

VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH

The picture is disturbing, the wounds are deeper



AHRAR AHMAD

Dr Ahrar Ahmad is professor emeritus at Black Hills State University in the US, and director general of Gyanapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation in Dhaka.

If Marcellus saw the picture of college students brutalising an innocent man, he would surely have said to Hamlet that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” These *bahinis*, by themselves, do not represent a major crisis, but they are certainly symptomatic of one that is much more profound.

The emergence of sponsored groups to intimidate, assault, and terrorise others in order to establish control and expedite exploitation is neither new nor novel in the world or the subcontinent. (After all, the word “thug” is of Indian origin).

Typically, such extremist groups are radicalised by a charismatic leader, mobilised along racial, religious or nationalist lines (to facilitate the demonisation of the “other”), and tethered to simplistic ideological notions with their own signs, symbols and semiotics. Other defining elements include unquestioned loyalty from the supporters, a sense of superiority in serving a higher cause, and a besieged masculinity (the protection of “our women” has become a usual subtext).

The obvious examples would be the Black Shirts (the Squadristo) of Mussolini, or the Brown Shirts (the Sturmabteilung) of Hitler, who were part of the physical and psychological apparatus of threat and violence that both the leaders had used cunningly and ferociously to rise to power. Groups that shared similar anti-socialist and anti-Semitic orientations also existed in several other European countries. A few extremist right-wing and racist groups remain in Europe today, and some unpopular governments use these groups as auxiliary support to forcibly remain in power in a few non-Western countries.

But even in the “bastions of democracy” there are some worrisome developments. We see Donald Trump in the US slyly encouraging entities like the Proud Boys and Q-Anon to “action” against non-white people and the government (which is reimagined as a “conspiracy” against individual freedoms). In India, we see anti-Muslim groups being actively instigated by powerful segments in the ruling establishment.

In Bengal, the practice of using muscle power in the service of the ruling elite was institutionalised during the British period. Following the Permanent Settlement Act, 1793, the newly created *zamindari* class(es) used the *lathiyals* (fighting men armed with sticks and staves) to protect and advance their interests in an arbitrary and extortionist rent-receiving environment. Peasant rebellions, and the gradual extension of the rule of law, eventually began to moderate their power and sense of impunity.

In our own lifetime, we saw the National Student Federation (NSF), patronised by the Ayub-Monem regime, establishing a dramatic and fearsome presence in the universities in the 1960s. This infusion of muscularity in college campuses was new, confusing and frightening. We could neither understand how students could be like this, nor figure out how to deal with the brutishness some of them demonstrated. It must be pointed out that certainly not all NSF supporters were goons and *mastans*, but this was the image that was cultivated and the notoriety we confronted.

Those forces were eventually defeated. The resistance from general students, the outrage at some of their excesses (e.g. the manhandling of the highly respected Prof Abu Mahmud of the economics department of Dhaka University), and the forces of history turning in our favour as the nationalist agitation took on greater urgency and appeal, compelled a realignment in the NSF. Several joined the popular movements in the 1970s; a few fought, and even died, in the Liberation War in 1971.

What is notable, both at home and abroad, is that while such violent groups may have nuisance value for some time, and may help to advance the political interest of some leader or cause here and there, their role has always been temporary, illegitimate and sad. Even leaders who used them (e.g. Hitler and Mussolini) gradually disbanded them, and many such groups either imploded internally or faded into irrelevance. Twentieth-century European history is littered with the corpses of many such groups and efforts.

However, even dedicated pacifists may admit that some violence, under certain circumstances, is understandable (though not necessarily supportable). As Frantz

Fanon pointed out, violence may have a cathartic function in shattering the image of invincibility and superiority that colonial rulers assumed and claimed. At times, it may also be the only way to challenge the exploitative hegemony of the ruling classes—who practise violence in more subtle, but no less brutal, ways.

The presence of violent groups in Bangladesh today is qualitatively different from anything that obtained earlier here or abroad. There are no charismatic leaders mobilising these groups, no political agendas to advance, no “others” to hate and eliminate, no ideological tropes to embrace, no “sacred cows” to protect, no perceived enemies to combat, no historical wounds to avenge, not even any threats to masculinity to overcome.

The most intriguing and appalling aspect of this violence is that it appears to be happening in a vacuum—a nihilist, pathological, obsessive, dystopic, emotionally bankrupt, ideologically vacant, and a strategically meaningless exercise of perverse force and fury.

These young men are not proving

provided by the market or the institutions of social democracy were non-existent, and the practice of acquiring as much as possible, as quickly as possible, and in whatever manner possible, became the norm. This culture of greed, display and immediate gratification almost invited social tensions and criminal behaviour.

Both political and economic conditions generated a level of resentment, anxiety and desperation that is typically expressed as impatience and intolerance in our daily interactions with others, and sometimes as unspeakable violence that is inflicted even for trivial reasons. For example, in Sirajganj, a woman was tied to a tree, beaten and hospitalised because of conflicts over a plantain tree. In Dhaka, a woman suspected of being a kidnapper was beaten to death when she had gone to check out a school for her child. A little boy was killed by air pumped through his rectum because he had started to work at a different workshop. A student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) was tortured to death by his fellow students for a

and names (with teachers teaching to the test). More alarmingly, there is no effort to encourage students towards critical thinking, aesthetic appreciation, or humanistic ideals. They are not educated about moral values, social graces, civic responsibilities, ethical principles, importance of community and shared spaces, respecting contrary points of view, or caring for the environment, the less fortunate, or the “other.” Schools churn out barely literate pupils, but totally unenlightened citizens.

