

The mathematics of two mayors in one city

Holy month of Ramadan

Quest for restraint and spiritual uplift

THE month of self-abnegation, purification and spiritual salvation begins today. Devotees abstain from food or drink from dawn to dusk and devote in intense prayer seeking mercy and guidance from the Almighty. Spiritually, the holy month is a gift for the faithful to seek communion with the Creator. Materially, it goes far beyond just bodily abstinence. It brings us face to face with the deprivations of the have-nots. It also involves engaging in charity to benefit those less fortunate.

Where Ramadan represents the spirit of abstinence and restraint, we watch on helplessly as a section of people gleefully practice devious means to make windfall profits from jacking up prices and adulterating food and other essentials. We urge the traders to respect the solemnity of the month and refrain from indulging in profiteering. The authorities should enforce a strong monitoring system to curb these unethical business practices.

During this month of introspection, a Muslim renews his pledge to be virtuous, to abstain from crass materialism and clear the heart of hatred and hostility against others in society. One may hope that the true spirit of Ramadan is embraced by political forces to curb divisiveness and engage in a dialogue to make a peaceful and prosperous Bangladesh. It is also our sincere hope that the amity during Ramadan be carried over and applied throughout the year. Ramadan Mubarak!

VAT imposition on e-commerce

Counterproductive for a fledgling industry

BUSINESS leaders have expressed concern on the proposed imposition of 4 percent value added tax (VAT) on e-commerce sales. At a recently held seminar, representatives of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS) argued that such imposition will be counterproductive for local vendors who face competition from foreign players owning internet sites registered abroad. As VAT will not be applicable on their sales, Bangladeshi electronic commerce (e-commerce) sites will be at a natural disadvantage. With about Tk 100 crore in annual sales, this is a growing industry that falls in line with the vision of "Digital Bangladesh", a cornerstone of government policy that aims to reach digital services to the masses.

Industry proponents argue that introduction of VAT would add a paltry Tk 4-5 crore to the national exchequer, but drive out the bulk of the local competition which will be at odds with foreign competition. There has to be a level playing field for domestic and internationally-owned businesses for e-commerce to reach its full potential. The other problem is that for any vendor to remain profitable, the imposition of VAT will take payments offline whereby vendors can dodge the whole issue of paying VAT to NBR i.e. consumers may have to "pay on delivery".

E-commerce holds the potential to employ thousands of educated youth in the country and should be recognised as a potential growth sector for the economy. It qualifies for policy support. Balancing the revenue budget by imposing VAT on a growing industry is hardly the way forward.

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

DHAKA City Corporation has been divided into two halves, but each one of its problems remain the same, if not worse. The traffic jam continues to cause spasmodic seizures within the city. The backed up drains overflow when streams of rainwater run full-freshet. Power transmission has improved, but it's still significantly impaired. Water supply is patchy and contaminated, crimes are on the rise, waste management is skimpy, and the sidewalks are eternally infested with vendors. After bifurcation, this city is like two individuals, sleeping on two beds, sharing the same nightmare.

It's said that two heads are better than one. Has that aphorism been true for our capital city so far? In 2011, one City Corporation was split into two, only to be run by two administrators. Almost four years later, questionable elections have given two mayors whose election campaigns convinced us they were already on top of all the solutions.

Thus, we have two mayors in one city like two flowers on a single stem. But where are they now? Before the elections it seemed like they were two bows at full draw, waiting to be elected before jumping into action and building a modern metropolis. It may be early to doubt their intentions, but their presence appears faded like an overexposed photograph.

It could be that they're lying low while learning the ropes. Another reason



PHOTO: STAR

could be what newspapers have recently reported. There simply isn't enough money to keep them busy with anything but the joy in their hearts. The best scenario under the circumstances is that they will vigorously start implementing their promises once both of these limitations are lifted.

The worst scenario could be that their campaigns were the best part of their commitments. It also could be that the two mayors will do no more than routine things, biding time between occasional works. It's possible that they are going to be no more than titular figures lost in the intense power struggle that characterises life in this nation's capital, where too many cooks spoil the broth.

But what about the city itself, which has been turning into a mounting mess? High-rises and flyovers may have soared with solutions in the air, but what about the problems which still keep us bound to the ground? Old Dhaka gives the

impression of organised chaos left to stew in its own juice. New Dhaka is a hurting heart hiding behind its happy face.

This city has waited for elected mayors like orphans yearn for a father figure. In fact, the last elected mayor had long ceased to be either. He overstayed the welcome under political constraints, while the city was being deprived.

It's said that if an earthworm is split in two, it will not become two new worms. The million dollar question is whether splitting one city corporation into two automatically creates two city corporations. I suppose the new mayors are grappling with that dilemma, trying to map out terrains before they find their feet on the ground.

First things first, they have to know where to start. Years of neglect, abuse, misuse, waste and corruption have turned this city into a wad of tangled yarns. All cities have evolved through

three stages: pre-industrial, industrial and metropolis. Our city is all three stages combined in one. Parts of it are pre-historic and parts of it are post-modern. In between lies an intermediate section, where the city verges on being one vast dystopian wasteland.

This city can accommodate two bosses provided two bosses can accommodate this one city in their hearts. It's not clear what they have in their minds, because to this day they have given us nothing but political spiels tailored to suit their personal, family and party ambitions. They have mostly talked to us from their heads, not from their hearts.

It's been almost two months since the mayors have been elected, yet instead of picking up steam they seem to have all but dissipated. In fact, the people of this city cannot even tell the difference perhaps because division of the City Corporation has diluted the relevance of mayors in their mind. That's all the more reason why the newly elected mayors should be all over this town with the tenacity of a business recovering losses. They have to stay visible if they wish to stay viable.

The slogan for Doublemint Gum is: "Double your pleasure, double your fun." We got a double deal when the government decided to give us two mayors. Each mayor should have double the time to do half the work of a single mayor. Ideally, they should "double our pleasure" and "double our fun". Bad news is if that doesn't happen, it'll prove neither of them is half as good as their single-handed predecessor.

The writer is the Editor of the weekly *First News* and an opinion writer for *The Daily Star*.
Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

TRIUMPHALISM OVER MYANMAR RAID

Perils of covert operations

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMNN



THE debate over the Indian Army's Special Forces raid against National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) insurgents on Myanmar territory has produced two main reactions.

The first, from Narendra Modi's diehard supporters, trumpets the operation's "great" success. The second defends covert operations, but believes that publicising them is self-defeating.

The first view's proponents support publicising the operation's details—against military rules—because India must send a signal not just to Khaplang, but to the "entire neighbourhood". India's national security approach has changed under its "56-inch-chest" leader, who recently insulted Sheikh Hasina for combatting terrorism "despite" being a woman.

This puerile argument comprehensively misunderstands history—today's India was not one nation for a thousand years—and geopolitics. Confident, prudent nation-states don't violate their neighbours' borders; they know that healthy relations with them are key to their own security.

After the Khaplang faction killed 18 Indian troops on June 4 in Manipur, India could have conducted joint operations against it with the Myanmar army, with which it has good relations.

India entered into ceasefire agreements with both the Isak-Swu-Thuingaleng-Muiwah (IM) and Khaplang factions of the NSCN respectively in 1997 and 2001. It had ample opportunity to renew the ceasefire with Khaplang which ended in March.

Alternatively, it could have roped in Naga civil society groups to persuade

Khaplang to explore peace. Nagaland Chief Minister Zeliang says such groups have credibility.

Indian intelligence agencies did neither. They failed to keep the Manipur and Nagaland governments in the loop, and ignored the emerging coalition between Khaplang and other small North-eastern militants.

In its hastily-conceived retaliation, India attacked proximate rebel-bases for "political" reasons—not because they harboured many insurgents. Contradictory claims were made about the number killed: 20, even 100; but only seven bodies were recovered, says *The Indian Express*.

India could have negotiated joint anti-militant operations with the Myanmar army, as it has done in Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The reason why India didn't even try is the Modi government's jingoism and its domination by super-hawks like National Security Adviser AK Doval, who prefer cloak-and-dagger methods.

Doval, a former intelligence man, is a firm believer in coercion, not diplomacy, to resolve all conflicts. He believes India-Pakistan peaceful co-existence is virtually impossible.

Both countries are nuclear-armed and so close that a nuclear exchange would lead to large-scale devastation and irreversible regional climatic change. As Kargil showed, conventional war rhetoric can lead to nuclear sabre-rattling, with horrifying consequences.

The second reaction recommends discretion: let covert operations speak for themselves. Yet, it fails to understand that protracted conflicts aren't decided by covert operations, but need strategic foresight and astute diplomacy. So it holds that a modern state must practice deception, skulduggery and lawlessness in exceptional circumstances.

Implicit here are three assumptions: first, covert operations successfully neutralise insurgents or terrorists; second, it's legitimate to use extreme/inhuman

methods in special circumstances; third, democracies can return to normal political-social negotiation once a crisis has passed.

All three assumptions are questionable. In the 1950s, India collaborated with the CIA to instigate the so-called Tibetan Khampa Rebellion against China. The CIA abandoned it after sacrificing thousands of Tibetans. India earned China's hostility, revealed in 1962.

India joined a dangerous CIA-sponsored covert operation in 1965 to place espionage equipment energised by a plutonium power-pack on Nanda Devi to monitor Chinese nuclear activities. An avalanche prevented its placement. It has remained untraceable, raising fears of

If torturing one person saves a hundred lives, wouldn't that be justified? This argument may seem attractive, but it's dangerously wrong. It violates the right to life and often produces false results which might lead to yet more violence.

If torturing one person saves a hundred lives, wouldn't that be justified? This argument may seem attractive, but it's dangerously wrong. It violates the right to life and often produces false results which might lead to yet more violence.

By violating human rights, a democratic state undermines its claim to legality; it loses popular legitimacy. That's why "fake" encounters add to the cesspool of grievances that feed extremism.

In Mizoram, the Indian state created Malaya-Vietnam-style "strategic hamlets" by forcibly grouping villages. In Nagaland, Manipur and Assam, it waged war on its own people. This

radioactive contamination of glaciers and the Ganga.

In 1987, India air-dropped "humanitarian" aid in northern Sri Lanka, and imposed the India-Sri Lanka accord on Colombo. India's "peace-keeping" operation cost it 1,200 soldiers—more than in all other wars—and led to Rajeev Gandhi's assassination.

Secondly, it's difficult to draw the line between lethal military attacks, and torture, hostage-taking, fake encounters, etc. They are all rationalised in the name of necessity to "deter" further attacks, or choosing "the lesser evil". They form a slippery ethical slope, which permits increasingly brutal acts; ultimately, all limits collapse.

fueled militancy.

The more ruthlessly the militancy was repressed, the greater were the civilian casualties. Hundreds of civilians were dehumanised through torture and forced labour in Manipur's "successful" Operation Loktak in 1999.

Finally, the state doesn't know when to stop. The draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act was introduced in 1958 as a "temporary" measure. It continues to operate in Kashmir and most North-Eastern states, barring Tripura.

The Myanmar raid forms part of the same vile pattern. This must end. For real long-term peace, India must talk to its alienated citizens without coercion.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

COMMENTS

"Rampal power plant to damage Sundarbans" (June 13, 2015)

Ibrahim Zaman
Even a fool would understand that but sadly, our government doesn't.

Anwar Haq
The Rampal project will hasten the destruction of all nearby greens. The other destructive project in Bangladesh is the Rooppur Nuclear Power Project, a potential for huge loss of Bangladesh.

Sadman Bin Ornob
Sundarbans are a vanguard of protection of our geographical diversity. We shouldn't intentionally slaughter this with a view to produce electricity, even when we have a cluster of alternatives of electricity production.

Jd Aziz
Yes, coal-fired power plants are not the best option. But, if one excludes nuclear power as well, what is left? There is limited scope for hydro-electric power. Solar energy and wind energy solutions need to be explored but, neither is optimal under Bangladesh's weather pattern conditions.

Moshi Rahman
Cancel it; this forest is the only credible barrier to cyclone and tidal surges.

Nirjon Pranto
Who cares about the environment or Sundarbans?! Bilateral benefits and political issues matter only.

Oliur Rahman
No concern at all! We are following a scorched earth policy that requires no land, no environment and no people. We need only money and power!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Khaleda unwilling to cut Jamaat ties

This refers to the news item "Snapping Jamaat Ties: Khaleda still unwilling" published on 14.6.2015 in TDS. In spite of her total lack of qualification, incredible dullness and deficiencies, she can instinctively and intuitively smell rats in the twisted logic of parting with Jamaat at a time so deceptive. Everything is defined by the will of a single person and law enforcers' ability to crush even a semblance of protest. Khaleda's intuition is like that of a boatman -- reading the whole weather pattern just by taking a look at a patch of cloud!

How many in our country can comprehend that the PM used the caretaker government twice: once to gain power and once to stay eternally in power? Elaboration is unnecessary.

How many understand that the PM, after finishing the first phase of grabbing power by hook or by crook, cunning and craft has now inaugurated her second phase of perpetuating it in the same manner?

Our intellectuals are apt at pedantic analysis of the effect and not the cause of event, including the British High Commissioner who expressed shock at the absence of investigation into the tainted mayoral polls. The PM even compared her January 5 win with that of Modi's landslide! In a wholesale moral famine is there any guarantee the ruling party will not try to woo Jamaat? Past records do not say so. I wish the government would ban Jamaat-Shibir's politics right away.

Yusuf Azad
Chief Evaluation Officer (Retd.)
Education Board Rajshahi

Women in danger

It is our failure that we cannot ensure the security and safety of women in our society. An incident takes place and similar crimes keep happening. The culprits see that there is little implementation of law and order in society and they take full advantage of it. After an incident, people who are concerned speak up. They participate in rallies and form human chains. But after a while, everyone forgets everything. From this perspective, I think women should learn some techniques of self-defence to protect themselves.

Tozo, Bonnie and Omar
On e-mail