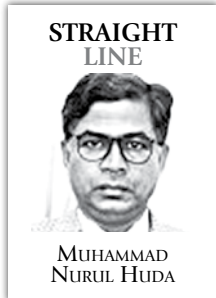


The poisonous politics of communalism



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

WHILE commenting on the unfortunate and shameful incidents triggered by the alleged desecration of Islamic scriptures in Cumilla, this newspaper in its editorial of October 16 very poignantly observed that "what would equally benefit us is to understand the dynamics of communal politics—the powerful forces that keep fanning communal tensions behind the scenes." The editorial very rightly points to the deep damage caused by the senseless zealotry when it says that the Cumilla incident has stoked communal tension temporarily, "but its effect—especially the feeling of trauma experienced by religious minorities, and the chasm among the adherents of different faith groups that threatens to widen with every such incident—is unlikely to fizzle out anytime soon."

The deep wound and frustration caused to the victims of this insanity can be aptly gauged from the wailing of Madhu Kanti Das, a shopkeeper in Lama Bazar, Bandarban, who said, "We have been living together in this area like brothers and friends for 30 long years. We shared our lives—our happiness and sorrows. But within the blink of an eye, these familiar people became strangers." His shop was among the 30 Hindu-owned business establishments that were vandalised and looted on October 14 in Lama upazila. Elsewhere in the country, aggrieved Hindu residents have expressed grave apprehensions about their safety and guarantee of their honourable living in the country.

The Cumilla incident appears to be a ploy designed to commit mischief. While the related inquiry and investigation are expected to unearth the motive and culpability of the planners and perpetrators, it can be said with a fair degree of certitude that no right thinking person of any faith would plant the holy Islamic scripture at a puja mandap. By all accounts, it was a diabolical plan meant to create widespread dislocation, destruction



Questioning authorities' role and demanding exemplary punishment for the perpetrators of the recent communal attacks, Ramakrishna Math and Mission organised a human chain at the capital's RK Mission Road. PHOTO: STAR

and dissension. Unfortunately, the evildoers have succeeded.

In popular understanding, one can associate religion with the violence in Cumilla and elsewhere in the country but a deeper probe may likely find that it is not religion per se, but the politicisation of religious identity and the exploitation of this identity for community and State ends that result in violence. The emphasis is not on textual analysis but contest for power and resources. Often such incidents are carefully planned and orchestrated and occur within a context of subtle political mobilisation. The criminals at times have committed violence with

impunity.

From a historical perspective, it needs to be impressed that the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 was the result of competitive communal politics and embittered sectarian obstinacy. Though in Bangladesh we have paid a heavy price to steer clear of the poison of politics of communalism, it would be less than truthful to say that there is a complete and all-pervasive doing-away with the partition baggage. There are quarters that would deliberately venture to realign State and cultural power in the interest of the majority. The success of such efforts will result in non-

Muslims being defined explicitly or implicitly as second-class citizens of Bangladesh. That, quite clearly, would run counter to the constitutional provisions of equality.

We have to remember that the appeal of secularism to religious minorities is very significant because it is identified with the protection of rights including the right to religious freedom. These rights in our constitution are defined both in individual and collective terms. Therefore, the executives in the law enforcement have to be pro-actively stringent in enforcing the rights with a view to ensuring the democratic rights for

the religious minorities.

It has to be borne in our minds that, however earnest and eloquent we might appear to be in proclaiming our democratic credentials and peaceful coexistence of all faiths, it is very easy to inflame the passions of gullible folks on the pretext of protecting the sanctity of religion. Events of the present and yesteryears lend credence to such an analysis. Therefore, stern executive and judicial actions to forestall the mischief-makers have to be ensured on a priority basis.

The use and abuse of religion in public life should provide sobering lessons. The main issue before the politicians is to provide appropriate mechanisms to make political integration of minorities possible in a multi-religious society. This has to be a practical endeavour because the recovery of tolerance in the public sphere will have no meaning for those who see themselves as oppressed and discriminated. The aggressive social mobilisation by fundamentalists has to be countered. In addition, public space should be provided for a continuous dialogue among religious traditions and perhaps between the religious and the secular. The aim of such an arrangement is to see if each of the major faiths includes within it an in-house version of other faiths, both as internal criticism and as a reminder of diversity.

Last but not the least, pandering to the religious sentiments and demonising and vilifying "the other" to secure electoral victory and other socio-political gains must be renounced and condemned squarely. The gradual marginalisation of the minorities in the body politic everywhere, including the subcontinent, has to end in public interest.

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Elbowed out by an open mind; sequel to 'mind block'



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

OUR wedding feasts are not the usual places to showcase our best behaviour. Reaching out to fetch a bowl of *rezala* over the next guy, tossing a *shami kebab* to a needy friend beyond the reach of your spoon, and trying to cover spilt *borhani* with only one layer of tissue paper are all part of the gaiety. I will not mention here wiping hands on the dangling part of the table cloth for want of evidence.

Despite the predatory instincts in our best clothing, when it comes to asking for an additional portion of the main dish—*kachchi, biriyani, polau*...whatever—we are rather conservative in our approach lest the others think we are also greedy. Therefore, intrinsically, we adopt the "good neighbour" policy.

"Hello Bhai, *ay-jay*, can you not see his plate is empty?" the gentleman calls out to the passing waiter with his mouth full of the main dish and sides. He was giving the excuse of another person sharing his table. The dish arrives, the other person hardly has a chance to glance at it before the charitable shouting man digs deep into it and scoops a whole load for himself. Then he smiles briefly at his table-mate, and no more.

As students, we also adopted a policy of involving others, supposedly all our classmates. Whenever a few of us, okay only three of us, decided to approach our project teacher with a firm determination to shift the submission date, we always spoke for everybody without their knowledge.

"Sir, everyone was saying, it will be difficult to submit the project next Thursday." To Sir's prodding "Why?", one of us says "We could not, Sir, work towards completing, Sir..." Looking behind us, the puzzled Sir asks, "How many of you?" By then we are only two students standing, the third had already fled

the scene. The case in favour of "everyone" was lost, until perhaps the next time.

Price rise of essentials is a universal phenomenon. Supply chain, production, hoarding, mark-ups and profit margin, transportation and distribution systems are variously cited as the cause. Often there is a scientific or socio-economic influence beyond the control of the players.

At Dhaka's Karwan Bazaar, a favourite haunt of TV channels, if only for proximity, vendors are interviewed after every price hike.

and the corrupt transport network. Their hands are clean. Although, profiting is not a crime, they seem to suffer from a guilty conscience. Some other happy sellers and a few concerned customers can be seen in the background. The session has no effect, whatsoever.

Cable operators have been students. They have been to vegetable markets, and to countless weddings. They are totally trained in the art of seeking favours via others. Obviously, they will try to persuade the

government to allow business to run as usual but, in line with the few scenarios narrated above, cable operators are giving "our suffering" as the reason to give them the right to relay foreign channels.

True, our *bodohyash* to guzzle *bideshi*

material, music and movies of any standard is decades old. The fan-following for live international football and cricket is titanic to say the least. The imported culture has also generated millions of addicts of Indian serials and pretend-wrestling, where no one ever really bleeds. Cartoons in Hindi are seriously damaging to our children, who are just picking up the *ka* and *kha* of Bangla.

Considering the above decadences, even if partly so, and recurring monetary loss to the national exchequer, the government moved boldly to prohibit broadcasting of advertisements (foreign and local) through any foreign channels. While at 50, we should start being an example, it may pacify some of the cynics among the about 15 million cable TV viewers in Bangladesh, that the "no-clean-feed, no broadcasting" policy is in line with similar legislation in other countries including neighbouring India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and even faraway Britain.

Cable operators pretended to fall from Burj Khalifa, and yet the clean-feed issue was on the table since the Cable Television Network Management Act of 2006, 15 years. With a view to implementing the law, Information and Broadcasting Minister, Dr Hasan Mahmud "started talking about it two years ago" with all concerned. Little wonder he can no longer tolerate excuses that foreign channels were not sending clean feeds.

Obviously, the blockade has been a rude shock to many viewers, but many homes have not enjoyed such peaceful tranquillity in a

long time. Couples have resumed talking. Children are discovering toys under their beds that they never knew existed. Despite all that, "the viewers are suffering" is a plea for allowing the illegal feed.

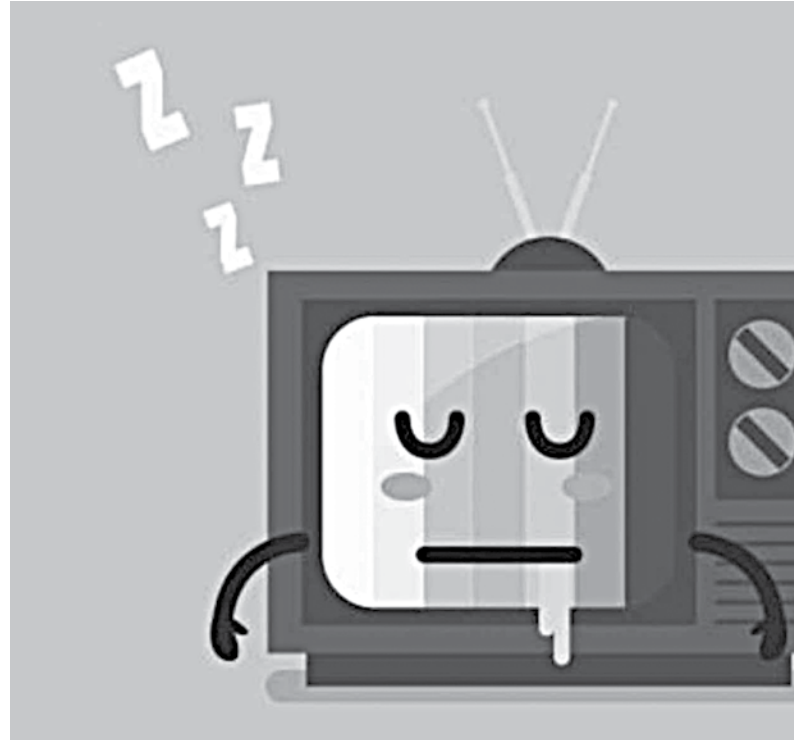
As with all issues in this country, we have a diametrically opposite viewpoint. Not for that specific reason alone, but the government's measure that bars foreign TV channels from airing feed with ads has been lauded by the (Bangladesh) Association of Television Channel Owners (ATCO).

Way back (May 17, 2018), in my column under, "Elbowed out by mind block" (Chintito, *The Daily Star*), I wrote: "Due to the manmade cultural chaos, I am having to meet some Indian idols on a regular basis (you too) as well as cope with their dance moves and wide smiles on Bangladeshi TV channels. Why someone should be so happy to use a certain washing powder, whitening cream, hair colourer, or face wash is beyond my quiet time in the bathroom."

I would like to renew my appeal, that is, local channels should not allow local ads that feature foreign artistes. I am certain that local TV and film artistes, film and music makers, will support my standpoint. Tired as I am of seeing Akshay Kumar advising us on cleaner commodities, and Salman Khan peddling soft drinks, the move would open some opportunities for our performers.

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Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed is professor of Architecture, a practising architect at Bashbari Ltd., a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

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QUOTABLE Quote

CHARLOTTE BRONTE
English novelist (1816 - 1855)

Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education; they grow firm there, firm as weeds among stones.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Finish a golf hole
- 5 Crescent's tip
- 9 Two-faced god
- 10 Egyptian dam site
- 12 Sports site
- 13 Too trusting
- 14 Spelunkers
- 16 Horse healer
- 17 Keats poems
- 18 Out-of-the-park hits
- 21 Actor Kingsley
- 22 Venice byways
- 23 Deeply touched
- 24 Makes rugs
- 26 "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-___"
- 29 Piano pedal
- 30 Therefore
- 31 Broad st.
- 32 Frugal fellows
- 34 Pithy
- 37 West Pointer
- 38 Inert gas
- 39 Borders
- 40 Transmit
- 41 Spots

DOWN

- 1 Holiday event
- 2 Irregular
- 3 Melodies
- 4 Nicholas II, for one
- 5 Soup buy
- 6 Much of N. Amer.
- 7 Rotate
- 8 Patio stones
- 9 Esau's twin
- 11 Brooklyn team
- 15 Young lads
- 19 Wallet bills
- 20 Fuming
- 22 Place to put in
- 23 Atlas page
- 24 Vacillates
- 25 Come into view
- 26 Search the riverbed
- 27 Concur
- 28 Party throwers
- 29 Almanac fill
- 30 Steer clear of
- 33 High cards
- 35 Bart, to Homer
- 36 Finale

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

A	R	G	O	S	T	A	B	S
L	E	A	N	S	C	O	V	E
A	L	L	O	W	O	M	E	G
R	O	O	A	R	T	N	I	P
M	A	R	S	H	A	S	U	N
D	E	L	I	C	A	T	E	S
E	L	E	N	A				
D	E	D	I	C	A	T	E	S
S	I	N	S	A	G	E	N	T
M	E	T	E	R	R	D	O	T
U	T	I	C	A	A	G	I	L
R	E	C	U	R	M	O	V	E
F	R	E	T	S	P	E	N	N

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT