

Hair, humiliation, and madness: The policing of bodies

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A recent video circulating on social media shows three men holding down a 70-year-old man named Halim Uddin Akand and forcibly cutting his dreadlocks in the name of social service. Halim Uddin claims to have been growing his hair for nearly four decades after visiting the shrines of Sufi saints Hazrat Shah Jalal (RA) and Hazrat Shah Poran (RA). As the deeply troubling video unfolds, the Mymensingh native can be seen crying to the Almighty, "Allah, tui dehis!" ("Bear witness to this, Allah.")

Much has already been written about this incident, critiquing the moral, religious and ideological policing that it reflects. Our interest in this vile act of coercive hair-policing, however, is twofold. On the one hand, we reject this kind of vigilantism against bodies and peoples, irrespective of their faith and value system, in a post-uprising Bangladesh. On the other hand, we want to interpret this particular incident through the historical lens of other forms of hair-policing that tend to target the vulnerable in our society, particularly women. We address the question: how could this particular video be placed within the narratives of hair, its policing and politics? Can women's and men's hair be placed within the same contentious framework of religio-patriarchal dominance?

Hair, one must acknowledge, shapes much of the narratives pertaining to womanhood, widowhood, modesty, sexuality, social ostracism and more within the context of South Asia. Consider the image of a Bangalee Hindu widow in popular culture

and literature, her head forcibly shaved after the passing of her husband, desexualising and dehumanising her for the rest of her life. The widow's hairlessness serves as a constant reminder of a woman's social status being inextricably tied to her hair. Consider also the pressures women in contemporary Bangladesh face—in our cities, villages, institutions, public spaces, and even within private domains—regarding how, and in what precise way, their hair is visible, concealed

Orthodox Jewish women, for example, are required to shave their heads and wear wigs after marriage to deter desirability from other men. Covering and uncovering hair is where societal "certification" is awarded.

Post-9/11, much global attention has been placed on Muslim women's right to cover, as well as the enforcement or removal of their headscarves. Recall the US's call to invade Afghanistan under the pretext of "rescuing women in cover" from the Taliban, as though

to resistance, and from social mobility to power. It is within this framework that we situate the forcible hair-chopping of Halim Uddin Akand.

A devotee of Shah Jalal (RA) and Shah Poran (RA), Halim Uddin's uncut hair testifies to Bengal's intrinsic plurality of faith. His long, uncut hair bears witness to the blending of Sufi traditions, Bengal's spiritual conventions and *tarika*, *fakiri*, and, more simply, an individual's autonomous choice to adorn their body as they decide. The cutting is part of the dangerous trend of attacking the sites of pluralism in the post-uprising Bangladesh, including mazars, akhras, and khankas, rejecting some of the very ideals the movement stood for. This forcible hair-cutting act is not merely about personal appearance but about policing identity, stripping away markers of belonging that do not conform to an exclusionary vision of faith. In doing so, the three men situate themselves within a broader project of erasure, where difference is not tolerated but eliminated.

Halim Uddin's *pagol* (madman) status is also uniquely familiar to us as Bangalee. Historically, women have been labelled *daini* (witches), *rakkhoshi* (monsters), and indeed, *pagli* (madwomen) whenever they did not conform to social norms or could not be contained by hegemonic frameworks. But history also reminds us that in Bengal, *pagol* were torchbearers of courage and resistance. Under Karam Shah Pagol and his son Tipu Shah, the Pagolpanthis of Mymensingh and Sherpur rose to become one of the first organised challenges to colonial power and zamindari oppression. In 1825, Tipu Shah's followers captured Sherpur and established a just administration with lower taxes, creating an independent nation of peasants (Gautam Bhadra, *Iman o Nishan*). It was a visceral jolt for the British administration. By 1833, the rebellion was crushed, and Tipu Shah was sentenced to life imprisonment. Local legend holds that Tipu Shah Pagol will return on a full moon to the banks of the Kangsha River. The eternal life of the *pagol* on the banks of

the Kangsha River does not die.

