

On the fringe of chaos

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BOMBS are not new in Bangladesh. Nor are truckloads of lethal weapons that have armed a sophisticated clandestine army. But targeting the entire country, as was done on August 17, is unprecedented even by Bangladeshi standards. Mercifully, the bombers did not seek much blood this time. It's not clear what their real intention was. It could have been a show of force or plain full-dress rehearsal for a dangerous course of action that is about to unfold on this unfortunate land. Remedial measures are still possible if only the truth is unearthed and the entire nation is drawn together for a comprehensive action plan. The blame game must stop here.

With 459 blasts in only 30 minutes spread over 63 districts; its enormity is simply staggering. All lethal technologies like explosives, detonators, and sophisticated time devices were used. Why then were the bombs made small enough to avoid substantial damage. Bigger bombs would have needed less manpower and carried less risk of unearthing. What was than the intention of this high risk nationwide bombing? We have not had enough clues so far. If we believe the first confessional statement of our Home Minister, intelligence organisations have not done a bad job really.

The immediate reaction of our Home Minister was that the government knew the threat of bombing between August 14 to 16, but somehow was surprised on the 17th morning. If the government had been warned of the possibility of such enormous scale bombings, what did it do to unearh the conspiracy and prevent the bombings? Security measures are primarily preventive, if dealt with, bombings of public places and

government offices do not scale down or dismantle overnight. Why were people not warned of the impending danger? By evening the Home Minister understandably changed his statement to knowing nothing.

Explosives are available in the clandestine bazaars, also detonators if one is willing to pay the right price. But what surprises one is the acquiring or making of hundreds of time devices worked in such a precision in that fateful half hour. It

On emergence of Bangladesh many are calibrating back towards historical perception of Muslim homeland out of apprehension. Bangladesh culture today is the curious mix of modernism with fundamentalist hedging, drifting in wilderness rather than anchoring on any fringe. Drifting is more accommodating for unfulfilled adventures. I don't agree with those who are too eager to call Bangladesh a failed state or even a failed government. But I wonder how long Bangladesh can drift without getting into greater trouble.

speaks of sophisticated training, discipline, and high intelligence of the bomb makers and handlers. What is stunning is the national coordination and precision work of a dedicated brigade of evil doers. How comes not a single case of apprehension took place by effort or accident before the commission of the actual offence?

Who are these people, what is the motivation and ultimate aim? Who all are providing leadership and organisation? These are very expensive activities. Where does the money come from? There had been many lethal bombings during the last couple of years – Udichi, Ramna Batamul, numerous bombings at cinema halls and jattras, brutal killing of ASMS Kibria,

attempt on the life of British High Commissioner and murderous attempt at Bangabandhu Avenue on the leader of the opposition, are only a few. The nation has no satisfactory answer to the bombings and killings and accidental recovery of 10 truckload of sophisticated arms, ammunition, and explosives from a government jetty in Chittagong.

Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) had some leaflets on display but this could not be taken for granted without further proof.

example of the government and opposition sitting together for consensus during national crisis. Let's hope there is not going to be another frustrating experience.

August has been a fateful month in Bangladesh. Legacies are as far-flung as the birth of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, that failed with the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. Pakistan was carved out of India in the name of Muslims. For many, Jinnah, a non-practicing Muslim, neither was a good leader nor Pakistan an ideal state. As Pakistan became non-stoppable many took a vow to convert Pakistan into a theological state. Pakistan whole and leftover still remains an unfulfilled promise to them.

The dream was further wrecked when Bangladesh came into existence in 1971, and more dissension was added when Bangladesh adopted secularism as one of the four national principles. To some, secularism is either an imported conspiracy or at least an existential distortion. The irony is that we were Muslims that founded Pakistan, but Bengalis in Pakistan had to struggle for their political rights. On emergence of Bangladesh many are calibrating back towards historical perception of Muslim homeland out of apprehension. Bangladesh culture today is the curious mix of modernism with fundamentalist hedging, drifting in wilderness rather than anchoring on any fringe. Drifting is more accommodating for unfulfilled adventures.

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Bomb blast sites: Tangail judge's court premise (left) and Sylhet Judge's court premise. At least 450 such devices went off simultaneously in 63 districts across the country on 17 August.



Philosophical crisis: A confused Bengali nation

RUBAIYAT HOSSAIN

459 bombs have blasted almost all over Bangladesh in exactly thirty minutes. This is certainly not the first attack of this type, but it is definitely the first of this scale. August 17 attack has successfully instilled fear in the civilians' minds.

Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, a banned militant group, has already claimed responsibility for the attacks. It seems as if they have lost faith in man made law. "[I]t is time to implement Islamic law in Bangladesh. There is no future with man-made law."

The attack of August 17 is not an isolated endeavour, but it resonates with the same urge that has been heard all over the world in the terrorist attacks: a cry for an alternative to the Western hegemonic rule. Islamic fundamentalism is accepted by some as a valid alternative to counter the omnipresent forces of capitalism and Western imperialism.

In fact, Maulana Nizami argues that since communism has failed, and the Western model of capitalism is inherently un-Islamic and materialistic, Islam can potentially offer an alternative path of development for Bangladesh. If we get down to the bottom of things, the world-wide terrorist phenomenon embodies a philosophical rebellion against the Western capitalist mode of life.

A part of the world youth is certainly frustrated and hopeless enough to have been recruited to the militant Islamic fundamentalist groups. What these attacks stand for is certainly a very dark force, but what we must also analyse for our own benefit is that these forces come out of a) ignorance and confusion, and b) deprivation and sense of extreme marginalisation.

In specific reference to the case of Bangladesh, the ignorance is double layered: firstly, our lack of reflection and understanding of our national identity, secondly, a partial and selective understanding of Islam.

Take for example the word *jihad*. According to Islamic philosophy the

word represents a vast notion that has to do with the ultimate freedom of spirit. Hazrat Muhammad (S) always advised his followers to fight against *nafs*, or ego comprising lust, desires and attachment to materialistic things. The battle against *nafs* is direct *zihad-e-akbari* (the greatest holy war). Hazrat Mowlana Rumi said, "our real enemy is *nafs*. "Allah declares in the *Hadith-e-Kudshi* (Holy Tradition): "Fight against *nafs*, because it is my enemy." The notion of *jihad* or holy war that is stained with blood, sword, and fear comes out of a very partial, materialistic, and ignorant reading of Islamic theology.

As per our national identity is

If we want to address the deep-rooted issues, we struggle to come up with a national ideology suited both for the elite and the mass. We must take active part in bridging the monstrous gap between the educated elites and the urban and rural masses. Today we must reconsolidate our internal dilemma as a nation to combat the forces of terrorism.

concerned, do we really know who we are as a people? And even if some of us may claim a certain national identity, have we all reached at least a minimum level of homogeneity to unite under one common umbrella of national identity?

Counting from 1905, our territory has been shifted three times along with our national identity. In 1905 Bengal was divided and Bengalis all of a sudden became Bengali Muslims, in 1947 Pakistan was created and they became Pakistanis, and in 1971 Bangladesh was born and Bangladeshi Muslims came into being.

It is very hard to tell what percentage of our national imagination is based on our ethnic identity versus our religious identity. We exist in a permanent state of confusion as we step out of the pages of our history text books.

We always hear veterans complaining that the dreams of *Muktiuddho* has not been realized, similarly Bangabandhu's dreams of

"Shonar Bangla" is also yet to be realised. We live in a state of shattered hopes and disappointments.

Dr. Humayun Azad rightly pointed out that for poverty stricken, uneducated, suffering masses religion works like a drug, which promises them to deliver all fruits of happiness only under one condition: blind faith and obedience to Allah's words. The mass, incapable of reading or writing Bangla, cannot be expected to read, conceptualise, and understand the Holy Quran in their own terms.

Thus they become prey to the local mullahs, who often interpret the scriptures to their own ends. As

"the predominance of capitalist relations in the transitional society."

The process of Islamisation can also be viewed as a result of the ruptured "ideological hegemony over the masses established during the struggle against Pakistani colonial rule." Ali Riaz argues that Islam is consciously used as a tool to earn public consensus as the state ruling bloc in Bangladesh fails to come up with an ideology suited both for the elites, and the mass.

Local mullahs are giving out *fatwas* to establish a superior ideology based on their inadequate knowledge of the Islamic scripture, militant Islamists such as Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh are poisoning our minds with blind fear to gain an ideological hold over our brains, but what are we – the so called conscious, educated, and middle class civil society -- doing about it?

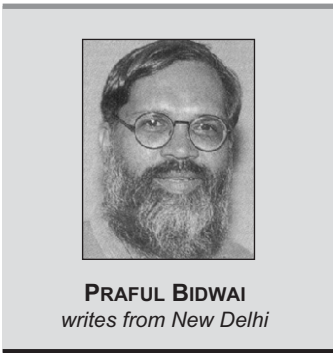
After bombs blast, we blame each other, point our fingers, and get heavily involved in politicising the whole event. The names and faces of those common men, women and children who die in the attacks get little or no attention. In haste we feel there is no time to look back and reconceptualise who we are as a nation.

