

Love in the time of cell phones

All this may seem trivial compared to "bigger," "life and death" issues we face, but culture wars are core struggles and often Trojan horses for larger battles. This is why the recent attempt to ban phone calls after midnight to stop teenage lovers bothers me so much. This is a nasty move that tries to stigmatize normal behaviour and dictate an antique moral code. Relationship dynamics are slowly shifting in our urban centers. But there are people and forces (sometimes religious forces, but equally a city elite that is socially right-wing in spite of its pretences) that would like to turn the clock back. The problem they face is a genie out of the box, and they are now trying desperately to fold, tuck, nip, crinkle, and crush the new freedoms.

NAEEM MOHAJEMEN

LAST week, the government launched another mini-salvo in their war against free speech. The new year already brought an amendment to the Telecommunications Act which gives intelligence agencies power to monitor, and stop, phone calls and e-mails in Bangladesh. But these are only steps to police the political sphere. For the enactment of a total surveillance nation, the private sphere and especially the area of "loose morals" has to be brought under state control.

After all, we do trust our government to legislate morality. Don't we?

In this spirit, a letter was sent this week to all five of Bangladesh's cellular phone companies from the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, demanding that "free calls after midnight" offers be immediately shut off. According to press reports, this is to "protect the morals" of young people who were using the service to "form romantic attachments," "losing sleep," and indulging in "vulgar talk." I put quotes around almost every phrase in the preceding sentence because the source for all this data are "scores of complaints from parents" (sure). The BBC's Ronald Buerk helpfully adds his own generalization-simplification, "Many people are conservative in Bangladesh."

All this teacup storming reminded me of our own times as "young people." We were also trying to form "romantic attachments," but more ineptly than today, and with fewer tools at hand. St Joseph, like all missionary schools, was single-sex, but our afternoons were brightened by the arrival of the Siddiqui's girls. Siddiqui's was an English Medium school, preparing students to take the A Levels and go abroad. In those days (early 1980s), Dhaka teens were divided into BMT

(Bangla Medium Type = St Joseph, Shaheen School, Government Lab, etc) and EMT (English Medium Type = Scholastica, Green Herald, Maple Leaf, etc). Siddiqui's was the rare EMT school without its own building, so they had to come to our school to use lab facilities. This meant we could get fleeting glimpses of girls, rare visions in our schoolyard.

In our pathetic, callow youth, we would wait around for hours after class ended in the hopes of that brief glance. But in all my time at St. Joseph, I don't recall a single person actually getting up the nerve to talk to one of the girls. All this unrequited swooning played havoc with our idea of relationships. Things got so bad that I was over the moon when an anonymous girl started calling my house. "Ami apnake kothai jani dekhechi" (I have seen you somewhere) was her coy flirtation and that was as hot and heavy as it got. But where had she seen me? WVA Meena Bazar? Newmarket? Elephant Road? The places to meet girls were very limited, so it could only be one of three places (this was before Aarong cafe added a fourth). But after a year of talking on the phone, I gave up because I realized that I had yet to meet her, and perhaps never would.

All this intense gender-segregation meant that when we finally got to co-ed Dhaka University, we had no idea what to do with ourselves. If you fell for someone, there was an elaborate ritual. You would let a male friend of yours know. He would then tell his friend who would tell the girl in question. Eventually through a daisy chain of whispered confidences you would figure out if all this was mutual. It was a slow, byzantine process.

All this sounds sweet -- innocent, hygienic times, etc, but at the same time tremendously frustrating. There were few chances to meet and interact with women in a normalized setting.

The first girl you fell for, you basically would have to marry, because there would be no second chances and no normal interaction outside marriage. You didn't date, you got married.

Through the decades, there were numerous interventions to ensure this suffocating condition continued. Recently I came across a photo from 1973 of my cousin in a band with local legend Bogey bhai (later founder of Renaissance). She was the tambourine girl and such innocent expressions of fun-loving high-jinks (think Josie & The Pussycats) were *verboten*. Similarly, Waves was a 70s rock band that faced morals tests. The sight of girls dancing on stage during the band's first and only appearance on television sent the guardians into a frenzy, with cries of "oposhongskriithi" banishing them from screens. It's especially worth remembering examples from the 1970s because, contrary to stereotype, virtue policing did not originate with the mullahs. In those days, it was the secularists that were up in arms, since their key plank was *uber*-Bangla nationalism. "Westernization" was the all-encompassing enemy, mullah politics still a twinkle in Jamaat's eye. From Abba to Boney M, everything disco was eventually hounded off the screens. One flash of Donna Summers' legs, and *Solid Gold* was also cancelled. For the rest of our school days, the only sanctioned music program was *James Last Orchestra* (German friends are baffled to hear this today). Later of course, political Islam came to be seen as a bigger threat, and some secularists embraced the same *opoculture* as a weapon to goad the maulvis.

