

The passing away of an icon, a trailblazer

We join the nation in mourning

IN the passing of Sir Fazle Hasan Abed the country has lost a humanitarian of the highest order, whose mission in life was the betterment of the poor. His humanitarian propensities became evident after the devastating cyclone of 1970 when he mastered his efforts to reach succour to the thousands of helpless people of the coastal district of the country, particularly in the island of Manpura, which had lost three quarters of its population. And very soon after the Liberation War, Sir Fazle understood that there was a need to strut government efforts to tackle the post-war devastation by other means, particularly the efforts of organised, non-state actor and this led to the formation of Brac. The organisation, under his stewardship, provided essential services to millions of poor Bangladeshis and today Brac is the world's largest NGO working in 11 countries. If a person's success is measured by the number of people whose lives, he or she has been able to affect positively, then Sir Fazle has touched the lives of millions. He has pioneered issues close to his heart like poverty reduction, primary education, enhancing skills, microfinance, agriculture and enterprise development. In education, Brac has played a leading role in promoting education at the primary level. The organisation has done much in the field of microfinance and to extend credit facilities to the poorest. Sir Fazle dreamt of a Bangladesh free of poverty and has received due recognition both at home and internationally. He was knighted in 2010 for his outstanding work in alleviating poverty, especially of women and children. The nation will be grateful to him for instilling in us the very critical self-confidence that we can overcome our woes. The institutions he has built are a legacy for not only Bangladesh but also for the rest of the world.

Asean shouldn't be at Myanmar's beck and call

Heed the legitimate grievances of Rohingyas

THE recent visit by a joint delegation of Myanmar and Asean to the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar saw Myanmar follow the usual trail of deceptions, falsehoods and complicit silence which have come to be associated with its bid to sell its repatriation story. Although they tried, unconvincingly, to persuade the Rohingyas to return home, without heeding any of their demands, it wasn't the latter that was their intended listeners. With the genocide trial underway at the International Court of Justice, Myanmar clearly timed the visit to send a message about its "commitment" to addressing the Rohingya crisis and thereby bolster its position in the trial. As preposterous as these theatrics maybe, what is more disturbing is the role of Asean, of which Myanmar is a member country. Asean's transformation from its pro-Rohingya stance in the early days of the crisis to its hands-off strategy in later days is baffling, to say the least. As the crisis lingered on, much to our shock, it further degenerated into being at Myanmar's beck and call, aiding it in advancing its cause at the expense of millions of Rohingyas. One may recall the disclosure of a leaked report in June in which Asean gave Myanmar a clean chit: blatantly hiding well-documented facts about the brutalities committed by the Myanmar army in Rakhine. Such an act, as we have said in earlier columns, amounts to validating and legalising actions that have been internationally accepted as "ethnic cleansing". Now, by sending its team to do Myanmar's bidding, at a time when it is expected to extend support to the judicial process of the UN, Asean has once again shown its pro-Myanmar bias and the moral hollowiness at the heart of its Rohingya policy. Clearly, it is not just Asean's credibility that is at stake here. We are talking about the fate of a stateless people who have been persecuted again and again, and who are now staring into an even darker future because of the parochial interests of Myanmar and its backers and because those responsible for its ethnic cleansing project couldn't be brought to justice. Asean needs a critical rethink of its existing policy. Instead of blindly supporting Myanmar, it should engage in a constructive dialogue for a viable solution to the crisis. And there can be no solution without addressing the legitimate demands and concerns of the Rohingyas. If one thing that the protracted crisis has proven, it is that a business-as-usual approach is not going to solve it.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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More mental health awareness is needed

Mental health awareness among teenagers is very common in our country. Yet, it is not paid much attention to because of the widespread stigma in our community against people with mental illnesses and also because of the lack of understanding about the matter. We must comprehend the seriousness of this subject and act accordingly. Earlier, World Health Organization reported that mental disorders affect 16.1 percent of adults and 18.4 percent of children in this country. Moreover, the condition of our mental health institutes across the nation, including Pabna Mental Hospital, the country's first specialised hospital for patients suffering from mental illnesses, are all extremely concerning. Most of them are underfunded and understaffed, which tend to have an extremely negative impact on the helpless patients, most of whom are also mistreated in their own homes. If the government does not raise more awareness about mental health and solve the problems we have regarding the issue in our society, it will only get worse by the day. And no country should remain so ignorant towards its own citizens.

Bulbul Ahmed, Jhenaidah

India's NRC and the new Citizenship Law are fraught with ramifications

MUHAMMAD AZIZUL HAQUE

PROTESTS against a divisive new citizenship law began to rage in the northeastern states of India (Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, etc.) on December 11, 2019 when the BJP-led Hindu nationalist government won parliamentary approval for the new citizenship law. Such protests, at times violent (clashes with police have, meanwhile, caused a number of deaths), have now engulfed all of India and continue unabated. Police clashed with protesters in Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore, Lucknow, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Patna, Raipur and in many other places. The scaled-up protests have witnessed West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee at the head of long street marches in Kolkata in the east of the country; and the Congress and CPI (M), two arch-rivals in the political arena, sharing the same dais in Thiruvananthapuram, capital of Kerala, in the south. At least five state chief ministers, including those of West Bengal and Kerala, have vowed to reject the implementation of the new citizenship law in their respective states.

