

COLUMN

Branding versus bashing Bangladesh

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I was attending a developmental assignment with an Australian Bank in Mumbai, India, in the second half of 1987. Incidentally, one of my economics professor was doing his post doctoral theses at the same time with Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, India. My teacher wrote me a letter, which said in the non-resident Bangladeshi circle, we are happier to be bashing Bangladesh rather than branding Bangladesh.

This tends to have a negative ripple effect. When one is constantly hearing only the bad sides of a country, the next generations are affected and there prevails an overall feel of negativity.

I read an article by the very popular President of India Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, where he shared his three visions for India.

He dwelt upon different aspects of society, depicting where he foresaw scope for improvement, and explaining why India was still not a part of the developed nations club. And I was thinking, each word, each sentence of that article is as true for Bangladesh as it is for India. All you need to do is replace the country's name, India, with Bangladesh.

But he asks the biggest question of all, while being critical of the whole system in the country, what are you, as an individual, doing about it? Individuals collectively form a community, a society, so isn't it the responsibility of each individual to act in the right way? Why do we throw etiquette out the window when in the country, but become prim and proper citizens when visiting another nation? A truly strongly recommended reading if you can get your hands on the article.

Look at us. We complain that

the government doesn't provide adequate utilities, so we are not getting our democratic rights, and justice is not being done to us. What justice are we doing by taking to the streets and vandalising an innocent person's car, or taking away a daily wage earner's source of livelihood by setting fire to his CNG or taxicab. These people are also sufferers because of the lack of electricity in their houses, or water to drink.

We want to be photographed while throwing bricks at windows of expensive buildings, or destroying an object that the owner took so much pain to attain. We are delighted to see our faces splashed across the papers and/or on national television. What a simple way to be in the headlines for a day.

But then what? What are we labelled as? A violent nation, a nation of unruly mobs? We brand ourselves negatively as individuals, and along with that, the whole nation gets dragged in. Do we care? No, we are just happy that we bashed the government, hurt an innocent person, and were seen on national TV.

Besides the negatives, which every country has, there are many good things happening in Bangladesh, but, somehow, we just forget to look or take note. It's high time this culture of negative branding was halted. It's time the world saw Bangladesh for all the glories she possesses. The media are already playing a strong role in shaping opinions of the people; they may play a stronger role yet, that of ambassadors for public relations for our country.

I dream of positive portrayal of Bangladesh, of showing the land of hope to the world, to convey the story of a small town housewife, Shamima Khatun, receiving an award from Chelsea



A bus goes up in flames. People do not think twice about taking to the streets and setting fire to passing vehicles.

Clinton, or of Nilufar Yasmin making cricket bats in an unknown, unfamiliar part of the country; real life heroines who are larger than life, who have fought with courage to challenge the clutches of poverty to march towards prosperity.

I dream, lot of tycoons will visit Bangladesh to watch our team's super performance in cricket, whole heartedly accept the success of our micro finance institutions in bringing out a lot of people from the clutches of poverty, our political leaders joining in debates, joking with each other, yet remaining firm on serving the country's interest in togetherness.

I often wonder what we gain out of negatively publicising our

own country. Has it ever occurred to us that negative criticism by individuals collectively forms a negative image of the country? We take pride in being proud of other countries and their achievements, but shy away from being proud of our own. It's almost as if we are embarrassed to call ourselves Bangladeshis. By degrading your own country, do you gain respect in the eyes of others, does it make you eligible for citizenship of another country? What makes other countries stronger than us? Their patriotism and their pride in being who they are.

Nation building, if not accompanied by national brand building, can only result in misery for the nation as a whole.

Have you ever watched a boxing match where even the first few punches may not amount to much, and you see the injured fighting back. But blow after blow weakens him, and ultimately leads to his defeat.

I feel as though we, the people who make up the nation, are acting as the country's opponent, dealing with each blow, and the nation is now cracking under the abuse. External forces can have a field day against a nation not united. We have wanted to build this nation since its independence, but wanted others to do the building while we criticise. Look at Professor Yunus, who brought this nation not only the Nobel Peace prize, but more confi-

dence "amrao pari" (we can also do it) -- how being treated by our biggies now.

