

Banshkhali: A burning shame for the nation

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

FROM Banshkhali to Pabna to Jhalakathi -- the whole region appears to be a tinder box of crime, namely killing, burning, arson and violence. Unbelievably and most horribly, at Banshkhali 11 persons, seven of them women and four of them children, in the family of Tejendra Lal Shil were burnt to death on the night of November 17 with, it is believed, incendiary materials.

It is hardly believable that the gangsters of Banshkhali came with the motive of committing dacoity in a not so affluent house. In the ground floor of the two storied mud house of Tejendra Lal Shil, the marauders did not break open the steel almirah that might have contained the valuables. The burning to death of Tejendra Lal Shil's family in a rural outback, 30 km away from Chittagong was an act of such horror, such barbarism, that there is almost no Bangladeshi who does not feel personally shamed. To lock a family inside a house and burn them to death is barbaric.

A stunned nation reeled under the sheer audacity of the attack and ferocity of the revenge killing or hatred, presumably the handiwork of some disgruntled and deviant groups operating without resistance.

Let us not delude ourselves by thinking that the attack either in Banshkhali, Jhalakathi or Pabna was some isolated incident. It demonstrated much more forcefully that the country has been a "soft target" for criminals and the law enforcement agencies are hardly capable of challenging their might. The Muhuri murder in Chittagong, the raping and killing of teenage girls at Bagerhat and Dinajpur and, in recent times, two cases of burning in Jhalakathi and Pabna are grim reminders of our softness and the shoddiness of police investigation.

In a pathetic bid to be liberal and apathetic to all such cases of violence in the country, the political class has been gently nudged along the path of appeasement. Several weeks after the atrocity, only a local sub-inspector has been suspended for neglect of duty. There is no point pinning the entire blame on the authorities or the police. As for the police, apart from normal problems like corruption and

As the cycle of violence and killing continues in Chittagong and some other targeted regions in the country, the reason put forward for the Banshkhali massacre -- something related to dacoity -- is far from convincing... People want to know for certain the reason that triggered the massacre either at Banshkhali or Jhalakathi or Pabna.

overwork, it is hamstrung by familiar political pressures and there is no denying the fact that either the authorities or administration are paralysed by the lack of political will.

Charred beyond recognition and reduced to a fragile frame of ashes at Banshkhali, the 11 bodies in Tejendra Lal Shil's house lay scattered without anyone reaching for help. Amazingly, after breaking open the door of the house forcibly, the murderous gang set the house ablaze without looting or touching anything. Even in a country where life is so easily extinguished, either on the road or river, every man, woman and child in the country has been united as rarely before by a collective sense of revulsion. In fact, the country has betrayed itself. The beastly act done, the marauders melted away in the darkness of the night as the flames that had leapt skywards simmered. But the heat generated by the senseless killings in Banshkhali, Pabna and Jhalakathi, and the outrage stoked are far from ebbing even weeks after the incident.

People wonder if the state has revealed itself to be completely incapable of fighting the forces of violence and gangsterism. What happened at Banshkhali was an evil and would perhaps not have happened at the first place if the earlier murders in the Chittagong region had been properly investigated and the actual culprit and culprits booked. What we have seen is that some groups, regardless of the communities or religion they belong to, are carrying a political agenda whose entire basis is factionalism, sectarianism and, in most cases, communalism of the most vicious kind. It is the sort of political agenda that ends up harming its proponents as much as its victims because its very essence is destructive. This is now beginning to happen in many extremist groups who are getting eliminated by fighting with each other. Unfortunately, the administration, for reasons best known to itself, did not root out the evil forces at the

outset and now they have spawned in many places.

The PM, performing Umrah at the Holy Kaba Sharif was shocked beyond measure, and instructed the home minister and other ministers belonging to the Chittagong region to personally visit the site of carnage. But the PM could have done something more, as the Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee did to put criticism to rest in the sensational Staines murder case at Orissa in 1999 (Staines and his two young sons were burnt alive while on missionary work in a jungle region of Orissa). When the needle of suspicion in the murder of Christian missionary Staines and his two sons was being pointed at the Bajrang Dal, an outfit linked to both the RSS and the ruling BJP, the Indian prime minister, besides sending three important cabinet ministers to the remotest Manoharpur village of Orissa, announced a judicial probe headed by a Supreme Court judge.

