

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## Increasing violence by the police Immediate intervention necessary

The tragic death of Babul Matabbar, a tea vendor, who suffered severe burns in a murky incident involving the police and died subsequently, moves the conscience of the nation, but unsurprisingly, not the administration.

At around 9:30 pm on Wednesday, the 45-year-old fell on a kerosene stove after being pushed allegedly by a police informant accompanied by some policemen who came to pick him up from his roadside stall in Mirpur. While his wife tried to save him, she was reportedly beaten with a baton. And when his son was desperately trying to get his father to a hospital, the posse of policemen simply left.

Such acts of mindless violence by the law enforcement agencies are becoming disturbingly common, hurting the country's moral standing in the world. The National Human Rights Commission chairman, after the incident, commented that the audacity of the police had crossed all limits.

Incidents like this may lead to citizens' distrust of the enforcers of the law, eroding a fundamental social contract. The government must realise how capricious and violent their law-enforcement system is becoming day by day. Changing it will be hard; but change is long overdue. Police brutality has complex origins, but quite a lot of them may be susceptible to structural reform, which we have reiterated time and again.

"Suspending" officials and forming committees to "probe the matter" is hardly enough at this stage. Transparency and accountability trickle down from the top and that's where we look today for intervention.

## Ancient railway bridges dangerous Comprehensive repair plan needed

THE Sylhet-Kulaura-Akhaura railway route is 177km long and has some 250 large and small bridges, many of which were constructed as long as 70 years ago. Interestingly, not one of them has been reconstructed since then and many are facing decay with time. Given that these bridges were constructed in surroundings that are somewhat inhospitable, i.e. over hilly terrains and over rivers, their upkeep is of utmost importance as trains plying this route carry hundreds of passengers on a daily basis. Sadly, many have turned hazardous due to a lack of proper maintenance. We are fortunate that no major accident has happened recently, but that does not mean things can be allowed to stand as they are.

We are told by railway authorities that the foundations of some bridges have been weakened due to indiscriminate removal of sand from river banks and that cracks have begun to appear on some of the foundations of certain bridges. Often train services are suspended for long hours as emergency repairs are done.

All this points to a scenario that is becoming more and more unsustainable with each passing day. We dread to think of the consequences should a train derail on a faulty bridge. The factors contributing to the vulnerability of the structures need to be countered to avert any accident. It is high time that Bangladesh

### STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

IT'S unbelievable but true. Some people still believe Bangladesh needs "development" first, before its transition to democracy! Mozammel Khan in a recent posting, "Development and Democracy: Time to look to the East" (DS, Feb 2, 2016), has argued that Bangladesh needs a Lee Kuan Yew or Mahathir Mohamad to become as developed as Singapore or Malaysia. Although an academic and a human rights activist in Canada, Mozammel Khan's arguments are very similar to what Ayub Khan and Sukarno put forward in defence of "guided democracy" or dictatorship in the 1950s and 1960s.

Setting aside my differences of opinion with Mozammel Khan's (who's an old family friend) rosy picture about the state of economy in Bangladesh, I concentrate here on the main premise of his article, which argues: "... it is probably the time that the country looks to the East for guidance, where development has taken priority over liberal democracy as practiced in the West. A case in this could be either Malaysia or Singapore - both of these countries have achieved exemplary growth over the last 50 years".

I believe no country anywhere in the world should trade human rights, human dignity, democracy, and above all, freedom, for so-called development. I'm not going into the polemics of development and underdevelopment, which Andre Gunder Frank, Hamza Alavi, and Immanuel Wallerstein - among many other social scientists - have already resolved in the 1970s.

Their shattering the myth of development under colonialism and post-colonial surrogate states of global capitalism is enlightening. I think those still enamoured by some so-called success stories of development, in countries like Singapore and Malaysia, should re-appraise Gunder Frank's "development of underdevelopment"; Wallerstein's "anti-systemic movements" theses; and Alavi's "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh".

For ten years, I taught modern Asian and Middle Eastern history at the National University of Singapore. The immaculately clean, organised, and disciplined city state with almost corruption-free governance; excellent law and order situation; affordable food, public housing, healthcare, education, and metro rail; and home to the "best airline" and "best airport" in the world failed to delude me into thinking that I was living in a "developed" country. Singapore isn't another Japan, Australia, New Zealand, or any country in West Europe or North America with regard to development.

Thanks to the draconian Internal Security Act, anybody in Singapore and Malaysia can be put behind bars without trial for an indefinite period. The exploitation of cheap foreign and domestic workers, not-so-hidden poverty, and the lack of respect for democracy, human rights and human dignity make it easy to draw a parallel between Singapore/Malaysia and the oil rich Arab autocracies in the Persian Gulf. They aren't developed countries, let alone role models for Bangladesh.

Mahathir's rule was as dictatorial as that of Lee Kuan Yew's. As one writer elaborates: "... his [Mahathir's] accumulation of power came at the expense of the independence of the judiciary and the traditional powers and privileges of Malaysia's royalty. He deployed the controversial Internal Security Act to detain activists, non-mainstream religious figures, and political opponents including the Deputy Prime Minister he fired in 1998, Anwar Ibrahim".

As quoted by Dr Khan, nothing could be more unsubstantial than Lee Kuan Yew's perception of democracy and development. Lee thought, "democracy leads to undisciplined and disorderly conditions which are inimical to development", and asserted in the manner of another Sukarno or Ayub Khan:

*The ultimate test of the value of a political system is whether it helps that society to establish conditions, which improve the standard of living for the majority of its people. Democracy is one way of getting the job done, but if controlled electoral procedures are more conducive to the attainment of valued ends, then I'm against liberal democracy. Nothing is morally at stake in the choice of procedures.... Democratic procedures have no intrinsic value. What matters is good government [italics mine].*

Both Lee and Mahathir believed "Asian values" were different from (and superior to) "Western values", in every sphere of life, including governance. The premise of "development-before-democracy" is an alibi for dictatorship, a fig leaf of autocrats' unquenchable thirst for glory and power.

We can't, however, define "development" by the number of tall buildings and flyovers, the length of paved roads, mass rapid transit networks, and the number of flashy cars in a given country. Development is all about the development of our mind and culture. In developed countries, people are free to think and express their

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opinion without any fear of intimidation; governments respect human rights, and guarantee equal opportunities to all, irrespective of race, religion, gender and age. And only true democracy protects human rights by ensuring the rule of law and equal opportunity.

Today - more than a quarter century after the end of the Cold War - those who still think there's nothing so special about democracy, and civil/military autocrats are as legitimate as elected governments, simply don't know that the wind of change - for democracy and freedom - is getting stronger, even in parts of the Arab World. One domino

will fall after another, everywhere, including Singapore and Malaysia. It's too late to revive the "good old days" of Lee and Mahathir anywhere, including Bangladesh. Nobody can sustain Marx's proverbial "Oriental Despotism" that existed in the past - and that still exists in countries like Myanmar and North Korea.

However, the theory that justified "controlled democracy" or absolute dictatorship - both in pro-Western and anti-Western dictatorships during the Cold War years - is fast losing altitude. A couple of them have already crash landed in Indonesia, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, and many more are struggling to remain afloat. While Moscow and Beijing are still backing their rogue client states, Washington and its allies are fast withdrawing support from their erstwhile client states.

Liberal democracy is not an impediment to development, but democracy is development; it's the epitome of human achievement and development, it's the "End of History". Liberal democracy is the most powerful weapon against terrorism. Leading counterterrorism experts believe that denial of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and human dignity are the main factors behind the rise of terrorism, Islamofascism, and anarchy in the Muslim World. Turbulent Bangladesh no longer can afford to wait for the elusive "development" before it becomes a fully-fledged liberal democracy.

Last but not least, the Pakistani military regime's refusal to respect the overwhelming majority Bangalis' democratic rights to choose their leader triggered the Liberation War in 1971. Since democracy was the *raison d'être* for Bangladesh, one wonders why the country should follow Lee, Mahathir, or other proponents of "controlled democracy" or dictatorship instead of its own founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who fought for the democratic rights of his people, and refused to compromise with the Pakistani military junta. Had Mujib compromised with Yahya and Bhutto by dishonouring his people's democratic aspirations, possibly our history would have been very different - nothing to be proud of or celebrate.

The writer teaches security studies at Austin Peay State University. He is the author of several books, including *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan* (Sage, 2014).

# The tale of "Rahmat Ali"

MIZANUR RAHMAN KHAN

I am sharing this story on occasion of Amir-ul-Islam's 80th birthday, which took place on February 2. Arun Bhattacharjee, author of a 1973 Vikas publication, *Dateline Mujibnagar*, wrote that "the two arrived at a well-guarded guesthouse at about midnight to be received by the senior most officer of the Border Security Force (BSF). The older one of the two strangers was identified as Mohammad Ali and the younger one as Rahmat Ali."

The date was March 30, 1971. The place was Kushtia-Nadia border. It was, indeed, the maiden 'state visit' of two Alis to a foreign country as a representative of a new-born nation.

'Mohammad Ali' was Tajuddin Ahmad and 'Rahmat Ali' was Amir-ul-Islam, aide to Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad. Though no ceremonial red carpet was rolled out for our Prime Minister and his 34-year-old aide, they were greeted "in a lantern light under a tree" at Changrakhalī BOP at the border of Chuadanga by a senior BSF official namely Golok Majumder and Col. Chakrobarty of the 76 Battalion.

The aforementioned narratives have been borrowed from the diary of KF Rustamji, founder DG of BSF, who was known as a shadow of Nehru and a close family friend of the Gandhis. He was the man who first established a link between our first visitors and Indira Gandhi.

The six-foot tall Rustamji jokingly recalled, "I gave them (two Alis) my *kurta* and pyjama to change into after having a bath. Golok made an omelette for them."

On April 1, Rustamji recalled, he and Golok went to New Market and bought clothes (including undergarments) and other accessories, such as suitcases and toiletries, for their guests. Golok remarked, "Sir, we're equipping them as if we are sending our daughter to her husband's house." Golok had used the word '*shashurbari*', as Amir fondly remembers.

Amir, who has devoted his whole life to upholding the law, made the first draft of a writ challenging the legality of his own arrest at the age of 18. He began his career as a junior of Denis Nowell Pritt, a Labour politician and lawyer, who was considered an "underground communist" by George Orwell. A few years later, Amir associated himself with a London-based study group, *Purboshuri*, which published an article called "Unhappy East Pakistan" that reflected on the

quest for freedom. As the first Bangali president (defeating Faruk leghari who later became President of Pakistan) of London-based Pakistan Student Federation, he developed a personal friendship with West Pakistani intellectuals (such as economist Hamza Alvi and Shafqat Ullah Qadri QC) along with British MPs like Peter Shore and John Stonehouse who later gave their support to our Liberation War.

He returned to Dhaka in 1963. He came in close contact with Suhrawardy and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

letter from Ayub Khan which asked him to dissuade the 'bad hats' from indulging in anti-state activities, a letter that he neither responded to nor acknowledged.

Amir has tried his best to jealously guard his *Ameeriship* throughout his chequered career especially in our struggle for freedom.

He won his first legal battle challenging the expulsion of DU students (Minister Rashed Khan Menon and two late High Court judges were among the expelled), which re-established the age old maxim -

adopt the unitary-form based on large concentration of power, giving up the federal structure that had been a demand in the historic 6-point charter. Thus Amir devised a new chapter "Local Government" by incorporating Articles 59 and 60 in the Constitution of 1972 for the sake of decentralisation. This scheme had no other comparison in the region or any other commonwealth countries.

If we sum up his anti-militaristic venture from the Agartala conspiracy case to the 5th amendment case, we can reach the conclusion that he is a



Barrister Amir-ul-Islam speaking to freedom fighters at Shikarpur, 1971.

Rahman during the United Front elections of 1954. Upon his return from London, Mujib then asked him to help him reenergise the party. He was instrumental in unearthing the Agartala conspiracy by initiating a baffling torture case, when no one knew about this. He passed the message to Bangabandhu and to his contacts in London and acted promptly to defend the accused by engaging Tom Williams QC to lead the defence team.

While in imprisonment (for two years), he refused to give a bond as proposed by the government to his father. Even when he lost his citizenship for engaging in the anti-Ayub movement, he refused the offer to get a British passport. In 1962, he received a

principles of natural justice - in this part of the world.

One of our leading framers of the Constitution, he single-handedly drafted Article 11 that defines democracy as 'respect for the dignity'. He envisioned an administration that, from top to bottom, would be run only by people's representatives under all circumstances. It was his dream to administer some core state affairs such as regulating public officials, controlling public order and turning Bangladesh's 'administrative units' into autonomous bodies. "I meant to make the districts & thanas into 'little republics'," he once told me. It was, indeed, a compromise to

torchbearer of establishing elected regimes committed to "human dignity and social justice" (as he brilliantly coined in our proclamation of independence). He believes in political dissent and abstained from a parliamentary meeting regarding the second amendment that introduced emergency laws. He was reminded of the prohibition of Article 70 but he politely defended his position to Bangabandhu and he was exonerated.

Now it is the duty of the new generation to make a fresh oath to realise the unfulfilled dreams of Amir-ul-Islam. I wish him a longer life and good health.

The writer is Joint Editor of Prothom Alo.

## COMMENTS

### "Caravan for tigers hits the road" (February 4, 2016)

Zahid Adrian

Good decision! Bangladesh is learning from its neighbour although it is a bit late.

### "WHO asks SE Asia for preventive action" (February 3, 2016)

Afreen Azhari

Yes, we, the people demand it too. The governments should immediately start destroying mosquito-breeding grounds in every city. Prevention is better than cure.

Sabbir Hossain

Bangladesh government should immediately take necessary steps to prevent Zika virus.

Neela Haq

The media can play an important role by creating public awareness.

### "Sexual abuse: Court orders judicial probe into SI's role" (February 2, 2016)

Ramim Ahsan

People are getting harassed every day by the police! And what exactly is the government doing about it?