

Bangladesh's 9/11: Looking beyond the tragedy

Examples of such mindless acts can be described as barbaric. The veneer of civilisation is so thin that it takes a minor excuse to expose the barbaric face. What does explain our disorderly and barbaric behaviour?

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

NO, I am not endorsing any conspiracy theory. I am not looking for a smoking gun. I am not finger pointing at a tall bearded man hiding in some glens. We all should let the inquiry commissions do their job to determine who did it and why.

My job is to think sociologically the roots of violence in the culture of Bangladesh and make some suggestions as to what should be done to move beyond this great tragedy into a future where such mindless mayhem will not be repeated.

I invoke 9/11 simply to bring home the point that after 9/11 the US government took a close look as to how did it happen and what could be done to avert such tragedies in the future. Homeland Security in the United States is clearly one of the outcomes of 9/11.

The US has a number of huge intelli-

gence networks some well known like CIA, FBI and other lesser-known but more powerful yet shadowy outfits such as National Security Agency, etc. Yet, 9/11 baffled everybody. So it is not often the number of agencies and personnel that matter, the co-ordination of such agencies is itself a major task. This issue needs a more serious analysis.

In recent history there are several examples of mindless collective violence between groups who see each other as divided by national, ethnic, or religious identity. In the not too distant past, for instance, we witnessed gruesome genocide on ideological grounds in Pol Pot's Cambodia.

In Bangladeshi context, it is important to ask what explains such a tragedy. Why did soldiers resort to such violent behaviour, gunning down their superior officers, committing barbaric offences?

In any collective violence, the enemy is made into an "other" whose humanity is

denied by the perpetrators of the crime. The Hutus thought that the Tutsis were less than human although they were no different from each other; the colonial rulers created the "races."

Why are we so ready to resort to violence at the drop of the hat? Socialisation? Does violence begin at home? How often parents and other family elders resort to violence on the children? Is violence the only means of discipline? What about reasoned arguments? What about corporal punishment at schools?

How often have we seen instant justice being meted out to a pick-pocket or a so-called mugger on the street? A rumour on a factory floor, the windows are destroyed, valuable machineries and premises are set on fire. A demonstration which starts peacefully ends up setting an unsuspecting driver's car on fire. No need for inquiry, no need for trying to ascertain what happened, who did what: First punish and then ask. Sometimes do not even ask.

Examples of such mindless acts can be described as barbaric. The veneer of civilisation is so thin that it takes a minor excuse to expose the barbaric face. What does explain our disorderly and barbaric behaviour?

We are a people with a huge deficit of discipline and respect for authority. The

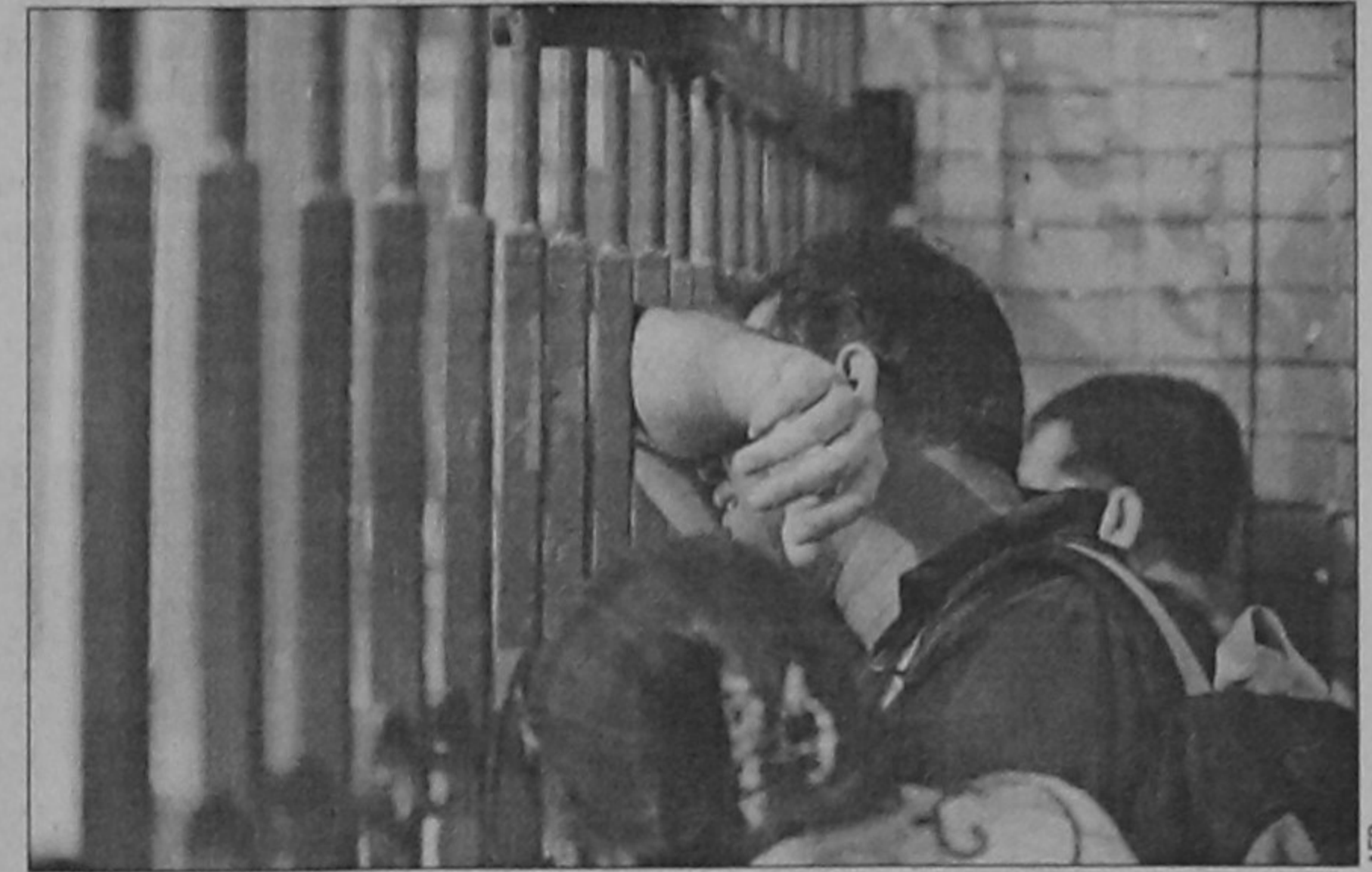
BDR tragedy is an exaggerated manifestation of these national traits. Our army is presented as a disciplined force. Just hear the tape of the PM's discussion with the army at the cantonment before you make a judgment.

Lack of civility is a product not only of the derailment of cultural evolution but also of a failure in administration of justice. We have seen time and again, gruesome crimes are committed and justice does not follow. It is of urgent importance to reinstate the sequence of crime, inquiry, adjudication, and punishment. We need a national consensus and before that, a national educational campaign reinstating the sequence.

Such a tragedy should also prompt us into soul searching. We must ask why did the jawans and their accomplices dehumanise their officers? What does it say about our nation?

First, we need to take the responsibility for this tragedy as a collectivity. It is too convenient to put the blame on some imagined outsiders. It is always the outsiders who are the villains, we are angels. Such self-righteousness will never help us understand, let alone tackle the problem.

If there were infiltrators, how could they get in to a supposedly secured area? If some soldiers behaved like common criminals looting money, the question is



Overcome by anguish.

how could these men enlist in a supposedly disciplined force? Who recruited them, when and how?

Some comments made by prominent leaders were not only so devoid of sanity but also vicious that it gives a clue to the sickness of the national psyche.

The poisonous lies and rumors that are flying are also clues of similar sickness. One sociologist colleague recommends counseling at the national level. I am not so sure. The sickness is rooted in social

malaise, which is a product of a fragmented education, a collapse of social norms, and utter disregard for rule of law.

