

The Daily Star

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Hasina’s claims are a distortion of facts

India’s failure to prevent such false narratives won’t help bilateral relations

We strongly oppose the false narrative propagated by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her first public appearance—a virtual address at an event in New York—since fleeing Bangladesh following the July mass uprising. Her accusation that Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus is involved in perpetrating “genocide” clearly demonstrates that she is speaking from a place of vengeance, in total disregard for facts. In reality, it is Hasina who stands accused of being involved in mass murder during the uprising, along with numerous other grievous human rights violations committed during her 15 years of fascist rule, for which there is substantial evidence. In her pursuit of vengeance against Prof Yunus, she has not only vilified him but also tarnished Bangladesh’s image.

For instance, in her virtual address, she falsely claimed that Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians have been persecuted in large numbers in Bangladesh since her government was ousted. This blatant lie, initially spread on social media, is now being amplified in a coordinated effort by certain sections of the Indian media and political class. Echoing the narrative of those who have been systematically demonising Bangladesh recently, Hasina falsely claimed that Chinmoy Krishna Das, the former ISKCON leader, was arrested in response to Hindus protesting their persecution in the country. Ironically, many communal incidents occurred during her own rule which she failed to prevent or acknowledge.

Furthermore, Hasina stated that she had left the country to prevent further bloodshed when protesters were heading towards Ganabhaban. However, as this and other media outlets then reported, until her final moments in office, she made every effort to cling to power through the use of even more force, at the cost of spilling more blood. This was only prevented when the army refused to fire on the citizens.

Given the seriousness of the crimes she is accused of committing, we are disappointed that the Indian government, which gave her shelter, did not do more to prevent her from propagating such false narratives against Bangladesh’s current government that emerged from a popular uprising. Moreover, the fact that her campaign to demonise Bangladesh is increasingly aligning with right-wing Indian media raises questions about whether India truly seeks “stable and constructive relations” with Bangladesh, as the Indian high commissioner recently asserted. This is particularly concerning given the ample evidence—such as leaked recordings of her phone calls—suggesting that Hasina has been trying to instigate and destabilise Bangladesh from New Delhi. In response, the Bangladeshi government—including its chief adviser—requested that its Indian counterpart prevent Hasina from carrying out such disruptive activities.

Yet, ignoring Bangladesh’s request, the Indian government has not taken any substantial steps to dissuade the deposed former prime minister from spewing hateful rhetoric against Bangladesh. By doing so, how is India helping our bilateral relations? India should carefully consider how such decisions will affect its relationship with Bangladesh. We also hope the Indian media, instead of repeating Hasina’s lies, portrays Bangladesh accurately in order to prevent harm to the relations between the two countries.

Save street children from sexual abuse

Existing legal, institutional frameworks should be overhauled

Only the other day, we wrote an editorial expressing our concern about the plight of street children who continue to live in a state of deprivation, humiliation, and abuse. However, one particular issue that is not discussed or studied enough is the sexual abuse these children, especially girls, face. There could be as many as 34 lakh street children living without parental care in Bangladesh, as per a UNICEF study, but even those having parents are equally vulnerable to such abuse due to the lack of legal and institutional safeguards. In Dhaka, where the majority of them live, the situation is particularly concerning.

A correspondent of this daily recently spoke to 15 such children, mostly adolescent girls, whose experiences highlight the urgent need to ensure the safety of street children. Among them is Amina, a 14-year-old girl who spends her days selling flowers. She tells us of the constant fear she faces as she navigates her daily routine: “Sometimes men touch my hands and shoulders when I sell them flowers. Sometimes, they even offer to take me elsewhere.” At night, when Amina seeks refuge in Suhrawardy Udyan, the fear of assault overwhelms her: “Night is a horrible time for me. I always have to be cautious, worrying what if someone does anything bad to me.”

