

3 is back in fashion

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FARID BAKHT

AGRICULTURE, industry and power generation are reeling under self-created crises. The winter boro crop is at risk of failing because the authorities cannot provide electricity to work the irrigation pumps or diesel at affordable prices. In fact, affordability of anything (i.e. inflation) should be the Achilles heel of this administration. It has not made an iota of difference in political terms.

Police are shooting dead ordinary people whose only crime is to demand electricity. In history books, we read that such incidents later become turning points. How will this massacre (what else would you call it) in Kansat be seen in the future? To date, the opposition has eaten their hands.

And what about our "development partners"? The vocal donors, happily micro-managing every aspect of our economy, are preoccupied with elections. Women

refugees are beaten in Cox's Bazar yet they remain silent. The other day, so-called Biharis enacted scenes reminiscent of the West Bank with stone throwing youths facing up to armed police.

All this violence is acceptable because the donors and their attendant political officers in the embassies see us as their allies. As long as we vote in the United Nations on the side of Washington (watch out what happens with Iran) and regularly send troops and NGO workers to assigned hotspots, our transgressions are ignored. We get off with a mild slap on the wrist.

However, when it comes to energy and infrastructure, they are not in a forgiving mood. As they say, follow the money.

Who wants to get elected?

Could someone compare the comments made by certain Western embassies before and after the 2001 elections, and today regarding the impending elections? How many of them praised

the last election? Until 2004, how many of them were still marvelling at our "unique" system of caretaker government?

Suddenly, we find that there is a real risk of the next elections being stolen. Well, Eureka! Of course, it will be manipulated. Of course, the voter list will have significant discrepancies. It always has and it always will. So why all the fuss now?

Calling Number 3

By casting doubt on the process, certain countries are keeping their options open. Post-election, they can then call the election either "free and fair" or "full of irregularities." Thus, what the election monitors do this time will be crucial. Most are funded from abroad and some are liable to be leaned on.

Let us say, for example, that a BNP-Jamaat-Jatiyo alliance returns with a whopping majority. If this is not part of the game plan for some, then the new regime can be weakened simply by calling the elections unfair. You know the drill: "Ballot

boxes were allegedly stuffed. Candidates were harassed. Counting was slow in many polling stations." Etcetera. Etcetera.

That would then allow the "opposition" to create a storm and destabilise the country, ultimately bringing in the "good guys."

Dream or nightmare?

In 2003, a new name appeared. Its one point strategy is to wait for the BNP to break up and set the "rejected" candidates up as their representatives, i.e. BNP II versus the "official" BNP. That is what the Bokalpa (alternative) in BKB means. If that was all that was available, I would prefer Coke to Pepsi.

In parallel, prominent NGO leaders have stepped into the breach. Recently, some expats have become excited about the latest formulas. They are positively in the throes of ecstasy, after that speech? It seems all very contrived to me.

The fact remains that ultimately NGOs have negligible political power, despite having micro-credit centres in every nook and cranny. Their political constituency is the village of Gulshan/Baridhara, not the villages in the countryside. There is a crucial difference between an NGO and a political movement. Calling an NGO a Movement does not make it so. They look the part because they

have friends in the media.

Even if they posed as a movement, they cannot find a party to support, which has a reliable nationwide network. That space has always belonged to the Awami League, a genuine political party, which for some reason has decided to sleepwalk. Hence the continual search for an alternative. That dreaded phrase: "we need a national government" is back in vogue, after a spot of hibernation.

The third option is not performing to the expectations of its backers. It has not made any breakthrough in the rural heartland. Those voters have either not heard about it or do not believe the hype.

Will someone miscalculate and think the only route open is the non-democratic one? A form of permanent caretaker government, perhaps? A transition regime? They can be put into power by a Third Force. They cannot be voted into office. If anyone is thinking along those lines, they had better be very careful. Not only is it wrong, it will be illegitimate.

Finally, we can all agree we need free and fair elections. But one where there is real choice. We are debating about Coke, Pepsi, or even Sprite. Don't we know they are all equally bad for our health?

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More clowning at Commerce

ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE majority of the people became crippled with the persistent pressure of price spiral of all the essential commodities during the last Ramadan. The most comical aspect of the crisis was that when the national media reported the immense sufferings of the people due to price spiral, the Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury informed the nation that the prices of essential commodities in the market were stable.

