

Martyred intellectuals' day They remain an inspiration

TODAY is a sad day of remembrance. We pay homage to the brightest souls of the intelligentsia who were picked up and murdered brutally by an occupying Pakistani military and their local collaborators. Between December 12 and 14, the nation lost some of its best intellectuals and professionals to mass and premeditated murder. Whilst it was a desperate ploy to cripple society on the eve of victory, we have prevailed as a nation and as a people.

On this day, we look back and wonder what more we could have achieved had they not been taken from us. The martyrs believed that this country would find its rightful place in the league of world's nations as a country built on the principles of justice and equality for its people, and their supreme sacrifice give us pause to reflect, whether we have done them justice in striving towards building a just, egalitarian and secular Bangladesh.

While we pay homage to the martyred intellectuals, we are ever grateful that the long awaited road to justice for the family members has come to fruition through the war crimes tribunal. However, to truly honour their memory, we must keep alive their sacrifice through deeds and not words. That can best be served if we preserve the memory of the killing fields nationwide in a just and fitting manner so that the younger generations who were born after the birth of Bangladesh do not forget their predecessors who loved this country enough to sacrifice their lives for it.

Law minister's puzzling denial It doesn't assuage public fear

WE are quite dumbfounded by the law minister's recent statement that he does not agree with the assumption that law enforcement agencies violate human rights. Given the growing number of allegations against law enforcement agencies committing excesses it is hardly unreasonable to have such "assumptions". Human rights organisations have recorded the rising number of extrajudicial killings (euphemistically termed "death in crossfire"), torture or death in police custody and enforced disappearances.

In the case of "crossfire" the official story is always the same—an accused is taken to a place during an operation, he then tries to run away or his cohorts fire at the law enforcers and he is killed in the crossfire. Such explanations do not fool anyone, least of all the families of victims of such extrajudicial killings.

The law minister has said that there may be "some individuals" who might have done "excesses". If this is true what has been done about them? Have all such bad apples been held accountable and punished under the law of the land? We would certainly like to know if they have. The law minister has further said that if any complaint is received, the authorities concerned take immediate actions against those responsible and a department probe is conducted. But what about the disappearances of hundreds of people as reported by various rights groups? Are the concerned authorities doing enough to find them? Many of the families of these missing persons have alleged that the victims were picked up by law enforcement agents but will not say anything in public because of fear. Why are they so afraid?

The law minister's denial will not remove the suspicion and fear in the public mind. It is the state's duty to probe into such allegations and ensure justice for the victims of human rights violations by members of the law enforcement agencies.

Bangladesh apparels at a crossroads The end of low-cost sourcing



BANGLADESH plans to increase its apparel export to the global market with a high ambition of reaching the USD 50-billion mark by 2021, in line with the government's Vision 2021, which is centred around a goal for the country to attain the middle-income country status by that year when the nation celebrates the golden jubilee of its independence. But doubling the export, which currently stands at USD 28 billion, in just four years' time is going to be a difficult task. The only way to increase the export amount is by adding value to the apparel.

The current competitive advantage of Bangladesh is already being challenged by countries that depend on low-cost production—like Ethiopia. Many European and US retailers and brands will follow these countries if better margins are offered. Moreover, if Bangladesh is to graduate into a middle-income country, then the wages for its four million workers involved with the garment industry will have to rise at the expense of the margins of the apparel producers, resulting in lower profitability and losing that competitive edge. It is a catch-22 situation given our current low-cost production strategy. And it's doom to failure because of the law of nature about a developing country that must offer the benefits of a higher living standard in its journey to becoming a nearly industrialised one.

Therefore, for the growth vision for 2021 to deliver, it is high time the apparel industry leadership fostered change as regards its customer base. The first option is to keep the customers in the apparel sector, not with low cost, but with innovation, collaboration and proliferation, thereby increasing the production volume and margin. Simultaneously, growing the number of customers in the value creation process will be an added bonus.

For decades, international buyers for large international apparel chains and brands have worked under the assumption that labour cost must be kept as low as possible in order for garments to be produced at competitive prices. This widely-held belief has made the industry move from country to country, as the increase in labour cost erode each local market's temporary advantage. One day, possibly soon, this journey will come to an end.

Cheap labour is becoming a rare commodity while the number of low-cost countries is also dwindling. Demonstrated thought leadership by the international retailers and brands need to get ahead of this trend by assessing what they can influence with their existing production partners to generate sustainable efficiency

gains, improve their production speed, and ultimately take pressure off labour cost management, thus ensuring that margins are offered as a part of efficiency—not through cheaper labour. Consequently, the challenge for the apparel buyers is to collaborate with their production partners to advance the ideas of innovation, collaboration and proliferation. By inspiring, generating and adopting production innovations that improve speed and efficiency, they can increase their responsiveness to fashion cycles. By collaborating on adopting a standard unit of measure, both parties can, through this act of co-creation, help bring cost transparency to the supply chain and boost productivity. And by managing sub-suppliers and improving coordination

pair of jeans cost more or less the same to produce, and it is mainly the raw materials that are adding cost to production. Managing the raw materials will be crucial but the margin gains will be many times more as the medium to premium brands and retailers sell at a much higher retail price and can buy the product in Bangladesh at a higher price.

The biggest trend in EU and the US for capturing margin building and value adding growth is Experience Economy, which is estimated at USD 1.3 trillion in annual consumer spending in the US alone. The shift from personal goods to experiences will benefit some fashion companies, provided they are positioned correctly. For example, the rise of health and wellness experiences benefits

premium segment with the already established production and supply chains in Bangladesh and harvesting the margins as the retail prices are higher than the entry price brands. In this, Bangladesh faces a few challenges. Medium to premium brands and retailers are looking for value adding design perspectives that will enhance the consumer experience and set the products apart from competition. Does Bangladesh have the ability to add value to design? The second challenge is the perception of Bangladesh as a production hub that ignores social and ethical issues leading up to the collapse of factory buildings due to lack of health and safety. Many US and EU boards of directors see Bangladesh as a liability that can get a



Workers sew clothes inside a textile factory in Ethiopia. The competitive advantage of Bangladesh in garments production, through cheap labour, is already being challenged by countries like Ethiopia offering lower-cost production. PHOTO: REUTERS

with tier one, two and three for fabric, trim and sundries, they can proactively manage the raw material suppliers, consequently delivering positive proliferation.

Next to streamlining the internal processes to gain value growth, the other obvious concept to support the growth of Bangladesh apparel export is the external shift from volume to value customers. According to the Boston Consulting Group, there has been a rebound in consumer confidence since the last financial crisis. As confidence rises, consumers become more willing to splurge on expensive products. Therefore, there are many opportunities for the Bangladesh apparel industry to grow margins by adding value and attracting premium brands and retailers. A blouse or

companies that make activewear, athletic footwear, and other apparel for exercising, hiking, and spending time outdoors. The rise in leisure travel will mean higher sales of layering clothes, luggage, and travel accessories.

To respond to this, companies will need to reposition themselves—at the levels of the portfolio and individual brands—by orienting products around specific experiences.

This is where the other opportunity lies for supporting the growth vision for Bangladesh by 2021: shortcutting the traditional entry price brands by adding new medium to premium brands and retailers that are targeting the experience economy. Quick gains could come by addressing these brands in the medium to

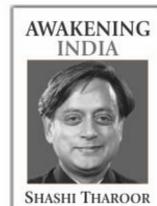
bad press and damage their image.

The value creation performance of the Bangladesh apparel industry has, for over 40 years, delivered continued growth but if the apparel industry is to continue to support the growth, change management and repositioning from volume to value are the key. There is no silver bullet to changing the industry's future. What's most important is that Bangladesh and its apparel industry leadership understand the factors that are most relevant to the growth vision that will allow Bangladesh to capitalise on a recovering global economy and return greater value to the future of the country.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India's culture war comes to Bollywood



SHASHI THAROOR

nation is already being torn apart further by another cultural controversy—this time, over a film.

The film, "Padmavati," tells the story of an eponymous Rajput queen believed to have died, together with 16,000 other women of the Rajput warrior caste, by self-immolation in 1301, in order to avoid being captured alive by the invading Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khilji.

CULTURE and history have become new battlegrounds in India. Debates over the Taj Mahal's position as a symbol of multicultural India have yet to be settled, yet the

forces, mentions the queen. Yet Padmavati has been a figure of legend since 1540, when the Sufi mystic poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi devoted his lyrical epic "Padmavat" to her story. It has been suggested that Jayasi did not intend his tale to be taken literally, and that his work, instead, represented the Persian mystical-poetic tradition of using romance to represent humanity's search for the divine. By this interpretation, the poem is an allegory for the union of mind and soul, under attack from external forces. Jayasi chose Khilji's attack on Chittorgarh as a setting for his epic, because its name includes the word chit (consciousness).

But literature, once published, acquires a life of its own. Jayasi's tale was retold countless times, by Bengali bards,

became a tourist attraction. The head of a Rajput organisation, the Karni Sena, claimed to be her direct descendent. (When confronted with the view that she was fictional, he replied, "I am 37th in her direct line of descent. Am I a ghost?")

With so much riding on Padmavati's image as a symbol of female honour and purity, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the Bollywood filmmaker who set out to make a film of her story, unwittingly became a target of historical passions. The Karni Sena trashed the film set at Jaigarh Fort in Jaipur, and disrupted further shooting in a new (less "authentic") location at Kohlapur, accusing Bhansali of filming a love scene between the Hindu queen and the Muslim invader. The Rajput community is also rumoured to have delayed the release of the film on the grounds that it "distorted history," though Bhansali has denied this.

The film's detractors, including the four BJP chief ministers who instituted the pre-emptive bans, did not even see the film before condemning it. That is how defensive some Hindus in India have become over the version of history to which they subscribe—even when, as in Padmavati's case, that history may well be nothing more than a figment of collective imagination.

No less an ardent secularist than India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, summed up the phenomenon seven decades ago: "Facts and fiction are so interwoven together as to be inseparable, and this amalgam becomes an imagined history, which may not tell us exactly what happened but does tell us something equally important—what people believed had taken place, what they thought their heroic ancestors were capable of, and what ideals inspired them." This "imagined history"—"a mixture of fact and fiction, or sometimes only fiction"—becomes "symbolically true."

This explains in a nutshell, the opposition to "Padmavati." For some Hindus, the difference between historical fact and cultural myth does not matter; what is remembered and believed is as

important as what is verifiable. And in today's climate, where "taking offense" is the name of the game and "hurting the sentiments of a community" is the name of the crime, that perspective is particularly relevant. The old Hindu boasts of expansive tolerance and acceptance of difference—the very tenets that underlie India's remarkable diversity—are wearing thin these days.

But there is precedent for this response. Indeed, Bhansali should have taken heed of the backlash against another film a decade ago. That time, hairdressers objected to the film "Billu Barber," arguing (absurdly) that the term "barber" is an insult to their profession. So they threatened to protest the film everywhere it was shown—threats that forced the Bollywood star and producer to drop the second word, renaming the film simply "Billu."

It may not seem to matter much what some lumpy elements think of a Bollywood film. But such responses reflect the same narrow-mindedness that led to the notorious "pulping" of Sankar scholar Wendy Doniger's erudite books on Hinduism. While it may seem alarmist to suggest that freedom of expression in India is in peril, the atmosphere of intimidation by inflamed mobs, to whom governments surrender all too willingly, is palpable. By permitting these intolerant bullies to get away with their lawless acts of intimidation, we are allowing them to do violence to something vital to India's survival as a civilisation.

A pluralist and democratic India must, by definition, tolerate diverse expressions of its many identities. To allow self-appointed arbiters of Indian culture to impose their hypocrisy and double standards on the rest of us is to permit them to define Indianness down until it ceases to be Indian.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)



Members of Rashtriya Rajput Karni Sena shout slogans demanding for a total ban on the movie "Padmavati" in Bengaluru. PHOTO: PTI

Despite not even having been released, "Padmavati" has already inspired countless front-page stories and debates on the evening news, hysterical threats of violence, and a ban in four states governed by India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

The historical accuracy of Padmavati's story is dubious: no contemporary account of Khilji's attack on Chittorgarh, including by historians accompanying his

Rajasthani folk-tellers, and even the English Colonel Tod, who included Padmavati's tale in his compilation *Annals and Antiquities of Rajputana*. Through those retellings, her self-immolation (*jauhar*) became a noble act of resistance against the "lustful" Muslim, making her an exemplar of "unsullied" Hindu womanhood.

Over time, Padmavati was effectively deified. The reputed site of her suicide

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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No receipt for charges

I went to a school to pay tuition fees for my son. They demanded that I pay five taka as service charge. I asked that they include the service charge in the receipt with other fees but they declined. Next, I went to a bank to pay the money for passport but the officer on duty demanded an excess of five taka which he also did not want to include in the receipt. Is this right?

Md Mashiur Rahman, Advocate, Judge Court, Criminal Court and Electricity Court, Rangpur

Help Musahar community in Bihar

The Daily Star on December 8 reported about Musahar community in Bihar. The fact that these people eat rats is disturbing. In the 21st century, it is unthinkable that there are nearly 2.5 million of people who eat rats to survive. It is a slap on the face of human dignity.

Years back, I read a piece in an international magazine about this community. Apparently, their fate has not changed much despite years of efforts from individuals such as Ms Sudha Varghese. Bihar state government has failed these people. Therefore, I would like to request Bangladeshi non-governmental organisations like BRAC and persons like Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, who have immense expertise and experience in poverty alleviation, to see whether they can set up an integrated programme for the people of this most downtrodden.

Engr ABM Nurul Islam, By email