

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-less 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 treeless.

However, there was a big banyan tree on the western side of the river named Sukhda. 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.

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.

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.

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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*.

As I asked for the reasons for the hike, they said that the price of potato 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.

As I asked for the reasons for the hike, they said that the price of potato

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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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.

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

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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 fire 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 once, so the hard choices they make

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 shining 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.

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