But it is the philosophical right of each one of us to come in terms with our national identity, and discuss it on a national level. Our problems today are brutal and violent, but no good can come out of violence in response to violence. Only a cultural and philosophical internalisation of our national identity can help us reflect on the internal ruptures of our nation-state.

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Rubaiyat Hossain is a freelance writer.

Time to make history? Freedom's unfinished agenda



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

ON Independence Day, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh exhorted Indians to "seize" the moment and "make India a truly great nation." The key to this, he said, lies in achieving "rapid economic growth and ensuring social justice."

Dr Singh said India is now witnessing "unprecedented economic growth" such as 7 or 8 percent a year. Besides, "the world wants us to do well." So we can "eradicate poverty [and] hunger if the current momentum is maintained for five to 10 years."

Dr Singh announced several welfare schemes. But his promises haven't kindled the hope that India will soon become a country "where there are no barriers between the government and the people." His slogan "garibi hatao, rozgar badhavo" hasn't caught on.

One reason is that the Independence Day address has long ceased to be a conversation between the Prime Minister and the public. The people have heard far too many promises to be impressed by more.

Another reason is that the UPA doesn't seem all ready to embark on a radically new policy course. It's content to carry on with the NDA's policies, with a slightly greater emphasis on the "human face" part of the formula, "Globalisation With a Human Face."

The public knows that higher GDP growth need not mean more jobs, even better nutrition. Twenty years ago, India's annual GDP growth was 3.5 percent, but employment expanded at 2.2 percent. Today, employment is only growing by 1.1 percent less than half the rate of addition to the workforce.

India's growth is unbalanced too: services are growing rapidly, industry sluggishly, while agriculture, on which 60 percent of people depend, is in distress. Farm incomes are falling. Mounting indebtedness has driven 9,000 farmers to suicide

since 1998.

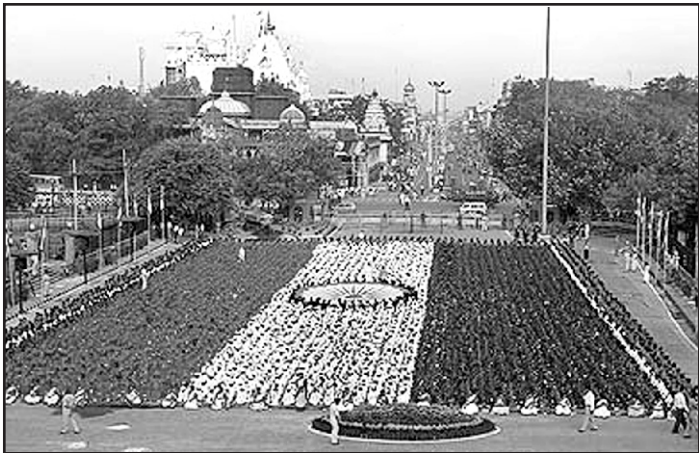
Today, annual per capita foodgrains consumption, 154 kg, is 20 kg lower than 6 years ago, and of the same order as in the 1940s, the decade of the Bengal Famine. Two-fifths of farm households recently queried by the National Sample Survey said they would quit farming, given a choice.

There are other contradictions in today's India. We have a fairly stable political democracy, a rare success in the Third World. But this goes

the globe's third largest army. But India belongs to the bottom one-fourth of all nations in the UN Human Development Index. As the Indian state's "National Security" obsession grows, human security declines, with shrinking food security, income security, gender security, and personal security.

India is rapidly urbanising. But 52 percent of its urban population has no sanitation. 35 percent lives in slums. Indian cities are among the world's most polluted and con-

Popular empowerment is India's greatest gain. It's the key to rectifying aberrations from true democracy. But there can be no empowerment without attacking poverty, combating income and regional disparities, and creating social opportunity. This is best done through public action. Market forces won't bridge social divides, nor reduce disparities in access to health and education.



Colourful Independence Day rally in New Delhi.

hand-in-hand with social bondage and economic servitude. Millions are barred by lack of social opportunity from developing their elementary human potential. For the 48 percent of Indian children who are malnourished, the future is sordid and cruel. 47 percent of Indian mothers are anaemic, a proportion twice as high as in sub-Saharan Africa after two decades of civil war, economic collapse, and famine.

India prides itself as a constitutional democracy. Yet, it's not a rule-of-law society. Its state cannot guarantee citizens that most basic right, the right to life/fitness Delhi 1984 and Gujarat 2002. The state is often predatory upon its own people, as in Kashmir, the Northeast, or Gurgaon.

