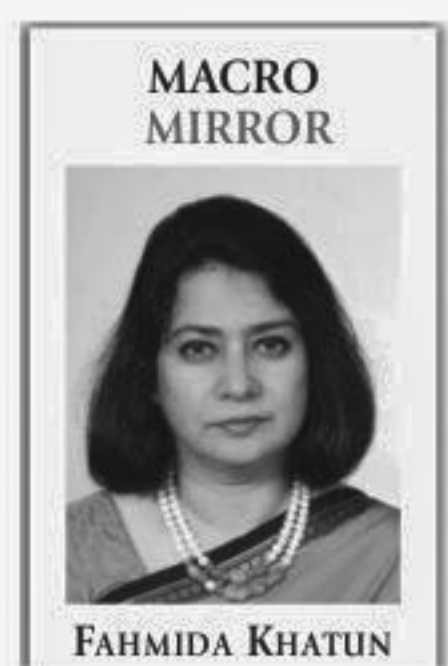


When the roof collapses



FAHMIDA KHATUN

MACRO MIRROR
 AS I finished writing condolence letters to my Nepalese colleagues and friends, who fortunately were spared from the deadly earthquake though some had to take shelter in tents for the whole

week, I began to learn about earthquakes as a layman: Why it happens and what should be done to save ourselves from such havoc.

According to scientists, earthquakes are inevitable in many parts of Asia including Bangladesh. The epicentre in Nepal was only about 750 kilometres far from Bangladesh. Though the intensity of the earthquake was not felt so strongly this time in Bangladesh and the casualty was not high, it can get worse anytime in future. Of course, several reports of cracking and slanting of buildings are coming to the media following the earthquake of 25th April.

Time and again, experts and urban planners have warned about the looming dangers of the way Dhaka city is being developed. The city has experienced unprecedented growth both in terms of population, buildings and vehicles during the last four decades. To cite population numbers, in 1974 population of Dhaka Statistical Metropolitan Area was 2,068,353 which increased to 14,543,124 in 2011. With a population density of 30,748 per square kilometre (Population Census 2011), Dhaka is one of the fastest growing megacities in the world. It is projected in the World Urbanisation Prospects (2014) of the UN that between 2014 and 2050, Bangladesh will contribute more than 50 million to global urban expansion.

Understandably, the housing and commercial requirements of such a large number of people are enormous. The high rise plush office buildings, hotels,



PHOTO: PRAKASH MATHEWA/AFP

shopping complex, apartments do not symbolise the city of a low income country. Various parts of Dhaka city are jokingly compared with Manhattan of New York city. But most parts of the city have been developed in an unplanned manner, without following land use planning and building standards making them difficult to access for providing essential services.

We have seen how difficult it was for the fire brigade to undertake rescue operation and reach out to the victims when there were incidences of fire. Buildings are constructed without any building codes with narrow approach roads where electric lines dangle dangerously, and waste management and sewage system barely exist. Even if the rescue team reaches the distressed people, taking them to safe places and hospitals through harrowing traffic congestion due to limited and overcrowded roads is another challenge. Thus the impact of disasters is amplified in many ways even during responses to incidences.

While talking about building codes, institutional weakness and lack of governance appear to be major concerns.

During the infamous Rana Plaza tragedy this was unveiled to us. Influential people can ignore official guidelines and acquire land and do constructions wherever and whichever way they like to. The voice of environmentalists and conscious citizens against grabbing lakes and rivers or the greeneries and civic facilities such as parks and playgrounds go unheeded and are often tamed by muscle power and money. As a result, buildings are built without any proper soil test, with low quality materials and without the supervision of the concerned authorities.

Unfortunately, we do not take preventive measures well in advance for any catastrophe. We only react to them, but in an insufficient manner. The impact of an earthquake of similar magnitude in Bangladesh will also be massive for the same reasons as for Nepal. Densely populated poor areas have always been the most affected ones during all disasters - be it flood, cyclone, tsunami or earthquake. With poor infrastructural facilities they are less prepared to deal with such emergencies.

Clearly, the socio-economic impact of

such disasters is also very large. Destruction of physical infrastructure affects livelihoods of the poor community and limits their access to educational and health care facilities. In case of Nepal, as the dust of the wreckage settles down, the country will face extreme challenges to rehabilitate the affected people and recover from the mammoth economic loss that it has suffered.

Does the experience of Nepal carry any lesson for us? Are we prepared? Ostensibly, yes. There have been various projects funded by donors such as UNDP and the World Bank on the preparedness for earthquake. However, there are probably only a handful of people who know what should be done when an earthquake strikes us, even though education and awareness building about risks and preventive measures to reduce risks are the first steps to any policy guideline on earthquake.

Earthquakes cannot be prevented. But the extent of destruction can be reduced through preparedness, and proper and timely responses. As other natural calamities, we will have to learn to adapt to earthquake disaster. In order to do so, proper planning, good governance and enforcement of regulation are critically important. This is a multi-dimensional task and needs coordination among various ministries starting from the Ministry of Disaster Management to Ministry of Environment and Forest, Ministry of Land, Ministry of Law, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and of course Ministry of Finance for adequate resource allocation. The recovery and rehabilitation process will also involve many more departments and ministries. However, this is not only an issue to be tackled by the government alone. It will have to be managed by all stakeholders as each one of us will be affected in the short and long term.

The writer is Research Director at CPD, currently a Visiting Scholar at the Earth Institute, Columbia University, New York.

Expanding media

Shrinking space for freedom?

THE World Press Freedom Day passed yesterday projecting a year-long thematic emphasis on 'Journalism Thrives'. Yes, journalism thrives against stifling odds placed on its way by state or non-state actors; and it ought to prevail against injustice by disseminating news, views, investigative output in greater public interest. And, because media is on an exponential growth trajectory with its multi-faceted dimensions including digitalisation, the questions of journalistic freedom and operational safety merit urgent consideration of all concerned.

Actually, this year's press freedom theme is set against the backdrop of journalistic profession being fraught with risks world-wide. Bangladesh is turning out to be no exception we have to say, even though we have had a vibrant media, especially since restoration of democracy in 1991.

The latest case in point is the attitude and stance taken by ruling party elements on journalists covering the just-concluded three city corporation polls. On the poll day, supporters of ruling-party backed candidates physically assaulted six journalists, intimidated 15 others from discharging their duties. The police stood by as mere spectators.

Just to gauge the risks journalists are exposed to, according to human rights organisation Ain-O-Salish Kendra, 11 journalists fell prey to police oppression, harassment and intimidation from January to March this year. To allude to the Paris-based international organisation, Reporters Without Borders' press freedom index, 2014, Bangladesh ranked 146 among 180 countries. This is hardly good going compared with Bhutan, Maldives, India and Nepal which have outscored us.

The media is expanding which points to an increasing diversity and volume of information and visuals. Governments tend to equate rising flow of information with free flow of information. A line needs to be drawn there.

Good show

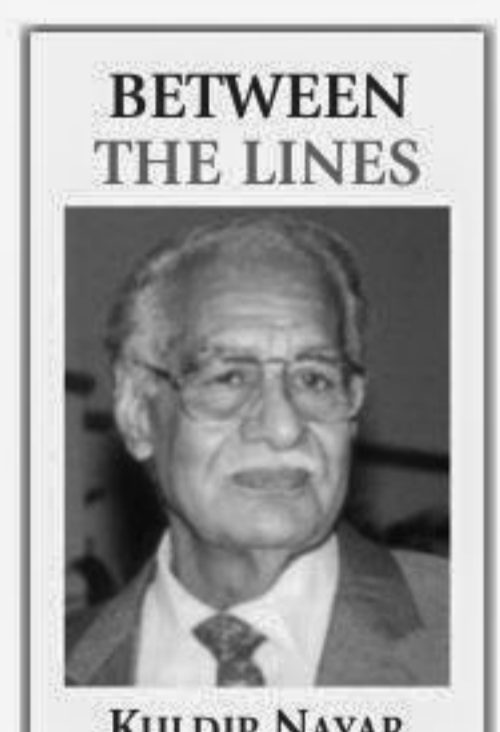
Our cricket has come of age

THE Bangladesh cricket team deserves a pat on the back and so do the officials who are associated with the team for a performance that has seen several individual and international records tumble on the last day of the Khulna Test between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Not only did the Tigers save the match, the manner of their play to reduce a huge deficit shows that our cricket has come of age. And it is not a mean effort to break a fifty-five year old record established by two Englishmen for the highest number of runs for the first wicket in second innings. What is most appreciable is that the approach of the team, to what was a daunting task, was very positive indeed.