To make a fresh beginning, first stop the blame game. Take a close look at the derailment of rule of law, look into the culture that breeds hatred and violence to the point of denial of humanity of fellow citizens.

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An officer and a gentleman

To many in army, Gen. Shakil Ahmed was considered one of the most brilliant army officers who had potential to progress further. May him and his colleagues, who bravely embraced the ultimate under the most unfortunate circumstances, find peace in the afterworld.

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

I came to know Maj. Gen. Shakil Ahmed in June 2007 when I invited him to a discussion that I used to moderate on BTv titled "Shomoyer Kotha." One such discussion was on rising prices of essentials and BDR's dalhat operations. From the first interaction during a TV program to the last exchange on the fatal day when he was leaving for Darbar Hall meeting, Gen. Shakil was one of the finest gentlemen I have met from the armed forces.

This was an impression shared by many who came to know him. His pleas-

ant demeanour and unassuming personality would make anyone instantly comfortable. Never lacking in courtesy, he was respectful to people around him. Many of my DU colleagues have similar views and when news of mutiny broke out, all of us were concerned about the fate of this gentleman who treated intellectuals with such respect.

What started with a simple TV discussion, became a friendship that grew stronger through lively intellectual discourses that we used to have since then. I used to call him "Shakil Bhai" and he would call me "Professor."

During tenure of CTG, we had numer-

ous discussions on whether the nation was moving in right direction and options the country was faced with. A firm believer in democracy, Gen. Shakil was unshakable in his belief that the country needed to have elections sooner than later.

Once we were having a TV discussion in late 2007 on challenges facing Bangladesh in 2008. When some participants expressed their skepticism on whether elections would be held in 2008, he remained positive and stated: "Election has to happen. We have no option but to return to democracy by 2008."

The other thing that impressed me was that he was a thoroughly well read person. From literature to sports, philosophy to politics, and modern warfare to history he could speak on any subject. Gen. Shakil excelled not only in depth of knowledge but also intelligent insights that he brought in discussions.

Those skeptics who question the intellectual abilities of army should have interacted with officers like Gen. Shakil.

We exchanged books, debated on matters where we disagreed, and agreed on issues where country's well-being was concerned.

A down-to-earth man, he was a nature lover and took enormous pleasure in showing around the lovely garden of roses and orchids that BDR Pilkhana hosts. To give an example of his simplicity, once I was having snacks with a delicious sauce in his office. I asked him whether I could get recipe of the sauce from BDR canteen. When he told me that this sauce actually was bought from an outside restaurant, I said fine and did not inquire any further. After I left, he sent me an SMS giving recipe of the sauce. Utterly surprised, when I called and asked him how he found the recipe, he told me that he asked his staff to collect phone number of the restaurant. Gen. Shakil then himself called owner of the restaurant and collected recipe of the sauce for me. What a humble and decent man he was.

Another incident I must mention. DU

campus was quite restless in September 2007 when some of our colleagues were jailed by authorities. This happened in the aftermath of campus violence due to conflict between members of army and DU students. General Shakil agreed that this should not have happened and used his good offices to convince authorities to release the professors. During those turbulent times, it was difficult but important to have channels of communications between the two most powerful institutions of the country to bring this unfortunate incident to an end. He played an important role in army's decision to close their camp and withdraw from DU campus.

Gen. Shakil was a natural leader. Last December ADC to Gen. Shakil, Capt. Mazhar, a fine young army officer who also I liked much, was getting married. Mazhar lost his father and during this entire event, General Shakil acted like Mazhar's father and would tell everyone that his "son" was getting married. He

was also one of those who would lead from the front and never hesitated to take a stand when necessary.

On that fatal day, BDR officers were trying to protect him by building a ring around him when confronted by mutineers. The mutineers then asked them to walk in line and Gen. Shakil went right in front of the line without a second thought to lead the column and calmed his colleagues by stating: "Sooner or later we all will have to die, so it's OK." He ended up being the first one to take the bullets. This is called leadership. This is called courage.

To many in army, Gen. Shakil Ahmed was considered one of the most brilliant army officers who had potential to progress further. May him and his colleagues, who bravely embraced the ultimate under the most unfortunate circumstances, find peace in the afterworld.

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Despite rhetoric, offshoring won't stop

In a globalised world, the flow of people, services and jobs will follow a natural trajectory determined by market forces. Tax breaks, trade barriers, legal restrictions and political posturing play only a limited role in affecting this trend.

DINESH C. SHARMA

PRESIDENT Barack Obama has caused some nervous moments for India's outsourcing industry, which depends on American corporations for the bulk of its business. First was the issue of curtailing the number of H1B visas that allow foreign workers to take up employment with US companies. Then came the announcement about "ending tax breaks for corporations that ship our jobs overseas." So, is India's outsourcing industry in trouble?

Obama's latest pronouncement is continuation of the political rhetoric on this subject that he indulged in throughout the presidential campaign last year, following the footsteps of Democratic candidate John Kerry. So, in effect, Obama is trying to send a message that he's ready

to deliver on his election promise relating to offshoring. For an economy facing its worst crisis, any semblance of protecting jobs would offer much relief.

If one examines closely what Obama is projecting as a major stride to tame the tide of offshoring, it would appear that it's not even half a step. American firms that transfer jobs overseas do not get any tax break as such. They are only entitled to concession in the US tax code under which they are allowed to defer income tax payments on offshore profits until they are repatriated back home. Obama wants to eliminate this and tries to present it as a tax break, making it palatable to beleaguered Americans.

India reacts to this along expected lines: Some in the business and government circles call it a protectionist measure, others feel it may not have any sig-

nificant impact. In any case, the Indian outsourcing industry has been under pressure since the downturn began in US financial, banking and insurance markets as this segment constitutes a large chunk of its business.

The industry also suffered an image problem in wake of large-scale fraud unraveled in one of its star firms, Satyam, a few months ago. These two factors are bound to affect bottom lines of major Indian outsourcing firms in coming quarters.

But this doesn't change the fundamentals of outsourcing business. Most companies outsource parts of their non-core operations to cut costs, remain competitive and offer good value to shareholders. All this becomes far more important when there is recession.

Economics suggest one should cut costs when the going is bad. If American companies wish to remain afloat in bad times, perhaps it is prudent to outsource more rather than do the reverse and add to costs. It is likely that corporations will outsource more and more of their business processes to India or elsewhere as the recession deepens.

Another reason why companies

outsource is to bring new products faster to markets. This happens in two ways. By outsourcing routine functions of their businesses to offshore locations, they have the room to deploy their workforce in core business areas such as getting new customers and developing new products. In some cases, they may outsource segments of the product development process also.

There are other reasons, too, why offshoring makes economic sense to America. For every dollar spent on outsourcing, the US economy receives \$1.12 to \$1.14 in return, according to estimates made by McKinsey. Outsourcing results in far more indirect benefits than direct cost savings to corporations.

The outsourcing business is so deep that it would be impossible to reverse the trend in a short period of time. It operates at different levels and in complex ways. Even a seemingly simple job of application software development can happen in different ways fully developed in India or partly onsite and partly offsite, or handled by subsidiaries of Indian companies in US or in a third country where Indian companies have offshore operations.

Alternatively, US corporations may get the job done at their own captive units in India, China or the Philippines. It would be difficult to make out which job is getting shipped where and to whom. Some people like to call this global sourcing.

Business of outsourced research and development has also grown tremendously in recent years. According to some estimates, nearly 200 Fortune-500 companies have set up R & D centers in India. These companies belong to sectors ranging from chip makers to aviation companies.

Firms like General Electric have invested several hundred million dollars in large facilities that employ thousands of research workers. Such units produce substantial numbers of patents and commercial products. The intellectual property generated by these units in India belongs to parent American corporations and they earn all the royalty earned through commercialisation and related products ultimately sold in mass consumption markets.

The US benefits from outsourcing in other unseen ways, including the outsourcing of talent from Asian nations

like India and China. A constant flow of talent and skilled manpower comes to the US in the form of students arriving at institutions like the MIT as well as trained professionals such as doctors and nurses.

Most students who study tend to stay and contribute to the US economy. Innovation hubs like Route 128 and the Silicon Valley are populated by companies floated by such outsourced talent. These companies hire local people and generate billions of dollars in revenue every year. So, in effect, the American economy gains at the cost of taxpayers' money spent on training such workers abroad.

In a globalised world, the flow of people, services and jobs will follow a natural trajectory determined by market forces. Tax breaks, trade barriers, legal restrictions and political posturing play only a limited role in affecting this trend. Political pronouncements notwithstanding, the case would not be different with US companies outsourcing work to India.

Dinesh C. Sharma is science editor of Mail Today and the author of *The Long Revolution: The Birth and Growth of India's IT Industry*. © Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

Truthful slogans for Asia



WARNING: The following article, on truthful slogans, was rated "hilarious but too cheeky to be publishable" by top international magazines. Read at your own risk.

I was approached by a tourism official recently with a cast-iron winner for the title of Worst Idea in History.

"Hey, you're a funny guy," he said. Everyone's really depressed just now.

Nobody's travelling. We should get you to write stuff for us so that people see the funny side."

There was one small problem. PR men like him want to focus only on the good bits, while fearless reporters like me have to follow The First Rule of Journalism: "Thou shalt emphasise bad news as it selth more publications."

I tried to explain this to him, using the classic intellectual debating technique of grabbing his jacket lapels and shouting in his face, but he couldn't see it. "Just try it," he said.

"Fine," I said. "In that case, I accept the job."

So I got together with a few regular contributors to this column and we wrote promotional slogans for the countries of

Asia. In some cases, we thought of more than one.

They are listed below in the random order that we came up with them.

Serious warning: Before reading the list below, please note. We do not intend to offend any particular nation. We intend to offend all nations. We are strictly an equal-opportunity offender.

The Official List of Accurate Travel Slogans for Asian Nations:

Laos: Landmine capital of the world.

Kazakhstan: Visit us and feel better about your home country.

Mongolia: Poor, cold and miserable, but mountain sheep like it.

China: 1.3 billion people can be wrong.

Maldives: Beautiful, clear blue waters, and islands shortly to disappear beneath

them.

South Korea: Right next door to a demented man making nuclear weapons.

North Korea: Paradise on earth, yeah right.

Vietnam: Not entirely sad, possibly.

Sri Lanka: The world's most glorious island, except for the war and the bombs and the soldiers and the guns and stuff.

Taiwan: Shortly to be overrun by China.

Bangladesh: Sometimes not flooded.

Thailand: Come and see how long you can stay prime minister.

Japan: You think our cartoons are weird, wait till you meet our people.

North Korea: Proud to be the world's maddest country.

China: Home of Earth's most polluted

cities.

Nepal: Compare the legend of fabled, exotic Kathmandu, with the grimy, barbed reality.

Malaysia: Pitched battles over leadership, and that's just within the ruling party.

Kyrgyzstan: Proud to be the world's least spell-able nation.

Hong Kong: Quite nice, as long as you don't breathe in.

Pakistan: Visit us for the best chance of being part of the world's first all-out nuclear war.

East Timor: Now transformed from a violent, poverty-stricken, occupied land, into a violent, poverty-stricken, INDEPENDENT land.

Philippines: Corrupt but cheap.

Singapore: Now developing ways to arrest people for thought-crimes.

Myanmar: Home of some of the world's nastiest leaders.

Brunei: Imagine a land totally free of pubs, nightclubs and alcoholic drinks.

Cambodia: We now have electricity in places.

China: We have more ways to detain you than you ever thought possible.

India: Your upset stomach might not last the whole trip.

I delivered the list to him over a cappuccino at a little Italian place. "I see what you mean," he said, eventually, his brow wrinkling and his dream campaign disappearing.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?"

For more truths visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com.