

# Fallout from Narayanganj Hope and Despair

## STRANGER THAN FICTION



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**N**OTHING could be more hackneyed than assuming that by now what happened at Narayanganj on May 13 – the day MP Salim Osman publicly assaulted and humiliated

Headmaster Shyamal Kanti Bhakta – is all but forgotten. As indicated in my last posting to this daily (May 21, “MP plays judge-jury-prosecutor!”), the lawmaker took the law into his own hands to punish the headmaster on trumped up charges of committing blasphemy against Islam. I believe the fallout from this shockingly disgraceful act has just started showing up on the horizon. The episode highlights the prevalent state of Machiavellian opportunism in Bangladesh, as well as sheds light on the course of politics here in the coming years, which I believe will augur some hope for a positive change amidst the prevailing state of despair.

Professor Ahrar Ahmad, a Bangladeshi-American political scientist, has aptly assessed the Salim Osman episode as an example of how power-drunk politicians humiliate the entire nation of Bangladesh. His frustration, expressed in a message to a group, with the event, may be taken as a sample of the opinion of many Bangladeshi intellectuals who are aghast at the cruelty and disrespect for teachers, which may be considered to be another fall-out of the Narayanganj episode:

*“The reason this incident is so offensive is not merely that a boorish and arrogant man humiliated an older school headmaster. He insulted not a person but a profession, a tradition, a time-honoured social institution, he also insulted the nation itself, everything we had fought for, sacrificed for, and hoped to achieve when we won our independence. His argument that he had to humiliate the teacher order to rescue him from public wrath, and like the one General Westmoreland made about some of his decisions in Vietnam: that he had to destroy the village in order to save it, that distressed me more than the thuggish behaviour of the MP was the throng, which gathered to support, and perhaps enjoy,*

*this spectacle.*

I think the fallout from Narayanganj has short- and long-term, positive and negative consequences. Controversial Islamist outfits like the Hefazat-e-Islam, and Tahaffuz-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat, and groups of Muslim traders, youths, students and ordinary people have been glorifying Salim Osman as a defender of Islam, and asking for the execution of the headmaster for “blasphemy against Islam”. Days after the public humiliation of the teacher, thousands of rabid Salim Osman supporters, along with members of anti-democratic Hefazat and the Khatm-e-Nabuwat, organised a mammoth rally at Narayanganj, in solidarity with the MP, the newly emerging “defender of Islam”. The rally was all about taking a vow to defend Islam from Hindus, atheists and “enemies of Islam”.

Interestingly, the Al-Madina Shilpi Gosthi uploaded a song on YouTube in

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praise of Salim Osman, glorifying him as a champion and defender of Islam. Ominously, as appears in its webpage, this cultural group is an offshoot of some clandestine Islamist extremist group, which circulates the writings of Osama bin Laden's mentor Imam Abdullah Azzam, and among others, those by Maulana Maududi. This group also admires Hefazat-e-Islam and Delwar Hossain Sayeedi. It also compares Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with Feraun (Pharaoh).

For almost a week following the public humiliation of the teacher, there was countrywide protest against Salim Osman and his henchmen. The protest was peaceful and mostly symbolic. Young men and women, holding their ears with their hands, formed human chains in public places, expressing symbolic solidarity with the victim, and their contempt for Osman and his men. The protest went viral in the social media.

Another unintended fallout from the Narayanganj episode is the online circulation of a recently leaked out telephone conversation between the MP and a journalist. The MP used unprintable swear words, 87 times in a telephone conversation that lasted less than 20 minutes. Thanks to these expletives, he has presumably lost the image as a “Champion of Islam”, among his followers, and neutral observers in Bangladesh. The leaked out conversation also reveals his manipulative, and corrupt ways of making business and political deals, least expected of good Muslims and politicians.

Meanwhile, several journalists, human rights groups, members of the civil society, and a handful of ruling party leaders have condemned the lawmaker for violating the law of the land, and have demanded his arrest and expulsion from the Parliament.

He has, however, remained defiant. Again, local youth and student leaders affiliated with the ruling party at Narayanganj believe Salim Osman to be innocent, simply a victim of propaganda. Interestingly, the High Court has given directives to police to take action against the MP by Wednesday, May 25.

In view of the High Court directives, even if the police take the lawmaker into custody, and/or he loses his seat in the Parliament, this won't be the end of the story. What the MP did to the headmaster definitely crossed the limit of what people in power do to ordinary people – servants, day labourers, rickshaw-pullers, peons, and drivers – to “discipline” them in public, albeit with total impunity and acceptance of the society at large. Making a teacher squat by holding his ears in public was unprecedented. Hence the protest!

Had Shyamal Kanti Bhakta been a sweeper or peon, nobody would have ever

made a fuss about it. In the recent past, one Bangladeshi cabinet minister publicly slapped a petty railway employer at the latter's workplace for dereliction of duty; and a police officer publicly pulled a rickshaw-puller's ear – for violating a certain traffic rule – in presence of the same minister, on a public thoroughfare. Recently, yet another state minister publicly kicked a police constable in broad daylight for some unspecified reason. They committed the crimes with total impunity, and without any embarrassment, at all.

Generally, ordinary citizens are unaware about the law of their land, having a vague idea about the concept of the rule of law, and accountability of each and every citizen, irrespective of one's position, wealth, and power. Again, the same people understand what's right and ethical, and what's wrong and unethical. They never give any blank cheques to the ruling elites. People often feign compliance, and hide their contempt for their rulers out of fear or expediency. Good rulers must feel the pulse of the people – dissent is, after all, not so invisible! And throughout history, dissents led to revolts, anarchy, and revolutions.

In view of the protests against the excesses of the MP, it seems that people have come to the point to yell “Enough is enough!” Salim Osman might have put the last straw on the camel's back. His using of cheap, religious and communal sentiments of the people is absurdly wild and dangerous. It could wreak havoc on Narayanganj, and eventually on the whole country. It could backfire as well, to the advantage of Islamist outfits, who are gradually spreading their tentacles in Bangladesh. As I have mentioned above, the Al-Madina Shilpi Gosthi's glorification of Salim Osman as a “defender of Islam” is ominous. In sum, the Narayanganj episode has spelt out one thing, i.e. there is a growing surge of fanaticism, if not extremism, in Bangladesh. Islamisation in the country has already infected large sections of Muslims, who have become far more intolerant than before.

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