

Where Poorest of Poor Live, Criminals Are Source of Both Crime and Punishment

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HAKA, Bangladesh -- "Handcuff" Babul got his bloody comeuppance a few weeks back, a rare occasion for common joy in the teeming and miserable Dhaka slum known as the B.N.P. Bustee.

Usually, when a man gets a good part of his arms chopped off with a machete, there is a wince in the telling of it and a proper show of pity. But for such a young man, barely 25, Handcuff Babul had acquired a contemptibility far beyond his years.

Extortion was his racket, say dozens of people in the slum. And he plied this trade with hell-intended threats and homemade bombs. He was detested by the poor and poorer alike, a man who put the squeeze on rickshaw drivers and fish peddlers and even beggars.

"He would enter your house and demand 5,000 taka," said a man still too afraid to give his name, referring to a sum of about \$100. "We would say, 'But we are poor. Where are we to get this much money?' And he would answer, 'This is your question to answer and not mine.'"

The police were quite familiar with Handcuff Babul. In fact, he got his nickname while under arrest, managing to escape with his manacles still on, running through the narrow maze of paths that separate so many hundreds of crammed-together shacks.

This is not to suggest, however, that the police tried hard to curb Mr. Babul's menacing behavior. Actually, little in the way of law enforcement goes on in the many slums of Bangladesh's capital, dismal collect basins of want occupied by three million people.

"Bustee" means slum in the Bengali language, and B.N.P. stands for the Bangladesh National Party. The squatter colony, where 40,000 people live, got its name because of a big sign for the party that once stood atop a nearby building.

In this notoriously impoverished country, politics is said to run on "money and muscle," both of them the required tools of an infant democracy where politicians find it easier to express themselves with street violence than parliamentary debate.

Essential to the "muscle" component are men known as mastans. These mobsters -- often politically well-connected -- collect "rent" from people who squat on government land. Mr. Babul was not a mastan, but he could not have operated without one's blessing.

"We have had to wait years for someone to rid us of Handcuff Babul," said another slum dweller who gave the name Muhammad and considered it best to leave it at that. He allowed himself a moment to ponder the image of the villain disassembled. He snickered and said, "We call him Handless Babul now."

Dhaka's Orthopedic Hospital is but a few hundred yards from the bustee. There, Mr. Babul was found lying in an airless hospital ward. Though he had the forlorn look of a man undone by a recent string of misjudgments, he otherwise seemed healthy enough except for the bandages on his stumps. A striped red blanket covered his legs.

"These are all lies," he said of the bad things for which he is routinely accused. Mr. Babul then launched into a windy and sometimes convoluted self-defense as his wife, mother and aunts -- all loyally at his bedside -- nodded agreeably.

In this account, Mr. Babul portrayed himself as a newly hired lookout for drug peddlers who infest the bustee, selling small amounts of heroin and a popular brand of narcotized cough syrup. Feeling underpaid, he one day quit this disagreeable job, a decision that upset the slum's big boss, Haji Noor Muhammad and his henchmen, Mintoo and Shantoo.

"Mintoo took a gun and held it to my chest," Mr. Babul said ruefully as his mother wept. "All of a sudden, I was pinned to the ground and tied up like a sacrificial cow ready for slaughter. Mintoo hacked off my right arm. And he told Shantoo to cut off the left."

Like many a good storyteller, Mr. Babul saved a rich twist of irony for the end, kicking off the blanket and revealing that he was shackled to the metal supports of the bed. "Not only did they chop off my arms, they filed a case against me," he said.

The police station was only a short drive away, where the deputy officer in charge, Syed Mohsinul Haque, sat at an old battered desk sipping tea. The building itself was little more than one large room. Mountains of moldy old files were stacked in a disheveled manner against the walls, making the place look like the dump site for a paper drive.

"No, Handcuff Babul was not in the drug trade," Officer Haque said firmly. "He was a terrorist, and he extorted money from drug peddlers just as he did from everyone else. There was a very important man backing him up, but we do not know who it is."

The deputy seemed nervous at being questioned and was timid with his answers. He did confirm that a case had been recorded against Mr. Babul, but he was at loss to say where the case file might be. He ordered five of his men to forgo their tea and search. They failed.

It seemed that little more information would be forthcoming, but then the front door opened and the more confident officer in charge, Abdur Rashid, walked in, striding purposefully in a crisp blue uniform. He had a modest office of his own.

"Babul is a terrorist," Officer Rashid agreed. "He had his own gang, and they had the support of the mastan who controls the bustee, Haji Noor Muhammad. But there was a big disagreement, and Noor Muhammad decided Babul must be reined in. I think Noor Muhammad and his son and son-in-law were involved in the hand-chopping."

A fair presumption was that Mr. Muhammad would now be hard to locate. But Officer Rashid said no, this was not so. He pulled out a small address book and found the mastan's phone number. He cooperatively made an introductory call. "Yes, come to my house," the mastan said.

At age 58, Mr. Muhammad appeared a gray-haired, grandfatherly figure. He was dressed in a long linen shirt and a traditional skirt, a lungi, wrapped around his waist. His short white beard hung like fringe from his chin. His home was a palace compared with the dwellings of tin and bamboo in the slum, but it was nothing by a rich man's standards.

He seated himself cross-legged on a bed and pointed proudly to photos on the wall that showed him with important politicians from the governing Awami League. "I am the senior vice president for Ward No. 41," he said. "I organize the voters for the party. When they need a crowd, I can produce a crowd."

The mention of Handcuff Babul made him chuckle. People in the bustee had gotten fed up with that terrorist, he said, "and I suppose that if a man commits crimes using his hands, then removal of those hands is a way to keep him from this business."

But the chuckling did not last long. Mr. Muhammad can be rather elastic in answering questions. One minute, he knows nothing. The next minute, he knows all. Finally, he explained that the entire Babul matter was causing him grief. His son Mintoo had been mentioned as a suspect in the amputations and now had to hide out until things blew over.

"This has all been caused by the greed of Handcuff Babul," he said somberly, his voice falling into a mutter. "Someone had set up a new slum and began collecting rents. Babul demanded a percentage. And he wanted a share from the drug selling, too."

Greed is a bad thing, Mr. Muhammad announced piously. The slums of Dhaka have a never-ending supply of poor people. There is no need to fight over the territory. And such greed was a wickedness that needed to be punished, he said, then pausing for words that might sum up his many thoughts. "Handcuff Babul has lost his hands," he said sagely, stroking the white hair beneath his chin. "About this, you will not hear anyone in the bustee complaining."