



A woman embraces the body of a Palestinian child killed in Israeli strikes, at a hospital in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip on October 17.

PHOTO: REUTERS

WORLD CHILDREN’S DAY

The lost children of Gaza



A CLOSER LOOK
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WCNSF is the acronym for Wounded Child No Surviving Family. This was coined by the health professionals in Gaza to refer to the increasing number of children who are wounded and have no caregivers, having lost their families to the genocide being carried out by the Israeli occupation forces since October 7. What kind of a world do we live in, where such acronyms are required to refer to children? What kind of a world do we live in, where children are forced to bear the wounds of a war—that was not of their choosing—on their bodies, and the scars of the loss of their loved ones on their souls, forever?

Gaza has no more children left. And I am not referring to the more than 4,500 children who have been butchered mercilessly by the Israeli apartheid regime in the name of its “right to self-defence”—or the thousands who lay trapped under the rubble of what once used to be their homes, or the thousands who remain missing—but to all the children of Gaza who have been brutally robbed off their childhood and thrust into a life of deprivation and grief.

Not that life was a bed of roses for these children before the ongoing genocide was unleashed on them. In more than the 16 years of painful blockade imposed by Israel, the children of Gaza have suffered dehumanisation, debasement, and deprivation at the hands of the occupation forces, resulting in irreparable mental trauma, childhood depression, and major psychological complications.

To quote a 2022 Save the Children report, “When we asked children and young people in 2022 what their daily lives in Gaza are like they spoke of living in a perpetual state of fear, worry, sadness and grief, waiting for the next round of violence to erupt, and feeling unable to sleep or concentrate. Many shared vivid memories of the bombings they had experienced, recalling how their homes and schools were destroyed, and their loved ones killed. They also spoke of how the blockade affects every aspect of their lives and shapes their hopes and aspirations for the future. When we asked children and young people about their ‘unwanted’ feelings, they spoke of fear, nervousness, anxiety, stress and anger, and listed family problems, violence, death, nightmares, poverty, war and the occupation, including the blockade, as the things they liked least in their lives.”

According to the same report, four out of five Gazan children suffered psychological distress and lived with fear, depression, and grief. Now, things have become even worse for these little souls, who have been forced to endure carpet bombing of their homeland and loss of home and belongings—as of November 14, more than 1.5 million people in Gaza were estimated to have been internally displaced—and have suffered the loss of their loved ones.

“I feel like it would be better if I died with my mom. It is better I’d rather not see this suffering and pain that I am witnessing. I mean, everyone I valued and loved is gone!” a girl from Gaza grieved as hot tears trickled down her face, her voice unsteady as she tried not to break down.

Israel has outdone itself in the ferocity and insanity of its recent attack on Gaza, along with other occupied Palestinian territories, including the West Bank. It did not even spare the premature babies gasping for oxygen in the hospitals. Since the siege of al-Shifa hospital, the largest, oldest—built in 1946—and most medically advanced healthcare facility in Gaza, Israel has destroyed the station which provided

oxygen to the incubators. The 39 infants later had to be taken out and shifted to another part of the hospital that still had electricity. Of them, 31 are alive.

The Israeli apathy towards Gaza’s children does not come as a surprise, since its ultra right-wing government—especially Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—very openly calls the Palestinians “children of darkness,” misinterpreting religious scriptures, and has slammed both French President Emmanuel Macron and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for calling on Israel to stop the killing of babies, children, and women in Gaza.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one child is killed in Gaza every 10 minutes, and at least two injured. Since about half of Gaza’s population of about 2.2 million are children, they are easily killed by Israel’s carpet bombing—which does not discriminate between terrorists and civilians—which has become a regular fixture of Gazan children’s lives. Since entire families are being torn apart by Israeli air strikes, many parents have adopted the practice of writing the names of their children on their bodies as markers, so that they can be identified should they be bombed.

Save the Children says that the Gaza War is by far the deadliest conflict for children in recent times, with the daily death toll of children in Gaza being much higher than in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Iraq. According to the international non profit, the number of children killed in Gaza in the ongoing war has crossed the number of children killed in conflict zones every year since 2019.

Perhaps for many of these orphaned, permanently disabled children, death would have been less painful than carrying such immense trauma for the rest of their lives. In the midst of the war, the Ministry of Education in Gaza has been forced to suspend the 2023-24 school year for 625,000 students. But in a land where children are being deprived of their basic rights to life, food, medical care, and security, their loss of education should not come as a surprise. Many of these children have already been displaced or will have been dead by the time the schools reopen.

While US President Joe Biden keeps referring to the 40 beheaded Israeli babies, he has done practically nothing to protect the children of Gaza who are being butchered by Israeli occupation forces every day in the name of “self-defence.”

There is a generation of children growing up in Gaza without family, without love, without limbs, without food, without education, without basic human rights, in unspeakable depravity, scarred by the trauma of war—and all because humanity has failed them, the world has failed them. In Gaza, there are no rights for any child.

The world should not be a silent spectator and passively watch Israel unleash the Grim Reaper on innocent children and wipe out the future of Palestine, of Gaza. Israeli’s allies should now be forced by the other powers that be to stop the genocide in Gaza. Bangladesh, South Africa, Bolivia, Comoros, and Djibouti have referred Israel to the International Criminal Court for a probe into the war crimes Israel is committing in Gaza. While this might not have practical impact in stopping the war on Gaza, if the international community keeps mounting pressure on Israel and its allies, this might at least force the apartheid state to cede to a ceasefire.

