

Who will mourn the silent deaths?

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

THE tragic death of over a hundred persons killed in a dramatic landslide in Chittagong two weeks ago immediately drew public attention. The government responded with unprecedented efficiency to recover the dead bodies, help the survivors with food rations and shelter. The operation was done humanely and showed a real concern for people. The immediate cause may have been heavy rains, but the tragedy was sparked by years of corruption which allowed illegal encroachments and denuding of the hills. Of course, the price was paid by the poor, who had no other place to set up their shanties.

There are equally tragic reports from Khalispur, where over a 1,000 jute workers laid off by four state-owned jute mills (Platinum, Crescent, Star and Eastern), along with their families can barely survive, because they have not been paid their back wages. BJMC officials reason that the mills are running at a loss, but do not explain the cause of this, nor indeed why the BJMC empire should appropriate funds for itself if its workers are forced into debt.

An investigation by five organizations (GJS, SPS, Rupayan, BLAST and Action Aid) found that 50 year old Abul Kalam, an

employee at Platinum Jute Mills for 18 years, the last 8 as a permanent employee, had been laid off in early April, because the mill was to be closed down. With his wife, three sons and one daughter, he lived in a rented room. The eldest son, a rickshaw puller, was married and working but could not afford to support his paternal family. On the night of June 6, after his dinner of plain boiled rice, he fell down and died.

Another permanent employee of People's Jute Mills, 52 year old Serajul Islam was laid off after 36 years. On June 9, he too died after severe chest pains. He left behind a wife, two daughters and a son who earns only Tk 1,500 per month in an ice cream factory.

Both workers were owed seven months' salary, and when they received only five weeks' pay they were already owed Tk 30,000 and Tk 14,000 respectively. Given that their room rent was Tk 300 to 500 per month, this left nothing for basic necessities. In both cases the doctors attributed the cause of death to a stroke. But weeks of a starvation diet, tension caused by indebtedness, and the insecurity of unemployment must have contributed.

The government may use efficiency criteria to justify their neglect of the industry. But efficiency also demands an investigation into the causes of the failure of the industry, to make the management accountable for the losses caused by their decisions. Reports have indicated that nationalised mills have failed to perform, not for worker inefficiency but due to manipulations in jute purchase, non-renewal of obsolete machineries, lack of market

research and product diversification. At a time when West Bengal jute industry has succeeded in entering world markets, Bangladesh has eased itself out. The Sonali Aash which was to be the economic foundation of a Sonar Bangla has itself turned to ashes!

Of course the present government cannot be held responsible for problems that emerged earlier, because BJMC bureaucratic management failed to understand the logic of industrial management and market entrepreneurship. By the early eighties allegations of corruption and mismanagement had put the workers at risk. In the nineties, the World Bank started raising alarms calling for closures.

Until 2005 there were reported to be 135 jute mills in Bangladesh, out of which 114 were functional and the remaining 21 had closed down. In 2005-2006 total earnings from jute export was Tk 22.28 million constituting 3.54 per cent of the total earnings. In addition, raw jute worth Tk 93.5 million was exported in the same year.

Workers in government own jute mills have demonstrated in the last three years as well for payment of arrears, and protested against lay offs and non-payment of compensation. In response to a question in Parliament in 2005, the minister is supposed to have said that eight jute mills in Khulna made a loss of Tk 12.9 million in eleven months, incurred a total of Tk 48.6 million bank loans, and an accumulated loss of Tk 18 billion. So the big question is where did the money go, and who was responsible?

We gave in to the World Bank's grandiose plans of dividing the

world into areas of raw material production and centres of manufacture. So the industries in West Bengal are now flourishing while previously successful factories in Bangladesh have been allowed to whither. The alternative has been that raw jute now feeds successful private enterprises or finds its way across the border, while skilled workers who could revive the industry are laid off.

Last April, when the workers protested the unilateral lay offs, they were attacked by the police, 70 of them were arrested, their homes were invaded, and even their families became targets of police attacks. The promise of a golden handshake was washed away as they became indebted to shopkeepers from whom they had to buy food rations with promissory notes. The workers have had to pay the price because we took no steps against the mismanagement of the jute sector.

