

Ami Bangladesher dalal

SHAKER ZAIDI

AFTER the latest round of protests, a friend called: "I see, now you've started writing for that dalal paper."

"Dalal paper, which one?"

"Daily Star, they are dalal for the Americans."

"Americans? But didn't you used to say they were dalal for army?"

"Yes, but then they became dalal for students, by printing photos of protests."

"But they can't be dalal for both?"

"Of course they can, that is part of

the sukhamo karchupi. And before that they were dalal of Yunus. It's all part of the master plan."

"But isn't it possible they are calling it as they see it?"

"Honeyed words will get you nowhere. We are coming back, and we will get all you chinnito dalals."

Here we go again ... At a business seminar, one speaker talked about the need for stronger business ties with India. I knew right away that he was being pegged as an India dalal. Silently, I was relieved that I was not seated anywhere near him. Dalal by

association!

There is a long, tortured history of dalal accusations in Bangladeshi politics. All the way back to the SENTO Treaty, which Suhrawardy signed with Mujib's support, making Mujib the Pro-Markin dalal to many on the Left. Later he became an Indian dalal for close ties with Indira (but no one ever called him an Arab dalal for reaching out to the OIC, or Pakistan dalal for the 1973 general amnesty).

Moscow dalal, Peking dalal, Delhi dalal, Washington dalal. The coups and counter-coups of the

1970s were all alleged to be one country's dalal against another. In that turbulent age, Bangladesh (actually Dhaka) was awash with people that were branded as dalals. India, Russia, China, America, CIA, KGB – if the allegations were cent-percent true, there were hundreds if not thousands of freelance dalals running around. I hope the agencies got value for their money.

In the early 1980s, feminists and left activists were resistant to the idea of working for NGOs, because no one wanted to become NGO

dalal. And now? Things change, nothing stays the same. Purity is hard to hold on to, at some point everyone faces realpolitik.

The dalal theory of political analysis is not over yet. Only the players have changed. China isn't a bad guy any more. During the BNP-Jamaat government, there was noise about a newly opened Taiwanese trade office in Dhaka. A day later, under pressure, the government revoked the announcement. But no one talked about China dalals. It's not as sexy – the only twin spectre that get the

blood boiling is India and America.

The problem with the dalal hyper-model is that it destroys the space for any policy debate and healthy disagreement over economic or foreign policy. Trade, investment, multinationals, treaties, negotiations, rights – everything is filtered through that prism.

The dominant elephant in the room is our tortured relation with India – no one dares even approach this topic for fear of losing their precious credibility. Instead of debating (and even demolishing) an argument, your opponent only has to slyly

attach "dalal" to the debate. That dirty word is enough, your base is gone. Like the age old "Islam gelo" argument, a hint and a breath and a whisper are enough.

A few stray words praising clean candidates – bam, civil society's dalal! Asian Highway? Gas policy? India's dalal! Islamist groups? America's dalal!

We are in volatile waters, and many more flash points may emerge. We don't really know what the next few months (or year) will bring, but we do know that we're at a junction. Either headed to something positive,

or about to go over the cliff. We very urgently need to carve out a space where we can debate things without a cloud of character assassination via the "dalal" tag.

Can we all get to the space of reasonable policy debate, without getting slandered with the dalal tags. Can't we consider ourselves Bangladesher dalal?

[Dalal, n. a stooge, lackey, go-between. Usually in the pay of a "foreign power"]

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Let good sense prevail in all quarters

NIAZ AHMED KHAN

WE observe with grave concern the incidents surrounding the recent arrest of senior university professors at the Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities. Our concerns are best expressed in the form of a few questions that have been dogging us ever since these ugly incidents: Was it absolutely necessary to get into these respectable teachers' residences in the middle of the night? Wouldn't it have been more decent to summon them through respective university authorities for the purpose of any investigation of allegations against them?

Newspapers tell us that the police have so far lodged some 35 cases -- targeting a staggering

82000 unnamed people -- over the recent incidents at the Dhaka University and their aftermath.

We, of course, note with some relief and appreciation the fact that there is an honest and sensible head of police (the current IGP) now. There have also been some reform efforts within the police lately, and some brilliant students have joined the service (as ASPs) in the recent years.

However, is the IGP's personal integrity, together with the reform attempts and induction of fresh blood into the service, good enough to protect ordinary citizens like us from the "police excess" that has historically been the hallmark of the police? Hand on heart, we do want to see our police living up to

their stated motto, i.e. acting as true "friends of the citizens," and we have our best wishes towards that end.

Meanwhile, who can give us explanation and elucidation on the distinction between "critique of the government actions" and "anti-state behaviour?"

Although I feel rather uncomfortable bringing in personal points, it may be relevant here to note that I have had the honour of teaching at the postgraduate level over 200 (both retired and currently serving) military officers (ranging between the ranks of Captain or equivalent and Brigadier General/equivalent) in the course of the last decade in various universities and military schools.

Based on my close affiliation with these enlightened individuals, and other experiences of interactions with the armed forces, I am convinced that there are very sensible officials in our military forces. As a proud teacher, can I now realistically expect and hope to see the wisdom and judiciousness reflected in the actions of the concerned law enforcing agencies in matters surrounding the DU events and their aftermath?

The Dhaka University authority – especially the honourable acting vice-chancellor – has done a good job by immediately taking up the matter with the honourable chief adviser. The Dhaka University Teachers' Association, led by its honourable president and vice-

president, has also expressed its "deep concern" over the arrest and remand of its respectable members in no ambiguous terms.

We are told that the honourable chief adviser has conveyed his assurance that there will be no harassment of members of the university community. We just hope that the law enforcing agencies will now act on, and adhere to, the spirit of the honourable chief adviser's commitment and words.

No patriotic citizen can deny the need for unearthing and containing any plot or conspiracy to disrupt peace and order in the country. We want to be fully cooperative and supportive of any effort by the law agencies or the university authorities in this regard. If anyone is

proven guilty of hatching such a plot against the country, we aspire to be amongst the first to condemn him.

At the moment, however, we feel that the way in which these senior academics have been dealt with is inappropriate -- to say the least. As a member of the university family, I feel that this has created much discomfort and anxiety in the minds of members -- both students and teachers alike -- of our family.

To be candid, as I write this piece, I cannot avoid noticing a creepy feeling of uncertainty and discomfort within my mind about what's in store for us. During some two decades of my career, I have deliberately avoided every single "group" or "political" activity, and

have taken no particular interest in national party politics. However, my "apolitical" career is not enough to give me the peace of mind that I desperately need today.

In the final analysis, let us all be reminded of an old fact of which we are often oblivious: public universities are national institutions and assets. The Dhaka University is as much my university as it is the university of the honourable chief adviser, the chief of

military staff, the IGP, or any other conscious citizen of the country. We all have a common stake in protecting this national institution.

The government has done a

commendable job of promptly lifting up the curfew, and we now keenly await opening of our universities. We all have a role to play in bringing back normalcy in the academia. The law enforcing agencies must respect the sanctity of these highest seats of learning by acting more judiciously, and we -- the members of the university family -- must reciprocate by helping the government in any reasonable effort towards reconciliation and pacification. Let good sense prevail in all quarters.

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Mass psychogenic illness -- The social role

ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

LIKE the way "stage fright" can cause nausea, shortness of breath, headache, a stomachache or diarrhea, our body can react strongly to other stressful situations. Outbreaks of mass psychogenic illness show us how stress and other people's feelings and behavior can affect the way we feel.

In July, the whole nation observed how a so far unfamiliar disease has wracked the nation with panic. On July 11, 21 students of Aliaab Islamia High School and College, Narsingdi, suddenly developed convulsions, but recovered within 30 minutes. The same thing happened on July 14, when 28 more students experienced the illness.

Subsequently, it spread to Ashulia, Narayanganj, Rupganj, Magura, Bagherhat, Satkhira, Gazipur, Natore, Barisal, Jhalokathi, Jhenidah, Khagrachari, Faridpur and Chapainabaganj, making the whole nation stupefied. Since July, the total number of cases, as reported countrywide, is 550 (Xinhua, August 2). Experts opine that it is "mass psychogenic ill-

ness" (MPI), not a new event in Bangladesh but so far it had remained overlooked and unnoticed in our vast backward community.

Mass psychogenic illness occurs when groups of people (such as a class in a school or workers in an office) start feeling sick at the same time, even though there is no physical or environmental reason. MPI has occurred for hundreds of years, all around the world and in many different social settings.

Less recorded, but probably a lot more common than we realize. There is collective human behaviour, which produces different kinds of activities and phenomena (Kerekhoff, 1968). These include crowd or mob behaviour, panics, crazes and fads. These types of behaviour often occur under stress or when the ordered reality of a culture or group is disrupted (Conner, 1989).

Mass hysteria illnesses have been found throughout history (Sirois 1982). Hippocrates in 400 BC introduced the Greek term "hysteria," meaning illness caused by a wondering womb. During the middle ages, outbreaks of mass psychogenic episodes, called the St. Vitus's dance, were common.

The twitching accompanying this illness was considered a curse due to sinfulness. Later, in early colonial America, illness among young girls in Salem was attributed to witches' curses (Pennebaker, 1982).

Twentieth century examples of this phenomenon have been generally found in factories, workplaces, and schools.

Outbreaks of mass psychogenic illness usually start with an environmental "trigger." The environmental trigger can be a bad smell, a sound, a suspicious-looking substance, or something else that makes people in a group believe they have been exposed to a danger. After the triggering event, many of them begin to experience signs of sickness at the same time.

Mass psychogenic illness is characterized by symptoms occurring among a group of persons with shared beliefs regarding those symptoms, that suggest organic illness but have no identifiable environmental cause and little clinical or laboratory evidence of disease.