This year, as we observe World Children’s Day with the theme “For every child, every right,” we should keep the lost children of Gaza in our thoughts; children who have very little chance of surviving this war, and even if they do, only have a very bleak future to face—a wasteland of lost dreams, of desperation, of grief. With every dying child in Gaza, the world is losing a tiny star that could one day have shone light on it.

The scattered legacies of Bengal’s Sufis

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Amongst the chaos of Dhaka city lie countless Sufi shrines (or mazars)—the tombs of Sufi spiritual leaders who have inhabited the country since the 12th century—places where men and women gather to find a moment of peace in an otherwise unrelenting city.

Sufis have a long history in this region, bringing Bengal into contact with Islamic thought and practice before Bakhtiyar Khalji’s conquest in 1203. In the 12th century, large numbers of Turkish-speaking groups from Central Asia were driven into the Iranian plateau and further to India, fleeing the Mongol advance. These migrant Turks often grouped themselves around Sufi leaders who drew in many disciples and followers as they arrived in Bengal.

Since this time, Sufism has played an important role in Bengal’s syncretic Islamic tradition, and it remains embedded in the social and cultural fabric of Bangladesh, surviving despite the increasing trend towards Islamic orthodoxy in the country.

Though Sufism is thought to exist primarily in rural villages, many earlier Sufi leaders made their way into Dhaka, and their legacies remain in the mazars dotted around the city—particularly in the large followings of many notable pirs who continue to exert significant social and political influence.

The most visible presence of Sufism

Pirs occupy an important role within Bangladeshi society and politics, gaining influence from their wealth, as well as the spiritual power they are accorded. Historically, when establishing themselves politically, rulers actively sought legitimacy from powerful saints. Indeed, in 1342 when Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah established the Ilyas Shah dynasty, he did so with the blessings of a renowned saint of the Chishti line.

Sufism also has its remnants in the countless mazars of the capital, which people pass through all day, praying for an answer to various life problems, or searching for a moment of peace amidst a city that never slows down. Most of the people visiting these mazars do not identify themselves as part of any Sufi tradition, or as *murids* of any specific pir. They simply believe in the power of the saints who lie in these tombs to cure their problems, come to the mazars for a sense of community in the evenings when people gather, or to have some of the food that the mazars provide on a daily basis.

The High Court Mazar, in the vicinity of the country’s Supreme Court, is one such example. Residents of the mazar believe it to be the tomb of Shah Khwaja Sharfuddin Chishti, buried in 1590 CE, who travelled from India. The mazar, with its beautiful tiling, provides a stunning entrance to the renaissance style High Court building, and its spirituality stands in contrast to the more formulaic conduct of law and order as you enter the court premises. A middle-aged man selling tea and biscuits near the entrance to the mazar

from Kurigram told me he comes and prays here when he is in Dhaka, ever since being separated from his parents a few years ago. “While a lot of people come here to eat food, I come here just to pray,” he said. Another woman who was supposedly sent to preach Islam in Dhaka by Shahjalal. In Mirpur, at the tomb of Shah Ali Baghdadi, lively Zikrs and Qawwalis are held on Thursday evenings where men, women, and children all gather to celebrate their devotion. These mazars all uphold the spirit of Sufism. They provide food to those who need it, and are a remnant of Bengal’s religious syncretism—fusing many Islamic and Hindu practices, and welcoming people from all different faiths and backgrounds. The presence of women at these shrines is also notable in contrast to their relative absence in many other public spaces of the city.

Though Islam in Bangladesh has always been a highly syncretic religion, in recent years, many Sufi traditions have come under fire as efforts to impose a more orthodox and fundamentalist version of Islam have been fostered by certain groups in the country. Zaheer



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PHOTO: MARUF AREFIN MIM

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said that he felt the mazar was very different to a mosque as people can come and go at any time. “There aren’t set times for prayer and everyone comes here, Hindus, Muslims and foreigners as well,” he said. This is thought to be the first Sufi mazar in Dhaka city, and it was a centre of activity in the 1970s, most notably for the followers of Nura Pagla, a famous semi-naked Sufi saint. The atmosphere is much more subdued now, but it continues to draw in various people wanting to offer a prayer to Sharfuddin.

Nearby is the Golap Shah Mazar—a small, beautifully decorated shrine, right in the middle of one of Dhaka’s busiest intersections. At noon on a Wednesday, the shrine was relatively quiet, with just a few people scattered around, and only one or two devotees offering their prayers. A 15-year-old boy

spoke of the soft persecution that many Sufis in Bangladesh face, citing an instance where he witnessed some *hujurs* in Sunamganj shutting down singing at a traditional *urs* ceremony (held annually to honour the death anniversary of a saint). He said that sharing his family history is always scary for him, and that he tends not to elaborate on his faith with anyone apart from close friends. Zaheer has ended up in many debates with people who criticise his beliefs and religious practices.

On occasion, this “soft persecution” has had severe impacts. In January 2020, Baul singer Shariat Sarkar was arrested when an Islamic cleric filed a case against him after he’d argued that the Quran did not prohibit the practice of music. Later in the year, two cases were filed against Rita Dewan for “hurting religious sentiments” during a *pala gaan* performance. Both cases were filed under the now suspended Digital Security Act. More chillingly, a number of Sufi leaders and followers were killed in recent years—such as Muhammad Shahidullah in Rajshahi in 2016 and Farhad Hossain Chowdhury in 2017. Both are suspected to have been killed by Islamist groups who consider them heretics.

As Dhaka city continues to expand—motorways, metro stations, and skyscrapers popping up at an astonishing pace—these Sufi shrines persevere as enduring symbols of beauty and stability amidst the whirlwind of modernisation and encroachment of religious fundamentalism. They will forever remain a testament to this region’s vibrant religious traditions and identities.

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