A Democracy of Crisis

THE MIDDLE PATH

ADNAN R AMIN

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MODERN society and citizen life are characterised and contextualised by infinite crises. Like TV programming or adhan (call to prayers) gives structure to one's days, these crises gives shape to our years, dividing 365 days into bite-size chunks of relief between crimes, accidents and disasters. The best examples of this phenomenon are major wars and conflicts, which typically slice time into 'pre' and 'post' event segments. The power of crises in contextualising thought and discourse has probably never been more evident than in the case of the 9/11 terror attacks. Today, issues ranging from bombing of Syria to airport security, from suspicion of halal food to development agency contracts are influenced by those fateful attacks. Every second opinion piece seems to suggest there was no geopolitics or history before September 2001.

Simply speaking, a 'crisis' is a time of difficulty that necessitates tough decisions. And slowly but surely, crises have become woven into the fabric of the global society. Think about the world we live in: it is characterised by millennium-long West vs. East conflicts (regardless of whether sophisticated thinkers eschew such simplistic categorisations or not); capitalist vs. socialist conflicts; superpower vs. weaker neighbour conflicts; occupier vs. resistance conflicts; nationalist vs. minority conflicts; security state vs. activist conflicts and power elite vs. citizen conflicts.

Now, think about the infinite crises that have arisen out these conflict patterns: nuclear crisis, crisis of the welfare state, crisis of propped up dictatorships, oil crisis, global warming crisis, crisis of terrorism, human rights crisis, financial crises, ageing population crisis, Iran nuclear crisis, crisis of free speech, crisis in Crimea, crisis of ISIS, crisis of entrapment, European refugee crises, crisis of conscience, Oscar diversity crisis – the list is inexhaustible! It would seem that we are at the most contentious and violent point in our race's history.

Yet, all evidence suggests that life on earth is rapidly improving. There were less than 20 democracies in 1946. Now there are more than a hundred. Conflict and casualties have decreased significantly. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker writes, "The decline of violence may be the most significant and least appreciated development in the history of our species." Before the era of nation states, conflicts killed over 500 out of every 100,000 people. In 19th century France, the number was down to 70. In the 20th century – featuring two world wars and several documented genocides – the casualty figure was 60. Today, battlefield deaths are down to three-tenths of a person per 100,000.

Statistically, murder, rape and discrimination are on a downward trajectory. Pinker attributes this decline to a more intelligent human race. To make his case, Pinker notes that a young person with an IQ of 100 today would have notched up 130 in 1910. Our measuring standard for intelligence has risen steadily.

So it's natural to ask: if things are really getting better, why does one get the feeling that we are inundated with crises? Let us look at some evidence: if we were to randomly skim news headlines (from the DS for example) from the first day of every month in 2015, this is what we would find: state of human rights alarming, thirteen killed in Styrofoam factory, scary recovery (of explosives), birthday party turns bloody, chaos over mobile court (traders shot), IS operative held in Dhaka, cops create bribe fund, (cyclone) Komen scare, beyond the call of duty (police rescue), PM urges global unity against terrorism, BNP-Jamaat carrying out secret killings and Pakistan denies war crimes. Readers may note that there is one positive front-page news item in that list.

Intuitively, we see that mass media has a role in creating a feeling of constant crises. But the questions still remain: do readers' preference of negative news prompt journalists to focus on crises? Or does the pattern of negative reporting shape readers' choices? Or are there larger, institutional forces that define and leverage crises?

Psychologists have suggested that humans have a natural preference for negative news, the public experience of which they enjoy via mass media. The reason is not necessarily 'schadenfreude' or secret pleasure derived out of other people's misery. The preference stems from a neural cautionary-mechanism. Others suggest that people prefer to hear of a disaster first, and then a positive story-arch that talks about relief, rescue or resilience. This reinforces the notion that 'things are getting better'.

A McGill University research (Trussler & Soroka) revealed that given the freedom, people chose negative or depressing news to read: corruption, hypocrisy, crime etc. But when asked, they claimed to prefer positive news. A 2014 Pew Research Centre study of American news for example reveals static sets of public preferences. The first is 'war and terrorism', distantly followed by 'natural and manmade disasters'. 'Money news' is gaining fast, while 'crime, health and politics' remain moderate-interest items. The most important takeaway from the study – one likely to apply to the Bangladeshi case as well – is that "the national news audience does not shift its news diet nearly so quickly as news organisations shift their news menu." The interest in negativity is quite stable.

Propagation of crises is faster too. Dr. Emilio Ferrera, a big data researcher at Indiana University, proposes that during crises, grapevines and social media simultaneously disseminate two types of content. One stream is expressions of fear/anxiety, while the other is an attempt to contain that fear. Typically, the former gains more traction. This is because audiences can seldom differentiate between a mild risk and a real threat. A second reason is that crises give birth to uncertainty, a gap in information – which quickly fills up with unsubstantiated, sensational theories. That kind of disruptive power has the potential to become viral stories.

Thus the role of modern mass and social media has expanded to instructing citizens on how to identify, prioritise and interpret crises. Raboy (1992) writes, "By applying the usual norms of journalistic coverage and definition of what constitutes news – in short, by accentuating the spectacular and the unusual instead of the everyday and the mundane – the media embark on a course that they cannot easily control afterwards." This has now become a prime mode of shaping social thought and opinion.

Corporatised mass media and hysteria-prone social media have come to possess unprecedented powers to manufacture, exaggerate and frame crises. Those who exert influence over media thus gain free reign to create anxiety and fear. Thus every smear is turned to fear, every slight to a fight; every frisk becomes a risk, every critic a heretic. While our taste for negative news and media's incentive to present regular crises are largely manufactured, it gives rise to an insulated echo-chamber that can be devoid of facts, evidence or common sense. That, in turn, opens up doors for the agenda-setters and propagandists to spin out regular turmoil. Selective crises and tragedies thus become markers of national narratives. The challenge is that the urgency of crises demands instant opinions and responses, thus sidelining broader issues, the pursuit of which is neither glamorous, nor immediately gratifying. And as is often the case, it is democracy that eventually suffers.

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.

The yearning for ancestral roots

TANVEER AHMED

IT was one of Bengal's greatest exports Amartya Sen who attacked the "solitarist" approach to human identity in his masterpiece *Identity and Violence*. The delusion of being tied to just one group, he goes on to illustrate, is at the heart of the greatest conflicts, from Hindu versus Muslim massacres to the notion of Aryan exceptionalism which lay at the ideological core of the Third Reich.

In a recent interview to the Spanish *El Pais* newspaper, renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman said, "Today, every society is just a collection of diasporas…the connection between where you live and identity has been broken."

Bangladesh has the fifth largest diaspora group in the world, estimated in 2015 by the data group Revision at 7.2 million, behind only India, China, Mexico and Russia. The bulk of this group is in the Middle East and represents a particularly downtrodden set of workers, manning the construction sites, cleaning the hotel rooms and driving the taxis. They are the modern version of the Dickensian working class, representatives of a country known for having cheap labour as one of its primary exports, its economy propped up by remittance payments.

The smaller but perhaps more significant group are the wealthier people of Bangladeshi origin living primarily in the West, be it the United Kingdom, North America and Australasia. Unlike the majority of migrants to the Middle East who plan to return to their lives and loved ones in Bangladesh, this group puts down new foundations in their adopted homelands but retain a longing for their roots. Despite many initiatives focused on non-resident Bangladeshis, their potential to contribute to Bangladesh remains dormant.

Ayub Khan, an Oxford educated British-Bangladeshi community leader and aspiring Sylheti politician, says the notion of diaspora in Bangladesh is limited to a view of uneducated Sylhetis in Britain running curry restaurants and sending money to their ancestral villages. He notes that the third and fourth generations of Bangladeshis do not fit this stereotype.

"We are seeing an emergence of highly talented, educated and skilled group who are very interested in the country of their parent's origin," he said in a phone interview.

This longing reflects the complexity of modern identity, where multiple influences- religious, occupational and cultural- must compete and mingle to form multi-layered, fluid selves. The upheaval in political economy wrought by modern communications is also felt at the level of personhood.

In my work as a psychiatrist, I have seen close up that this complexity is not always easily tolerated, particularly among those brought up to balance the outlooks steeped in clan, religion and tradition often present within Bangladeshi families with the ideals of individualistic, secular Western societies.

Psychological theories of home grown terrorism point to this identity disturbance as being critical to groups feeling they neither belong to their adopted societies nor to their ancestral cultures. The psychic space is filled sometimes by a rigid interpretation of Islam, one directly overlapping with Amartya Sen's notion of a solitarist identity. In fact, many visitors from Bangladesh have observed that diaspora communities living in the West are often more religious than their equivalent demographic groups in Dhaka.

This is borne out further in multiple research surveys, varying from Pew to the British think tank Policy Exchange, that show Muslims are the only group that become more religious in latter generations after migrating to Western countries.

The distress felt in identity formation is only rarely directed towards religious extremism, but is present nevertheless. The 'unbelonging' is in part because people of Bangladeshi origin living overseas do not see their lives reflected in story telling industries. Bangladeshi media in the West is primarily directed to the first generation and has a strong nostalgic element. For example, the largest site aimed at Bangladeshis in Australia, bangla-sydney.com, is filled with stories about Dhaka and Rajshahi University reunions or a celebration of Bangabandhu's legacy. This holds little appeal for latter generations.

But the mainstream media in the adopted homelands are also unlikely to tell their stories, in part because so few from the community are likely to enter the cultural industries, focusing almost exclusively on secure professions like information technology, medicine or engineering. This is understandable, but stories are critical in helping us make sense of our lives, reflect our lived reality and crystallise what may be possible. In helping the management of complex identity formation that the Bangladeshi diaspora experience, it is critical their stories are told more widely. This will also foster connections with their ancestral land, a connection for which there is a great yearning but few outlets. For example, I wish my children could access exchange programmes to Bangladesh when they are of working age.

While there is no suggestion they should not be British or American first and foremost, a multi-layered identity better blending ancestral culture, religion and the adopted West bodes well for cohesive multicultural societies in the West and offers potential to better engage emerging diaspora communities in the future of Bangladesh. The skills, networks and capital of this group remain untapped.
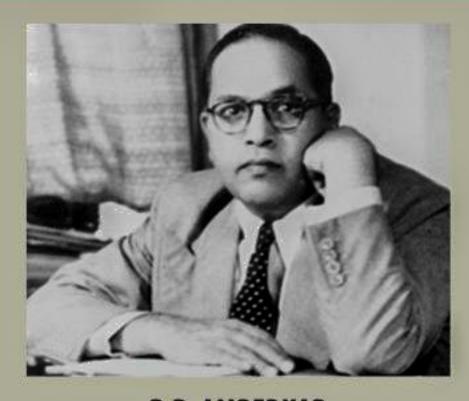
The writer is an Australian based psychiatrist, author of The Exotic Rissole, and founder of website www.bddiaspora.com.

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Anna Bhushan, *Untitled-5*, A Delicate Point: Images from a South Asian diaspora.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

Across

1 "Beat it!"
6 Curving paths
10 Yes-man
11 Prepares leftovers
13 Thompson and Stone
14 Folder's phrase
15 Flow out
16 "MY country- of thee"
18 Poem of praise
19 Pocket fill
22 Anger
23 Lusty look
24 Not well
27 Hawks and doves
28 Wicked
29 Tavern drink
30 Unpredictable sort
35 Vacuum lack
36 Fellows
37 Stop- dime
38 Sun Valley's state
40 Toys with tails
42 Mail, as payment
43 Happening
44 Postmark
45 Lacy nightwear

Down

1 Girder material
2 Jazz group
3 Stallone role
4 Nabokov novel
5 Whodunit
6 "Make-!" (birthday cry)
7 Ewe's mate
8 Bing Crosby, for one
9 Messed up, as makeup
12 Takes the wheel
17 Rink stuff
20 Opera's Beverly
21 UFO flyer
24 Ritzy Los Angeles area
25 Dodged
26 Museum display
27 Snow layer
29 King topper
31 Ham it up
32 Famous
33 Without stop
34 Unpleasant
39 Wallop
41 "- had it!"

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	O	D	A		F	A	S	T
D	O	R	A	G		U	L	T	R	A
A	L	I	V	E		S	E	R	U	M
R	E	G	E	N	T	S		I	M	A
E	L	I		D	A	Y	S	P	A	S
S	Y	N	T	A	X		H	E	N	S
			A	S	I	D	E			
S	N	A	P		C	O	A	S	T	S
T	O	T	E	B	A	G		T	O	E
A	D	O		O	B	S	C	E	N	E
M	E	N	S	A		L	O	V	E	D
P	A	C	E	R		E	V	E	R	Y
	L	E	A	D			D	E	N	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott