

Plus ça change, ...



I could not help wondering how many like him are there in Bangladesh, who do not want to do anything and still enjoy themselves. Are there already many like him? If there are, that indeed is change, I shuddered.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

... plus c'est la même chose. Which in plain English is: the more it changes the more it remains the same. This might sound like uncalled for Francophilia. But I hope you will agree that the English in this case cannot hold a candle to the French as a title of an essay.

On my annual visits to Dhaka I always have a car at my disposal, thanks to the generosity and love of my sisters-in-law.

Stuck in the traffic some months back, I suddenly recalled that a couple of years earlier the police had started clamping down on drivers parking their cars in a particular area. I am a staunch believer in rules, and was glad that rules were being enforced.

I asked Quayum, who was driving me: "Do you still have parking restrictions at ... ? I remember it was illegal to park there." "No *Khaluji*," he replied, "it is alright now." It is all right now. It sounded far more

authentic in the original Bengali: "*Na khaluji, ekhon shob thik hoyo geche*". I was stunned by the "alright" in what was not at all the right thing to do. I was reminded how things stayed the same.

Some 150 years ago, Bankimchandra's Kamalakanta lamented the absence of change in the world around him thus: "Now I know that to ride this revolving *chakra* of *sansar* is to return exactly where I started from. When I thought I was going forward, I have only been going round and round."

Kamalakanta could well have been talking of our society today. It is of course absurd to suggest that nothing has changed. Things have changed, for better or for worse. But some things have not, and do not seem to be on the verge of change any time soon. They are not always palpable like traffic jam, power outage, gas shortage or even corruption. They often look or sound trifling; in reality they often define our very ethos. They determine, perhaps even more than adequacies of physical infrastructure, the potential of our progress as a nation.

Consider traffic rules. Drivers in Bangladesh are notorious for ignoring traffic rules.

But this is not a matter of traffic alone. It reflects a mindset that has implications going far beyond traffic problems. Ask any driver of vehicles in Dhaka, someone who routinely flouts traffic rules, whether ignoring traffic rules is a bad thing.

In all probability he would answer yes. He would probably, and significantly, say: "The problem is nobody obeys traffic rules." He is then in fact saying, it is always for the "others" to obey rules, not for him. That is part of our ethos that impedes us in a whole lot of other areas where things have not changed.

And it is not in the streets alone that things have remained the same. Look around at random and you will find the phenomenon staring you in the face. I found myself picking three: the university, the airport, and the Jatiya Sangsad.

Go no further than the public universities of the country for examples of things remaining the same. And I am not talking about what passes for "student politics." Consider this instead. The tuition fee in Dhaka University arts subjects has remained stuck at Tk.25 for what seems time immemorial. I recollect my days at the university over half a century ago. Our tuition fee in the final Master year was Rs.12 per month. This should work out at something like Tk.250 today. (This I figure out by a rather crude extrapolation from the cost of a rickshaw ride then (eight annas) and now (ten takas).)

In the light of history, the tuition fee of Tk.25 today would be a joke were it not so preposterous. Yet to talk of raising the fee by a fraction of the real cost of education to the society is to bring down hell on the halls, campuses and much beyond. The cost of education is to be borne by others, the students feel. Other things might change, the fees remain the same. University education remains free -- and unsatisfactory.

Further search for manifestations of our unchanging ethos took me, surprisingly, to Dhaka international airport. A permanent feature of the airport is a throng of government ministers and high officials lining up to say good-bye whenever our prime minister or president leaves the country for a visit abroad, and to receive them when they return home. The scene is the same irrespective of the political affiliation of the head of government or state. It also does not matter what time of the day or

night it is. It could be midnight and still the reception line would be long. I have often wondered why.

The president of the United States or the British prime minister quite often leaves his capital city on foreign visits and nobody seems to notice. Their ministers are either deep in sleep or work as they leave. Neither is there a reception line when they return home.

So why do cabinet ministers and top bureaucrats have to be at the airport to see off the prime minister, for example, or to receive her when she returns? Should not they better be working or sleeping rather than spending hours seeing off or receiving their leader? There are rather unflattering hypotheses about the motives of ministers and bureaucrats insisting on seeing off their prime minister or president. But neither does it appear that the departing or arriving national leaders themselves object to such standing on ceremony.

I believe there is an inverse correlation between the stage of development of a country and the size of the entourage of its leaders. The *zamindars* and village elders of our country in not so distant past were fond of being surrounded by admirers and flatters and hangers-on. If there is indeed such a correlation, the reception lines at the airports are not going to be a thing of the past soon.

Talking of political leaders brings to mind what should normally be the hub of our national politics: the parliament. Television pictures of the Jatiya Sangsad in session often present a strange sight. Most of the time, the seats are empty. In particular, all seats assigned to the opposition have almost always been empty since the beginning of the present parliament. The opposition parties, led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have been boycotting

parliament ever since their crushing defeat in the last general election.

