

Kalkey ashen: A national scourge

In an era of globalisation, many global corporate entities are beginning to set up operations in Bangladesh with state-of-the-art service systems and high service quality. Needless to elaborate, they will pose competitive challenges to local organisations, public or private. It is their service excellence that differentiates them and sets them apart as world-class organisations from the mediocre and sordid ones. Will we be able to compete with them?

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

HAVE you been to some office to resolve a household or personal matter when you have been told "Kalkey ashen (K-A)?" Undoubtedly! Have "you" ever said K-A to someone who came to you to resolve a problem? If so... shame on you!

Just think of the time, cost, effort, and stresses involved. I wonder if any economist has done any cost-benefit analysis, or estimated the productivity losses associated with the K-A phenomenon. I wonder if a sociologist has looked at the power dynamics and its social ramifications. I wonder if a psychologist has researched the psychological stresses and strains involved, and the end result of the humiliating experience.

Organisations, public or private, exist to "serve" their constituencies or customers, at least in theory. Global organisations that have bought into the customer service mantra have been incredibly successful. For many organisations in Bangladesh, unfortunately, and even to this day, K-A has become a way of life; telephone connections, electricity

service, water supply, gas bills, car inspections, school admissions, university registrar's offices, passport office, and on and on.

Even some private banks, cell phone services, ISPs, and others have begun to jump on the bandwagon. In organisations that live by this dictum, there is either something seriously wrong or something absolutely unholy going on that requires attention and amelioration.

Let's consider one scenario: your telephone bill is grossly over the average and you need to get it corrected. What needs to be done? You must go to some office, find the right person, identify the problem, and see it through to its resolution. This rather simple matter, in the western world, is taken care of in a few minutes -- over the telephone -- where the service staff explains all the calls you made and where the charges came from (can you see why they are so efficient and have the time to be more productive than people in the developing world?). If they have made an error, not only is the resolution immediate, it also comes with a sincere apology. Many organisations will even give

you something back as a way of doing justice for making you suffer the injustice of inconvenience. They call it "service recovery."

What happens in Bangladesh? Let me delve into the simple day-to-day experiences; I have no experience with the mega deals! For one thing, it may take a better part of the day to even find the office or person responsible for addressing the discrepancy. It is not unusual to feel like an electron as you are bounced around from one office/person to the next in search of who "might" be able to assist you. And when you finally discover the person who can assist you, the peon casually tells you: "Char tow chit-ey nai (sir is not in his seat!)"

OK, so who is next in charge? Well... there really is no one else; this is a complicated and unusually difficult matter that no one else can handle. You wonder how the sweet and sincere voice in a western context handles this matter so efficaciously. All along, the line keeps growing and growing and growing. And even though you came first, you have this sense of foreboding that others will rush you or perhaps trample you when

the person in-charge shows up. Can a simple solution such as picking up a number to establish order of arrival be so hard to devise?

As you wait and wait, you feel that your time is worth nothing, zilch! After an interminable interlude the "gentleperson" finally arrives in a huff. Did I say gentleperson? He really looks gruff, agitated, and uncompromising to say the least. And he looks at the line, up and down, as if to say: "Why the #** are you here?" You wonder if he will even give you a hearing. Perhaps, you think, you made a mistake to have come to this God forsaken place and might as well have paid the surcharges and saved yourself the aggravation and humiliation.

When your turn comes, you approach with an ingratiating face (read ingratiating as stupid-looking), wondering how you should address him: Sir? Bha? Janab? Boro Bha? Idirot?

After assessing the piece of paper you have with you, he frowns and grunts: "Dekhi ki kora jai, kalkey ashen." Excuse me? Tomorrow? Why? How do you know I have time tomorrow? Will you be present? What assurance is there of any resolution? A million questions converge in your mind in a bewildering array of murderous thoughts. Should you condone the person? Do you wring his neck? Or do you back off and come back tomorrow hoping for sympathetic treatment?

One segment plays wily and quietly succumbs to the situation,



Please don't reduce us to pounding on the gates.

resorting to some sort of "facilitation" arrangement. Not surprisingly, the peon looks content, as do they. It is this last group that is responsible to a large degree for fostering corruption in the country. In fact, to get things done expeditiously, they have overridden rules, broken the queue, and bribed their way to obtain a service completely out of turn. Shamelessly, or perhaps being intimidated, they have helped create and sustain the corruption monster that could not have grown so big had it not been fed so promptly, so much, and with whatever it demanded.

