 1971 begins to emerge.

In their interviews with *The Daily Star*, Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Salimullah Khan and Syed Manzoorul Islam, all eminent scholars, identified the absence of democratic politics and youth unemployment, disappearance of an active civil society, and societal disengagement and cultural vacuum, respectively, to be the underlying causes of the rise of communal forces in Bangladesh. Each of these points are relevant and must be considered by our policymakers with seriousness and urgency.

While we have made considerable progress on the economic front, these gains have come at a great cost of our democratic rights and freedoms, and at the cost of a widening rich-poor gap. Our economic progress, substantial as it is, has not led to a deeper harmony, but to greater dissonance, part of which gets expressed in attacking minorities. It should not have escaped any one's attention that those participating in the attacks on Hindu temples and mandaps were mostly youth.

As for the role of civil society, there is nothing to write home about. The Bangla term for civil society is "*shushil samaj*." The present leadership, with the help of some partisan intellectuals, have turned the word "*shushil*" into one of ridicule, derision, and near hatred. It has become almost like an abuse to be called a member of "*shushil samaj*."

The fact of societal disengagement is also sadly true. We no longer seem to be bothered enough to take up social causes and fight for them as our own. However, this must be judged against two instances in which mass outpouring was most brutally suppressed—the road safety movement and the quota movement—sending a clear message that mass participation in social causes will not be tolerated, resulting, among other factors, into the citizens' disengagement that Prof Manzoorul Islam has referred to.

As for the absence of cultural activities, we really need to think deep and wide as to what happened in this area. Our cultural heritage was one of the principal weapons in our arsenal to fight the Pakistani domination and its army. Of particular importance is the near-total disappearance of cultural activities at the village level. This absence of cultural activities—and we are not talking about government-sponsored ones, but those that emanate from people's spontaneous participation—has deprived our youth of their heritage, sense of identity and pride, and allowed the entry of nefarious influences to fill the vacuum.

The challenge we face today requires broader unity among the people, especially involving the political parties, cultural organisations, youth, the civil society, the NGOs, the media, and people of all views and beliefs. There should be mass awareness campaigns all across the country about why Bangladesh was born and why millions laid down their lives in 1971.

If we don't learn from the events of the last few days and keep on saying that these are isolated incidents—carried out by a handful of misguided people, by forces that have an eye on the next election—and refuse to take responsibility for what we have done wrong, and also continue to demonise critics, then we will not be able to tackle the danger that looms over us in its enormity, urgency, and viciousness.

.....
Mahfuz Anam is editor and publisher of *The Daily Star*.

.....
Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh is regional director in South-East Asia at World Health Organization (WHO).