

## GROUND REALITIES

# Story of a lost king

## It should be a wake-up call

*Long-festering issues of hill districts need early resolution*

LOCAL inhabitants, the administration and the police have been taken by surprise at the scale of Saturday's violence at Rangamati town over a trifling incident of fisticuff between a tribal and a Bengali student of the local government college.

Even leaders of indigenous and Bengali communities as well as those of the ruling and opposition political parties have been baffled by the sudden eruption of the violence.

In the aftermath, normal life came to a standstill for the last three days amidst clamping of section 144 and deployment of armed forces to restore order in the town.

A semblance of peace and normality has returned. The challenge is to build up on the present ambience marked by peace marches.

The police are still in the dark about the root cause of this widespread violence. But the common belief among all sections of people is that some quarters out to fish in the troubled waters have been behind this riot.

The inability of either the administration, or community leaders or the political quarters to foresee such a sudden eruption of violence only betrays their deplorable lack of understanding and hence their grip over the situation in the area.

There is no room for complacency, as no one could be identified and arrested so far in connection with the trouble.

The government will have to pay full attention to the incident, take lesson from it and address it wholeheartedly. In place of an adhocist approach to the problems, it will have to concentrate on mitigating those on a long-term basis.

Major issues militating against restoring hill people's trust are settling their land-related problems and implementing Parbatya Chattagram peace accord. The imperative is to address them in earnest.

For now what is most urgent is to restore trust between the indigenous people and Bengali settlers and remain on guard against any untoward development in the area.

## Street violence with a reckless abandon

*Enforcers lack effective mob control measures*

TEMPERS are always high-strung in the capital city when it comes to road accidents. Two accidents in Dhanmondi and Moghbazar area on September 24, leading to fatality in one, sparked widespread violence in both areas. While we sympathise completely with the families of the killed, we simply cannot condone the unruly behaviour of the students and the mob. Venting their anger on others, in terms of loss to property, smashing and torching of vehicles and causing endless suffering to commuters as traffic comes to a standstill has become typical behaviour we witness all too often. Why should the average commuter, pedestrian, or vehicle operator for that matter have to pay for an incident that was not their fault?

Such behaviour is a serious breach of law and order. Sadly our law enforcers seem to have no measures in place to effectively contain the rule of the mob. Indeed, if readers recall, Dhaka city's commuting suffered immensely at end-August when traffic police shut down movement on roads leading to Dhaka University in an effort to contain vandalism by students. This time round however, the usual baton charge followed by the odd teargas shell helped ignite an already charged atmosphere into full-scale street battles between vandals and police.

Authorities are in full knowledge of the fact that reckless driving and uncoordinated pedestrian crossing are major problems in the city. Unless proper infrastructure, such as, underpasses located at suitable junctions, zebra crossings manned by policemen, etc. are made operational, erratic movement by pedestrians will continue to happen. And such movement will always raise the probability of fatalities. It has become obvious that changes need to happen at institutional level. The authorities must make contingency plans and measures for mob control. The police need to be trained and equipped to that effect so as to be able to defuse a situa-



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**R**AJA Tridiv Roy's death in Pakistan takes us back, yet once more, to the question of what men like him ought to have done for

Bangladesh back in the year when we were battling the state of Pakistan for freedom.

The Chakma chief, like a good number of others whose homes were, and are, in Bangladesh, chose of his own volition to offer his services to Pakistan once the Pakistan occupation army had surrendered to the joint command of Indian and Bangladesh forces in December 1971. He had everything to lose by opting to be a citizen of truncated Pakistan in that year of bloodletting. He was a raja, a powerful symbol of authority for his Chakmas. He was more. At the Pakistan national assembly elections held in December 1970, he was one of only two men (the other was former chief minister Nurul Amin) who survived the Awami League juggernaut to be elected to the assembly. That election was a patent demonstration of Tridiv Roy's powerful appeal to his constituency. It was popularity that even Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman acknowledged.

And yet, when the moment of reckoning came in March 1971, Raja Tridiv Roy made it clear that he was not with us. He tells us in his memoirs, published nine years ago in Pakistan as *The Departed Melody*, that when Bangabandhu waffled on the question of separate, distinctive rights for Bangladesh's tribals, he knew that a triumphant Awami League would do nothing for his Chakmas. Throughout the terror-driven months of 1971,

Tridiv Roy saw little reason to condemn the Pakistan army over the genocide it had launched against the Bengalis. He honestly believed that the Chakmas stood a better chance, where acquiring political rights were concerned, with Pakistan staying intact than with a soon-to-be Bangladesh. In late 1971, as General Yahya Khan went ahead (and he did not see the writing on the wall) with drafting a constitution for a Pakistan that was rapidly coming to an end in its eastern province, he reassured Tridiv Roy about a grant of autonomy to the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. The Chakma chief believed him and probably supposed that that indeed

*Raja Tridiv Roy's chance to make history came and went in 1971. He could have identified with the oppressed, which Bengalis were. He chose to be with the oppressor, which Pakistan was.*

was what would happen. Surprisingly, he did not foresee Pakistan's impending doom. The Pakistanis sent him off to New York to argue their case.

That every individual has his political views to express and persuade others into accepting is something that has never been disputed. Had the state of Pakistan not resorted to the murder of Bengalis and a subverting of the election results of 1970, it would be easier to understand and accept the argument by a section of Bengalis that Pakistan needed to be preserved as a state. Tridiv Roy and everyone else from "East Pakistan," coming forth with expressions of support for a united Pakistan, would then have a case to make. But once the Pakistan army took recourse to genocide, it became the moral responsibility of every inhabitant of

Bangladesh to resist Pakistan. Tridiv Roy did not resist. Neither did Mahmud Ali, who made even Pakistanis roll with laughter when in 1996 he told them that "East Pakistan" would someday return to being part of Pakistan. The scholar Syed Sajjad Husain, in clear defiance of logic and common sense, went abroad to spread the lie that no Bengali intellectuals and students had been murdered by the Pakistan army.

In the case of Tridiv Roy, as his memoirs make it clear, there did not appear to be a genocide at all. He says little or nothing about the conspiracy by the generals and the West Pakistani political establishment to undermine

return to Rawalpindi, President Bhutto, casting protocol aside, welcomed him along with Tridiv Roy's colleagues in the cabinet as a hero. It was an eerie instance of a man coming back to a place not home, happy in the knowledge that he had prevented a country that was home from getting into the world body, with not a little support from a veto-casting China. Tridiv Roy believed in Pakistan and not even his mother, who had been sent by Bangabandhu to New York to persuade him to return to Bangladesh, could influence him into forsaking Pakistan.

But a day came when Bhutto dropped Tridiv Roy in a cabinet reshuffle, placing him in the new position of special envoy. With Bhutto dead and gone in the late 1970s, it was General Ziaul Haq before whom the Chakma Raja's services were placed. He would serve a record fifteen years as Pakistan's ambassador to Argentina, with concurrent accreditation to a few other South American countries.

In the end, Raja Tridiv Roy died a sad, lonely man. In interviews with the Pakistani media, he complained about his neglect by the Pakistani establishment. In the Pervez Musharraf years, few would pick up his calls at the foreign office. Inquiries were made into certain medical expenses he had incurred as Pakistan's envoy abroad.

Raja Tridiv Roy's chance to make history came and went in 1971. He could have identified with the oppressed, which Bengalis were. He chose to be with the oppressor, which Pakistan was. In the final forty years of his life, he was on the wrong side of history. The sadness is that he refused to see it that way.

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

## PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# Retail FDI, wholesale disaster



PRAFUL BIDWAI

**I**MAGINE a society where 80% of all grocery sales are monopolised by just five giant retailers like Walmart, Tesco and

Carrefour, locally grown fresh food is replaced by processed, low-nutrition items, and people's attire based on traditional fabrics is destroyed by synthetic clothing.

Most South Asians would consider this a nightmare. But it's not very far from what has happened in much of Western Europe and North America over 30 years, especially as regards groceries, clothes, and increasingly, fruits and vegetables.

That's the trajectory on to which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has pushed India by permitting 51% foreign direct investment in multi-brand retail. This is his strategy to boost GDP growth by feeding the "animal spirits" of entrepreneurs, in this case hated transnational corporations (TNC) like Walmart.

This decision is one of the most destructive measures ever taken in India. It will undermine the livelihoods of millions of petty traders, kirana shop-owners, street vendors and dirt-poor kabadiwalas who contribute to society by recycling waste and reducing carbon emissions. Its benefits will be limited to TNCs and India's shopping-mall-addicted urban elite.

The decision is rooted in the bravado of a leader who doesn't care for his own people, especially the poor, but is ashamed at being called an "underachiever" by the West. So he has hardened his neoliberal stance just as neoliberalism stands globally discredited.

Dr. Singh's bravado will extract a heavy price from the nation. The Congress party, which is foolishly indulging him, will soon find that he has become a great political liability. He has wantonly provoked the

Trinamool Congress to walk out of the UP and weakened his own credibility.