At the university level, fierce partisanship and widespread corruption have vitiated the environments in the campuses. Out of 52 public universities in Bangladesh, vice-chancellors of 18 universities are under investigation for various transgressions; 12 reports have been submitted, but no action has been taken against anyone. Similarly, university teachers have been found guilty of plagiarism, sexual predation, and unethical conduct. They also realise that their appointments, salaries, promotions, and lucrative administrative stints or foreign trips depend not upon the quality of their teaching, service or research, but on “playing the game.” Students know it, too. Thus, while OUR teachers served as moral exemplars, most of today’s teachers lack that presence or authority.

Moreover, the systematic “depoliticisation” of the universities (by not allowing elections to student bodies for more than two decades, and aggressively curtailing free speech and expression), inevitably led to a single party hegemony. Student “leaders” were provided with considerable financial and social perks, particularly in the residential halls that they “controlled.”

Apart from extortion of nearby businesses or cuts from university contracts, these leaders also demanded ritual genuflection from dorm residents. An inability to demonstrate this satisfactorily could result in a warning, a beating, or even expulsion, depending on the perceived nature of the violation.

University administrations “bravely” looked away, or helplessly tolerated, or actively courted such elements (paying them out of construction funds at Jahangirnagar University, calling them to “rescue” the VC from students demonstrating against quotas at Dhaka University, or rewarding many with jobs at Rajshahi University). Very few challenged their presence or power. The respect that the university administrations and teachers traditionally enjoyed among students has been gradually replaced with widespread cynicism and rudeness.

Consequently, in the moral chaos and the free-for-all environment that has been generated, where honesty is synonymous with stupidity, politeness is interpreted as weakness, and being law-abiding is a sign of low status, where the usual restraints provided by legal structures, responsible leadership, individual conscience and civic consciousness become irrelevant, violence becomes natural, if not inevitable.

The Helmet Bahini and their ilk are not merely the creations of this or that party or leader, nor reflect just some political or policing failure. They represent an intellectual, ethical and structural rot that is much deeper and more corrosive.

We are all complicit in the developments that have led to privileging physical force over moral authority. We have met the enemy, and it is us.



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their loyalty to a leader or a cause (except perhaps some temporary and localised interests), or their courage, manhood or power (very little of that can be proven by hacking away at a helpless man lying inert on the ground), or their patriotism and their belief in the ideals of the Liberation War (when they are actually bringing shame and disrepute on both).

They are true mercenaries, entrepreneurs of violence, human beings reduced to their bodies, weapons and egos, easily bought and manipulated, and just as easily discarded and trashed. The lure and thrill of raw power and the ability to get away with it eventually become the black hole that swallows up their identities and their future.

Their rise can perhaps be explained in terms of the social context in which they are located. There are several interrelated factors that may be relevant.

First, they indicate weaknesses in governance, particularly public disenchantment with questionable elections, pervasive corruption, limitations on free speech and expression, increasing inequalities, environmental degradation, the vulnerabilities of women and minority communities, and disregard (and often contempt) for the rule of law or the institutions of justice. All of this has helped to foster an enabling environment for such behaviour. Some lawmakers (e.g. from Noakhali) can publicly advocate “lynching of all miscreants,” absolving everyone of responsibility, and those entrusted with upholding the law allegedly flout it through enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and long, unconstitutional and inhumane delays in resolving cases.

Second, there are some disarticulations and disruptions inherent in capitalism, where traditional norms of social decency and solidarity are replaced by what Marx identified as alienation, “commodity fetishism” (the mindless acquisition and flaunting of possessions), false consciousness, and increasing exploitation of people and resources.

In most other countries, the excesses of capitalism are mitigated through the discipline that the market imposes, the controls established by regulatory mechanisms and legislative oversight, and the reassurances offered by social programmes and the recognition of worker rights (unions, minimum wages, safety in the workplace, etc).

But in Bangladesh, the development of capitalism has been sudden, chaotic and unbridled. The safety valves and restraints

Facebook post critical of India. Every day, there are reports of clashes, beatings, assaults, rapes, vandalism, abductions and disappearances. It is most disconcerting that even when the perpetrators are identified—for example, while viciously attacking the anti-quota or the safe roads demonstrators (the latter were schoolchildren)—and pictures of them armed with knives, rods and firearms are carried in the media, little is done.

While political and economic conditions are obviously important, a third factor deserves mention and elaboration: the failure of the education system. This refers to more than the content of the syllabus or the pedagogical techniques through which knowledge is disbursed at the school level, though both may be relevant. More importantly, it appears that educators are more obsessed with quantity rather than quality, with enrolment numbers, graduation rates and GPAs, rather than what is being actually offered or learnt in our schools.

History, social sciences and humanities, when taught at all, are reduced to rote memorisation of dates

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Blinds piece
5 Spirited horse
10 Broad
11 Vestiges
13 Heaps
14 Oxygen-thriving organism
15 Foster
17 Skin art, for short
18 Grabbed with a toothpick
19 Halloween mo.
20 Heel
21 Male moose
22 Odor
25 “You Don’t Know —” (Cole Porter song)
26 Parakeet home
27 Golf goal
28 Major lang.
29 Championship emblem
33 Slangy denial
34 Toronto’s province
35 Stuck at the chalet, perhaps
37 Rowing team
38 Sentence part
39 Doily stuff
40 Moved sideways
41 Looked over
DOWN
1 Graceful birds
2 Illuminated
3 Find darling
4 Octopus arm
5 Gawked
6 Cornered
7 Lobed organ
8 Travel to endangered areas
9 Spectacular failure
12 Make a home
16 River of Russia
21 Nautical hanger-on
22 Like vistas
23 Shackle
24 Brainiac
25 Gasp for air
27 Wrote
29 Modeling asset
30 Ordered display
31 Brother’s daughter
32 Took to impound
36 Used a spade



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



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