Boycott of parliament is nothing new; has a long tradition in Bangladesh. The election of December 2008 seemed to presage a new beginning, however, and even sceptics saw it as a page-turner in the political development of the nation. This was not to be. The BNP could not reconcile itself to sitting in opposition; it is for parliament to sit there. It refused to sit in opposition because, it said, it had not been given enough front seats in it. To its critics, the far more weighty reason was that it could just not bear to see the Awami League in power. The politics of spite has been a constant in the history of Bangladesh for the last three decades. It shows no sign of abating. Sometimes it descends to ludicrous lows. *Plu ça change*....

I did not intend to end on such negative note. But then something I overheard very recently rushed into my memory. I was driving on a street in New York, carrying a mother and her eleven-year old son on a visit from Bangladesh. The traffic was busy, fast, and well-disciplined. In the back seat the already overweight boy, scion of a very wealthy family in Dhaka, member of the burgeoning leisure class in the country, was telling his mother: "Once I have finished school, I am going to get a job with a big salary where I don't have to do a-a-a-anything." Perhaps the demands of driving on a busy street helped me keep my cool. But I could not help wondering how many like him are there in Bangladesh, who do not want to do anything and still enjoy themselves. Are there already many like him? If there are, that indeed is change, I shuddered.

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Mass Protests in France Renewed challenge to Neoliberalism

Again, the French protests have also been marked by growing militancy, a fact noted with great concern by French officials. During the week leading up to the debate in the French Senate, which has obviously been a crucial week in the whole conflict, the country has witnessed continuous workers' strikes in key sectors of the economy.

PETER CUSTERS

STREET protests peaked just before the senatorial debate was scheduled to take place. On Thursday October 21, the Senate of France witnessed acrimonious debates over the package of pension reforms proposed by France's rightwing ruler Sarkozy. The French president has put forward a plan for changes in retirement rules, which at first sight appear unexceptional.

Taking as starting point the fact that its population, just as elsewhere in Europe, is ageing rapidly, the French government argues that two adjustments in pension rules are urgently required. The age at which people are allowed to retire and have the legal right to a pension, is to be raised from 60 to 62 years. Further, whereas until now people were entitled to a full pension, and in consequence would normally retire at the age of 65, Sarkozy wants to raise this age to 67 years.

Whereas elsewhere in Europe, similar reforms in pension rights have evoked little or no public outrage reactions by the French population have been highly critical, to say the least. Over a period of

roughly a month, mass protests in cities all over France were staged, and have snowballed into a major challenge to Sarkozy's government.

In analysing the reasons for the large response to, and the success of, the social actions, we need to highlight at least two factors, i.e. their unitarian thrust and their militancy. Over a period of about a month, mass demonstrations and manifestations have been organised throughout the length and breadth of the country, i.e. in many cities, simultaneously. These protests have been marked by a large degree of unity between France's main trade union bodies, i.e. CGT, CFDT and FO.

Whereas several years back, when similar protests were staged, the unions failed to sustain a united opposition against the government's plans, this time round all the three mentioned trade union confederations have stuck together. In consequence, people's participation in the protests has been overwhelmingly large.

Estimates regarding the number of participants in 6 consecutive days of national actions range from 1 to over 3 million people for each. Again, public sympathy towards the protests has largely

sustained. According to France's leading daily *Le Monde*, fully two-thirds of the French population believes that the protests against Sarkozy's pension reforms are justified!

Again, the French protests have also been marked by growing militancy, a fact noted with great concern by French officials. During the week leading up to the debate in the French Senate, which has obviously been a crucial week in the whole conflict, the country has witnessed continuous workers' strikes in key sectors of the economy.

Most threatening to the government was the fact that workers of oil refineries joined the strikes. French and European newspapers have reported that all of France's 12 oil refineries were paralysed for over a week by workers' resistance. Further, the strikes have been backed up by actions aimed at blockading the transportation of oil from oil distribution centers.

And while these actions entailed a risk that public sympathy towards the protests would wane, the strikes and blockades have been highly effective. Half of the air flights from Paris' Orly airport had to be cancelled due to the disruption in gasoline supplies. And according to both *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, by the middle of the week as much as a third of the gasoline refilling stations, i.e. 1,600 in a total of 4,000, had to be closed due to depletion of stocks. By then, Sarkozy intervened and ordered that protestors obstructing transports from oil distribution centers be dislodged.

There is yet a third factor that is very significant in France's present wave of protests: youngsters are taking part enthu-

siastically. The number of high school students, for instance, who joined the demonstrations on October 20 was stated to be nearly 200,000. Universities, traditionally a legendary seat of French social resistance, and high schools have witnessed fierce opposition against Sarkozy's pension reform plans.

This might seem surprising at first. For why should young people seeking work today worry about a retirement age that lies beyond the horizon, at the end of their working life? Yet, interviewed by journalists, student activists have expressed a common sentiment. They fear that an extension of the working life of the elderly will negatively affect their own chances at finding employment. And unemployment is an issue that cannot be slighted, certainly not in today's France.