Are there things that can be done to fix the K-A syndrome? I believe there are solutions, and I summarise a few for lack of space.

- More people should begin to stand their ground and say: "I will not be induced to pay a

facilitation fee." This nation has stood its ground against an oppressive foreign nation to earn its freedom, and it can develop a collective mindset again to stand against its own internal oppressive forces.

- There must be better signage in all offices to direct people to the right person.

- All service should be mandated to provide in writing when a party should return, if at all, to get their issue resolved, while the resolution status is tracked in some data file.

- All service staff must wear visible identification badges. I want to know who I am dealing with. This should introduce some curbs because shady people do not want their names known.

- The K-A phenomenon could be portrayed in dramas on TV

screens across the nation. The creative minds of our artistes can surely characterise and besmirch these K-A goons.

- Citizens must also develop a national response which needs to be consistently and widely practiced to keep the ugly head of K-A from rearing up, and so that no service provider will dare to use the term without a good reason. Such a response could be a firm "Excuse me?" or "Maaf Korben?" that can be popularised by the media and civil society.

On a policy level there are additional measures that can be vigorously pursued:

- It is possible that the employees of some organisations engage in K-A because they simply cannot handle the sheer scale of the problems created across the system. This calls for a proactive assessment of the internal systems and processes. Critical components of the system, such as human capital, materials, money, time and equipment, must be re-calibrated periodically in order to foster process efficiencies, cost savings, competitiveness, and customer service. Done effectively, and with the right motive, the public will no longer need to endure the K-A phenomenon.

- Greater competition is another avenue. For services that fail frequently (and this too must be monitored by regulatory bodies, or even civil society), alternative suppliers must be allowed to

flourish where possible. If the K-A syndrome persists, alternative solutions should be explored. For example, I believe the checking of gas, electricity, water and other meters can be done by local communities with some training. In fact, I believe, community volunteers will line up for this job and perform commendably, given the opportunity.

In an era of globalisation, many global corporate entities are beginning to set up operations in Bangladesh with state-of-the-art service systems and high service quality. Needless to elaborate, they will pose competitive challenges to local organisations, public or private. It is their service excellence that differentiates them and sets them apart as world-class organisations from the mediocre and sordid ones. Will we be able to compete with them? And where will the K-A organisations end up: in the garbage heap of incompetent and unholy establishments?

Aside from that, Bangladeshis deserve far more respect than what they have been accorded by their local service providers. It is time to collectively demand a new brand of service that will eradicate the K-A phenomenon from our society and help improve people's quality of lives and productivity.

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So far so good

During the run-up to the recent elections, none of the major political parties highlighted Pakistan's dispute with India over Kashmir. That raises expectations of a political consensus on developing normal relations with India without insisting on prior resolution of the Kashmir issue. In the past, any politician seeking friendly ties with India has faced criticism from rivals, prodded by the establishment, seeking to tap into anti-India sentiment within Pakistan.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

THE aftermath of Pakistan's February 18 parliamentary election has created hope of ending Pakistan's political dysfunction. The voters overwhelmingly rejected supporters of General (retired) Pervez Musharraf at the polls, and the leaders of the country's major political parties have agreed to work together to build a democratic political order.

Pakistan's politicians have clearly scored a major victory against what is euphemistically called "the establishment" in Pakistan. But the battle between "the establishment" and the politicians is far from over.

Musharraf has yet to understand that his rejection by the people requires him to either step down or, at least, accept a diminution of his role. Musharraf might

mistakenly see the election results as comparable to the victory of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in the 1988 polls held immediately after the death of General Ziaul Haq.

Then, Ziaul Haq's successor Ghulam Ishaq Khan retained considerable influence as president, even after Ms Bhutto became prime minister, and eventually used Zia's constitutional amendments to overthrow the elected government. But in 1988, Pakistan's establishment had not been as thoroughly discredited as it is now.

President Ghulam Ishaq Khan benefited from being different from Ziaul Haq, the hated dictator. The army remained politically engaged, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had little experience of the establishment's maneuvers, and the pro-Zia politicians retained considerable political

strength.

This time, the country's major political parties have agreed on a common minimum platform that aims at restoring the Pakistani constitution, rehabilitating its judiciary, and moving towards national reconciliation. The army appears to have decided to pull out of politics.

The nation and the international community have little stomach for covert political manipulation at a time when Pakistan faces a serious threat from terrorists.

That said, "the establishment," made up of politicised generals, intelligence officials, and Pakistan's managerial class -- bankers, civil servants, some overseas businessmen, World Bank beneficiaries, and former or current IMF employees -- will not give up easily.

Soon there will be rumours of

corruption and mismanagement to discredit the elected leadership, and a concerted effort to create rifts among them.

So far, PPP Co-Chairman Asif Ali Zardari and the PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif have shown that the politicians have learnt from the experience of the 1990s. Mr Zardari, in particular, has emerged as a statesman, in contrast with the demonisation to which he was subjected for being married to Mohtarma Bhutto, Pakistan's most popular anti-establishment politician.

The priority of Pakistan's establishment has been to create a centralised state, focused on the perceived threat from India, with the help of the United States. American assistance is obtained by allying with Washington's strategic concern of the day, which, in turn, has led to over-engagement by the military on several fronts.

Many of Pakistan's problems, such as the influence of jihadi extremists and difficult relations with Afghanistan and India, can be traced to the ascendancy of strategic military doctrine at the expense of domestic stability and democratic decision-making.

All that could now change if the

army stays its new course of disengagement from politics and the politicians can work together rather than against each other.

A future government of national unity led by elected politicians should try and end the political role of the intelligence services. For too long, an all powerful intelligence community has run -- and most observers would agree, ruined -- Pakistan by fixing elections, dividing parties and buying-off politicians.

If the politicians prevail, the war against terrorism would be fought to eliminate out of control jihadi groups previously nurtured or tolerated by the Pakistani state, not to secure additional funding from the United States.

An elected Pakistani government might be less amendable, say, to requests for rendition of Pakistani citizens. But it would almost certainly be interested in rooting out al-Qaeda and stopping cross-border Taliban terrorism in Afghanistan.

The civilians would also seek a clearer strategy against militant Talibanisation within Pakistan, particularly because they have a clear popular mandate in the form of electoral rejection of Islamists.

The PPP leadership and the PML-N also seem to agree on normalisation of relations with India, and this time there is little likelihood that either side would paint the other as being "soft" on India.

After initial confrontation, even Musharraf has come around to managing a relatively quiet relationship with Pakistan's larger South Asian neighbour, making it difficult for the establishment to play the India card to discredit popular politicians.

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The cost of conflict

Before America invaded Iraq, officials in the Bush administration estimated that the war might cost tens, at most hundreds, of billions of dollars. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes of Harvard's Kennedy School lay out very different figures in their new book, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*. In it, they tally data on everything from troop pay to equipment to veteran's entitlements to larger social and economic costs, and examine how mismanagement, opaque accounting, and the privatisation of conflict have resulted in a megabill that Americans could be paying back for the next half-century. Stiglitz recently spoke with Newsweek's Rana Foroohar.

Newsweek: How much is \$3 trillion over the course of 50 years? What else could the US have done with that money?

Stiglitz: You can look at it and say, "This is a small percentage of a rich economy," or you can look at things like the proposed children's health-insurance program that was recently vetoed as too expensive -- that can be measured in the cost of days of fighting in Iraq. Funding for a major autism research effort is equal to hours of fighting. Bush has said there's a "giant hole" in our Social Security program, but for one sixth the cost of the war in Iraq, we could have fixed Social Security for the next 50

to 75 years. Why are your numbers so much higher, not only than what the administration came up with, but than your own initial 2006 estimates of \$1 trillion to \$2 trillion? The war has gone worse than people thought it would, and it has gone on for much longer. Things like the cost of recruitment have gone up because the war has gone so badly. There's more use of private contractors -- there are security guards that get \$1,000 per day, and we also pay for the insurance on these people. There are also ambiguities in accounting. For example, if the first tank in a convoy is blown up, that counts as

a military loss, but if the second one crashes into the first, it's called something else, and doesn't get tallied in the defense budget. But taxpayers still foot the bill. How expensive is the war from a historical perspective? Iraq is now America's most expensive conflict since World War II. The cost to keep a soldier in Iraq for one year is about \$400,000, versus \$50,000 in inflation adjusted terms for WWII. This is due in part to the fact that the ratio of injuries to fatalities has grown from 2 to 1, to 15 to 1. It's a miracle of modern medicine. But there is a cost to that. The last of the payments of veteran's benefits from



Iraq: \$ 3 trillion and counting.

WWII has only just ended (and those payments peaked only in 1993).

This war has created a huge, unfunded entitlement for veterans -- they've worked for it, but it's unfunded. Already, 260,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan have been treated in VA hospitals. That's crowding out other veterans. At the same time, life-saving equipment like MRAP armored vehicles that Marines asked for in early 2005 didn't get ordered until after Rumsfeld left -- I believe this was because the government was

trying to keep down the most obvious costs of the war.

What are the macroeconomic costs of Iraq for the US?

We looked at things like the increase in the price of oil, the increased deficit, interest on debt, the diversion of resources from other investments. Given all these things, you'd actually think the economy would be in worse shape than it is now. So, why isn't it?

Our explanation is that loose monetary policy and lax financial regulation covered up the problem; \$900 billion worth of mortgage equity

withdrawals per year helped finance all this. But it was only a matter of time before the day of reckoning came -- and now it has. We didn't pay (for the war) up front; now we're going to pay a higher price because of macroeconomic turmoil.

What will the key global economic fallout be?


Oil prices were \$25 before the war. They are \$100 now. That shift moves wealth away from the US and towards places like, say, Abu Dhabi. So, it's no surprise that when we have financial problems in this country we have to turn to sovereign wealth funds to bail us out. That's a predictable consequence of this war.

What's your recommendation for policymakers in dealing with Iraq at this point?

We have to consider that we are spending \$12 billion in up-front costs per month, plus all the downstream costs, like disability benefits. Over the course of two years, that could all add up to \$500 million to \$600 million. Will the situation be \$600 billion better in two years? What else could we do with that money to improve the lives of Iraqis?

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ONLY IN ASIA
by Nury Vittachi

My sports car is not fuchsia

WOMEN in Asia have smaller vocabularies than men but talk more, scientists have discovered. Yet females have a much larger choice of words in certain areas, such as in the description of colours, buffins say.

Well, hel-lo, scientists. Welcome to Planet Earth.

Honestly, you have to feel sorry for these people. They spend years of their lives finding out what the rest of us already know.

I mean, take the business about colours. A friend of mine decided to buy a sports car recently. "I think I'll get a red one," he said.

"But what shade of red?" his wife asked. "Blush? Brick? Cerise? Fuchsia? Cherry? Russet? Claret? Crimson? Salmon? Ruby? Scarlet? Vermilion?"

We could hear her continuing to identify sub-categories of red as we left the flat and travelled 20 floors down in the elevator.

These discoveries appeared after a team of male scientists spent months recording and analysing speech patterns. (It apparently never occurred to them to use the time-saving but rather risky technique of Talking to a Woman).

Discovery one: Men and women use entirely different words to describe the same thing.

Example: words for the lower midriff.

If you are a woman, you have an "abdomen" or a "tummy."

If you are a man, you have a "belly" or a "gut."

To test this hypothesis, I re-watched my entire library of Arnold Schwarzenegger movies. Amazing to relate, Arnie never once said: "Damn. They got me in the abdomen." Or "He's still alive -- I feel it in my tum-tum."

The aerobics teacher on my wife's exercise videos spoke endlessly about "abdominal scrunches" but never once said: "Belly in. Belly out. C'mon, you

can do it. Let me see you thrust those bellies around."

Discovery two: Girls are better at forming complex sentences than boys.

I observed a little girl making a chocolate spread sandwich and emerging from the kitchen to make the following speech: "Mummy sayth I'm a vevy good lickle girl 'cos I know how to make myself a samwidge and I know how to clean up the kitchen afterwarth and I'm nearly five and a half and this is my dolly who is called Emma and she's gonna help me eat the samwidge."

Before she had finished speaking, the sandwich in question had been summarily inhaled by a small boy belonging to a visitor. The only sounds he had made during his visit were preternaturally loud expulsions of air from various locations on his person.

Discovery three: Men's brains are wired for systematic recall (that means they can remember lists of facts) while women's are wired for empathetic recall (that means they can remember periods of heightened emotion).

Somehow, Mother Nature knew that males would bond by swapping statistics about sports, Pokemon and so on, while females would exchange opinions about relationships.

Guys, try starting a conversation with "Let's talk about our feelings" and watch your buddies fight to leave the room. I don't need scientists to tell me this. I have a gut feeling about it.

And I don't mean a tum-tum feeling.

Tomorrow: The revolutionary new form of English Asians use.

Nury Vittachi was born on Earth and still spends much of his time there. Visit him at www.vittachi.com.