Today the jute industry has become a pariah in Bangladesh's development strategy, even though environmental considerations have raised international demand. On the other hand, the debts have mounted. Should we not be asking ourselves why we have allowed the management to mount debts in an industry whose products have a growing international demand. And will the termination of workers solve the problem of indebtedness created by mismanagement?

There is time yet for a rethink. And the Advisor on Jute indicated that she wanted to explore short term, medium term, and long term possibilities. Last May she told representatives of the Sromik



Nirapotta Forum that she would call a meeting of experts to advise on steps for its reconstruction. This needs to be done immediately, at a commercial pace not at a bureaucratic pace. If she has convinced her colleagues and the BJMC officials of the urgent need to do so, this is not reflected in the budget. The Finance Advisor has also

expressed concern, but this must move beyond verbal statements. The silence of the Labour Adviser indicates that the workers' interests have been put on the back burner. But this will be at the cost of national schemes for poverty alleviation and industrial growth. It is worth listening to the voices of the workers who have asked

that the police withdraw all cases against them because they protested lay offs in the mills in April, to release all workers who were arrested, to pay all arrears including their back wages and benefits, and to plan to open all production sectors and not just one sector. In the long run, the government must engage immediately and

more seriously with experts to consider ways of reviving the jute industry. Strategies that end up with long lines of unemployed cannot be a criteria of efficiency.

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Between evil and civil

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THE recent events of Bangladesh especially since 1/11 are revealing some of the deep contradictions in Bangladesh polity. These contradictions were in the making for quite some time. It is high time that we try to understand the sources of these contradictions so that we can begin to address them.

The good, bad, and the ugly

First, on the positive note, what is redeeming is to discover amidst us people with courage and conviction who could keep themselves away from the temptation of corruption.

A situation when one could amass wealth illegally by crime and corruption, without the fear of

penalty or recrimination, deserves condemnation. Dr. Kamal Hossain's apology to the nation is an example to be emulated by all except those who showed contempt for decency and utter disregard for the laws of the state, and created a culture of impunity where crime and high corruption thrived. Criminals deserve a second chance. And we must not hate the criminals; we should hate the crime. But how to deal with pure evil is another matter.

Rather than dealing with the social and cultural determinants of the social blight, I will try to explore here what Dr. Kamal Hossain characterized as "sick politics" or dysfunctional polity, which collapsed under the weight of its own dysfunctionality on 1/11.

How did the situation come to this? There are at least three

narratives on the history of corrosion of Bangladesh polity. One school would assert that since the taking over of political power by General Ershad 25 years ago, corruption has marked the body politic of Bangladesh.

Others would assert that the so-called "democracies" are responsible for sponsoring corruption in Bangladesh. There are others who would point fingers at the alliance government headed by BNP for creating a new history of corruption in Bangladesh.

The eye of the hurricane of corruption was Hawa Bhavan. Ironically, Prime Minister Begum Zia's favorite metaphor was "flood of development" that was sweeping across Bangladesh.

But why would elected politicians suddenly become evil? What explains their transformation from civil to evil? Were they just bad

people? Could it be the result of the bad influence of Hindi cinemas, where the likes of Umresh Puri pretend to be smiling politicians but secretly patronize criminal gangs? Those who bought expensive houses in Dubai, and bought top of the line cars, and became victims of unbridled consumerism beamed to them by satellite television?

The problem of such off-the-cuff analysis is that it does not define corruption, nor does it separate corruption from outright criminality. Even within corruption there are gradients of corruption, as in criminal behaviour there are degrees of crime.

One can wake up one morning and say, "I am going to rid the world of corruption. I would complement the idea, but judge it as naïveté." We wish the world was peaceful and Bangladesh was corruption free. Wishes have their

rightful place. We must have dreams; but to confuse reality with dream, or pragmatic thought with wishful thinking, will be counter-productive.

Corruption, and criminal behaviour and malpractices are generic problems. Normal societies generate normal corruption, normal crime, normal malpractices. Lying, cowardice, submission to and abetment of crime and malpractices, were not invented in Bangladesh. They all are part of normal society.

What makes Bangladesh unique is the scale of these problems. And I might add, the conspiracy of silence. Many in the government and outside remained on the sidelines as spectators of a diabolical game.

The civil society spoke out; the communication organs of civil society, especially the print media, pointed out the evil and, in turn,

were denigrated as taking part in "media terrorism." One cabinet minister of the past government had the audacity to call the civil society a collective of barbers (a derogatory term in Bengali).

It is crucial that we separate the extraordinary level of corruption from ordinary, routine corruption; misdemeanor from felony, and theft from treason. Those who have access to the necessary information need to do such screening carefully.

Secondly, let us not divide the world in to a simplistic duality: the good and the bad, the civil and the evil. One who was civil became evila transformation that needs careful understanding.

What helped such a transformation?

There can be several factors accounting for the dramatic shift that converted a civil element into

an evil one, but the ones that stand out are the total desecration of the judicial system and the defilement of the law.

Creating and empowering a fanatical terrorist group to repress political opposition, protecting murderers from the law, obstructing justice, and falsely accusing innocent citizens of crimes which they not only did not commit but were victims of, are obscenely ugly.

Various forms of corruption, from money laundering to bribe taking, and so on, must be dealt with in terms of their own merits, but should not be equated with extraordinary crimes.

The main repair works the present government must do is reinstate the cycle of crime and punishment, and return to administration of justice in a fair and impartial manner so that men and

women in charge of governing can do their job without fear or favour. Important and unprecedented steps have been taken, for which the nation will remain grateful.

We may not create heaven on earth, but to prevent earth from degenerating into hell is an obligation for us all, because of which we must deal with the evil, and in a civil manner. In these extraordinary times, when mega corruption and heinous crimes are being exposed, the guardians of society must not lose their cool, and must remain vigilant so that revenge does not take the place of justice and ends do not justify the means.

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Towards healthier entertainment



KAJALIE SHEHREEN ISLAM

CENSORSHIP" has never been a popular word with the media. When it comes to films, however, certain restrictions have always been deemed necessary due to the widespread reach and strong impact of the medium. A visit to cinema halls screening films like *Noshta Meye* (Unchaste/Wanton Girl), *Kukhyato Shontrashi* (Notorious Terrorist) and *Nogno Hamla* (Naked Attack) makes it obvious why censorship is needed.

Films have been censored or completely banned for many reasons. Our history of film censorship can be traced back to the

Cinematograph Act 1909 in Britain, which was introduced following safety concerns raised after a number of nitrate film fires, requiring cinemas to be licensed by local authorities.

A court ruling the following year, however, determined that the criteria for granting or refusing a licence did not have to be restricted to issues of health and safety. As the law now allowed councils to grant or refuse licenses to cinemas according to the content of the films they showed, the 1909 Act thus enabled the introduction of censorship and led to the formation of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) in 1912, the name of

which was later changed to the British Board of Film Classification.

Following this, the Cinematograph Act of 1918 was enacted in British India, basically passed to uphold British imperialism in the sub-continent and, later, the Censorship of Films Act, 1963 in Pakistan. This was amended after independence in Bangladesh. The criteria upon which a film will be regarded as "unsuitable for public exhibition," according to a notification by the Ministry of Information in 1985 are: security or law and order (cannot be undermined), international relations (cannot be threatened), religious susceptibilities

(must be respected), immorality or obscenity, bestiality, crime, plagiarism, and miscellaneous.

Interestingly enough, while the main criticism of Bangla cinema is in the areas of obscenity and violence in mainstream films, the films most often held at the censor board are alternative films, from Zahir Raihan's *Jibon Theke Neya* (1970) to Tareque Masud's *Matir Moina* (1992), Morshedul Islam's *Agami* and Tanvir Mokammel's *Smruti* '71—all directors and films highly acclaimed locally and internationally. While *Matir Moina* was said to have religious undertones, films like Nasiruddin Yusuf Bachchu's *Ekkattorer Jesus* were not given certification because they allegedly

"distorted historical facts particularly maligning Bangladesh and its ideas and heroes" and Tanvir Mokammel's *Nodir Naam Modhumoti* because of its graphic depictions of the Liberation War of 1971.

On the other hand, mainstream films such as *Boma Hamla*, *Kukhyato Shontrashi*, *City Terror* and *Fire* and recent releases like *Rosher Baidani*, *Nogno Hamla* and *Bidrohi Raja*, portraying horrific violence and sexual content to the point of pornography continue to run in theatres unabated. Though the Film Censor Board (FCB) claims to be cracking down on such films, its effectiveness comes into question with their screening in cinema halls across the country, especially in district towns.

The loopholes of the censorship act are many. First is a lack of clarity and specificity. For example, what exactly is "immorality" and how appropriate and useful a word is it really? What manner of clothing and posture is "indecorous" or "suggestive"? Why the double standards where bikinis or bathing costumes may be allowed only in the case of foreign films and "modest," "modern dress and suitable bathing costume" may be allowed in local productions of export quality films?

And where depiction of rape is forbidden, including "attempts or indication" to rape unless it is "intended to condemn it," how does every other Bangla film manage to get away with one to three rape scenes which, at the end of the day, become a source of warped entertainment for the audience?

If clauses such as "immorality" and "obscenity" are to exist, they must be more specific, with an outline of just what can and cannot be shown in movie-specific acts, language/dialogues, etc.

On the other hand, there is no separate clause on violence at all. Even though there is a section on crime, physical violence is hardly mentioned anywhere in the act and most mainstream Bangla films are ridden with extreme violence. There should be provisions against unnecessarily prolonged and graphic violence, as well as violent acts that can be easily imitated.

It also needs to be made clear whether the provisions under security or law and order, international relations and religious susceptibilities would apply even in the case of historical films and documentaries in which certain depictions may be in breach of these.

Some leeway may be provided to historical films and documentaries to allow them to reflect reality and perform an educative function. There can, in fact, be different standards or sets of rules for commercial and alternative films. Clear guidelines will help the FCB to be consistent.

Subjectivity is one of the main problems with censorship, and 15 people cannot easily judge what is suitable for viewing by a growing and changing population of over 141 million. Along with the usual bureaucrats and film personalities on the board, the inclusion of media scholars (who would be able to judge the potential impact of films on the audience), as well as common citi-

zens (representative of society and contemporary values and tastes) is advisable.

Film education/orientation as well as funding for good films is necessary for filmmakers. A survey of filmgoers is also needed in order to find out what they want to see. Simply assuming that the majority audience whose options are few and their tastes unknown are fascinated by obese heroines dancing in skimpy clothing hardly seems fair.

Finally, proper enforcement of the law is of the utmost importance. Newspaper reports have revealed that stay orders can literally be bought from the lower courts in exchange for hefty sums of cash, which allows the screening of uncensored films for at least a period of time before further action is taken against them. Sometimes, stay orders are taken even before the release of films.

The amendment of 2006 has made it somewhat tougher legally, by barring court injunctions without hearing first from the FCB and increasing the penalty for projection of films, display of posters and advertisements without certificates from three months to a maximum of three years' imprisonment and a fine of Tk. 10,000.

The fine can be increased further and hall owners, who often pressurise filmmakers into making sub-standard films for greater profit, should also be held liable for the screening of uncensored/decertified films. It may be noted here that the censorship act applies only to cinematograph

films and not to films on video, CDs and DVDs. The unrestricted sale of low-grade films both local and foreign in stores thus makes the act redundant in a sense.

Censorship may seem ridiculous to many, in an age where technology makes access so very easy. Thus "cut pieces" containing everything from bathing to explicit sex scenes -- are inserted in films during screening at theatres and censored pornography is easily available on the internet. In this context, doing away with the censorship act altogether, replacing it with an age-restrictive classification system as in the UK, US, India, etc. may be an option.

Such a rating system leaves it up to the audience (and, in the case of children, their guardians) to decide what they deem suitable for viewing. Classification is also a more democratic-sounding word, implying freedom of the media to produce what they will and freedom of the audience to accept or reject it.

Classification or censorship, the ultimate goal is to provide healthy entertainment for the audience. Knowledge of the society, its tastes and values, clear guidelines stemming from this and, subsequently, their strict implementation and enforcement can make film-viewing a pleasurable and positive entertainment experience.

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