Before the horror, shock and grief of Banshkhali could die down, the nation learnt with stunned disbelief of two more attempts of burning to death by setting ablaze three houses at Jhalakathi and Pabna, the first one relating to a previous conflict and the last two totally clueless. In the burning case that shook Pabna, two innocent housewives and one child, fast asleep in their thatched houses, were burnt to death, while the father of the child, a day labourer, was away in Rajshahi.

In the Rampura area of Dhaka, Rahmat Ali, a businessman was shot by some extortionists in the area. The extortionist group then swooped on him again while he was recuperating in the post-operative ward of the Mahakhal lung diseases hospital, and shot him to death in the presence of his wife and daughter, the next day.

Not even the harshest words could measure up to the indignation felt either at the Banshkhali killing or the killing of Rahmat Ali at the hospital at Mahakhal.

Banshkhali has again surfaced in the news headlines for another atrocious incident. On the night of Eid, a teenage girl Rafeza was tortured to death after she was gang raped by four hoodlums. The gaping injury on her body and the brutality perpetrated on her remind us that barbarians are now living in Bangladesh. This is the sort of killing that belongs to the world's inventory of black deeds. One might call it a monumental aberration of the time-tested tolerance and harmony of rural life in this country.

The spate of violence, arson and killing relating to partisan politics and religious extremism is more than alarming. Once known as the most resilient of countries, that has weathered many crises like liberation struggle, famines, sleazy politicians, and insensitive administration, discord of the type we are witnessing now terrifies us the most. It is the only thing that can tear this country apart.

The country does have people belonging to many faiths, sects and communities, and they are spread all over this land. But when sectarian vengeance, communal discord, or partisan conflicts become major issues and politicians gain by fanning such discord, civil society as we know it, begins to unravel. We have seen this in the violence and ruthless elimination tactics of an entire nation resorted to by the Pakistani army in 1971, violence against the Sikhs in India in 1984, and the riots that followed the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. Now there is a feeling of uneasiness in the air in our country.

As the cycle of violence and

killing continues in Chittagong and some other targeted regions in the country, the reason put forward for the Banshkhali massacre -- something related to dacoity -- is far from convincing. Overwhelmed by poverty, illiteracy, loss of farmland, drought, erosion and natural ravages, Chittagong and some other regions in the country are low on general expectations and high on religious fervour. People want to know for certain the reason that triggered the massacre either at Banshkhali or Jhalakathi or Pabna.

Undeniably true, all these horrific incidents appear to be only the logical culmination of years of apathy which has totally discredited the administration and allowed criminals and armed gangs to hold sway in the country. The recent killings have deepened the religio-political divide and hatred in the country more than ever and that's a dangerous symptom for the nation. As the country waits for the harsh truth to emerge, it can only rue the fact that differences are still resolved in this country by roasting people to death or cutting them into pieces.

MD Asadullah Khan, a former teacher of physics, is Controller of Examinations, BUET.



Indian Muslims Identity and modernity

For a minority community, religious identity becomes even more important. It becomes a mental refuge. Communal solidarity is seen as effective compensation for external pressure. And this communal solidarity puts its own demands on individual liberties. Individuals have to fall in line under the weight of communal pressure and individual rights are compromised.

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

BOTH identity and modernity are important parts of socio-political discourse today and more so in case of Muslims. Muslims, needless to say, are considered much more concerned about religion and religious identity and supposed to be rejecting modernity. It is assumed that they prefer madrasa education to modern secular education and refuse to accept any change in their personal law. These are considered as indicators of rejection of modernity and pre-occupation with religious identity.

What is the truth? In fact social questions are quite complex and cannot be reduced to black and white ignoring grey areas in between. Another important thing is that we cannot subject the Indian Muslim community of more than 130 million to uniformity and homogeneity. Indian Muslims are immensely diverse not only in terms of sects, languages and cultures but also in terms of classes and socio-political attitudes. There is hardly any issue about which there is complete consensus in the entire community, not even issues like change in Muslim personal law. It is really dangerous to apply stereotypes on such immensely diverse community.

