

Law must recognise rape threats as audible intent



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On September 5, *The Daily Star* published an opinion piece titled "Threatening to gang-rape is not just vile, it's a crime." It recounted the case of a male student of Dhaka University who posted on social media that a female candidate in the student union elections should be "gang-raped." His grotesque threat led to nothing more than a six-month suspension. Such leniency is staggering in a country where, between January and August this year alone, 140 gang rapes were reported, according to Ain o Salish Kendra. The contradiction is glaring: rapists can be sent to the gallows, yet those who publicly fantasise about gang rape walk away with symbolic punishments.

This commentary is, in essence, a spinoff of *The Daily Star* opinion piece, carrying the argument further. A threat of rape or sexual assault is not just vile, it is itself violence, a weapon of intimidation that silences women and excludes them from public life. A man who utters such words exposes his predatory instinct. He should be behind bars, or at the very least forced to wear an ankle monitor, for he has already declared his capacity for violence. Wearing a tracking device may well be one of the most effective deterrents for all future rape and sexual assault threateners. It will also signal to others that there will be no escape from scrutiny once such threats are made.

Threat of sexual assault—from harassment to molestation to even rape—must be treated as a crime too. They are assaults on dignity and security. To dismiss such threats as casual banter is like saying a gun pointed at someone's head is not violence until the trigger is pulled.

Other countries recognise this clearly. In India, after the 2012 Delhi gang rape, the

Act of 1861 and the Sexual Offences Act of 2003. In Saudi Arabia's Sharia-based system, threats of sexual violence can lead to long prison terms. Civilised societies treat threats of sexual violence as crimes in themselves. Although certain provisions of Bangladesh's Penal Code, 1860 and the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025 can be interpreted to classify online rape threats as criminal offence, there is no specific provision that deals with hate

or sexual assault—which can drive victims to suicide, force families to withdraw daughters from schools, and destroy futures—is often treated as a minor mischief.

In a country where political thuggery, campus violence, and systemic impunity dominate, extraordinary deterrence for sexual assault threats is required. Prison terms alone, often reduced or commuted through influence, do little to change behaviour. If

sex offenders. Countries like Poland, South Korea, and Indonesia have legalised chemical castration for convicted child rapists. In the US, several states allow it as a condition of parole. By surgically rendering perpetrators impotent, society sends an unambiguous message: the body of a woman is not a battlefield for political, religious, or personal dominance.

South Asia is plagued by what can only be called a culture of impunity. In Bangladesh, the word "eve-teasing" once masked a widespread epidemic of harassment, stalking, and threats of sexual violence. Girls as young as 12 have taken their own lives after repeated threats of rape or molestation. This is not just harassment; it is the systemic silencing of half the population. Perpetrators are emboldened to continue their criminal behaviour when they know the worst consequence is a brief arrest or, at most, a few years in prison, often followed by a political connection to secure release. The state must respond with punishments that are permanent, public, and proportionate to the terror inflicted.

Justice must mean more than symbolic outrage. Threats of rape and sexual assault should be criminalised as felonies, not treated as misdemeanour. Offenders should be listed in a national registry, their names permanently recorded as threats to society. Victims must receive not only legal protection but also psychological care and, where necessary, relocation to a safe environment.

Every society that tolerates threats of sexual violence is complicit in perpetuating gendered terror. Words can shatter lives, silence voices, and deny women their right to safety and dignity. The fight against rape culture must therefore move beyond condemning the act to eradicating the threats that normalise it. If men can threaten rape or sexual assault without irreversible consequences, these crimes will remain weapons of dominance. To treat such threats lightly is to ignore pathology at its earliest stage. Law must recognise rape threats not as speech, but as an audible intent—punishable and deterred. Only then will women trust that the law is on their side, and only then will men think twice before weaponising such threats to control women. Anything less is surrender.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

country's criminal laws have been reformed. Threatening a woman with rape, even online, can be punishable now by up to seven years in prison under certain provisions of the Criminal (Amendment) Act of 2013. In the US, under certain circumstances, federal law treats a threat of sexual assault as a felony, an offence punishable by imprisonment. In the UK, threatening rape is prosecutable under both the Offences Against the Person

speech against women.

