

Thoughts on the past 36 years

But consider this, in the final analysis we cannot but ignore the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor has further widened, the majority of the people have little or no access to health and medical services, the spiraling of prices has pushed them against the wall, the rule of law has taken a severe beating, democracy has been maligned and bruised in more ways than one, and continues to be so. Fear, uncertainty, and terror of all dimensions stalk the lives of everyone, the good the bad and the ugly. We have become independent, but are in chains everywhere.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

We enter the 37th year of our independence, my mind races back to memories both bitter and sweet. I lost a brother, Shahid Munir Chowdhury, one of the most illustrious sons of the soil, only 48 hours before we gained our independence. Although I feel occasionally bitter and sad, I must say I am no longer haunted by it. After all, 36 years have passed by and I have seen bigger tragedies taking place on this very independent soil. Human rights and justice continue to be accessible to a selected few, and as elusive as ever before to most. Economists are busy producing lofty statistics, whereas the poor continue to struggle for mere survival.

Every year, we write and write about the glory of our liberation war and the sacrifices made by many, known and unknown. Today, it seems, at least to me, that all these are sheer ceremonious exercises. These are mostly aimed at being with the tune of the times. The members of our civil society, "senior intellectuals", Mukti Jodhas, thinkers and politicians alike get real high during the month of December each year. Yet, there clearly has been a serious fall in the state of our conscience, morality and ethics. Slowly and slowly we are turning out to be a suicidal nation. Years have past by and, as a nation, we have proved to be poor managers of our own affairs, and to be a nation incapable of governing ourselves.

What have we achieved so far is

blaming each other, each of us trying to prove himself holier than the other, staying divided, pursuing individual agenda, and indulging in self-aggrandisement. We have banished clean thinking and good education. We have become extremely intolerant of each other. We thrive on hatred. We talk more and hear less. Frankly, I feel that in the past 36 years, compared to the years prior to that, our intrinsic value as human beings has gone down considerably. We are quick to blame others for our own failures.

They talk of the ever-growing GDP, the foreign currency reserves, the flourishing garment industries, the development of the telecommunication sector, both in the IT technologies and other forms of infrastructure develop-

ments, that have taken place. Indeed, something to be reckoned with.

But consider this, in the final analysis we cannot but ignore the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor has further widened, the majority of the people have little or no access to health and medical services, the spiraling of prices has pushed them against the wall, the rule of law has taken a severe beating, democracy has been maligned and bruised in more ways than one, and continues to be so. Fear, uncertainty, and terror of all dimensions stalk the lives of everyone, the good the bad and the ugly. We have become independent, but are in chains everywhere.

We are a nation totally incapable of self-criticism. We are an ungrateful people as a nation, we hesitate to say thank you where it is most warranted. I fail to understand why the people of this country, the powerful, the poor, the innocent, the historian, the analysts and the strategists, all in a row, either failed to or shied away from recognising and acknowledging in "clear" terms the invaluable services the Indian army rendered in our War of Liberation.

Please do not get me wrong, I am in no way trying to belittle or undermine the extraordinary sacrifices made by our valiant freedom fighters. I know of no other nation in the world that engaged in a war with so little, the main weaponry being their indomitable spirit and unmatched courage.

On the other hand, we are incapable of asking forgiveness when and where a mistake is committed. We are often too proud to admit our guilt, or proud for all the wrong reasons. We are often high on the moral well-being of others, more than on our own self. We are physicians ready to heal others before we have healed ourselves.

There are three other specific areas where we have steadily gone down: religion, education and population growth.

We need not probe deep into the state of our religion, but should look into the five pillars of our religion. We have turned them into mere rituals and ends in themselves, both at individual and community levels. Our prayers have become an end in themselves, all that remains is like going through some ritualistic

lifeless motions. There is no reflection of the advocated cleanliness, with concern for the people on the right or the left, no awareness of constant exposure to God. We have turned the Salat into some form of a social gathering, with no commitment of reforming ourselves. Our vision of fasting has become extremely narrow, there is no reflection on its essence and teachings. There is but little reflection of its teaching, like self-restraint, in our lives, no real efforts in taming our ugly passions. As for Zakat, it is no different either, it begins and ends in doing out a few coins here and there, or generously donating for construction of yet another mosque in a society that is reeling under poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy.

Our road to Mecca (Hajj) brings us back from where it started, as if the journey was never made: back to the divided community devoured by its own divisions.

We have, over the years, for all practical purposes, lost our focus on education. It has been progressively neglected right from the day we gained our independence. Instead of making it our priority "number one", we have turned it into a subject of senseless contro-

versy. Whatever measures we may undertake to make social, political and economic reforms, without education taking off in the right direction we shall continue to merely survive. We should, therefore, invest the lion's share of our resources in this sector in order to bring about a qualitative change in the system.

Extremely worrisome is the galloping increase in our population. Whatever growth we achieve, it is gobbled up year after year, resulting in the piling of problems in all spheres of our lives, social, political, economic, healthcare, housing, civic amenities, crippling our ability to cope with the problems that beset us. Both at field and policy levels, matters have steadily deteriorated over the years. A recent report in the media pointed out that our target of bringing the rate of population growth from 3 to 2.2 percent may not be achieved any time soon, if ever.

Furthermore, I remain worried about the state of our food security and employment creation in the coming years, due to two calamities that hit the country in recent times. Besides, there clearly exists a kind of apathy and discon-

tent amongst major players in our economy, trading houses, and businesses in the private sector in giving their best.

Despite all that has been said, I can only say that I am cautiously optimistic about the future of the country in the next decade or so. Right at this point of time, in all sincerity, I must admit that I remain rather worried.

If we are to come out of this rut, we need to muster support of all patriotic forces. First and foremost, we have to forge a unity in the entire society that continues to be fiercely divided. All sections of the society have to come out from their "protective" shells, forsaking their individual and collective vanity. Besides, we also have to shed the "holier than thou" cloak."

In the end, let me say this, I love this country, I was born here and in all likelihood I shall breathe my last here, therefore, I thought it to be within my rights to express my fears and premonitions. I do sincerely hope that I am proved wrong.

Shamshe Chowdhury is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Brokers not welcome

Brokerage is a coveted and respected profession all over the world. It is a significant part of the service industry and the economy as a whole in developed nations. Whereas, our attitude towards brokers and the services they provide is reflected in classified advertisements that display phrases like "no brokers please" or "brokers not welcome," and in our interpretation of the translated term for broker.

ASIF ANWAR

I often see the phrases "no brokers please" or "brokers not welcome" appearing in certain "for sale" advertisements while browsing the classified section of our local newspapers. For example, just the other day, I noticed an advertisement (boxed space) in a local daily where an individual was trying to sell xxx decimal industrial land located in Gazipur. The data within the space contained a brief description of the property, contact information of the seller, an asking price of Tk yyy, and the phrase "no brokers please."

In today's service oriented business environment, it is incomprehensible that the advertiser, having stated an expected price, finds a broker or the services of a broker unwelcome for such a transaction. The reason behind such negative attitude towards brokers, that I can think of, could only be 1) the seller

had traumatic experience with brokers in the past or 2) the seller is void of any commonsense. The obvious reason the seller of the property (mentioned above) had to resort to advertising in a newspaper is the lack of a marketplace where one could take the title deed to buyers waiting with cash. In other words, there is no physical market for real estate where transactions can be consummated, freely and quickly, without the services of a middleman with expertise in such deals.

Some of the basic reasons behind the requirement of middlemen in real estate transactions are: immobility of the product; infrequent transactions; highly bureaucratic and antiquated paperwork; susceptibility to fraud and forgery; difficulties with possession, hidden liabilities, etc.

To fully appreciate the services of a broker, let us consider, for instance, the situation from the perspective of a potential buyer (of

the land cited as example) who happens to be a busy manufacturing entrepreneur from Chittagong. The buyer from Chittagong is in the "market" for industrial land near Dhaka for his/her new factory, as part of a major expansion plan. Though the property in Gazipur (appearing in a classified) might be suitable as a potential location, it is unlikely that the busy entrepreneur would have time to go through all the classifieds and spot this particular advertisement.

Nevertheless, even in the case the classified was spotted, he/she would find it difficult to accurately form an idea regarding the size of the property (mentioned in decimals) since a different measuring unit (gondas) is used in Chittagong for this purpose.

In order to evaluate the fairness of the asking price of Tk yyy, the buyer must also acquire solid knowledge of the real estate trends in general, particularly of Gazipur, recent transactions around the area

where the property is located, taxes and registration costs, hidden liabilities or lien holders, just to name a few. In addition, he/she must understand the complications regarding transfer and authenticity of title deeds, possession, utility connections, etc., not mentioning the need for a trip to Dhaka just to view the property.

On the other hand, both time and money could have been saved had a professional middleman or a broker been engaged by the buyer for purchasing the required land for the new factory. Ideally, a broker, in real estate or in other industries, should be a licensed professional, qualified on the basis of having demonstrated knowledge and expertise in his chosen field. Brokers should also be guided by ethical and fair business practice codes specific to industries, and monitored by industry regulators for malpractice.

The services provided by the broker, in real estate transactions or in other industries, are usually free until a deal is executed, as the broker's fee comes as a percentage of the transaction value.