The new citizenship law grants Indian citizenship to non-Muslims, who fled Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan before 2015. Along with Muslim immigrants from those three countries, if any; other minorities, such as Tamils from Sri Lanka, Rohingyas from Myanmar and Tibetans from China would also be refused citizenship. Therefore, they would be rendered stateless. The law evidently violates the principles of equality and secularism enshrined in India's constitution. Some opponents of the law have already submitted petitions in India's Supreme Court to challenge the legality of this law. The topmost court says it will hear the petitions in January (2020). Prime Minister Modi, however, remains defiant; and is blaming the opposition Congress Party for spreading "violence and creating an environment of fear by lying about the law's intent", and on December 19, police banned protests against the controversial law in several places in India. However, protesters are defying the ban.

The enactment of the law is the third major election promise that Modi's government has fulfilled. Political analysts believe that the law will re-invigorate his nationalist Hindu support base and divert people's attention away "from a slackening economy". The opposition and rights groups believe it is part of Modi's Hindu-nationalist masterplan aimed at marginalisation of India's 200 million Muslims. His government said the Citizenship Bill had "sought to correct the wrong done by the partition of India on religious lines". The BJP-led government, by having passed the new discriminatory citizenship

law, and pursuing NRC, has, in effect, lent weight, despite itself, to Pakistan's founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah's "Two-Nation theory", which considered Hindus and Muslims as two separate nations, who should have separate homelands. Derek O'Brien, an opposition lawmaker in the upper house of the Indian parliament, observed that the legislation had an "eerie similarity" to Nazi laws against Jews in 1930s' Germany. Many Indian Muslims feel they have become second-class citizens since Mr Modi assumed power as prime minister in 2014. Several cities with Islamic-sounding names were renamed. Allahabad, for instance, became Prayagraj, or Prayag, and Faizabad district became Ayodhya, while some school textbooks reportedly stand modified to understate Muslims' contributions to India. In August (2019), the Indian government rescinded the special status, or limited autonomy, that was granted to Jammu and Kashmir—the only Muslim

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majority state of India—under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. The government has split the state into two union territories—each to be governed by a lieutenant governor and a unicameral legislature. A register of citizens in Assam, finalised recently, left out 1.9 million people, a huge chunk of them Muslims. Now they are facing possible statelessness, detention in camps and even deportation. The BJP-led government intends to replicate the register nationwide with the aim of deporting all "infiltrators" by 2024. Modi's right-hand-man and Home Minister, Amit Shah, has compared illegal immigrants to "termites". Human Rights Watch suspects that "the Indian



Protesters participate in a mass rally against the Indian government's Citizenship Amendment Act in Kolkata on December 16.

PHOTO: AFP

government is creating legal grounds to strip millions of Muslims of their fundamental right of equal access to citizenship". The US Commission on International Religious Freedom termed the Constitutional Amendment Bill a "dangerous turn in the wrong direction". The BJP-led NDA government of India seems to have taken the sub-continent back to a situation that smacks of the horrific communal situation in India in 1947. Far-right Hindu nationalist political organisations like BJP, RSS, Biswa Hindu Parishad, Shib Sena, etc. have been nurturing communalistic "Hindutva" (an ideology seeking to establish Hindu hegemony and the Hindu way of life) in constitutionally secular India since its independence. There was BJP-led government in India in the past (Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government) too, but that government had not pushed "Hindutva" too far. Persecution of minorities, especially of Muslims, has been carried to extremes under the Modi government. This is indeed inconceivable in these enlightened times. The right-wing Hindutvadi cultural and political organisations envision India as a Hindu country and regard Muslims as outsiders. During the first term of the Modi government, Muslims were killed just for eating beef and were coerced into converting to Hinduism under the Ghar Wapsi programme. Celebrity actors like Aamir Khan and Shah Rukh Khan felt insecure and alienated in an atmosphere of extreme religious intolerance; and they faced severe backlashes too for voicing their sense of insecurity. The new citizenship law, the pursuance of NRC, and other acts of discrimination against Muslims could divide the Indian nation and generate communal unrest

and tensions amongst the people of India, with serious implications for India's economy. All such acts of the Modi government are potentially fraught with diverse ramifications for India and its neighbours. These could provoke acts of communal hatred in all the countries of South Asia; and could plunge them into political chaos, social instability, and religious riots between different communities. The communally biased steps of the BJP-led government could also embitter India's bilateral relations with its Muslim neighbours; and badly undermine the efforts towards economic integration between the South Asian countries. These could also spark a wish amongst the Hindus in the Muslim majority neighbours of India to migrate in large numbers to India in expectation that the cut-off date of 2015 would be further extended. On the other hand, Muslims in India could come under increased communalistic pressure to leave their own homeland for one of the Muslim majority countries in the sub-continent—a situation that would be vividly reminiscent of the atmosphere of trepidation and mass migration of people between India and Pakistan in 1947. It is because of the far-right Hindu nationalist organisations in India that communal sentiments of Hindu majority India have remained largely at the 1947 level. However, as the largest country in South Asia, it was incumbent upon India to lift the masses from the scourges of religious bigotry, extremism, militancy, communal hatred, etc. The founding fathers of independent India dreamt of a secular India—and not of a Hindu state.

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Improving the process of our urban development



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IN building urban infrastructure and services, we are faced with a huge challenge of meeting the demand created by increasing rate of urbanisation in Bangladesh. It is a paradoxical situation where central and local government bodies are constantly implementing new infrastructure projects but cannot keep up with the demand due to: i) Need for new roads, drains, water supply, health and educational institutions, public toilets etc. in the ever-growing urban context; and ii) Repeated demand created mainly due to poor operation and maintenance (O&M) of infrastructure facilities. O&M is considered by engineers as an essential and routine task to enhance the life of infrastructure and assets. However, there is lack of appreciation about the value of O&M in sustaining development efforts. Operation and maintenance refer to operating a service with good quality and preserving infrastructure in usable conditions through inspection, routine maintenance and scheduled replacement procedures. The purpose of O&M is to ensure efficiency and sustainability of service delivery and infrastructure quality. O&M activities are important for at least three different reasons: (i) It ensures the sustainability of an infrastructure and enables service delivery; (ii) It helps to provide agreed amount of services and benefits to the end-users; and iii) it prevents a service system from collapse, creating environmental and health hazards. We often see roads, drains and public buildings falling into disrepair and become unusable before their projected lives are reached. Not properly maintaining urban services is considered a loss for the country. The responsibility of O&M falls mainly on the government departments which invest in infrastructure and provide public services. Local government bodies like City Corporations and Paurashavas

in urban areas and Union Parishads, Upazila Parishads and Zilla Parishads in rural areas also develop roads, bridges and drainage systems; build offices, houses, community centres, markets, parks and playgrounds; and provide utility services like drinking water, streetlights, solid waste collection and others. The responsibility to operate and maintain them also falls mostly on the respective local bodies. Those of us living in urban areas regularly experience problems with our piped water in terms of both quantity and quality of supply, to give an example of challenges faced by urban people.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

This problem is, however, not caused only by technical factors but also due to managerial, financial, institutional and social reasons. These have a relationship with the level of O&M planned and implemented to keep service delivery at a sustainable level. An ongoing and quality O&M is crucial for sustainability and lack of it can cause service failures and frustration for the urban dwellers. Poor O&M planning, limited budgetary allocation, inadequate cost recovery, shortage of staff and centralised agency's inadequate outreach capacity are responsible for early decay of public infrastructure and poor utility services.

Operation and maintenance have been a neglected area in Bangladesh so far, but they have been getting some attention in recent times. The government is now emphasising the need for routine maintenance especially after completion of a development project. It has been recognised that not properly maintaining the physical conditions both during and after a project ended is supposed to lower its value and has a serious negative consequence on the social benefits accruing from it. Not maintaining a project well is also reasoned as an evidence of poor results derived from it



and this often obstructs the policymakers from pursuing same type of projects in future, although the project, if properly maintained, may have the potential for immense public benefit. A crumbling school building, for example, cannot be a justification for not building more schools. Instead, maintaining it well would save it from falling apart in the first place and save public money from being misused later on. O&M has gained some importance over the past few years and some project managers are consciously adopting improved O&M practices. One such example is the adoption of improved

O&M planning and implementation modalities under a World Bank funded "Municipal Governance and Services Project (MGSP)" being implemented since 2015 in 89 City Corporations and Paurashavas through an agreement between the WB and Local Government Division of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development & Cooperatives. This project is supporting building of basic urban services that include road construction and rehabilitation, bridges and culverts, drainage, public toilets, streetlights, wholesale/kitchen market, community centres and bus/truck terminals. The urban local bodies are each preparing a 5-year Capital Investment Plan and an annual O&M Plan. They are drawing up these plans in a participatory manner with the active support of the local communities. This has greatly helped maintain the urban infrastructure in good conditions. Different development departments and service agencies need to increasingly plan for the operation and maintenance of their projects and programmes whether they are funded with revenue or development budgets. They should draw up annual O&M plans, allocate budgets, train their staff, undertake routine maintenance and monitor their performances. In some cases, the task of O&M may be contracted out to the private sector or to the NGOs if that is proved to be more effective and cost-efficient. Routine check-up and maintenance using a regular schedule will reduce the need for costly repairs and save public money. Bangladesh is implementing over 1,200 projects at this point of time, some of which require massive budgetary investments. We should not let the physical value of project infrastructure to go down. In case of projects using revenue budget, a part of the budget should be earmarked for O&M to sustain the results derived from them. In case of development projects, regular operation and maintenance cost should be arranged or a special allocation should be ensured if a project is not extended, to sustain the social benefits.

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