According to official data, France's unemployment rate as of June of 2010 stood at 10%, up from 7.5% in the middle of 2008, i.e. before the financial crisis hit the European economy. French youngsters are especially vulnerable. According to reliable sources, the employment rate among people aged less than 25 years is only 28.1%, meaning that less than a quarter of those seeking paid work succeed.

Economists defending Sarkozy's pension reforms have now launched a publicity offensive, saying it is wrong to presume that changes in the retirement age for the elderly automatically affect the chances of youngsters seeking work. They dispute the idea that there is a direct connection between the two.

Yet the discontent in France has much broader contours than the issue of pension reforms alone. Everywhere in Europe,



huge financial resources have been allocated since 2008 to save powerful banks and other financial institutions from bankruptcy. Meanwhile, policymakers have stubbornly stuck to old policies, even as people know that deregulation of financial markets and neo-liberal policymaking were decisive factors triggering the crisis.

Instead of fighting the current recession with large scale public investments aimed at stimulating employment -- for instance via projects accelerating the shift to renewable energy -- policymakers are obsessed with balancing budgets and with cutting spending so as to reduce their public

deficit. Against the given background, the French protests may be read as a referendum on neo-liberalism, or rather as a second one.

When referendums were organised on the draft European Constitution several years back, the majority of the French voted "no" because the draft enshrined neo-liberal policymaking. As the French Senate continued debating the pension reforms last Friday, the unions have announced fresh days of national protests.

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WatSan in city slums through public-private partnership

It is more important than ever to enlist residents of slums as partners. It will also be an important step in redressing the social exclusion, inequity, and disempowerment that characterise their situation.

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BECAUSE of climate change as well as disasters such as river erosion and job crisis in rural areas people are increasingly migrating to cities. Most of them, and people of limited income, live in slums as it is cheaper. Because of overcrowding, the limited facilities of slum areas cannot cope with the demand anymore.

Poor water quality is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality and a danger of living in slums. Lack of access to water also restricts water intake, and cooking, bathing and personal hygiene are also affected.

The lack of infrastructure affects all aspects of life, including waste collection and sewage, public transportation, policing, education, and electricity supply. Hundreds of slum residents live without access to toilets. Human waste contaminates the environment.

Violence between gangs of drug traffickers or with the police creates unsafe conditions for all residents and poses a major barrier to provision of public health interventions. Violence towards women is also associated with the absence of basic services.

Vaccination coverage in slums is markedly lower than in other urban areas due to inadequate infrastructure

and a lack of community awareness and mobilisation. Appropriate interventions and treatments are only effective in the context of accessible and utilised health care services.

It is more important than ever to enlist residents of slums as partners. It will also be an important step in redressing the social exclusion, inequity, and disempowerment that characterise their situation.

Effective interventions involve not only treating disease but also addressing the underlying social and living conditions of slums. Many solutions will require significant multi-sectoral effort and resource mobilisation, which may be beyond the traditional role of health professionals.

Health professionals can also make important contributions as civic leaders by organising neighbourhood associations and resident advocacy groups, or representing the neglected slum dwellers.

For addressing the issue, the government and NGOs are working together in close coordination. Freshwater Action Network South Asia (FANSA)-Bangladesh has launched an urban sanitation campaign.

As part of the campaign, FANSA-Bangladesh recently arranged an exposure visit to see the government facilities being provided at the slums of Mirpur and Kolyanpur.

The objective of the study was:

- To observe the WatSan facilities being provided by government in slum areas;
- To exchange experiences with the organisations working to address the issue;
- To have discussions with the authority and suggest recommendation for improving quality of the facilities.

Team members were representatives from major NGOs that work on urban sanitation, and Buet teachers who have the technical expertise. BAPA, WaterAid, VERC and print media representative

also visited the slums.

Since 1990, DSK and other NGOs have been working in slums of Mirpur and Kolyanpur for improving the WatSan facility. With the help of these organisations, slum dwellers formed a committee for changing their economic condition as well as their fortune. The committee members held advocacy meetings at the policy level and made sure of getting Wasa facilities. Now, there are 72 water points at Kolyanpur burnt slum. Slum dwellers also abandoned the hanging toilets. Now all latrines are hygiene and sanitary.

The committee already has taken initiatives to manage solid waste. In this regard they were helped by Dhaka City Corporation. They believe that as the government does not have the capacity to fulfill all of their needs, they should take concerted efforts to manage by themselves, thus helping government in fulfilling the target.

After visiting the slums, the team met

the executive engineer of Dhaka Wasa, Zone-4 (Mirpur region), who mentioned his limitations. He said that the majority of the floating people of Dhaka city are mostly living in the slum areas of Mirpur, Kolyanpur and Gabtoli.

The number of people is increasing day by day, so it is difficult to fulfill their demand though the government is trying its level best. The situation is improving; if it had not then child mortality rate would not have declined.

Recently, our prime minister got a prestigious award from the United Nations in recognition of her relentless efforts to improve health facilities, along with WatSan.

Poverty eradication and sanitation for all by 2013 are not only the goals of the government but also of non-government organisations, civil society, media and the public. They should try and work together to achieve the same.

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