

Selected extracts from the June issue of Forum

Truth, not punishment

JALAL ALAMGIR

I have often asked scholars from Pakistan about their perspective on 1971. Usually I hear profound apologies, personal gestures meant to compensate for the official failure of their government to come to terms with the tragedy.

Last February, when I asked that question at a conference at Tufts University, a Pakistani historian took the podium. "Let me tell you what history classes teach in Pakistan," he said. "I went to the best university in Lahore. In my master's course, the professor stopped the lecture around 1970 and picked up the story again from 1973."

"They didn't cover 1971 in a masters-level history class?" I asked, astonished.

"No. And when I pressed my professor for details, he said, you don't need to worry about 1971; they'll never ask questions about that in your exams."

The room fell silent. "You see," explained my colleague, "there is no way for a regular Pakistani to know about the genocide unless he studies it on his own."

Although the war crimes trials will be the most significant event for us in the coming months, we must recognise, painful though it is, that much of the world has forgotten about 1971. One may understand why it does not appear in Pakistani curriculum. But the genocide, one of the worst in history, does not feature prominently even in western research. And that absence is the fault of Bangladesh's own home-grown politics.

War crimes were ubiquitous in 1971 -- that much is fact. This fact is established by mass graves discovered all over the country; Pakistani documents and the written hit lists of local collaborators; reports, photographs and video footage by journalists; and most significantly, eye-witness accounts of the survivors.

But what is remarkable is that those crimes still remain to be "proven" after forty years. The perpetrators remain to be unmasked, and the

national politics of protecting them remains distressingly obscure even to us, let alone the outside world. Who did it? Who committed the specific massacres? Who protected them afterwards? Why is the story of the genocide still elusive?

At the age of eighteen, I left Bangladesh for higher study in America. At our university, all first-year students had to take a course called "The Human Condition." We began with two books: Night, a memoir by Elie Wiesel of his time in concentration camp, and Approaches to Auschwitz, a collection of essays on understanding the Holocaust, the Nazi extermination of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. Our study of life thus began with no rose-tinted recollection of humanity's achievements, but with an expose of a most disturbing question: why do humans, unlike any other animal species, take to killing others of their kind en masse?

Of course, they don't simply kill; they construct grand phobias and ideologies -- nationalism, fundamentalism, racism, and the like -- to justify their acts. And when those acts contradict their own moral schemes, they devise elaborate ploys to hide their role. They find collaborators at all levels, from suppliers happy to arm them, to mercenaries ready to butcher their targets, statesmen to protect them and intellectuals to validate their causes. The blood trail extends far.

In that trail, other tragedies follow when the hunted regroup and becomes the hunter. Israel, which was created after six million Jews were slaughtered by the Nazis and their collaborators, later committed war crimes of its own, from the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon to the 2008-09 wanton killings in Gaza. The Bengalis, who suffered genocide under the bayonet of the Pakistani army and its allies, also slaughtered Bihari non-combatants in turn. The extent was less, but these too were war crimes.

The Rwandan genocide of 1994, which killed 800,000 in a hundred days, spawned afterwards a deadlier spiral of organised revenge, paranoia, and extremism in neighbouring Congo, in which eventually another 5 million perished.



PHOTO: MAIB UDDIN/NAME

This Great War of Africa, as some call it, was expanding while the UN-sanctioned international tribunal was putting Rwandan genocidaires on trial.

Clearly, trials offer no deterrent to future atrocities, whether committed by the original perpetrators or by the victims. The basis of international trials is also questioned at times, because such trials have never been held without impunity for big powers.

In that category, the worst were the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials after the Second World War. They were simply victors' justice, for allied war crimes were ignored. Even the erstwhile chief justice of the US Supreme Court criticised the validity of the Nuremberg trials.

The Tokyo trials, which sentenced Japanese ministers and generals for war crimes, were more egregious. It left out of consideration the largest instantaneous massacre of civilians in history, which had occurred just months before the trials were set up. This, of course, was the American atomic bomb attacks that pulverised Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing 220,000 civilians directly and many more in the years to come.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on June 7.

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TV 2010

KHALID HASSAN

CURRENTLY TV has penetrated 70 per cent of the population across the country. Similarly, with more than 60 per cent of the population using a mobile phone, penetration through SMS advertising is also high.

According to a recent qualitative survey by Nielsen Bangladesh, the majority of text messages sent are actually read by people, as opposed to the number of emails that are actually opened, which are often deleted or sent directly to the spam box.