The 1980s brought a fresh military dictatorship and a new legal enforcement against "free mixing of the sexes." Tinted glasses on cars were banned to prevent "opokormo." Special police squads roved the area around Parliament, hoping to catch young couples.

The few friends who actually had girlfriends (there were not many!) developed the technique of driving to Airport Road while holding hands. As with any dynamic where law enforcement meets morality (look at the Iranian and Saudi virtue police), the clashes were ugly. Stories of young couples being brutally harassed by police officers were frequent. Unlike other situations, it was not in the hopes of a bribe -- the public humiliation was what the police relished.

Today there is a tendency in the West to fetishize arranged marriages. This is pushed along by a segment of the Asian diaspora that wants to promote things from "the old country" as inherently better than "modern life." Articles like "Looking for Love on Craigslist" (soon to be a book) argue that since modern romance is so random, we may as well retreat and allow parents to arrange marriages again. Exhibit A may be a "successful" corporate lawyer, but at the end of the day he wants to come home to mummy, have her cook *khichuri* and find a girl just like her (and of course, she will be the same religion). Divorce rates are high today goes the argument, bring back the good old days. No one mentions that divorce rates are also a function of situations where single or divorced women can live productive, stigma-free lives on their own. Anyway, some of us have no interest in going back to the "old ways" of arranged marriages. Better to make our own mistakes and learn from them.

Thinking back to those suffocating school years, it makes me happy to see today's young Dhaka lovers. For the most part I only see people holding hands near Dhanmondi lake, more pda (public display of affection) is not here yet. Of course, all this enforces the vice squad. This Christmas, three police officers (one on motorcycle, two with bulky wirelasses)



surrounded a young couple on a rickshaw and held them for interrogation outside our Dhanmondi gate. A crowd gathered, everyone was there to see the *tamasha*. When I came to protest, I was harshly told to mind my own business. "Era kharap lok, apni nak golaben na" (these are bad people, don't stick your nose in). There was almost a Roman spectacle to the episode. As if the young couple would now be fed to the lions.

Rokhok jokhon bhokkoi.

All this may seem trivial compared to "bigger," "life and death" issues we face, but culture wars are core struggles and often Trojan horses for larger battles. This is why the recent attempt to ban phone calls after midnight to stop teenage lovers bothers me so much. This is a nasty move that tries to stigmatize normal behaviour and dictate an antique moral code. Relationship dynamics are slowly shifting in our urban centers. But there are people and forces (sometimes religious forces, but equally a city elite that is socially right-wing in spite of its pretences) that would like to turn the clock back. The problem they face is a genie out of the box, and they are now trying desperately to fold, tuck, nip, crinkle, and crush the new freedoms.

In earlier essays, I argued that people needed to urgently make the connection between the loss of civil liberties in one sphere (phone tapping) and the loss of liberty everywhere.

It's already starting.

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Notes:

1 See my past articles "Your Last Phone Call" (12/12/05), "Big Brother is Taping You" (12/22/05) and "Ditrich Boulevard & Stasi Consciousness" (8/1/06)
2 BBC, 1/15/06
3 I am indebted to Dr. Amalia Reddy for the terms BMT and EMT.

Are YOU getting the message?

I am not anti-advertisement. I enjoy the creative work and am willing to be led by their slogans like any other. But there's a line between targeted suggestive adverts and having it stuffed down our throats. The core of an effective ad campaign is to get the message across to the consumer. And as you probably have guessed by now, this is one consumer who's having a difficult time deciphering what that message actually is. Is bigger -- and brighter -- better?

AZIZ MALICK writes from London

THE age of blatant commercialization has arrived in full splendour. Or so it seemed to me when I came out of the Zia International Airport. While I was trying to figure out the reason we had palm trees planted all along the sidewalks, my thoughts were interrupted by the bizarre tiger-striped buses whizzing past. But that was only the start.

