



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

ATTACK ON RADHAPADA ROY

When poets cry



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The attack on 80-year-old poet Radhapada Roy in Kurigram has only added to the list of reasons why many Bangladeshis feel ashamed of being perceived as the citizens of a country where communal elements are gaining ground. We can only wonder how a poet so revered – an author of at least 100 spiritual poems – could be beaten up with a bamboo stick when he had simply been fishing at a nearby pond in the morning. How did these goons muster up the audacity to attack an elderly man? And more importantly, why did they even do so?

Radhapada has said, while in hospital being treated for his injuries, that one of his attackers had quipped, “Nothing will happen if I beat a Hindu poet.” The greatest tragedy is that Radhapada knew who his attackers were – they were men from a nearby village. One of them had gotten into an argument with the victim several months ago. It is therefore also puzzling why the attackers decided to assault the elderly poet so many months after the incident.

But we should own up to what has been happening in independent Bangladesh. We cannot be sure whether Radhapada’s assault was part of any ploys to lay blame on a particular political party, or a random attack triggered by previous events. But it seems clear that Radhapada being a member of a minority community gave the attackers the audacity to commit such a reprehensible crime – because they thought they would get away with it.

The attackers’ sense of infallibility is a consequence of an insidious movement that has been going on for a long time, and that is to change the identity of Bangladesh from a nation historically known for its religious harmony and tolerance for diversity, to one where negative communal ideas can thrive and

even be encouraged for political expediency.

We have already seen how other poets, baul singers and, generally, members of minority communities have been threatened and attacked, with their homes destroyed and lives left in tatters. Ramu, Nasirnagar, Cumilla, Narail, Sunamganj – the list of places where communal attacks have taken place is endless. In almost all cases, there has been deafening silence and incredible apathy from the police, the majoritarian community, and the state in general.

Thus we, Bangladeshis, have watched helplessly as bigots have successfully erased the work of writers and poets from school textbooks, citing their last names, and as baul singers have been arrested and imprisoned for their spiritual songs. Everything has become a question of “hurting religious sentiments” (of the majoritarian population) and “an attempt to tarnish the image of the country,” or just plain “anti-state.” These are the phrases that are used to take away (using draconian laws) the freedoms of citizens for simply expressing a different point of view. Even poetry and song – mediums that convey our deepest emotions and represent our very souls – are being labelled as dangerous or sacrilegious.

In this pre-election period, it will not be surprising to see instances of bigotry as political parties try to affiliate themselves with religious groups in hopes

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This tacit tolerance of bigotry over the years has nurtured ideologies that are diametrically opposite to the founding principles of our nation. They are contradictory to our syncretic culture. Our freedom fighters fought with their lives and limbs to safeguard this harmonious existence and free us from the shackles of the racial and religious discrimination clamped onto us by a foreign regime. But it did not take long for intolerance and hatred for “the other” to pull us back, especially when consecutive governments decided to hold hands with groups that were explicitly against the pluralistic spirit of our independent nation, allowing them to spread their tentacles all over the country.

of expanding their voter base. As we have seen already, many new religion-based parties have cropped up to challenge the existing ones. These alliances – and the popular response of looking the other way when blatant acts of violence against minority communities take place – will further erode the syncretic culture we are so proud of as Bangladeshis.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh is changing and is in danger of moving further away from the ideals of the Liberation War. We can no longer just pay lip service to the spirit of the war through ritualistic observations of days. It’s time we took a deep look into ourselves and ask: who have we become?

Assange may be in the dock, but it is journalism that’s on trial



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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ERESH OMAR JAMAL

During the 78th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 18-22 in New York, Brazilian President Lula Da Silva and Honduras President Xiomara Castro called on the US and the UK for the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. To the applause of world leaders, Lula said, “Preserving press freedom is essential... A journalist like Julian Assange cannot be punished [for] informing society in a transparent and legitimate way.” Yet, it is these same world leaders – many of them, at least – who are often found to be involved in the persecution of journalists.

the Ecuadorian embassy in London – in clear violation of numerous international laws and treaties.

So, why take such a risk? What is Assange’s crime that the CIA contemplated risking an international outcry to destroy just one publisher and journalist?

According to Pilger, Assange’s crime was that “he broke a silence.” Pilger claimed that “no investigative journalism in my lifetime can equal the importance of what WikiLeaks has done and the public service it has provided in calling rapacious power to account.” A bold claim, indeed.