We would like to believe that this is not a flash in the pan. The Bangladesh cricket team's performance in the recently concluded World Cup and the shorter version series against Pakistan shows that the team has acquired the temperament that helps it to perform with consistency. We would hope that our performance over the last several months in particular is a fitting riposte to those critics who questioned the very rationale of giving Bangladesh Test status.

The Tigers should remember that with their recent performance they have raised the country's expectations from them. The important thing is to learn from the mistakes and build on the achievements so far. In any competitive game there will be winners and losers. We all expect our cricket team to make winning a habit.

NGOs and agrarian crises



KULDIP NAYYAR

BETWEEN THE LINES
 IT is unfortunate that the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is harassing and hounding the NGOs. Probably, the party's leaders do not realise that many of its members were once themselves NGOs. When the Jana Sangh merged into the Janata Party after successfully resisting the authoritarian rule of Mrs Indira Gandhi, they were part of the struggle to uphold human rights, which the then ruling Congress Party had trampled upon mercilessly. How can those very people be anti-NGOs now?

Accounts of voluntary organisations are audited and checked by the Finance Ministry on a regular basis. All foreign funds come through the government channels. There is little scope for any hanky-panky. The change of procedure is nothing but harassment. Prior government sanction means an endless waiting for the urgently needed funds in the field where the activists work.

I am surprised how the BJP has forgotten the probe against the Gandhi Peace Foundation was hauled over the coals after Mrs Gandhi came to power in 1980. The then Jana Sangh workers were chastised unnecessarily. The BJP is only a new avatar of the Jana Sangh, which took part in movements for the assertion of individuals' right to liberty and free speech.

I know both Teesta Setelvad and Javed Anand. They enjoy an impeccable reputation for integrity. Their relentless fight against communal force is the bright chapter in the annals of secularism. That the BJP is tilting towards the Hindu ideology is unfortunate, to say the least. But that does not mean those who are fighting against parochialism to underline the secular spirit of our constitution should be getting the wrong end of the stick.

After winning freedom, the constituent assembly discussed many forms of governance. But what came to be supported by all

sections of the society was a secular polity. To undo that would mean mocking at the sacrifices which millions of people made to establish a democratic, secular republic.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was reportedly behind the Gujarat riots which killed thousands of Muslims, has himself realised the futility of dividing the society on religious basis. It is a healthy development that Modi himself now publicly says: *sab ka sarkar, sab ka vikas* (Everybody's government for everybody's progresses).

Unthinkingly some BJP members, who are under the influence of the RSS, are picking on members of minority communities and going to the extent of vandalising the churches or indulging in conversions in the name of *ghar-wapsi*. Modi should intervene at some stage to stop them from bringing a bad name to India which is admired for its spirit of tolerance and sense of accommodation.

I remember a Jewish delegation calling on me when I was India's High Commissioner at London. The delegates wanted to convey their gratefulness for the tolerance India had come to signify. They said that it was the only country in the world where Jews had never faced any kind of discrimination. At that time New Delhi had not given recognition to Israel. Still they did not make any issue of it.

What is disconcerting is that secularism which should have deepened its roots by this time has failed to do so. India has developed economically as it should have in the last 68 years since independence. Maybe, a rapid economic development is the answer. In this context, the backwardness of villages testifies to our failure. Farmers are the backbone of India's economy. But they are suffering the most. Their countryside suicides indicate that the benefit of production has not reached them. Even the basic amenity like clean drinking water is a mirage.

Another farmer has committed suicide in a well-off state of Maharashtra. He is the ninth since March. The news from other states is too distressing. He cannot afford the rising cost of production from the farm. After a farmer from Rajasthan committed suicide

at a public meeting in New Delhi, India's capital, I thought that his death would touch the respondent chord and the nation would focus seriously its attention on how to improve the plight of the farmers. I must admit that I was wrong.