Sadly, Amina is not alone. The UNICEF study says that many street children sleep alone or in groups for safety, and one-third experience violence during sleep. A study by the Ministry of Social Welfare sheds further light on this, stating that 46 percent of female children experience sexual abuse. This abuse takes many forms. Girls who change clothes in public spaces often face harassment from male pedestrians. They also frequently encounter unwanted physical contact and threats of sexual assault at night. Without parental guidance, some children also begin to engage in unsafe sexual activities, often due to early exposure to abuse. Some are exploited by promises of marriage or a better life, sometimes in exchange for as little as Tk 10. Drug addicts, policemen, rickshaw pullers, bus drivers—the list of abusers is long.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative that the authorities take decisive measures to ensure the safety, dignity and wellbeing of children living on streets. While the government has shelters and other services to protect them, the reality is that these are not effectively reaching most children. The lack of a comprehensive legal framework surrounding child protection further exacerbates the problem. We, therefore, must prioritise addressing sexual abuse among street children and overhaul the existing support system to make it truly effective.



FILE VISUAL: FATEMA JAHAN ENA

What is Indian media’s gain in branding us as a Hindu-hating country?



THE THIRD VIEW

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The only conclusion that can be drawn from much of the Indian media’s recent coverage of Bangladesh is that it is a Hindu-hating country. The venom that is being spewed, the language that is being used, the hatred that is being spread, and the demeaning stereotype that is being portrayed about us seem geared towards generating a hatred for Bangladeshis among the Indian people. The long-term impact of this, along with its backlash here, will be very difficult to neutralise.

What is India’s gain from such stigmatisation of its neighbour? Isn’t it harming both our countries? It is harming us because it demonises Bangladesh. It is harming India because it proves once again that India wants to dominate its neighbours and will not allow any of them to choose their own policies. These policies are not inherently against India, per se, but are merely expressions of each nation’s own way of moving forward.

My Nepali journalist friends tell a story of Indian attitude and behaviour that are far from flattering, to say the least. Public perception in Bhutan is not favourable towards India either. The Maldives’ insistence that India’s meagre military presence must end is as clear a message as it can get. Doesn’t the election of the new leadership in Sri Lanka also carry a special message for our big neighbour? Together, do these not form a common view of how India’s neighbours perceive it? Should this not compel India’s policymakers to spend more time understanding their neighbours, rather than dismissing contrarian sentiments as inconsequential, baseless or rooted in jealousy—or, in Bangladesh’s case, ingratitude?

Until August 4, 2024, Bangladesh was considered, according to Indian leaders and media, a very good neighbour, with bilateral relations and our friendship reaching new heights. What changed to reduce Bangladesh from a good neighbour to a most vilified one?

It is obviously due to the regime change that happened in Bangladesh on August 5. However, it was not a conspiratorial change of power, despite what India and its media believe. They are convinced that Pakistan, China or the US orchestrated it, not the people of Bangladesh. The fact that ours was a stronger demonstration of public will than the People Power Revolution that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines many years ago, or the Arab Spring that toppled Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, did not find any receptive heart or mind in our neighbour. Our people did something in weeks that others took months if not years to accomplish. That was the power of July.

India does not understand the power of our students because it overlooks the history of our student movements. Our students defied

Pakistan’s founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, within a year of its founding to establish Bangla as a state language. They toppled Gen Ayub Khan’s “Iron Regime,” turned Bangabandhu’s Six-Point Movement (1966) and the students’ 11-Point Movement (1969) the most powerful movements that even Pakistan’s military could not suppress. Our students were the strongest force behind the Awami League’s victory in the 1970 election and, of course, they along with the peasant-based youth spearheaded the formation of the armed struggle during our Liberation War.

The glorious tradition of student activism continued after Bangladesh’s establishment, with students resisting military dictatorships, autocracy and oppression, and supporting democracy, rights and social equality.

So, what happened during the “36 Days of July” is a continuation of the same tradition and even more. The latest uprising was far more energetic, vigorous and all-encompassing. Nobody believed that the Hasina government could be toppled through mass demonstration. But the students did it, and that is where lies its

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What India is doing is refusing to acknowledge that we have the right to change our government democratically. While the regime change may not have followed the usual electoral route—which the former prime minister herself prevented (ironically, if she had allowed for the holding of free elections and lost, she might have at least remained in the country instead of facing the humiliation of fleeing)—it was an expression of public will that elections typically reflect. It was democracy in full play.

From the outset, India did not accept this. Instead, it embraced conspiracy theories, which continue to dominate its thinking.

We all know Sheikh Hasina fled and her government collapsed on August 5. Prof Muhammad Yunus took over on August 8. The three-

day gap in forming the interim government created a law and order vacuum during which several Awami League leaders, including members of minority communities, were attacked, and their properties vandalised. While this is true, it is also true that many of those targeted and attacked were Awami League activists, and some were also special beneficiaries of the discredited regime (this, however, does

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not justify the attacks on them). So, the incidents should not be painted as fully communal—as it was made out to be. Such attacks would not have occurred had the police force maintained order.