It would also be equally wrong to think, as we often do, that all non-Muslims in India have accepted modernity and all that goes with it and that only Muslims resist it. Modernity, in such discourses, is never defined properly and is used in rather highly generalised sense. Some scholars have sub-divided modernity into 'hard modernity' and 'soft modernity'.

What is meant by 'hard modernity'? It is science and technology and in this sense all Indians, including Muslims, have accepted modernity. No one rejects the benefits of modern science and technology any more. If there was any resistance to it, it was in the nineteenth century.

Soft modernity implies philosophical issues and critical examination of traditional beliefs. Here one can say there are significantly differing attitudes among Muslims. Soft modernity also includes secular education and acceptance of secularism. It is true there is comparatively more resistance to soft modernity among Muslims in general and Indian Muslims, in particular.

Secularism is an integral part of soft modernity and it is also important to note that secularism implies discourse of rights, whereas religious discourse is discourse of duties. All authoritarian societies adopt discourse of duties rather than that of rights. During emergency in our country from 1975-1977 concept of duties was added to our constitution. The Indian Constitution otherwise always talked of rights. Religious authorities also always talk of duties and never of rights. Religious authorities never concede rights to their followers. Their duty is only to obey the authority or traditional beliefs.

Secular discourse, on the other hand, is entirely discourse of rights. A modern thinker asserts, not only political rights but also the right to examine traditional beliefs critically. But this right can be availed of only when there is widespread high standard education. Muslims, for various reasons, chief among them being poverty, lack of widespread high degree of secular education and hence there is general resistance to discourse of rights, including right to critical examination of traditional beliefs.

But it should also be admitted that education is one factor among many. Socio-political interests also play an important role. Thus, both among Muslims and Hindus we find some highly educated ones aggressively promoting traditional beliefs and vehemently opposing any attempt to critically examine them. The members of VHP and Bajrang Dal and even those of BJP advocate old beliefs and traditions and even imply violence against those asserting their secular rights.

Similarly, among Muslims organisations like SIMI adopt violence against those who promote rational thinking and Muslim Personal Law Board only promoting concept of duties among Muslims and rejecting their right to critically examine certain age-old traditions followed by Muslims. They often invoke the concept of divine immutability to oppose any change. The other reason is fear of aggressive communal campaign from a section of majority community.

Whatever the reasons, women have to pay a heavy price for rejection of soft modernity by men of the community. Women are entirely subject to the discourse of duty. The discourse of duty, it can be said, doubly applicable to women in all the communities in India. Women are subject to this discourse both in the name of religion as well as in the name of age-old customs and traditions. Women are much more

unequal as they are denied benefits of soft modernity. Even among Hindus very few women are truly 'liberated' in this sense. Among Muslims, women are even more unequal. The aggression shown by Muslim leadership during the Shah Bano movement was a good example of this. Though such aggressive movement is no longer possible, the situation of women has not improved much. They suffer from many disabilities more due to customs and traditions than religion. Islam is far more just to them than the traditions. But in traditional societies, religion itself is subject to customs and tradition. Often it becomes important to liberate religion from traditions.

In modern Indian society, question of religious identity has become far more important. A religiously plural country like India throws up complex problems in a democratic set up. A secular democratic society throws up the question of rights for different religious communities and also promotes competition for political power and economic resources. The elite of the communities mobilise masses by using religious identities and hence religious identities becomes quite important.

Communal problems came into existence in modern society, as concept of rights became more important than that of duty. Every community asserts its religious identity to put pressure on the system to wrest greater share in power. Our experiences in post-independence period shows that minority community finds it difficult to match aggressive mobilisation by majority community. Though before independence too, Nehruvian theory of communalism emphasised that majority communalism could be more dangerous but in post-independence period majority communalism did prove to be much more aggressive than before independence.

Thus for a minority community, religious identity becomes even more important. It becomes a mental refuge. Communal solidarity is seen as effective compensation for external pressure. And this communal solidarity puts its own demands on individual liberties. Individuals have to fall in line under the weight of communal pressure and individual rights are compromised.

