

# Consuming Unspeakable Tragedies



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

**THE SOUND & THE FURY**

**L**IGHTS. Camera. Action. The camera zooms in on a traumatised, grieving mother. A microphone pokes at the woman's face, and an ever-zealous reporter (outside of the frame), interrupts her wailing to decipher her *onubhuti* (feelings): "how do you feel now that your son's body has been recovered?"

The camera remains unmoving and voyeuristically on the wailing mother's face as she struggles to render intelligible her emotions for mass public consumption. How does she *feel*, indeed, I wonder, to have her privacy impinged upon like this, to be asked what, in any circle anywhere in the world, would be deemed a thoroughly insensitive question?

A different channel is replaying raw footages of her son's body – dead body, mind you – being pulled out of the ruins. The camera wastes no time in capturing the heart-breaking sight of his motionless body, as we, on the other side of the telly, eagerly swallow the tragedy unfolding in front of our eyes. This is reality TV at its best, after all, and we, an audience whose appetite for the sensational, the ghastly and the atrocious, knows no bounds, readily forsake all considerations of ethics and human decency in our desperate bid to feel connected.

In yet another international channel, footages of a natural disaster is being played and replayed in a continuous loop; people's death and displacement are being broadcast – live – with the titillating header "BREAKING NEWS." In the comfort of our homes, miles away from the disaster, detached from the reality on the ground, we gulp down the heart-rending images of destruction, death and poverty, with or without popcorn. As I click through the '50 images that'll tell you everything you need to know about the X

tragedy', I can't help but wonder: is there a perverse pleasure involved in the removed yet voyeuristic manner in which we consume such disasters? How is it that unspeakable tragedies are converted into highly lucrative, clickbait-worthy images and news for rapid mass consumption?

Let all those who partake in the visual experiencing of such disasters take offence, allow me to clarify that my problem lies not with the fact that disasters are covered so widely – after all, one can argue that had the media not diligently highlighted the incidents, we would never know the extent of the catastrophes, and we would never be moved to act. What I do take issue with, however, is the *way* in which we cover what we call 'disasters' or 'tragedies', and how little consideration we show to the 'victims' of such incidents – the people whose stories we claim to be narrating and listening to. Beyond the politics of representation, there is also a need to question why we feel the urge to reduce what should be appalling incidents into spectator sports, and what the implications are of doing so. We need to explore if these 'sensational' stories hide more than they reveal by shifting our attention from the bigger, more critical – and less clickbait-worthy – stories about structural oppression and injustice.

Take the Haiti earthquake in 2010, for instance. The best reporters and photographers of the world raced to the disaster-laden country to tell us the "real" story about Haiti – a story of dismembered limbs, rescue operations and the healing power of foreign aid. What got left out of the Pulitzer-nominated stories, however, was how decades of colonial rule and neoliberal policies had made such extensive destruction from a natural disaster inevitable. As David Sirota wrote in the *Huffington Post*, "Rather than reporting on what made Haiti so poor and therefore its infrastructure so susceptible to collapse, we get clips of Haitians momentarily cheering 'USA!' as food packages trickle into their devastated capital. Rather than inquiries about how poverty made Haiti so ill-prepared

for rescue operations, the disaster pornographers instead obediently follow George W. Bush, who self-servingly says, 'you've got to deal with the desperation and there ought to be no politicisation of that.'"

We can see a similar narrow pattern emerging in the Nepal earthquake coverage, with people's lives and deaths being filmed and telecast with the flash befitting a Bollywood production. Many Nepalese have begun to harshly criticise the Indian media coverage of the earthquake, terming it as jingoistic, paternalistic, sensational and highly disrespectful of the Nepalese nation and its people. #GoHomeIndianMedia was trending on Twitter, with posts such as "Dear @narendramodi thank for ur help but the shock of your media and army is bigger than earthquake," or "Your media and media personnel are acting like they are shooting some kind of family serials. If your media person can reach to the places where the relief supplies have not reached, at this time of crisis can't they take a first-aid kit or some food supplies with them as well?"

Our own media, too, has become increasingly adept at marketing disasters, going into extensive lengths to exclusively capture the 'tragedy', from shooting live footages as a person is hacked to death to making a critically injured arson victim pose in front of a camera, from dropping a mic down an abandoned well where a child is trapped to interrogating a child whose parents were both killed about their murder. During Rana Plaza, the media interviewed dying workers "LIVE" and went into the collapsed building with heavy recording equipment despite warnings that they might hurt survivors.

As the family members prayed, cried or sat still near the corpses of their relatives, too traumatised to betray any emotions, we, journalists, moved through the crowd, quickly but methodically, asking people who they had lost, if they had found the body, who the deceased or missing had left behind and so on. After a while, we'd only listen to the stories of those who had something "special" to add: three missing family members,

perhaps, or two dead daughters, or an orphan who had lost both her parents in the incident. The rest of the deaths were deemed too ordinary, too commonplace, really, for front-page news. And this is the image that plagues me the most: running through the field of dead bodies, asking the devastated relatives first how many people they had lost before we engaged them in conversation, for the sake of efficiency. All those dead bodies, the mothers and sisters, the brothers and husbands, and their debilitating grief, was all just, to us, in the end, quotes to fill a 500-word story. The workers remained in death, as in life, nameless, faceless, disposable.

In attempting to make visible the cruelty of the world, these sensational narratives actually dictate the very limits of that visibility. They are five-minute package news that breaks the monotony of our alienated lives, that enables us to debate, condemn and moralise;

but they never let us *see* the slain and wounded bodies, the structures of empire and violence.

Perhaps we are so drawn to these debilitating narratives because they make us shudder, they make us conscious of own humanity or our alienation from it. We are made aware of our power over the Other, while also being overpowered by what we see, feeling vulnerable at witnessing the Other's vulnerability. But the people whose lives and deaths we consume, remain, in the end, just that: Others.

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## MODI'S VISIT TO BANGLADESH Hope for faster resolutions



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

**BOTTOM LINE**

**O**N May 6 and 7, in both the houses of parliament, the Indian government passed the historic constitution amendment bill (119th) paving the way to the implementation of the 1974 Indira-Mujib Land Boundary Agreement and its 2011 Protocol. After passage of the bill, Prime Minister Modi reportedly telephoned his counterpart Sheikh Hasina and they congratulated each other. Hopefully, other formalities for ratification will be completed soon so that both countries may take actions to put into operation the agreement on the ground.

One immediate effect is that it will facilitate the proposed first visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June or July to Bangladesh despite the unresolved Teesta Water Sharing Agreement between the two countries. Modi can show that he has not come to Bangladesh empty-handed and he has delivered the promised land-swap deal to Bangladesh. The Teesta deal will follow.

The visit will provide Bangladesh the opportunity to raise some other key issues with Prime Minister Modi to consolidate further bilateral relations. First is the reduction of the huge trade deficit of Bangladesh with India. During 2013-14, Bangladesh imported goods worth \$6.2 billion in official channel, while Bangladesh could only export goods worth about \$456.63 million (much less than previous years). In addition, unofficial imports from India are reportedly about 1.5 times more than official imports.

Researchers in both countries have found that Bangladesh has a potential export market of \$2 billion in India. They have suggested, some steps, such as: (a) India should recognise the principle of asymmetry and non-reciprocity in trade with Bangladesh, (b) there should be guaranteed market access of Bangladeshi products to India (liberal rules of origin) (c) no tariff, non-tariff barriers and para-tariffs and (d) export quality Bangladeshi products should not be in India's negative list. These measures will hardly dent India's large \$2.3 trillion economy or its import worth \$450 billion as of 2013-14.

Furthermore, joint ventures at the private sectors level for local, regional and global markets, trade



complementariness can be developed by vertical specialisation through production sharing. For improvement of business cooperation, India-Bangladesh may sign an Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement and Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement.

Unabated border killings of Bangladeshi nationals are a matter of grave concern. Since the flourishing of the illegal trade of cattle, involving \$500 million annually for beneficiaries of both sides of the border, most of the dead are found to be the unarmed cattle traders from Bangladesh.

Although a renewed thrust by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is to ban cattle-trade from India, the New Delhi government may realise that if the border killings continue, India will be considered as insensitive to the loss of lives of Bangladesh people. It may be recalled that the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India in paragraph 18 of the Joint Communiqué of January 13, 2010 agreed that "respective border guarding forces exercise restraint...and prevent loss of lives."

In view of the real thrust of regional cooperation that came from the decision by Prime Minister Modi when he invited the SAARC leaders to attend the swearing-in ceremony in May last year, researchers working on Bangladesh and Indian economic relations have talked about a closer integration of Bangladesh's economy with the northeastern

states of India, Nepal and Bhutan. All these countries could constitute a sub-regional unit within Saarc to make this part an economic hub of the region.

Bangladesh has emphasised on accelerating industry, trade and energy in the south of Bangladesh, and Matarbari Island near Chittagong is being developed into a massive supply base of primary energy. This can support a quantum leap in industry and trade not only for Bangladesh but for the region as a whole. Furthermore, Bangladesh can provide a gateway to the Bay of Bengal for this region's hinterlands comprising of Bhutan, Nepal and north eastern states of India which are considered to be a huge untapped market for more than 70 million people.

Bangladesh has shown keen interest in the regional economic corridor. India has so far been lukewarm about it thus Bangladesh may request Prime Minister Modi to push for it.

While the Awami League government's friendly policy toward India is vindicated in the eyes of the Bangladeshi people, Prime Minister Modi's visit will no doubt boost Bangladesh-India relations. It may also act as a catalyst for stronger bilateral architecture if the Modi government takes fresh initiatives on the Teesta water sharing agreement as well as all the other pressing issues.

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The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## BB's restructuring of large loans

**S.K. SUR CHOWDHURY**

**R**ESTRUCTURING of large loans of large corporate groups facing repayment difficulties due to adverse circumstances beyond control is a routine practice in developed and developing economies, including neighbouring India. The restructuring process allows lenders and borrowers to arrive at mutually beneficial arrangements of keeping the businesses up and running to generate income flows for repayments of the loans at realistically written down values over realistically feasible repayment periods; saving lenders from much larger losses at the likely break up values of borrower business's assets, thereby also saving the economy from losses in output, income and employment from such break up.

Disruptions in economic activities in the prolonged spells of blockades and hartals in 2014 created numerous episodes of severe cash flow crunches in borrower businesses that couldn't be managed within the rigid down-payment and time period limits of the loan rescheduling guidelines prescribed by BB for normal situations. Some relaxations in these rigidities in loan rescheduling drills were therefore allowed temporarily by BB in 2014; which helped businesses large and small keep running in the face of disruptions, in turn helping uphold output and price stability in the broader economy.

However, dealing effectively with large exposures of banks to large business groups needs a more structured approach than the ad-hoc rescheduling criteria relaxations allowed temporarily in 2014; and as directed by BB's Board of Directors, a new large loan restructuring framework has been drawn-up in light of the restructuring frameworks in other developing economies in our region including India, Malaysia, Philippines etc. Introduced in January 2015 including restructuring proposals to be submitted by June 2015, the process is intended to begin with loan size of Tk 5 billion or higher to keep the initial number of restructuring proposals manageable small. Based on initial experience and actual need, the restructuring framework will be widened further with modifications and fine tuning in light of evolving international best practices.

The new large loan restructuring framework has been introduced not to extend undue favours to a handful of delinquent large borrowers, but to broaden the toolkit for more effective management of larger loan exposures to good borrowers in the growing economy. While BB's loan rescheduling and restructuring guidelines remain harshly discouraging for habitual delinquent borrowers, BB's March 2015 directive asks lenders to reward good repayment behaviour with rebates in interest payments.

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The writer is Deputy Governor, Bangladesh Bank.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

Those who do not want to imitate anything, produce nothing.

Salvador Dali

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Bean-bearing tree
- 6 Truck stop sights
- 11 Sports spot
- 12 Like lambs
- 13 Homes for koi
- 14 Pigeon's perch
- 15 Spare tire
- 16 "Hmmm..."
- 18 Purpose
- 19 Rick's pianist
- 20 -Palmas
- 21 Uncool fellow
- 23 Fido's pal
- 25 Remote
- 27 "Platoon" setting
- 28 Awaits
- 30 Writer Janowitz
- 33 "The Bells" writer
- 34 Calendar box
- 36 Constant complainer
- 37 "As You Like It" hero
- 39 Reduce drastically
- 40 Excessive
- 41 "Eat!"
- 43 Prom crowd
- 44 News item

**DOWN**

- 1 Kid's shooter
- 2 Kindle
- 3 Wille Mays, e.g.
- 4 Plus
- 5 Caravan stop
- 6 Wise king
- 7 Tied up
- 8 Department head, e.g.
- 9 Engaged
- 10 Claivoyants
- 17 General activity
- 22 Pop
- 24 Brewery sight
- 26 Sign of tired eyes
- 28 Third largest island
- 29 Blue
- 31 Congresswoman
- Waters
- 32 FBI employees
- 33 Acts sullen
- 35 Alpine trill
- 38 Pop's sister
- 42 College climber

**CRYPTOQUOTE** 4-1

AXL HLDGCGJ TDVGJX GV AXL PGYH'-LUL TGLE, PKA JI HILJ AXL PGYH'-LUL TGLE TDVGJX GV AXL HLDGCGJ.

-EGCCGDF ODFLJ

**YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUOTE: TO VICE, INNOCENCE MUST ALWAYS SEEM ONLY A SUPERIOR KIND OF CHICANERY.**

-OUIDA

**Yesterday's answer**

SOSO BATES  
ANON BEGONE  
SENT UGANDA  
HIGHERUP  
RUNNERUP  
STEERS USA  
CAMEO SANER  
ABU AMPERE  
MUSTERUP  
BATTERUP  
ACROSS NILE  
CHENEY DONE  
TIDES STAR

**A XYDLBAXR is LONGFELLOW**

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

THIS FOG IS SO THICK I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING

CAN'T YOU SEE ME, SARGE?

NO, BEETLE, I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING!

6-28

**HENRY** by Don Trachte

WILL BE GOOD I WILL BE

WILL BE GOOD I WILL BE