India is among the world's top three buyers of armaments and has

gested.

India for decades campaigned for global peace and nuclear disarmament, and defended multilateralism and multipolarity. Today, it has become a camp-follower of the world's most belligerent power in pursuit of Empire. India has joined the Nuclear Club and craves recognition from the United States as a "responsible" nuclear weapons-state (NWS) – a contradiction in terms.

Traditionally, India has opposed occupation. Today, it has a close military relationship with Israel, which has no intention of ending Palestine's occupation after quitting Gaza.

New Delhi is offering to collaborate with Washington's occupation of Iraq in the name of "democracy" and "stabilisation." India recently

Macroeconomics and agriculture

ANAM A CHOUDHURY

MANY political scientists have criticised political campaigns in the United States as increasingly resembling beauty contests looks, personality and images. But in other countries there is a growing body of evidence that economic circumstances have powerful effects on the outcomes of major elections. Undoubtedly prosperity favours the prospects of political incumbents. Macroeconomic variables unemployment, inflation, growth of per capita real income determine greatly to pick the winners. The outcry against rising trade deficits and the growing external debts continue to mount in Bangladesh. Huge public sector borrowing requirement, large trade deficits and skyrocketing oil prices are primarily responsible for the erosion of Bangladesh Taka's purchasing power. Government should identify common flaws that need to be addressed before confidence in our currency and growth can be restored.

The first and major set of problems sprang from an unsound financial system, inadequately regulated and supervised, that channelled capital unwisely and allowed the private sector quietly to accumulate debts that could not be sustained any more. Conflicting microeconomic priorities under political considerations are also responsible for declines in our exchange rate.

Ironically Asian Development Bank suspended aid packages amounting millions of dollars as our government apparently failed to collect required amount of taxes and implement promised fiscal and monetary reforms. In view of the current situation World Bank should shift course and sponsor emergency stimulus package to ease the country's present economic crisis.

Our public sector borrowing requirement should be reduced and austerity measures like wage-price freeze are urgently needed to put our finance on a firmer footing. Unlike western countries, our economy is not structured to introduce tough austerity measures as desired by IMF. It is rather difficult to increase tax revenues as we all know most people cheat on their taxes by understating their incomes. There is a growing underground economy in most countries. Estimates of its size range from a conservative 3 per cent to an astounding as 20 per cent of GNP. Legitimate business people may not report cash incomes or may overstate their tax reductions and thus understate their incomes. Economic growth and inflation have driven many business into high tax

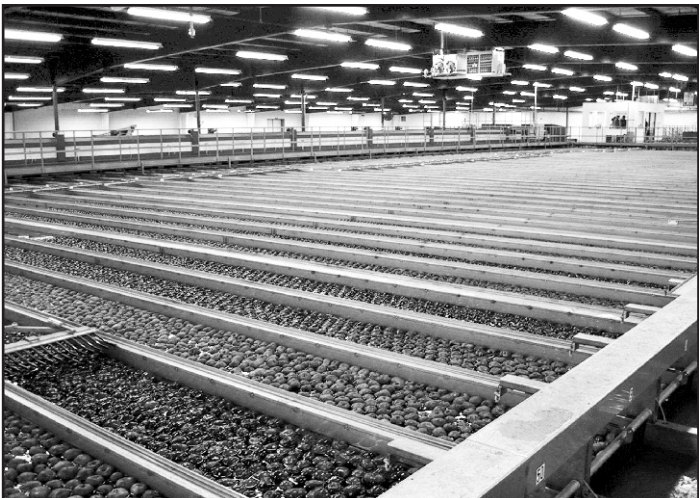
brackets, so there is a greater incentive to cheat. Finally tax evasion has become respectable in the eyes of some, who excuse their behaviour with the argument that 'everybody does it'.

Failure of the government to collect taxes also punishes those who scrupulously pay their taxes, because they suffer from higher rates. High employment, price level stability and economic growth are the major microeconomic goals of

denationalisation of state owned banks, insurance companies and other ailing industries are sine-qua-non to reduce public debts and enrich government's coffers. Government must reaffirm its commitment to a stable exchange rate and dealing with economic challenges which it faces.

Is Bangladesh at a competitive disadvantage? Our imports have been exceeding exports continuously. The first and most important

What policy makers need to do is to create basic infrastructure and offer a policy environment that will attract private investment, both domestic and foreign, into agriculture and related sectors.



A modern food processing plant requires sizeable investment.

all societies. Achieving these goals simultaneously is difficult. For example, boosting employment may cause inflation to rise while attempt to curve inflationary pressure may push more workers into unemployment lines. However our focus must be on developing the elements of a modern market based financial system including independent, effective supervision, improved accounting standards, high levels of financial disclosure, and a much cleaner, more transparent relationship between government and business.

In macroeconomic policy, too, government needs to set clear rules and follow them. Our Ministry of Finance has to act decisively to stimulate growth. Most urgent challenges are for government to follow through on their domestic reform commitments. All these measures will take time and a few will be easy. But they can be achieved with strong support from the international community. Continued strong reforms and

of several factors that accounts for concern is that Bangladesh has been losing its ability to compete in the globalised market. Most countries are both exporting and importing larger shares of their production and income than ever before, so most of our neighbouring countries are gaining an international flavour, but our growing trade imbalances alarm many people.

Second, exports of many of our neighbouring countries have grown up faster than those of Bangladesh. Some other countries are playing 'catch-up', but in Bangladesh signals are emerging that our rates of gain is slowing down. Our average labour productivity also grew slower than most countries. But we must reverse this pattern.

I think government so far failed to identify agricultural area which needs improvement. Bulk of our water resources is wasted and unless we address the issue of irrigation and the extent of land, we cannot place agriculture on our desired target of self-sufficiency in food.

sanctified US unilateralism by signing the defence and nuclear cooperation deals with Washington.

India has failed to expand its room for independent manoeuvre in the world despite its growing economic and military strength. It has attached itself to Washington's apron-strings. Unequal "strategic partnership" with the US is earning India enmity, especially in Asia.

Politically too, the US-India alliance is turning counter-productive, witness India's compromise with the US's skewed trade agenda. India's desperate search for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council has proved illusory.

All in all, India has weakened its credentials as an independent non-aligned country. This is one of the four pillars of the Great Project India embraced at Independence, the others being democracy, secularism and socialism. The other pillars too have faced threats.

True, the dire predictions made until the 1970s haven't materialised. The last British-Indian army commander-in-chief Auchinleck was convinced that 1947 would be only the first of many Partitions. In 1975, Time magazine ran a story entitled "India: A Huge Country on the Verge of Collapse."

These scenarios haven't materialised. But India's institutions have been weakened and its secular aspirations have suffered rude shocks through the anti-Babri mobilisation and the BJP's ascendancy to power.

It's a great achievement that the Indian people have beaten back some of these threats by defeating the Emergency-era Congress, bringing the hitherto disenfranchised into public life, and voting out the NDA.

Popular empowerment is India's greatest gain. It's the key to rectifying aberrations from true democracy. But there can be no empowerment without attacking poverty, combating income and regional disparities, and creating social opportunity.

This is best done through public action. Market forces won't bridge social divides, nor reduce disparities in access to health and education.

That's the challenge before the UPA. It cannot address it by adding a "human face" to inequality-enhancing globalisation. To make India "a truly great nation," the UPA will have to change policies. The sooner, the better.

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In Bangladesh more than 6 out of every 10 citizen depend upon agriculture for survival and livelihood. For every tonne of rice produced in a hectre in Bangladesh, China manages two, while productivity in USA and EU countries are three times higher than that of Bangladesh. If farming is a profession and as a way of life is not to collapse, there is a need for attention today to farmers' needs in the areas of irrigation, technology and market and land aquarian reforms.

Because most of our farmers own farms that are small and fragmented, they also do not get the capital needed to take advantage of new technology and new processes. The global trade in food products and food processing is enormous, worth more than \$200 billion a year. Some big multinationals with brand images are keen to outsource manufacturing plants to third world countries because of cost factor. If government under private-public partnership can set up modern cold storages in properly identified locations across the country, Bangladesh could witness a big surge in food processing exports. More than 50 per cent of our fruit and vegetable outputs are sold at throw away prices or rot because there are no proper cold storage facilities near farmlands.

Value addition in our food processing is next to nothing while a country like Thailand boasts more than 40 per cent. Multinational company like Pepsi foods set up a big food processing plant in Panjab. A large quantity of tomatoes and fruits are processed and sold in many European countries.

What policy makers need to do is to create basic infrastructure and offer a policy environment that will attract private investment, both domestic and foreign, into agriculture and related sectors.

We cannot leave food processing and agro processing in the hands of small entrepreneurs only. Small and fragmented players in this sector cannot generate economies of scale or the market muscle to take on competition in global market. If food processing blooms in our country it will go a long way in solving unemployment problems that plague our agriculture. After the collapse of Soviet Union, geopolitical and strategic scenario of the world has changed. Bangladesh is no longer US strategic asset.

We must realise that trade, not aid is a more fitting standard for America's new relations with us.

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