How many more deaths before mob violence is stopped?

Dipu Chandra Das with his wife and young child

The Bhaluka incident is a textbook case of how rumour is weaponised. Criminologists identify three types of offenders in such lynchings: seasonal, habitual, and professional.

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One morning, in the fictional world of Franz Kafka, Josef K. awoke to find himself arrested for a crime he did not commit, by an organisation he did not understand. "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K.," the novel begins; "he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested." On the night of December 18, 2025, in the very real district of Bhaluka in Mymensingh, a garment worker named Dipu Chandra Das was thrust into a similarly irrational and lethal machinery. While Josef K.'s journey ended in a quiet quarry, Dipu's ended on a national highway median, amid a spectacle of fire and fury. His death exposes a haunting reality: when the rule of law vanishes and impunity prevails, the world becomes a stage where innocence is no defence against a predetermined verdict.

CASTE, CLASS, AND THE MAKING OF A TARGET

Throughout *The Trial*, K. is never informed of his specific crime. The horror of Dipu Das's death began with an identical void of evidence. A mob accused him of making derogatory remarks about Islam on Facebook, but the claim quickly collapsed under scrutiny. The Company Commander of RAB-14 in Mymensingh later confirmed that "no evidence was found" on the deceased's social media. Furthermore, other workers and local people could not point to any specific activity that justified the mob's "righteous" fury. The "crime" was a phantom — a rumour that metamorphosed into a death sentence before a single fact could be verified.

But beneath the surface of religious fervour lay a more calculated motive. Dipu was a member of the Rabidas community, a Dalit group traditionally engaged in leatherwork and historically associated with the so-called 'Chamar' caste. In Bangladesh, the Rabidas face crushing social stigma. According to Shipon Kumar Rabidas, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), the killing was driven by a mix of workplace rivalry and entrenched caste bias.

"Our fact-finding suggests that both professional jealousy and deep-seated caste prejudice played a role," he said. "Dipu was degree-passed and had been nominated for a supervisor position at the factory. This reportedly triggered resentment among three co-workers who had allegedly paid bribes for the same post and could not tolerate a person from a so-called 'lower' caste rising to such a position."

Dipu Chandra Das

Unable to compete on merit, they weaponised the most volatile tool available in the new Bangladesh: an accusation of blasphemy. The factory, rather than acting as a guardian, "forcibly pushed out" Dipu to appease the gathering crowd. It was an act of institutional betrayal that mirrored Kafka's *Before the Law* — closing the door of safety on a man whose life depended on it.

THE SPECTACLE OF VIOLENCE AND DISSECTING THE MOB

What remains most baffling is how the murder morphed into a public performance — filmed, shared on social media, and reduced to spectacle. Dipu was stripped, beaten, hung from a tree, and set on fire. Criminologists point to this as a breakdown of social order. Md Rezaul Karim Shohag, an Assistant Professor of Criminology at Dhaka University, notes that this phenomenon is fuelled by a failure of deterrence.

He draws on the 'Broken Windows Theory' to explain that visible signs of disorder and unpunished minor crimes lead to more serious offences. "When people see that crimes are committed without legal consequences, they feel empowered to act on personal grievances or take advantage of the chaos." In Bangladesh, "likely offenders" are often waiting for an opportunity, and the current absence of legal guardianship — that is, effective law enforcement — allows them to act on their targets, according to him.

The Bhaluka incident is a textbook case of how rumour is weaponised. Criminologists identify three types of offenders in such lynchings: seasonal, habitual, and professional. In Dipu's case, "professional" offenders likely orchestrated the rumour to settle a workplace grudge, while "habitual" and "seasonal" offenders joined the fray, shielded by the anonymity of the crowd.

WHO BEARS RESPONSIBILITY — AND WHAT MUST CHANGE

Who should bear responsibility for Dipu Das's killing? The men who took part in the lynching? The factory authorities who pushed him out to face the mob? Or a state whose indifference and delayed responses have allowed mob violence to flourish?

Each lynching is followed by a familiar promise from the government: that it will "take responsibility for the family." The implication is unsettling. Protection appears to arrive only after death. If the state acknowledges its duty only after a citizen is killed, what does that say about the rule of law? What does it reveal about a system that repeatedly fails to intervene, deter, or deliver justice?

Despite a string of mob attacks across the country this year, accountability remains elusive. Arrests are announced, inquiries promised, but convictions are rare and deterrence weaker still. Who are these people being arrested? How many are actually prosecuted? And have we seen even a single instance of exemplary punishment that might signal the true cost of mob violence?

Breaking this cycle requires more than ritual condemnation. "Law enforcement must intervene early and decisively, ensuring that accusations — however inflammatory — are handled strictly through legal channels," said Md Rezaul Karim Shohag. "At the same time, political actors must abandon selective outrage and close ranks across ideological lines to reject mob violence unequivocally." Without institutional unity and credible punishment, awareness campaigns alone will achieve little.

The murder of Dipu Das follows a blood-stained trail of names we are already beginning to forget: Tofazzal, Ruplal Rabidas, or the man in Bhola whose eyes were gouged out and thumb severed on mere suspicion of theft. Each time, the shock fades. Each time, impunity survives.

