

Myanmar in the dock

But how likely are the Rohingyas to get justice?

India's Citizenship Bill

Is it the end of a pluralistic and secular India?

COMING on the heels of the controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC) policy in Assam, does the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB), one wonders, herald the end of a pluralistic and secular India, and the fulfilment of the dream of the RSS and its founders like Savarkar? What is so ominously clear is the end of a pluralistic and secular state as far as India is concerned, because the Bill, once the legislative process is completed, will strike at the very fundamental principles and ethos on which the country's founding fathers had established it. And it will validate communal politics in India, which the BJP government had no pretensions about since it came to power in the Centre in India.

Admittedly, elected leaders do have the right to implement policies which in their wisdom they see as beneficial to the country and its people. But popular mandate does not allow for the kind of politics where brute majority in parliament is exploited for partisan politics that strikes at the basic ethos of a nation. This, along with the NRC, we are constrained to say, is blatantly discriminatory towards the Muslims. What we see as even more worrisome is that the CAB directly encourages migration of Hindus from Bangladesh.

India's soul, we dare say, is being jaundiced. That's a pity and we say this from our own experience when the fundamental tenet of the nation—secularism—was deleted from the Constitution of Bangladesh. We say this also out of a feeling of apprehension and a sense of despondency as well. Because, India was cited, not only by Bangladesh but also the world, as an example of a pluralistic, inclusive nation with a syncretic culture and eclectic society. What we see now is the retrogression of a nation which once exemplified "unity in diversity" to an exclusively Hindu state where only one religion will prevail. That, we regrettably say, will strike the very soul of India. And the consequence of this policy will certainly reach its neighbouring countries too—to which India may not remain impervious.

A man's love for trees

A lesson for us all

IT is heartening to learn from a report by *The Daily Star* on December 9 that a farmer named Md Abdul Wahid Sardar in Jashore has been removing nails from billboards, banners and signboards from the trunks of roadside trees since July 2018. Until now, he has removed 250 kilogrammes of nails from 22,000 trees. The 57-year-old man has also been planting trees since 2006. He has planted about 20,000 fruit and medicinal plants in different places of Jashore town, including mosques, temples, police stations and road intersections, with his own money.

The story of Wahid Sardar is very encouraging, particularly at a time when influential people all across the country have been destroying the environment—cutting down trees, razing the hills, polluting and grabbing rivers—for petty self-interests and financial gains. In the recent past, the country has faced many environmental disasters, such as cyclones and land erosion, the effects of which could have been minimised by planting more trees. The lack of greenery in the capital is also taking a toll on people's health. Amid such a situation, Wahid has set an example of what can be done on a personal level to save the environment.

Many of us may not be aware of the Graffiti Writing and Poster Sticking Control Act, 2012, according to which it is illegal to put a billboard on a tree, because like many other environmental laws, this law is also not enforced. Surprisingly, Wahid Sardar not only knows the law but also has been making people aware of it. This law should be strictly enforced by the authorities concerned, including the forest department, and there should also be specific guidelines about where billboards and posters can be put up.

We hope Wahid Sardar's mission to plant and save trees will encourage others to do the same. We believe that there are many people like him amongst us who, with some encouragement, can take up similar endeavours and play a vital role in saving the environment.



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

MADE stateless by Myanmar in 1982, the Rohingyas have been left vulnerable to waves of violence at the hands of the Burmese army as part of a "clearing" programme that began in the 1970s. The latest of these waves forced more than 700,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh since 2017. In its report published in September 2018, an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar revealed that "perpetrators have killed Rohingya, caused serious bodily and mental harm... [and] deliberately inflicted conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of Rohingya."

This led the Gambia to accuse Myanmar of violating the 1948 Genocide Convention, asking the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of the United Nations to order Myanmar to cease continuing its "genocidal acts" against the Rohingyas and to bring those responsible to justice. The 46-page application

appointed International Fact-Finding Mission in September 2019, "hundreds of thousands of ethnic Rohingya who remain in Myanmar may face greater threat of genocide than ever, amid government attempts to erase their identity and remove them from the country." As such, the Gambia's Attorney General and Justice Minister Abubacarr Marie Tambadou, also a former prosecutor at the tribunal into Rwanda's 1994 genocide, appealed to the court during the ICJ hearing (which began on December 10 and is set to end today) to "tell Myanmar to stop these senseless killings... these acts of barbarity that continue to shock our collective conscience."

Whether Myanmar will take heed of any such warning, should the court provide it, is another story. The main complications in regard to the ICJ hearing are: i) It may take years for the final judgement to be delivered; and ii) An individual cannot sue or be sued at the ICJ, and the court can only determine whether a state breached a law. According to Ilias Bantekas, a professor of law at Hamad bin Khalifa University, "The best the victims can claim from this is an acknowledgement of the type of mass crime committed and an authoritative

in Myanmar." Sticking to Myanmar's old tune of blaming the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army for all the violence, Suu Kyi tactfully evaded the countless allegations of grave human rights violation directed against Myanmar by various human rights groups and UN missions. (A more detailed examination of her speech will be published tomorrow.)

Despite that, lawyer Priya Pillay believes that the case represents "a significant step in the quest for accountability." And Richard Dicker, head of the international justice programme at the Human Rights Watch, says, "It's difficult to overstate the importance of what is unfolding at the ICJ."

Besides, the loopholes that exist at the ICJ could be made up for in a separate investigation that was opened by the International Criminal Court (ICC), after a UN Fact-Finding Mission last year called for six of Myanmar's top generals to be tried for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Unlike the ICJ, the ICC investigates individuals rather than states. Put together, the ICC and the ICJ will be investigating both the state of Myanmar and those individuals alleged to be responsible for the persecution of Rohingyas, which is good news.

being issued for Myanmar's generals, although the process itself is lengthy and may require Myanmar to hand over the suspects, which is unlikely.

There is also a third case that Myanmar must worry about. A case filed in Argentina—under the principle of "universal jurisdiction" similar to the one in the ICJ—by Argentinian lawyer Tomas Ojea, once a UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar between 2008 and 2014. Ojea is a first-hand witness to the sufferings of the Rohingyas and his lawsuit is being supported by two Argentinian human rights groups.

The procedures of all three lawsuits are long and complex. And what each court decides is anyone's guess, even though evidence gathered by the UN and others does lend sufficient weight against Myanmar. However, there is another aspect here that is equally important—that of politics.

Thus far, the international community has not taken enough significant steps, nor put sufficient pressure on Myanmar, to substantially influence the condition of the crisis. The UN Security Council has failed to pass any meaningful resolution, mainly due to the opposition of Russia and China, both of whom have good relations with Myanmar. Other countries that could have played a big role in mitigating the crisis have also refrained from doing so, perhaps believing that silence will best serve their own interests.

If nothing else, these cases will raise the political cost of supporting Myanmar for all countries, which could mean that countries that previously supported Myanmar can no longer afford to do so. Simultaneously, it increases the viability of countries that have so far remained on the fence to join the ranks of countries that are speaking up for the rights of the Rohingyas—and against genocide.

This could potentially make it easier for the international community to come to a consensus, and to finally take actions needed to put enough pressure on Myanmar to stop its violent campaign against the Rohingyas.

As far as holding those responsible for the crimes that have been committed are concerned, that seems more difficult. But it's not impossible. Should the ICJ rule against Myanmar, and the two other courts find those named in the additional cases guilty, and the international community puts enough pressure on Myanmar to comply with the court rulings, something like that could happen.

For now, that seems like a long shot. But the heat on Myanmar has certainly been turned up. And the Myanmar authorities, who have shown absolute contempt for all of its critics so far, should definitely think twice about how they should proceed from this point on.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. His Twitter handle is: @EreshOmarJamal



Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (Centre) stands before the International Court of Justice at the start of a three-day hearing in a Rohingya genocide case, in the Peace Palace of The Hague, the Netherlands, on December 10, 2019. PHOTO: AFP

submitted to the ICJ said: "The genocidal acts committed during these operations were intended to destroy the Rohingya as a group... by the use of mass murder, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as the systematic destruction by fire of their villages, often with inhabitants locked inside burning houses."

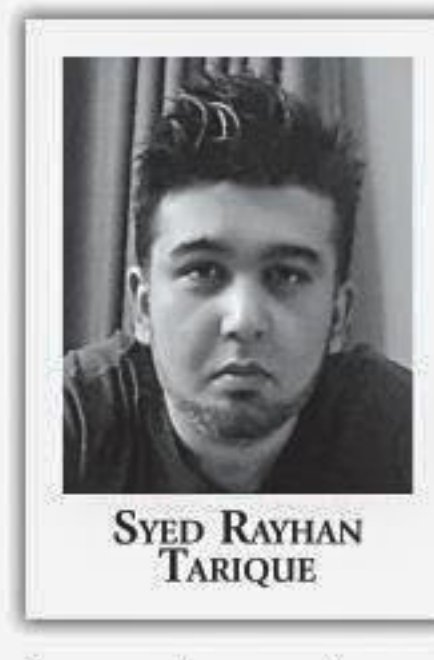
This ground-breaking case could potentially be very important in terms of preventing further injustice, as according to another report published by a UN-

record of events" (Al-Jazeera). The court could further direct Myanmar to issue "a formal apology to the victims", alongside "some form of collective compensation."

Most regrettably, Myanmar continues to deny committing any serious crimes against the Rohingyas. In her response at the ICJ yesterday, State Counsellor of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, said that "the Gambia has placed before the court an incomplete and misleading factual picture of the situation in Rakhine State

Even though Myanmar has not signed up to the ICC, the court launched its preliminary investigations on the basis that Bangladesh—where the Rohingyas are refugees—is a member. According to government data, between August 2017 and November 3 this year, Bangladesh has had to directly spend Tk 2,308 crore for the management of the crisis, as well as bear a number of other visible and invisible costs. The investigation could ultimately lead to arrest warrants

Are we paying enough attention to digital public relations?



SYED RAYHAN TARIQUE

HUMAN behaviour continues to evolve over time. In this post-modern age, however, our collective behaviour has been evolving faster than ever. Modern humans thrive on constant online engagement,

interaction and communication. Our lives are now defined by an insatiable need for digital connectivity, to an extent that we have lost sense of the physical world and have developed a new cosmos for our own individual self—all within the parameters of cyberspace. We are always connected to each other and any information we need is only seconds away. Accessing and sharing information has never been simpler and easier.

The traditional thought process is being replaced with the modern digital cuisine of connectivity: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, WeChat, Line, etc. Information and entertainment are on the palms of our hands, with a variety of service-providers rooting for our attention. For customers, three words define the experience—Endless Digital Entertainment. Therefore, business corporations that have not been able to master the newer modes of communication have lost ground to those that have.

The media industry across the globe is suffering the brunt of this transformation. Newspapers as well as marketing communications agencies are racing to catch up with the rapid transition to digital screens. Customers are now fully aware of the business operations of media houses. Hence, publishing advertisements for products and services is no longer the ideal route to influence customers but may only be for building awareness—and that, too, without credibility.

Our consumption behaviour has changed tremendously. We are now much more informed. Before taking any decision, we can consider all our options. Therefore, "credibility" is KEY. To ensure credibility, word of mouth

has also become ever more important. We seek more of direct reviews from our loved ones, friends and even strangers on the internet. For that purpose, we search and find articles and information about products and services, rather than visiting stores, malls or checking out published advertisements. We do not purchase a product before we have considered all our options and are convinced of our chosen brand's credibility.

In order to build this credibility, businesses across the globe are looking for ways to develop positive perception about their products and services through new scopes of public relations in both traditional and digital spaces. Whether in the traditional or digital space, public relations (PR) is the most effective tool a brand can use to develop credibility and add new perspectives for customers to consume or buy.

Public relations is all about building a brand's identity, developing reputation and projecting a brand's characteristics in a way that will lure customers to consume and influence them to buy, all depending on how you communicate with your customers. These days, due to the emergence of social media, the bridge between brands and customers has become more direct, interactive and engaging.

Hence, using public relations, brands can now communicate key messages, instigate relevant brand emotions, target customers' need more specifically, and address their queries and serve them individually. This leads to positive customer experiences and helps brands engrave a positive perception in the customer's mind. All of the above complements the constant delivery of key messages to the customers through traditional print and online media houses.

Building credibility lies in the art of delivering messages subtly to customers across the board—driving brand sensations, sculpting a positive thought process, instigating awareness and establishing industry stance. Hence, it is safe to say that social media has become the most powerful tool for public relations.

Nowadays, companies seek direct engagement with their customers and

consumers. Every brand wants to create the best possible user experience—be it about service or product. Every company wants to establish itself as more customer/consumer-friendly than its competitors. For that, it wants to interact with each individual customer and draw a blueprint of their behaviour to fully comprehend and outline a pattern of their consumption. This has set the tone for an integration within the communication industry—the merging of social media and public relations with data science and research.

But a question that we must ask ourselves is, how prepared is Bangladesh to start integrating social media with public relations, and public relations with data science and research?

The communication industry globally is evolving into an integrated one-stop solution for all. Bangladesh, however, has remained stuck in traditional ways despite the vision for digitalisation making commendable strides. The main reason for this could be the relatively slow progress in ensuring industrial frameworks, regulations and policies that can help the industries to grow, mature and compete globally.

Another aspect the country suffers from is the lack of understanding of how public relations actually works—the misconception that public relations is bounded by the idea of press releases and paid adverts. Unfortunately, this misconception rides heavily amongst the local corporates and even communication specialists across companies. The whole idea of media engagement is mostly misconstrued and public relations is quietly placed in the backseat of the communication vehicle. As a result, the industry bleeds heavily in terms of effective communication, and suffers with a deepening wound in keeping up with global standards.

On the other hand, the potential of digital marketing has only been limited to likes, comments and shares. Whereas, globally, the social media platform has become the key dais for building reputation and perception. Global brands have taken the opportunity to use this platform to deliver brand messages in the

most unconventional ways, embracing subtlety and amplifying features through quirky videos and static posts that beg people's attention. Business organisations need to realise that social media is only a public relations tool to enhance reputation and drive the right messages to the right people. The way to go about modern communication is simply integrating public relations with social media. The potential to drive and enhance reputation with the right strategic approach can deliver a wondrous outcome, and the prospects of generating good content that can create awareness are limitless.

Just like public relations uses traditional media like print media houses, television channels and online news portals as prime platforms for delivering key messages, similarly, social media can be considered as one of the most effective platforms to do the same. Big corporations need to understand that integrating the two industries into one can pave the way for more effective communication, which will not only be more strategic in nature but also well-aligned with more focused messaging. In this era of the millennials and Generation Z, it has become pertinent that agencies and corporations start to embrace the ideology of digital marketing as a tool of public relations. Maybe, with this, the true potential of digital marketing will be realised and it will bring more sense in terms of ideation and also enable them to address and deliver key messages to the right people more effectively.

It is important that our educational institutions realise the importance of communication and public relations and create scopes to produce human resources with the right skill-sets. Industry players should also work on opening the doors to the global market by eradicating misconceptions prevailing in the industry and ensure productive dialogue with the global players to establish a strong foundation that promotes local players to implement and understand global practices. They should also create opportunities to further develop the communication industry.

Syed Rayhan Tarique is Associate Director at Client Relations, Forethought PR Limited.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Will justice be finally served?

The state of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh was taking a toll as no positive approaches were being made until recently. Much to the world's relief, The Gambia finally filed the case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Myanmar, accusing it of genocide against the minority Rohingya population.

At the UN's top court, a 17-member panel of judges of ICJ were present during the first international legal attempt to bring Myanmar to justice over the mass killings of the Rohingyas. According to a report published in this daily, Professor Mizanur Rahman, an expert on international law at Dhaka University, said that if the ICJ primarily found evidence of genocide, it could issue an order for provisional measures. And as there is plenty of evidence to prove the perpetrators wrong, I hope that they will be convicted for genocide. What they did to the Rohingyas will never be forgotten. However, yesterday when Aung San Suu Kyi ruled out the allegation of ongoing genocide or genocidal intent at Rohingya villages in Rakhine, it was absolutely unacceptable! Does that mean the entire community of Rohingyas are lying? The horrors they faced are clearly visible on their faces. Like the rest, I just hope and pray that justice will be served.

Al-Amin Rubel, Dhaka