They can spread rapidly through apparent visual transmission, and may be aggravated by a prominent emergency or media response, but are frequently resolved after patients

are separated from each other and removed from the environment in which the outbreak began.

Children and adolescents are frequently affected (Boss, 1997), and the phenomenon commonly involves groups under stress (Philen et al, 1989). Females are often disproportionately affected (Boss, 1997). From 1973 to 1993, one half of the reported outbreaks of psychogenic illness occurred in schools, followed by factories (29%), towns and villages (10%), families and other institutions.

Predominant symptoms
MPI manifests itself with the occurrence of headache (67%), dizziness (46%), nausea (41%), abdominal pain (39%), fatigue (30%), convolution (23%), sore throat (19%), difficult breathing (13%), watery/itching eyes (12%), chest pain (11%), trouble in thinking (10%), vomiting (10%), tingling/numbness (10%), anxiety (8%), diarrhea (7%), trouble with vision (7%), rash (4%), loss of consciousness (4%) and itching (3%) (Source: Timothy FJ, 2006).

Common characteristics of MPI

Often exposure to an environmental trigger (e.g. odour, rumour,

emergency response) precedes MPI. Those at risk are females, adolescents and children, and patients with psychological or physiological stress. The causes may be boredom, or perceived boredom, a felt lack of emotional or social support, victims often knowing each other or moving in the same friendship circles; the symptoms spread by "line-of-sight" transmission (i.e. seeing or hearing of another ill person causes the symptoms).

MPI has unique characteristics; the symptoms spread and dissipate rapidly, they are associated with minimal physical or laboratory findings, no environmental changes in scientific tests may recur with return to the environment of the initial outbreak, but they may escalate with vigorous or prolonged emergency or media response, and the victims may experience shortness of breathing and syncope (Grundy SM, 1997).

Events of mass psychogenic illness in the past

Biting and dancing manias that spread throughout parts of Europe between 13th and 17th century.

In 1981, in a school in Montreal, Canada, 500 students aged 13-14 years fainted.

In 1983, in the West bank of Gaza, more than 900 people, mostly schoolgirls, lost consciousness following a rumor of gas poisoning.

In 1988, in a military school in USA, 375 were evacuated for medical emergency because of MPI.

In 1991, 26 girls in a school in Iran developed psychomotor syndrome.

In 1996, in a large fish-packing plant in New Brunswick, Canada, 208 people were affected by MPI.

In September 1998, almost 800 young people in Jordan had suffered from mass psychogenic illness following tetanus-diphtheria toxoid vaccination.

In November 1998 in UK, a teacher noticed a gasoline-like smell in her classroom, and she along with 80 students and 19 staff members developed MPI.

On December 18 2001, 234 children at a primary school in Ca Mau City in Vietnam received the cholera vaccine and 97 were affected by MPI.

In 2003, a 31-member family displayed mass hysteria in East Delhi, India.

In April 2007, 600 girls in a Mexican boarding school suffered collective hysteria.

Recommended approach to patients with MPI

Attempt to separate persons with illness associated with the outbreak.

Promptly perform physical examination and basic laboratory testing to exclude other causes.

Monitor and provide oxygen as necessary.

Minimize unnecessary exposure to medical procedures or other potential anxiety-stimulating situations.

Notify public health authority.

Promptly communicate the results of the laboratory and environmental testing.

While maintaining confidentiality, propagate the message that cases are improving.

Acknowledge that the symptoms experienced by the patients are real.

Explain potential contribution of anxiety to the patient's syn-

drome.

Reassure the patients.

Encourage the media to show the real scenario, not to create panic.

Create social awareness.

In a previous era, spirits and demons oppressed us. Although they have been replaced by our contemporary concern about the fear of invisible viruses, chemicals, toxins, the fears of social origin remain the same. Mass Psychogenic Illness is a social disorder.

Psychogenic expressions which manifest themselves as psychogenic expressions which can only be dealt with by appropriate social behaviour, media campaign and mass awareness, to prevent further onslaught in our society.

(I gratefully acknowledge the valuable suggestions of my friend Dr Abdullah Al Mamun, Head, Department of Psychiatry, DMCH).

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Party with Islamist roots set to modernize Turkey

HASAN KOSEBALABAN

THE election of Abdullah Gul as president of Turkey -- a foregone conclusion since the landslide victory of Prime Minister Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in July -- marks a turning point in the country's history. If allowed to carry on the mandate with which the party won 46.5 percent of the vote in July elections, the AKP could further democratize the country, bringing about economic liberalization and international integration.

But if the AKP victory -- and the entry of a first lady wearing a headscarf -- is interpreted by Europe and the US as marking the rise of an Islamist government, this could contribute to reactionary nationalism in Turkey.

The first multiparty elections in Turkey were conducted in 1946 through an "open cast, secret tally" system, resulting in the victory of the Kemalist People's Republican Party (CHP). Since the country's first free and fair elections conducted in 1950, however, the CHP never returned to the status of absolute majority. Almost all elections in which it came in first place followed a military intervention.