

# Unreason's recent onrush

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

CRITICAL thinking -- the ability or willingness to use reason -- is a trait that not many Bengalis can call their own. Unreason prevails. In this we Bengalis are not unique; but in any conceivable international index of unreason we will probably score high. This perhaps has always been so. Our brand of irrationality has something in common with our raging rivers, cyclones and tidal waves. More often, unreason has the numbing pervasiveness of the heat and humidity of an endless summer. Whatever the genre, though, there is little cause to doubt that the frequency of the manifestation of irrationality has been on the increase. Unlike the weather, we not only can talk about it, we must talk about it and perhaps can do something about it.

It is not easy to begin at the beginning. But take the case of the recent unrest in the garments industry. It caused an enormous amount of damage to the industry and the economy and great suffering to the workers themselves through lost income. It all started at a particular factory where an employee went missing. Foul play was instantly suspected and violent worker protest ensued. The "missing" person soon turned up for work and his disappearance turned out to be pure rumour. There was no reason for protest on this score. Still, passion took over. The protest soon took the form of demand for higher wages, bringing in an altogether different issue. The violence that followed had no rational basis either, though the demand for decent wages certainly had.

Still on the matter of violence, how many roads and highways are forcibly closed and vehicles smashed by mobs every year following traffic accidents that kill and maim? The vehicles involved in a fatal accident are often total wrecks and their drivers are often among the casualties. But the rage that often follows an accident consumes other vehicles which have nothing to do with the accident. Either they are smashed up too or their movement is halted, resulting in miles of misery in vehicles stuck in traffic gridlock. It is impossible to find a rationale for such action. Yet it is a common phenomenon on roads and highways of the country.

The irrationality of blockades and smashing up of vehicles following traffic accidents is often matched by the fuzziness of our understanding of why accidents happen in the first place. I ignore for a start the cynical view, expressed for example by a senior leader of the present party in power, that accidents are accidents and will happen, or that accidents

happen in developed countries too. This is not to suggest that causes often cited are all flawed. But some certainly are. Road conditions, the age and state of maintenance of the vehicles are sometimes responsible for accidents. But they are not among the major causes of mishaps.

Most of the major accidents on our highways take the form of head-on collision and vehicle going off the road while overtaking another vehicle or trying to avoid an impending collision. The overriding consideration here is the attitude of the driver at the wheel -

*It is evident that there are many kinds of irrationality. But high on the list should be acts of unreason that sometimes result from pure emotion or come dressed up as sweet reasonableness.*



- his reason for driving at a certain speed, his judgment on whether he can safely overtake a vehicle, or his perception of the importance of road signs warning of danger, for example.

Rigorous training of drivers has been rightly emphasised, precisely to tackle situations like these. But the core of such training must be the development of an attitude that uses reason to the full. Contrast this with the reality in the country where driver's licences can be bought rather than earned through rigorous tests, or where a minister of government discounts educational qualification as prerequisite for getting a licence.

It must not be supposed that it is only the plebs, the rampaging garment workers or smashers of vehicles who fail to exercise reason. If that were true, the perpetrators of rampant violence in various educational campuses would be models of rational thinking. I am also reminded that journalists too can go berserk when protesting deaths of colleagues in traffic accidents. The elites of society, be they educated

or not so educated, are often afflicted by the same disability. Take the recent case of parliamentarians of the country excoriating Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed for his alleged remarks about members of parliament. Not a few of the lawmakers called for the scalp of the respected professor. It never occurred to them to verify the allegations, which turned out to be quite untrue. An uncritical acceptance of certain newspaper reports about what the professor said led to an ugly caricature in parliament that was fortunately ended by a final exercise of decency on the

part of the deputy speaker.

It is evident that there are many kinds of irrationality. But high on the list should be acts of unreason that sometimes result from pure emotion or come dressed up as sweet reasonableness. Take, for example, the action of a group of intellectuals in the month of February this year, calling on the High Court to ban the use of incorrect Bangla. Yes, just ban bad Bangla. But, does such demand stand to reason? Evidently not. For one thing, there is no universally accepted standard against which the correctness of a piece of Bangla can be judged. Secondly, there is no way of enforcing the ban legally or otherwise. In calling for such a ban the intellectuals had embraced emotion and abandoned reason. There must be better ways of promoting the Bengali language and literature than through official fiat.

Talking of literature, can a court of justice reasonably decide what a piece of literary work should or should not look like? Courts in this country and elsewhere have a history of banning books. But I haven't

heard of courts being asked to adjudicate whether a novel must be "true" to "facts" if the work is broadly based on historical reality -- until now.

Recently, the attorney-general of the country went to court to point out that a certain paragraph of a novel by the popular writer Humayun Ahmed does not correctly describe the scene of the horrific murder of the child Sheikh Russell, son of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He wishes the novelist rather to follow the facts as recorded in the judgment in the Bangabandhu murder trial to describe the scene. I have always thought, in literature the reader is the ultimate judge, not justices of courts of law. The attorney-general felt the readers would get "wrong information" reading this part of the novel. In other words, he wants conformity, which is the very antithesis of critical thinking. He assumes readers of the novel cannot think for themselves, cannot tell fact from fiction, will necessarily take the novel for the bible, and fail to take the author to task if needed. In a society of rampant unreason, it is still unreasonable to demand conformity here.

Finally, of the various dimensions of conformity and unreason, try this one: I heard someone, who incidentally is a close relative of mine, say, tax is something we pay the government, but *zakat* is a tax we pay Allah. This, of course, is true, the latter not literally, though. But what the person was really doing was to emphasise the inferiority and unimportance of paying taxes to government. It never occurred to his uncritical mind that government would grind to a halt if it could not collect tax. He belongs to a certain mosque-centered movement, based on the strictest literal interpretation of Islam and total unacceptability of dissent.

Examples like the one about paying taxes can be multiplied many-fold. The important thing to note is that the teachings and propaganda of the group virtually shut out all rational thinking. They close the mind. I am certain very few members of the movement have ever heard of the days of historic Islam when reasoning was openly propagated even in matters of religion.

Years ago I wrote an essay in these pages called "Khoda Hafez versus Allah Hafez," which argued that there is no reason -- emphasis is on reason -- to make the transition from the traditional Khoda Hafez to Allah Hafez. I did not make many converts to my thinking, not even in my extended family.

Still, we must think, and reason.

The writer is a former United Nations economist.

## Defeat enemy No.1

QUAZI SALIMUDDIN

SILENT genocide has started, says a newspaper headline. The media have regularly been highlighting the grim situation the nation is already in. Yet neither the public nor the government is getting out of the deep slumber they are in. The genocide is being committed by using poison in our food and drinks.

The suffering due to lethal dose of poison ends quickly through death. But the agony and suffering due to slow poisoning are very painful and the end comes through death after very long time. We are being poisoned very systematically. It can be said without any hesitation that almost all, if not all, the food we take contains poison. The amount of poison in food is many times higher than the recommended safe limit.

Poisons are freely and deliberately used in all types of foods, be they agricultural, dairy, poultry, fishery, bottled, canned, imported products. Imported food items like fresh fruit, processed food, milk also contain deadly poisons in much higher than safe level. Even some baby food and medicines are not free of poison.

The deadly effects of these poisons are slow but definite. The whole nation, without any exception of age, gender, caste, political affiliation, religion etc., is the victim of this slow poisoning. Children are the main victims. Even human fetus is not safe from poisoning. Expecting mothers have no option but to take the poisonous foods. These poisons have very grave effect on development of brain and other organs of the children, our future citizens. They will take birth as severely mentally and physically challenged humans. It has been established in various countries that the main reason for increased rate of kidney, liver, intestine, lung, nerve and skin diseases, and also cancer of these vital organs, are the poisons we are taking through our food, air and water every day. In our country, knowledgeable people have time and again opined that failure of vital organs of our body has increased many-fold during last few years and is likely to turn in to an epidemic soon.

