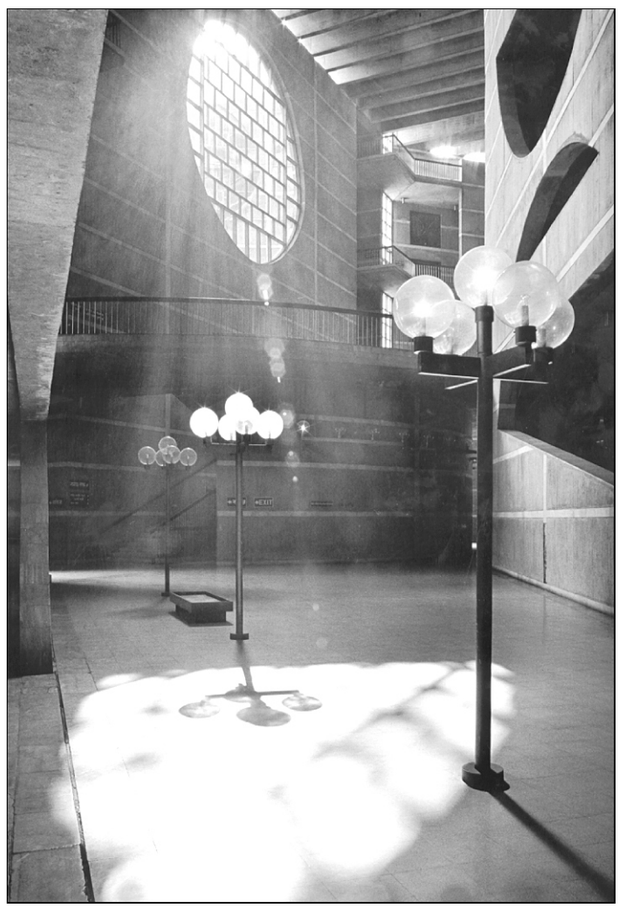
Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Spare this treasure of our pride



The excerpts from a conversation between Nathaniel Kahn, creator of "My Architect: A Son's Journey," a recently released acclaimed film on his father, the illustrious architect Louis I. Kahn and K. Ashraf, a Bangladeshi architect published on December 2 was extremely worth reading. The promising filmmaker from New York discovered our Parliament Complex project as his father's greatest piece of work rising above the barrier of time with it's architectural splendour, and projected it prominently in the film that received considerable appreciation from critics in the pages of The New York Times, the New Yorker, Variety and so on. Our pride and gratification increase even more with Nathaniel's prediction of this absolute masterpiece of modern architecture being the subject of several books for future architects.

This seminal, "abstract and evocative" (in the words of The New York Times) piece of work has brought the name of Bangladesh to the global audience alongside the name of Louis I. Kahn, who tallies with the greatest 20th century architects like Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Miles van der Rohe.

But we feel utterly stupefied as we think back about the plans to alter the original structure of this "abstract and evocative" design by some quarters, who claim themselves to be holders and cultivators of democracy(!) in the country. Would our stalwarts pay due heed to our earnest request to let off this treasure from disfigurement, as they have so far spared only a few things for the nation to feel proud of from their inconsequential and callous approach.

Takad Ahmed Chowdhury
Lecturer in English, The University of Asia Pacific

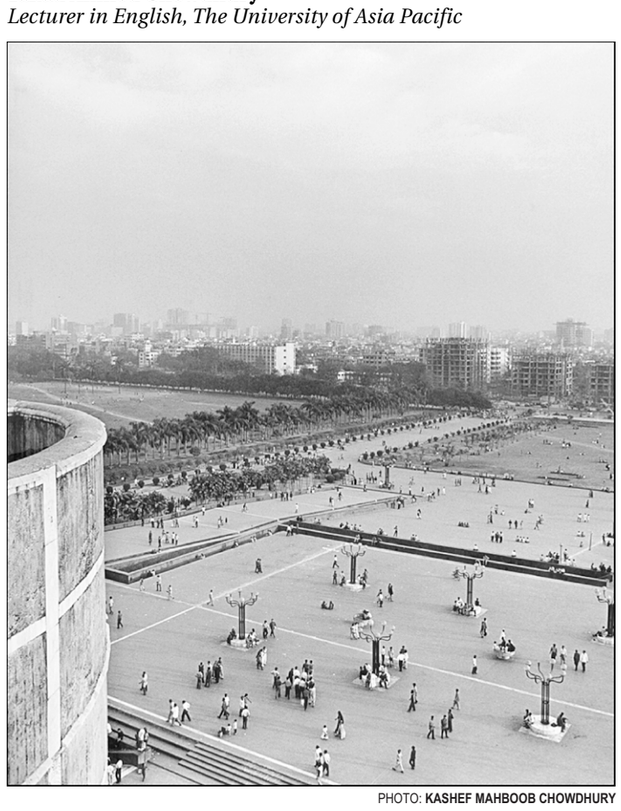


PHOTO: KASHEF MAHBOOB CHOWDHURY

Ominous clouds

Today my mind is racing back to the article, "Bangladesh A Cocoon of Terror" published in the Far Eastern Economic Review sometime back. The entire media including the largest section of the civil society at that time condemned the article as being biased, derogatory and based on false notions. I too joined the ranks simply because I was also of the similar conviction. To this day I believe that the largest section of people of this country continue to be tolerant to people belonging to other religious faiths and do not believe in any form of religious fundamentalism. Yet the fact remains, we do see ominous clouds of rising religious fundamentalism in the country. To my mind this should be a matter of grave concern both for the state and the people at large. Whether we like it or not it must be said that nearly all of the religious fundamentalists are Muslims by faith.

Nearly all other major recognised religions of the world do have sectarian differences both in their beliefs and practices. Yet one seldom hears of any sectarian strife or persecutions amongst themselves. This is not to say that religious fundamentalism did not exist amongst peoples of other faiths. It did indeed reach critical proportions amongst the Christians way back in the 17th and the 18th centuries. While the people have been successful in coming out of this scourge of fundamentalism, we seem to be slowly slipping into it, creating opportunities for "our" enemies to be hostile and resort to extreme measures against us.

One day in the late sixties when I saw a news item in the daily Dawn, published from Karachi, about Mr. M. M. Ahmed of the then Pakistan Planning Commission, a Kadiani by faith, being manhandled by some Muslim religious fundamentalists, I knew then that the seed of religious fundamentalism had set its feet on the soil of Pakistan. The stories which followed thereafter are but too well known to us and the world at large. It is my firm belief that the propagation of our faith Islam is often too loud and certainly unduly aggressive.

The government talks about "taking appropriate and adequate measures" against recurrence of all such incidents like the recent burning of the mosque of the Ahmadias and the Banshkhali carnage. I am indeed sorry to say that the people are not convinced simply because the leaders and activists directly involved in all such incidences past and present are but too well known to the government. On the contrary, it is my belief that the perpetrators are being encouraged and receiving patronage from behind the scenes.

I also believe if we fail to arrest these heinous acts with an iron hand now, we may end up seeing the emergence of a "second Pakistan'' in not too distant a future here on the sacred soil of Bangladesh. While the "first" Pakistan was the work and creation of the British Raj, this "second Pakistan" will be our creation, ushering in disastrous consequences for our future generations.

Shamsher Chowdhury
On e-mail

Noise, everywhere!

Reportedly, the ministry of environment and forests is finalising a draft on noise pollution control (DS, December 3). The minister, Shahjahan Siraj, said that the draft gives "utmost importance to noise pollution cuts in the cities". He promised to scrutinise the draft before approval. The Noise Pollution Control Rules, 2003, has zoned the city into five noise limits, which are being further reduced in the night.

Along with the crime situation going berserk , chaos in the roads, electricity and telephone system playing games with consumers, noise pollution has become another nightmare for city dwellers. That they have lost a "little of hearing ability" is no surprise; the greater surprise being that they have been able to maintain their sanity!

But before the government issues the rules, it should tarry a while and think about the consequences. Will the police (Noise Control Police?) be able to implement the rules? Do they have the ability to measure the decibel limits imposed by the rules? We have seen the minister going to bazaars catching shop owners with polythene bags, he is running in the brick fields checking the height of chimneys of brick-kilns. Hopefully, he won't be standing at the Farm Gate or Gulistan with an audiometer to check noise levels!

But there is a bigger problem -- a substantial proportion of pedestrians in Dhaka's streets would jay walk; they are careless pedestrians who do not bother about the traffic. When I drive through Tejgaon, I occasionally watch scores of garment girls crossing roads without bothering to check the traffic. Slowing down for them to cross, I have often wondered, is looking right and looking left to check the traffic so difficult for them when they are taking a grave risk on their lives. What can a motorist do rather than honk to warn them? Clusters of rickshaws and scores of people block roads, obstructing free- flow of traffic. One is compelled to honk in such situations.

Many people are not aware of traffic rules, of the damage that honking does to one's ear-drums and one's nervous system. Obviously, a sustained campaign is needed to train them for their benefit and for the benefit of society. Let not a good initiative wither away because of wrong planning and thoughtless implementation.

Abdullah Haroon Pasha
Former Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests,
Gulshan 1, Dhaka

Anticipating foreign intervention?

As published in a well known daily, JSD Chairman Hasanul Haq Inu in a press conference held at Col. Taher Auditorium on December 2, expressed his concern over rising of a hard-line radical force in the country. He said that military intervention by the US or India might occur in Bangladesh.

How could he reach such a ridiculous conclusion? We did not hear anything harsh about rising of a radical force in Bangladesh either from the US or from India. Rather, the USA and western countries consider Bangladesh a moderate Muslim country and the US Ambassador in Bangladesh and spokesmen of the White House acknowledged the same many times.

Then what is the source of Mr. Inu's remarks? Is he authorised to make statement on behalf of other countries, or does he want to encourage military interference in the country from outside? This is quite unexpected from a veteran politician who is also a party chief. The simile he presented between Iraq and Bangladesh is hardly plausible. Apprehension of such interference does not seem logical. But what appears from his statement is that it is the anticipation of some quarters who would be happy with such intervention.

Fakhrul Alam
Siddeswari,
Dhaka

Reverse logic?

The more we, helpless people, try to explain to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina, the less they seem to understand. A few days ago, the DS reported about the AL's massive plans to launch a countrywide agitation against the four-party alliance government. And on 7 December, the DS again reported that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, in a close-door meeting, directed her senior cabinet members to prepare for massive "party activities". We wonder where do all these energy and enthusiasm go when it comes to doing something good for the country?

The people didn't vote the BNP for launching public agitation. However, we understand that every party has to defend itself and do all it can to get elected. But we keep telling these two leaders that wasting our money in their personal fights is not the way to get votes. Try serving the people for once and you will see that people will vote for you.

Instead of getting votes by serving people, both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina seem to be obsessed with using 'organisational strength' for this purpose. So the obvious question is: why do they believe in means other than democratic practices? The reason, I believe, is that they have not been paying a high price for their mistakes.

Let me give you a simple example. Many of us, Bangladeshis, are quite happy to offer bribe (yes, let's admit it) to police and other government officials to get our job done. But when these same Bangladeshis are arrested by police abroad (in the UK, for example), we don't offer them bribe. Why? That is because we know by offering bribe we will make matters worse and get even harsher punishment. If Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina paid a price for their mistakes, they would have corrected the same. Ask yourself how many people have sacrificed their lives for this country? Many of our senior citizens today will clearly remember the pain and harassment they had to tolerate in the hands of the occupiers. Many of you had lost your loved ones in the Liberation War. But why did they fight? They didn't sacrifice their precious lives for this country so that we can just hand it over to other occupiers?

We are guilty of being too soft with criminals.

Azad Miah
Oldham, UK

Kudos to Shajahan

I must applaud the state minister for religious affairs, Hossein Shajahan, for taking the stand against the unfair demand of the mullahs to declare the Ahmadias as non-Muslims. What he did showed that the government was not afraid of the clergy and that the mullahs have no real power to determine the fate of any community.

That power lies solely in the supreme hand of Allah, as the minister said so himself. And the fact, that their desire to brand the Ahmadias as "kafir" was thwarted by the government, should serve as a warning to the maulvis not to push their luck.

I should add that, even though this decision of Hossein Shajahan, has somewhat restored the confidence of the Ahmadias in the government of Bangladesh, what the Ahmadias really need is to feel secure within the boundaries of their mosques.

That is where they will know that nobody can encroach upon their right to worship; that nobody can threaten to burn their mosques.

