

Natore highway tragedy

When will authorities rise from slumber?

RECKLESS driving coupled with disregard for traffic rules on highways has again taken its deadly toll as a Rajshahi-bound bus from Dhaka crashed into another bus coming from the opposite direction near Natore killing 33 passengers. The bus from Dhaka turned to the wrong side of the road while overtaking a truck causing the accident. An account of the accident from a passenger traveling in one of the buses provides yet another narrative of the tragedy: a third bus from Natore passing the spot at the same time had run over the victims of the crash-trapped buses.

We condole the deaths and urge speedy disbursement of compensations.

How life-threatening road travel has become can be gauged from reports which show that in this month alone, including the casualties of the present accident, 159 people have died in road crashes, while the toll this year till date stands at 1261.

The government has formed a three-member committee to probe this latest road crash. This is like locking the proverbial stable door after the horse has bolted.

While the authorities look into the exact circumstances of the Natore road crash, it must not fail to clamp down on reckless driving, especially the existing free-for-all on the highways. Two factors need urgent attention. One, disciplining traffic on the highways through regular patrolling. Two, the accident-prone road segments will have to be re-engineered.

Time extension on safety welcome

Complete the task unfailingly

IN a move that recognises efforts by the government to improve workplace safety and workers' rights in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse, the 'Sustainability Compact' has recommended more time be given to authorities to make further progress in areas of concern. The review committee in Brussels hosted a 12-member team led by the Minister of Commerce to study progress made on various issues since July, 2013. The body appreciates government efforts in amending labour law, enabling registration of new trade unions and taking steps to ensure infrastructure safety and fire prevention.

Yet, significant challenges remain on the issues of intimidation that workers face in safeguarding their rights at the workplace and paving the way for workers' unions in Export Processing Zones (EPZs). These are contentious issues since authorities view them as conditions that will be detrimental to maintaining foreign investments in EPZs. Given that Workers' Welfare Associations exist in factories operating in these zones and the wage structure being much higher than in non-EPZ factories, it is understandable why there is such resistance to unionisation of workers.

Despite differences of opinion, the good news is that the government has been given an additional year to make good on unresolved issues. Since the EU remains the largest destination for readymade garments (RMG) exports from Bangladesh, we hope that the government will continue on its path of active cooperation to find a balance between demands and deliverables that will ensure our RMG's continued entrance into the common market.

Making the market work better for the poor

MUAZ JALIL

THE Mecca of modern day capitalism is markets. Our needs and wants are usually allocated through the market; more and more aspects of our lives are becoming embedded in it. The global recessions and its widespread impact is a testament to the power, interconnectedness and importance of markets. Taking into account this ubiquity of market, one has to ponder why we have such widespread poverty coexisting with affluence. This is not a speculation on inequality or redistribution but a pragmatic question: is it possible to harness this powerful market to work for the poor? Take the vegetable seed market in Bangladesh; until recently, most companies were targeting farmers using large packages and distributing them through dealers/retailers. This made business sense and was reaching many farmers. But about the poorest farmers in chars, homestead growers or last mile farmers; who were reaching them? The reality was that most of these extremely poor vegetable farmers were either using low yielding retained seeds or buying small volume of open adulterated seeds from mobile seed vendors (MSVs). Seed companies had to undertake prohibitive search and negotiation cost to establish a new distribution channel using MSVs, if they wanted to target these poor farmers. The poor farmers faced high coordination cost meaning they couldn't raise their voices to demand smaller packaged seeds. Thus there was a market failure purely because of high transaction cost.

This underlying constraint was identified by a project that supported a leading local seed company to pilot and then scale-up production and distribution of low priced mini-packets of seeds through MSVs. Within a couple of years of launch, the number of mini-packets sold has crossed millions, with additional companies crowding in to the small packet seed market. Research shows that most of the customers are poor smallholder farmers. Philosopher Karl Popper was suspicious of the idea of wholesale change. He argued society, just like science, grows through incremental progress. Similarly when we talk about helping the poor, the answer is not starting with a blank slate, but rather exploiting the power of the market. Market development is a pragmatic approach, where we try to identify where the poor operates, what are the underlying constraints, and how by working with the market actors we can address them in order to bring about changes which are pro-poor, sustainable and resilient. While foreign donors can surely assist, in the long run, it is up to our government to take the lead and steer the markets so that they work better for the poor.

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Captains of economy



THREE centuries ago, Adam Smith thought economy was a clock that would continue its motion once set. Almost three hundred years before the birth of Christ, Plato thought quite the opposite. He thought that the ship of the state would have to be captained by philosopher kings. Way back then, Plato didn't quite think that many centuries later, those ruling the public sphere would be the farthest from philosophy and social good would ultimately be non-existent. Instead of planning for public services, states and institutions today attempt manipulated erasure. Every time there's a scandal in the national scenario, almost every nation in the world tries erasing it in defence. That is natural even in the case of an individual. Think about a small village in France where a farmer spends all his life's savings trying to erase the debt of a distant cousin, a practice that is best known as "Passer l'éponge", erasing liability from the chalkboard with a sponge. So in one form or the other, erasure is a practice that is either privately or publicly practiced.

But fortunately, not all can be forgotten. The infamous list of financial scandals that mark our national landscape includes Hall Mark borrowing 2554 crore from Sonali Bank; Bismillah siphoning 1100 crore from Prime, Jamuna, Shahjala Islami Bank and Premier; BASIC Bank's irregularities amounting to 1500 crore; Imran Group stealing 101 crore from Bangladesh Krishi Bank, Destiny Group robbing 3800 crore directly from clients; Paragon Group defaulting on 146.60 crore in Sonali Bank; Ideal cooperative society siphoning 1000 crore from 70000 of its members; T&Brothers taking 609.9 crore, once again from Sonali Bank, and the last-but-not-the-least case of the director of Shahjalal Islami Bank, himself polishing off 140 crore from the bank he himself owns. In recent months, another example of Agrani bank going ahead with providing Tk. 2.38 billion and National Bank giving the group Tk. 600 to Moon Group could be called into question. The group has already applied to Agrani to reschedule its loan and has further declared that it would be unable to make any repayments before 2021. Even after 2021, Moon has requested for a loan repayment structure of three-monthly instalments over a period of 12 years, stretching till 2033. Agrani Bank has approved its prayers and has given it till 2028 while Bangladesh Bank has refused. But, Moon has not given up. It has been pressing the central bank for further consideration. There are more ironies to follow. One of the real estate sites that the group owns has a 20-storey building erected with the signboard 'Mizanur Rahman Medical College (proposed)' along with another building by the name of Razia Tower, having 160 flats, standing beside this. Apparently Mizanur Rahman has named the road in front of his building as 'Razia Road'. With both the buildings being mortgaged to Agrani Bank, the group has the audacity to even name the road that the group has no claims to! This can only happen in a country where rules of directorship in the board are blatantly flouted with authority, where political influence plagues the sector, and where there are suspicious ways of appointing board members and leadership.

Going by the fact that the share of percentage of classified loan to total outstanding loan has been going up every six months and that at the end of March 2014, the share of percentage of classified loan to total outstanding loan was 10.5% compared to 8.9% in December 2013, where, as of September 2014, the Non-Performing Loans was 28.76 %

in state-owned banks, 29.39 % in specialised banks, 7.30 % in private banks and 6.02 % in foreign banks, one may only humbly suggest that the state today needs to immediately address issues like captured governance, oversight and the abuse of political power in the banking sector.

What then is the recourse for failed enterprises or toxic assets that continue to plague the economy? Briefly, establishing asset management companies and setting up more banks to bear the brunt of the nonperforming loans and also letting state enterprises fail are common practices in our part of the world. For example, in 1999, China established bodies to control four such failing big state-owned lenders and put them on stock market again after a few years. A similar rescue mission had been attempted in Vietnam where Vinashin, a state-owned shipbuilder was strapped with billions of dollars in debt in 2010. The Vietnamese government had then targeted another state-owned ship builder Vinalines to shoulder some of its rival's losses in spite of having similar debt issues. In 2012, Vinalines also nearly collapsed with about \$3 billion in debt. As a result, last December, the former chairman and the general director of Vinalines were sentenced to death for corruption. Going by this example, one would assume that at the end, the buck has to stop somewhere, even if it's not the right place. The bad practices in the banking system and overall economy have indeed impacted growth and for the seventh consecutive year in a row, Vietnam's economy has been under 7%. Only 5.4% growth is expected this year.

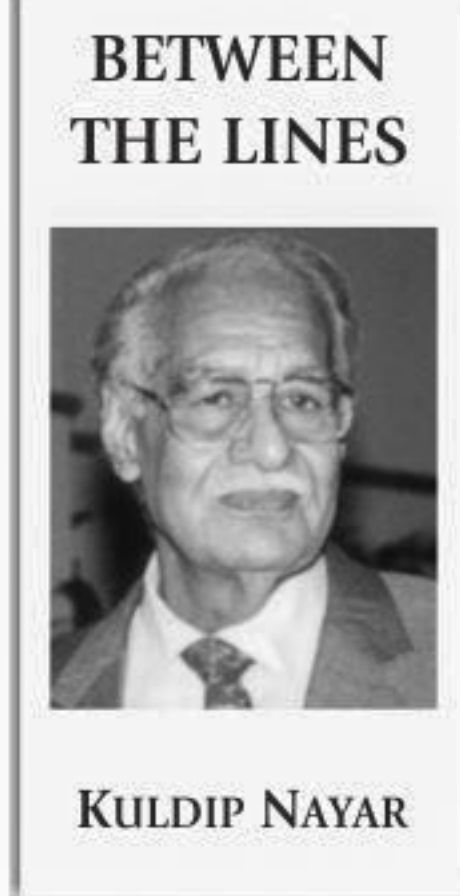
What will happen to Bangladesh if we continue to shield the defaulters and look away from impending disasters that will finally hit the economy at some point? Can this land really afford so many financial scams?

A few realisations need to set in this minute. We need to come to terms with the fact that in general, we are more debt-ridden than ever before. We are living off borrowed money to a large extent. The cars we ride, the homes we own, the trips we take are all charged to our cards that give us the leverage of feeling rich. The more we own, the more difficult it is for us to live within what we truly earn. We seemed to have reached a point where the cost of wanting 'more' costs us more than not having enough, where 'plenty' is harder to handle than a crunch.

Roman statesman Cato the Censor was suspicious of comfort. Ironically, as a nation, we have grown too comfortable with borrowed prosperity. Just like Procrustes, the inn-keeper in Greek mythology who cut the limbs of the travellers who did not fit into his iron bed, we too have begun to tailor ethics and propriety as per our own convenience. As a nation, we need to decide if we can take chronic shocks like slow, consistent Chinese water torture method and prepare the citizens for irrecoverable, chronic damages that occur because of bad entrepreneurship and compromised governance. Or if this is time to cauterize Hydra's head and destroy recovery of bad practices, once and for all.

German toxicologist Hugo Schulz observed that small doses of poison stimulate growth. But by hugely pampering corrupt pockets and protecting the deviant in the economy to gain immediate prosperity is not sustainable. Long ago, Mithridates IV, king of Pontus in Asia Minor, got himself protected against poisoning. Later on, when he tried taking his own life, he failed and asked a military commander to deliver a blow with a sword. Fortunately we haven't still found a way to be mithridatised against the swords of sheer public wrath. When that happens, bad captaincy has no other route to succumb to than failure.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

KULDIP NAYAR

returned more than 10 BJP candidates in the earlier elections. This time the party has constituted its government single-handed. It shows the strides the party has made. Maharashtra has seen the Shiv Sena pulling down the Congress colossus. But the BJP has never been in the reckoning. The two together have an absolute majority today.

Whether or not this astonishing scenario is due to the spell which Prime Minister Narendra Modi has cast on the nation is not a matter of discussion any more. There is no doubting of the BJP emerging as a national party and Modi as a national leader. True, nationalism is the trump card Modi plays. Parochialism is its main content. The secular forces are surrendering meekly.

Surprisingly, both Haryana and Maharashtra, progressive otherwise, have returned very few women. The parties are essentially to blame because they fielded only a few female candidates. But the archaic thinking of voters is very much evident. After nearly seven decades since independence, women have not been able to get their due.

I do not think that the Congress can bounce back, at least for another decade. And that too would require new vigour and new leadership. Since Congress President Sonia Gandhi does not see beyond the dynastic politics, there is very little hope for the party to recover. She does not appreciate, even after years of projecting, that Rahul Gandhi does not sell nor has he any content.

The disorder in the Congress is palpable. The growing frustration within the party ranks only confirms this. Some of the old Congress loyalists have found courage to raise their voice, and have blamed Rahul Gandhi and his team for the debacle. But such voices are stifled in the party. Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi run the party. Now that both have failed, who do the people turn to? Both had reportedly once offered to resign, but the loyal Congress working committee had refused to accept their resignations. Both continue to constitute the party and its leadership. And both have seen to it that the non-dynasty elements do not come up.

Logically, Rahul's political career should have been over after the two back-to-back reversals, one in the Lok Sabha elections and the second in some of the state assembly polls. Yet, in dynastic politics, there is no room for such a

debate. The Gandhi family has come to be considered central to the survival of the Congress. Rahul is important for the party, particularly since Sonia has indifferent health. Despite the resentment against Rahul's style of functioning, the sycophants in the party are still hopeful that he would one day act like a leader.

That, in a way, sums up the strategy of Congress and Sonia. It is amusing to see the party leaders sheltering Rahul from criticism. The A.K. Antony report that followed the Lok Sabha's pathetic poll results points to the organisational weakness rather than putting the blame squarely on Rahul Gandhi for the defeat of the party. He had to be pulled out of the election campaign in Haryana and Maharashtra because he was having a negative effect.

One good thing that Sonia once admitted in a letter was that the revival of the party was a challenge. Her letter to the leaders offered encouraging words, infusing fresh confidence to overcome the hostile conditions. "This path is long and requires relentless struggle. But I am confident you can overcome the hostile conditions with your determination and hard work. I am always there with you in this struggle. I shall be in regular contact with all of you," she had said.

For the demoralised leaders, the letter served as a soothing morale booster. The leaders admitted that, unlike Rahul's attitude, Sonia's letter was full of humility with soothing words, providing them with some much-needed comfort in these difficult times. Yet, they wonder why Rahul was still relying on his advisers who failed him in the assembly elections held in the last two years.

The plain truth is that the Congressmen have nowhere to go except the dynasty, which has run the party since independence. Jawaharlal Nehru was compared with a banyan tree, which did not let anything beneath to grow. The Congress was dependent on him. Consequently, none in the party emerged to be its natural choice when he died. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, his daughter, whom he had groomed, was not acceptable to the party in the beginning. Yet, slowly and surely, she made her way to the top.

The end of the Congress may not be good for the country because it has provided an ideological platform with pronounced secular credentials. What is still disconcerting is that the vacuum created by the vacation of the Congress is being filled by the elements which are inimical to the integrity of the country. Their efforts to polarise the country have already evoked a sense of discrimination in the country. The attack on the people from Manipur in Delhi is one recent example.

Unfortunately, the Modi phenomenon has RSS blessing. This is interfering in the affairs of governance. The appearance of RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat on Doordarshan was unfortunate, and told the story of RSS ideology being an integral part of the government.

At present, Modi is trying to be on the side of development, not the RSS philosophy. But he will have to distance himself from the organisation for the sake of credibility. The Muslims are feeling insecure and they, as good Indians as the Hindus, have to be given confidence. How Modi does it is his business. But he must do it.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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DU should rethink its new admission policy

Dhaka University is the first choice of the majority of students willing to get higher education. Students try their level best to get admitted into this university. In the previous years, students used to get a second chance to sit for the admission test. But the DU authorities have decided to allow only freshly passed HSC students to appear in the admission test from the next academic session.

Dhaka University is an autonomous institution and can take any decision freely regarding its academic issues. But the decisions must be beneficial to all of its stakeholders. The authorities are claiming that they have taken the decision to create equal opportunity for the aspirants and to solve the problem of seats remaining vacant in many departments. They have taken a big decision all of a sudden which will create uncertainty in the lives of many students. They must rethink their decision and shouldn't do anything which will disappoint and dishearten many of the young minds.

Indrojit Bhowmick
Jahangirnagar University

Political lesson to learn from Bolivia

Evo Morales won his third consecutive term as the Bolivian president on October 12, 2014. He defeated his conservative opponent by a comfortable margin. Morales is the first Bolivian president to hail from the country's indigenous majority. He was first elected in 2006, and will remain in office until January 2020.

Morales is one of the most popular socialist leaders of Latin America. During his presidency, Bolivia has grown economically, decreased income inequality and uplifted the economic status of the extremely poorest segment of the society. According to a report by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) in Washington DC, "Bolivia has grown much faster over the last four years than in any period over the past thirty years." According to the New York Times, Bolivia's economy grew an estimated 6.5 percent last year. Its inflation has been under control and budget is balanced.

We hope the politicians of Bangladesh would learn from Evo Morales's patriotic leadership style. Our politicians, the ruling party and the former opposition in parliament, should stop blaming each other and try to work together for the betterment of the country.

Nawfal Taulkdhara
Woodside, NY, USA

Exemplary step by parents of drug addict sons

The report, "Parents hand over 3 drug addict youths to police," published in your daily on October 19, 2014, caught my eye. Helpless parents of three drug addicts handed over their sons to police. In our country, most of the parents want to hide such kind of information relating to their children. But these parents have taken a bold decision. No one should ever hide these types of incidents and should raise their voice against it.

Afrab Aanan
Viqarunnisa Noon School & College

Comments on news report, "Dream big, defeat failures to succeed," published on October 18, 2014

Hafeejul Alam

I am no more a youth. But the inspiring speech given by the former Indian President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam makes me feel as if I am still a youth and of course I have a dream.

"Unfreedom and indecency" (Oct. 17, 2014)

Sayed Chowdhury

I mostly agree with Mr. Hashmi's comments about the democratic principles and practices, including mutual tolerance as an indispensable element of democracy. I also fully agree that Piash Karim should not be judged by his father's deeds. However, unfortunately Hashmi seemed to have conveniently overlooked the facts why Karim recently earned the wrath of many Bangladeshis. Karim positioned himself against the trials of Jamaat leaders and the spontaneous mass uprising at Shahbagh.

A freedom fighter

Taj Hashmi and Piash Karim are both birds of a feather. What is Taj Hashmi's stand on '71, though he is lecturing us what is good for Bangladesh? What an irony! Piash Karim became controversial for his current views on Gonojagoron Mancha vis-à-vis war crimes trials, not for what his father did in 1971. Taj Hashmi is no different, who has always been siding with people who were in the wrong side of history in 1971.