A Roman Column

A Baptism



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Perhaps all this is part of something we as a nation were fated to go through: the 'Ogniporikkha' as we call it in Bangla, the test of fire. But after the bloodletting of Pilkhana, did we really need another disaster, the recent conflagration at a landmark commercial centre, and so literal a test of fire?

The sad answer might be, yes.

Dhaka, as the centre of rampant urban growth, was ripe to undergo its test of fire and fail it. The conflagration at Bashundhora City demonstrated the failure of a dynamic metropolis and a capital city to boot, to provide commercial and urban growth with some reference to the safety of its citizens against avoidable hazards like fire. Unfortunately and tragically, the lessons had to be learnt at the cost of precious lives. And in an organised society, the loss of even one life is a loss too many.

Given the fact that high-rise structures are becoming the norm in Dhaka, I am thinking (and only in a bitter and ironic sense) that, perhaps, it is time to update an old patriotic songs like 'Dhon o dhanney pushpey bhora ' and instead sing it to the tune of a more cautionary line such as: 'Unsafe Highrise Mall e bhora, jemon moder Bashundhora…'

Of course, in some fairness, it must be said that Bashundhora City itself, apparently, was equipped with all modern fire-fighting amenities---- except the most important one of all, trained man power. There had never been any fire drills or training to ensure that the staff responsible for the safety and security of the building could handle an emergency.

Also, it is now a fact that the fire departments of the city were woefully deficient of any state-of-the art or plain modern day means to access the top floors of the skyscraper, such as a helicopter or plane to spray the place with water or foam.

It is now agreed that our fire fighting services have to be upgraded. Also, it has since been discovered that many other high-rise buildings in the city are inadequate to a fire emergency, and this has to be looked into as well. But all this 'after the fact' perspective--- invaluable though it is, was earned at the price of lost lives; and this makes it imperative that we launch into action now.

Perhaps, we as citizens, before we patronise any commercial institution should demand to find out if the theatres, restaurants, cinema, educational institutions, shopping malls and office buildings (high-rise or not) comply with strict fire-safety standards. It is said that just as important as fire fighting is fire prevention, and constant vigilance and precaution is the price we must pay to ensure our safety. To that end, even private dwellings and apartment buildings must be forced to comply with fire regulations and norms. In many developed countries and societies fire drills for inhabitants of apartment buildings are mandatory. It should be so in offices, hotels and other public places.

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If it is any consolation, Dhaka is not unique in its tragedy. In Urban history across the centuries, conflagration has been a constant hazard plaguing the organisers and leaders of most societies. My other city, Rome, was devastated by fires countless times in its history. Nero may or may not have fiddled during one of its greatest fires that lasted days but it is obvious that the Roman firemen of the time proved inadequate.

And yet it is to the eternal credit of the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar that the first recorded fire station and firemen were created in his time, around 22 B.C. Till today the modern Italian firemen carry the ancient name Vigili del Fuoco, or literally the Watchman for Fire, from Augustus' times. These at first were slaves, who would warn citizens of fires if sighted.

Later around A.D 6, Augustus Caesar improved this concept by creating a more professional fire brigade, and the first municipal type fire department emerged. The structure was similar if not almost identical to that used by fire departments today:

Corpus of Vigils-Fire fighting force of seven squads that contained 100 to 1000 men per squad.