Praying with police protection means that there is still some unfinished business left. The anti-Ahmadia movement has obstinately vowed to carry on with their intentions and Shajahan's statement was not able to silence them.

But I hope that the Ahmadias will always have the support of their government and that they will never have any fear of being given away to the demands of the mullahs.

Maham Bilal Khan, *USA*

Bankrupt politics

I am amazed by the government's efforts directed at looking for links between bureaucrats and police officers and the former President AQM Bodrudozza Chowdhury as published in newspapers recently, though I can see some logic and even value in statutes preventing coalitions between the civil servants and politicians .

Let's face the facts that almost every sector of life in Bangladesh has been politicised: schools, colleges, universities, professionals' organisations, trade unions etc., making the most benign interpretation of such arcane laws (enacted by our colonial rulers) quite defunct.

Let us also face the fact that the individualistic politics of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia conveniently passed off under the guise of democracy. There have been miserable failures and utter disappointments for those who had anticipated much since the demise of military rule. What has the country seen in terms of real development since 1991? President Ziaur Rahman mobilised the country to cut canals and export manpower to the Middle East, President HM Ershad undertook extensive road construction projects, yet in 12 years, these two leaders between them have not even been able to establish a viable broadband telecommunication network essential for our economic growth, but rather brought down the law and order to an all time low!

Leaders without vision and wisdom have really hurt our country. When I think of Dr. Mahatir Mohammad and the magical transformation of Malaysia, when I think of Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu and removal of the evil called apartheid from South Africa, when I look at South Korea, Taiwan and India, I discover those two traits of leaders being of paramount importance to any nation. Sadly, in Bangladesh these people are trying to create a legacy riding on the coattails of former national leaders. Frankly, the so-called "new generation" - my generation - that now populates the ranks and files of the BNP and Awami League fill me with horror. I was extremely dismayed when I read that staggering sums of money had to be contributed by many to earn a seat in the largest ever cabinet of the Bangladesh government. I wish it were not true.

Dr. B may not be the charismatic and energetic face of a frontline leader that we may be looking for. Alas! he has always been the second man - but he is an educated man, an established professional physician, not widely reputed for corruption, an experienced politician, a man with enough dignity and wisdom to step down from the office of the president to save the country from yet another political crisis, even though forcing him out was totally wrong.

A man well respected by the nation has spoken out and stated the obvious: we need a new breed of politicians. Therefore, to hunt down those who are communicating with him seems a blatant abuse of power and waste of valuable national resources. I happen to think that the country would benefit much more if these intelligence agencies focused their efforts on finding which known criminals were communicating with which lawmaker or minister.

I hope Dr. B and his followers will stay afloat, despite harassment and veiled threats

Shabbir A Bashar
Stanford University, California, USA

Koizumi's decision

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan has got approval of his cabinet to send troops to Iraq. He has a prior commitment to president Bush to come to his support in Iraq. Though the troops will be non-combatants, it is likely that they will be seen as troops in support of American occupation forces. A commitment stands fulfilled; yet questions remain if the timing and the conditions are right for such action.

By its own admission, the coalition is still at war in Iraq. Most parts of Iraq still remain combat zones; security is far from secured as is clear by the daily incidents of attack on coalition troops and reprisals by them on Iraqi civilians. Question arises how then Japan abides by its constitutional obligation not to engage in combat role in a foreign land? If the troops come under attack by Iraqi resistance they will have to respond ; the arms they carry will be in use; casualties are likely. How all that will go with the sentiments of Japanese public, many of whom are already protesting the deployment?

Japanese people are sceptical; they do not wish to see body bags coming home. Only recently, the deaths of two of their diplomats in Iraq grieved and shocked many. Their sentiments and apprehensions are real.

The commitment of the Japanese prime minister to help Iraq's reconstruction, to rebuild Iraq's shattered infrastructure and to give valuable humanitarian assistance reflects Japan's deep desire to be a responsible member of the international community. Japan already has demonstrated its generosity and goodwill in ample measure by its pledge to provide a huge amount of aid at the Madrid donors' meeting. Japanese goodwill and commitment to international development is second to none - a fact the world community will readily acknowledge. Given this background, would it not have been more appropriate and perhaps more reasonable had Japan committed its able and willing reconstruction team of engineers and others, only after a stable and internationally accepted Iraqi representative government was formed.

PHOTO: AFP

Japanese firms had undertaken several infrastructure projects in Iraq under the previous regime. Japanese voluntary organisations remained active in medical and related humanitarian work in Iraq; they are no strangers to the people of Iraq who would welcome Japanese participation in the reconstruction of their country destroyed by war and sanctions. But are the conditions right or the timing opportune? This is an issue that will concern not only the opposition political parties but also perhaps a large majority of citizens of Japan. It is a tribute to the industry of its people that Japan has emerged as a major economic power in the world. Japanese solidarity with Iraqi people and its generous help for Iraq's reconstruction, which is in the long term interest of Japan also, should make countries and peoples of the Asian continent proud .

Dr. Zakir
On e-mail

The Geneva Accord

US Secretary of State Colin Powell created something of a rift between the US and Israel last week when he agreed to meet in Washington with the architects of the so-called "Geneva Accord," an unofficial blueprint for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Israel's reservations about the meeting are understandable, but our sense is that leaders who demonstrate optimism and ingenuity in the Middle East these days deserve encouragement, and the Bush administration can support a peace offensive on multiple fronts.

Ariel Sharon, however, has dismissed the Geneva plan, and one can sympathise with an elected leader who resents self-appointed negotiators engaging in freelance diplomacy. But that doesn't mean that the US, or other world powers pursuing an Israeli-Arab peace, should dismiss the Geneva efforts. The two chief negotiators are not amateurs or subversives: Yossi Beilin was Israel's justice minister under Prime Minister Ehud Barak and is a veteran peace negotiator; Yasser Abed Rabbo, though a confidante of the blundering Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, must be counted among the moderates and realists in the Palestinian leadership. Moreover, Beilin and Rabbo have supplied something that the current Israeli government lacks: an endgame for peace talks. Sharon, elected as a hawk, has proved surprisingly flexible and pragmatic in office, but he has focused almost exclusively on the terms and conditions of Israeli-Palestinian talks, leaving many Palestinians and outsiders to wonder if he wants a peace process without a peace.

The endgame that Beilin and Rabbo negotiated actually makes the difficult compromises that will be necessary for a stable peace: Israel would abandon most of its settlements in Palestinian territories, for example; Palestinians would renounce certain of their rights to return to homes in Israel. The accord resembles the framework that the best negotiators have broached for more than a decade. In other words, Beilin and Rabbo offer something much needed in the Middle East -- hope to the moderates on both sides that people of expertise and goodwill still believe in the possibility of a fair two-state solution. For that, they deserve Powell's support.

This message of perseverance is especially timely, for the weekend has produced more disappointing news in the region. The two leading Palestinian extremist organisations, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, refused at meetings in Cairo to participate in a cease-fire with Israel, even though regional Arab powers and the new Palestinian prime minister, Ahmed Qorei, twisted their arms. Then on Sunday, conservative members of Sharon's government denounced a proposal by one of their own, Ehud Olmert, that Israel eventually withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza Strip -- a proposal that would have been uncontroversial in Israel five or 10 years ago.

When disaster strikes in the Middle East -- and it has struck too often in the last three years -- the US is urged to do something. So when opportunity strikes, perhaps even hope, it is utterly appropriate for the Bush administration to give it a tailwind.

The Bush administration's handling of Iraq has come under fire not only from Democrats, but a staunch Republican as well. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich described the Bush administration's strategy as "off a cliff" in post-war Iraq and said the White House has to get a grip on this, the Washington Post said Monday. On NBC's Meet the Press, Gingrich said the administration failed to send enough Iraqi-Americans there after the war. On the main online site of the US occupying authority, he added, "Up until last week you didn't see a single Iraqi on that Web page, and now there is only one."

Meanwhile, on CBS's Face the Nation, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card defended the US administration's policy. "Newt Gingrich is not all-knowing," he said. On ABC's This Week, Senator Hillary Clinton said she agreed with Gingrich. She blamed the administration for miscalculation and inept planning in Iraq. "I do think we need more troops in Iraq," Clinton is reported as saying.

Sirajul Islam, *Dhaka*

PHOTO: AFP