But he is not the only respected

the world have been increasingly doing so. This case in particular could set the most important precedent for extraterritorial prosecution of media across the globe.

Additionally, if Assange is prosecuted for publishing leaked classified documents, every single media outlet is at risk of prosecution for doing the exact same thing. The Obama administration, for example, explored for years whether it could criminally charge Assange and WikiLeaks for publishing classified information, only to decide that it could not do so given the press freedom guarantee of the US Constitution’s First Amendment. There would be no way to differentiate a traditional media outlet such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* from an entity like WikiLeaks without involving the government and the courts in the formulation of a legal definition of what qualifies as a part of the press. And would we really want that, given



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

From the very beginning, the Assange case has been fraught with many inconsistencies and controversies.

The US itself is often considered – and frequently claims – to be a world leader, particularly when it comes to upholding and defending human rights and freedom of expression. Which again makes its persecution of Assange all the more ironic and especially dangerous.

From the very beginning, the Assange case has been fraught with many inconsistencies and controversies. One doesn’t have to be a legal expert to realise that the Swedish, UK, US and other authorities have handled the Assange case differently time and again. It almost seemed as if some powerful force was out to get him no matter the cost, and was willing to bend or break all the rules to do so.

In fact, according to legendary journalist John Pilger, a plan was conceived as early as 2008 by the cyber counterintelligence assessment branch of the US Department of Defense with the aim to destroy “the feeling of trust that is Wikileaks’ centre of gravity.” After 2008, endless information has come to light showing how some of the most powerful organisations in the world have been out to get Assange. The most outlandish among these is the fact that senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials during the Trump administration’s tenure had discussed abducting and even assassinating Assange, while he was still within the confines of

human rights defender to have made such a claim. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Glenn Greenwald once described WikiLeaks as being “one of the very few, if not (the) only, group effectively putting fear into the hearts of the world’s most powerful and corrupt people.” Other famed individuals such as Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Zizek, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Maguire have vehemently applauded Assange for his journalistic achievements.

Yet, aside from the injustices that have been perpetrated against Assange, the case against him and WikiLeaks is much more important for what it might entail for press freedom itself. From Amnesty International to Human Rights Watch, from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), all the important organisations have condemned the prosecution of Julian Assange, denouncing its devastating impact on journalism and on the public’s right to know.

Firstly, the very notion that the US can indict and demand the extradition of a foreign journalist is extremely dangerous. It means that sovereignty has no value. And, of course, there is no reason why other countries or governments wouldn’t follow suit. In fact, many authoritarian governments around

the numerous risks that could arise from such a scenario?

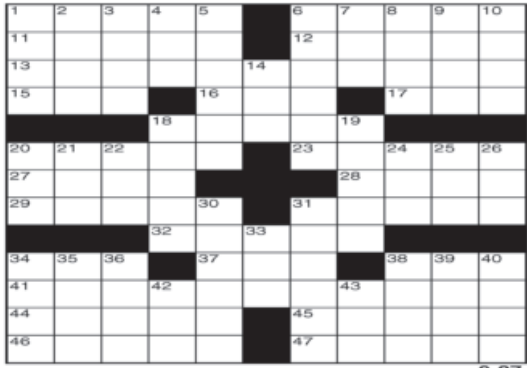
This is why even the editors and publishers of *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel*, and *El Pais* – not all of which are fans of Assange – have said in a letter that his “indictment sets a dangerous precedent, and threatens to undermine America’s First Amendment and the freedom of the press.”

But, as things stand, Assange’s extradition to the US might be imminent. His legal team has filed a final application for appeal, the last option available in the British courts. If accepted, the case could proceed to a public hearing in front of two new High Court judges. If rejected, Assange could immediately be extradited to the US, where he will stand trial for 18 counts of violating the vague Espionage Act, and face charges that could see him receive a 175-year sentence. As RSF said in a statement on June 8, “The historical weight of what happens next cannot be overstated.”

Therefore, regardless of one’s personal feelings towards Assange or his organisation, WikiLeaks, it is high time for anyone who believes in the importance of press freedom and of protecting journalism to realise that, while Assange sits in the dock, journalistic rights and press freedom are truly the ones under trial and in grave danger.

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