There was a furore in parliament all right. Prime Minister Modi too expressed his grief. Yet, it was business as usual soon after. The farmer was forgotten. I have not been able to draw up a blueprint on how to improve the farmer's lot. In fact, the introduction of the land acquisition bill in parliament showed that the corporate sector has had its way.

The concerns of the farmers, a pre-requisite, have been dropped. The matter has been pushed into the background. Even the opposition's march, led by Congress president Sonia Gandhi, is an event of the distant past. I do not have to remind that some 67 percent of the people in the country depend on the fields which are increasingly becoming killing fields.

Showing preference over the corporate sector, which no doubt provides jobs, will be against the ethos of the freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi focused attention on the people in rural areas and moved from a bustling city to a small place Wardha which later became an important town in the country.

NGOs are carrying on the work of the Mahatma. The sanction to some 900 NGOs has been withdrawn because they have not kept the accounts properly. The purpose of auditing their income should be to see whether there is an overall pilferage of funds. Expecting them to maintain accounts is not wrong. But checking even the last paisa spent is asking for a little too much because these activists are engaged in day to day work at the grassroots level.

The task which Teesta and Anand have embarked upon may not be to the liking of the ruling party because ideologically the two are poles apart. One stands for a composite society while the other is engaged in a task which is divisive. Both cannot coexist. The freedom was won for a secular democratic society and the society should stay with that purpose.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

That the BJP is tilting towards the Hindu ideology is unfortunate, to say the least. But that does not mean those who are fighting against parochialism to underline the secular spirit of our constitution should be getting the wrong end of the stick.

COMMENTS

"It's pleasant to see one can exercise his voting rights in a peaceful atmosphere, free from any interference and fear."

--Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

Deep

I am shocked to see how one can tell a lie so blatantly.

"An election marred"
(April 29, 2015)

Mozammel Hussein

The early pull-out by the BNP and the unethical means adopted by the AL to win the city corporation polls are equally disturbing.

Ruhul1

I doubt that the BNP's withdrawal from the polls was pre-planned.

"It's mockery of democracy: BNP"
(April 29, 2015)

Zman7

They may think hurling petrol bombs and burning people is true democracy.

"Bangladesh is not the same Bangladesh it used to be and I think they can now upset any team because they are getting better and better each day."

-- Former Pakistan captain JAVED MIANDAD

Hafeejul Alam

Yes, Mr. Miandad, Bangladesh is not the same as before -- not only in cricket but also in terms of social and economic development.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Stop food waste

According to a finding of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the annual estimated value of global food waste is \$1 trillion. To produce this wasted food, 30 percent of the world's agricultural land is being used. This global food waste emits 3.3 giga tons of greenhouse gases -- which, if counted as a nation, would rank as the third-largest greenhouse gas emitter after the US and China. If we look at the Bangladesh scenario, it would be evident that food is wasted mainly at the production and post-harvest levels due to lack of access to technology and infrastructure plus protected marketing system. Appropriate actions need to be taken both at global and country levels to stop food wastage. In the developing world, political stability is a must for attaining sustainable food security through containing food waste.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
 Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU Dhaka

The shortcut to deradicalisation is the long road

Every Arab state, regardless of the extent to which it is involved in combating violent extremism, must recognise that there is no shortcut to defeating this scourge, and those who are looking for quick fixes are in for a rude awakening. Whereas military force is selectively necessary to destroy irredeemably ruthless and bloodthirsty organisations such as ISIS, to neutralise violent extremism in the long-term, no amount of military muscle will suffice. The Arab states must realise that the root causes of radicalisation are embedded in their

internal socio-economic and political disorder. Only by undertaking systematic and consistent measures to cure this domestic malaise, violent radicalisation will abate. Although the West has not been without fault and contributed to the plight of the Arab masses, Arab leaders can no longer blame their problems on Western powers. The convergence of a plethora of jihadist groups into Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen is not accidental and as long as grievances, hopelessness and desolation prevail, they will continue to provide fertile ground for radical Islamists to step in and capitalise on public despair.

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir
 Professor of International Relations
 Center for Global Affairs, NYU