

## Road accidents mar Eid festivities

*When will Eid travels be free of tragedy?*

WE are deeply saddened to know from news reports that at least 30 lives have been lost in road accidents around the country during the last three days of Eid holidays. The number of injured is as high as 104 till the time of writing this editorial.

It is a matter of regret that despite the passionate road safety movement by students and the various drives conducted by the government we have not been able to make our roads any safer. Eid is one of the most joyous of occasions for people and it is a time when they go home to their villages to celebrate with loved ones. To think that such a happy occasion would be marred by such horrible tragedy is truly unfortunate and unacceptable.

Most of the accidents were due to reckless driving with head-on collisions of buses, motorcycles, buses hitting motorcycles and a private car falling into a ditch. Speeding and reckless overtaking continue to take lives and leave hundreds injured or maimed for life. This is especially so during Eid holidays. Travelling outside the country during this time has become a dangerous activity.

But why should it be so—especially after government assurances that roads will be safer?

Why is it so difficult to enforce speed limits on the highways?

It is high time that the authorities took serious steps to curb these tragedies—by ensuring that all vehicles pass the fitness test, that all drivers are qualified to drive and have valid licenses and most of all, that all drivers respect traffic rules and not take unnecessary risks while driving. Highways must be monitored and patrolled by police so that people may travel to their destinations without the constant fear of getting killed or maimed for doing so.

## When fishermen cannot fish

*They should be given adequate support*

SEVERAL fishing villages in Barishal did not take part in the usual Eid festivities like most parts of the country. It was like any other day, a day of struggle and hardship. Fishermen who have been in this profession for generations were barred from throwing their nets into the river to fish because of a government ban to preserve *jalka* llish. Despite the good intention of the ban, it had a debilitating effect on many fishermen of this area as fishing is their only livelihood. For them a day of not being able to fish often means going hungry. Although the government has a rehabilitation programme for fishermen and their families which distributes rice among them, many of them have not received this assistance or received it inadequately. This has left a pall of gloom on these villages, especially on Eid day as many of these fisherfolk could not afford to buy new clothes for their children and eat a special meal as is customary during this occasion.

Fishermen in this country provide us with one of the main sources of protein and other essential nutrients, not to mention allows us to continue to enjoy our traditional fish-based cuisine. They should be supported in every way possible during such lean periods when they are forced to refrain from engaging in the only livelihood they know. Rice given by the government must be distributed equitably and in adequate amounts. Other income generating activities during the ban period should be initiated to tie them over during this difficult period. We hope the government will take immediate steps to help these fisher communities who play such a crucial role in feeding us.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Bangladesh doing well so far in England

Bangladesh's performance in the World Cup so far has been good to watch. It had to have given the Tigers a lot of confidence to beat South Africa in their opening match.

Despite the fact that this South African team is not the strongest we have seen in recent times, opening matches are always difficult. And a weakened South Africa is still a good team that can upset anyone on any given day.

But Bangladesh showed good maturity in their batting to rack up a big total that was always going to be difficult for South Africa to chase down.

In their second match against New Zealand, the batting line-up did not show the same level of maturity. Despite getting off to a good start, Bangladesh kept losing wickets at regular intervals, which led to the Tigers ending up with a below average total of 244. That total did not seem very threatening against a strong Kiwi batting unit.

However, Bangladeshi bowlers tried their best. And there were glimmers of hope now and then that Bangladesh could bowl out the Kiwis for less than that.

In the end, the Kiwis chased down Bangladesh's total with two wickets in hand and 17 balls left. But the fact that the Tigers did not give up and roll over even though they did not score a big total was encouraging to see.

Akram Khan, Dhaka

# Now is the time for unity within the RMG industry



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

“ALL for one and one for all, united we stand divided we fall,” is a famous quote traditionally associated with the titular heroes of the novel *The Three Musketeers* written by Alexandre

Dumas, first published in 1844.

The resonance of “all for one, one for all” is such that is now considered the motto of Switzerland having been adopted as an aid campaign by officials of the country after widespread floods wreaked havoc in the region in 1868. National newspaper advertisements were run with the slogan, deliberately using it to evoke a sense of duty, solidarity and national unity in the population of the young nation (Switzerland having only become a federal state some 20 years earlier).

When considering this admirable principal, I feel the time is right for the ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh to consider its merits as, collectively, we face the most daunting apparel market conditions since the inception of the industry in the early 1980s.

Retailers and brands in Europe and the United States of America (the Bangladesh RMG's largest export markets) are reporting their hardest trading conditions for decades, with companies announcing store closures, redundancies, excess stock levels, and bringing pressure to bear on suppliers to reduce costs.

At the same time as applying purchase price pressure on existing suppliers, new sourcing hubs are being developed by our customers (the growth of the garment sectors in Vietnam and Ethiopia spring to mind). Bangladesh manufacturers are increasingly being pressurised to bear more of the costs of production, taking responsibility for the purchase of fabrics, development of samples, costs of couriers and, in some cases the holding of stock.

These testing conditions give rise to the need for manufacturers across the Bangladesh RMG sector to present a united front for a number of reasons, despite the fact that this is not a mindset that currently exists in industry.

First and foremost of these, is for the industry to unite and present to buyers and the world at large, their case for support and better pricing to enable the industry to grow and continue to develop in a sustainable, environmentally



conscious and transparent manner. We are all aware of the investments required in upgrading or developing manufacturing facilities to international compliance standards for workers safety and well-being and to ensure that environmental requirements are met or bettered.

Collectively, we will be able to present a far stronger argument to our customers for legitimate rises in unit prices of product if we all agree a common pricing policy, hand-in-hand with agreed standards of social and environmental compliance that we, as an industry, should promote and police ourselves, without the need for intervention from government or international agencies.

Secondly, we need to be promoting the industry and investigating and developing business in other areas outside of the EU and USA. A united garment industry can present a far more cohesive, attractive image of the nation and the opportunities available within the country. To do this, we need to consider a united promotion of Bangladesh at international trade events. It is not enough for a small number of manufacturers or fabric mills to present their wares at international events. We need a concerted, combined effort from all sectors of the garment industry to present a true representation of what the Bangladesh RMG industry can offer the wider international audience.

This approach requires careful strategic planning, government support

with finance and an agreed approach to develop a common “voice” for the industry to promote, as one, to, as yet largely untapped, potential customers.

Another area where a unified industry will benefit all is addressing the rise of other competitor nations. We have a talented eager workforce, with a growing population, 70 percent below the age of 40. As a unified industry, we can investigate opportunities to upgrade the product we produce and collectively, make a move away from the traditional reliance on mass-volume, price sensitive, “basic” product.

As a body, the RMG industry needs to agree to the level of training required, what steps we need to adopt to upgrade the product we produce and to ensure that the framework is in place for the necessary skills to be effectively passed on to the emerging talent that the country undoubtedly possesses.

With competition growing in the apparel sector, the RMG industry needs to be safeguarding the future of some of the smaller manufacturers that exist in the country. We are all aware that profit margins on apparel product are, generally, low and combined with an environment of rising wages and costs for services (gas, water and electricity) increasingly restrictive for smaller business concerns. As we develop our programme of Economic Processing Zones (EPZ's) an admirable initiative of the Bangladesh

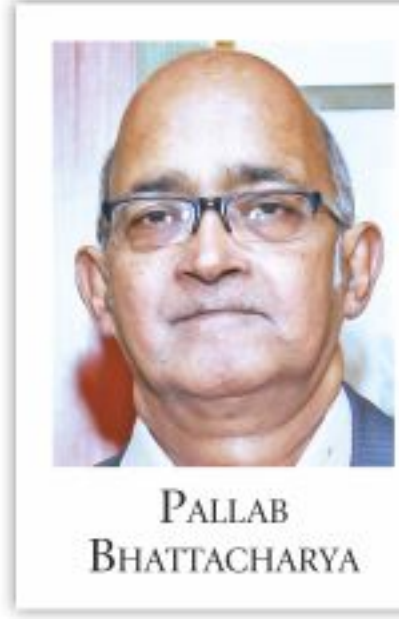
government, we should be suggesting ways that smaller companies can take occupancy of purpose-built units within the EPZ's, offered at favourable rents with subsidised services and the opportunity to upgrade or refine the product they produce through the advice, guidance and mentoring of their peers.

As a nation we can take pride in the fact that Bangladesh has become one of Asia's most remarkable and unexpected success stories in recent years. The RMG sector in Bangladesh has contributed greatly to this success, having enjoyed rapid growth over the past decades. Collectively we need to ensure that this momentum is not lost and unify to develop a clear strategy to guarantee the security of our industry for decades to come.

A united RMG industry will, without doubt, be better equipped to deal with the challenging global apparel market situation and be able to weather the storms that we may face, emerging stronger and better established, as a leader in the apparel field. Perhaps I should close with the words of Aesop, the legendary ancient Greek storyteller: “United we stand, divided we fall”. Never have these words seemed more relevant than at the present time.

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# Surfeit of slogans and sub-nationalism in Bengal



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

POST-PARLIAMENTARY elections, a battle over sub-nationalism along ideological lines is on in West Bengal between Trinamool Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party. That battle, accompanied by the din created by new slogans, comes after months of bitter war of words in the run up to and during the election campaign.

The latest bout of the battle has been in the making since a bust of 19th century Bengal renaissance stalwart Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was broken during a road show by BJP President Amit Shah in Kolkata a few days before the final phase of polling in parliamentary election on May 19. After the election results were declared on May 23, the daily war of words has taken the form of slogan-coinage, Bangla cultural and independence struggle icons and Hindu deities.

It all began with BJP supporters, emboldened by the party's impressive performance in the polls, confronting Trinamool Congress Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee with “Jai Shri Ram” slogans at least on two occasions, which infuriated her so much that she came out of her

car and snapped back at the slogan-shouting people. Trinamool Congress responded to this by first coming out with “Jai Bangla” slogan. Trinamool Congress has also decided to undertake a door-to-door campaign with the message how Bengal and Bangla culture are different from that BJP is trying to project. In short, Trinamool Congress appears to have decided its fight with BJP as a “Bengali versus non-Bengali” issue.

The main reason behind Trinamool's strategy seems to be the outrage that had followed the vandalising of Vidyasagar's bust. Mamata's party promptly adopted a strident Bangla sub-nationalism stance as all Trinamool Congress leaders, including the Chief Minister, changed their social media picture with the portrait of Vidyasagar. The party also drove home the point that many BJP leaders in West Bengal did not speak Bangla. West Bengal Education Minister Partha Chattopadhyay announced the state government would install the statues of Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore and Ashutosh Mukherjee in Kolkata. It seems to have helped Trinamool Congress in the last round of voting in the nine parliamentary constituencies in and around Kolkata all of which were won by the party. One of the allegations made by Trinamool Congress soon after the bust vandalising incident was that those involved in it

were from “outside” West Bengal.

Later, both BJP and Trinamool Congress made changes in their strategies with contrasting objectives. First, Trinamool Congress added “Jai Hind”, which has a pan-India appeal, to “Jai Bangla” slogan apparently to insulate it from being accused of indulging in Bangla chauvinism. Second, BJP added “Jai Maa Kaali” to its slogan of “Jai Shri Ram” hoping this would give the party wider acceptance to Hindus in West Bengal and to counter Trinamool Congress' Bangla sub-nationalism plank. As part of bolstering its Bangla cultural theme with a pan-India touch.

Also, Mamata Banerjee and other leaders of her party recently changed their profile by including the pictures of Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh to those of Vidyasagar, Matangini Hazra, Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. In a bid to ward off the charge by BJP of her being anti-majority community, Mamata in a Facebook post also said she does not have a problem with the slogan “Jai Shri Ram” but objected to the manner in which it is being used by BJP workers to “create unrest in West Bengal by mixing religion with politics”.

What needs to be pointed out in this context is that Trinamool Congress, like some other anti-BJP parties, have resorted to what is being dubbed as “soft Hindutva” in countering the BJP. One just has to recall how Trinamool leaders and workers had in recent years taken out processions to mark the Ram Navami religious festival to match those of BJP. Trinamool leaders also make it a point to remind the people how long and wide Red Road passing through the Maidan in central Kolkata, which has for long been used for offering of Eid prayers every year, is also witnessing for the last few years a cultural pageantry on the occasion of immersion of the idols of deities at the culmination of Durga Puja festival.

The race for the Bengali mind is certain to heat up in the months ahead of fresh assembly elections in West Bengal due in 2021. Elections in India are won not by developmental issues alone. There have to be some add-on factors like nationalism and sub-nationalism. Implicit in this is the recognition that the debate on nationalism is far from settled even 71 years after independence. I am reminded of my five and half years stay in Dhaka in 1990s, a time which was roiled by a similar debate over Awami League's Bengali nationalism and BNP's Bangladeshi nationalism. Many in Bangladesh had rued that the issue of nationalism remained unresolved even after so many years of liberation.

It might be naive to expect a quick resolution to the debate on nationalism or sub-nationalism in a sharp polarised political atmosphere in an open and pluralistic democracy. It is quite possible that the idea of nationalism is a work in progress. But more importantly, it reflects the social and political metamorphosis taking place in a society.

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