

Suu Kyi's denial is disillusioning

Accept the truth, end the persecution

We are outraged and disappointed at Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi's denial of the atrocities that amount to ethnic cleansing, committed by Myanmar security forces on Rohingya Muslims. It is unfathomable that the Nobel Laureate, internationally known as a defender of human rights, would make this statement in a BBC interview. She has even claimed that the conflict was due to 'Muslims killing Muslims as well' completely ignoring the UN report that has found mass killings and gang rapes of Rohingyas by the Myanmar army and police.

The report was based on interviews with survivors in Bangladesh and revealed horrific accounts of Rohingya women, children and men being brutally killed and tortured. Is Suu Kyi trying to say that all these accounts have been made up? Apart from the UN investigations, local and international media have continuously reported the campaign of killing and rape of Rohingya people who have been denied citizenship for decades because of their ethnicity and religion. Around 75,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh to flee the latest bout of violence in October 2016. If this isn't ethnic cleansing, what is?

Myanmar says its operations, which began last October, were aimed at tracking down militants who attacked police border posts in Rakhine. If that were so how can it justify the mass murders of men, the execution of babies and rapes of women as fleeing Rohingyas have told UN workers?

The lukewarm reassurance made by Suu Kyi in the BBC interview that "if they come back they will be safe" rings hollow in the wake of her outright denial of the atrocities committed. Instead of denial she should make all out efforts to see that the persecution of Rohingyas are stopped, that the perpetrators are held to account and that Rohingyas are given their rightful status in their homeland, Myanmar.

Bangladesh moves up in HDI

We still have a long way to go

BANGLADESH has moved up three notches in the Global Human Development Index 2015, ranking 139th out of 188 countries, according to the recently published Human Development Report (HDR) 2016 by UNDP. Thanks to the progress, Bangladesh has achieved in a number of socio-economic indicators – such as life expectancy, health and education – the country's improvement in human development is nothing short of impressive.

Furthermore, we have remarkably maintained an average annual HDI growth rate of 1.64 percent from 1990 to 2015 – higher than all other South Asian countries – and have been categorised as a "medium human development" country, according to HDR 2016.

Despite our overall progress indicated by economic indicators, it must be noted that since the Human Development Index (HDI) is an average of basic socio-economic achievements, the HDI masks growing inequality in the country. Bangladesh's HDI for 2015 is 0.579. The closer the figure is to 1, the better its HDI. Bangladesh's HDI drops to 0.412 once you discount it for inequality – one of the primary impediments to human development.

Bangladesh, by adopting the historic 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, has committed itself to reducing inequalities (SDG 10 to be specific) among 16 other goals. Bangladesh's situation must be seen in the context of a global climate where the gap between the rich and the poor is ever increasing. As such, we must work towards a more equitable society in which affordable health care and education, decent labour conditions, access to justice, etc., are available to all. HDI growth will be meaningful only when the lack of equal distribution of human development across the population is addressed.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Work that remains to be done

South Asia has made great strides in getting girls to schools in recent years. But digging into statistics can reveal huge disparities that grow at the secondary school level.

As families are torn apart and impoverished by conflict, children's education suffers. Hard-up families are more likely to send children onto the streets to sell flowers or cigarettes, or have boys labouring on building sites and farms. Girls are being married off young in the hopes of economic security. More boys are being recruited into fighting, manning checkpoints, carrying weapons, and even militancy. It's important to focus on girls, but it's equally important to focus on boys, too. Some refugee parents prefer to marry off their daughters than send them to school, which leaves them less in control of their lives and more likely to be poor and sick. For parents, there's an added layer of fear around girls' honour stemming from the threat of sexual harassment at school.

For every year that a girl spends in school, her future earnings can grow by as much as 25 percent, making a valuable contribution to the economy. They are also less likely to marry young and die in childbirth.

62 million girls are out of schools around the world today. Cultural misogyny, inequality, and institutional discrimination are killing girls' rights every single day. To address these issues, we need more international-standard schools and universities which will be accessible to girls from all backgrounds.

Mohammad Rajja
Birgunj, Nepal



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

I grew up with Chhayanaut. No, I never took any music lessons there. I am simply one of those countless Bengalis who partook of its rich cultural offerings over the years.

Some of my fondest memories of childhood and youth are inextricably linked to Chhayanaut, our great cultural treasure, that completes 50 years this month.

In my childhood, I accompanied family members to the Ramna Botomul to join Chhayanaut in welcoming the Bengali New Year. The remarkable thing about Chhayanaut's naba barsha celebrations wasn't just the music – lovely as it was. I marveled at its ability to create a quintessential Bengali cultural environment that resonated deeply with the public.

This is no small feat. Our colonial biases die hard, especially among the educated middle class, who are easily seduced into mindlessly aping the West. Yet on that particular day, those in attendance followed Chhayanaut's example. Women dressed in lovely cotton saris, men wore kurtas.

What a sight it was to behold! On a beautiful, crisp dawn, nestled amongst the lush greenery of Ramna, men and women, dressed in traditional clothing, listened to enchanting Bengali music. The moment had an almost sacred ambience. This was a heartfelt homage to our language and culture.

In my youth, I recall attending a Nazrul birth anniversary musical soiree at the Eskaton Ladies' Club (Chhayanaut didn't have its campus then. Volunteers ran it on weekends out of the University Laboratory School in Nilkhet.) I listened, mesmerised, to top Nazrul song exponents of the day – Kamal Rodrigues and Sadya Afreen.

Like all Chhayanaut events, the event was free and open to the public.

The organisation began in the early 1960s. Bengalis were getting ready to celebrate the birth centenary of their beloved literary icon, Rabindranath Tagore. The erstwhile East Pakistan government and its sectarian cultural goons, forever terrified of the plural, humanist spirit of Bengali culture, slapped a ban on Tagore.

How do you battle a grievous injustice? In 1971, Bengalis took up arms and

wrested freedom after a nine-month-long bloody battle. The cultural battle in the early 1960s was no less momentous, though not a drop of blood was spilled. The cultural activists who seethed at the ban were an unassuming lot. There was not a single weapon between the lot of them. All they had was a deep, abiding love of Bengali culture, which, it turned out, is no less formidable as a weapon of defense.

Their sustained struggle made a profound impression on the Bangladeshi

campus, built entirely with private donations, is a testament to the enormous public esteem and affection the organisation has acquired.

Chhayanaut has become what it is today, thanks to the efforts of, among others, the late Wahidul Huq, a polymath cultural activist par excellence, and Sanjida Khatun, his wife, an acclaimed, cerebral scholar of Tagore and Bengali literature. Wahidul Huq was a bit of a curmudgeon who didn't suffer fools gladly. This ferociously well-read, peripatetic activist

overall Bengali ambience at Chhayanaut that has made it clear to students – and everybody else associated with Chhayanaut, for that matter – that Chhayanaut is not just a music school. Chhayanaut's goal is to imbue its students with an appreciation and love of being Bengali. This means adhering to a dress code and conducting oneself in a manner consistent with Bengali etiquette. Thousands of graduates leave Chhayanaut with a renewed pride in being Bengali, and become potent ambassadors of



Pahela Baishakh at Ramna Botomul -- a tradition that Chhayanaut has kept alive.

PHOTO: ATL AAKASH

cultural psyche. For 50 long years, with minimal media fuss, the volunteers of Chhayanaut took upon themselves a mission to nurture a love and appreciation of Bengali culture. Some of the nation's top performers gave their services for free, and over time, their hard work paid off.

Today, every year, 1,300 students enter Chhayanaut's multi-year programmes in various genres of Bengali music in its impressive campus. Many more thousands are turned away. Cabinet ministers, tycoons plead to get their wards in. The multi-story

crisscrossed the length and breadth of Bangladesh to promote Bengali culture with missionary zeal. The overwhelming outpouring of grief across the country following his death is proof of how deeply his efforts were appreciated.

For 50 years, Sanjida Khatun has nurtured Chhayanaut like an affectionate but strict mother. A retiring person who avoids the limelight, her great contribution is not just imparting excellent instruction in Tagore songs over the decades. She has been uncompromising in demanding an

Bengali culture.

In a globalised world, there can be no greater asset for a young person today. This is an age of flux, of uncertainty, of great social and political change. Chhayanaut provides a profound, reassuring sense of cultural identity deeply anchored in our roots as we try to steer through the stormy seas of social and cultural turmoil in a fast-changing, globalising world.

The writer is a contributing editor for Silicooner, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.

Asia's search for cultural-intellectual rejuvenation



ANDREW SHENG

LAST month, Professor Michael Heng argued in Singapore that in order to achieve the Asian Century, there is a need for Asian cultural-intellectual rejuvenation.

Heng's lecture was in the tradition of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Dean Kishore Mahbubani's 1998 challenge – 'Can Asians think?'

This search for intellectual rejuvenation is made more urgent by the rise of Trumpism, which has over-turned the American neo-liberal world order to spread free markets, democracy and technology to the rest of the world. Chinese President Xi's defense of globalisation at Davos this year was a dramatic contrast to the protectionist and inward-looking tone of Trump.

Professor Heng categorised the issues as three challenges - how to rejuvenate Asian cultures, learning from non-Asians and learning from each other. These are serious challenges that deserve serious thinking. How the questions are framed often affect their answers.

Whilst we can identify at least five Asian cultures and intellectual traditions (Islam, Hindu, Chinese, Shinto and South-East Asian), it is no longer possible to delineate precisely where these traditions have affected each other, Western culture and traditions and how they are evolving.

Cultures, like languages, are living and not fixed in time, borrowing, learning, forgetting and adapting to a changing environment, including changing the environment itself. Whereas in the 17th century, cultures were segregated by geography, the advances in transport and communications technology are such that almost no culture can be an island - they are invaded by foreign technology to such an extent that the lines have become blurred.

But cultures survive because they are preserved and reborn. Even as Syrian culture and society is shattered by its

devastating civil war, Syrian music is being spread throughout the world through the Internet, preserved by Syrian migrant and expatriate musicians and artists.

Thus, the issue of cultural-intellectual rejuvenation is a perennial search for identity in a rapidly changing world, bombarded by politics, economics, technology, climate change, religion and human migration and conflicts.

The search for identity was construed by English philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1922-2009) as the two paths to Post-Modernity - one forward looking in facing the future, and the other nostalgic and backing into old ideas of religious purity and nationalism.

The American lurch towards protectionism is part of the Republican nostalgia for right wing values - mostly

insecurity has fed the populist drive for purity and identity, seeking to protect identities from foreign or others' "contaminations".

Such daily disruption is being forced on all of us, from the poorest to the most privileged. How else can we explain President Trump's inaugural address when he promised to address 'American carnage', meaning the perceived destruction of American jobs and the decline of the white middle class worker in terms of income and power?

Every nation-state and religion is being pulled in the two Toulmin directions, one to move forward with open modernity or to return to a glorious past of pure values that exist only in someone's imagination. We cannot categorise the trials and tribulations of every local community's

growing region, with leadership that has so far been open-minded to globalisation, trade and technology as solutions to domestic poverty and under-development.

Whether one likes it or not, the resources for dealing with social inequities, climate change and security can only come from growth. Asians have learnt from war and devastating conflict that without political and social stability, growth cannot be achieved, creating a vicious cycle of declining resources and growing social fragmentation and ultimately crises.

Each society, irrespective of those in Asia or elsewhere, must find its own solution or rationale for being, because globalisation is irreversible. National economies and local cultures are interconnected through social media and migration to such an extent that for better or worse, there is no returning to any glorious past.

Despite the fact that Asia is itself a concept of geography and a mosaic of cultures, success appears in clustered neighbourhoods. Thus, if Asian economies, especially cities, do not begin the search for modernity and moderate values and beliefs in earnest, they will be overwhelmed by the forces of extremism, domestic or imported.

To do so, Asians need both the secular and the sacred - an openness to science and globalisation with a simultaneous openness to understanding and respect for what is sacred to each and everyone of us.

Asean was able to break out of poverty despite diversity of development and cultures, because of a pragmatic approach to consensus-building. We cannot find common values if we are each stuck in our own mental silos, compartmentalised and fragmented in gated communities, ghettos or sects.

The Asian story is not a belief but a process, in which all of us have a stake - to succeed or fail.

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defined in White Christian terms. This is not unlike the search for religious and ethnic sacred values within Asia in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto or other native beliefs.

Modern human and informational migration is such that we are all today genetic or ideological hybrids, simultaneously local, global, liberal and fundamentalist in different aspects of our lives.

Even though billions have been lifted out of poverty and illiteracy, inequality remains rife and keenly felt, creating resentment, insecurity and conflict. Each Asian culture is being melded profoundly in a potpourri that is becoming inseparable from daily contact with technology, foreigners and social media. Small wonder that such

struggle with globalisation in simple terms - they are the product of complex, complicated and convulsive forces that interact with each other in non-quantifiable and qualitative terms.

Current social science cannot quantify nor predict, let alone control these conflicts of values that directly threaten social stability. We are witnessing terrorism and cataclysmic civil wars that ensue from the toxic mixture of geo-politics, religion and ethnicity, natural disasters from drought or famine and incompetent governance.

No all-encompassing philosophy, religion or culture can restore the broken families and societies, destroyed by terrorism and civil war.

Asia's current strength arises from the fact that the region remains the fastest