We shall have to destroy the devil before it destroys this nation. This slow poisoning is not only causing human suffering of very high magnitude, but

is also making Bangladesh a nation of imbeciles and mentally and physically challenged inhabitants. What will happen to this country? What is the cost of this human suffering? What will be the effect on human resources, development, loss of working hour, medical treatment cost etc etc. We can firmly say the effects will be devastating, far reaching and long term. Experts should make the calculation in



tangible terms.

It is high time we go for action, if we do not want to die a very miserable death, if we do not want our children and grand children to become mentally and physically retarded, leading a humiliating life and ultimately meeting an agonising death.

It is the foremost duty of government to make poison-free food available to the people. It has to motivate, educate, monitor, supervise, regulate, implement, formulate rules and regulations, and make laws to save people from this all-encompassing slow poisoning. Slow poisoning of a nation is a crime against humanity. Our right to safe food is being brutally violated. Those who are engaged in production, manufacture, import, distribution and retailing of poison mixed food are "Public Enemy No.1" (*ak nombor gono dushmon*).

We demand of our government to form a cabinet

committee headed by the prime minister. Ministers in charge of agriculture, commerce, health, law, home and information should be members of this committee. Amongst other things, it may;

(a) Impose immediate ban on import of chemical pesticides/insecticides, herbicides, fertilizers, food additives, hormones etc., which are banned or severely restricted in developed countries; (b) Strictly

*It is high time we go for action, if we do not want to die a very miserable death, if we do not want our children and grand children to become mentally and physically retarded, leading a humiliating life and ultimately meeting an agonising death.*

regulate import/production, sale and use of various chemicals. Ensure that excess quantity is not available in the market and is used by government-authorised consumers only; (c) Discourage use of chemicals by making them more costly by imposing various taxes and duties; (d) The existing laws against adulteration, use of various chemicals and hormones etc. in manufacturing, producing, processing, selling of various food and food products, need to be made appropriate to the threat they pose to the very survival of the people. They need to be revised so that the punishment is highly deterrent and covers all aspects of malpractice without any loopholes. There should be at least one special court/tribunal constituted in every district headquarter. There should be dozens if not hundreds of mobile courts having much more power than present courts. These steps should be taken on immediate basis.

In the long term;

(a) Educate peasants, agriculture farm workers and owners, fishermen, traders in *haats/bazzars* and *gonjes* about the crime they are knowingly or unknowingly committing, highlighting loss of land fertility, and insects, pests etc becoming immune to chemical insecticides. Introduce to the peasants viable, sustainable, more profitable and cost effective alternatives to chemical fertilizers and insecticides; (b) Research organisations which are engaged in various fields of agriculture should be strengthened to find high-yielding, drought and pest-resistant seeds and plants. They have laudable achievements in their own fields; (c) Government departments engaged in detecting, monitoring, prosecuting must be empowered, reorganised if necessary, strengthened, and equipped with proper testing laboratories and other expertise. As these departments are under different ministries, they should operate under same policy/guideline and under one directing authority; (d) Government should seek support/cooperation from NGOs, associations, bodies, experts in appropriate fields, media, political parties, civil society etc.; (e) To be prepared with physical infrastructure, doctors, support staff, medicine, equipment etc to handle patients with vital organ failure, cancer, autism etc.

The suggestions as made above are nothing new. The government has to understand that survival of our nation is more important than allowing some culprits in industries/firms/business etc to flourish. The situation demands vigorous and sustained action by the government.

As this is a national problem of very grave nature, we cannot just sit idle and criticise the government. It is not going to save the nation. All of us old and young, male and female, rich and poor, in villages or cities, have a duty to perform. Media, political parties, civil society, students, NGOs, actors/actresses, professional groups, agricultural/industrial labourers, businessmen/ industrialist, ulema, ex-service men, etc., all have definite roles to play. Come out and defeat the "enemy No.1" to have *bish mukto* Bangladesh (poison-free Bangladesh).

The writer is a retired lieutenant colonel.  
E-mail: bishmukto.bangla@gmail.com