Clearly, SMS advertising is here to stay. This article will focus on the TV habits among the adult population, both males and females, across the country. It is mainly based on a survey conducted by Nielsen (National Media and Demographic Survey (NMDS) 2009).

Our People, Our Consumers

Bangladesh is a country with 155 million people; 70 per cent of them live in rural areas, and the rest in cities and towns, including 6 major metropolitan areas (metros). Their per capita income is increasing with rapid growth in their purchasing power. Currently, the average monthly household income is Tk. 11,051, which was Tk. 9,790 in 2008 and Tk. 4,470 in 1998.

The mean household income among the urban dwellers is Tk. 15,242 and among the rural ones it is Tk. 9,213. As expected, people in the metro areas on average earn Tk. 16,457 (NMDS 2009).

Currently, we have a national literacy rate of 70 per cent, which was 20 per cent three decades ago. As expected, the urban population (86 per cent) is more literate than the rural people (64 per cent).

Men (71 per cent) are marginally ahead of women (69 per cent). Three-fourths of the populations were born after 1971, i.e. it is a country of young people having "modern" mindset. The mean age is around 26.

The mean household size has slightly declined in 2009 over 2008. Currently, it is found 4.9 across the country, which was 5.0 in 2008. It is 5.0 in the rural areas, and is 4.8 in the urban area.

Television Habits

Globally, television has emerged as the most powerful media. Television ownership and reach are increasing day by day. The global trend has also influenced viewers in Bangladesh. The following section will focus on some important findings on TV viewership and their habits.

Ownership of TVs

Bangladeshis are allured by the television. At present, 46 per cent of households own a television, with 76 per cent ownership amongst urban dwellers and 32 per cent amongst rural ones.

In comparison to the figures of a 1995 media survey, it is apparent that the ownership rate has increased considerably over the past fourteen years. Within this period, the overall ownership of TVs nationally has gone up by around six times from 8 per cent to 46 per cent; and it is seven times as much in the rural areas -- from 3 per cent to 32 per cent. At present, TV is available to 83 per cent of the households in metro areas.

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Building a world-class university



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE Rise of Asian Universities, an article written in Foreign Affairs (May-June 2010) by Richard Levin, President of Yale

University, reflects the new dynamism in higher education that has gripped the Asian region. The article provides insight that provokes serious thinking about the state of higher education in Bangladesh, its intended purpose, and what it

has really accomplished over the years.

For educational planners and thinkers, this is a "must-read" article to imbue its message seriously, contemplate deeply, and act in right earnest -- and soon -- if they are sincere about building a higher education system in Bangladesh that is linked to the nation's growth and development.

If nothing else, my desire behind writing this piece is to stoke the fire once again and buttress the idea that the higher education system in Bangladesh must be reinvented for the 21st century. In such a system there must be a few crown jewels to lead the way, blazing a path of innovative, relevant, exciting, and context-specific education.

Unfortunately, in a systematic search of world university rankings there was no crown jewel to be found representing Bangladesh. Only the name of the University of Dhaka peeped out timidly with a ranking somewhere in the range of 500-599.

A similar search of top ranking Asian universities showed that Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea dominate the top ten, while IIT Bombay is ranked 30th, followed by Kanpur (34), Delhi (36), and Roorkee (63). Not a single university from Bangladesh was categorised among the top 200 Asian universities.

Perhaps this is a reflection of the deep-seated

problems that exist in the entire education system: Even to this day, our educational system remains very parochial, colonial, and primitive in orientation.

Such a system will not take Bangladesh forward; instead it will stunt the nation and render it ineffective in competing with its neighbors in the region who were at par on education around the time of independence and who have forged ahead resolutely in leaps and bounds, leaving Bangladesh near the bottom of the heap in educational attainments in the region and, indeed, the world.

I have tried to nurture and infuse academics from and in Bangladesh to dream of building "world-class" institutions. This is a comprehensive task that requires persistent and contemporary thinking, a credible and critical mass of academic leaders, organisation and team effort, participation of the best and brightest, and substantial resources. When brought to fruition, the returns from a world-class institution can be incalculable.

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Just another bomb blast in Afghanistan

SYED A. MAHMOOD

I first read about this in the on-line edition of the New York Times. The early report did not have a full count of the casualties. The headline, which vastly under-reported the number of dead, said simply: "26 dead in Afghan suicide blast."

The first paragraph was a repeat of news items about Afghanistan that I had become so familiar with:

"A suicide attacker threw himself at a delegation of lawmakers visiting a town in northern Afghanistan on Tuesday, killing as many as 26 people, including a leading opposition figure, and wounding scores more, local and regional Afghan officials said."

Sad though it may seem, I had become used to such dispatches from Afghanistan. It was just another bomb blast in Afghanistan, I thought, and was about to move on to other stories.

The next paragraph, consisting of a single sentence, drew my attention: "Many of the victims were schoolchildren performing at a welcoming ceremony."

I started having the same thought that has haunted me ever since I came to know this beautiful but unfortunate country: when will this all stop?

And where were the leaders who could ensure that Afghans are forever spared such tragedies? Karzai was clearly failing and the old warlords could not be trusted. My thoughts then drifted towards Sayed Mustafa Kazemi.

A strikingly handsome man, even by Afghan standards, Mustafa Kazemi was Afghanistan's commerce minister when I first met him in early 2004. I had walked into his room with the usual trepidation you have when meeting a minister.

The interlocutor, either a fellow World Bank staff or an official of the Commerce Ministry -- I do not remember exactly now -- introduced me as Syed Mahmood (the name that I was known by at my work place in deference to the western practice of using one's first name).

Suddenly, Mr. Kazemi's eyes opened up, his smile became broader, and as his hands clasped mine in one of the warmest handshakes I have ever experienced, he repeated my name, with an extra emphasis on the word "Syed." I noted he was a Syed too, and that emphasis reminded me of something I had heard many years ago -- that Afghans have a special regard for "Syeds," believed to be people with a direct lineage to the Prophet.

That was my first visit to Afghanistan and the meeting took place on the third day of my visit. I was still unsure of things in this troubled and risky land. My wife had not wanted me to work in Afghanistan, having had her own worries about security compounded by the reactions of whoever she had mentioned my impending visit to: "What, Afghanistan?!" or "Does he really have to go there?!"

And it was not reassuring that within two hours of landing in Kabul, I had to go, with many other officials of international organisations making their first trip to Afghanistan, to a UN



briefing session, where we learned not about the culture and literature of Afghanistan but about the different sizes and shapes of car bombs.

But Kabul was a warm place. The snow-capped mountains in the distance, the bright sunshine, the crowded streets and, above all, the friendliness of the people, kept telling me that it can't be all that bad. But the meeting with Mr. Kazemi was the tipping point -- his warm hand-

shake and the emphasised mention of my first name made me feel immediately at home. The subsequent discussions got me excited about Afghanistan's future.

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Justice denied

MARIANNE SCHOLTE

NOW, with the attention of the Bangladeshi public riveted on the formation of a war crimes tribunal to prosecute those who allegedly committed crimes against humanity during the 1971 war, the fate of over 200,000 women who were raped during this conflict must not be pushed off to the side of the proceedings nor instrumentalised for political purposes.

Rape has long been used as an instrument of war. However, rape today is no longer viewed as inevitable collateral damage of war, but as a grave human rights violation. Thus, although the issue is complex and contentious, the question of justice for Bangladeshi women subjected to sexualised violence in 1971 cannot be avoided.

The brutalities of the 1971 war were no secret: the national and international press reported extensively on the unspeakable violence to which the Bangladeshi population was subjected, and on the rape of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi women, including many who had been held for months in rape camps.

Thousands of women become pregnant and then sought abortions. Many carried an unwanted child to term, gave it up for adoption, or abandoned it. Very, very few families were willing to accept the child and many families did not take the "disgraced" woman back, either. Many women committed suicide. Others fled to Pakistan with their Pakistani captors rather than face what awaited them in Bangladeshi society.

Nilima Ibrahim, Professor of Bangla at the University of Dhaka, worked with rape survivors in 1972 and later edited a book detailing their experiences. One of these women explained to Ibrahim why she and others left with the soldiers:

"We went with them voluntarily because when we were being pulled out from the bunkers by the Indian soldiers, some of us half-clad, others half-dead, the hatred and deceit I saw in the eyes of our countrymen standing by, I could not raise my eyes a second time. They were throwing various dirty words at us... I did not imagine that we would be subjected to so much hatred from our countrymen. Rather, I imagined if the freedom fighters ever find us, they will accept us as their mothers and sisters. Because we did not come into this of our own choice."

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