

Of failing standards in our service sector

DR. SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

In a recent depiction of product standards, The Daily Star (Oct 16) bewailed that, "We have become hostage to ... a group of unscrupulous businessmen." Not only are standards being abused, some basic items we consume could be extremely harmful to our health. This is not merely a crisis of accountability; Bangladesh today faces a serious crisis of character and conscience that has grown to become pervasive. Consequently, the failure to meet standards is also true of our service providers. It would seem as if they never really understood or cared about the meaning of the term "service."

In simple terms, service providers (educators, law enforcers, health care providers, restaurants, retailers, etc.) ought to act as facilitators. By this simple act, they can facilitate the lives of others, thus setting up a chain of service provisions and consumptions. When this

system is well orchestrated, people develop a set of stable expectations around which they can organise their lives and make it as productive as possible, and are thus enabled to contribute to the national wealth pool.

Introduce a weak link in this system and the expectations become unstable, disrupting normal productive routines. Introduce several weak links in the system and we have the potential for chaos. Valuable national hours are lost as people try to bring order to their lives when broken expectations become a devastatingly disorienting force.

Chaos, unfortunately, is routine in the lives of the people of Bangladesh. In the service sector, somehow, life's basic expectations and ability to predict have been maimed and this is costing the nation ... royally! Witness, for example, how droves of people having lost faith in predictability are seeking health care, higher education, or even vacations and other services

So, there you have it: a succinct view of this nation's so called service providers. Interestingly, for this study, we gained insights from the middle class. One can only imagine the plight of the marginalised -- the rickshaw puller, the garment worker, the street peddler, and so on. The cost of adjusting to these uncertainties can be exorbitant, making emancipation elusive. It's not the public or private sector that we really ought to worry about, it's ourselves -- our character and conscience as service providers -- that we need to fix.

abroad. This failure of the service sector to facilitate the lives of others is so abysmal, the apathy so palpable, it is no wonder this nation of immense possibilities continues to languish in despair and hopelessness.

Who is failing us? What is the extent of this failure? Is there a way out?

The country's political leadership is always an easy scapegoat, although one cannot deny that the past and continuing failures of leadership translate to failures on a wider scale as reflected across the economic, social, and spiritual landscape. But there's much more

to it. Here, I do not engage in arm-chair discourse or ivory tower theorising to examine the questions. Instead, I rely on data -- real data from real people. I asked people about their daily lives and the role that various service providers, both public and private, have played as facilitators. The findings are not unexpected: both sectors have failed them miserably, barring, perhaps, some freak anomalies. The private sector's provision of low grade and deplorable services rivals those of the public sector -- as the data will show -- and efficiency gains may have been marginal at best, while the plight of the consumer has

been one of sustained suffering. The bottom line is that the service sector -- like its manufacturing counterpart -- is costing the nation untold woes that translate into financial, psychological, and social costs. What is distressing is that instead of being in the business of service, both sectors seem to be championing the business of disservice, exploiting and impoverishing the hapless consumer, anytime anywhere. I call this the *leech syndrome*! The saddest part is that the maltreated and thoroughly abused citizen has no one to turn to for redress. Here are some statistics to support my exhortations: you, the

readers, be the judge.

We employed students of a private university to survey people from their own middle class backgrounds about recent service experiences. Of the 346 people interviewed, 320 or 92.5 per cent indicated having recently encountered a highly dissatisfying service. This is staggering -- a staggering failure of our service providers! Of these low grade service experiences, 126 (39.4 per cent) were delivered by the public sector, while 172 (54 per cent) were delivered by the private sector. Note the percentage of dissatisfying services delivered by the private sector.

We probed further to investigate what went wrong and found that the "human factor" was responsible for 72 per cent of the dissatisfactions. Human failures include callousness, carelessness, incompetence, lack of empathy, lack of responsiveness, poor reliability, shameless greed, laziness, and plain bad manners. "Technological failures" were noted by 11 per cent of the dissatisfied respondents, while "process failures" (having to wait longer than necessary, too many

signatures, etc.) accounted for another 10 per cent.

And who were the offenders? The telecommunications industry (both public and private) was by far the worst offender, registering 25 per cent of the dissatisfaction votes, followed by the transportation sector, the banking sector, electric supply, retail food sector, and Internet service providers. Hospital and health services, water sector, and "other" retail services were also among the prominent offenders. Interestingly, with all the furor over education, it didn't show up as a big offender. Perhaps people are so overwhelmed by the daily irritants that they have little time to contemplate the failures of this ubiquitous industry and its long-term adverse impact; or perhaps, people do not see education as a service yet!

When asked about redress or solutions, a large proportion of the sufferers felt they had nowhere to turn. Many of them felt strongly that there was no use complaining, another sizeable proportion didn't even know where to complain, while a significant number felt it was not worth their time to seek redress, choosing to suffer their inconveniences and rage silently because they felt they would be given the run around by an acerbic *kalkey ashen* (come tomorrow). When it comes to service, this is what we have turned into -- a "kalkey ashen" society that is conducive to various forms of manipulation: forget for the moment the height of inconvenience and quandary this little phrase generates! And among those who tried to

complain, a whopping 74 per cent indicated that their complaints were never resolved.

So, there you have it: a succinct view of this nation's so called service providers. Interestingly, for this study, we gained insights from the middle class. One can only imagine the plight of the marginalised -- the rickshaw puller, the garment worker, the street peddler, and so on.

