

## A tale of two cities

I grieve over a city where many of us were born. It has the poorest area to population ratio. Every road is choking with maddening traffic jams. There are more automobiles and fewer roads. Cars are parked on the road, and buses stop anywhere they want to. Pedestrians cross the roads at any point, while the foot over-bridges teem with beggars or stand like forlorn structures. There is not a single main and free-flowing thoroughfare connecting the eastern part with the western part. A capital tells a lot about a country. Sadly apathy and avarice are scripting the tale.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

It happened to be in the chamber of my friend, a prominent lawyer of the country. He was giving legal advice to another friend about the vacation of a court injunction. His ancestral land on the North South Road near Bangshal cross-roads has been forcibly occupied by a thuggish city commissioner who is absconding.

While advising a firm stand on the injunction, my lawyer friend vented his scorn against our city fathers past and present. He was particularly incensed about the ubiquitous presence of markets wherever the land was vacated by government bodies. By that he meant the mess in and around Fulbaria and Gulistan.

Yes, indeed, the city of Dhaka with over 10 million people does not have a single open space where city dwellers can inhale clean air. In this respect the Kolkatans are fortunate in having a capacious Gorer Math (Open Ground). Dhaka still has remnants of an open space in Paltan Maidan (Paltan Ground).

The open space of Paltan has shrunk considerably after the hockey stadium was set up to make politics difficult. In the diminution of Paltan Maidan, Dhaka has also lost a part of its heritage.

Dhaka was very near to getting its maidan when the Ramna racecourse was shut down. It was turned into a wooded park and was named "Suhrawardy Uddyan." Soon, a part of it was claimed for "Shishu Park." Even that could be defended, for the city needed an amusement park for children.

The wooded park has descended into infamy because the cover of darkness provided by it started attracting pleasure girls and muggers. Soon it became a God-forsaken place as decent folks stayed away from it. In recent times, the Uddyan was taken over for building Swadhinata Shombo (Liberty Column).

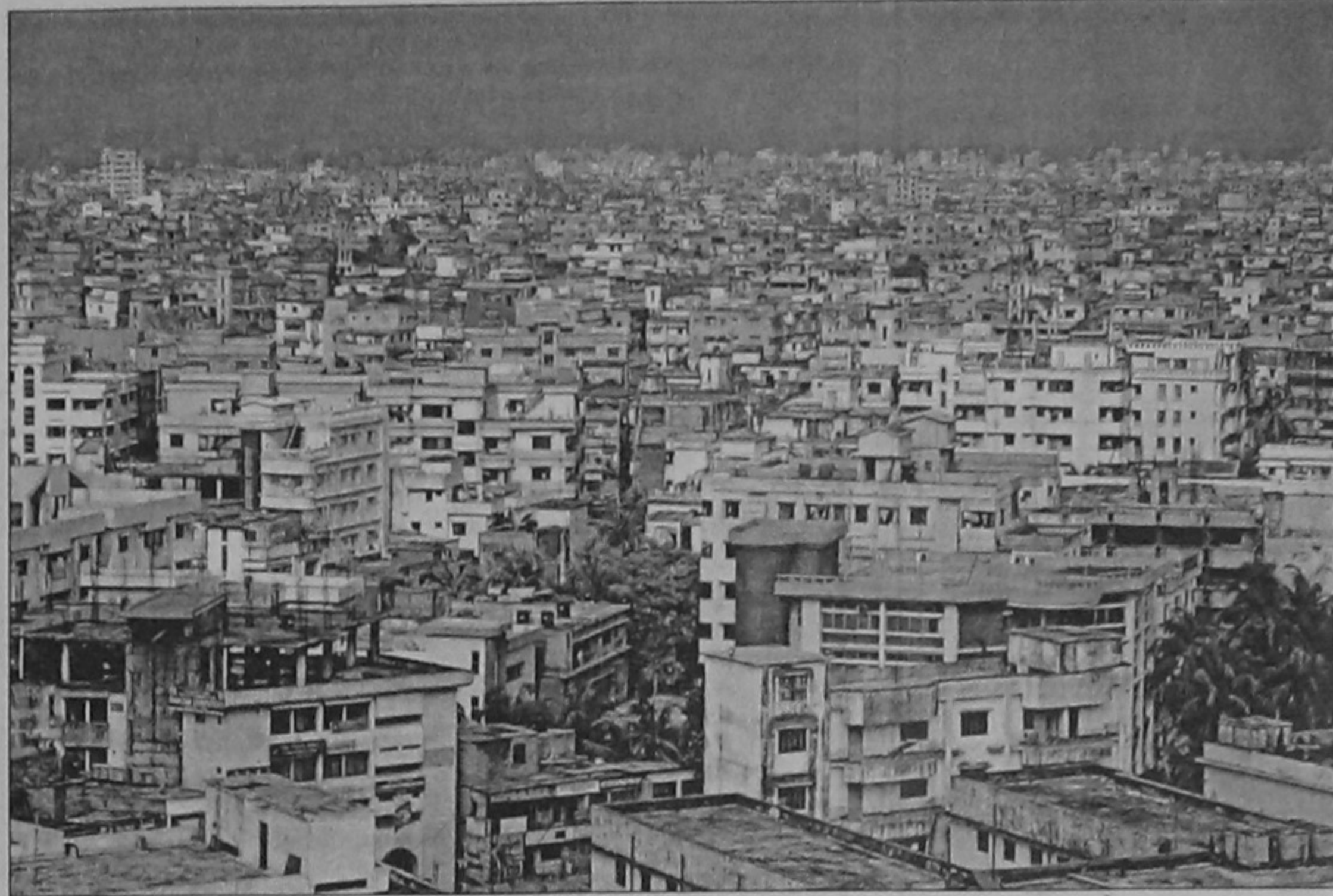
An outgoing advisor of the caretaker government was ready to hand over 25 acres of the park for the development of a golf course for Dhaka Club. Dhaka had a maidan in Paltan, but its eminence is lost. Fulbaria was an open space, it was lost to markets and bus

stands, and the racecourse has been brutalised. The mega city now breathes without a maidan for its teeming population. We can only lament the loss. Can we now conceive of an open space for Dhaka?

A city is judged by its heritage and aesthetic standard. These are the marks that lend eminence and character to a city. A city is, therefore, as good as its city fathers, its planners, and, above all, its leaders. Dhaka has not been fortunate in this regard. Kolkata has fared much better because it is a legacy of the

vaunted British Raj. Its successors have been equally committed and caring in upholding its heritage. Dhaka, although older than Kolkata by hundred years if we consider Jahangir Nagar as the starting point, has suffered due to the profligacy and covetous nature of its patrons. The Heritage Council protects Kolkata from brutish builders and from the high-rise scramble. It takes years in Kolkata to get permission for dismantling an old building.

Pitifully, Dhaka is suffering wholesale abuse from the merchants of power and benders of law. There is no system, and if there



is one it pays obeisance to power and office. It has robbed Dhaka of the last vestiges of its heritage. As for aesthetic standard, there is none, only the wholesale scramble for high-rise growth. It will be a futile exercise to try to find eminence and character in this mindless chaos.

Wari was the first residential area of Dhaka. T.J. Rankin, the then magistrate of Dhaka, set it up in 1880. Planned with great precision, the original plots were of one bigha, with 30 feet wide north-south and east-west roads marking it like a lattice. Almost all the houses were single floor one-unit mansions, or

2-storied palatial mansions with sprawling lawns or gardens in the front.

Wari was serenely quiet even in the eighties, with few vehicles crossing the streets. The consulates of the British and Indian High Commissions were located in Wari in the late forties. The Indian High Commission was in a Rankin Street house, which later became Kabitangan (Poesy Place) when Justice Nurul and his poetess wife Jahanara Arzu became the owner of the house.

The house has been long brought down for a high-rise building. Bhabesh Chandra Nandi the

renowned physician, and the personal physician of Huq Sahib, used to reside in 37 Rankin Street. There was the red-brick palatial mansion of the landlord of Dhaka, which became Text Book Board building after the 1965 Pakistan-India War. There were two palatial mansions belonging to Manik Ghosh, in Nawab Street and in Larmini Street. One of them even contained the 19th century memorial plaques of his ancestors.

And who can forget that Nobel laureate Amartya Sen grew up in Wari in his parental house in Larmini Street. Only the Dhala zamindar's house and the one in

Nawab Street survive even today, and stand statuesquely. The sprawling compound of Manik Ghosh's house has given way to a party centre. The main mansion has been repainted beyond recognition, and is the head office of Haji Islam Group. So when a young photographer friend asked for my help in taking photographs of the mansions and palaces of Wari as a part of his work on the heritage of Dhaka, I had to tell him with a heavy heart that I did not know of any such mansions.

I lament that Dhaka does not have a Heritage Council, if it had the heritage of Wari would have survived. Surely, modern buildings would go up with time but there should be a symmetry or system even among modern buildings. There is absolutely no sense in the concrete chaos bulldozing over heritage.

There is little left of Dhaka's heritage, and the city is choking with vertical expansion! The city kept on expanding in the north from Pakistan time. It has gone beyond Tongi up to Gazipur. On the eastern and the northeastern sides, bounded by wet and floodplain lands, the expansion spearheaded by dubious developers has run havoc over the area. Dholpur, Manda, Madartek, Ulan, Badda, Kuril, Kalachandpur, Shahzadpur have all grown on low and wetlands. Even Basundhara stands on wetlands. The whole area went under water during the last flood.

I wonder whether these settlements grew with the knowledge or permission of the city planners. Dhaka had a great opportunity of systematically expanding in the south, to Keraniganj across the Buriganga. There was wonderful infrastructure support in the two Buriganga bridges, particularly the Babu Bazar Bridge. Instead, Keraniganj has become an industrial ghetto -- a mishmash of urban and semi-urban settlements. Developing Keraniganj as a middle class settlement could have relieved much of the pressure on the city proper.

The Babu Bazar Bridge is now a deplorable sight. Had Ershad been able to act on his plans of flyovers and metro in Dhaka the pressure of traffic on the city roads would have lessened to a great degree. Should I say Kolkata has several flyovers and a sleek metro while Dhaka glots with two flyovers?

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## Bangladesh: Developing, not modernising

The real challenge of Bangladesh is not just to yank a derailed politics on the tracks or lifting a sinking economy on the ground but to reinvigorate the public life where people can think freely, honestly and boldly. A developed and modern society must have a public sphere that is free, cultivated and public-minded. The real challenge is to reinstate a public life and public-spirited professionals, and politicians.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

ONE way to understand Bangladesh today after 37 years of her independence is to look at it as an interesting paradox. Bangladesh has made some headway in economic development. Today's sky-high prices of basic necessities combined with a sluggish economy with low purchasing power of the average people should not negate the tangible achievements in the economic development of the country. The economic difficulties which are results of unfavorable global economy combined with bad planning aggravated by some bad weather situations are not intractable. Bangladesh has experienced increase in real per capita income however measured -- in purchasing power parity or by conventional methods.

Even in social and cultural correlates of development one will find some evidence of progress such as rise in literacy (47.5%), increase in life expectancy at birth (63.1), emancipation of women as measured in gender-related development index by the UNDP (which in its 2007-08 Report gives Bangladesh the rank of 108 out of 156 countries) or by sheer presence of more women in public life. Social developments in fertility decline and ratio of students going for higher education can also be found.

Yet, at the same time Bangladesh has failed to modernise. Why I am saying that the society has failed to modernise is not because these correlates of economic development are missing but what is palpably missing is the public life and the shrinking of the public space. One can be tempted

to ask: what about the innumerable shopping centres in Dhaka where modern looking young people in modern dresses are seen shopping and drinking coffee in the coffee shops? These are aspects of a new global culture of consumerism that helps erode public life. Coffee shops and saloons in the 19th century Paris -- as in Kolkata in the 20th century -- were parts of a public culture. The expensive, sanitised coffee shops in Dhaka are merely copies of a globalised Starbucks culture.

The stalled modernity in Bangladesh is a result of criminalisation of political life and an erosion of public life. A combination of greed and hyper consumerism that has fuelled some semblance of economic development has produced a high level of privatism and selfish individuals while public spirit has retreated.

This brand of impatient capitalism has played a role in criminalising politics which became a short-cut to private wealth, not public welfare. The difference between criminals and custodians of law on the one hand and between purloin and business became thinner.

What happened during the BNP regime (2001-2006) was the culmination of a long-drawn process of regression. Simply, consider the character of two young politicians Mr. Mosaddek Ali Falu and Mr. Lutfozzaman Babar, who enjoyed the confidence of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia with those of Dr. Kamal Hossain and Barrister Amirul Islam who were also young politicians (in their 30s) in the 1970s and enjoyed similar confidence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This comparison will vindicate the erosion of the public life in Bangladesh.

If a yardstick can be made to measure the moral quality of the professionals Bangladesh has definitely regressed. What is most palpable is that when a thuggish politician stole a by-election by

fraud and muscle power during the immediate past regime, an organisation of the medical doctors in Dhaka gave him a gala reception. The complicity of the professionals in lending legitimacy to the criminal politicians marked a new low.

Compare the shameless behaviour of the justices chosen by the last government to officiate as chief election commissioner with the moral stand taken by Justice B. A. Siddiky, who refused to officiate the oath of Gen Tikka Khan as governor of the then East Pakistan in 1971.

A civilised society makes a difference between shameless, dishonorable acts and honorable acts. Enlightenment is not just a sign of maturity but also an upliftment of moral standard. The standards of behaviour of the past ministers (with few exceptions), the language they used, and the activities they were indulged in were not only corrupt and devoid of propriety and integrity. They had no sense of self-respect or respect for the public. A public official is nothing without a sense of public or collective well-being.

But is there any silver lining? Only a thin one. The presence of a small number of public intellectuals, and a pool of highly talented artistic people. Some of these men and women of high intellectual caliber will be seen in talk shows and seminars; they are seen but not listened to. The tragedy of a dysfunctional society is that honorable people with imagination and integrity are marginalised, and the ones who are opportunistic, use their intelligence to amass ill-begotten wealth or assist corrupt politicians for kickoffs are often at the centre stage.

The real challenge of Bangladesh is not just to yank a derailed politics on the tracks or lifting a sinking economy on the ground but to reinvigorate the public life where people can think freely, honestly and boldly. A developed and modern society must have a public sphere that is free, cultivated and public-minded. The real challenge is to reinstate a public life and public-spirited professionals, and politicians.

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## The spirit of independence and the younger generation

On special days like Independence or Victory days, repeated lamentations on erosion of the spirit of independence since the post-Mujib era have become a cliché. To the new generations, especially to many members of the post-liberation generation, this simplistic notion has no special appeal at all. Rather, to them, the spirit of liberation signifies some nostalgic slogans of some members of the older generation.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

ON special days like Independence or Victory days, repeated lamentations on erosion of the spirit of independence since the post-Mujib era have become a cliché. To the new generations, especially to many members of the post-liberation generation, this simplistic notion has no special appeal at all. Rather, to them, the spirit of liberation signifies some nostalgic slogans of some members of the older generation.

This is, no doubt, due to the utmost failure of our older generation, who bore the torch of some patriotic ideologies with a view to guiding and rationalising the popular demand for independence. Perhaps, they were so overwhelmed with their success in the war of independence that they were little concerned about transmitting those patriotic ideologies to the newer generations, who are

at the helm in different sections of the society of Bangladesh.

Understandably, due to this weakness of the patriotic forces of the older generation, the reactionary and defeated forces of 1971 could quite easily succeed in manipulating the mindset of the younger generation by fabricating and twisting our history in a shrewd manner. The defeated forces knew that if the new generations, who have not witnessed the war of independence, could be kept in the dark concerning the history of our liberation, they would, one day, be successful.

This speculation of the evil forces is true to that extent that even in independent Bangladesh infamous, identified collaborators and credibly alleged war criminals could become ministers. Not only this, but one of them has even said "there was no war criminal in 1971," yet the government seems wish to take no action in this regard.

As a nation, we must be ashamed of the fact that, only a few years after independence, we have deviated from the very objectives of our war of liberation, which could have been the driving forces for the overall development of the country. The valiant freedom fighters in 1971 sacrificed their lives not only for achieving a mere nation state, rather, they also dreamt of complete emancipation of the people of their Sonar Bangla.

The Bangladesh we are witnessing today is not in keeping with the ambition of the freedom loving people of that time. In fact, their ambition reflected the spirit of independence, which is depicted in the 1972 constitution as four firm columns -- nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. The unfortunate distortion of these four columns has rotted the nation as a whole, which is why we are facing a severe crisis in the socio-political fabric of the country.

Abandoning the "two nation

theory" in 1971, the people of this land embraced Bengali nationalism and secularism as basic mantras for salvation. The irony is that, being a valiant freedom fighter, Ziaur Rahman totally failed to foresee the implication of the reinvention of the two-nation theory in the guise of "Bangladeshi nationalism." It was the first hit on the spirit of the independence and destroyed the first column of the constitution.

It was Zia who divided the nation into pro-liberation and anti-liberation groups by legalising communal politics in Bangladesh for his own political interest. So, instead of secularism, a few years after our independence, we again stepped into the realm of communalism in our socio-political realm.

Many have claimed that it was none but Bangabandhu who killed democracy and established authoritarian rule by introducing Baksal in 1975. On the surface, this seems to be true. But this becomes half-true if we objectively analyse the rationale behind introduction of Baksal. In fact, it could be argued that democracy loving Bangabandhu was bound to embrace authoritarian rule in accordance with the

demand of the time. The very objective of Baksal was to establish socialism in the country. Besides, Baksal was formed in a democratic way through proper discussion in the parliament, and many of the people of the country at that time, including leading intellectuals, journalists and other professional groups, welcomed it. However, right now, no conclusive remark on Baksal is possible as it died in its infantile stage with the brutal killing of the father of the nation.

Socialism has been depicted as one of the vital driving forces of our war of liberation. Because, at that time, socialism was considered as the most powerful ideology for total economic emancipation. Though, at present, in the global context, socialism has no appeal for many but, in the context of our country, it symbolises the economic emancipation of the people. However, we have also distorted this spirit by importing consumer driven and black money oriented economy on our country.

The post-1975 era failed to put the country on right democratic footings. In fact, from 1975 to 1990, the country was running under either direct or quasi-

military regimes. It has been historically proven that no military regime (either direct or indirect) in the world works for promoting true democracy. However, post-1990 could have been a golden era for practising true democracy in the country. But due to rising impact of communalism and terrorism, corruption-ridden leadership, and intolerance between two major political parties, the country failed to avail that opportunity.

The change in 1/11 has raised hope among the people of the country. Recent comments by the army chief General M U Ahmed as well as the head of the interim government, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, on the issues of the liberation war and war collaborators have prompted some to think that the country is now moving in the right direction.

We must instil the spirit of the liberation war into the mindset of the new generations. Then, maybe in the near future, new leadership infused with the spirit of the war will be created to lead the country in a positive way.

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**ONLY IN ASIA**  
by Nury Vittachi

## Yes, we do have a sense of humour

SET aside any notion that Asians have no sense of humour. We have a sharp eye for the absurd. "Life being what it is in Asia, we have the choice of laughing or crying, so we may as well laugh," said reader Ameena Chowdhury. A correspondent named Steven Yang agreed that many jokes tended to be "imported and not relevant to the local culture," so it was worthwhile for us to gather work which "stands uniquely against this trend." So here's some humour sent in by readers.

This came from a reader in South Asia: Top tax officials of South Asian countries are on a plane going to a meeting of tax ministers. The Bangladeshi pulls out a thousand rupees. "I'm going to drop this out of the window and make someone happy." The Sri Lankan official says, "I would rather drop two 500-rupee notes and make two people happy."

The pilot says, "I'd like to drop all three of you out and make a billion people happy."

This was received from a student in the United States: A Chinese girl, newly arrived at Harvard, has a long chat with the librarian about a book she is seeking. Finally he says, "I'll give you a ring tomorrow."

The Chinese girl is stunned. "Wow," she says, clapping her hands. "You Americans really work fast."

Recent headline on a newspaper in the Philippines: "Crucifixion bad for health." The cutting was sent in by Chato Olivares-Gallo, who commented: "I saw this news headline and thought for a moment I was reading your column."

Five reasons why there won't be a South Asian in the US White House any time soon.

5. Western dignitaries intimidated by eating with fingers at state dinners.

3. Agarbattis (incense sticks) will set off smoke alarms.  
2. Visitors such as Queen Elizabeth won't like having to take off shoes at the door.  
1. Aides will dislike being addressed as "peon" and being made to live in huts in the garden.

Here's a piece of globalised humour, both Eastern and Western:

Barack Obama goes to China to see how the Olympic preparations are coming along. "How come you guys win all the medals?" he asks.

The Chinese coach replies: "We train all our sports people using Asian philosophy. I'll show you."

Basketball player Yao Ming is passing by. The Chinese coach asks him: "He is not your brother, but he is your father's son. Who is he?"

Yao Ming thinks for a few seconds. "It is me."

"Interesting, thanks," says Obama. He goes back to America and visits footballer David Beckham, who now lives in Los Angeles. "David, here's a riddle. He is not your brother but he is your father's son. Who is he?"

"Wot? I dunno," says Beckham.

"It's Asian philosophical training. Think about it," says Obama.

Beckham goes to consult Tiger Woods, a sportsman with Asian blood. "He is not your brother but he is your father's son. Who is he?"

Tiger Woods thinks about it. "I know. It's me."

David Beckham goes back to see Obama. "I know the answer to the riddle."  
"What is it?" Obama asks.  
"It's Tiger Woods," says Beckham.  
"No, you idiot," says Obama. "It's Yao Ming!"

Visit Nury at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com) to deliver or collect gems of Asian humour.