The job of a broker can be viewed as a "transaction facilitator" for goods and services lacking a physical market (i.e. real estate, large capital equipment, etc.), or technical in nature (i.e. financial securi-

ties, intellectual property etc.). However, a broker may find opportunity in any market, wherever or whenever inefficiencies in the system are present.

Though the term "dalal" would be the right translation in Bangla for "broker," unfortunately, we are accustomed to the term "dalal" as a substitute for "pimp" only. It is true that, technically, a pimp is also a dalal, working on behalf of the "seller" to facilitate transactions with "buyers" for a fee. But, in the true sense, a "dalal" is not a pimp unless pimping has been recognised as a legitimate profession.

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world. It is a significant part of the service industry and the economy as a whole in developed nations. Whereas, our attitude towards brokers and the services they provide is reflected in classified advertisements that display phrases like "no brokers please" or "brokers not welcome," and in our interpretation of the translated term for broker.

Having been a broker myself (financial assets, real estate), I find it insulting, discriminatory, prejudiced, and a serious threat towards the growth of the service industry in Bangladesh.

Asif Anwar is a lecturer at Independent University, Bangladesh.

CMAG and Pakistan

Mass public support in the favour of judicial independence and fair elections show that the people of Pakistan are not exactly ill-prepared for democracy. CMAG should not fall prey to the neo-colonial idea of guiding peoples to democracy and endorse it in any way. CMAG should, instead, act to uphold the Commonwealth's heritage of struggling against injustice and authoritarianism by helping the Pakistani people to realise their democratic aspirations.

R. INIYAN ILANGO

THE Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group's (CMAG) past record of dealing with Pakistan has been notoriously indecisive and often riddled with miscalculations. In 1999, CMAG suspended Pakistan from the Councils of the Commonwealth, only to re-admit it in 2004 when General Musharraf became a favourite in the so-called "war against terror." From 2004 until last month, CMAG continued to naively tolerate Mr. Musharraf despite warnings from civil society groups, who, in the end, have been shown to be correct.

One could say that Mr. Musharraf's recent transition from general to civilian president appears as ceremonial as his lifting of the emergency ahead of the promised January 8, 2008, elections.

With a sabotaged judiciary, skewed rule of law, tampered constitution, extraordinary military powers, suppressed civil society, restricted media, and pre-election manipulations, all steps taken by Musharraf, after CMAG's November 22 suspension of Pakistan, remain mere window-dressings.

Given the undemocratic context, it seems that the outcome of the January 8 elections will only add to such flourishes. In this context, it is imperative at this stage that CMAG not become carried away by such window-dressing by considering the immediate re-admittance of Pakistan into the Commonwealth.

In 1956, at the height of the Cold War, Ayub Khan, the first military dictator of Pakistan, gave the world a new idea. It was called "guided-democracy." This idea justified authoritarian military rule as legitimate and necessary to prepare certain countries for democracy.

At that time, this idea survived with the support of the Western bloc that was eager to counter the spread of Communism in Asia. Today, half a century later, not much seems to have changed in Pakistan.

The Cold War is over, but the fight for democracy continues -- the enemy now is terrorism.

Mass public support in the favour of judicial independence and fair elections show that the people of Pakistan are not exactly ill-prepared for democracy. CMAG should not fall prey to the neo-colonial idea of guiding peoples to democracy and endorse it in any way.

CMAG should, instead, act to uphold the Commonwealth's heritage of struggling against injustice and authoritarianism by helping the Pakistani people to realise their democratic aspirations.

The Commonwealth's Harare Declaration enunciates human rights and rule of law as fundamental political values. Latimer House Rules adopted by the Commonwealth Heads of Governments in Abuja in 2003 lays down the independence of the judiciary as a fundamental aspect of democratic governance.

These have to be the standards that guide CMAG's future decisions on Pakistan. In accordance with these standards, CMAG's most important task has to be to ensure that the independence of the Pakistani judiciary is restored at the earliest.

CMAG also has to ensure that foreign policy and real-politik considerations do not overpower the democratic promises of these principles.

As January 8 draws closer, Mr. Musharraf's regime in Pakistan is busying itself with the task of sugar-coating a bitter and abusive election process. CMAG has to analyse both the pre-election scenario and the post-election scenario in the light of the Harare Declaration and the Latimer House Rules.

Any decisions taken by the CMAG should be taken according to these principles. In the meanwhile, the remaining Commonwealth mechanisms, including that of the Secretary-General's good offices as well as Commonwealth governments, have an important duty -- to help Pakistan's people in this, their time of struggle for democracy.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam is a freelance travel writer.

Protecting Saint Martin

Man plays the major role in the destruction of the coral reefs. Nature also has her own part to play. Sometimes, hurricanes and such storms destroy major portions of the reef. A lot of marine animals, such as the starfish, even eat into the corals. The prime destruction of the coral reef at Saint Martin has been due to mankind. Global warming and the increase in pollution levels have caused a lot of damage to the reef.

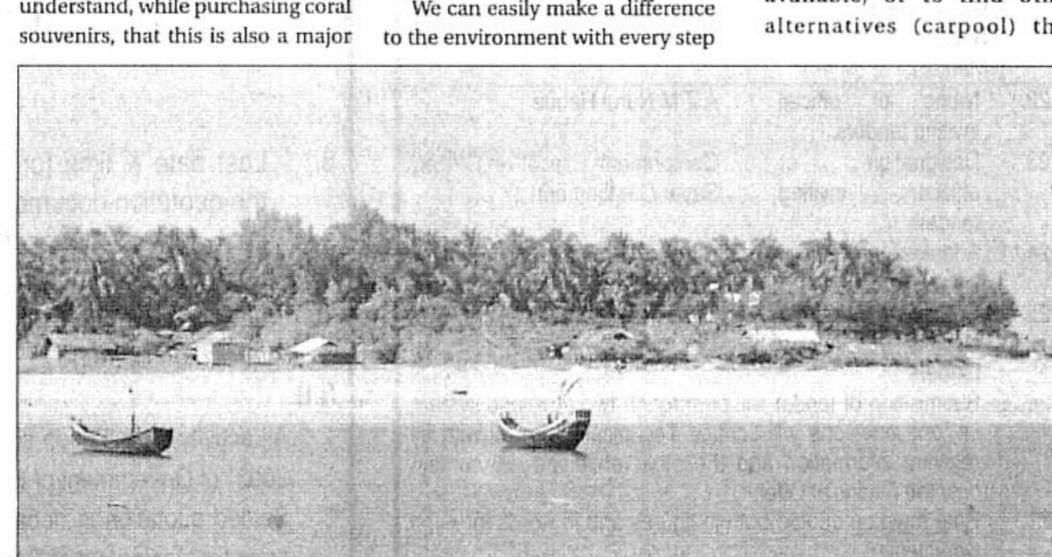
MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

SAINT Martin has undoubtedly added beauty to tourism in Bangladesh. It has also brought variety in our environmental balance. Corals and coral reefs are its chief attraction.

Presently, Saint Martin is losing its beauty and has almost become environmentally vulnerable. The coral reef of the island is facing many man-made threats. Sometimes, humans cause serious damage to the corals and the coral reefs without realising. After Sundarbans, Saint Martin is our main attraction, and it needs to be protected soon.

Coral reefs can only thrive in a congenial environment. They need ample sunlight, narrow range of the temperature of the water, and the salinity of the water should be around 34-37 parts per thousand. Shallow waters are the areas where we see the reefs thriving, as the algae need sunlight for photosynthesis. This is definitely not possible in deeper waters.

Man plays the major role in the destruction of the coral reefs. The dumping of waste products into the sea has contaminated the oceans. This can sometimes result in the over-growth of algae, and an excess of algae covering the reef causes less intake of oxygen. The increase in the levels of carbon dioxide in the water has made the coral structures weaker. This makes the reef more vulnerable.



cause of the damage to the coral reef. Tourism has had a devastating effect on the coral reefs, as they are being stripped of their natural cover to satisfy the increasing greed of the human race.

also to navigate the boat carefully to prevent any damage to the reef.

• When we go to our favourite restaurant for sumptuous seafood delights, we have to avoid those items that are caught through illegal practices and the use of illegal equipment.

• To use the public transport available, or to find other alternatives (carpool) that

water will reduce the amount of wastewater being dumped into our oceans.

• When we feel the need to snorkel or scuba dive, we have to ensure the authenticity of the operators. We have to know if they are aware of, and care for, the coral reefs, and the measures they undertake to preserve them. Most operators are out to make a quick buck, so we have to support only those people who are aware of their responsibilities towards the sea.

• To plant trees to reduce the rising temperatures caused by global warming.

• As tourists, we must be completely avoid giving encouragement to those outlets that sell illegal souvenirs. There is only one way to put an end to this practice -- let's stop buying such souvenirs.

• We, too, can help in the clean-up of the coastal area. Let's avoid littering the beaches, and support local groups that are actively involved in these causes.

No argument, Saint Martin is one of the main natural resources of Bangladesh. We had been proud of Sundarbans, but Sidr has killed its beauty and safeguard to the environment. So, to protect the corals and coral reefs at Saint Martin is now our prime duty to defend against cyclones in future, so to say, facing the upshots of climate change.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam is a freelance travel writer.