As we neared Mohakhali, the billboards loomed higher and higher. One billboard competing with another in colour, size, and height. Freezers, cheap mobiles, sewing machines, I had to crane my neck to catch the highest one. No doubt it's a safe structure, because Heaven forbid if that pack-of-cards structure was ever to sway even slightly, we'd all need a new flyover.

If Mohakhali was difficult to figure out, Dhanmondi was a complete jigsaw. A visual bombardment of mega bazaars, mini-bazaars, blaring out the best the freshest and the latest-whatsoever. The idea of putting on so much colour and glare was simple, someone told me, people are drawn to bright lights pretty much the same way moths are to a flame. And looking at the Eid-price tags on some of the merchandise, the analogy's probably not far from the truth.

Home. Relax, some TV? Hardly. Every *natak* or soap runs for about 7 minutes before the viewer is hit with 15 minutes worth of prime advertisements. The adverts, I must add, are quite appealing, but seeing the same spices, milk-powder, washing detergents (and how it can change your life) five

times in under 5 minutes somehow killed my urge to rush out and buy myself a can of the magic wonder.

Ok so you turn on the News. Some serious stuff. Which is all there -- courtesy of a wild medley of consumer goods. Headlines sponsored by XYZ mobile phones, main news by the competing ABC phones, sports by 123 conglomerate, and quite ostentatiously the LCD screen at the back of the news anchor proudly bearing its maker's name.

And in case you missed the sponsor's logo appearing next to the news on the screen, there's another logo appearing at the bottom -- this after the anchor had twice mentioned the sponsor verbally. Well you gotta be sure, the message gets through I guess. I wonder how long before the wardrobe of the anchors are also sponsored, a nice subtle seal across chest of the crisp suit perhaps? I must add that the quality of the news programs, talk shows are excellent. But brandishing a sponsor's name on everything that isn't nailed down dilutes the gravity somewhat. Or maybe I am just not plain getting it yet.

On the same topic of news, it's no different in newspapers -- English and Bengali ones alike. The front page -- the main page that everyone looks at first, shrinks to a quarter page, and that on a dull day. The bottom half belongs to some cement manufacturer announcing the "deal of the year," or some mega tourist package or something more creative -- like how you can solve the majority of your earthly problems simply by opening the super-friendly saving account at the nearest branch. And off course, one has to be democratic, so the

top of the page (even above the daily's name) proudly appears names of the futuristic corrugated steel sheets (in case you suddenly remember you have to build a home in your village), safety-first matchsticks, or something equally exotic. Turn the page over, and you have to go on a search-and-find mission to get the news, littered amongst the labyrinth of advertisements ranging from how to get a quick visa to UK to the "patro chayi" SOS messages.

Come Friday *Jumma*. Would they dare? It was almost a relief when the Imam didn't say that the *Monajat* was sponsored by a real estate developer or a nearby shopping mall. But my relief was short-lived. As soon as I stepped out, the small kids from the *madrasas* who used to distribute leaflets on the virtues of the religion or something equally platonic were busy shoveling glossy adverts on to my helpless hands. By the time I walked the 50 feet from the mosque to the gate I could tell you where to buy the cheapest jackets, the sure-fire admissions coaching, or where to learn to play the Spanish guitar in under a month.

I am not anti-advertisement. I enjoy the creative work and am willing to be led by their slogans like any other. But there's a line between targeted suggestive adverts and having it stuffed down our throats. The core of an effective ad campaign is to get the message across to the consumer. And as you probably have guessed by now, this is one consumer who's having a difficult time deciphering what that message actually is. Is bigger -- and brighter -- better?

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Why Goldman Sachs may be right about Bangladesh

With sensible policies, the gap between Bangladesh's promise and performance can narrow, if not disappear. If Bangladesh receives its demographic dividend in full, Goldman Sachs may be proved right in its prediction.

ANDY MUKHERJEE

TWO recent lists show just how wide the gap is between Bangladesh's promise and its performance. In October, Berlin-based research organization Transparency International declared Bangladesh to be the most corrupt nation on Earth, along with Chad.

Then last month Goldman Sachs Group Inc. included it in a list of 11 developing countries that, according to its analysts, have the greatest potential to emulate the long-term economic success expected from China, India, Brazil and Russia.