A national daily termed this remark of the Commerce Minister as "a cruel joke." The advisor for commerce ministry also advised the people to eat molasses instead of sugar as the price of sugar has gone up.

The persons in power who are supposed to assure the people not to be worried as the government has taken appropriate measures to halt the rise in prices must not make mockery with the miseries of people.

It has been reported that, speaking in London, where he was to inaugurate the Bangladesh Exposition, that the minister mentioned that Bangladesh's population could be reduced if it were struck by a tsunami or Hurricane Katrina.

The minister also said at a press conference at his ministry on January 31, that his ministry would take necessary measures to assign either Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) or Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC) or both to import sugar within a week and then release it to the market either on retail or wholesale basis.

Although the minister arranged the press conference to tell the



media representatives about the successful holding of the first ever single country Bangladesh Trade Show in Sri Lanka, he faced a volley of questions about the unusual price of sugar. Sugar is now selling at Tk 58 to 60 per kg against Tk 30 to 32 about one and a half months ago.

It has been learnt that a dishonest syndicate, mainly importers in Chittagong, are controlling the country's sugar market with the blessing of some mandarins in the government.

Answering a question about delay in taking actions for the skyrocketing price, the Commerce Minister said, as the ministry is a government wing, it has some formalities to complete before taking any action. "But we are very much conscious about the present sugar price and taking measures to bring the high sugar price down in the market," he claimed.

Indicating high price on the international market, the Commerce Minister said sugar

price has increased all over the world due to shortfall of production: "While its price in the international market was \$193 per metric ton a couple of months ago, now it has gone up to \$420." So, higher price of imported sugar is likely to be a lingering phenomenon for the country.

According to a government report, the consumers in Bangladesh are paying exorbitant prices for sugar compared to the consumers in neighbouring countries. The report revealed that consumers in India buy sugar for half of the retail price in Dhaka. One kilogram of sugar is sold for an equivalent value of Tk 26.88 in Kolkata, while it is for Tk 39.44 in Karachi, for Tk 30.20 in Kathmandu, for Tk 34.92 in Myanmar, and for Tk 26.26 in Kuala Lumpur.

So the statement of the Commerce Minister on price of sugar in the international market does not match with reality.

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O-Bangali: Crisis in identity

When I see an entire nation mesmerised by Bollywood, or being educated in the archaic Bengali education system, or a privileged group who shun their own linguistic and cultural heritage for the sake of modernity, I cannot but help sometimes feel that the deaths of 1952 went in vain.

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

*Amar bhaiyer rokte rangano
Ekushey February
Ami kibhulite paari*

MAYBE this is a social and future political suicide, but does no one quite

see the irony in those lines of the song? Why "Ekushey February" and not "Atay Falgun"? Till today, as a nation, there still remains a lot of emotional and politicised fragmentation of the history of 1971 Liberation War. But as for the language movement of 1952, there is a consolidated take on this particular historical event which is in many ways considered to transcend beyond nationalism, symbolising the epitome of "Bengali-ness." Yet the day in itself holds a contradictory. Instead of remem-bering the historical movement on its Bengali calendar, we very proudly show off our "Bengali-ness" on "Ekushey February." And I was scolded while growing up for speaking Bangla-lish when the entire nation has been commemorating in this fusion style for decades!

Why be so controversial?

Rather, why be so blunt? The point of Ekushey February was to grab the attention of the readers on a far more pressing and immediate issue of identity confusion which we as a nation seem to be harbouring. The commemoration of the Bengali language movement according to the Christian/Western calendar, for me, is not the epitome of Bengali-ness, but rather Bangladeshi cluelessness.

Here I want to point out to a very important but usually overlooked differentiation between a Bangladeshi and a Bengali. Not all Bangladeshis are Bengalis and not all Bengalis are Bangladeshis. A particular number of ethnic Bengalis of this world constitute as the nationals of the country known

as Bangladesh. While we sing so proudly for a mother tongue our heroes had given their lives for, we forget about the thousands of minority non-Bengali children who are forced to be educated in a language which comes across to them as neo-imperialistic.

While we put on those white sarees with black borders and khadi and paanjab (by the way, if you pseudo intellectual men truly want to have that "Bengali" look, I would recommend a lungi rather than a paanjab which is in fact Pakistani) for the morning processions, we still come home to watch our favourite Hindi soaps on Sony TV.

While certain parents insist that English medium schools are too "loose" and Bengali standard of education is still quality education, those same parents will spend extra money years after years for private English lessons and push for their children to migrate to the US, UK, Australia, or Canada. On the flip side, a walk down North South University campus on any given day, which prides itself as being the best private university of the country, being affiliated with American universities, it feels like the Bangladeshi version of Beverly Hills 90210 with rickshaws and tongas!

At first glance this is all quite amusing, but then one digs a little deeper and finds the same contradictions in every part of the social strata and realises that people are generally apathetic and accept them quite submissively. What do I mean? Let us take my favourite topic of Hindi movies. More specifically, let us talk about Devdas and everyone's love for the movie. Everyone other than my own parents and myself, not a single Bangladeshi whom I know, irrespective of how Bengali-ness they preach (or do not preach for that matter), raised a single objection to the complete murdering of per-

haps one of the greatest stories written in the Bengali language. The inability of Devdas, the son of a zamindar, to leave his comfort and become de-classed for the woman he loved and its implications in 19th century Bengal or the passivity of the Bengali man which later on creates the grounding for a plethora of work on Bengali masculinity (or the lack off) did not seem to be of interest to the filmmakers of this version of Devdas.

No, rather, we are blessed with the over-acting of Aishwarya, the much-too-heavy-to-dance-around-but-still-going-strong Madhuri, and the terrible handling of the dhoti and daaru by Shahrukh. People of both Bengals were mesmerised by the glitter and glamour. My favourite parts of the entire movie were how Charu's mother is a natonk-walih and sudden insertion of Bengali expression said in the most God awful accent by those Hindi-speaking wallahs. (Yes, I actually watched the entire movie! Three very good hours of my life were needless to say wasted.)

Not a single sign of protest. Not a single objection. Instead, we clapped and danced to the songs. We wow-ed and ooh-ed to the sarees. We completely basked in the glory which is Bollywood. Interestingly enough, Sharatchandra still holds true about the Bengali passivity.

I know more children who can sing and dance to the latest Hindi movie songs yet cannot recite even two lines from any of the classic Bengali nursery rhymes. Parents allow their children to watch Priyanka Chopra shake her assets, but will not permit the viewing of movies like Sound of Music because of a kissing scene between Maria and the Captain. Dollywood movies are becoming more obscene by the day and the fundamentalists are more interested in important and vital lessons of the past? How do we retain our heri-

tage while competing at the global level? What does it mean to be a Bengali/Bangladeshi and have "fused," "hyphenated, fragmented identities"? Why are we prone to sweeping away with the currents of tides? Why do we as a nation discuss these identity crises on peripheral terms? Why do we simplify cultural troubles along the lines of English-Bengali media of education or secularist-fundamentalist approaches to politics and societal interactions?

Those of us living, studying abroad are constantly compared and contrasted with and against the Indians yet we are unable to put up a strong enough stand for ourselves simply because we have not achieved anything significant enough as a nation, as an ethnic group. Those of us surviving in Bangladesh (I fall in both groups since I spend equal number of years both abroad and in motherland) either become apathetic to such changes and go with the flow, or for many, the frustrations of such changes have led to seeking comfort and allegiance with certain fanatic groups who create that space which we as civil society are unable to provide for ourselves.

This article was not written to persuade my generation to take upon a puritanical stand on the matter of globalisation and our prolonged identity crisis. But rather, how do we absorb such massive changes that the world is undergoing while retaining certain important and vital lessons of the past? How do we retain our heri-

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DR. NOUSHI RAHMAN AND KYOKO MONA

THE recent crisis in petroleum supply has produced chaos and confusion among businesses and individual consumers. Two underlying reasons have caused such outcome: (1) failure to secure orders with suppliers, and (2) inadequate coordination to distribute available petroleum nationwide because of sudden excess demand by the Chinese economy. Let us examine both of these issues systematically.

Failure to secure orders
It has become common knowledge now that Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation's (BPC) outstanding debt of Tk 8,000 crore (roughly \$1.3 billion) with Sonali and Janata Banks prevented BPC from securing further funds to buy additional petroleum. Despite access to dependable communication facilities (land and mobile phones), petroleum prices have varied hugely in recent days. While businesses and individual consumers are aware of price gouging, it seems that these people are not aware of the proper authorities to whom they can report such incidents.

While the NCBs and two foreign banks (Standard Chartered and HSBC) have finally agreed to loan BPC several hundred million dollars "at commercial interest rate," the proposition seems very grim. The effective interest rate that Standard Chartered will charge is 14.73 percent! Soon enough, BPC will struggle to pay the mere interest on the \$250 million loan it is about to receive.

Even if the imminent petroleum crisis is met through all these loans, how would BPC tackle another crisis? By that time BPC would owe so much in interest in addition to capital of the loans. And, on top of that, BPC would have to plan on securing more funds to buy the much needed petroleum for the various sectors in our country.

What can be done to ensure that BPC can secure orders in the future? One tangible suggestion is to look for new petroleum suppliers in Venezuela, Russia, and Nigeria. Another necessary step would be to renegotiate petroleum exploration pacts with (questionably competent) foreign companies as soon as current contracts expire. Sometimes structural changes within the petroleum companies (because of mergers and acquisitions) may void the current contract, allowing for quick opportunities for contract renegotiations.

Inadequate coordination
The petroleum crisis and gas price

increases in the last two years is not a unique problem for Bangladesh. Every nation is facing the same crisis. Regrettably, Bangladesh government is handling this crisis with little considerations on probable effectiveness. It is common knowledge that everyday OPEC is drilling up more oil than ever before to meet the current demand of the world. However, sudden excess demand from China because of their economic growth is one of the main reasons for this oil crisis.

For Bangladesh, this shortage of petroleum supply has exacerbated the problem of inadequate coordination in our distribution process. Tanker trucks bound for the northern districts have been stalled and left parked for days, while petroleum supplies have dwindled in those districts. Despite access to dependable communication facilities (land and mobile phones), petroleum prices have varied hugely in recent days. While businesses and individual consumers are aware of price gouging, it seems that these people are not aware of the proper authorities to whom they can report such incidents.

The conditions are so extreme that northern district farmers are paying anywhere between 20-50 percent premium when buying much needed petroleum products. Our top-down government has ordered dealers to straighten out the chaos within a week, or else military forces will be brought in. How is this going to improve our coordination efforts to ensure proper distribution?

Extensive monitoring, which is very expensive, can bring order for now. However, such a quick fix does not address our chronic condition. Our chronic condition is our inadequate coordination capabilities to distribute current petroleum reserves in the most equitable way throughout the country. A necessary requirement is a web of communication infrastructure throughout the nation. We have the communication infrastructure, but somehow we still cannot achieve coordination.

What is the real problem?
According to Say's Law, some form of demand will rise to meet any increases in the supply. We really cannot afford to have just any random increase in fuel demand. While we do need to secure orders from petroleum suppliers to enable ongoing operations in businesses and in households, we are really oblivious to the demand-

side problem, like the rest of the world.

Superficially, increase in demand in fuel is a good sign of progress. But is the constantly increasing demand for petroleum entirely attributable to industrial growth? Or is it significantly attributable to under-maintained motors, extravagant lifestyle of several thousand people who run multiple automobiles all the time and use fuel-burning generators to mitigate for load shedding. While we are busy blaming the supply-side, have we thought of the real reasons for our demand-side as well?

Government policy suggestions

1. Government should initiate mass awareness programs to inform people of global petroleum crisis and help people to explore alternatives.
2. Government official themselves must show energy conservation.
3. Government should set an award for people who come up with better alternatives especially scholarship programs for BUET students.
4. Government should impose a very high unit tax (for unit purchased) on private consumption of gasoline and discourage people to use private cars which they buy from foreign market for luxury instead of reinvesting the foreign exchange. Over the course of months, people will be encouraged to use public transportation (just like people let go of their established habits of using polythene bags).
5. Government should give some oil subsidies to the businesses that use gasoline, for example the transportation industry.
6. Government should impose exemplary penalty on those who break rules for petroleum usage, for example towing away the private car of the owner.
7. Government should first control its officials, who often break the law and make the law loose. Government officials and their family must recognize they are setting the standard for the rest of the nation.

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