

Ashulia tragedy

Counting the cost of our apathy

THE Tazreen factory tragedy is another sad episode in our long chapter of garment factory disasters. It is a fact that in many garment factories accidents are waiting to happen, because of lax safety measures, and going by the description of the factory and its access and exit facilities such a disaster was bound to happen in Tazreen Garments.

While our heart goes out to the relatives of the victims, we can only ask whether this is merely a mishap or sheer murder owing to breach of safety procedures and gross negligence of the authorities. We are happy to note that the government has declared today a day of mourning.

The basic safety measures were disregarded in many ways. The factory godown, from where the fire originated, was located on the ground floor and the rest of shop floors on top. And the godown, that held inflammable materials, had no walls at all. We understand that the factory in question was nearly 3 kilometers from the main road and outside the export processing zone, with a very narrow access road. And this is one of the reasons that caused the delay to the fire fighting vehicles in reaching the site. And who will answer for the fact that the exit door for female workers was locked, which accounts for the fact that most of the victims were women.

It is a pity that in spite of a series of RMG factory fires and loss of lives over the past several years the authorities have made little effort to learn from past mishaps. While one accepts that accidents can happen, proper readiness and safety drills can prevent casualties. In this case, confusion was compounded by the fact the workers were told that it was a fire drill and not actual fire.

We want a judicial enquiry into the disaster. A hundred and eleven lives, and the figure may rise, is no small number. Time has come to take legal action against those in breach of the rules; the guilty must face justice, because for long these people have gotten away with plain murder. And that includes not only the managerial level staff of the factory; we want those responsible for overseeing the safety measures of the factories, the BGMEA, to answer too. Merely paying compensation is not enough, and that too, the amount promised, we feel, is a cruel joke.

Our health ministry so helpless?

Presence of doctors in rural areas must be ensured

THE health minister, in a rather helpless move, has called upon members of parliament for suggestions on how to keep reluctant doctors serving in villages. Despite development of infrastructure in the form of health complexes and community clinics, medical service remains wanting in rural areas, with, reportedly, 5,731 doctors' posts vacant across the country.

While the minister's appeal is a frank call for help, it raises questions about his ministry's efficiency in this particular area. According to him, despite punitive measures having been taken against errant doctors, they continue to forego their duties, remaining absent from their posts and getting transfers as early as a day after being posted to a station.

Some parliamentarians' suggestions that doctors be required to obtain recommendations from local MPs before being transferred are not quite the solution either. The concerned ministry itself should have a system by which it can ensure the presence and performance of its members and officers.

Countries with some of the world's best health care systems, such as Cuba, make it mandatory for doctors to serve in rural areas for a stipulated time, such as for two years, after graduating from the country's medical schools. Considering the subsidised medical education in Bangladesh, not to mention the shortage of doctors and lack of proper medical facilities in rural areas, we would do well to implement such rules in our own country if they do not already exist. Our young generation of professionals owe their service to their country, and if it cannot be ensured through their own sense of responsibility, then they must be compelled to fulfil their duties towards their profession and to their country. While urging the government to take measures in this regard, we would also like to remind doctors across the country about the Hippocratic Oaththe promise to serve humanitythat they took at

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 27

1727
The foundation stone to the Jerusalem's Church in Berlin is laid.

1868
American Indian Wars: Battle of Washita River United States Army Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer leads an attack on Cheyenne living on reservation land.

1895
At the Swedish-Norwegian Club in Paris, Alfred Nobel signs his last will and testament, setting aside his estate to establish the Nobel Prize after he dies.

1964
Cold War: Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru appeals to the United States and the Soviet Union to end nuclear testing and to start nuclear disarmament, stating that such an action would "save humanity from the ultimate disaster".

Entrepreneurship development: Hurdles along the way



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ASPIRING entrepreneurs in Bangladesh face a mountain of hurdles thanks to the intricacies involved in getting necessary licenses, permits, etc. from the bureaucracy that is anything but pro-business. Let's face it. For entrepreneurship to thrive, one doesn't need endless seminars and roundtable conferences. What is needed is a government that is cooperative and understands the need for smart regulations that is easily accessible for start-up companies and individuals. It is only natural that entrepreneurship has thrived in the developed economies. As stated by entrepreneurship professor Solomon of George Washington University it was only "in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of entrepreneurship was just being hatched. It's been growing by leaps and bounds since, of course. By contrast, entrepreneurial ecosystems in many other countries aren't established yet. They haven't developed a support system at government agencies, universities or among the private sector."

Yet despite these problems that are all too prevalent in Bangladesh, one is pleasantly taken aback to find a product originating in some obscure part of Bangladesh on a supermarket shelf in the West. As a columnist wrote recently from Maryland, USA, "at first, I thought it was misspelling! But then, I did not expect this sub-district, the northern-most tip of Bangladesh, one

half of the iconic phrase 'From Teknaf to Tetulia' to have anything to do with my neighbourhood grocery in a suburb of Maryland, USA. But there it is, occupying a small part of the tea shelves in *Whole Foods*, a new brand called *Teatulia*. As I turned the canister, containing a medley of *Teatulia* tea, I got half the connection - the tea had come all the way from Bangladesh. As I googled later, the other half was revealed; the tea came from an organic farm in the Tetulia region of the greater Dinajpur district [...] Right now *Teatulia* occupies only a small space on the shelves of my favourite grocery. But that's exactly how the

But for every success, there are hundreds that do not make it but we never get to hear their ending. It is truly unfortunate that policymakers do not take cognizance of the fact that numerous micro and small firms in the country generate most of the jobs

Bangladeshi garments started their journey twenty or so years ago!" There it is. Entrepreneurial spirit knows no bounds they say. But for every success, there are hundreds that do not make it but we never get to hear their ending. It is truly unfortunate that policymakers do not take cognizance of the fact that numerous micro and small firms in the country generate most of the jobs.

Unfortunately, many are shutting down businesses or thinking of relocating to other countries with friendlier regulatory regimes. One business in IT industry (that wishes to remain anonymous for obvious reasons) that

has of late been recognised for its innovativeness and contributions recently has been hounded and harassed by tax officials.

The management came clean on allegations of tax evasion - a laudable step, one which cost the management weeks of precious time and a huge amount of staff time. The point being made here is that no one contends that the taxman has every right to ask for financial dealings of any establishment, but why go after only the low hanging fruits?

Fledgling companies invariably face such hurdles, small time businesses that do not possess dedicated man-

power to look after such matters. The other business is involved in making dresses locally and has issues with the government's tax policy favouring imported garments from India and Pakistan. With government charging VAT @5% on the local producers, whereas it charges a mere 1.5% on the importers of readymade dresses - immediately puts local producers, who are by and large small entrepreneurship businesses at a disadvantage.

Doing business has become frustrating for a local consulting firm too. This company does not get any response on the proposals submitted

to the government and non-government entities. The management is not willing to throw away their hard-earned reputation for quality and integrity.

So the management keeps away from paying hefty speed money and does not engage in backdoor negotiations. Slowly but surely, this firm is turning to international market and winning bids to work in India and other countries through competitive process. The firm is thinking now to take the business out of the country.

It is therefore not surprising to find Bangladesh ranked 129th out of a possible score of 185 economies surveyed by International Finance Corporation's Doing Business 2013 in terms of Business Environment. It measures and tracks changes in regulations affecting 11 areas in the life cycle of a business: starting a business, dealing with construction permits, getting electricity, registering property, getting credit, protecting investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts, resolving insolvency and employing workers.

Hence when Bangladesh ranks 185th trying to get electricity to power up a business, or, when it takes an average of 175 days to register a new business compared to India's 94 days, or 21 days in case of Nepal, it certainly does not inspire confidence for a budding entrepreneur. Is it not time that the government starts to pay attention to the micro and small enterprises? Thousands of these businesses prop up daily and a similar number close their doors to business.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Thackeray's toxic legacy



PRAFUL BIDWAI

INDIAN politicians, television anchors and film stars fell over one another in lavishing praise on Bal Thackeray for his personal candour and tactical shrewdness, despite his ghastly politics. But I won't shed tears over one of South Asia's most repulsive demagogues, who infused poison into India's body politic and debased its democracy.

Thackeray's politics concentrated the worst possible prejudice, intolerance, regional-linguistic chauvinism, corruption, authoritarianism, divisiveness and bigotry. He instigated murder and defied the state -- only to get away unpunished and unrepentant.

The story of Thackeray's success is the story of Indian democracy's failure. Shamefully, the establishment bestowed state honours upon a rascal who worshipped fascism, practised virulent communalism, and all but destroyed Bombay as a cosmopolitan multi-cultural city.

Thackeray's political debut came in the late 1960s. This was a period of industrial restructuring, to accomplish which managements needed to tame assertive trade unions.

The Sena, a puppet in the hands of industrialists, became the main agency for achieving this, by beating up, intimidating, and even murdering, union and Left party activists. Its first targets were young activists, especially from the South.

