

Japanese therapy and British diplomatic savvy

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

LAST week, a group of Japanese university students swept clean some busy dirt-filled street corners around Farmgate. They demonstrated a rare humility, dignity of labour and empathy for Dhaka dwellers' urban plight. It was a humbling, endearing and eye-opening experience for onlookers.

Michael Thomsett, a British-born American author, once said: "The trouble with true humility is that you can't talk about it". The Japanese students are not talking about their humility but we are.

Please note that the Japanese dogooders represent Tokyo, which is as populous as Dhaka but ranks as one of the toppers among the most livable cities in the world. So they have been eloquent ambassadors of cleanliness, needing no hymn of praise but of course a thousand followers to translate their symbolic act into feverish dynamism of our own.

Let's cite one extraordinary example of Japanese government's tangible support towards waste management in Dhaka. It gave city corporation 100 pink coloured dumpers mounted on trucks that crane out garbage and squeezes the water and sewage to place the treated stuff for onward disposal. This happens to be the only device connecting us to any semblance of scientific garbage management befitting 21st century. In other areas, it is an echo from antiquity, as it were!

Jawad Mubashawir, founder of the project named Clean Up Dhaka, aims with the foreign students to foster critical mass of public awareness and community

cooperation for waste management and cleanliness of the city. More foreign students are expected to visit Dhaka as part of the initiative that has just kicked in. That there is local brain behind the project means there is an ownership.

You can't outsource cleanliness; it has to be internally ensured and provided in a bottom-up process beginning with personal and family hygiene through community cooperation to state management via the city corporations.



A group of students from University of Japan was seen cleaning waste manually on the streets of Indira Road at Farmgate.

Perhaps we were waiting for a therapeutic application on the adrenaline glands for the city mayors to exert themselves to the formidable two-fold task: Scientific waste management and disposal topped by a radical improvement in the dire sanitary condition of the city. It is a shame that in both areas we languish in a primitive state. It is no less shameful that we do not see any human chain formed to lead the way for public resistance against living with garbage.

Dhaka city produces 5,000 tonnes of

solid waste per day. Of this, two-thirds are euphemistically said to be collected and disposed off! As much as one-third is left to poisonously intrude into the environment directly. There are two dump yards -- Matuail and Amin Bazar -- located widely apart. And between them all you see are big open bins occupying the narrow width of the roads belching toxicity.

Mayor Annisul Haq wishes to set up 50 transfer zones between the two major

make a livelihood out of the garbage on the sides. If large scale scientific recycling were undertaken it could employ thousands of youngsters with export potential thrown in, apart from producing biogas like China.

Two other sources of dangerous living are rooted in liquid industrial effluents and clinical wastes from hospitals. We never even have attempted to scientifically treat, decontaminate and dispose them of to keep the environment safe for healthy living.

These real concerns should occupy the attention of our leaders. For, we don't want Dhaka to echo John Gunther's description of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, "looking as if it has been dragged piecemeal from an aeroplane carrying rubbish."

Nor would we savour American architect and realtor Lloyd Wright's strange solution to a troubled city: "The only way to improve Pittsburgh would be to abandon it."

Those two cities have come a long way from their bleak days. Why can't we?

On the national plane, we have had an embalming waft of sophisticated British diplomacy from UK Minister of State for International Development Desmond Swayne. The gist of what he said rang out with a great meaning for our future. He maintained that Bangladesh, having successfully met the millennium development goals (MDGs), must now strive to attain sustained development goals (SDGs) in the next decade. For this, the country needs good governance and strong civil society, the British minister added. Good governance means upholding the rule of law and according protection to civil liberties. But the emphasis on 'strong civil society' is particularly noteworthy since a hope is being apparently pinned on this as a safeguard for democracy and progressive society.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

Kick Butt

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

ONCE we are done having our tea, we throw the ash of our cigarettes into the cup turned ash tray. There is one remedy to this bad habit -- serve tea in ash trays.

Somewhere along the line tea and tobacco became good friends. Hence it is part and parcel of the classic *adda*, more so when it's all about the camaraderie during the benign backbiting or the sinister conspiring.

We pick up smoking while barely in our double digits. Other than to impress, well, other guys, we are in a hurry to grow up and look older. And the wish comes true -- by the time we're thirty, we look sixty, thanks to the wrinkles.

We look cool as a cucumber while we cough and look manly as the Marlboro Man who is long dead from lung cancer.

As for myself, I just couldn't find the logic in spending money to buy something that warrants the fire truck to hose down my throat while having charcoal for lungs. Thank Heavens for my consumer ADHD (Attention Deficit in High Definition), for I never went past the nicotine addiction stage.

But whoever it was, was a genius (an evil one in retrospect), to latch on nicotine for market sustainability and customer loyalty. So, why not have the boys (and gals) start early and have loyalty turn into lifelong ('life' and 'long'? Oxymoron?) customers enrolled in frequent smoker programmes?

Hence the cultlike dedication -- strangers huddled inside a glass box called 'Smoking Zone' at airports, the silhouettes barely visible amidst the smoke. Onlookers (like zoo visitors) from outside almost expect that once (if at all) the smoke clears, Boney M would emerge with a disco beat. Pity these passengers on 17 hour trans Pacific flights, jittery to the point of taking a chance to walk on to the aircraft wing only for a smoke, if they can light it that is.

On the surface, they also risk it all. 'No smoking within 50 feet of building' means it's ok to smoke at 50.1 feet. Given that the sidewalk is just 10 feet wide, you're smoking smack in the middle of the busy street.

However, changes have come. Benson and Hedges World Cup Cricket sounds almost like a fairy tale. The tobacco industry is forced to pay for anti-smoking billboards sporting: "Kissing a smoker is like licking an ash tray..." I wonder how McDonalds would do if they said, "French fries can cause heart attacks."

Yet, profits soar. Even more so in developing countries where there is a grey line into being able to market below the belt, er, below the line (BTL).

To guard against this, the West checks IDs before selling tobacco products. But who are we kidding? Even the kids there come up with fake IDs. Genuine ID-ing would work here -- we wouldn't be able to smoke till we are grandparents. After all, we have two ages -- the real and the certificate age. Again, who are we kidding? It is the kid who is rolling the *bidi* for another kid to pick up the habit.

Is there a way to kick the habit? There are genuine attempts. And so grows the other industry -- the nicotine patch, electronic cigarette, and hey, chewing gum (not applicable to Singapore). The products sell, but truth be told, some quit and the majority go back to square one like a drop of blood turning a vegetarian shark into its original carnivore self. It's like the arms trade -- sell arms, have wars, then do reconstruction which is good business. And the cycle repeats.

The business, pretty darned lucky. The consumers, maybe not quite so... But at least, see if you can have a kick (cigarette) butt day. It may just be worth it...

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ELECTRONIC WASTE

Why should you care?

NAUREEN SHAFINAZ MAHBOOB and RASHNA RAYA RAHMAN

BANGLADESH has grown by around 6 percent per annum over the past decade and is expected to continue to grow at a similar rate over the next ten years. The country's ready-made garments industry is responsible for much of this growth, but economic forecasters predict that rising incomes and improvements to infrastructure and regulation will gradually encourage a move towards higher value sectors such as electronics assembly. In fact, the country's ICT sector is due to receive a significant boost in investment with the recent announcement to build a high-tech business park in Gazipur, a joint venture by Bangladesh's Summit Group and India's Infinity Infosys Parks.

But there is a flip side to this relentless technological progress. Rapid growth of the electronics industry and a high rate of obsolescence of the electronic products lead to the continuous generation of large quantities of e-waste. These waste products contain harmful chemicals like lead, cadmium, mercury, plastics, barium, beryllium, phosphorus and additives. In the absence of proper disposal or recycling facilities, these toxic materials create major health and environmental problems. A 2013 study conducted by the Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross International across more than 3,000 sites in over 49 countries identified the Agbobloshie e-waste dumping yard in Ghana's capital, Accra, as the place which poses the highest toxic threat to human life.

Guiyu, in Guangdong Province, China, is widely reported to be the largest e-waste site in the world. A June 2009 study on Guiyu residents concluded that children living in this region have dangerously elevated blood lead levels (BLL) and that there is heavy metal contamination on surface water and sediments, which can cause kidney problems, brain and liver

damage, weakened immune system and several neurological abnormalities.

In Dhaka, the informal sector controls the operations and processes of e-waste recycling. A survey was conducted and in-depth interviews around the city were taken aimed to understand and observe the key channel members of the unorganised trade and their current practices in places like Nimtoli, Dholaikhaal, Dholaipaar, Gulistan, Mirpur and Elephant Road. Large bulks of e-waste that are collected from households and offices are brought to these collection points by *bhangariwalas* (scrap collectors). Workers, including children, manually dismantle the electronic devices without any protective gear, using hazardous and unsafe methods of dismantling like open burning and acid treatment processes to recover metals. Components and parts, which cannot be processed further, are dumped in neighbourhoods or stored in electronic repair shops.

A separate limited random survey was conducted this year on 200 Dhaka city inhabitants from higher and middle-income groups to understand the knowledge, awareness levels and practices of this segment of the population regarding e-waste and its impact on the environment. The study revealed that over 60 percent of the respondents were not aware of the term e-waste and the threats it poses. The results also showed that at least one electronic equipment was purchased by one of the members of the household within a timespan of every six to twelve months for at least one of these three reasons: technology available at an affordable price, product technical failure and keeping up with the latest trends.

In terms of disposal, respondents disclosed that large non-working electronic products are either stored in their homes or sold to e-waste collectors. Smaller ones are primarily handed down to relatives or dumped in trash bins. When asked what are

the factors they consider most strongly before disposing of an electronic product, about 80 percent of the respondents stated that it was convenience for disposal and best exchange offer. Consequently, after revealing a few facts about e-waste and its direct negative impact on our environment and health, over 65 percent of the respondents stated that they would take additional pains to safely dispose of the electronic waste regardless of the price they will get in exchange of the product.

The laws in countries like Japan and South Korea use the principles of Polluter Pays Principle (PPP) and Extender Producer Responsibility (EPR), in some cases using fiscal space such as Advanced Recycling Fee (ARF), to establish a system of accountability among relevant stakeholders in the electronic goods industry. All parties - consumers, manufacturers, recyclers, local and federal government - have prescribed responsibilities to ensure the proper disposal and recycling of unusable electronic products. The key to making such a multi-stakeholder system work is to build awareness among all players.

The Bangladesh government, through its Department of Environment, is currently working to establish a set of rules to address e-waste management in the country. This is an important first step in awareness building as it formalises a previously unorganised sector. India's Ministry of Communications and IT launched an Awareness Programme on Environmental Hazards of Electronic Waste under Digital India Initiative, which aims to use different mediums of communication (workshops, seminars, print and digital media etc.) to create public awareness on the ill-effects associated with e-waste. Sri Lankan government's Central Environmental Authority (CEA) declared an awareness campaign titled National E-waste Management Week

that kickstarted in 2014. The regulatory arm intends to collect huge quantities of waste electrical and electronic devices during the one-week campaign and concurrently build awareness.

The government plays a crucial role in implementing mass public education programmes. The government, NGOs and the private sector have formed interesting collaborations in both India and Sri Lanka to drive change and create awareness. Attero, India's largest e-waste management company, in partnership with IFC, a World Bank entity, has launched several e-waste awareness programmes and collection drives to keep electronic waste out of landfills and promote safe recycling. As a part of this initiative, Attero will be training the informal sector and will use the existing scrap pickers to collect e-waste from consumers. Since its inception in 2014, around 14 electronics companies in Sri Lanka, such as Singer, Mobitel and Hutch, have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government.

The survey of Dhaka residents revealed that ordinary citizens, as consumers of electronic goods, are not adequately informed about the ill-effects of e-waste. Informal sectors workers, who regularly handle e-waste, are also ignorant of their own diminishing health from repeated exposure to hazardous substances. Without the pressure created by informed workers and conscientious consumers, and in the absence of government regulations, producers of electronic goods have little to no incentive to manage their products at its end of life. The situation in Bangladesh may not be as grim as that of China or Ghana, but working to build awareness among the different stakeholders is an effective step towards the safe management of an impending crisis.

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The writers are Project Manager, EHS Business Solutions and Director (Governance and Environment), 5R Associates, respectively.

QUOTABLE Quote

Saul Bellow

A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Deep singers
6 Church areas
11 Jellied dish
12 Blue Grotto setting
13 Flat fish
14 Use the gym
15 In the buff
17 Taverns
18 Impertinent
20 Writer Morrison
22 -- Angeles
23 Rap style
26 Despire
28 Theater worker
29 Treasure-hunting kids in a 1985 Movie
31 Put away
32 Citi Field team
33 Refinery rocks
34 Stagger
36 Salon job
38 Showy display
40 Let up
43 Concert spot
44 Kind of pool
45 Toned down
46 Unadorned

DOWN

1 -- relief
2 Demand
3 Brunch choice
4 Crunch kin
5 Tea type
6 Drama division
7 Some kitchen waste
8 Threat to England in 1588
9 The Emerald Isle
10 Moral no-nos
16 Seventh letter
18 Golf hole marker
19 Timber wolf
21 Burden
23 Fortitude
24 Henri's head
25 Warring god
27 Like some rural bridges
30 Sixth sense, briefly
33 Satellite path
34 Paper pack
35 Oatmeal shade
37 Diner chow
39 Wee bit
41 Old salt
42 Caribou's cousin

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

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