

For communal violence, the burden of guilt falls on the majority too

An open letter to the Hindu community



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

My dearest Hindu sisters and brothers, I am overcome with grief, outrage and shame as I write to you. I live in the United States, on the other side of the world, but the heart-breaking anguish that I feel is so real, that the terrible events that took place

a few weeks ago might as well have happened in front of my eyes.

As time passes by, such events begin to recede from our collective memory.

But that is most certainly not true in my case.

In fact, it is our collective moral duty to keep this harrowing memory alive and fresh in our minds—as a warning about the depths to which human depravity can descend in the name of religion.

I wince every time I revisit the ghastly experience you have gone through, my sisters and brothers.

The desecration of your idols. Attacks on defenceless fishermen a long distance away.

The fear, humiliation and helplessness that all of you feel.

The desolate feeling of being all alone and helpless in your own country, where you have lived for generations.

What support and consolation can I offer, when words seem so woefully inadequate?

What use are tears of grief, when there is no substantive sign that the culprits will be brought to book?

The recent events have laid bare an awful paradox.

Bangladesh today has all the accoutrements of a plural, tolerant society—and the achievements are not inconsiderable.

Our celebration of Ekushey—and yes, I call it a celebration of our culture and our language—is a truly inclusive celebration that late author Sunil Gangopadhyay once described, tongue-in-cheek, as the first truly secular Bengali festival. We celebrate Pahela Baisakh with gusto. Our reverence of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam is widespread.

In the bureaucracy and government, after decades of unspoken discrimination, the presence of minorities is impressive and encouraging—full credit to the government for that.

But all of it feels utterly hollow when such terrible depredations befall you, our Hindu brethren. It reminds me of the furious rage that my African-American brethren in the United States felt when they asked: What good is it to have Barack Obama as the nation's first African-American president, when a police officer in Minnesota can throttle George Floyd to death?

In Bangladesh, it is my hope that the government will eschew the temptation to sweep the incidents under the rug. It would do well to remember that the attacks against our Hindu brethren are as much an attack on the government itself as well as on our nation's lofty goal of a plural, tolerant, and humane society.

Rather than blaming the government, with deep anguish and shame, I would much rather point an accusing finger at broader society. It is the majority community which has to shoulder the blame. And yes, I include myself among the accused.

While it is heart-warming to see the fairly widespread expressions of protest and condemnation of the horrific attacks on Hindus, that, alas, is not the full story.

There is a chilling lack of outrage that borders on apathy in the broader majority community that encourages these bigoted



What does it say about us when we play silent bystanders as our Hindu brethren's homes burn in the fire of bigotry and mindless hatred?

PHOTO: COLLECTED

miscreants. Is this the same country where the killing of a few students galvanized the nation in February 1952?

Humane, conscientious Muslims—and I do believe they constitute an overwhelming majority in Bangladesh—can no longer afford the unconscionable luxury of remaining bystanders as violent bigots take over their faith. The attackers—like bigots of every faith—are unprincipled scoundrels. They used an incendiary excuse to launch widespread attacks on innocent Hindus, knowing full well that they had nothing to do with the alleged incident.

Muslims must realize that the honour of their faith does not only rest on its teachings alone. How Muslims conduct themselves can sully its reputation grievously. The destruction of the Bamiyan sculptures by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the mass rape of Iraq's Yazidi women by the Islamic State soldiers are, among other things, also a direct attack on Islam's reputation as a tolerant, humane faith.

"When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle," warned Edmund Burke, an 18th century Irish

philosopher and statesman.

It is not enough to express our condemnation. As the majority community, let's take a page out of history. I have heard old-timers recount to me how, during the Pakistan era, they went on nightly vigils to protect Hindus during riots. Next Durga Puja, let's set up a multi-faith infrastructure to protect the freedom of religion.

The majority community needs to ensure the safety and honour of all minorities as if the honour of our faith depended on it. Because it does.

But I would like to believe that we will protect you, my sisters and brothers, for a simpler reason. We will protect you because for millennia we have shared this land, and shared together all the joys and sorrows that life offers. We will protect you because regardless of your faith, you are part of our family.

Over a hundred years ago, Rabindranath Tagore returned the knighthood following the 1919 massacre in Jallianwala Bagh in Punjab.

In a letter to Lord Chelmsford, the erstwhile viceroy, Tagore wrote: "The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings."

Tagore's protest was against the British colonial government, but mine is a call to arms to the majority community.

My Hindu sisters and brothers, I share your grief, pain, and outrage. What I cannot share with you is a terrible burden of guilt that is mine alone.

We failed to protect you.

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Will Glasgow fix the broken climate finance promises?

ANIS CHOWDHURY and JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

THE current climate mitigation plans will result in a catastrophic 2.7 degrees Celsius rise in world temperature. USD 1.6-3.8 trillion is needed annually to avoid global warming exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Rich countries have long broken their COP15 pledge, made in Copenhagen in 2009, to mobilise "USD 100 billion per year by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries." The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the situation, reducing available finance. Poor countries, many of whom are already caught in debt traps, struggle to cope.

While minuscule compared to the finance needed to adequately address climate change, it was considered a good start. The number includes both public and private finance, but with sources—public or private, grants or loans, etc—unspecified. Such ambiguity has enabled double-counting, poor transparency, and creative accounting, the UN Independent Expert Group on Climate Finance has noted. Thus, the rich countries' Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported USD 80 billion in climate finance for developing countries in 2019.

Fudging numbers

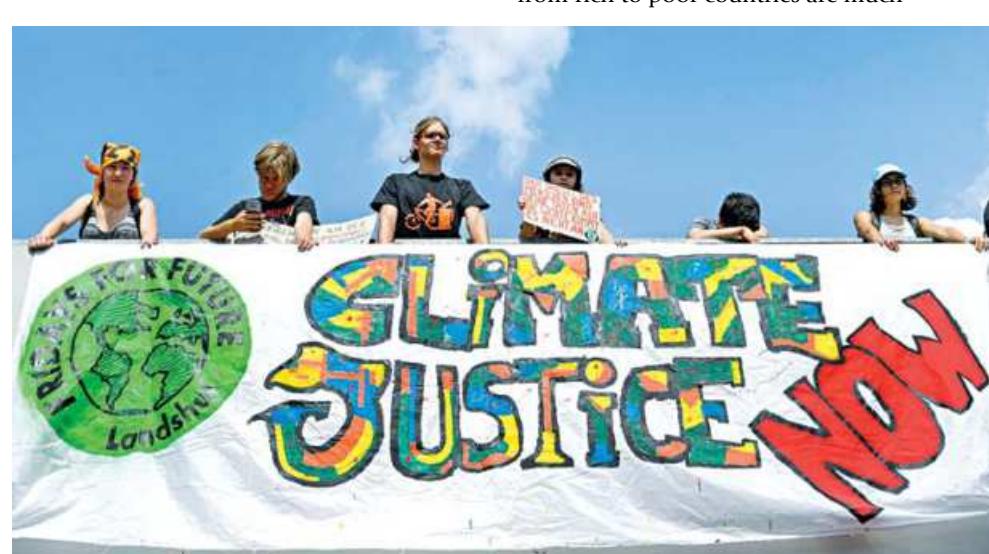
But the OECD climate finance numbers include non-concessional commercial loans, "rolled-over" loans and private finance. Some donor governments count most development aid, even when not primarily for "climate action." Also, the dispute over which funds are to be considered "new and additional" has not been resolved since the 1992 adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the Rio Earth Summit.

Official development assistance redesignated as climate finance should be categorised as "reallocated," rather than "additional" funding. Consequently, poor countries are losing aid for education, healthcare, and other public goods. India has disputed the OECD claim of USD 57 billion climate finance in 2013-14, suggesting

a paltry USD 2.2 billion instead! Other developing countries have also challenged such creative accounting and "greenwashing."

Climate finance anarchy

Developing countries expected the promised USD 100 billion yearly to be largely public grants disbursed via the then new UNFCCC Green Climate Fund. Oxfam estimates public climate financing at only USD 19-22.5 billion in 2017-18, with little effective coordination



The big emitters' promise to ramp up aid for the developing countries to USD 100 billion per year by 2020 was first made at the 15th UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, in 2009. That promise has yet to be fulfilled.

Putting profits first

The poorest countries desperately need to rebuild resilience and adapt human environments and livelihoods. Adaptation funds are required to better cope with the new circumstances created by global warming. The needed adaptation—such as improving drainage, water catchment and infrastructure—is costly, but nonetheless desperately necessary. But donors prefer publicise "easy wins" from climate mitigation, especially as they increasingly gave loans, rather than grants. Thus, although the Paris Agreement at COP21 sought to balance mitigation with adaptation, most climate finance still seeks to cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

As climate adaptation is rarely lucrative, it is of less interest to private investors. Rather, private finance favours mitigation investments generating higher returns. Thus, only USD 20 billion was for adaptation in 2019—less than half the sum for mitigation. Unsurprisingly, the OECD report acknowledges that only three percent of private climate finance has been for adaptation.

Chasing profits, most climate finance goes to middle-income countries, not the poorest or most vulnerable. Only USD 5.9 billion—less than a fifth of the total adaptation finance—has gone to the UN's 46 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) during 2014-18! This is "less than three percent of [poorly] estimated LDCs annual adaptation finance needs between 2020-2030."

Cruel ironies

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recognizes the "unequal burden of rising temperatures." It is indeed a "cruel irony" that those far less responsible for global warming bear the brunt of its costs. Meanwhile, providing climate finance via loans is pushing poor countries deeper into debt.

Increasingly frequent extreme weather disasters are often followed by much more borrowing due to the poor countries' limited fiscal space. But loans for low-income countries (LICs) cost much more than for

high-income ones. Hence, LICs spend five times more on debt than on coping with climate change and cutting GHG emissions.

Four-fifths of the most damaging disasters since 2000 have been due to tropical storms. The worst disasters have raised government debt in 90 percent of cases within two years—with no prospect of debt relief. As many LICs are already heavily indebted, climate disasters have been truly catastrophic—as in Belize, Grenada and Mozambique. Little has trickled down to the worst affected, and other vulnerable, needy and poor communities.

Funding gap

Based on the countries' own long-term goals for mitigation and adaptation, the UNFCCC's Standing Committee on Finance estimated that developing countries need USD 5.8-5.9 trillion in all until 2030. The UN estimates that the developing countries currently need USD 70 billion yearly for adaptation, rising to USD 140-300 billion by 2030.

In July, the "V20" of finance ministers from 48 climate-vulnerable countries urged delivery of the 2009 pledge of USD 100 billion to affirm a commitment to improve climate finance. This should include increased funds, more in grants, and with at least half for adaptation, but the UNFCCC chief has noted a lack of progress since.

Only strong enforcement of rigorous climate finance criteria can stop rich countries from abusing the existing ambiguous reporting requirements. Currently, fragmented climate financing urgently needs more coherence and strategic prioritisation of support to those most distressed and vulnerable.

This month's UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland can and must set things right before it is too late. Will the new Cold War drive the North to do the unexpected to win the rest of the world to its side, instead of further militarising tensions?

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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- 35 One or more
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- 38 Rounded hill
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- 41 Eagle abode
- 42 Grove makeup
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- 51 Periphery
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- 60 One Airs
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