A debacle in Pakistan

STRANGER THAN FICTION

TAJ HASHMI

Am I an alarmist for believing elements of the Pakistani "debacle" might eventually trickle down to Bangladesh? I hope that it turns out so. But I don't think so.

WHAT Indian nationalist Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915) once quipped, "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow" is no longer applicable to what is left of Bengal today, Bangladesh and the Indian state of Paschim Banga.

Bangladesh, in particular, is at the receiving end of all traits of culture – material or immaterial. While most of the acquired behaviour is benign, some are infested with debilitating "flesh-eating" bacteria, which have already infected the body politic of Bangladesh without being considered dangerous by many.

The rapid, mindless adoption of alien culture is reflected in the language, literature, music, attire, manners, social etiquette, food habit, and most importantly, in politics and political culture of Bangladesh. As the quarter-century of Pakistani hegemony substantially moulded the political culture, so has expatriate workers' exposure to Arab culture since the 1970s profoundly impacted the popular culture in Bangladesh. Thus, civil-military authoritarianism; state-sponsored religious programmes; and persecution of freethinkers, women, and minorities have almost become a regular feature across the country.

The Pakistani "debacle" I'm referring to is state-sponsorship of Wahhabism, pre-modern Sharia code, and the infringement of human rights, especially of minorities and women. Thanks to its unabated growth, political Islam has already destabilised the country, and has spilled over beyond its borders. It's no exaggeration that the country's criminal justice system – to a large extent – has broken down, and its leftover is comparable to what prevails in Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the age-old tribal honour system, "blood money", and the so-called Blasphemy Law reign supreme.

Am I an alarmist for believing elements of the Pakistani "debacle" might eventually trickle down to Bangladesh? I hope that it turns out so. But I don't think so. Before I elaborate why I think the Pakistani "debacle" is potentially dangerous to Bangladesh, I cite just one example from Pakistan, in this regard. Recently, the whole world witnessed mammoth mass protests by tens of thousands of Pakistanis in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad against the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, a convicted killer of Salman Taseer, a former Governor of the Pakistani province of Punjab. Qadri, the Governor's bodyguard, gunned him down in January 2011 for his public sympathy for Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman, convicted to death in 2010 for allegedly committing blasphemy. Interestingly, Qadri didn't belong to any Islamist extremist group but a Sufi order.

Is the killing of Governor Taseer and people's support for his killer among millions of Pakistanis relevant to Bangladesh? Possibly yes. Bangladesh has already adopted ways to placate extremists who have terrorised secular writers and intellectuals and killed scores of them for their alleged blasphemous writings against Islam. Ominously, there are people and groups in the country who favour killing for blasphemy and the declaration of the tiny Ahmadiyya Muslim community as "non-Muslim", a la Pakistan.

As an eyewitness to the metamorphosis of the relatively liberal and secular Bangladeshi society into an 'illiberal' and intolerant one during the last four decades, I think the complacent people and government are collectively responsible for this development. What was once unthinkable, is a reality today; and what we think will never happen in this country, might be in the pipeline, will give us an unpleasant surprise, one day! What our rulers once considered harmless or even necessary – trading secularism with religion – have become a big liability and threat to secular democracy in Bangladesh. I refer to the unwise rehabilitation of religion based political parties, and very similar to Pakistan, the quixotic decision to make Islam as the "state religion" in Bangladesh.

Since Pakistan and what is Bangladesh today started their postcolonial journey together in 1947, and have inherited the state-sponsored "soft" Islamism introduced by the first Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan in 1949, they have a common legacy with regard to the Islamisation process. Very similar to General Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan, two successive military rulers of Bangladesh – Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad – also legitimised political Islam in their own ways. Meanwhile, thanks to state patronage, the ruling elite's political expediency and hypocrisy, and pressure from Islamist parties "soft" Islamism has become crystallised, and posing a threat to liberal democracy and secularism in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Ever since the Liberation, the fate of civility, democracy and secularism in Bangladesh is in a state of entropy. Unless democracy and secularism get a breathing space, the re-staging of the Pakistani tragedy cannot be ruled out. I know Bangladeshi analysts, scholars, and politicians might disagree with me. "Bangladesh is very different from Pakistan" has been the common thread of their argument. I wish the argument were convincing!

The reality in Bangladesh is somewhat very different from the elite perception. Despite the Supreme Court ruling of August 1, 2013, that the Jamaat-e-Islami was unfit to contest national polls, the Islamist party is yet to be officially proscribed. One has reasons to believe no executive decision is in the offing, in concurrence with the judiciary. Once the genie is out, it's almost impossible to put it back into the bottle.

Islamist extremism does not drop from the heavens or sprout out of the ground. Secular leaders – over the years – prepare the groundwork for Islamist takeover, terrorism, or insurgency through corruption, despotism, hypocrisy and opportunism. This has happened in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Bangladesh must learn from these examples. Since Islamism is an ideology-driven phenomenon – not a law-and-order-problem – even highly efficient police and military are no match for extremism. Pakistan's experience should be an eye-opener. Bangladesh must realise neither opportunistic politics nor political hypocrisy, but democracy and the rule of law are the only antidotes to Islamist extremism.

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Ray Tomlinson, @ 74; pioneer of e-mail

BRYAN MARQUARD

IMAGINE for a moment that you were sitting at a keyboard in 1971, about to send the world's first e-mail from one computer to another. You had to determine how to designate an electronic "address," even though your message would travel to a computer on a desk only about 15 feet away.

Ray Tomlinson, fresh from graduate work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, faced that decision early in his career at his first and only employer, the high-tech research company Bolt, Beranek and Newman. Before that day in 1971, people had sent electronic messages to each other while sharing the same computer, but no one had done what he was about to do — send a message between two separate machines.

To designate an address, he settled on the @ key — a flick of the left ring finger for a 10-finger typist. "I was mostly looking for a symbol that wasn't used much," he told Smithsonian magazine in 2012. "And there weren't a lot of options — an exclamation point or a comma. I could have used an equal sign, but that wouldn't have made much sense."

Besides, he once told NPR, the @ symbol was "the only preposition on the keyboard," and his fidelity to proper grammar created an enduring part of the billions of e-mails sent since.

Mr. Tomlinson, who at 74 was still a principal engineer at what is now called Raytheon BBN Technologies, collapsed in his Lincoln home early Saturday while he and his longtime companion were seeking medical help for leg pain he had developed. He died in Emerson Hospital, where he was brought by ambulance.

The biography for Mr. Tomlinson's 2012 induction into the Internet Hall of Fame praised his e-mail program for fostering "a complete revolution, fundamentally changing the way people communicate, including the way businesses, from huge corporations to tiny mom-and-pop shops, operate and the way millions of people shop, bank, and keep in touch with friends and family, whether they are across town or across oceans."

Mr. Tomlinson took that first step toward a communication revolution by walking away from MIT. After receiving a master's in electrical engineering, he initially stuck around for more graduate work. "I was working on my doctorate and not making a whole lot of progress," he recalled in a 2012 interview posted at theverge.com. An academic adviser suggested he seek work at Bolt, Beranek and Newman, which hired Mr. Tomlinson in 1967.

Once there, he worked on early components of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, or ARPANET, a precursor to the Internet. At one point, he read a memo with a mail box protocol someone else had written. "I looked at it and thought probably we could do something better," he said in the interview with The Verge.

When it came time to send that first e-mail, "I looked at the keyboard, and I thought: 'What can I choose here that won't be confused with a username?' If every person had an '@' sign in their name, it wouldn't work too well. But they didn't. They did use commas and slashes and brackets," he told Wired magazine in 2012. "Of the remaining three or four characters, the '@' sign made the most sense. It denoted where the user was . . . at. Excuse my English."

A stickler for language use and accuracy, Mr. Tomlinson said in a 2010 interview posted on motherboard.vice.com: "Personally, I prefer e-mails that use correctly spelled words."

Raymond Samuel Tomlinson was born in Amsterdam, N.Y., the oldest of three brothers. His father, Raymond Tomlinson, had worked in carpet mills and later ran a grocery store. His mother, the former Dorothy Aspin, worked for a dry cleaning business.

Mr. Tomlinson graduated from high school in Broadalbin, N.Y., north of Amsterdam, and received a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., in 1963. He graduated from MIT with a master's two years later.

"He was always very intelligent and did very well in school," said his brother Gary, who lives in Broadalbin, as does their other brother, David.

"Part of what he had was a certain elegance and simplicity of how he worked things through. He liked things to be effective and efficient," said Karen Seo, Mr. Tomlinson's companion of nearly a decade.

They met at Raytheon BBN Technologies when she worked there, too, during a lunchroom card game of Eleusis, in which one player creates a secret rule for how cards are played on top of each other and the remaining players use logic to guess the rule. On that day, Seo recalled, Mr. Tomlinson's rule had an algorithmic grace and sophistication that challenged the sharp minds of colleagues at the table.

The couple also had worked together in Lincoln to establish a European breed of miniature sheep in the United States. Whether figuring out fence issues for sheep or puzzling out a problem at work, "he was just focused intellectually on what he was doing," she said. "Something would catch his eye and be interesting and he'd think about it, and he might have a creative flash."

"He was this wonderful combination of quick and insightful and warm and loving and affectionate," she added. "He was so wonderful."

Mr. Tomlinson was married to Ann Tomlinson of West Palm Beach, Fla., with whom he had two daughters. He and his wife had been separated for many years, though not divorced.

A service will be announced for Mr. Tomlinson, who in addition to Seo, his two brothers, and his former wife leaves his daughters, Brooke Tomlinson MacKenzie of St. Petersburg, Fla., and Suzanne Tomlinson Schaffer of Cambridge, and two grandchildren.

In the Motherboard interview, Mr. Tomlinson said he used e-mail "all the time. It is my preferred means of communication." As for a habit common among certain e-mail users, he added: "I read the subject. For some e-mails, that is enough."

Not until the early 1990s, when the 25th anniversary of ARPANET was observed, did he truly recognize the magnitude of the change he had wrought. At the time of its creation, he told The Verge, e-mail "always seemed like something that anyone with a network connection would want. But at the time, there were probably 1,000 users on the ARPANET. . . . That's a lot if you have to put them in your address book, but not that many when you think about the size of the world as a whole."

Nevertheless, e-mail is "being used, by and large, exactly the way I envisioned," he said in that interview. "In particular, it's not strictly a work tool or strictly a personal thing. Everybody uses it in different ways, but they use it in a way they find works for them."

As for that first e-mail, however, Mr. Tomlinson could never recall what message he sent to himself. "The first e-mail is completely forgettable," he told NPR. "And, therefore, forgotten."

When it came time to send that first e-mail, "I looked at the keyboard, and I thought: 'What can I choose here that won't be confused with a username?' If every person had an '@' sign in their name, it wouldn't work too well."

The writer is Obituary Editor at The Boston Globe.
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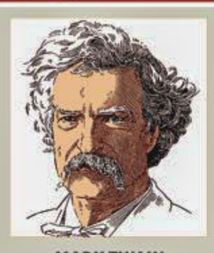

MARK TWAIN

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