Is there a way out? Unfortunately, the malady goes down deep. The character and conscience of our service providers are gravely afflicted. Widespread selfishness, uncaring authority, depraved values, unbridled greed, a senseless rush to acquire and "show" ones wealth and a host of similar human failures are behind what ails this nation and mars its chances of emerging from the morass. Unless these deep-seated traits change, uncertainty and unpredictability, that are easy to manipulate for personal gain, will be a substantial part of our service experiences. The cost of adjusting to these uncertainties can be exorbitant, making emancipation elusive. It's not the public or private sector that we really ought to worry about, it's ourselves -- our character and conscience as service providers -- that we need to fix.

Dr. Syed Saad Andaleeb is Professor and Program Chair of Marketing at the Sam and Irene Black School of Business, Pennsylvania State University at Erie, and Editor of the Journal of Bangladesh Studies. This article is dedicated to those students of East West University, Bangladesh, who

Importance of Ramadan

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

THE Holy Qur'an was revealed in the month of Ramadan. About the matchless position of the Holy Qur'an the world-renowned translator and commentator Allama Abdullah Yusuf Ali has observed: "There is no Book in the world in whose service so much talent, so much labour and so much money and time have been expended as

has been the case with the Qur'an.

He has also opined elsewhere that "Qur'anic literature is so voluminous that no single man can compass a perusal of the whole." So, we can easily realise and appreciate the unrivalled position of the Qur'an, and it was revealed unto our holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) on 21st Ramadan night, when he was exactly 40 years 6 months of age. The candid observations of the

famous commentator clearly indicate the great importance and unique position of the holy month of Ramadan. In this connection we may recall here what Allah Gafur-ar-Rahim declares in Ayat (Verse) 185 of Sura (Chapter) Baqara (the Cow) of the Holy Qur'an. He says:

"Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So,

every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting, but if any one is ill or on a journey the prescribed period (should be made up) by days later. Allah intends every facility for you: He does not want you to put you to difficulty. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period, and to glorify Him in that He has guided you, and perchance you shall be grateful."

Again, Benign Allah wants us to achieve success in our everyday life through self-restraint, that is, through observance of "Siam" (Fasting) for full 30 days from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan. And in this connection one may refer to two very important Qur'anic Ayats (Verses) of Sura Baqara in which Merciful Allah declares in clear and unambiguous terms:

Ayat: 183 "O ye who believe! fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye (learn) self-restraint",

Ayat 184 "(Fasting) for a fixed number of days: But if any one is ill or on a journey, the prescribed number (should be made up) from days later. For those who can do it (with hardship), is a ransom, the feeding of that is indigent, but if he will give more of his own free will it is better for him. And it is better ye fast, if you only knew."

It is evident from the aforesaid Verses of the Qur'an that Allah is not only considerate, He is magnanimous also to those who can "fast with hardship." Islam is not only a scientific religion of Almighty Allah, it is also His chosen religion which he has perfected as clearly indicated in Ayat (Verse) 3 of Sura (Chapter) Maida (or the Table Spread) of the Holy Qur'an.

The literal meaning of the term 'Siam' as it appears in the Qur'an is "abstention," that is, abstention from food, drink and sex. But when considered from the point of view of Islamic terminology 'Siam' also means abstention from all kinds of shameful deeds. Fasting, as ordained by Allah Rabbul Alameen, is not meant for self-torture. Allama Abdullah Yusuf Ali while commenting on Ayats 183 and 184 of Sura Baqara of the Qur'an, has observed, "The Muslim fast is not meant for self torture. Although it is stricter than other fasts it also provides alleviations for special circumstances. If it were merely a temporary abstention from food and drink it would be salutary for many

people, who habitually eat and drink to excess. The instinct for food, drink and sex is strong in animal nature, and temporary restraint from all these enables the attention to be diverted to higher things. This is necessary through prayer, contemplation and acts of charity, not of the showy kind but by seeking out those really in need certain higher standards are prescribed. But much higher standards are prescribed."

It may be mentioned here that the people of Makkah claimed their descent from Prophet Hazrat Ibrahim (AS) through his son Prophet Hazrat Ismail (AS) and tradition states that their place of worship was still the Ka'bah or the House of Allah, but the chief objects of worship there were a number of idols "who were called daughters of Allah and intercessors." The few who felt disgust at this idolatry longed for the religion of Abraham and tried to find out what had been its teaching.

Such seekers of the truth were known as 'Hunafa' (sing. 'Hanif'). Mentionable, Muhammad (SM) was also a 'Hanif'. He had his own way of thinking and it was his usual practice to retire with his family to a cave called Hira in the Mount An-Noun which was only two miles from Makkah. As the holy prophet (pbuh) was a 'Hanif' he required a suitable time or period of the year for his deep and proper meditation, and that period was again certainly the holy month of Ramadan. So, Ramadan played an important role in the eventful life of our holy prophet also immediately before he was honoured with Prophethood by Almighty Allah.

The holy month of Ramadan is here once again. The whole Muslim world has been awaiting to hail it, and observe it with due solemnity. Muslims in Bangladesh should be conscious and mindful of observing this holy month. Let us also think of those unfortunate and indigent people who often experience sharp pinch of hunger and cannot meet both ends during this month of Ramadan. Let Ramadan be an excellent training period for all Muslims to be religious, pious and honest during the remaining eleven months of the year so that society will certainly be a better place to live in.

Kazi Aulad Hossain is a retired Govt official.

7X3

8X3

5X2

5X6