It is an irony of the situation that on one hand the majority communal discourse puts Muslims under pressure for uniform civil code and makes it part of political agenda and on the other hand, creates conditions making it increasingly difficult for the community to accept change or 'soft modernity'. In fact, the Sangh Parivar itself rejects soft modernity and opposes secular discourse of rights and loves concept of duties. It attacks those who emphasise individualism and individual rights.

Here it should also be noted that it is wrong to depict one's religious community as more liberal and progressive and another community as more regressive and backward. It all depends on socio-political conditions, particularly in multi-religious societies. If Muslims are less under majority communal pressure and find the political atmosphere more congenial for their economic progress, they will be more prone in a democratic society like India to accept change and soft modernity.

It can be demonstrated from Kerala experience of the Muslim community. The Kerala Muslims, living under a comparative sense of security are ahead of other Indian Muslims in accepting modern secular education, family planning and social change. The rate of family planning among Kerala Muslims is higher than that of Hindu women in U.P. Also, the rate of literacy among them is far higher than their counterparts in other parts of India.

Also, more educated Muslims more easily opt for soft modernism than less educated and less secure Muslims. Some sects like the Bohras and Khojas accept change more easily than other sects. These sects are economically and educationally better off, though not all Bohras and Khojas. There is poverty and illiteracy among them too. Thus there are regional, sectarian and economic factors influencing Muslim behaviour. Religion is invoked by these sections to accept or reject change as legitimising factor.

Thus it will be seen that a sense of physical security and economic status can be far more influential than is generally recognised. However, communal discourse tries to blame it only on religion and that itself is a communal approach to the complex problem of change and progress. The rationalists too err in this matter and tend to blame religion rather than these material factors for lack of acceptability of change.

Asghar Ali Engineer is the executive director of Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai, India

Many Dhakas



KAZI KHALED ASHRAF

THERE is not one Dhaka, there are many Dhakas. Like most metropolitan developments fighting for the control of capital and land, Dhaka is a socially and spatially heterogeneous place.

Six morphologies define the urban organism that is Dhaka, each representing a certain social, economic, and environmental destiny (there are perhaps more than six, but for now that is enough). The term morphology implies the essential form and structure of an organism, as used in biology, that also reveals some of its functional and vital makeup. An urban morphology represents the interrelated composition of a part or whole of a city created by a definitive pattern of buildings and spaces. The buildings, generally residential units, provide a basic typology -- literally the building block of the morphology -- despite what apparently seems like immense variations. In other words, it is housing -- house types and their neighbourly arrangement -- that gives content to the morphology. Housing is what forms the fabric of the city: How one defines and conceives housing is finally how one sees cities, and vice-versa.

Consider Isfahan and Manhattan. One is a mix of low continuous buildings and covered streets punctuated by open to the sky courtyards, and the other is a grid of open streets, and buildings that form the streets and soar to the sky. Each morphology contains a certain spatial and social cohesiveness, even its own internal order and functional prerogatives and hierarchies. Each morphology is then an urban reality by itself, each a place assigned for certain promises and promises withheld at the same time. Each morphology is a city by itself.

Among the six cities of Dhaka, the oldest is the original settlement that grew along the river Buriganga characterised by its mixed-use buildings jostling against each other in a rambunctious way, its narrow, winding streets, and its traditionally organised neighbourhoods (mohollas). But that is old Dhaka of the romantic lore. Even within the old city there are now many diversities, but above all, the old city is coming apart at the seams. It is no longer able to sustain its morphological matrix in the onslaught of overwhelming commercialisation and further densification, and adoption of alien 'development' strategies.

The so-called colonial part of

ABOUT CITIES

If housing is how one makes cities, then housing is Dhaka's greatest failure. One reason for the city's chaotic condition is that there have not been suitable large-scale residential models, and therefore morphological visions, for the many different communities that inhabit it.

the city forms the second morphology, which began as the site of new governmental, cultural, institutional, and residential buildings built by the British from the 1900s onwards around the old Race Course. The buildings of this city heralded the first move away from the river (and since then Dhaka has been incessantly moving farther and farther from the river), and also created the first prominent urban divide in Dhaka -- an urban racism if you like -- creating the sense of an "old" city seen as irksome and chaotic, and the new one with its euphoric possibilities. The old railway line that cut through where Nagar Bhaban now is demarcated the boundary of these two worlds. The nature of the desirable building unit also changed: A bungalow house in a large garden typified the building type in this morphology.

