

# Faces of tragedy

NURUL KABIR

THIS write-up follows on the news that we discussed one evening in Boston in December 2005. In the vast and cold country that is the USA, it was a tiny blip soon lost in the tumultuous ocean of the media, and effaced from memory for many of us perhaps too soon. A man on a bicycle had carried a bomb to a crowd, killing and wounding many, in a small town called Netrokona in Bangladesh. As happens all the time, nobody we knew directly was touched. Only abstractly, we knew that the people affected were real, that somewhere there was a mother, a father, a brother, a sister.

No, it is not that we must have a direct relationship with the victims to care about a crime. Indeed, what sort of world would it be if we care about injustice and oppression only when we are affected personally? We know better than that. And yet, we know too that such considerations of humanity are abstract, that they need a connection to people and actions to become real and true. Our concern and our condolences must be a hand in support, an embrace, words heard by the aggrieved - otherwise they mean nothing. And similarly, to understand the news, to be with our country, our people, we need to see faces behind the reports. Thus, a visit that I write of today.

Netrokona, the town I went to, is in the north east region of Bangladesh. You can go there by car in about three and a half hours from the capital. The road is a strip of grey on a green landscape of cultivated fields spread all the way to the horizon. In winter mornings a thick fog comes to hide all that is a stone's throw away. An overloaded truck, a packed bus, a lone rickshaw materialize out of absolutely nothing. In the summer the rainfall in this region is among the heaviest in Bangladesh. All these can make the journey a little difficult even in the best of times.

Once you are there, after the road trip, it is peaceful and very quiet, as if on a remote island. The town is about 50,000 people. Small bungalow homes lie in rows by the narrow streets. A short walk in any direction gives way to the open fields of the countryside. It is very peaceful and life has a certain simplicity. It is a gentler sort of life. Strangers trust each other, the language is softer and, there is much hospitality and kindness.

It is not a backwater by any means. This area was a site of much activity during the resistance against British rule in India. The Tebagha movement happened here. A major three day All India Peasant Conference was held here in 1945. Today many progressive groups like Bangladesh Nari Progoti Songstha and Udichi are

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active here. Perhaps as much as 30 percent of the population is non-Muslim. With this diversity and history of progressive culture it is not a mystery that this town became the target of religious extremists.

In my visit I met many people, victims of that infamous attack, families. Today I want to speak of Shudipta Rani Paul. Shelly, as she was known to her friends, lived with her parents in a one room bungalow. On this morning that I was there, the sun streamed in from a window through the branches of a tree and the floor shone bright. It is a small home but pretty, clean, colourful, spare. The family belongings gathered in one room underline the simplicity of their life: two beds, a bookshelf, a glass almira in which are framed a few pictures of Shudipta.

Shudipta was a beautiful vivacious young woman. In the pictures you see her youthful, amongst friends, with family, in plays performed on stage, in a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Kerala. She had many friends. No doubt her friends were gladdened by someone who rose above the plainness of her surroundings in such enthusiasm for the arts, for her activism with the women of the town, for her singing and indeed for her life. Plays were her passion

and Udichi was a good organization for her. Udichi is one of the oldest cultural organizations in the country, mass based in its music, drama, dance, fine arts and literature. The majority of its performances are street plays. One of these Katha Kao (Speak, History!) -- has been performed over 1,050 times.

On this morning, Shudipta's mother entered the room. Grief was fresh on her face.

She was sobbing. "The boy did not want to be left here. He cried and cried begging me to not leave him here."

This boy she was crying for is Shudipta's younger brother. He is there in a picture, perhaps late teens, handsome, a smile on his face. He had been suffering from mental illness. In the non-existent mental health system in Bangladesh, the only option after a point is to leave him in the one "mental asylum" in the country that is little more than a prison. So infamous is this institution that it is not known by its own name but by the name of the town it is situated in, at another end of the country, and that name is used in insults. So that is what had happened, after Shudipta's death, just before this bright morning of my visit.

Shudipta's father is a slim, pepper-haired man of perhaps a little more than sixty. A retired

schoolteacher, frailer than his age, he recently developed serious health problems. But on this day he could only speak of his daughter; she was the only earning member of the family and it was she who had cared for the entire family. All her small earnings from the women's NGO that she worked in went to support the family mother, father, brother. She used to love her work, her plays. She was born in this one roomed house we were in today, and here it was that she had grown up.

The room didn't have many things, but it had sunshine. Once this sunshine had warmth, children's laughter, happiness. Here a little baby girl was born, spoke her first words, played with her dolls, did her school work, grew up and cared for sick parents. And here, in this room, is one of the oldest stories of humankind, a story repeated endlessly through the ages and never the lesser, a story that has been told by others in far better ways than I can, this tragedy unlike any for a mother and a father: the child dies.

Now a thousand memories in each corner of their home, overlapping one other as the layers of a ruined city, each one evoking that which is no longer, each calling a name that is no longer even a name. Now the emptiness of it!

And yet, fate does not leave them alone. This home, where they had lived so long, where their children were born, so heavy with memories, tragic and familiar, too may not be theirs anymore. The landlord on whose land they rented this room, is selling the land, and the future for Shudipta's parents is uncertain.

This morning, in the Udichi bungalow nearby, the same one which was the target of the bombs and where Shudipta suffered her fatal wounds she had not died instantly, but lingered on with her broken body for almost a day people gathered to mark the 30 day passage of the atrocity. The room was full of men and women. It was a subdued atmosphere, sorrowful. People wept quietly. There was not much talk of bringing the perpetrators to justice. Perhaps people despair of it. The killer destroyed himself. Alive are the real perpetrators of the crime, anonymous and arrogant, the tentacles of their power assiduously cultivated over decades today mixed in with the life blood of the country, in the schools, in the police barracks, in the fashionable homes of the power brokers of the elite.

But powerful though they may be, these evil ones do not have the hearts of the people of the land. Ordinary people, those who do not seek to be bribed by power or money, see today's fascists for what they are. People remember, too, those other atrocities that were perpetrated by the same criminals at the very birth of Bangladesh. They can win if they consider murder a victory, but they can not convince us, can not win us over, for to do that they would have to have tolerance, reason and humanity on their side, which is precisely what they lack. So long there are people who oppose them and extend sympathy and help to our traumatized communities, those enemies of the people have not won, for each of their crimes shouts aloud their subhumanity.

For Shudipta and all the other martyred activists of Udichi, may we pay homage with a few lines from Neruda?

*Sister, you do not sleep, no, you do not sleep.  
Pure is your gentle name, pure is your fragile life.  
Of bee, shadow, fire, snow, silence, foam,  
of steel, line, pollen was built your tough,  
your slender structure.  
They are your people, sister: those who today speak your name,  
we who from everywhere, from the water and the land,  
with your name leave unspoken and speak other names.  
Because fire does not die.*

The author, who lives in Boston, USA, has been on a visit to Bangladesh.



Protesting terrorists' bomb attack

# Widening the telecom divide

## OneIndia is misguided



Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

IS India about to launch the much-awaited Telecommunications Revolution through the OneIndia tariff plan that Minister Dayanidhi Maran announced last week? Or is it likely to miss the bus again?

The honest answer is, probably the second. On the face of it, OneIndia is attractive. Reducing the local-call landline rates by the state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam by 17 percent to the magic figure of Rs 1 for three minutes is audacious.

Slashing long-distance tariffs by 58 percent to Rs 1 a minute irrespective of distance is even bolder. This carries the attraction of promoting a unified all-India market. Similar reductions have been effected in mobile tariffs too.

However, in reality, OneIndia will block telecom growth, especially in villages which need it the most. It will also discourage lower-middle class people from acquiring telephones and widen India's yawning Telecom Divide. There's no merit in imposing distance-independent tariffs in a semi-continental country.

OneIndia is likely to prolong the long stagnation in India's telephony, which is just 4.5 fixed lines per 100 people, among the lowest in the world. In Asia, India compares poorly not just with South Korea or Taiwan (telephony, 50 per 100), but with China or Malaysia (telephony, about 20). In India's villages, telephony is an abysmal 2 per 100.

OneIndia will again deprive India of advantages like saving costs, and reducing drudgery and labour expended in avoidable physical movement of people.

What explains the gap between appearance and reality? Call charges have been lowered, but monthly telephone rentals have been raised to Rs 299. The rise is 20 percent for Mumbai and Delhi, but much steeper (66 percent) for BSNL's city-based subscribers and an even sharper five-fold for villages.

This will put off potential new subscribers. True, existing subscribers can still stay with their old plan. But high rentals will act as future barriers.

OneIndia also discriminates against low-end users and favours subscribers who make frequent long-distance calls. Ordinary Indians use the telephone frugally. Seventy three percent pay monthly bills of Rs 500 or less. As many as two-fifths ensure that their bill doesn't exceed the rent, which includes a number of free calls.

Under OneIndia, there will be no free calls at all. Incomes of those who operate 1.2 million public-call offices will be hit. BSNL and MTNL will suffer losses of Rs 3,000 to 5,000 crores.

Mr Maran seems to have been guided by motives other than ensuring BSNL-MTNL's financial well-being. One is the coming Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, which has a relatively high telecom penetration. But this short-sighted calculation will prove expensive for India.

It's hard to justify the sudden, large, reduction in long-distance rates. These have sharply fallen since 1999 from Rs 36 per minute. They dropped to Rs 24 (2000) to Rs 9 (2002), Rs 4.80 (2003), to Rs 3.60 (April 2004) and Rs 2.40 (September 2004). Further reduction could be spread over, say, three years. But a precipitate decrease will impose losses on the two public-sector companies.

They need to be strongly supported -- for sound economic and social reasons. The burden of connectivity has fallen on BSNL's shoulders. It has connected over 500,000 villages. The private companies have only connected 15,000!

Private firms were meant to commit 10 percent of all new lines to rural areas. They have provided only one-tenth this number.

Under OneIndia, private companies will indulge in cherry-picking, leaving public companies with low-end users and revenue losses.

India's telecom sector is marked by enormous disparities and anomalies. The greatest anomaly is the National Telecom Policy of 1994, arbitrarily rewritten and repeatedly violated, as in the award of contracts for each of 20 basic telecom circles. The winners were obliged to pay high license fees, but were left off -- Banana Republic-style.

Numerous scandals followed: cheating on service obligations, formation of cartels, cheap sell-off of the public sector VSNL, and

Reliance's abuse of its fixed-line licence to provide full mobility.

Disparities are no less striking. Mobile telephony has witnessed dizzying growth, especially after 2003, when incoming calls were made free. Since 2000, the number of mobile lines has increased 30-fold to 65 million, overtaking fixed-line connections. It's now annually growing at 50 percent, or by two million lines a month.

However, fixed-line growth has slowed from 25 percent in the 1990s to just 7-8 percent.

Worse, the rural-urban divide has widened from 1:3 to 1:11. About 85,000 villages remain unconnected. Mobile telephony has not bridged the divide. Mobile network coverage is only about 30 percent of India's land-area.

Three lessons emerge. Mobile telephones are not a substitute for fixed-line phones. A large proportion of their owners are fixed-line subscribers. Their spin-off effects are limited. Most cell-phones don't allow Internet access.

Second, mere competition doesn't guarantee growth. Competitors can narrowly focus on affluent consumers. It's only when MTNL and BSNL were allowed to enter mobile telephony that costs dropped.

Third, markets don't address the needs of low-end consumers.

OneIndia is based on a technologically unsound presumption -- the "death of distance." This can only happen when Internet-based data transfers through Broadband connections greatly exceed voice traffic.

But in India, the number of fixed lines is 48 million. There are only about 1 million Broadband subscribers. Therefore, the length of copper wire or optical fibre must remain a major determinant of the real cost of calls. A Delhi-Chandigarh call should not be charged at the same rate as a Delhi-Kolkata call.

Irrational pricing is a recipe for losses and slower telecom growth.

Mr Maran is a man in a hurry. But he should pause and ask if any country has provided telephones to the masses without cross-subsidies -- so that surpluses from long-distance calls and rich subscribers to support expansion in backward areas and among low-end users.

India is no exception to this. OneIndia will promote telecom elitism and further divide the country. That's not what we need.

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# Pitfalls of politicisation



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWANI

WITH Awami League returning to the parliament, the alliance lawmakers should no longer feel lonely, at least for now. However, the government has reason to be fretful about this development. Flouting opposition demands for reforming the EC and the CTG provisions will have adverse repercussions both inside and outside the country. On the other hand, debate and discussion of them will spell out the shortcomings and loopholes justifying reforms now. At the end, the AL may walk out empty handed which will undoubtedly draw mass appeal, since people are already displaying antipathy with some of the recent activities of the ruling alliance.

These activities include unashamed politicisation wherever the ruling alliance could. But the hiring of SM Zakaria, a trouble-making former EC secretary as an election commissioner and that of Mahfuzur Rahman (a former justice) who surfaced in the limelight on October 28, 2002, when illegal arms were recovered from his Mohammadpur residence, allegedly secreted by his brother-in-law (a BNP activist), is anything but politicisation use of brute naked power. Mahfuzur Rahman instead of being behind bars for harbouring illegal arms, is now an election commissioner.

As always, Law Minister Moudud Ahmed on January 16 advanced the most bizarre defence for these appointments. While speaking with the BBC radio, he said, "The appointments were made to break the deadlock." With a three-member commission,

given two members voting one way, the outcome was "unacceptable" to the government, but not a deadlock. Mr. Moudud Ahmed, sir, why do you make such statements?

The 22nd appeal for another extension of time for separation of the judiciary from the executive, given Moudud's track record, cannot be technical, rather tactical. As if these disreputable actions are not nefarious enough, BNP has recently been surging with party sympathising promotions (270 or so) and expansions of contractual

those who are screened out from promotion and appointments in better positions, although they had the seniority and requisite qualifications? Being demoralised, they will never work to their fullest potential ever again. Why would they?

Politicisation is a form of discrimination similar to that of racism, gender, age, religion, and ethnicity. Confluence of these factors has both short term and long term ramifications for economy's overall performance.

- In the short horizon, produc-

power within the government structure itself. Senior civil servants and political executives are conceptualised as having relatively similar values and goals that contributes to the maintenance and functioning of government.

- "Functional village life" model assumes a degree of some integration of civil service and political careers. In this model, a politician and civil servant from one government department has more in common than a minister with his cabinet colleagues heading differ-

ployment etc).

- Rising rate of crime, poverty, discriminatory application of rule of law, and suppression of the media.
- Capricious behaviour of ruling politicians (deceptions, lies, etc) and conduct of civil servants (politicisation, corruption, etc).
- Making excuses for broken election pledges and casting of failures on past government.

All these irregularities are consummated because the ruling lawmakers are afraid to "reason why" and voices of the opposition are completely marginalised. It is not so esoteric why BNP's leadership is so despotic given that the party was created by a president who was from the military and subsequently headed by his widow whose leadership and organisational experience, were groomed under military environment and discipline.

## NO NONSENSE

**BNP as a political party with a two-thirds majority in the parliament had the best opportunity to develop a consensus-driven political milieu in the country which AL had failed to do. Every bad move the ruling party takes (politicisation of the judiciary, civil services appointment and promotion etc), it claims as defence the precedents set by the AL when in power. If that is the modus operandi of governance, then BNP may lose its majority in the next general election to replicate the AL precedent.**

appointments (stands at 240 now).

All these barefaced display make the country look like a "kleptocracy."

This brute naked powerisation proceeds in two steps:

- First step is politicisation, which involves recruiting and promoting officials who would uphold the interests and idiosyncrasies of a party while demeaning official procedures and rules.
- The second step simply uplifts a select group of public officials from the pool of step 1. This is designed to realise the party's narrowest goals which may otherwise be in jeopardy.

Politicisation of public officials generally creates bottlenecks in implementing economic and social reforms resulting in inefficiency and wastes. The inefficiency arises from employing inferior and less capable people for doing jobs they lack experience, education, and aptitude to do. The waste arises because the more able and the qualified are discriminated out of activities they are trained and have the most aptitudes for. How about

tion of a country's GDP (or production of services and output in the sector in which politicisation and other discriminating factors are rampant) will be less than of the economy's full potential.

- If these discriminating factors become the way of governance for a prolonged period, there will be a permanent loss of valuable expertise and experience. The economy's overall potential will be permanently lost.

A country's civil service can belong to one of 5 possible models; each in its own way manifests the relationship between public officials and their political masters:

- "Separation model" embodies a clear separation between politicians and civil servants, in which the latter indubitably follow the orders of the political appointees. It is detached from the hurry and strife of politics, namely politicians make policies and civil servants implement them.
- "Village life" model assumes that civil servants and politicians are both part of a unified state elite. They should not conflict over

ent governmental portfolios.

- "Adverse model" assumes a significant separation between politicians and bureaucrats who are assumed to be competitors for power and control over policy.
- "Administrative state model" hypothesizes a clear separation between policy makers and administration, but in which civil servants are the dominant force.

Bureaucratic scheme of the alliance government fits the "Village Life" model explicated above. Here political bosses look for toadying agents. Like numerous such agents in the past, they found one to promote to the position of Power Division Secretary (disregarding official norms and objections from the cabinet division) and two others to implant as commissioners to join the other think-a-like, the CEC chairman.

Political scientists argue that there are essentially a confluence of factors, which erode trust in government and the democratic process. They are:

- Worsening economic plight of the people (e.g. rising prices, unem-

BNP is now being slowly Jamaat-ised. Jamaatization of BNP is already in the offing. Jamaat is already clamouring for nomination for 50 or more seats compared to 30 in the last national election (winning only 17) and Jamaat leaning officials are allegedly being promoted to additional secretary and secretary level positions (20 percent). Many of us lose our sleep wondering where the country is heading.

BNP as a political party with a two-thirds majority in the parliament had the best opportunity to develop a consensus-driven political milieu in the country which AL had failed to do. Every bad move the ruling party takes (examples: politicisation of the judiciary, civil services appointment and promotion, public procurement works, etc), it claims as defence the precedents set by the AL when in power. If that is the modus operandi of governance, then BNP may lose its majority in the next general election to replicate the AL precedent. That seems a fair political outcome.

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# Iran's right to nuclear energy

## Double standards must go

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THERE is a clear provision in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which came into effect from March 5, 1970, that "nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the parties to the treaty to develop, research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purpose without discrimination and in conformity with articles 1 and 11 of this treaty". All the parties to the treaty undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, material and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Parties to the treaty in a position to do so shall also cooperate in contributing alone or together with other States or international organisations to the further development of the application of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, especially in the territories of non-nuclear weapon states party to the treaty, with due consideration for the needs of the developing areas of the world.

Articles 1 and 11 state that each nuclear weapon state party to the treaty should undertake not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other explosive devices, and non-nuclear state party should undertake not to receive the transfer from any or whatsoever of nuclear weapons; not to manufacture or acquire such weapons. It is, therefore, clear that Iran has inalienable right to pursue research to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purpose. Iran is the country that has gone beyond its obligations to ensure others of its peaceful intentions, which reflects signing of an additional Protocol to its safeguard agreement. It implied that IAEA could make surprise visit to monitor and inspect nuclear facilities. It would be relevant to quote from Dr. Gordon Pether, nuclear scientist under Reagan administration for the army, who pointed out that Iran has offered to voluntarily forego a complete fuel cycle if the Europeans would get the United States to reverse the campaign of denial, obstruction, intervention, and misinformation.

As of now International Atomic Energy Agency did not find any evidence that would indicate a nuclear weapon programme by Iran. At the same time International Atomic Energy Agency did not give

blank check about Iran's strict observance of non-nuclear proliferation treaty. The insistence of Bush administration to drag Iran's so-called nuclear programme to the Security Council reminds the same old game, which Bush administration did at the time of invasion of Iraq in 2003. There is no provision in Nonproliferation treaty to refer any dispute relating to nonproliferation of nuclear weapons to the Security Council.

If we go back to thirty years we can see that the US administration did not object to develop nuclear energy by Iran during the regime of Shah, who was seen as US protégé. Similarly, US administration not only sided with Saddam Hussein of Iraq during Iraq-Iran war, but also sold arsenal to attack Iran after the fall of Shah. Is it not double standards?

We may look at another development. Bush administration agreed in July, 2005 to share civilian technologies with India which signalled decade-long policy of US of discouraging countries from developing nuclear weapons. But in New Delhi, US under Secretary of State Nicolas Burns possibly reached an agreement on January 22, 2006 with India, which is not a signatory to NPT, that if the US Congress approved the agreement, India would buy military hardware and sensitive nuclear technologies. Therefore, deal with India appears to be another glaring example of double-standard policy of the United States. This deal would undermine the stand of Bush administration over nuclear weapon programme of North Korea and Iran.

What is happening with North Korea? So-called six parties' negotiation with North Korea becomes a farce, to say the least. The United States did not pursue the matter that it deserves in the interest of the security of the world. North Korea was a party to NPT, but it withdrew from the treaty in 2003. The United States does not have a stake in North Korea because she does not possess oil and gas, which seem to be the vital interests of the politics of Bush administration. Here US seems little concerned about its closest ally South Korea.

Apart from Iranian President's recent remarks about Israel, the decision by Iran to sell oil and gas in Euro instead of Dollar has caused serious concern in Bush administration. We have now come to know that Saddam Hussein also went

ahead to sell oil in Euro which caused annoyance, apart from driving out American oil companies from Iraq. This was revealed by William R. Clark in his book: Petrodollar Warfare: Oil, Iraq and the future of the Dollar. Iran is the second largest oil producer in the Middle East while she is the biggest producer of gas as well. Iran has developed a petro euro system which is likely to be implemented from March this year. If it goes into effect, it will hit hard the US currency. It has much greater effect than Iraq's switching over to Euro in 2000. Iranian minister for oil gave a warning recently that if Iran was deprived of conducting research on nuclear power for peaceful purpose, many countries would feel the pinch of the prices of oil. Oil and gas are playing critical role in world politics these days.

It would be advisable to leave the matter to IAEA which is a watch dog of the United Nations. Board of Governors of this body is comprised of 35 countries covering all continents of the world whereas Security Council does not represent the world as such because power rests with five permanent members. They possess veto power which is tantamount to an undemocratic exercise.

On the other hand, it is open secret that Israel has nuclear weapons and wide range missiles. According to Washington Times of January 19, Israel could strike nuclear weapons producing facilities in Iran as she did in 1981 to destroy Iraq weapons facility at Osirik. Most likely scenario is US or Israeli destruction of Iranian nuclear facilities, said in an editorial of the Washington Times. Have we heard a single word either from European or American leaders against Israel's possession of nuclear weapons? The answer is no.

It is high time that European and American leaders should stop double standards in international politics in the interest of the security and peace in the world. And Iran should open to the monitoring by the inspectors of IAEA without any hesitation and allow them whatever facilities they are looking for inspection to resolve the problem peacefully. Or Iran should gracefully accept the proposal of Russia for enrichment of uranium at Russian territory.

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