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Kolkata's flag-burning incident must not recur

Such hostile acts will add fuel to the fire

The burning of the Bangladesh national flag and the effigy of the chief adviser to the interim government of Bangladesh outside the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata was a reckless and provocative act. This incident has the potential to inflame tensions between India and Bangladesh, exacerbating already strained relations. Such hostile displays only serve to deepen divisions.

According to Bangladesh's foreign ministry, violent protests erupted with demonstrators breaking through police barricades and reaching the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission's boundaries, creating a sense of insecurity among the staff. This kind of aggression threatens not only bilateral relations but could have far-reaching consequences, spilling over into social unrest and further instability in the region.

What makes this incident even more concerning is the involvement of certain Indian regional political figures who appear to be exploiting anti-Bangladesh sentiment for domestic political gain. The recent inflammatory rhetoric and actions by some politicians risk undermining India's own foreign policy and could have broader implications. India has long been a vocal advocate for the rights of minorities in Bangladesh, which the interim government has time and again committed to uphold.

One particularly dangerous narrative being peddled is the claim that the arrest of former ISKCON member Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmachari is an attack on the Hindu community in Bangladesh. This rhetoric is baseless and irresponsible. The arrest has been misrepresented by sections of the Indian media, which serves to stoke fears and fuel divisions. The tragic death of a lawyer during protests in Chattogram has further been distorted to fit this narrative. Initially, some outlets erroneously claimed that the lawyer, a Muslim, had been targeted because he was representing Chinmoy Das, but this was later proven false. Despite this, false narratives continue to circulate, amplifying tensions.

India and Bangladesh share a complex history, but they also share significant economic and strategic interests. The actions of a few individuals should not be allowed to undermine the broader relationship. It is time for both governments, and particularly the Indian media, to resist the temptation of inflammatory rhetoric and focus on strengthening the ties that bind the two nations. The stakes are far too high to allow such provocative incidents to escalate into something far worse.

We urge the Indian media, in particular, to exercise rigorous journalistic principles when reporting these incidents and to avoid taking them out of context, which may lead to exaggeration and misreporting.

Address the misuse of social media and AI

We must not let lies in cyberspace disrupt peace and unity

The United Nations chief's recent comment about social media and artificial intelligence (AI) amplifying hate speech and spreading disinformation rings true in Bangladesh's present context. Only five months ago, social media networks were used to unite people in bringing down Sheikh Hasina's fascist regime. Unfortunately, the same tool, enhanced with AI-generated content, is now being used to create divisions in society.

After the ouster of Sheikh Hasina's fascist regime, many perceive—60 percent, according to a recent survey by Voice of America—that freedom of speech and expression has improved in Bangladesh. Yet, as the lines between expressing an opinion and stating a fact become blurry and murky on social media platforms, people and organisations are being harassed or threatened with mob justice. More concerning, thanks to social media, the propagation of misinformation and disinformation—as well as taking content out of context and presenting it with ill intention—is quickly spreading across national borders.

It has reached a new level, especially after the fall of Sheikh Hasina. For instance, our neighbouring country's media—given the political ideology they serve—are resorting to social media misinformation to such an extent that their actions are causing a rift in Bangladesh-India relations. More worryingly, it is instilling hatred among many people, threatening social cohesion and unity. Sadly, reiteration of falsehoods, sometimes with the help of AI-generated content on social media, often succeeds in gaining people's trust. In fact, a 2018 study by MIT's Media Lab found that "falsehood diffuses significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth." Moreover, it is humans who reshare false information more than bots that are made for that purpose.

To counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media, the government must develop ways to address the deepfakes of the cyber world. Countering false narratives and controlling the propagation of disinformation by forces outside the nation may require well-thought-out strategies. The country's media, as well as internationally reputed outlets, can play a role in this fight. At the same time, the government must ensure that press freedom in the country is not threatened. Additionally, the government's messaging in this context should be uniform, and its actions must reflect its words.