However, the events of the first few days clouded the Indian government’s and media’s perception of the changed situation in Bangladesh. Instead of waiting, observing, and judging the new leadership, the Indian media went on a spree of misjudging, misinterpreting, and misreporting.

In my earlier interviews with respected Indian media leaders, I pleaded that they should see Bangladesh not through the “lens of Hasina but through the lens of democracy.” Unfortunately, my pleas fell on deaf ears, and the tirade continued. Indian media outlets fed one another and reinforced the story that Hasina’s fall was the work of Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing Chhatra Shibir, assisted by Pakistan’s ISI. Students might have started the movement, they argue, but they were soon outmanoeuvred by the conspirators. This was the narrative of the ousted prime minister that the Indian media swallowed hook, line, and sinker.

As the narrative of “Hindu killing” dominates Indian media and threatens bilateral relations, here is what the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, the most well-organised body of the minority communities, reported on September 19, covering the period from August 4-20. This was the period during which the interim administration was just organising itself, and was at its weakest. The council’s report said that a total of 2,010 communal incidents occurred in which nine people were killed, four women were raped, 69 places of worship were attacked, 915 homes were vandalised, 953 business establishments were attacked, 38 cases of physical attack occurred, and 21 properties were occupied.

Prothom Alo, Bangladesh’s most respected Bangla daily, conducted its own investigation—using 64 of its own correspondents in 64 districts and 69 upazilas (sub-districts)—covering the same period (August 5-20) and found evidence of attacks on 1,068 homes and businesses. In addition, there were 22 attacks on places of worship (temples, churches, and prayer places

of the Ahmadiyya sect). This daily’s own correspondents personally visited 546 sites (51 percent) and covered the rest through reliable sources. There were two deaths: one was of a retired school teacher in Bagerhat, Mrinal Kanti Chatterjee, and the other was of Swapan Kumar Biswas of Paikgachha, Khulna.

All attacks on minorities are totally unacceptable. While Bangladesh must work to ensure security for all, does this justify the Indian media’s portrayal of Bangladesh? Are attacks on minorities not a reality in India too? Consider the Godhra train burning incident and the riots that followed, which alone killed 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus—rendering tens of thousands of people homeless. According to conservative figures by India’s National Human Rights Commission, from 2002 to 2024, as many as 31 riots occurred in India, of which 20 were between Hindus and Muslims. Did the Bangladeshi media respond to that the way the Indian media is responding now?

The recent events that led to the desecration of Bangladeshi flag by demonstrators in India, and of Indian flag by some students in our university campuses, the killing of a Muslim lawyer in Chattogram and a Hindu doctor in Dhaka, were triggered by the arrest of a former ISKCON leader. The attack on the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Agartala is condemnable and could and should have been prevented. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s suggestion to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ask for UN peacekeepers to intervene in Bangladesh is an insult that has further worsened the situation.

The chief adviser’s call for national unity and the consensus of all political parties to unite to protect our sovereignty is a clear indication of how seriously we consider the situation. It is also an indication of how things may take a seriously wrong turn.

Irrespective of what they may have been, the incidents—even though they shouldn’t have happened at all in the first place—were made far worse by a belligerent Indian media. What has shocked me is their refusal to fact-check what they are writing, broadcasting or televising—a basic duty of any journalist. In many interviews or talk shows, certain incidents were discussed with loaded questions, where footage was shown of unrelated events to make Bangladesh look communal. Recently, on RT India’s website, footage of an idol of Shiva being broken into pieces was shown, claiming it was from a Hindu temple in Bangladesh. The truth is, it was footage from a ritual being performed at another temple in Sultanpur, Bardhaman, India. We debunked the story on our website, but no action, let alone regret, came from RT India.

The incidents will no doubt subside. The rhetoric will also, perhaps, acquire a more sobering hue. The media, hopefully, will return to its ethical values. However, the attitudinal, psychological, and most importantly emotional impact of the contrived narrative of the Indian media will leave a long and sad impression here. Being power-drunk and click-driven, the Indian media may not think much about it, but the professional diplomats hopefully will.