The third city is formed by post-1947 development of regulated and planned residential areas, and pockets of commercial and institutional growth. The quality of these developments still define the nature of urban planning for whatever it is worth, which is beginning to be obvious that it is not much considering the accelerating impoverishment of the urban environment. The planning was and still is based simply on plotting, that is, acquiring agricultural land and dividing that up in the most unimaginative way for privilege and dynamics of a city in the twenty-first century.

In any case, the vision of a bungalow with a rose garden in the city is under threat internally by the users and dwellers themselves. As imagination-deficient planners keep mincing the plot-and-isolated-bungalow theme, the owners are immediately poised to subvert that to make a bastion of multiple dwellings (if not shops, clinics and schools). Take Dhanmandi for example, considered even now the paradigm of planning. From an imagery of secluded bungalows in an exclusive neighbourhood, whatever the worth of the idea was at that time, it has mutated under the inexorable laws of desires to a cacophony of buildings and functions. When a city is left to the instrumentation of mediocre planning unwilling to take up the challenge of new urban dynamics, and when that city succumbs to unilateral forces of personal desires and profits, strange things can happen. The old city that was left behind with such haste can return to haunt the skyline of the privileged city.

The fourth city is a strange and, strangely, treasured anomaly. The National Capital Complex at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, that represents the American architect Louis Kahn's vision of a government and civic complex in a deltaic land-

scape, forms an exclusive enclave in the form of a fourth city. The building complex of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar was a catalytic event that gave a new impetus to Dhaka, and provided an urban anchor for the city growing beyond the older areas. But what is perhaps strange

shops after shops after shops... There is no better proof than that that planning in this city has not failed but fled from the field where it is most needed. There is still a sixth morphology, invisible but vital, that spreads out across Dhaka weaving in and out of

the five morphologies, along the railways tracks, between buildings, on the sidewalks, and the flood dams, eked out by fresh migrants, vagrants, and generally by people at the periphery of planning, unrecognised and yet crucial to the visible city. This is the city that for a lack of appropriate term continues to be called a "slum" or a "shack." Planners elsewhere have described such a city as "spontaneous settlement," "self-help housing," even "city of joy," the last one reified in the semi-fictional work of Dominique Lapierre on such a settlement in Calcutta. The sixth city also makes the point that it would be a mistake to seek a morphology in the physical structure alone.

Why is the question of morphology critical? One needs to consider housing again: Housing is not just a numerical and fiscal matter; it can enhance the quality of life, both the life of the immediate dwellers and the life of the city. If housing is how one makes cities, then housing is Dhaka's greatest failure. One reason for the city's chaotic condition is that there have not been suitable large-scale residential models, and therefore morphological visions, for the many different communities that inhabit it. In short, housing and planning experts have not been able to provide any prospective image of how the people of Dhaka should live as a group in new or even restructured urban conditions. None of the six morphologies is fixed and permanent; all are con-

tical visions, for the many different communities that inhabit it. In short, housing and planning experts have not been able to provide any prospective image of how the people of Dhaka should live as a group in new or even restructured urban conditions. None of the six morphologies is fixed and permanent; all are con-

stantly being renovated and transformed by new desires and fresh possibilities. Dhanmandi, as I have said, that was originally planned as a bungalow-and-garden model has been changed beyond recognition into a beehive of buildings and apartments. A similar mutation is occurring to other so-called planned cities such as Gulshan, Baridhara and Uttara, proving just one thing: that the only planning strategy this city had been superceded long ago by the laws of desire and free will.

An example of a biological metamorphosis is the creation of a butterfly, the arrival of an organism to a functional and aesthetic maturity. An urban metamorphosis does not automatically guarantee that. In fact, unless it is choreographed by the most skilled and dedicated professionals, the metamorphosis can only be calamitous.