However, Bangladesh acknowledges rape as one of the gravest crimes. In 2020, the parliament amended the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act to introduce death penalty after waves of outrage over rape incidents. Since then, courts have sentenced perpetrators to death by hanging. But here lies the contradiction: while the act of rape may lead to the gallows, the threat of rape

men can terrorise women with impunity, they will continue to use sexual violence as an instrument of control. That is why threats must be met not with stricter punishments that permanently diminish the perpetrators' capacity to act on their words.

One of the strongest deterrents is to ensure that offenders cannot commit the act. Castration—chemical or surgical—has long been debated in Europe and the US for repeat

An Orwellian look at modern Asian upheavals



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On a night lit by the glow of telescreens, George Orwell imagined Winston Smith scribbling in his diary: Big Brother is watching you. That phrase, once dismissed as fiction, now rings uncomfortably close to our daily lives. Smartphones track us, CCTV cameras watch silently, and social media platforms record more than we willingly share. The unsettling part? These are not the tools of a future dictatorship—they are today's habits, normalised in the name of convenience and security. The question lingers: was Orwell simply writing a novel, or was he sketching the manual of a society we are now stumbling into?

Published in 1949, the novel *1984* was built from Orwell's bruises: his time in the Spanish Civil War, his observation of Stalin's Soviet Union, and the shadow of World War II. Surveillance, distortion of language, and the rewriting of history were not abstract ideas for him; they were lived experiences. What makes the book remarkable is not just its dystopian landscape but how it exposes the fragility of truth when power demands obedience. In Oceania, as in many corners of today's world, history is not remembered but edited. Language is not free but restricted, cut

into pieces until even imagination becomes unthinkable.

Orwell's warnings feel sharper in South and Southeast Asia, where democracy often lives on borrowed time. Bangladesh and Nepal's youth-led uprisings, Sri Lanka's collapse under economic mismanagement, and Indonesia's crackdowns on free speech all echo the patterns *1984* mapped out decades ago. If Oceania controlled minds through fear and language, these societies show how modern states still bend information, economics, and even history to tighten their grip.

Take Bangladesh and Nepal. In Bangladesh, what began as a simple protest to dismantle the quota system in public job recruitment turned into a nationwide movement in July-August 2024. In Nepal, the protests of 2025 were not merely angry gatherings; they were a reminder that a digitally charged generation refuses silence. In both countries, young demonstrators toppled a prime minister. Their strength didn't come from grand political parties but from collective frustration: lack of jobs, endless corruption, and governments trying to muzzle online speech. When authorities attempted to

shut down social platforms, it backfired spectacularly. Gen Z organised faster, angrier, and more determined. It is Orwell's logic in motion: the more you tighten control, the more truth slips through cracks.

Sri Lanka tells a different story. The 2022 economic meltdown stripped the island bare: fuel queues snaked across streets, food prices ballooned, and medicines vanished from shelves. Public patience collapsed with the currency. What followed was not a carefully plotted revolution but raw human desperation that ended with the president fleeing his palace. International lenders arrived with bailouts, yet the lesson is brutally simple. When governments hoard power but fail to secure the basic needs of their citizens, no amount of propaganda can protect them. Orwell wrote of regimes that manipulate hunger to tame populations; Sri Lanka's tragedy proves hunger can also topple the powerful.

Indonesia, often praised as one of Asia's strongest democracies, carries its own contradictions. Reports of human rights abuses in Papua, intimidation of journalists, and a creeping culture of self-censorship raise the question: how democratic is a democracy where criticism comes with risk? Here, Orwell's "thought police" may not appear in trench coats, but the effect is similar. Once media voices hesitate, once journalists start editing themselves out of fear, the state doesn't even need to censor directly—it has already won.

