

Mourning Kalam's passing away

The inspirer of dreams remains a beacon

We express our profound grief at the death of former Indian president APJ Abdul Kalam. Regarded as “People’s president in his own country”, he endeared himself in a special way to Bangladeshis by his inspiring and dream-stirring words during his visit to Dhaka in October last year. Although his loss is irreparable in terms of pushing the borders in science and technology, knowledge and enlightenment, and leadership and enterprise, his life and works will remain an undimmed source of inspiration for generations to come. Undaunted by his humble origins and unshaken in self-belief to reach the high goals he set for himself, his attainments in physics, aeronautical engineering and aerospace engineering came in quick succession. His close association with civilian space programme and military missile development efforts earned him the sobriquet: “India’s Missile Man.” The rest is history - he served as the head of state from 2002 to 2007 having been elected from outside the political spectrum overwhelmingly, with BJP lending support to him. Popular as president as he was, he literally bloomed on his return to a life of education, writing and public service. He excelled in the art of public speaking with his inimitable interactive rapport-building skills. Thus, he remained powerfully connected with the people, especially the youth. We fondly remember his dynamic flair and inspiring words at the inaugural of the 110th anniversary of Dhaka Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry last October. He urged his hosts to dream, think and act for Bangladesh. His conversations with the students were simply mesmerising: “If you want to shine like a sun, first burn like a sun”; “Dream is not that which you see while sleeping, it is something that does not let you sleep.” The sheer power of his words to spur the youth on to scale new heights will pay a lasting homage to his memory.

Dwindling Royal Bengal Tigers

Replenish it through effective intervention

It is highly disquieting that the Royal Bengal Tiger, one of the most valued species of tigers in the world, appears to be on an extinction course in its home, the Sundarbans. A recent census shows that now only 106 big cats are left in our part of the Sundarbans. According to the report, poaching of tigers and their preys, commercial traffic through their habitat and ever increasing development activities in the Sundarbans are major reasons behind such a steep decline of tiger population. It also reveals the poor status on tiger conservation projects. Experts say, projects like Rampal power plant will further affect the tiger conservation programmes. We wonder what role the Department of Forest has been playing to arrest the dwindling tiger population which is concerning for biodiversity in the world’s largest mangrove forest. As the tigers are nearing a point of extinction, priority projects should be undertaken to facilitate procreation of this endangered species. A task force should be formed to keep track on the progress of tiger conservation projects through regular pugmark surveys. The government should keep the tiger habitat out of harmful projects. We must now unambiguously adopt the policy of protecting bio-diversity of the Sundarbans rather than allowing it to be damaged in the name of development.

COMMENTS

“No smile on highways”
(July 26, 2015)

▼

Adm Reza Ul Hasan
We need more bypass roads. They are more effective than four-lane roads.

“Neutral govt, not caretaker, a must for free polls: says Khaleda”
(July 26, 2015)

▼

Kalo Jam
I think mutual respect and understanding between BNP and AL is more important than a neutral government to organise national election.

Moazzam Hossen Manik
You may not like BNP but you have to support their demand for a fair election. I couldn't even give my vote in the last election and was very angry when some ministers including the PM said that the elections they arranged were fair.

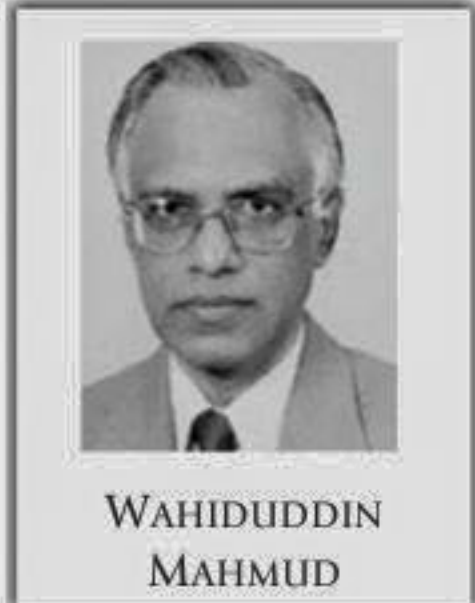
Alamgir Mahmud
She is absolutely correct. In the last national and mayoral elections, we had bitter experiences with AL cadres (associated with police) occupying vote centres and stuffing ballot boxes with fake votes.

“Gang rape of teenage girl”
(July 25, 2015)

▼

Len McAlpine
The police must care about deterring such crimes. When a crime has been committed, they must relentlessly pursue the perpetrators until they are found and punished.

Is social business the way forward?



WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

THE idea of socially-oriented business is not new, although Nobel laureate Muhammed Yunus has certainly given an enormous impetus to it by his articulate branding of it as “social business”. The reason his campaign has caught so much public attention is its timing. Global capitalism, driven by the singular pursuit of profit, has in recent times exposed some of the worst brutalities of the system – repeated global financial meltdown, the increasing concentration of wealth and the unmitigated environmental damage associated with the looming threat of climate change. French economist Thomas Piketty’s convincing analysis in his recent best-selling book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* as to why the current capitalist system will lead to an unabated process of wealth concentration has only helped to add fuel to the fire of public discontent. It is not surprising that the global business community is eager to embrace the idea of social business, at least in its public posture, almost as a penance for the sins that have been committed. In the world of academia, while the business schools in top universities worldwide are setting up dedicated chairs to offer courses on social business, the response from the mainstream economics is at best lukewarm. Why? First, the idea of social business is still too fuzzy for an academic discipline that claims the status of a science. Muhammad Yunus describes it as a business which has social mission rather than profit-seeking as its main purpose and the owners of which do not earn any dividend from profit. That definition may fit a wide range of business models, so that it may be easier to say which one does not qualify than which one actually does so as a social business. Second, while admitting that many market distortions do exist, economists are accustomed to the elegant theorising of the efficiency of the market economy that is rooted in the premise of self-seeking behaviour and the “profit motive”, and this tradition has continued ever since Adam Smith famously remarked that we owed our bread not to the benevolence of the baker and the butcher but their attending to self-interest. Yet, this need not be so. According to a long-forgotten strand of economic theorising, the success of a competitive free-enterprise economy can be shown to depend on people pursuing self-chosen interest, which can be altruistic or anything else. It was also once argued by some economists, for example, that the loyalty of the Japanese worker to his firm and to his co-workers, rather than individual self-seeking, was the key to the success of the Japanese economy. Incorporating social objectives in the working of the market economy should not be therefore altogether new to economic theorising.

In the real world of the market economy, it is now the generally accepted view that private business must exercise some measure of social responsibility beyond looking after shareholder interests. The question is how to do it best. Modern-day smart CEOs worldwide know that strategic spending on corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities can be, in the long-run, business interest of their firms. However, the phenomenon is reversed in the case of a social business, which takes advantage of commercial business methods while pursuing its overriding social goals. Indeed, an advantage of social business over conventional corporate philanthropy, as argued by Muhammad Yunus, is that once an investment is made in a social business, its benefits will continue over the years while companies have to allocate funds annually for their CSR activities. This is similar to the advantage that a revolving fund for a microcredit programme may have over annual transfers to the poor under social

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safety net programmes. It is no coincidence that Yunus happens to be the pioneer of both microcredit and social business. A social business is expected to achieve its social objectives by producing some socially-oriented products or services that are not supplied by profit-oriented businesses. Examples may include marketing products at affordable prices specifically needed by the poor or promoting some environment-friendly or employment generating technology. These products and services are supposed to have what economists call “public good” characteristics; that is, their benefits extend beyond what would be otherwise reflected in the market demand and business profits. Because of the absence of the compulsion of profit maximisation, an implicit subsidy is involved when such products or services are produced and supplied by social businesses; only the subsidies in this case come not from the public exchequer but from foregone business

profits. Such subsidies can be justified in economic theory as a legitimate means of correcting market deficiencies. This line of reasoning can in fact be a more fruitful way of conceptualising social business instead of either trying to fit it in the grand scheme of the theory of competitive market equilibrium or attempting to discredit the entire logic of the market economy. A more relevant concern about social businesses is to do with the informational problem that may arise from their not being able to take full advantage of market signals in making decisions about prices and products. The informational deficiency may arise in perceiving what is good for society while not necessarily maximising profit as allowed by the market. Prices and profits, resulting from self-interested behaviour, serve a useful signalling function, since the interests of each person are best known by the person herself or himself. As Amartya Sen aptly puts it, “Doing good is not an easy matter with informational deficiency”. One has to only recollect O Henry’s story *The Gift of the Magi* to see how the pursuit of altruism can lead to frustration. A safeguard against social businesses not messing up the market mechanism is, however, provided by the stipulation of running the businesses at least on a no-loss basis, which provides a bottom line for using the market as a disciplining force. Overall, it may be more useful to judge the comparative merits of non-profit-maximising behaviour of social businesses in particular practical contexts rather than in terms of any given notion of efficiency or optimality of market mechanism. The problem of informational deficiency is also linked to business risks. Private capitalists or their financiers take risks while investing in new business ventures. They are willing to undertake the risk of business failure because of the lure of earning profits; in fact, the riskier the investment, the higher is usually the expected returns from profits. Donors and philanthropists, however, may feel less comfortable with the idea that the social businesses they are investing in may, in some cases, fail to deliver the goods and may therefore like to see strict pre-project scrutiny. Moreover, while profits and shareholder dividends are taken as yardsticks of profit-motivated businesses, it will be difficult to find one such single measure of success for a social business, so that the performance of each one has to be evaluated in terms of meeting its particular avowed social objectives. How far the social business campaign can go in creating an impact on global capitalism will perhaps depend, to a large measure, on the resolution of these issues. Motivating the institutions and individuals with enough capital to embrace the idea is of course a more fundamental challenge.

The writer is a member of the UN Committee for Development Policy and is on the Board of Global Development Network.

While We Travel



KNOT SO TRUE
RUBANA HUQ

A few things are necessary when one travels: a reasonable, peaceful hotel, good shopping and food, fast transport, a quick guide to the list of must-see and must-do and of course, news from home. Your columnist has had 48 sleepless hours. In fact it feels like even longer, almost like 98. The children in the hotel corridor chanted their own hymns the whole night and dashed all chances of an uninterrupted slumber. Complaining didn’t help as the more than 50 percent of the hotel space was taken up by a huge group, who were traveling for a “huge” wedding to be held at the same venue. As luck would have it, we were only a minority. After all, money can buy most of what the world can offer. Including a dose of insomnia at the cost of another. While we travel, we essentially get drawn to shopping and it ends up forming part of our travel experience. This time, while the Bangali boys dressed in suits, trying to sell in many of the High Street shops, asked quietly, “Apni ki Dhaka-r?” (Are you from Dhaka?), the range of apparel presented on the floors was doubly a surprise. Prices in Europe have fallen drastically. Price tags with an unbelievable £32 for a jacket made in Myanmar looked like a potential nightmare to a Bangladesh apparel exporter. Suits were selling at £80, shoes for £20 et al. Prices looked like crashing by the day and at the end, left one wondering whether labour, in spite of the humane concerns, is becoming even cheaper. One would

have understood if this was the case of just one or two retailers, but the ground reality was that as most of us leave as happy shoppers, the labour forces, who make these clothes sitting next to our skin, are bleeding. So, somewhere down the line, there’s injustice at some level or the other. Very soon, a review of whether it’s the manufacturers or the retailers competing at the sharpest prices ever for business will again have to surface and

dawned on us. They were hopelessly out of touch with Bangladesh. Living away from their own homeland for over two decades, they had no interest in our development, challenges or news. That was the most shocking realisation of all. That they were clueless about home came as a shock as, most of us, by habit, stare at our telephone screens for “breaking news” from different sources in the country; as a habit, most of us



PHOTO: STAR

that prompts discussion, and stimulates small *addas* where many of us often air...ahhh... our views, without having to execute any of them. So what matters most is the content of the news. Absence of “real” news depresses us, appearance of “regular” news frustrates. So, we, by habit, subscribe to deaths and disappointments and we routinely go sniffing for sensational news in web, screen and print. While we travel, many of us look at the most scenic towns with cobbled roads, pretty cafes and the splash of green, and complain about our own hawkers, our own traffic, our own waste, our own billboards. At almost every opportunity, we habitually break into a conversation about why things won’t change in this country of ours. The discussion always boils down to one thing: mindsets. Apparently, changes can’t happen overnight and apparently, people would take a long time to change their habits. What would make things turn around for people? Inspiration. However, where is the voice to change things around? Where are the leaders who would inspire people to initiate and sustain positive changes in habits and practices and make people believe that civic virtue is constructed by strenuous citizenship? While we travel, with so much to be proud of, starting from the Bangali boys serving at the Selfridges, trying to sell high end products down to the ones in the Silicon Valley, starting from manufacturing down to saving people at high-risk zones of the world, it is worth admitting that no earth displaces us, no work humiliates, no challenges kill, and no rules stifle. We are everywhere. The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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NASA helping farmers

In January 2015, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) launched the Soil Moisture Active Passive satellite (SMAP), designed to collect data on soil moisture around the globe. Using microwave radar and radiometer instruments, the SMAP has started producing the highest-resolution and most accurate soil moisture maps on a global scale. Reviewing these maps and data, the farmers around the globe will get a clear understanding of soil moisture content which will help them to decide which crop to grow on which land. In addition, governments and international organisations can use the SMAP data to forecast floods and droughts more accurately and to improve the early-warning systems to predict famine. No doubt, SMAP is a great accomplishment of NASA. It is expected that the three-year SMAP project will develop a network to monitor SMAP data around the world and coordinate actions. The USAID may undertake a project to help the agro-based countries, including Bangladesh, improve their agricultural water management system. Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Roads or death traps?

In the post-Eid period of ten days, road accidents claimed 111 lives. During this time, buses remained crammed with passengers. Reckless driving, unfit vehicles, overloading, etc. are some of the reasons why road accidents occur so frequently. Again some roads are full of potholes which contribute to road accidents. Sometimes apprentices sit on the driver’s seat and they do not follow traffic rules. We hope the authorities concerned will do something to ensure road safety. Zabed Wali
Chittagong



PHOTO: STAR