If the "new Bangladesh" is to be more than a rhetorical reset, it must confront situations in which mobs replace courts and rumours substitute for evidence. Bob Dylan once asked, "How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?" In Bangladesh, the answer is not blowing in the wind — it is written in case files that go nowhere, trials that never begin, and a silence screaming louder at our collective conscience with every life erased.

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CHAR HAATS

The unequal economics of the chars

S DILIP ROY

In the middle of the Brahmaputra River, far from paved roads and permanent markets, lies the remote char of Daikhawa under Begumganj Union in Ulipur upazila of Kurigram. Life here is shaped by sand, silt, and uncertainty. For 65-year-old Javed Ali, a farmer, each year begins with a question: how much land will the river leave behind?

On the shifting sands of the char, Javed grows paddy, maize, jute, kaun (foxtail millet), wheat, chhena (proso millet), lentils, and whatever else the land allows. Some years, erosion takes away his fields; in others, fresh silt creates new plots. Around 70 families live on Daikhawa char, all dependent on agriculture. Crop cultivation and livestock rearing are their only means of survival.

Growing food on the char is arduous, but selling it is often harder.

There is no permanent market nearby. When harvest time comes, farmers load sacks of grain onto boats and travel to makeshift markets that spring up along the riverbanks — the char haats. These markets operate only for a few hours each day and shift location as riverbanks erode or emerge. Here, farmers sell their produce at prices lower than those in mainland markets, while buying essentials at higher rates.

"We suffer more trying to sell our produce than we do growing it," Javed Ali said. "We bring our harvest by boat to the char market, only to sell it at low prices. Due to the lack of transport, we can't go to markets on the mainland. And we have to buy essentials from char markets at higher prices."

According to him, farmers sell their crops at 8–10 percent less than mainland prices and buy goods at 8–10 percent more. "That loss stays with us every season," he said.

For char residents, this unequal exchange is not new. Azgor Ali Mondol, 75, another farmer from Daikhawa, said char markets have existed for generations. "These markets are temporary. Depending on the riverbank's condition, they pop up on different chars at different times. Traders from the mainland bring goods to sell and also buy products from us. We come here by boat."

"Selling at low prices and buying at high prices has become our norm," he added quietly. "We've accepted it. This is our fate."

The scale of this system is vast. According to the Kurigram Char Development Committee, more than 650 chars lie along the Brahmaputra, Teesta, and Dudhkumar rivers across Kurigram, Gaibandha, Lalmonirhat, and Rangpur. Kurigram alone has about 450 chars on the Brahmaputra. Despite their remoteness, these chars are served by just 18–20 char markets.Every day, thousands of farmers depend on these haats.

At the Jorgachh char market on the Brahmaputra in Chilmari upazila, activity begins before sunrise. By noon, the market disappears as quickly as it forms. Nadim Mondol, 55, a farmer from Montola char, arrives early with his produce.

"Mainland markets open after noon, but char markets start at sunrise and end by noon," he said. "We prepare early in the morning, sell our goods, buy what we need, and return home by boat."

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Traders and farmers conduct business at Jorgachh Char Haat, a temporary market held on the Brahmaputra riverbed in the Char Jorgachh area of Kurigram's Chilmari upazila.

Each char market typically sees 1,000–1,200 farmers bringing their produce. Around 150–200 traders attend. Despite its temporary nature, a single market can see transactions worth more than Tk 1 crore in a few hours.

Traders argue that the price difference reflects logistics rather than exploitation. Shamsul Alam, a trader at the Jorgachh market, said produce is bought cheaper and sold dearer because of transport costs.

"It's not discrimination," he said. "Horse-drawn carts are the only means of transporting goods in the chars. These markets are 5–7 kilometres from the mainland. The cost of transporting goods by horse-drawn cart makes prices higher. That's why farmers get less for their crops and pay more for essentials."

According to him, transporting one maund of goods by horse-drawn cart costs Tk 120–150. "I've been buying produce from char markets for 39 years," he said.

Shahed Ali, a seller of agricultural inputs, echoed this view. "We bring fertilisers, seeds, pesticides, and diesel from the mainland using horse-drawn carts. If anything remains unsold, we take it back the same way. That's why we sell at higher prices than in mainland markets. The extra charge is only for transportation."

The carts themselves are part of a fragile economy. Majidul Islam, a horse-drawn cart driver, earns Tk 1,800–2,000 a day transporting goods. Half of that income goes to feeding his horse. "I've been driving a cart for 20 years," he said.

Each char market has 50–60 such carts. Each can carry 10–12 maunds of goods. No alternative transport exists on the sandy terrain. Moving just one kilometre can take 20–25 minutes, with the driver walking beside the horse under the sun.

For development experts, char haats are both a lifeline and a symbol of inequality. Professor Shafiqul Islam Bebu, convener of the Kurigram Char Development Committee, said char residents are trapped in a cycle of disadvantage.

"They live with the constant struggle of selling at low rates and buying at high rates, along with many other inequalities," he said. "Many government and NGO projects have been implemented, but there has been no real change. Without a separate ministry for char development, their welfare is not possible."

He believes a dedicated 'Char Ministry' could help establish permanent markets, improve transport, and ensure fair prices. "Char residents are also protesting for it," he said.

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Horse-drawn carts transport goods across the sandy riverbed to and from Jorgachh Char Haat on the Brahmaputra, the only means of moving produce and essentials between the chars and the mainland. PHOTO: S DILIP ROY