

# Rana Plaza and our collective conscience

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550 and counting, needlessly killed. They should not rest in peace, but should haunt our collective middle and upper class conscience for every second that we are prepared to enjoy our relative prosperity, complicit in its human cost. Helping the victims of an avoidable tragedy after the fact is very admirable but it does nothing to stop the next avoidable tragedy. This was not a natural disaster. This was not an act of God. We let this happen. We did this to ourselves. And I do not see enough being demanded to stop it from happening again.

In every country there are unscrupulous people who would trade human life for personal gain. It is the role of a nation's institutions to protect the vulnerable among its citizens from those who seek to profit by harming them.

Those of us who can afford it have adapted to our feeble public institutions by creating private ones. When the public utilities fail to provide us with electricity, we buy IPSs and generators. When the police fail to protect our homes, we employ private security guards. And when we no longer trust that Rajuk is ensuring the safety of the capital's buildings, we choose to live in apartments built by brands like Asset or Navana and work for companies like Brac Bank, whose employees' lives were thankfully spared.

Private institutions per se are no bad thing; they can demonstrate to the public sector that better service is possible and through competitive pressure they can help raise standards everywhere. But when the private institutions tend to further undermine the already frail public ones, they can harm those who cannot afford to buy into them -- usually those very people who are most in need of society's protection. My private security guard allows me to sleep more soundly at night, making me less likely to demand that the police do their job. In this way, private institutions have stopped those most able to effectively demand change -- the relatively well off -- from feeling the need to do so. As a result, the death toll at Rana Plaza creeps ever upwards, while we sleep soundly.

In case that does not quite qualify as blood on our hands, there is another, more sinister channel through



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which the private motives of the relatively privileged have increased the alienation of the poor. Whenever the frail arm of the law comes between us and something we want, more and more of us find ourselves willing to grease its palm. But every time someone bribes a government official they are undermining one of the institutions that are supposed to serve and protect society's vulnerable from those that would do them harm. Bribing a traffic policeman to get out of paying a ticket weakens the police, an institution that is charged with protecting us from the weapons of violent criminals. Paying someone at the border to avoid the taxes due on

a piece of electronic kit weakens the very customs office that is supposed to keep synthetic drugs out of our country and away from our children. And bribing the building inspector for those ten extra square feet on your balcony weakens the institutions that are charged with preventing those 550 deaths.

Finally, we -- the middle and upper classes -- are the friends and family of those who have forsaken their duties of public office for private gain. We know who among us are living beyond the means afforded by their government salaries. But we let the corrupt flaunt their gains in public because we have created a society where

it is impolite to call them on it. Those who buy and sell human life for profit can do so shamelessly because we still set them places at our dinner tables and call it civility. This civility reduces the cost of being corrupt.

The Rana Plaza tragedy happened because a collection of government officials, charged with the responsibility of preventing it from happening, failed to do their jobs, presumably because they were paid not to. They are killers now. So are the men who paid them. But what does that make all of us, who bought privatised peace of mind, without a second thought to those we were leaving unprotected? Who, bribe by bribe, taka by taka, eroded the institutions that might have protected them? Who contributed to a culture that reduced the cost of being corrupt, by allowing those who we knew to be corrupt a place at our dinner tables, our parties and our festivals?

We have Sohel Rana in custody. But that is not enough. We want the name of the government engineer who approved the plans for the building. We want the name of the government official who inspected the site to check that the building was in line with the plans. And we want these names before the signed documents go missing from government offices. We want the names of the construction company, the contractor, the site engineer, the structural engineer and the architect of this building. And we want all this to be public information, now. And if our police, our courts, our politicians or our prisons allow any of these people to slip through the cracks of our system, we want their friends and relatives and every person they pass on the street to not abstain from calling them murderers to their faces in the name of civility.

But much more than any of this, we want us to start demanding the strong institutions that are absolutely essential if we are to avoid another tragedy like this. We want us to stop undermining these critical institutions for petty personal gains. We want us to raise the cost of being corrupt by ostracising those we know to be corrupt. Through action or inaction, we are collectively responsible for the status quo. We can never wash this off our hands. We really just want us to not fail our countrymen quite so utterly ever again.

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## No more of this slavery!

MARTIN ADHIKARY

THE Biblical book of Ecclesiastes records Solomon, the wise king of the ancient Israelite people, as saying: "One sinner destroys much good" (Ecclesiastes 9:18). How true is this wise saying! The death of so many garments workers in Rana Plaza at Savar, and other many such recent man-made disasters, are living commentaries of that adage.

Words cannot describe the pangs, the sorrows of thousands of people who lost their dear ones in the rubble of that monument of greed. Millions of people will remember this horrendous crime against humanity for many years to come. This will remain as a classical example of corruption of some people, who lay behind this man-made disaster of epochal proportion.

This kind of corruption eats into the vitals of our life and our God-given identity and dignity as the crown of creation of God, '*ashraful mamlukath*' as it is termed in Islamic teaching. Human rights of the poorly paid and ill-nourished labourers have been violated in the garment industry in Bangladesh ever since this industry drew the attention of the world market. They are abused, exploited as cheap labour. Garment industry is but a kind of slavery!

I am reminded of the Mine Engineering French Professor Le Pley, who asked his students: "What is the most valuable thing that comes out of the mine?" Some students replied: "It is gold"; some said: "It is diamond," etc. etc. "No", replied the teacher, "it is the human person, the mining labourer, who goes underground and come back alive, who is most valuable."

Many of our garments factories have proved to be death traps for the workers. Because of the insatiable greed for more and more money owners compel the poor workers to work virtually like slaves in most abject and vulnerable conditions. Saraka Garments fire in 1993 cost 17 lives (all women), Spectrum Garments in 2005 cost 64, Tazneen Garments tragedy in 2012 killed 112 people, and Rana Plaza has taken

almost 600 lives, most of whom were women.

Three most important positions in our parliamentary democracy are now held by women -- the prime minister, the leader of the opposition in the Jatiyo Sangsad and the Speaker. It is not too much to hope for a better day for our women in the future. Our lady leaders must play a vital role in securing the human rights of the women workers.

Someone has divided human beings from perspective of attitude to wealth into three distinct types: one type of people says "what is mine is mine and what is yours is also mine," another says "what is yours is yours and what is mine is mine," and the third type of people says "what is yours is not mine and even what is mine is not mine!"

RMG factories earn the lion's share of our foreign currency. Over the last decade or so Bangladesh has gained reputation as a promising economy due to the RMG indus-

try. We have been dreaming of achieving the status of middle income country. Our garment industry is second in rank in the world after China; it has been a \$ 20 billion export-driven industry, but is now under microscopic scrutiny by importers from so many countries. We are now in a vulnerable situation.

The question is how do we retain the glory that we enjoyed? Perhaps one way is to ensure that our authorities make the world understand that they are determined to address the issue with all-out efforts to make sure justice is done and workers are respected. Industrial compliance must be ensured.

Savar tragedy is but a corporate crime resulting from greed and pride, god-fathered by stakeholders of different types in different times over the years gone by. There are many stakeholders, both government and non-government, having definite interests in the entire corrupt phenomena involved. How many are involved in this heinous system and structure of abuse and exploitation? We need to trace them out and identify them. Corrupt people cannot live and thrive on their own and without allies.

Hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries and maiming, millions saddened and the entire nation challenged to do self-searching. But the truth remains, the corrupt and evil ones are always in the minority. We need to create and sustain the spirit of love and compassion among people. We need to cultivate the spirit which will make us decry what is evil, and respect what is good. The problem for us is that evil appear to be overpowering because people in office and authority do not play the part they ought to.

Let us hope, and join hands with all those who have goodwill and respect for the dignity of people to usher in a day when modern-day slavery will be a thing of the past. We can overcome. But first of all, let those who are supposed to represent the people really represent their hopes and aspirations

## RMG and industrialisation: Safety with profitability

SALIM RASHID

THE tragedy in Savar has given rise to much soul searching and pointing out blame. Much of the criticism is justified. Humanitarianism will do much good, but it is not as steady a force as the urge for profits. Profits are not bad, it is the urge to make profits now that is the issue. It is the desperation with which profits are sought as fast as possible which leads to the many shady activities that eventually harm our long-run self-interest. If we want a more sustainable, longer-term, solution we have to have long-term aims. Of course we want profits, but they need not be profits right now.

Bangladesh has the potential to become, as the news channels put it, "tailor to the world." There are no guarantees. Some one or two or five poorer countries may suddenly coordinate their policies so effectively that the growth of RMG in Bangladesh is no longer number one. Hence, economic growth cannot be reliant on RMG as primary exports. If Bangladesh is to utilise its economic advantages, it will have to develop varied industries. So a long-term view requires a policy which allows ready access to the market, while building industrial units that are capable of utilising cheap labor in a flexible manner to adapt to world market fluctuations. Since the most lucrative markets are in the developed world, these plans will have to comport with the quality and labour standards required by the EU and the USA. Here then are the conditions that have to be met:

- Easy access to markets;
- Infrastructure enabled;
- Flexible to new needs;
- Labour standards compliant.

Market access is brought about by locating at or near a major road; electricity and gas lines are also typically available at such locations. These roads can be in cities or along major highways. Each location has its good and bad points. Flexibility to meet market volatility is a sign of

good entrepreneurship and Bangladeshi entrepreneurs are now sufficiently mature to meet such challenges. Maintaining quality is an entrepreneurial issue and, in general terms, it is most safely entrusted to the RMG owners -- since they will make no sales otherwise. So the most trying issue is that of figuring out how compliance with labour laws can be obtained.

The discussion so far has urged stricter laws and, more importantly, even stricter compliance. The difficulty with the language of the current discussion is that it does not attempt to systematically engage our better side. While laws are relatively easy to write it is compliance that is really hard. Who will fund the inspectors, what incentive will they have to be strict and how will we know that the fines are paid or the prosecutions completed? Are there arrangements which will be more conducive to keeping both owners and workers happy?

During the Industrial Revolution many factory owners built entire factory villages, with houses for workers, stores for the families, and schools for the children. Some owners did this to get near water power, others to be near coal, and some to keep an eye on the work habits of the workers. For the workers, it meant having a place where they could not only work, but also live. Their homes were near, their family was at hand, education of children was being looked after. The relations were often paternalistic, which is a bad word nowadays; but when we ask employers to be caring of their workers, what is this compassion but a species of paternal care?

We see at least one sizable garment factory, set up many years ago in Miyabazar on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. More recently, several factories have been set up along the Dhaka-Sylhet highway, outside Narshingdi. As these have been set up entirely privately, we may be sure that such enterprises can be profitable. The question now is whether such enterprises can be persuaded to delay profit taking in

order to build more comprehensive factories which will cater not only to the income of workers but also to their lives. Even the land needed for such larger units can be obtained in co-operative fashion by giving the owners of the acquired land shares in the new RMG factory in addition to the usual monetary compensation. There must be a hundred large RMGs which hire over 5,000 workers; when we take into account all those who will be needed to house, feed, clothe and educate the workers and their families, we have all the elements of a small township.

This brings me to the final step of such a new industrial unit; local self-government within such new

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productive townships. This last needs the enabling hand of the government. We do not want such enterprise-towns to be set up by the government, just that the obstacles in cooperative association and production be removed. Provide the civic machinery for such townships to tax and spend and use its own police; let there be competition between such townships to attract and hold business and industry; and let the government set the legal framework for such local government to survive and flourish. Such a model will give Bangladesh the industrial structure it needs to prosper in an increasingly globalised and competitive world.

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