



Why is Assam burning? (With the thanks to The News/Daily Jang London)

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The writer is a Gulf-based commentator.

Most editors are failed writers, argued T S Eliot. By the same logic, television hosts must be failed politicians and activists, I guess. Every time I watch folks like Bill O'Reilly of Fox News and Arnab Goswami of Times Now, I am reminded of the Spanish Inquisition.

While O'Reilly has spawned around himself an alternative universe of his own where Islam is out to capture the West and America and the shadow of Islamist terror is lurking in every nook and corner, our own answer to Murdoch's hatchet man likes to think he's holding his own court every night where he has to tackle the formidable challenges facing the great democracy with his profound wisdom and vision and come up with instant solutions.

With his full court in attendance and the whole nation dutifully watching and listening to him, Arnab is the judge, jury and executioner as he rails and rails against the usual suspects. It's an endless treat to watch the Times Now host as he addresses the nation from his pulpit with the choir earnestly nodding in agreement, and angrily demands answers from the politicians – usually the prime minister himself, no less.

Forever outraged, our hero truly thinks he is God's gift to mankind and has been sent down to watch over the national interests. And everyone is accountable to Arnab Goswami. While he finds something or the other to be outraged about every night, nothing gets him going like the never-ending shenanigans of our Western neighbours who are apparently forever plotting against Mother India. If it's not Pakistan, then it's Indian Muslims or "international Islamist terrorists," who deserve his outrage. In any case, as far as he is concerned they are all one and the same!

The latest to provide grist to the Times Now mill is the unfolding mayhem in Assam, the Indian state bordering Bangladesh. Scores have been killed in attacks largely targeting Muslims and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes. While the state government blames both sides-Bodo tribesmen and Bengali-speaking Muslims – for the violence, the majority of the victims are once again Muslims.

Entire villages have been burnt down while the state administration, as is our tradition, remains curiously clueless and indifferent. Delhi insists Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi is "monitoring the situation" and

doing everything possible to restore peace. This is little comfort to the community, though, which increasingly lives in fear, worrying the worst may be yet to come. Gogoi is yet to visit the affected areas. Not even a flying, whirlwind tour for the cloistered satrap.

There are reports of totally deserted villages and total absence of security forces in the troubled areas. While police are patrolling urban areas, it's free-for-all for marauding mobs in interiors.

Assam has a long history of recurring violence targeting minorities. However, what remains forever seared in public memory is the 1983 Nellie massacre when Indira Gandhi ruled from Delhi with her famous iron fist. The pogrom, carried out with crude weapons in a matter of a few hours, left 1,819 people dead. Independent sources suggest the toll was as high as 5,000. The killers didn't even spare young babies.

As usual, Muslims were caught in the deadly games of the Congress and assorted separatist groups. Our Hindutva benefactors added fuel to the fire by raising the spectre of invasion by Bangladeshi Muslims. The same drama is being re-enacted today with consequences that could be even deadlier. Yet unlike in the past, this conflict isn't communal or religious in nature. It's an economic struggle for the land and dwindling natural resources.

In the end, it's a humanitarian tragedy, and which is how it should be viewed. People hadn't even recovered from the havoc wreaked by one of the worst floods in history when they were driven from their homes by people with whom they have lived for decades.

Even Arnab Goswami opening the discussion on Assam began by arguing that no one should "communalise" the issue. Yet, this is precisely what he and his guests ended up doing. Instead of showing some sympathy for the victims and what they have just been through, all Muslims are there condemned as "Bangladeshi infiltrators." Indeed, the nation is warned of "thousands of international Islamist fundamentalist terrorists with heavy weapons invading from across the border." Not surprisingly, there was no one to present the other side of the story except for a state minister who kept mumbling, "I don't disagree with you."

In fact, listening to the finger-wagging television pundits you would think the entire Northeast has been taken over by Bangladeshi infiltrators and Pakistani terrorists and Delhi and thousands of its security forces and intelligence agencies haven't the faintest idea.

Extreme as it is, Times Now – from the Times of India stable – is hardly an exception. There are many out there who routinely tap into this reservoir of hatred and our deep-seated fear of the Other.

Is this how responsible media should function? What's the difference between this scaremongering and the Nazi demonisation of Jews? As journalism students and rookies, we were told ad nauseam by our teachers and editors that the media's job is to inform, educate and act as a watchdog of society. A journalist's job is to speak the truth and report facts as truthfully as possible and let people draw their own conclusions. The media's job is to stand up for the weak, not join the witch hunt.

Many from my tribe routinely quote C P Scott, the legendary editor of The Guardian, that comment is free but facts are sacred. How many of us really believe in it, though? How many of us pause and ponder before passing off blatant lies, innuendos and our prejudices as facts, endangering lives and putting an entire community in the dock?

If I had been one of those watching that Times Now “debate,” I would have probably rushed to join the bloodthirsty mob rampaging across Assam to teach a lesson to the “international Islamist terrorists,” as Arnab calls those fear-stricken, bruised and battered people running for their lives with their humble belongings.

But all this is in a day’s work for television pundits and journalists. Who gives a damn who killed whom and what havoc your words wreak in an already inflamed land, as long as you have your TRPs up and your audiences suitably agitated. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? So what if Assam has always had a large Muslim population, as much as 30 percent, and most of those being terrorised as “outsiders” have been there for ages, since long before the Partition?

Of course, given the porous and indistinct nature of the India-Bangladesh border, it’s possible some Bangladeshis might have now and then crossed over to this side. But as Congress leader Digvijay Singh points out, there has been a similar movement of migrants from the Indian side as well. With the Bangladeshi economy doing well in recent years, people have been moving to work in Bangladesh. Besides, weren’t we all part of one country not long ago?

The BJP has a point when it claims all this is a result of the Congress’s vote bank politics. Indeed, successive Congress governments have used Assamese Muslims as little more than a vote bank without recognising their rights.

If it were serious about the well-being of Muslims as well as other communities, it would have taken steps to cool down this simmering volcano that erupts from time to time. There’s no peace where there’s no justice. Muslims, or for that matter any other community, need no special treatment. They just need what’s their due. Recognise everyone’s rights and give their due. That’s the only way to lasting peace in Assam.

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