Isn't it high time we looked inside our hearts, and questioned our true feelings for this country that feeds us? It's time we left our mark in the march towards true liberalisation, and a national identity, to keep in step with the rest of the world, and for the sake of the generations to come. To echo with prime minister on what she said at the recently concluded DCCI Conference: We need to brand Bangladesh as an able nation, a respectable nation without surprises, other than the pleasant ones.

The writer is an economic analyst. The views expressed are his own.

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Once plentiful rivers run low on fish

AFP, Char Paliamary, Bangladesh

Bangladesh's rivers have provided for fisherman Rafiqul Islam's family for generations but a few years ago the 27-year-old noticed his nets were coming up empty.

This year, Islam was forced to leave his small fishing community in northern Mymensingh district to find work, an early victim of what scientists are warning is an alarming decline in freshwater fish stocks.

"Eight, ten years ago it was possible for a fisherman to make a decent living all year round -- now, our catches are tiny and most people are having to find other seasonal work to survive," Islam told AFP.

Surveys of fish stocks paint a gloomy picture.

According to a report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2000, Bangladesh is home to 266 species of freshwater fish, 54 of which are classified as "threatened" in the group's Red List.

But a more recent study by the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) stated that at least 25 of the freshwater species of fish are now extinct and over 100 species should be classed as threatened.

"We are losing our freshwater fish at an alarming rate," said Professor Mostafa Ali Reza Hossain of the BAU, whose team has spent a decade travelling the country to track the decline in fish species.

The dwindling of freshwater fish has major repercussions for low-lying and deeply impoverished Bangladesh, home to numerous rivers, floodplains, lakes and lowland areas.

It puts over a million jobs at risk, will accelerate migration of the estimated 1.4 million fishermen to Bangladesh's already overcrowded cities, and removes a crucial, free source of protein for the rural poor.

It also risks having a catastrophic effect on overall biodiversity as the impact ripples up the food chain to birds and reptiles, Hossein said.

Inland fishing is deeply traditional in Bangladesh -- as one old adage goes,



A fisherman throws his net to catch fish in Mymensingh. Bangladesh is home to 266 species of freshwater fish, 54 of which are classified as "threatened".

fish and rice make a Bangladeshi -- and another 11 million people are involved in seasonal or part-time fishing or fish-dependent businesses.

Many of these part-time fishermen come from the bottom third of Bangladesh's population -- the "ultra-poor" who cannot afford to buy more costly farmed fish, said Dhaka-based food and nutrition professor Keramat Ali.

"The very poor have traditionally relied on fish caught in inland rivers and lakes to supplement their diet -- especially for pregnant women, children or the old and sick," he said.

"These fish are crucial for protein supplies -- without these fish in their diets, the poor will be missing out on key nutrients as well as protein. How are they meant to afford an alternative to these fish?"

In Bangladesh, a nation with over two hundred rivers, fish accounts for at least 60 percent of the average person's total animal protein intake, according to the department of fisheries.

Overfishing, especially using illegal drag nets, industrial pollution of fish breeding grounds and the impact of pesticide run-off from farms are the

primary reasons behind the decline, the BAU's research has found.

In addition, waterways are being filled up for construction of roads, bridges and houses to accommodate Bangladesh's ever-increasing population, which grew nearly two-and-a-half times in four decades.

"The 375-square-kilometre Chalan Beel, the largest inland wetland in the north, is a perfect example of how pesticide use and construction are having an impact on fish," the BAU's Reza said.

According to BAU research, pesticide

use has increased nearly sixfold since 1982, with fish production in Chalan Beel halving in the same period.

In addition, a 25-kilometre highway built nearly a decade ago dividing the Chalan Beel has severely limited fish movement which has had a devastating effect on fish breeding patterns, Reza said.

Commercial overfishing, including the use of gill and drag nets and explosives such as TNT are also a major part of the problem, Reza said. While such harmful fishing methods are illegal, the laws are rarely enforced.

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