

Village chronicle

NAZRUL ISLAM

I have a habit of visiting my village every two, or sometimes less, months. I went there a few days ago, braving sweltering heat. It is not so easy to reach my village in the northern district of Bogra. I have to first take a rickshaw, then a local bus to reach Kalyanpur bus terminal, then the Dhaka-Bogra coach.

After reaching Bogra, I have to hire a rickshaw again, then board a local bus, then a rickshaw van, and finally a few yards on foot. Need-les to say, the journey is not only irritating but also costly and time-consuming.

Although I do not have a strong attachment to the village, I miserably fail to prevent myself visiting it frequently, although I have been an urban citizen for more than 30 years. However, to me those visits are not mere pleasure trips but opportunities to know the real problems of the villagers, and their hopes and expectation. Those who read one or two of my pieces in the Daily Star might have noticed that I always try to depict the experiences I gather from the public sphere.

During my two-day stay this time, I came across a cross-section of people. I will narrate here some of the issues I learned about, and I think this will give you an overall socio-politico-

economic picture of rural Bangladesh.

Pointless felling of a 50-year-old banyan tree

After reaching the local bus stop from Bogra, I took a rickshaw van to reach my village, 6 km east of the bus stand. I was moving through a rural zigzag road, although it was mostly metalled. I could hardly feel the brunt of the sun as sprawling branches of roadside trees shaded the road. But after about 4 km, the next one km up to the bank of a river is straight and almost tree-less.

However, there was a big banyan tree on the western side of the river named Sukhdaha. On its eastern side, there is a bazar and a primary school, mosque etc. From the rickshaw van, as I looked forward, I saw that the riverbank was barren. The banyan tree was so big and luxuriant that it could be seen from a km away. When I asked the van-puller about the tree, he informed me that it was cut down a week back.

I felt very sad, and a sort of pain surged through my heart. The banyan tree and our generation in the locality had grown up almost simultaneously for nearly the last 50 years. We have a lot of memories centering the tree. I stopped for a while at the barren site of the felled tree and paid my homage to it.

I looked around but could not find any reason for felling the tree. A small, 16 ft wide bridge has been constructed over the river. Compared to the bridge, the breadth of the existing approach road is almost double, and there was no need to cut the tree at this moment, as there is no possibility of introducing bus service on the road for at least the next 10 years.

Then why was the tree felled? The van pullers who were waiting for passengers under the open sky (earlier they used to take rest under the tree) said that a contractor with the aegis of some unscrupulous LGED officials felled the tree for financial gain.

Dr. Yunus and his political party

Whenever I go to the village, the villagers invariably asked me to describe the latest political situation in the capital. This time it was no different. The next morning, I dropped into a village *adda* of 20-25 people. After the exchange of pleasantries, the first question I faced was whether Dr. Yunus was still sticking to his decision to float a new party.

As I asked: "What is the problem, if Dr. Yunus does politics?" -- one of them hurled an invective against the pioneer of micro-credit. "Go and tell him to come here to seek vote -- we will give him a befitting lesson," some others said angrily.

"Why are you so angry at Dr. Yunus? He is doing a tremendous job by giving credit to poor people. He is trying to take you out of poverty," I argued in favour of Dr. Yunus terming him a genius and an honest person.

"Poverty eradication? Look at this house (pointing to a thatched house). Its roof and fence were made of CI sheet. Sufia (the owner of the house) had to sell the sheets to repay the loan she borrowed from an NGO," said the firebrand of the *adda*. He complained that about 100 people of the village have been caught in the vicious cycle of loan and repayment, and they would have to sell all their movable and immovable property to get rid of the loan. The economists who don't have any vested interests can initiate a genuine research on the outcomes of microcredit in our country.

It was the day before Dr. Yunus's announcement that he was not going to float his planned political party. On May 3, when Dr. Yunus announced his latest decision, I found grounds to agree with my co-villagers who wanted to give him a befitting teaching. Dr. Yunus probably got the messages from the grassroots.

Electricity

I could hardly sleep at night as there was no electricity connection in our house. Almost all the houses in the village, except four to five, were given

electricity connections. The Reb officials did not give connection to those few as they declined to pay a good sum of money as bribe.

As I raised my nighttime misery before the *adda*, others, almost in a chorus, narrated the same experience. Although they have power connection, they hardly get electricity supply at night. All the consumers of my village, and surrounding villages, got the same Tk 92 bill as metre charge for the month of March.

Price of essentials

Potato is being sold at Tk 19 per kg, beef at Tk 180 per kg, kerosene at Tk 50 per litre, palm oil at Tk 72 (soybean is at all not available and palm oil is being sold as soybean) per litre, lentil at Tk 72 per kg in the local *bazar*.

The villagers said they were turning into vegetarians as both meat and fish had become so costly that it was not possible for them to buy those. For example, a few years ago, four to five cows were slaughtered in our *bazar* every *hat* day. But now, not a single cow is slaughtered as it is beyond the capacity of a villager to buy a kg of meat at Tk 180.

As I asked for the reasons for the hike, they said that the price of potatoes rose because huge quantities had been stored by the owners of the potato crackers factories (several factories have been set up in northern



districts), and two export-oriented meat-processing plants bought cows - one at Thakurgaon and other at Sirajganj.

"A 35 gm pack of potato chip sells at Tk 10. There is no problem for the chips factory owners to purchase potato at Tk 50 per kg," one said, holding the urban people responsible for the unusual price hike. In contrast, locally produced vegetables are being sold at

throwaway prices. For example, brinjal is being sold at Tk 8, Pui at Tk 2, and a middle-sized sweet-gourd at Tk 15-20.

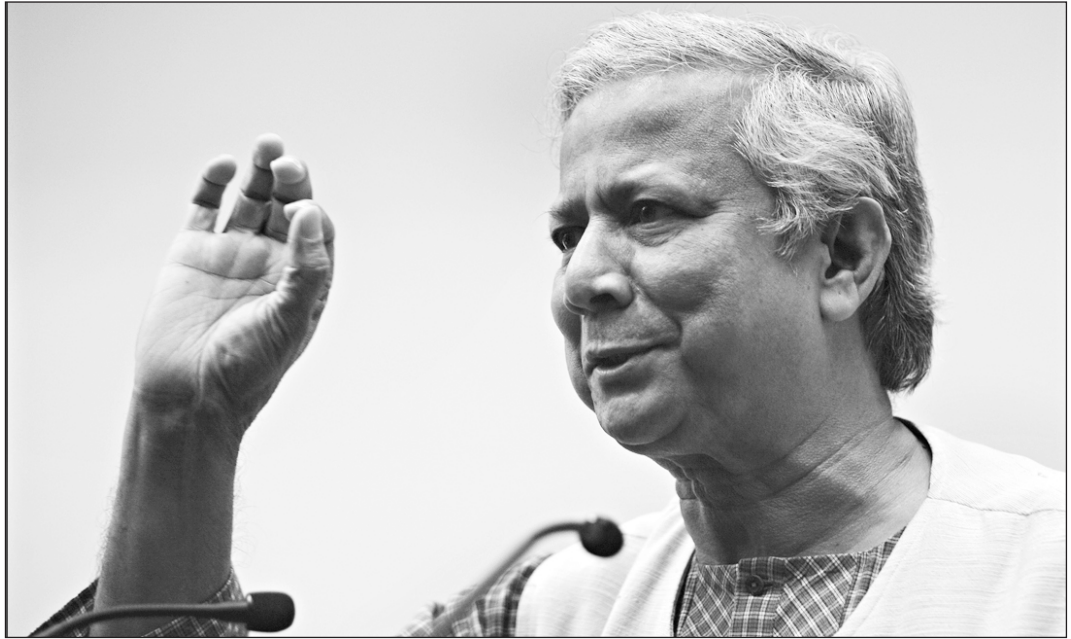
Khaleda-Hasina

People are disillusioned with both Hasina and Khaleda. Those who were once hardcore supporters of BNP have now become speechless, hearing about the monumental corruption of their leaders, especially of Tareq Rahman. I enjoyed a debate on the

corruption of Awami League and BNP at the *adda*. Finally, one drew a conclusion that those who go to Lanka, become Raban. The villagers are happy to know that some of the big fish were caught and are being tried.

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The unbearable temporality of Professor Yunus's political being



ADNAN MORSHED

It is no coincidence that the title of this piece on Professor Yunus's short-lived political life rhymes with that of the Czech writer Milan Kundera's classic novel: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). Employing a quartet of existentially-challenged characters against the backdrop of 1968 Prague, Kundera probes the fragility of life to tell us a broader story that people live just once, so the hard choices they make

about their lives are ultimately insignificant. But this insignificance of decision-making in life -- or the lightness of being -- can itself become an unbearable burden. What haunts people, Kundera argues, is not the dire need to make decisions about life, but the eventual frivolity of these decisions!

Professor Yunus's recent political cameo is interlaced with similar existential conflicts. The gravitas of his lighthearted, if sincere, decision to enter politics at a time of crisis and

help usher in a brand-new prosperous Bangladesh was unnerving.

The sheer lightness and temporality of his weighty ambitions burden us with an impossible puzzle: what to think of his political commitment? His hasty appeal to the public for political support offers us a glimpse not only into the mind of post-Nobel Yunus, but also into the political culture of Bangladesh.

Bangladeshis, at home and abroad, celebrated the news of Yunus's winning the Nobel Peace

Prize with unbridled patriotism and raw emotion. Many eyes shed tears of joy and pride. It was, understandably, a shinning national moment in the history of the country, as the world's spotlight focused on Bangladesh to offer homage to the country's worthy son.

Yunus himself reciprocated the euphoric public reaction with equal fervour by appearing in the media and at civic receptions with a jubilant face, and by making ambitious statements befitting the occasion. Basking in the limelight, he lifted the country to a new height of optimism.

But something crucial happened then. At the peak of the mass frenzy, the public, journalists, expatriates, and a segment of the civil society, still intoxicated with hardcore emotion, expected from Yunus a radical cure-all political solution for an allegedly dysfunctional Bangladesh.

And Yunus promised -- often from the airport (alas, the entrenched postmodern metaphor of lightness) -- to deliver it, without really knowing how. He assured his countrymen, albeit prematurely, that he would play the role of a saviour, without actually investigating the nature of this humongous responsibility.

Apeculiar quality of the limelight is that it has a propensity to blur our vision instead of sharpening it. Yunus seemingly misjudged the public

celebration of his Nobel Prize -- or what he called in his first open letter, "pure love and respect from people of all ages" -- as political support.

No doubt, in the wake of the Nobel, the masses elevated him to the loftiest pedestal of reverence because he brought the country the highest honour, but it was by no means political endorsement. It was an exalted moment of glory, mostly apolitical.

But when Yunus emerged as a would-be political figure, the people subjected him to a completely new set of judgment criteria. Would Yunus be a good administrator? Would he safeguard the interests of the common folks? Is he ready to commit to the rigorous bureaucratic needs of an elected official? It was a completely new, and necessary, political analysis for which he was barely ready, and hardly prepared any profile.

Suddenly, the Nobel Prize seemed inadequate to convince many that Yunus was ready to run the country. Here in Washington, I was amazed to see how the living rooms of expatriates were abuzz with the incessant debates between Yunus admirers and skeptics.

Seldom black and white, the debates presented a litany of viewpoints: *sui generis* figures like Yunus are a must in the government for a political renaissance in Bangladesh; he should be the conscience and

visionary reformer of the country rather than its prime minister; and Yunus is not tested as a political figure.

Yunus's open-letter policy to all citizens, asking for their suggestions and advice, was refreshing, for it promised a new participatory approach to politics. But his first letter was flawed, and at times corny, despite its honesty. He wrote: "I feel it with my heart that I should, showing due respect to the people's expectation of me, participate in the mission of taking the nation to the height it deserves."

The innocent pre-judging of "the people's expectation of me" bordered on juvenile excitement, a dangerous setback for a future political figure-head eager to reform the country's virulent *rajniti*.

We find a curiously satisfied man in his first letter: "I am a very fortunate man. There is nothing left for me to desire." A cynical interpretation of this could be that the war on poverty has been won, and now it was time to march to the next battlefield: the corrupt world of politics. Does a Nobel Prize mean a spectacular finale to the ongoing fight against poverty, or rather an acknowledgement of the fight's humanity?

The harshest cynic would even smell in the "nothing left for me to desire" a light shade of postcolonial sycophancy toward the West that, as

if, provides the final seal of approval to a humane project in the impoverished East. Not that Yunus's letters contained any, but there is hardly the need for that kind of asymmetric self-perception.

A Nobel or not, Yunus's model of poverty alleviation was already staging a silent social revolution in rural Bangladesh, despite whispering, and often unanswered, criticism of Grameen Bank's high interest rate.

The Nobel Committee needed Yunus, and a humanitarian project with a global appeal that could suppress the subterranean allegations of political nepotism against the Nobel Peace Prize, more than Yunus needed the Nobel.

Yunus's final letter (May 3) had a deep, melancholic subtext of fatalism, and the wounded sentiment of a dejected warrior. "...[O]ne thing became clearer, that those who were encouraging me will not join politics themselves and will not give public support because of their own problems. And those who are in political parties will not leave their parties, at least, now. They might join later if the political situation changes. After all calculations, I realised that nothing much is being accumulated. So, whom will I form the strong team with?" he lamented.

We are saddened, no doubt, to see our hero feeling betrayed. But, despite

all good intentions, Yunus's political life hardly crossed the threshold of the utopianism of a visionary reformer.

One crucial thing was missing in his whole new-politics project: a real engagement with the political nitty-gritty, a political strategy, not articulated *en passant* at the VIP lounge of the airport. Airport conversations are notoriously superficial.

Yunus's political life echoes the classic Kundera narrative, filled with both transience and insignificance. Bangladeshis carry the unbearable weight of bafflement resulting from their hero's innocent miscalculation, in which the public's blinding zealotry in expecting from him an overnight, radical remedy is also largely responsible.

There is no denying, though, that Yunus is still our national treasure, the most recognisable and esteemed Bangladeshi around the world. We must cherish him, for he is most adept at illuminating new paths of growth for us. The fog of confusion remains, but it seems like the people want to see him as a Gandhi, rather than as a Nehru.

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Now ban the brutal *lathee*

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

MORE than a century ago Bankim Chandra Chatterji lamented, in one of his famous novels, the demise, or rather the metamorphosis, of the *lathee*, the sturdy staff that was once as ubiquitous in Bengali society as the bamboo it was made of. "You had your day," he says to the *lathee*. There was a time when the *lathee* was a robust defence against evil and oppression. Now, Chatterji laments, the *lathee* is a mere walking-cane in the hands of the *habus*, ever fearful of jackals and dogs, the hands going limp and losing the cane at the first canine bark.

Chatterji turned out to be too hasty in his judgment. The *lathee*, even in its heyday, could be an instrument of aggression as well as defence. More important, its use might have diminished in some areas of Bengali life; elsewhere, it was to become a formidable instrument of oppression in ways probably not foreseen by Chatterji.

Not very long after that lament, the *lathee* staged a come back. This time it was the police of the Raj who wielded it. And they were quite nasty with it. The use of the *lathee* -- sometimes called, rather euphemistically, the baton -- on totally peaceful political demonstrations was an essential ingredient of the history of the independence movement in British India. During the years of Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha* the police used the *lathee* on countless occasions, each time leaving behind a desolation

of broken limbs and bloodied, fractured skulls. In general, even the most peaceful protesters were thoroughly clubbed.

In 1928, Lala Lajpat Rai of the Punjab, leading a group of marchers demonstrating against the Simon Commission, was severely beaten up. He died a few days later. Rai was old and ailing and the death might not have been entirely due to the beating, but it was certainly a contributing factor. The marks of the beating were all too visible on his back and chest, and were carried prominently in national newspapers of the day. People from all walks of life were shocked at the beating of a man of his stature.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the future prime minister of India, too, was leading a group of demonstrators at about the same time, also against the same Commission. In his autobiography he described his first encounter with the police *latheethus*:

I led one of the groups of sixteen ... My group had gone perhaps about two hundred yards ... when we heard the clatter of horses' hooves behind us. We looked back to find a bunch of mounted police, probably two or three dozen in number, bearing down upon us at a rapid pace. They were soon right upon us, and the impact of the horses broke up our little column of sixteen. The mounted policemen then started belabouring our volunteers with huge batons or truncheons ... (Soon after,) I looked round to find that a mounted policeman was trotting up to me, brandishing a long new baton. I told

him to go ahead, and turned my head away -- again an instinctive effort to save the head and face. He gave me two resounding blows on the back. I felt stunned, and my body quivered all over, but, to my surprise and satisfaction, I found I was still standing...

The very next morning, in a large demonstration against the Commission, Nehru was beaten again, this time even more severely. He was "half blinded with blows," as he put it, with this result:

I felt pain all over my body, and great fatigue. Almost every part of me seemed to ache, and I was covered with contused wounds and marks of blows. But, fortunately, I was not injured in any vital spot. Many of our companions were less fortunate, and were badly injured.

The pain inflicted by the *lathee* on the non-belligerent, someone without a *lathee* of his own to defend himself, is not purely physical, however. Much of it is the pain of the humiliation of being at the wrong end of the stick. In the case of Lajpat Rai, the humiliation was perceived as national, brought on by brute force wielded by a foreign power against a national leader. It was a sense of national humiliation that drove Bhagat Singh to gun down the police officer said to have been responsible for the beating. Singh was hanged, making him a martyr.

The humiliation of a police beating is not, however, an unintended consequence of an action by the person wielding the *lathee*. Indeed, the major idea behind administering a *lathee* blow is to humiliate the individual

receiving it. This is as true of the countless *lathee* charges on peaceful demonstrations throughout India's struggle for independence from British rule, as it is of police brutalities during the civil rights movement in the United States many years later. Neither is the intent to humiliate limited to the immediate wielder of the *lathee*; more often than not, those in positions of power who order the beating also have very much the same intention.

To be sure, this, so far, is history. But this is a tale with no ending, and continues to be told to this day. The police in Pakistan inherited the *lathee*, along with the tradition of humiliation that it represents, from the British, and passed it on to their Bangladeshi counterparts. There was a report in a section of the press in February that the police lathi-charged people lining up to enter the Ekushey Boi Mela. The crowd was large, there was some jostling, and the police resorted to the *lathee* to restore order. For me, the report took a long time to sink in, hence this rather belated retrospection. *Lathi*-charge in a book fair, and that too in a glorious month dedicated to Bengali culture, isn't something easy to comprehend.

Those of us who are old enough to remember the passing of the baton from the British police -- more strictly the Indian police employed by the British -- at the time of independence from British rule, must also remember how often the Pakistani police used it, and how effectively too. Used in full swing during the language movement

of the 1950s, it produced a large crop of bloodied skulls and shattered bodies. Helpless political inmates in Pakistani prisons were *lathee*-charged on a number of occasions. The tumultuous 1960s saw a huge surge in use of the *lathee* along with firearms.

One would have thought that once we Bengalis were masters of our destiny, we would rid ourselves of the instrument of humiliation that the police *lathee* is. The facts speak otherwise. The use of the *lathee* by the Bangladeshi police against entirely peaceful political demonstrations harks back to the days when the police in British India were at their fiercest in dealing with pacifist protests. I have often heard that police *lathee*-charges on peaceful protests in Bangladesh have been more common and more brutal than even under Pakistani rule. I tend to agree. The frequency of *lathee*-charges on unarmed demonstrators, as well as their severity, seemed to peak during the past few years.

The beating up of demonstrators, actual or potential, by policemen has been among the most recurrent action photographs in newspapers in Bangladesh over the past three decades. One would see a heap of unarmed political activists and leaders lying or crouching on the street, having already been subjected to *lathee* blows, or about to receive some. Often the ferocity of the blows could be conjured from the width of the angle the staff made as it swung into action. Sometimes you could clearly see it in the face of the police-

man wielding the *lathee*.

The person at the receiving end of the punishment could even be a prominent political leader. I have seen photographs of a former home minister, lately an opposition leader, being beaten up by *lathee*-toting policemen, the very men whose boss he had been just a few months before. That must be seen as the clearest case where humiliation is indeed the intended consequence of the *lathee* blow. I have seen women political activists and their leaders being clubbed by the police. In the latter case, sometimes an involuntary unraveling of the sari of the

protester added to the humiliation of the beating. I have seen younger political activists desperately trying to shield their leaders from the assaults and receiving the blows themselves. I have read reports of people who took no part in protest demonstrations being clubbed by the police for merely being in their way. I have also read reports of a government plan to equip the police with longer and sturdier staves that would enable them to do their job of inflicting pain more thoroughly.

As a tale of pain and humiliation wrought by the police *lathee*, this should be enough. Let us divest the

lathee of its power to intimidate. Let its use be made illegal, except as a weapon of defence. In a country where the dignity of the individual is trampled on in myriad ways everyday, let there be one fewer way of humiliating him or her. It is even possible that the idea might catch on and get translated into action in other areas. It is certainly worthy of attention of the guardians of "civil society."

These are quiet times for the policymakers of the country. Let them ban the police *lathee* of intimidation quietly, now.

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