These examples may seem distant from the London of Orwell's imagination, yet the underlying thread is the same: control information, and you control people. In *1984*,

"Newspeak" reduced language so thoroughly that rebellion became linguistically impossible. In today's South Southeast Asian region, it is not new words but the flooding of misinformation, algorithm-driven outrage, and deliberate silencing of independent journalism that limit the public's ability to think freely. Orwell warned us that whoever defines words defines reality. Social media platforms, governments, and even corporations now compete for that power.

Still, it would be a mistake to treat *1984* as a prophecy fulfilled in one neat stroke. Every society is messier than fiction allows. Bangladesh and Nepal's youth use the same social media tools for both mobilisation and spreading rumours. Sri Lanka's crisis was rooted in economics as much as politics. Indonesia's democratic backsliding is complicated by regional conflicts and a history of military dominance. Orwell's novel doesn't predict these specifics; it equips us with a language to critique them. The challenge lies in not forcing lazy comparisons but recognising patterns of control that echo across time.

What makes the novel last is not just its politics but its humanity. Readers remember Winston not because he is heroic—he fails—but because he is recognisably ordinary. His brief affair, his scribbled thoughts, his fragile hope—these small details remind us that political oppression is never abstract. It crushes people's most private moments. In South and Southeast Asia today, behind the grand talk of "economic reform" or "digital regulation," it is always the ordinary people who pay the price: the student unable to find work, the family skipping meals, the

journalist too afraid to print what he knows. The human cost is what gives Orwell's warnings their weight.

What, then, is the way forward? The easy answer, "strengthen democracy," is too vague. The harder truth is that democracy demands specific, unglamorous safeguards: independent courts, free press, credible civil society organisations, and education systems that encourage critical thinking. Without any of them, societies slip into the cycles Orwell dissected so clearly.

The media deserves special mention. Once reduced to government mouthpieces or algorithm-driven echo chambers, the press loses its power to hold authority accountable. The new battleground is not only newsrooms but also classrooms. Teaching students how to read critically, to question sources, and to understand how digital platforms manipulate attention may be the only antidote to modern "Newspeak." If Orwell argued that words could be cut to cut thought, then expanding media literacy is our best chance to resist.

The lesson of *1984* is uncomfortable: repression does not begin with violence but with indifference. When citizens shrug at surveillance, when misinformation becomes entertainment, when hunger is tolerated as "temporary hardship," the groundwork is already laid. Asia's recent turmoil—whether in Dhaka, Kathmandu, Colombo or Jakarta—shows what happens when that groundwork hardens into reality. Fiction does not predict the future, but it can warn us. Orwell's warning has been sounding for more than 70 years. The real question is whether we are willing to listen.

ACROSS

- 1 Wilson of "Midnight in Paris"
- 5 44th president
- 10 Peeling gadget
- 12 Deserve
- 13 Ooze forth
- 14 Prelude
- 15 Workout unit
- 16 Sewing aid
- 18 Toward the wake
- 20 "The Simpsons" bartender
- 21 A bunch
- 23 Auditor's org.
- 24 String tie
- 26 Fail to fail
- 28 Scathing review
- 29 Ump's call
- 31 Imitating
- 32 Hospital worker
- 36 Old North Church sight
- 39 Spike of film
- 40 Supply with funding
- 41 Writer Jong
- 43 Point count
- 44 Barber's tool
- 45 Campout sights
- 46 Works leather
- DOWN
- 1 Verdi field
- 2 Becomes fuller
- 3 Blow one's top
- 4 Composer
- 5 Rorem
- 6 Leave off
- 7 Greek goddess of

hunting

- 8 Parallels
- 9 Makes amends
- 11 Criticism
- 17 Busy worker
- 19 Angled pipe
- 22 Alternative to dice
- 24 Tightrope walker's need
- 25 Continually
- 27 Gallery fill
- 28 Least bright
- 30 Vacuum's lack
- 33 "My Fair Lady" lady
- 34 Scout's work
- 35 Approaches
- 37 Civil wrong
- 38 Some sheep
- 42 Mob pariah

TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

M	E	D	A	L	S	I	D	E
A	V	E	N	U	E	G	I	L
D	E	N	I	A	L	U	G	L
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