The name Shiv Sena was invented in 1966 by industrialist and Thackeray mentor Ramakrishna Bajaj. The Sena advocated a virulent sons-of-the-soil agenda. It received a degree of legitimacy from the Samyukta (unified) Maharashtra movement, which had succeeded in 1960 in securing a separate Marathi-speaking province.

The movement also strengthened the cult of Shivaji.

The investor-friendly Maharashtra government colluded with industry to help the Sena smash the unions. Sena

goons broke strikes and set up pro-company unions with impunity. The Sena didn't attack Gujarati, Parsi and Marwari businessmen, regarded as "outsiders," because they bribed it.

The Sena quickly mastered the art of shutting down Bombay through threats and fear of violence. Fear was crucial to its success.

In response to the Sena's intimidatory tactics, the Left built self-defence squads. Their best-known organiser was the highly popular Communist Party of India legislator Krishna Desai, admired for his courage and combativeness. In 1970, the Sena decided to eliminate Desai. Thugs chopped him into pieces.

Tens of thousands spontaneously joined Desai's funeral procession to register their disgust with the Sena. The area, where the Sena headquarters is located, seethed with anger. Many CPI leaders demanded a campaign against the Sena's violence.

However, CPI general secretary SA Dange vetoed the idea. Desai's assassins weren't brought to justice. The Sena wasn't made to pay a political price. It got emboldened and infiltrated the police, thus securing additional insurance against prosecution.

Shiv Sainiks soon established elaborate protection and extortion rackets. Every street vendor had to pay them a commission. They would blackmail Bollywood producers and actors by declaring their films "anti-national" and threatened to burn cinema-houses showing them. The threat would be withdrawn after a hefty bribe was paid.

The Sena claimed, and was granted, veto power over deciding which books, paintings and plays were acceptable, and whether Pakistan could play cricket in India.

It became a political party, trade union, vigilante group, social movement, business enterprise and black-mailing racket rolled into one.

By the late 1980s, it became clear that the Sena couldn't extend its influence beyond Mumbai-Thane and pockets in coastal Konkan. But the Ramjanmabhoomi movement presented itself as a great opportunity.

Thackeray embraced crass *Hindutva*.

The Babri demolition, for which Thackeray falsely claimed credit, paid him huge dividends through the Mumbai riots of 1993. Thackeray directed the violence day after day by naming specific localities as "mini-Pakistans" in the Sena mouthpiece *Saamna* and ordering attacks on Muslims and their property. The Srikrishna commission documented this at length.

The Maharashtra government, to its disgrace, failed to stop the killing and arson. Policemen ensured that fire-fighters wouldn't be told about arson at Muslim-owned shops.

The army was called in, but not given a clear mandate to use all means necessary to prevent violence. An army column passively watched as former Shiv Sena MP Madhukar Sarpotdar directed mob violence from an open jeep, wielding loaded guns.

Thackeray got away with all this. The Bombay High Court dismissed on flimsy grounds a writ petition filed by former Chief Secretary JB D'Souza for Thackeray's prosecution for instigating the violence. It cited nine *Saamna* editorials, which Thackeray didn't disown, which fully establish his guilt. The Supreme Court upheld the dismissal.

The Indian state thus proved that it doesn't have the stomach to enforce its own laws against a consummate bully, or defend the fundamental rights of its citizens, including the right to life.

This is a terrible comment on the integrity of India's institutions, as well as Indian society's appetite for condoning the systematic, planned use of

force against a religious group.

Strengthened by this success, the Sena won the 1995 Maharashtra Assembly in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party. Thackeray famously boasted that he exercised total power over the Chief Minister by "remote control", making a mockery of democracy.

Thackeray had threatened to dump a ruinously expensive power project promoted by the US company Enron into the Arabian Sea. But just one visit by Enron's Rebecca Mark to his residence -- no doubt lubricated with money -- was enough for him to allow the project's size to be tripled!

Thackeray could be easily bought. Like all bullies, he was a coward and mortally afraid of jail.

Who, besides politicians, was responsible for the Thackeray phenomenon? And what's the future of Uddhav and Raj Thackeray's rival Sena factions? The answer to the first question is, industrialists and film producers who capitulated to Thackeray's blackmail, and used him to settle business rivalries. They saw nothing wrong with his hate-filled politics.

In the absence of Bal Thackeray's charisma, a big question-mark hangs over the two Senas' future. Uddhav has a loyal party following. Raj is a firebrand orator and ran a successful, violent, anti-North Indian hate campaign. Neither has a coherent platform.

Chauvinist hate-mongering worked for Bal Thackeray because of circumstances at a particular conjuncture. It's unlikely to work now.

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