Goldman's vote of confidence was entirely unexpected. What payoffs can investors expect from a country where the average daily income of citizens was just \$1.20 last year? As *Slate* magazine summarized the current U.S. view of

Bangladesh last month: "To most of us, Bangladesh seems like a remote mess -- poor and devoid of natural resources."

Bangladesh is also overpopulated.

Some 144 million people, equivalent to about half of the US population, live in an area the size of New York state, situated on the Bay of Bengal and bordering India and Myanmar. Floods ravage the Bangladesh economy once a year; corruption gnaws away at it every day.

In two out of five instances, parents must bribe officials to enroll their children in state schools; every second person needing an X-ray scan in a public hospital must make an illegal payment, according to a 2005 survey of Bangladeshi households by Transparency, which has ranked the South Asian nation as the world's most corrupt for five years in a row.

Suicide bombings

A poor, overpopulated, corrupt country with rising income disparity is fertile ground for extremism. Sectarian violence was always present in Bangladesh, though of late it has become a lot uglier.

The US State Department last month acknowledged the threat posed to American citizens and organizations by Jama'atul Mujahedein Bangladesh, blamed by the government for a spate of suicide bombings since November 29 that have killed at least 17 people.

The group, known as JMB, has called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Bangladesh, where 83 percent of the population is Muslim and 16 percent Hindu. With so much going wrong, why should investors care about Bangladesh? There are three good reasons.

Growth, demographics

First, no matter how bad things get, Bangladesh almost always manages to produce a decent economic growth rate of about 5 percent. In a sample of 151 countries studied by the World Bank, Bangladesh's gross domestic product expanded with the least volatility.

Second, almost 35 percent of Bangladeshis are now aged 15 years or younger. They will soon enter the workforce. Compared with three decades ago, when women, on average, produced six children, fertility rates have dropped below three children. That means the new workers won't have too many young dependents to care for. Household incomes and savings will rise, provided there's enough capital to employ the labor productively.

Third, for all the beating the legal system has taken from rampant corruption and entrenched special interest groups, it still has a healthy kernel in the form of a British common law tradition dating back to 1862, when it was part of British-ruled India. With some cleaning up, the Bangladesh judiciary can be made to support a modern economy if only politicians would agree to create one.

Enforcing contracts

Enforcing a contract is 4 percent cheaper in Bangladesh than in China, where a creditor ends up losing 25 percent of the value of the debt in the process of trying to collect it legally, according to a World Bank assessment of economies and the ease of doing business in them. Not only are Bangladesh's investor protection standards far superior to China's, they're also better than what's available, on average, in rich countries, according to the World Bank Web site <http://www.doingbusiness.org>.

Bangladesh is also competitive on labour costs. Garment workers in Dhaka earn 39 US cents an hour, while the hourly wage for sewing and stitching in coastal China is 88

cents. Bangladesh is paying a price for not being open to trade. It takes 38 official signatures and 57 days to import anything into the country, compared with 24 days for China, 39 days for Pakistan and 43 days for India.

Middle class

Bangladesh shot itself in the foot in abandoning English as the language of instruction in publicly funded schools following the country's 1971 independence from West Pakistan. If it weren't for the superior courts, which staunchly resisted the frenzy to switch all judicial communication to Bengali, English may have been wiped out in the country. That partly explains why Bangladesh, unlike India or the Philippines, isn't able to benefit from global outsourcing of back-office jobs, which require English-language skills more than anything else. The neglect of English has also hindered the development of a strong middle class.

Nirvikar Singh, an economics professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has compiled estimates of the size of the middle class on the Indian sub-continent. The figures show that, at most, Bangladesh's middle class accounts for 9 percent of the country's population, or 13 million people. The estimates for Pakistan and India are 18 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Bangladesh needs to cut red tape and open up to foreign trade and investment so that more and better-paying jobs lead to a bigger middle class and stronger public institutions. Only then will the nexus between corruption, poverty, terrorism and general lawlessness be broken.

With sensible policies, the gap between Bangladesh's promise and performance can narrow, if not disappear. If Bangladesh receives its demographic dividend in full, Goldman Sachs may be proved right in its prediction.

Andy Mukherjee is a Bloomberg News columnist.