The arguments cited for opening up retail trade to supermarket chains are wrong, if not dishonest too, including creation of new jobs, elimination of middlemen, better prices for farmers, and benefits to consumers.

India's trade sector has a turnover of \$450 billion and employs 44 million people. Walmart has a comparable global turnover (\$420 billion), but employs only 2.1 million. For each new job it creates in India, at least 17 workers will lose employment.

India's experience with retail, recently opened up to domestic corporations like Big Bazaar and

extract the lowest possible prices, while imposing all kinds of fees and extra payments on them.

These include "retro-active payments," such as costs of advertisements and renewal of stores, listing fees and slotting fees, and delayed payments through which to reap unearned profits.

These can add up to a high 50% of suppliers' revenues in Italy, and 70% in France, often leading to their ruin. Surveys find that small and medium enterprises and farmers are especially vulnerable. So much for farmers' interests!

Many supermarket chains sell goods under "private labels," that is, products with their own brand labels.

*FDI-in-retail policy will have achieved not higher GDP growth -- the rise will probably be marginal -- but large-scale destruction of livelihoods, and greater depredation on some of India's most underprivileged people.*

Reliance, shows that it harms extremely vulnerable people.

Corporate retailers routinely resort to predatory or below-cost pricing to attract customers initially -- only to jack up prices later. TNCs have deep pockets and can absorb big initial losses. They will only increase excessive concentration and non-competitive practices.

Supermarkets won't eliminate middlemen, but introduce new ones, such as buying agents, processors, packagers, quality checkers, and all kinds of corporate consultants.

Farmers will become vulnerable to manipulative and monopolistic practices of TNC chains vis-a-vis which they lack bargaining power. TNCs can beat down their prices through harsh negotiations and threats of de-listing.

Giant retailers routinely abuse their "buyer power." In the European Union, supermarket chains reduce "the number of suppliers to a few or just one" and tie them down. They

This is claimed as a new opportunity for suppliers. But supermarkets can threaten both branded product suppliers and "private label" producers with de-listing.

Supermarkets alone decide "what products are sold on the shelves" and hold all the trump cards. So "private labels" have become "an important additional element" of "buyer power."

Many European countries have over the years witnessed a serious reduction in the number of "small independent retail stores as well as independent wholesalers, and a lack of opportunity for them to expand due to the collective dominance of a few supermarket chains. It has also resulted in growing concentration of buying arrangements..."

In the long run, "buyer power" affects consumer interests -- through "decreasing choice and quality of products, lack of food available in local neighbourhoods, decreasing innovation of products for consum-

ers, and increasing dependence on private labels."

No wonder supermarket prices, initially pitched low, soon catch up with open-market levels and overtake them by 20 to 30%. This is the universal evidence from the West and from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brazil.

This evidence also suggests that it's impossible to secure compliance with conditions such as 30% sourcing from small-scale industries. Under World Trade Organisation rules, these cannot be limited to national producers. In India, the condition has already been diluted to favour Swedish home-furnishings retailer Ikea.

Consumer choice decreases as supermarket concentration grows and the number of viable chains falls. When only a few buyers dominate the market, monopolies get formed quickly, allowing them to dictate terms

The giant retailers can steeply raise their margins and also resort to more unfair labour practices for which they are notorious, including anti-union policies, ultra-low wages, and use of prison/bonded labour.

They can increasingly source consumer durables like electronic goods from companies like Foxconn, which runs 13 factories in China amidst appalling working conditions, such as a 12-hour working day with a six-day week.

Why, some of their Indian collaborators would be only too willing to supply similar products at ultra-low prices, while demanding "liberalisation" of labour laws so they become "competitive" with Foxconn. This would spell a race to the bottom -- and great social retrogression.

So at the end of the day, the FDI-in-retail policy will have achieved not higher GDP growth -- the rise will probably be marginal -- but large-scale destruction of livelihoods, and greater depredation on some of India's most underprivileged people.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist. E-mail: bidwai@bol.net.in

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 26

**1371** Serbian-Turkish wars: The forces of the Ottoman sultan Murad I's lieutenant Lala Şahin Paşa and the Serbian army under the command of Vukašin Mrnjavićević and Jovan Uglješa clash at the Battle of Maritsa.

**1950** United Nations troops recapture Seoul from North Korean forces.

**1960** In Chicago, the first televised debate takes place between presidential candidates Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy.

**1960** Fidel Castro announces Cuba's support for the U.S.S.R.

**1984** The United Kingdom agrees to the handover of Hong Kong.