Additionally, the authorities should focus on improving social media literacy. Enhancing online intelligence capabilities should also be considered. However, any steps, including creating new policies to control and prevent cybercrimes using information as a weapon, should not come at the cost of people's right to privacy and free speech.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Rosa Parks ignites bus boycott



On this day in 1955, in violation of segregation laws in Montgomery, Alabama (USA), Rosa Parks refused to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger and was arrested, sparking a 381-day bus boycott led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

The gathering storm

Post-revolution challenges and the new generation's role in shaping our future



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

If anyone had thought that the post-revolution government or the people, in general, would have an easy ride in conducting the affairs of the state, they were living in a paradise dominated by fools. The more aware among us perhaps anticipated some resistance posed by the supporters of the disgraced autocrat. However, the highly coordinated and well-orchestrated programmes—planned, instigated, and directed from across the border to spoil the gains and thwart the recovery programmes of the interim government—make us wonder.

And the wonder is at the ineptness of the intelligence agencies to anticipate the anti-state elements because anyone who resists the current recovery and reform programmes cannot be categorised as anything but that. We will dwell on this aspect a little later.

All successful revolutions run the risk of a counter-revolution, particularly when there is a lot at stake for a deposed autocrat, their party, and its diehard supporters. The destruction that has been wreaked on every sector, including the very moral edifice of the nation that elevates a country in the community of nations, needs a turbulence-free environment to set right. The longer a post-revolution regime lasts, the more of their wrongdoings come to light—and more of the wrongdoers face trial and punishment. Thus, to have failed to foresee the events now unfolding would suggest either incompetence or dereliction of duty on the part of those responsible for forewarning the administration.

Our problems are essentially twofold. Firstly, the opposition has an external sponsor and beneficiary. They have perhaps an equally high, if not greater, stake in the fugitive prime minister's reinstatement to power. It seems that hostile intelligence agencies are working overtime to create as much turmoil as possible inside Bangladesh to bring down the interim government and ensure that outcome.

For this, the most sensitive issue—the minority issue—has been exploited. Facts have been distorted and exaggerated, and, in most instances, narratives have been manufactured to create communal strife in Bangladesh to restore the disgraced autocrat to power.



Supporters of former ISKCON leader Chinmoy Krishna Das and police clash at court premises in Chattogram on November 26, 2024.

PHOTO: STAR

This looks like a crass, callow, and rustic approach from the mandarins sitting in New Delhi, who seem to be out to atone for their dismal failure, firstly, to anticipate the fate of their protégé in Dhaka and, secondly, to prevent the outcome that eventuated, by any means, fair or foul.

The second problem is that the former autocrat has not only been provided a safe sanctuary across the border but is also being allowed to carry out anti-Bangladesh activities seemingly in collusion with hostile intelligence agencies. Investigations so far have revealed that the anti-minority activities and attacks on the minority community have been instigated and perpetrated by Awami League elements. In fact, they have been behind most of the troubles witnessed in various sectors.

And regarding the above, I have a few submissions.

Firstly, the use of Indian soil to conduct anti-Bangladesh activities by anti-Bangladesh elements. It is not only Hasina but also a large number of her party members who are now ensconced in India and, in fact, are seemingly being supported by Indian authorities. It is time the Bangladesh government looked its counterpart in the eye and demanded that this be stopped

forthwith. We are used to hearing ad nauseam the whining of the Indian authorities about so-called hostile anti-Indian elements, without credible proof, conducting anti-Indian activities from inside Bangladesh. Hasina makes no secret of her activities. She and her fugitive party members are a distinct threat to our security interests, and this issue must be dealt with the alacrity

programmes has remained outside the notice of the international community. In fact, very little, if any, news of the persecution of Muslims in India since 2014 has found space in our electronic or print media. But perhaps I am expecting too much, given a situation where a large section of the fourth estate in Bangladesh, over the last 15 years, had surrendered to the

and seriousness it deserves. Otherwise, I fear we will rue the fact that many of the top leadership managed to leave the country—indeed, some of them were helped to leave.

Secondly, the role of the intelligence agencies. In the past, they had been serving party interests rather than national interests. Vestiges of the deposed party may still exist among their serving members, with loyalty to the erstwhile ruling party. Thus, it may not be beyond the realm of possibility that the timely passage of intelligence is being deliberately disrupted. This must be addressed seriously.

Thirdly, countering ill-motivated distortions of facts by the Indian media. The concerted, coordinated offensive by the Indian media, certainly at the direction of the authorities in Delhi, must be addressed effectively. Here, I feel the role of our media is vital.

Notice the quickness with which a minority matter is turned into an issue by the Indian media and how stories are manufactured with slants given to events occurring in Bangladesh to tarnish our image. I have not seen enough editorials or articles in our leading newspapers countering these spurious and malicious news stories.

The fact that the Modi government has been carrying out anti-Muslim

party in power and, instead of being a watchdog, had become a lapdog of the party (see my article: "Surrender of the fourth estate," *The Daily Star*, February 27, 2019). It is time we put national interests first and helped in our own ways to enhance and preserve national security.

Let me end by asserting that the Indian political leadership and their policy planners are out of sync with the reality prevailing in Bangladesh. The quiescent they set up in Dhaka and her party have all but lost public support. More importantly, a new generation in Bangladesh has come of age and has taken, somewhat by force, the baton that the old guards—who have consistently failed the people—failed to pass on to the new generation in a timely manner. Luckily, this generation is not burdened by the baggage of history and is gifted with greater acuity to see the tree from the woods.

It is my firm belief that this new generation will run the affairs of the state in the very near future. In all likelihood, political power alternation will no longer be considered in binary terms. A third party will emerge—it needs to emerge—to replace the ossified minds that have been running the affairs of the state for so long.

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Widening the domain of domestic abuse



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MUNIRA FIDAI

A big gap in the common descriptions of domestic abuse is the mention of marital rape which is not even considered abusive in public perception. But for many women who endure domestic violence, marital rape is almost an inescapable issue further aggravated by the acute need to keep this particular form of violence, a secret.

Rokshana Begum, a domestic worker by profession, describes her ordeal: "It happened for years and years. Almost until he (her husband) died, a few years ago. He would come home drunk, pick a fight, hit me and then demean me even further by forcing himself on me."

Begum suffered decades of such abuse at the hands of her husband because he told her that she would suffer gravely if she denied her husband his "rights." "I had no clue that I too had rights," she adds.

"Victims of marital rape usually confide to a close confidante; going to law enforcement agencies or seeking

legal redress is seldom a priority," says Sifat-E-Nur Khanam, associate legal specialist at BLAST.

This need for secrecy stems not only from cultural norms that discourage speaking out but also from an almost non-existent support system at home and insufficient awareness of the legal solutions available to them.

Bangladesh's legal framework provides very few avenues for addressing domestic violence and next to no protection for victims of marital rape.

The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010, coming

into place through the Citizen Initiative against Domestic Violence (CIDV) initiated in 2007, for example, emphasises resolving conflicts without disrupting family life. However, Khanam notes that the act's impact has been slow, due to poor implementation and a lack of awareness.

"An eighteen-point guide by the Honourable High Court mentions

critical, but proving non-consensual acts is challenging, particularly for married women," opines Khanam.

The absence of marital rape as a legally recognised crime aggravates these issues. The concept itself is alien to Bangladesh's legal framework, with existing laws such as Section 375 of the Penal Code failing to accept that sexual violence can occur within a marriage unless the wife is under 12 years of age! Many survivors of domestic violence also experience marital rape, yet they have no official alternative—except if the physical coercion results in harm or danger to life, limb, or health, and/or causes developmental impairment.

"Rape Law Reform Coalition, comprising BLAST and other likeminded advocacy groups, are working to address this gap by pushing for the inclusion of marital rape within legal definitions of sexual violence but addressing these systemic issues requires more than legal reforms," says Sifat-E-Nur Khanam.

Besides legal reform, Sifat emphasises altering social perception and awareness of this issue. She notes that societal attitudes must shift if we are to challenge archaic patriarchal norms that continue to suppress women and disregard their right to consent. It is also important that children are taught to respect women as equals. Both men and women must be seen as human beings first, whose consent takes top priority, whether in or out of marriage.

that a victim of rape may approach their nearest police station to file a complaint, and the authorities must consider it, noting all details, no matter which locality the victim belongs to or which area the incident has taken place," she mentions. "Unfortunately, implementation of such an important guide remains questionable."

Women who manage to approach a police station or law enforcement agency can also access mediation mechanisms such as an arbitration known as *salish*. Despite these provisions, the majority of victims remain unaware of their rights.

"In cases of rape, evidence becomes