The Daily Star

An irreparable loss to the nation

Nov 3 will remain a day of infamy

THERE are certain days in a nation's history that can never be obliterated from the minds of its people. November 3, 1975 is one of the two days that shall never become antiquated—August 15 being the other. Coming on the heels of the brutal killing of the Father of the Nation and his entire family, save his two daughters, the brutal killing of the four national leaders added to the void that the nation was cast into already. The then Vice-President Syed Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, Captain (Retd) Mansur Ali, and Home Minister AHM Quamruzzaman were brutally gunned down on that day in Dhaka Central Jail, an area that is supposed to be highly secured. They were thorns on the side of the killers of Bangabandhu and their foreign sponsors. As expected of them, they refused to fall for the enticement that the killers offered them.

There can be little doubt that the killings were the result of a deliberate long-term plan following the murder of Bangabandhu, which was to ensure that there would be no credible political force or leadership to carry forward Bangabandhu's ideology and establish the values which formed the guiding principles of our nation. And for which 3 million Bengalis sacrificed their lives and hundreds of thousands of our mothers and sisters sacrificed so much.

For there was no one better equipped nor adequately prepared than these four close associates of Bangabandhu, to bear the mantle of leadership and steer the country out of the morass that it found itself in on August 15, 1975. The four had acquitted themselves remarkably well in the test they faced with Bangabandhu incarcerated in Pakistani jail. They drew their inspiration from Bangabandhu and steered the course of the Liberation War to a successful conclusion.

We recall with gratitude the contribution of the four national leaders to our cause and their stewardship during the tumultuous days of 1971 and soon after our liberation. We hope that their role in our liberation movement, as trusted lieutenants of Bangabandhu, would be properly recorded in our history books and accorded even more reverence than they are now.

Protect the rights of persons with disabilities

Sensitise society towards the issue

IT is unfortunate that persons with disabilities in the country still have to face many problems in their day-to-day life for lack of enforcement of the relevant law and society's total disregard to their needs. These people face obstructions everywhere—from homes to footpaths, public transports to educational institutions, and shopping malls to office buildings. Currently, there are 16 lakh people in the country who have different kinds of disabilities. If we cannot ensure an inclusive environment for them so that they can participate in educational and economic activities comfortably, it is not only that these people will lag behind but the whole country will have to bear the consequences.

According to a *Daily Star* report on November 3, the designated seats in our public transports for people with disabilities are mostly occupied by others and there are no ramps in the buses and trains to allow them to get on and off easily. Even our roads and footpaths are built without taking into consideration the needs of the physically challenged people. Although in Dhaka, the city authorities have started making footpaths accessible to the visually and physically challenged, by using tactile tracks and smooth surface, footpaths are mostly occupied by hawkers, and sometimes bikers.

Under the circumstances, the government needs to strictly enforce the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act, 2013 to protect their rights. The Dhaka Building Construction Rules 2008 in this regard should be strictly implemented. Furthermore, our attitude towards persons with disabilities should be changed through building awareness about the issue among the more fortunate in society. There are many people with disabilities who have overcome their individual challenges and are contributing to our economy. Through ensuring a congenial environment for these people, we can turn these 16 lakh people into an asset.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The mother of all rights!

The recent rise in intolerance towards different opinions among governments and individuals should greatly concern us all.

It seems that in the past decade or so, for whatever reason, people have forgotten the importance of free speech and are justifying the censorship of speech they disagree with using different reasons. But ultimately, once it is accepted that speech can and should be regulated for any reason whatsoever, that always ends up being used by the state to censor speech that it does not like.

It is incredible that we, in the 21st century, do not realise the importance of this lesson. Nor the fact that the right to free speech and expression is the mother of all rights—i.e., all other rights are negotiated and won using the right to free speech and expressions.

It is our lack of knowledge and understanding, despite the availability of ever greater information, that is leading to our own enslavement as we rapidly lose our right to free speech and our ability to articulate the world as we perceive it and offer solutions that could get us out of the various crises that we face today as a civilisation.

Nuzhat Chowdhury, *Dhaka*

The deeper politics of deep sea ports

MUINUL ISLAM

THE Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a development strategy of the Chinese government aimed at enhancing regional connectivity and cooperation among the Eurasian countries—primarily the People's Republic of China and the countries that spread along the historically famous land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR).

BRI is designed to address an infrastructure gap along several land corridors of Asia, Europe and Africa and in maritime countries of Asia, Europe, Africa and Oceania. The proposed infrastructure development projects including deep seaports, highways and railways in Bangladesh under BRI for regional connectivity, should be given utmost importance by the Government of Bangladesh for modernising and expanding the existing infrastructure facilities in the country, which have been acting as serious bottlenecks in the way of our economic development.

Bangladesh became a part of the regional cooperation arrangement known as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), also known as the Kunming Initiative, which was vigorously pursued by both India and China up to 2014. But after the election defeat of the Congress-led coalition government in India in 2014, the UPA government led by BJP's Narendra Modi virtually abandoned the BCIM-EC agreement for its changed regional geopolitical strategy, where India considers China as its foremost regional adversary and superpower rival. Therefore, India has forged a strong alliance with the USA and Japan to deny China easy access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.

It is alleged that pressure was exerted on Bangladesh in 2014 to cancel a financing arrangement with China to build a deep sea port in Sonadia of Cox's Bazar. Earlier, a feasibility study conducted by a Japanese firm in 2009 recommended to build the Sonadia Deep Sea Port in phases.

Prime Minister Modi has been propagating a new regional cooperation arrangement since then styled as BBIN Framework including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. Needless to say, the BBIN framework will be a very poor alternative to BCIM-EC. But it seems the BCIM-EC will not be implemented in the near future. The future of Sonadia Deep Sea Port project is now uncertain. Under the BCIM-EC arrangement, two projects for building a railway line and a highway connecting Bangladesh's Ukhia in Cox's Bazar with China's Kunming City and the Yunan province through Myanmar were taken up for implementation. The Bangladesh part of the railway line is being constructed, but the Myanmar parts of both of the railway and highway projects seem to have been abandoned by Myanmar.

Earlier, China helped Myanmar to build a deep sea port at Sittwe (former Akyab), capital of Rakhine State, to overcome the problems of its Yangon Port. India has taken up the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project linking Mizoram of India with Sittwe to provide the land-locked "Seven Sisters" states of North-east India a vital ocean link for international trade through the deeply excavated and broadened Kaladan River. But after its failure to obtain clearance for Sonadia, China quickly embarked on a new cooperation arrangement with Myanmar for building another deep sea port and a special economic zone in Kyaukphyu, about 100km south of Sittwe. It should be clear that both China and India are vying for Myanmar's favour for their own geo-strategic advantages. Obviously, Bangladesh cannot out-compete Myanmar in this geo-political game because of the latter's vast natural resources as well as geo-strategic advantages.

Meanwhile, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been given a contract by Bangladesh to build a deep sea port along with an LNG terminal at Matarbari of Maheshkhali in Cox's Bazar, not far away from Sonadia. It is claimed that Matarbari Port will provide about 13 metres of depth for deep-draft ships. But experts point out that Sonadia has got a gift of nature in the form of a deep strip of the Bay of Bengal with a natural depth of 15 metres.

Experts advise that Bangladesh should not abandon the idea of building a genuine deep sea port on Sonadia Island. PHOTO: STAR

Experts advise that Bangladesh should not abandon the idea of building a genuine deep sea port in Sonadia Island. Now that the geo-political rivalry of the superpowers has led to the lack of support for the Chinese-funded deep sea port project, for the time being Bangladesh should start to build the port in phases for its own use with alternative sources of financing, especially in the context of the sad reality that Bangladesh's prime sea port at Chattogram has become seriously handicapped because of a maximum of only 9.1 metres of available draft for ships.

Chattogram has become a lighterage port where deeper-draft ships and longer ships are anchored at the outer-anchorage in the Bay. Lighter vessels are used to lighter the cargo or the containers to the port at considerable cost involving both money and time. Even the bigger motherships unload their import-cargo or containers at either Singapore or Colombo to be lightered to Chattogram in lighter-vessels. Similar lighterage methods are used for some export items from Bangladesh. A proposed "Bay Terminal" at Patenga coast with a maximum available draft of 12 metres for ships may be able to handle longer ships with deeper draft, but that will not meet the urgent need for a genuine deep sea port for the rapidly growing economy of Bangladesh.

The reality is that Bangladesh cannot antagonise its regional superpower neighbour India, which surrounds Bangladesh from three sides. Bangladesh has a very delicate balancing act at hand in pursuing the opportunities offered by China's BRI projects. Bangladesh officially became a participant of BRI in 2016, when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh, through signing a number of projects worth USD 21.5 billion. But we have to make judicious feasibility study of plans before accepting Chinese credit for infrastructure projects. We should also carefully study the terms and conditions of the loans to avoid the alleged "debt traps" created in different countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan.

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BLOCKCHAIN:
Ticket to universality of truths?

CYBERNAUTIC RUMINATIONS

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

BLOCKCHAIN technology has been all the rage of late from Azkaban to Zurich, from magical realms to the real world. This cryptic name for a technology is far more cryptic in construction that started its journey in 2008 when someone or some group under the penname of Satoshi Nakamoto published on the internet a whitepaper titled, "Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System". This paper promised to solve the decades-old "double-spend" problem of electronic cash operation without the need for a "trusted intermediary". So now I have introduced two more esoteric concepts to explain the first cryptic abstraction.

"Double-spend" has long been recognised as a truculent challenge that the smartest programmers, data scientists and cryptographers in the world failed to resolve through even the most clever algorithmic constructs since the seventies. So what is the intractable "double-spend" problem? Since electronic computing facilities became the norm in large government, financial and business organisations, first in the developed economies and then increasingly all over the world since the seventies, the concept of electronic cash has cropped up time and time again. However, when we send a mail or a document electronically to someone, as is ubiquitous these days, we basically share a copy of the text or document.
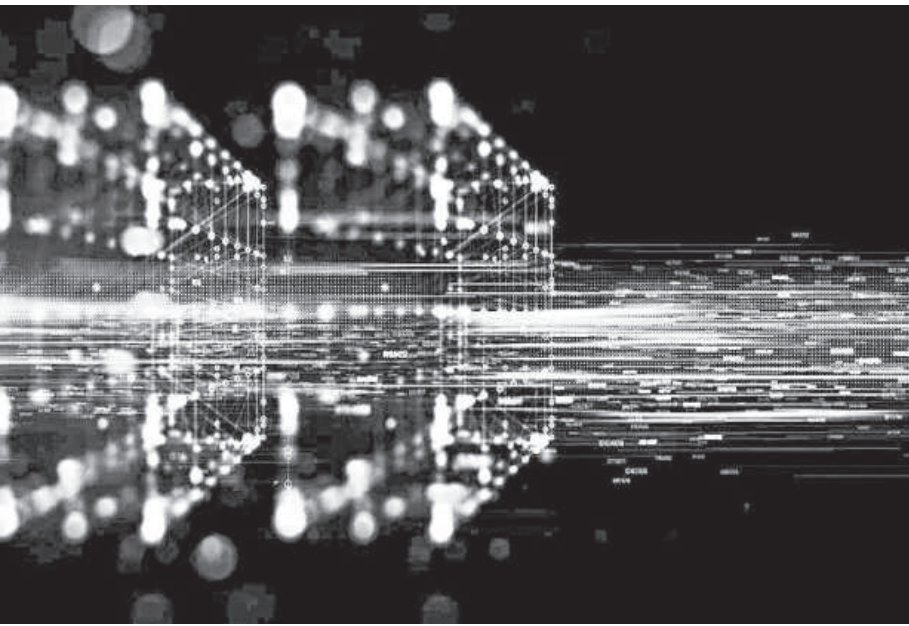
However, if we want to send someone money electronically, we cannot simply send some electronic money and still retain a copy because then we can keep on sending such electronic cash to any number of people and hence the double-spend problem arose. To prevent such double spend we use trusted intermediaries such as banks that keep track of our money whether dispensed physically through an ATM or electronically through Electronic Fund Transfer Network (EFTN). No amount of encryption of the transmission messages can help prevent the double-spend problem when such transactions take place peer to peer, meaning between two individuals directly without a trusted intermediary employed as the gatekeeper. The encryption of such messages only helps with privacy of data and prevention of unauthorised access.

So how did Bitcoin solve this when it debuted in 2009? Bitcoin is built on a new technology called Blockchain that

A Blockchain literally is a chain of data blocks interlinked through cryptographic hash functions that prevent any tampering of such data contained in the blocks.

the proponents of Bitcoin put together using a combination of established cryptographic protocols, innovative algorithmic design and game theory concepts. The last part drawn from game theory is what allows Bitcoin to operate as an electronic cash system without the need for a trusted intermediary. This very first use-case of Blockchain technology is known as permission-less blockchain meaning it is open to all for participation. Anyone, anywhere in the world can download the Bitcoin app and start participating in the Bitcoin ecosystem.

Blockchain technology's utility is much broader than its use just as a crypto-currency such as Bitcoin, Ethereum or Ripple—three popular crypto-currencies out of thousands available today. Blockchain's biggest strength is its ability to maintain any chain of transaction data in an open, distributed and immutable fashion. In other words, it provides an openly verified audit trail of transactions that cannot be changed by any one person.

This powerful concept of "Single Truth" for anything of value such as money, land titles, shares in public companies, skills certifications, government subsidies, taxes, etc., can be applied through use of Blockchain technology whereby the truth regarding anything of value can be ascertained automatically when all parties of a particular value-based ecosystem participate in the Blockchain implementation.

A Blockchain literally is a chain of data blocks interlinked through cryptographic hash functions that prevent any tampering of such data contained in the blocks. Any tampering of data in a block will prevent the hash functions from pairing up with the previous and subsequent blocks and thus the chain containing the suspicious block will be rejected. However, not all blockchain use-cases are permission-less, that is free for all to participate. For example, Hyperledger—an open-source Blockchain protocol—allows constructing permissioned blockchain ecosystems where certain relevant stakeholders are allowed to participate. Let's say the government decides to use Blockchain for land ownership records or titles, then the government agencies or staff that are directly involved in administering land ownership records will constitute one set of permissioned participants while the land owners will be another set of permissioned participants who in turn can invite a bank financing the land purchase to have access to the relevant ownership details, and all such participants thus become privy to the single truth on land ownerships.

Blockchain is tremendously powerful as a tool for maintaining open, distributed and immutable truths that matter for anything of value. The adoption of this new technology has been challenging because of the highly complex nature of the technology itself, even though the underlying concepts are well established. Many different platforms for deployment of Blockchain technology are competing for market share and new platforms continue to evolve as we speak. Technology pundits believe Blockchain will transform transactional businesses like the internet transformed information sharing. Blockchain promises to finally deliver humanity from the capriciousness of manipulated truths. Shall we ride to the top of this surging wave of "Single Truth" technology and be a vanguard in the tsunami of blockchain use-cases aimed at universality of truths?

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