Since then, the word *pagol* has metamorphosed in the hands of oppressors. Once a title given to the knowledgeable and wise (think of Lalou's *tin pagoler hoilo mela*), it has been turned into a tool to otherise and dehumanise bodies that do not conform to power. Irrespective of gender, once the *pagol* label is attached to someone, it clings to the bodies of the subjugated, questioning their very humanity, as seen in the case of Halim Uddin. His spectacularised hair-chopping thus can be read as an act of patriarchal disciplining, a violent attempt to erase difference, and a continuation of branding the resistant as "mad" to strip them of dignity and legitimacy.

Indeed, a quick Google search reveals multiple incidents of forcible hair cutting and its resulting humiliation in recent months: in June, a woman's head was shaved over dowry demands in Lakshmipur; in July, another woman in Gaibandha was shaved and stripped naked for an alleged extramarital affair. Earlier in March, a 19-year-old young man took his own life after a union parishad member forcibly cut his hair to publicly shame and discipline him. These acts are not isolated; they reflect a broader pattern of using bodily humiliation to enforce social control and punish those who defy hegemonic norms. The psychological and social consequences of such violence can be long-lasting, instilling fear and reinforcing oppressive power structures within communities.

We wonder how long the state will remain apathetic in the face of such brutality. While it is encouraging that two arrests have been made in connection to Halim Uddin's case, we cannot ignore that repeated acts of violence make all of us—women, children, bauls, the poor, and *pagol*—vulnerable. Every cut, every humiliation, is an attack on our shared humanity, and ignoring it only strengthens those who thrive on fear and control. Silence is complicity; courage and collective action are the only antidotes to the cruelty that seeks to divide and dominate us.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

or sexualised. It is no exaggeration to claim that how a *ghomta* is worn, what form of hair covering is being practised, when hair can be let loose, and in whose presence, are questions and concerns that women and girls of this region must negotiate constantly, even daily. Some businesses insist that their staff must cover their hair, some schools encourage it, and the general public freely shames and polices women for their hair (un)covering or (in)visibility practices. Women's hair choices, thus, are incessantly monitored, surveilled, and often enforced. Hair is deeply political, and its regulation is not exclusive to South Asian or Bangalee female lives.

a debilitating war against an entire people could somehow be framed as a feminist mission. Considering the state Afghan women find themselves in, 20 years after the US left, the facile and, frankly, racist nature of that claim could not be more obvious. Curiously, Western feminism's embracing of the headcover as an empowering garment also remains a partial truth to the larger Muslim hair-covering narrative. Of course, just as one cannot be forced to cover their hair, one cannot be forced to remove their hair covering either. So much depends upon female hair—from empowerment to coercion, from religious indoctrination

Of Donald Trump's peace plan and Palestinian subordination



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He had moments of discomfort and embarrassment—pressed into calling the Qatari prime minister by his host to apologise for striking Doha and made to pay lip service to the prospect of a Palestinian state—but Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu had many reasons to be pleased. On September 29, US President Donald Trump advanced a peace proposal that essentially preserves Israeli pre-eminence regarding the fate of Palestinians, though it entails a cessation of hostilities, an affirmation that Gazans would not be expelled (those leaving would have the right to return), and an injunction against Israeli annexation of the strip. But Hamas, militarily and politically, would have to surrender all claims, with the Palestinian Authority shepherded and supervised by foreign powers.

Trump's peace proposal comprises 20 points. They include a "deradicalised terror-free zone," Gaza's redevelopment for the benefit of its people aided by "a panel of experts who have helped birth some of the thriving miracle cities in the Middle East," and

an immediate end to the war on its acceptance by the parties. Israel would withdraw to an agreed upon line in anticipation of a hostage release, during which all military operations would cease pending complete withdrawal. All hostages, dead and alive, would be returned within 72 hours, to be followed by the release of 250 Palestinian life sentence prisoners and Gazans detained since October 7, 2023.

Hamas and militant factions will forfeit any role in governing Gaza, with any offensive infrastructure and equipment destroyed, but any of its members wishing to commit to "peaceful co-existence" and decommissioning of weapons will be granted amnesty, with those wishing to leave given safe passage to receiving countries. Compliance by the militant group will be overseen by "regional partners." Full aid would resume, with the UN and Red Crescent restored to their role as chief distributors.

On the issue of governance, a temporary technocratic "apolitical" Palestinian

committee" of qualified Palestinians and "international experts" would form a temporary transitional body, subject to a "Board of Peace" personally chaired by Trump. Most unfortunately, it is likely to include such figures as Sir Tony Blair, the Middle East's typhoid Mary when it comes to peace. The transitional authority would hold the reins till reforms by the Palestinian Authority (PA) are completed. With immediacy, however, the

In keeping with history, the Trump plan, even if it were to be implemented to the letter, enshrines the essential subordination of Palestinian goals to the dictates of other powers. Palestinian military presence is not only to be curtailed but essentially eliminated altogether.

US would work with Arab and international partners to deploy an "International Stabilisation Force" (ISF) to Gaza. The ISF will be responsible for training Palestinian police forces and provide support in terms of vetting recruits, with assistance from Jordan and Egypt.

The proposal clearly envisages a significant role for the ISF, though it says who will comprise it. Israel will not, under the plan,

occupy or annex Gaza, surrendering what territory it has taken to the ISF. Even if Hamas were to delay or reject the proposal, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) would still hand over occupied territory of "terror-free areas" to the stabilisation force but retain a security perimeter to stem "any resurgent terror threat."

The plan also envisages the establishment of an interfaith dialogue to promote the values of peace between the parties, and a "credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood" if the programmes for Gaza's redevelopment and PA reform take place as planned. A vague US promise to "establish a dialogue" between Israel and the Palestinians regarding peaceful and prosperous co-existence rounds off the points.

There was palpable grumbling from the Israeli camp. Netanyahu undoubtedly harbours ambitions of finishing "the job," and there is little to say the war will not resume once the Israeli hostages are returned. Having previously rejected any governing role of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, he now reluctantly accepts the idea subject to a "radical and genuine overhaul" of the body.

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, one of the right-wing heavies in the Israeli cabinet, is threatening to withdraw his Religious Zionist Party from the coalition. Agreeing with the plan had been "an act of wilful blindness that ignores every lesson of October 7," and it would only "end in tears," he said. Fellow zealot, National Security Minister Itamar

Ben-Gvir, is also likely to be seething.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid is also suspicious of Netanyahu, who tends to say "yes" when visiting Washington, "standing in front of the cameras at the White House, feeling like a breakthrough statesman." On returning to Israel, however, he always seemed to add a qualifying "but," his political base always reminding him "who the boss is."

In keeping with history, the Trump plan, even if it were to be implemented to the letter, enshrines the essential subordination of Palestinian goals to the dictates of other powers. Palestinian military presence is not only to be curtailed but essentially eliminated altogether. Hamas, never consulted regarding the peace terms, is to accept its own effacing. The PA is to accept its own subservience and infantilisation. The Gazans are also to accept an economic and development programme dictated and directed from without. Statehood is to be kept in cold storage till appropriate, controlled conditions for its release are approved—and certainly not by the Palestinians themselves. They, it would seem, remain the considered errand children of international relations, mistrusted and requiring permanent, stern invigilation.

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CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Golf target
5 Casino figure
9 Spring sign
11 Classifies
13 Biathlon need
14 Swindler
15 Poker prize
16 Case in point
18 Surprise hit
20 Chapel seat
21 Borders
22 Bears' lairs
23 Mass of gum
24 Haddock's cousin
25 Getting on
27 Half of a '60s group
29 King of France
30 Mom and pop
32 Tycoon
34 Busy one in Apr.
35 Clear sky
36 One of the Kennedys
38 Coup —
39 Alex Haley book

40 Spot
41 Open space

DOWN
1 Heavenly strings
2 Meadowlark's cousin
3 Got some reps in
4 Twisty fish
5 Film prize
6 Frosh housing
7 Parked at sea
8 Hot
10 Oozed
12 Distorts
17 Marks a ballot
19 Old oath
22 Rotunda topper
24 Line of work
25 Ready for war
26 Chin cover
27 Yoga need
28 Spring break city, for short
30 Bash
31 Dip for a chip
33 Tide type
37 Start of an ode title

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38											
40											

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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