

Shakharibazar tragedy spotlights inept handling of civic responsibilities



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MASS tragedy is a part of Bangladeshi life. There is something about Bangladesh that virtually attracts calamity. We seem to stagger from one catastrophe to another. It's always been that way. Unfortunately as the scale of tragedies -- both manmade and natural -- increased massively during the 90s and continues to wreak havoc in the country today, so did our apathy, both before and after. What is truly tragic is so much of it is man-made, a product of government indifference and official callousness. It is like some vicious cycle of misery with which we have been cursed. Launch disaster, truck and public vehicle crashes on the national highways, fires in the garment factories, diseases namely malaria, diarrhea, TB and Dengue fever like the medieval plague -- they were mostly all preventable.

Yet we never learned our lessons, never had the positive mindset to tackle these catastrophes. In any case we were inured to the sight of human suffering and death. And so disaster after disaster diminished and devastated us. But the consumerist Bangladesh with the inept administration running the country was too busy living its life to be unduly bothered by the horrifying death tolls. Shockingly, after the launch disaster on the river Meghna last May when about 100 men, women, and children met watery death, disaster came calling again in the heart of the city.

A Shakharibazar building collapse on June 9, claiming nineteen lives, including the one who died in the hospital on June 18 before the watchful eyes of the citizens and public service organisations like the RAJUK, DCC, and the administration in general. Three top floors of the building No. 81 at Shakharizabar, home to 12 families, marked as extremely vulnerable, and some shops propped up, were crushed like paper cups. Danger still lurks in the area with apprehension of another disaster waiting to happen any moment. Apart from the building that collapsed, it is now learnt from the DCC source that there are 81 vulnerable buildings in the Shakharibazar area about 200 years old that may be razed to ground any moment, not by any natural calamity but because of

human failings and indifference.

The DCC source indicated that they sent notices to all the owners including the owner of the collapsed building as early as 2001. RAJUK authorities also claimed that they had taken similar action fifteen days ago. But the owners did not comply with the DCC notice. DCC, according to ordinance-1983, is empowered to destroy any vulnerable building. In the present case there was no court case forcing DCC to stall such demolition job, yet they failed, causing so

ings, nobody would have died. The residents or owners of the buildings, because of the multiplicity of ownership title and family feud, could hardly do the demolition job themselves.

We need to admit that our administration or the concerned officials get away with these things because of our apathy. If old Dhaka residents had reacted to the Shakharibazar tragedy through protests and rallies, the concerned authority would have taken the appropriate measures. How many

tion, it was only desirable that the Mayor recognised the fact that solution lay not in demolition, but in planned construction. And only if these two activities happen side by side will they win the support and delighted response of the people.

Expectedly at the present size of migration to Dhaka city, and urban centres, Bangladesh's urban population would have more than doubled in 20 years. However, much we talk about rural development, strengthening of villages, and

them bloom or flow with milk and honey. It needs a team of visionary leaders, a committed bureaucracy, and an enlightened citizenry imbued with zeal and motivation to make such grand dream a success.

What we need more than anything else from the DCC or RAJUK is a master plan that would replace such decrepit, dingy buildings and slums with decent, low-cost housing. There are enough talented architects in the country who can put this together in months (not

sons fresh in the mind of the people, the administration can ill-afford to fight shy of such momentous problems involving life and death of a sizable section of the citizenry.

The capital city Dhaka, beautiful not so long ago, is today the ugliest and most polluted city in the world. It can be saved as other cities have been. Singapore being a remarkable example of what can be done if there is a will to do something constructive. Our ministers and other high-ups in the officialdom must realise that Singapore sprang up from the ruins of the Second World War by sheer determination of its leaders and active participation of its people. We have to understand the importance of construction and not just demolition.

Undeniably true, cities shape civilisations and are in turn shaped by them. Few urban centres in the country are known for their urban discipline. Shockingly, of late norms of organised civic life have been violated with impunity. Illegal encroachments and unauthorised constructions, as were the case in Shakharibazar and on the banks of Buriganga have become rampant. The crisis

of governance is particularly marked at the municipal level. Whereas urban governance demands a coherent, coordinated and vibrant setup, our capital city including other urban centres have been saddled with fragmented, fractured and imbecile authorities, incapable of tackling core problems.

Expectedly, after liberation in 1971, the country should have evolved a clear urban vision which should have been part of an equally clear national vision. Unfortunately those at the helm did not show any real ingenuity. They became more imitative than creative. They failed to regenerate the mind of the citizenry. This means that development of the urban centres has suffered at the hands of the policy makers. So unless we change the contours of our mindscape, the urban landscape will continue to decay, and tragedies like the one in Shakharibazar that exacted an enormous price will endlessly be repeated.

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many loss of lives.

On the other hand, RAJUK officials allowed the owners of the building no. 80, next plot to the collapsed building, to build up a six storey structure without considering the fate of the adjacent building, which, according to experts was the main reason for the collapse. DCC and RAJUK sources apart, government's intelligence agency on the basis of the tenant-owner versions, had identified 572 buildings in three thanas of old Dhaka as most vulnerable. In the Shakharibazar area, out of 142 buildings, about 100 buildings have been found to be extremely vulnerable.

It is now apparent that as DCC and RAJUK continue passing the buck, people in the area will continue to die. They will die over and over, in incident after incident, until we recognise that the machinery looking after such lapses is now so venal, so apathetic, so inhuman, that it could not care less. We also need to realise that until all of us -- get up and say enough is enough, nothing is going to change. It was a disaster waiting to happen. It is like a bad play endlessly repeated. Residents of the old city must wake up to the impending disaster that may engulf them at any time in the future. As members of conscious citizenry, it should be as much our mission, if we want things to change.

Amid the welter of accusations and counter accusations, the problem that exposes people to death and destruction seems to have got buried under the debris and rubble. To prevent recurrence of such tragic incidents in future, officials guilty of neglecting their mandatory obligations must be booked. And sure enough, until this is done, justice will not have been done, and recurrence stopped. And left unaddressed, there could be more deaths that must be avoided. Evidently, if the DCC or RAJUK officials had acted as per ordinance, by demolishing the extremely vulnerable build-

more tragedies is going to take for us to wake up to the truth that the fate of the Shakharibazar families has to be our fate as well?

The DCC or RAJUK, as the case may be, must draw a master plan for these vulnerable buildings encompassing the old Dhaka city, and easy bank loans must be made available to the residents for construction of houses in the interest of preventing further tragedies. It is less likely that they will defraud the banks and fly away with the loans issued to them than our so-called big business groups. People believe if lives are saved and a somewhat decent accommodation is available, the residents or owners have hardly anything to object to. It is quite usual that there would be lot of meetings, discussions, and even plans will be prepared, and then everything will fizzle out as days, weeks, or months elapse until another such tragedy strikes this risky zone.

It is heartening to learn that Dhaka city Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka, who actually owns the responsibility for such demolition as well as for drawing master plan and reconstruction job, has shown his grit to draw up a master plan and have it approved by the concerned ministry. The Mayor sounded sincere and certainly seems to be doing more than his predecessors in the past decade, but surely, if he confines his activities to demolishing buildings only, he will never get the sort of delighted response. As it happens in such cases, interest groups moving in the corridors of power might put their dirty hands in the project claiming fake ownership title of the land that might doom a noble mission to failure.

One tends to believe that neither DCC nor RAJUK has understood the enormity of the problem and the appalling living conditions the old Dhaka residents face, like the maze of narrow lanes other than decrepit and dingy buildings with no running water and other amenities of life. In such a situa-

alleviation of rural poverty, stopping migration to cities seems to be a daunting job. Because the basic ingredients towards achieving the goal, namely literacy, effective schooling for children, health and sanitation programmes, motorable roads and, most important of all, electricity in every house are still a distant dream. Pouring money into villages will not make

years), and only when we have a concrete model for urban renewal should demolition of such decrepit buildings begin or carry some meaning. With memories of Jagannath Hall building collapse in 1985 that claimed 43 precious lives, building crash in Sabujbag area that took 2 lives last year, and another Shakharibazar building collapse in 2001 injuring 10 per-

Tiger Woods in denial

Dr. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

ANOTHER of golf's major championships, the US Open, concluded on June 20 at Long Island's Shinnecock Hills, and Tiger Woods failed to win it. While Woods is not expected to win every major he plays in, for a while it appeared as though he was capable of doing exactly that. When Woods won the 2002 US Open at Long Island's Bethpage course that was the 7th major he had won out of the previous eleven. Supremely confident, Tiger Woods severed his relationship with his long time coach Butch Harmon after his US Open victory. Eight more majors have passed since then, and Tiger Woods has not won any. Not only is Woods not winning, he is getting beaten savagely. In last week's US Open, Woods staggered to the finish ten strokes over par, a whopping fourteen strokes behind the winner, South Africa's Retief Goosen at four under par! These are the kind of margins with which Woods used to beat the second place finisher!

If fellow South African Ernie Els, who was in the last pairing with Goosen had won the US Open instead of Goosen, Els would have overtaken Woods as the world's number one player. Woods has been the world's number one golfer since overtaking David Duval in 1999. He was so far ahead of the second ranked player at one time that it would have taken the second-ranked player close to two years overtake Woods. Now Woods is barely two strokes ahead of Els and Fiji's Vijay Singh. The pathetic way that Woods is playing, combined with surging Els, Singh and Phil Mickelson, it is a matter of weeks before Woods loses his top ranking to any of these three players.

So, what has happened to the world's number one sports icon? In short, faulty swing, parting from the world's best swing coach and overconfidence bordering on arrogance has destroyed Woods' game. Woods cannot hit straight anymore. Yet, he gets extremely upset if anyone points out the obvious. Unfortunately, Woods appears to have believed all the hyperbole that his father had uttered about his son; that Woods is a superman, the next best thing to Jesus! Golf is a humbling game;

it has shown everyone, with the exception of Woods, how human Woods is!

Swing is the fundamental part of golf. To make the ball travel over 200 or 300 yards off the tee depending on the length of the hole, a golfer's arms and body have to generate tremendous power in split-seconds and be in perfect sync. Slight misalignment or mistiming of the swing can result in the ball going far off the fairway into the rough, which may result in a bogey (over par score). When Tiger Woods was playing well, he was hitting the fairway off the tee over 70 percent of the time. Lately, he is hitting the fairway less 50% of the time. That puts tremendous pressure on his short game, courts

banishing all negative thoughts. Lately, Tiger Woods has been accentuating the positive in the face of hopelessness to such an extent as to make him look ridiculous. Nine strokes behind Retief Goosen, the US Open winner also in 2001, after three rounds Woods still claimed, "I can still win the tournament." Retorted The New York Times' columnist Dave Anderson: "No he can't!" Although his performance is getting steadily worse, Woods keeps on claiming that he is getting "close." Critics are now making fun of Woods' misplaced optimism. In its preview of the US Open, Sports Illustrated predicted that Woods would not win because of his "slump, er, because he is close!"

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Woods's friends and enemies agree that to get back to the top he must get back with Harmon. It is doubtful that Woods will, because of misplaced pride. Woods believes that Harmon was getting too much credit for coaching him. And Harmon was getting tired of Woods' demand that he attend every major Woods plays in.

disaster and results inevitably in bogeys.

Golf's coaching has evolved over the last thirty years. The previous generation did not depend of swing coaches. The greatest golfer to date, Jack Nicklaus, on rare occasion sought the advice of a swing coach. The players corrected their own swing as they played along. Things are quite different now. Every young player has fine-tuned his swing under the watchful eye of a swing coach. The coach provides another pair of eyes. For ten years before 2002, Butch Harmon was Tiger Woods' swing coach and extra eyes. Having been weaned on, and prospered under the tutelage of a swing coach, it stands to reason that Woods cannot go it alone now. But try telling that to Woods!

Superstars these days also employ sports psychologists. These cheerleaders motivate players into thinking positively and

It took Woods' coach Butch Harmon to articulate what every golfer is thinking privately of Woods' golf: Woods is in denial about the problems in his game starting with the swing. Harmon said that Woods looks like a different player than when he coached him, with a messed up swing. Woods has not won a stroke play PGA tournament since last October. Like other average players, Woods cannot play well for more than two of the four days in a tournament. Harmon commented: "For him to stand there in every interview and say he is getting close and he feels really good about what he is doing I think he is in denial. I just think Tiger Woods is not playing well. He is not swinging the golf club well and he is not working the right things."

As expected, Woods reacted sharply: "I don't know why Butch would say that. Obviously, he does not know I'm working on, and he's never asked me and I've never talked him about it, and no one

knows. I don't understand why he would say anything like that, especially when we've been as close as we are. And we've resolved everything, I thought. I thought everything would have been cool. For him to go off and say things like that, I don't understand where he is coming from. Friends say that face to face. If you go say something like that, you go right up to my face and say it. That's what we used to do. That's the way it should have been handled." Woods still does not get it, does he? The fact that his game stinks in spite of Woods' claim to the contrary is a validation of Harmon's criticism. This time Harmon did not back off. He added that the Woods that he knew was his (Woods's) number one critic. If he played poorly, he would say so in the press conference, rush out and go to the practice range. These days, observed Harmon, although Woods is playing poorly, he would never admit to it, or rush to the practice range to correct his game. I doubt that Woods realizes Harmon has done him a huge favour by shining the spotlight on the problems in Woods's game that Woods is trying to hide.

Woods's friends and enemies agree that to get back to the top he must get back with Harmon. It is doubtful that Woods will, because of misplaced pride. Woods believes that Harmon was getting too much credit for coaching him. And Harmon was getting tired of Woods' demand that he attend every major Woods plays in. Woods has such an inflated ego that he believes Harmon should be his coach on demand. Woods is great, but not that great.

One of the reasons why boxing legend Muhammad Ali remains the writer's number one hero is because in a sport that relies on brawn, Ali used brain. Unfortunately, not all jocks are that smart. For some inexplicable reason, the greatest basketball player in the history of the game, Michael Jordan, retired from the game for three years at his prime to play minor league baseball before returning to basketball! To the delight of his competitors, Tiger Woods is in denial that he is in a major slump and needs his coach Butch Harmon back. No one in the history of golf has talked his way out of a slump. Tiger Woods will not be the first one.

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