The long history of violence behind Hizb ut-Tahrir

ZIAUDDIN SARDAR

THE bearded and elegantly attired supporters of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), the fundamentalist Muslim group, like to emphasise the non-violent nature of their party. As a recent press release put it, they "have never resorted to armed struggle or violence." This is correct as far as it goes. While HT has openly engaged in the politics of hatred, particularly towards the Jews, it has not, strictly speaking, advocated violence.

But this does not mean that it is not a violent organisation. During a recent debate on PTV, the Pakistani satellite channel, a prominent member of HT told me emphatically: "The idea of compromise does not exist in Islam." This is standard HT rhetoric, and it explains why the group is deemed dangerous and worthy of being proscribed. Intolerance of that kind is a natural precursor of, and invitation to, violence.

In fact, violence is central to HT's goals. Its primary objective is to establish a caliphate. It seeks, I have been told on numerous occasions, a "great Islamic state" ruled by a single caliph who would apply Islam "completely to all Islamic lands" and eventually to "the whole world". What would be applied "completely" is the sharia, Islamic law.

No wonder they recognise no compromise. Their ideology argues that there is only one way Muslims can or should be ruled, that those who form this caliphate have the right to rule, that all others must submit unconditionally and that only this political interpretation of Islam is valid and legitimate. In other words, the caliphate of Hizb ut-Tahrir's vision can be established only by doing violence to all other interpretations of Islam and all Muslims who do not agree with it - not to mention the violence it must do to the rest of the world, which also must eventually succumb.

The notion of the caliphate was problematic from the very beginning of Islam. All Muslims recognise the authoritative example of the four caliphs, the "rightly guided" rulers who were the immediate successors of Prophet Muhammad. Their authority derived from having been the Prophet's closest companions, most familiar with his teaching, methods and practice. Such circumstances are unrepeatable. And even then each faced dissent and rebellion: three were actually murdered.

There were many more caliphs in Muslim history, but it was with the fifth caliph, Muawiyah, that the institution became a work of Islamic imperialism. Like all imperialisms, it was always tenuous and never complete in its governance of Muslim territory. The caliphate was occasionally only effective in the heartlands of the Middle East, and in those heartlands it was eventually resisted and rejected by its own citizens.

The religious scholars of early Islam saw the caliphate as a work of naked power and they tried

to keep themselves at arm's length from it. Indeed, religion throughout Muslim history has operated as an alternative, in tension with the caliphate: it was a repository of ideals of justice and equity, and its purpose was to speak the truth to the vainglory of institutions of power.

Perhaps the most cogent reason why the religious scholars who first developed Islam's legal reasoning rejected an all-powerful unitary caliphate was that they accepted diversity. They knew that different circumstances and environments would lead to different ways of fulfilling the moral and ethical principles laid down by the Koran. In this context, they saw the sharia not as a divine utterance of immutable law, but as the earnest attempts of Muslims in history to put into action their understanding of the Koran. These founders of Islamic thought produced and acknowledged different schools of sharia because they accepted diversity as part of the inherent design of Islam.

The reductive refashioning offered by Hizb ut-Tahrir makes sharia immutable, something that is beyond thought or change. The particular sharia they advocate was formulated in the ninth century and is frozen in history. Inherently violent towards women, minorities and criminals, it has never been willingly accepted by Muslims but always had to be forcibly imposed by authoritarian regimes. Inevitably, HT's adherence to the idea of one caliphate with one sharia leads it to put a particular spin on the idea of jihad: it must be an all-out offensive war. A "concept" document from the group makes this clear: "Jihad is a war against anyone who stands against the call to Islam, whether he is an aggressor or not."

So, while HT may not directly engage in violence, it certainly preaches engagement with violence.

What HT peddles, in fact, is an escapist romantic fascism of a sort that appeals to members who simply want to be told what to do. Not for them the awesome responsibility of making their own choices. They are not responsible for the British society in which they live and neither will they be responsible for the Islamic society of which they dream - because there, too, they will merely be told what to do.

Violent though Hizb ut-Tahrir's vision is, society's answer should not be to ban it, but rather to expose and ridicule the intellectual poverty of its delusions. Ridicule, as opponents of the religious hatred legislation are so keen to point out, is a potent weapon. It should be our weapon of choice in the fight against Islamic fascism.

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