Why is the question of morphology critical? One needs to consider housing again: Housing is not just a numerical and fiscal matter; it can enhance the quality of life, both the life of the immediate dwellers and the life of the city. If housing is how one makes cities, then housing is Dhaka's greatest failure. One reason for the city's chaotic condition is that there have not been suitable large-scale residential models, and therefore morphological



PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

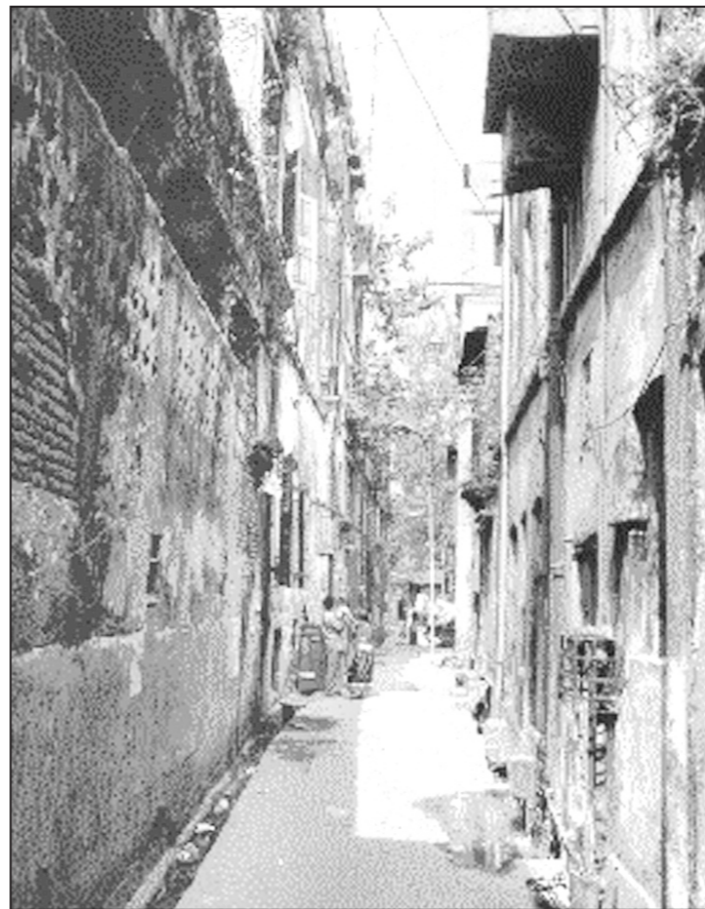


PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

An old Dhaka neighbourhood

the five morphologies, along the railways tracks, between buildings, on the sidewalks, and the flood dams, eked out by fresh migrants, vagrants, and generally by people at the periphery of planning, unrecognised and yet crucial to the visible city. This is the city that for a lack of appropriate term continues to be called a "slum" or a "shack." Planners elsewhere have described such a city as "spontaneous settlement," "self-help housing," even "city of joy," the last one reified in the semi-fictional work of Dominique Lapierre on such a settlement in Calcutta. The sixth city also makes the point that it would be a mistake to seek a morphology in the physical structure alone.

Why is the question of morphology critical? One needs to consider housing again: Housing is not just a numerical and fiscal matter; it can enhance the quality of life, both the life of the immediate dwellers and the life of the city. If housing is how one makes cities, then housing is Dhaka's greatest failure. One reason for the city's chaotic condition is that there have not been suitable large-scale residential models, and therefore morphological

stantly being renovated and transformed by new desires and fresh possibilities. Dhanmandi, as I have said, that was originally planned as a bungalow-and-garden model has been changed beyond recognition into a beehive of buildings and apartments. A similar mutation is occurring to other so-called planned cities such as Gulshan, Baridhara and Uttara, proving just one thing: that the only planning strategy this city had been superceded long ago by the laws of desire and free will.

An example of a biological metamorphosis is the creation of a butterfly, the arrival of an organism to a functional and aesthetic maturity. An urban metamorphosis does not automatically guarantee that. In fact, unless it is choreographed by the most skilled and dedicated professionals, the metamorphosis can only be calamitous.

Kazi Khaled Ashraf, an architect and writer, currently teaches at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu.