

Brahmanbaria mayhem

Why destroy public property?

THE mayhem that took place on Tuesday in Brahmanbaria over the death of a madrasa student is of grave concern to us. The student in question seems to have died of injuries sustained during clashes between traders, police and madrasa students. It is unthinkable that an argument over the sale of a mobile phone could erupt into a full scale battle that led to an individual's death and injuries to many others, as well as the destruction of various establishments including a cultural centre, a bank and railway station. The vandals also removed fishplates from the tracks causing immense disruptions in the train schedules. It took four platoons of BGB, 100 rounds of rubber bullets and teargas shells to bring the situation under control.

We condemn the indiscriminate destruction of public and private property in the name of protest. It is reprehensible that the violence was egged on by posts in social media by political parties and their wings. While it is understandable that the death of a fellow student would evoke outrage, there is no excuse for anyone to take the law into their own hands and unleash such terror on a town and its residents. It appears that the students were bent on destruction rather than seeking justice. Acts of vandalism under any pretext cannot be tolerated and have to be handled with stringent measures.

At the same time there is no question that the circumstances under which the madrasa student died have to be revealed. It is encouraging that a probe body of the police has been formed and two officers involved in the incidents have been withdrawn. A thorough, swift investigation is in order and the person(s) responsible must be brought to book.

Address railway's systemic problems

We urge the PM to lead the reform process

BANGLADESH railway's annual loss currently stands at Tk 900 crore. A parliamentary body has endorsed the raising of fares in a bid to counter some of that loss. As we understand it, the revised fare chart will increase the railway's coffers by about Tk 45 crore, or to put it in other words, reduce the loss by 5 per cent. The fact of the matter is the service is plagued by major problems which have been allowed to fester over decades and now the losses have burgeoned into a major financial worry for policymakers. Although revising fares is a rational first step, we believe that unless some tough decisions are taken to revamp the service, positive results cannot be expected.

The problems are multifarious; passengers travelling without tickets, high fuel prices, graft and mismanagement have eaten away at both profitability and reduced the quality of travel and overall service. It is with dismay we see that many of the projects undertaken over the years have been stumbling along, missing deadlines and failing to deliver.

A robust railway system could play a crucial service in economic development. Freight service can carry bulk goods over long distances at affordable prices. Timely passenger trains could go a long way in alleviating the population pressure of Dhaka, as people would prefer to come to the city for work and then leave, as is the case in neighbouring India's Kolkata. All this requires pragmatic steps to address systemic problems our railway faces and we hope authorities will take into account the economic benefits of such measures. An inter-ministerial body can be formed under the Prime Minister's leadership for an immediate, comprehensive rebirth.

SHAFIQUK ISLAM

IN 1976, a book titled "Bangladesh: The Test Case of Development" drew significant attention and the hopeless implications of the title got stuck ever since; most likely, in response to Henry Kissinger's infamous reference to Bangladesh as a "bottomless basket". The book was titled not as "a" but "the" test case for development.

In other words, if "development" would work in Bangladesh, it would work everywhere.

In the 1970s "development" meant foreign capital, foreign aid and foreign know-how. At that time, many feared Bangladesh would not survive as an independent nation. One famine, at least five military coups, four catastrophic floods, and several disastrous cyclones later, where is Bangladesh now?

It has not only survived, but prospered despite the hopeless predictions of 1970s. How did this happen? What makes Bangladesh no longer a test case - but a model - for development, ingenuity and resilience?

A MODEL FOR DEVELOPMENT

In the last 40 years, Bangladesh has made extraordinary improvements in almost every indicator of social development. It met almost all the Millennium Development Goals. The country has made remarkable progress in poverty alleviation, primary school enrolment, gender parity in primary and secondary level education, lowering the infant and under-five mortality rate and maternal mortality ratio, improving immunisation coverage and reducing the incidence of communicable diseases.

A Bangladeshi can now expect to live four years longer than an Indian, though Indians are twice as wealthy. It has made huge gains in education and health. In 2005, more than 90 percent of girls were enrolled in primary school, which was twice the female enrolment rate in 2000. Infant mortality has more than halved from 1990 to 2010.

A MODEL FOR INGENUITY

Unlike China's one-child policy or India's forced sterilisation in 1970s, Bangladesh adopted a culturally sensitive and ingenious approach to tackle population growth. Birth control was made free and government and non-governmental workers fanned out across the country to distribute pills and advice. While in 1975 only 8 percent of women were using contraception, by 2010 the number was over 60 percent. Bangladesh has shown one of the steepest declines in fertility rate (the average number of children a woman can expect to have during her lifetime) of 6.3 in 1975 to about 2.2 which is slightly above the "replacement level" at which the population stabilizes in the long term.

Between 1970 and 2010, Bangladesh has more than tripled its rice production - by creatively supplementing traditional rain-fed aman rice with irrigated boro-rice in the winter - although the area under cultivation increased by less than 10 percent. Despite several global food-price spikes, many disastrous cyclones and floods, it has not experienced famine since 1976 and exported 50,000 Metric Tons of rice to Sri Lanka in 2014.

Due to increased urbanisation most developing

A model, not a test case

countries have seen a reduction in rural living standards and a resultant increase in extreme poverty. Bangladesh is an exception here. Ingenious Bangladeshi villagers found actionable solutions within the constraints they have. Homogeneity of language, culture, and religion has proven helpful for NGOs to scale up development efforts. What worked in one village is likely to work in the next village and the next village is not far away. Another contributor to development in rural Bangladesh is the massive migration of over six million Bangladeshis - mostly male - to foreign countries. They send a large portion of their income to their families and relatives in villages. In 2014, they sent over \$14 billion. By some calculations, remittances exceed net aid by a factor of 20: a remarkable success for the "bottomless basket" of 1970s. Yet, whether this glowing success indicator is contributing to an apparently hidden - but potentially problematic - social change related to "absent groom" and "runaway bride" in villages remains to be seen.

A MODEL FOR RESILIENCE

The cyclone of 1970 was estimated to have killed over half a million people in Bangladesh while the 2007 cyclone Sidr was more powerful, but killed only one hundredth as many. This pragmatic response to natural disaster shows how effectively Bangladesh has learned and adapted through careful planning and effective implementation of cyclone shelters and early warning systems.

In 1970s, in many developing countries, diarrhea was one of the leading causes of childhood mortality. Many solutions were possible to combat this global problem. Several national and international governmental and non-governmental organisations started working together and developed an extraordinary actionable solution - oral rehydration therapy (ORT) - consisting of sugar, salt, and water to save lives of millions. The

development of ORT is considered by many as a magic bullet that has saved more lives than any other medical discovery of our time. The simplicity of ORT and BRAC's implementation strategy to popularise and spread its use made a significant drop in diarrhea related mortality actionable.

BANGLADESH'S MODEL IS NOT AN ORPHAN

Not surprisingly, different groups will fight over who and what is responsible for the successes of Bangladesh. Key contenders include the government, politicians, army, international community, and the NGOs. Success usually has many parents and an independent 'paternity test' for this remarkable story would be difficult and may not be necessary or even helpful. Despite dysfunctional institutions, level of poverty, and widespread corruption, Bangladesh has achieved progress in many social development indicators by creating social awareness and implementing context specific actionable solutions. Many are somewhat surprised by this success and rightfully skeptical about its sustainability because of fragile governance structure, inadequate long-term planning, and uncertainty imposed by changing climate and sea-level rise.

Now, instead of looking for the parent for this story of success or surprise, we should ask: What made this success possible? What will it take to make this sustainable? How to tell this story and engage the world to promote Bangladesh Brand of Ingenuity and spread this recipe for success to other developing nations?

Please share possible to actionable ideas to thinkanddo@shafikislam.com that we can discuss and create a network of partners to address these societal problems in actionable ways.

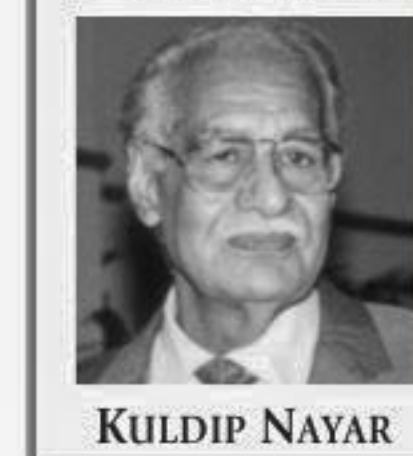
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PHOTO: STAR

The question of tolerance

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

I am not a film buff. But I do watch movies by actors like Aamir Khan because he appears to be a natural actor. Such actors make me feel as if I am not seeing a film but reliving my life. I must

admit that I did not like Aamir Khan's remark at the Tarkunde annual lecture about his wife often asking him whether they should migrate to some other country. Subsequently, he apologised and closed an ugly controversy.

But the Narendra Modi government has once again revived the controversy by not reviewing his tenure as the brand ambassador for Incredible India to promote tourism. What message the BJP is sending is beyond my comprehension. But it is clear that the ruling party was punishing him for having made the remark.

I was present at the function because I was conferred a lifetime achievement award there. Aamir Khan's remarks looked odd but were not offensive. His despondency that tolerance, of late, had been pushed into the background was in tune with what was happening in the country. But there was nothing which would hurt one's sensibilities.

Apparently, the Modi government did not forget and forgive his remarks and his tenure was not renewed. This did raise eyebrows and the liberals even questioned the government because they did not want to make it an issue. Yet, there is no doubt that the

Modi government has punished him, as they never explained why the tenure, a routine matter, was not extended.

This does raise question about the credentials of the Modi government. It pacified the minorities by saying, "Sab ka saath, sab ka vikas," but apparently it is driven by the extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Even Prashar Bharti, otherwise an autonomous body, had to allow RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat the use of its radio network to broadcast his points of view. This happened for the first time after independence.

The Modi government does not realise that it is probably legally correct but morally wrong. The minorities which already suspect the government for being pro-Hindutva are terrified and feel that they are treated as second-class citizens in a country where the Constitution guarantees equality before law.

The appointments which the BJP government are making smack of parochialism. Students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, have been able to block some pro-RSS academics getting top positions there. But otherwise, the message the Modi government seems to be sending across is that even academic institutions are no longer autonomous but are under the clutches of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD).

The Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune has not been functioning for over a year now because RSS pracharak Gajendra Chauhan was appointed its chairman. Chauhan, who is a TV actor, was preferred over more eligible people. The Modi government refuses to budge, even after some leading cine stars pointed out to them that they were in the wrong.

Another glaring example was that of Pankaj Nihalani, who was appointed the chief of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). Nobody doubts his credentials as a good filmmaker but, at the same time, no one can ignore his RSS connections. Ever since he became the chairperson of CBFC, there has been a lot of criticism of saffronisation of the institution. But fortunately, the mounting pressure on the government has worked, and Nihalani has been replaced by the impeccable Shyam Benegal. However, the government has not yet relented in the case of the Pune film institute.

I concede that Aamir Khan should not have made the remark when he was still the brand ambassador for the government's Incredible India campaign. He should have resigned before taking the stance. In fact, I was surprised when he accepted the position in the first place. He knew what the Modi government stood for and how the RSS has the run of the government.

But the most grievous cut is the acceptance of the position by Amitabh Bachchan. It is known that he tends to take a pro-establishment stance, whichever government is in power. He contested from the Allahabad Lok Sabha seat as a Congress candidate. Since then, he has not taken any stand and gone along with any Prime Minister in power, whether from the Congress or the BJP. He only knows which side of the bread is buttered.

Incidentally, Bachchan was Gujarat's brand ambassador when Modi was the chief minister. Had he refused the position because of Aamir Khan's forced exit, Bachchan would have given the message that when it came to principles, he would not compromise. But then what I am

seeking in him is actually not there.

Take the case of his wife, Jaya Bachchan who was nominated twice to the Rajya Sabha by the Samajwadi Party's Mulayam Singh. In fact, the party wanted her to contest the Lok Sabha 2014 seat, but after her refusal to do so, Mulayam Singh still accommodated and nominated her as the Rajya Sabha member for a second term. All these point to the fact that Amitabh is clever enough to gain from the political situation. He does seem to be bothered about how Aamir Khan was unceremoniously ousted of the campaign for his bold comments on BJP's parochialism.

There is a lesson in it for the nation to learn. A secular, democratic country has to give space to everyone, including critics. Unlike Pakistan, which is an Islamic state, India is pluralistic where freedom of expression is guaranteed and minorities have every right to express themselves. It is a pity that people like Asaduddin Owaisi are misusing the rights of free speech to widen the gulf between Hindus and Muslims.

The ball is in BJP's court. The party has to create a climate of tolerance. Even a person like me feels that the nation is being "Hinduised" and taken away from the path of pluralism. This is not India's ethos nor does our Constitution permit it. The struggle for independence was not only against the British but also against the communal division created during their 150-year rule. We have to create an atmosphere where Aamir Khans are not forced to make remarks that reflect the pains of the minority communities of the country.

The writer is an eminent columnist.

COMMENTS

"Islamic State member executes his mother in Syria"

(January 9, 2016)

Shahin Chowdhury

Islam does not condone killing parents and it is not acceptable in Islam. It is hateful.

Sizzling Safa

IS is the enemy of Islam.

Saidur Rahman

IS is not an Islamic group. It is an occupation force like Israel.

"North Korea H-bomb test worries Dhaka"

(January 8, 2016)

Adnan R. Amin

Condemning only North Korea but not other countries with nuclear power is a double standard.

SamSia Sifat

It's not a double standard; it's just a foreign policy strategy.

Himel Hossain

In diplomacy there is no such thing as a 'double standard'. You just act the way that best serves your interest.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters@thedailystar.net

Free textbooks for students

The government distributed free textbooks to students on the first day of the year. Children going to schools, holding new textbooks—what a wonderful thing! It was indeed a big challenge to distribute so many books but needless to say this is a great achievement for the government. Zabed Wali Chittagong



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Exploring global organic food market

I fully support Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's suggestion of exporting organic foods as there is huge demand for it in the global market ("PM for exploiting global organic food market," TDS, Jan 8, 2016). People all over the world are getting more conscious about food crops produced through application of hazardous chemical fertilizers and genetically modified (GM) planting materials.

There is great scope for producing

organic crops in our country and exporting the organic produces to neighbouring countries and the Middle East, Europe and America. It's true that the present government has adopted a number of measures to modernise agriculture and to boost crop production. In order to ensure easy access of our organic agricultural products to the global market, the government needs to facilitate air-cargo spaces and insurance for exportable organic food items. Professor M Zahidul Haque Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka