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Amar Ekushey Boi Mela celebrating the Liberation Spirit

Health guidelines must be maintained to make it successful

THE eagerly awaited Amar Ekushey Boi Mela 2021 has finally begun—delayed by almost a month and a half because of the pandemic. Having the book fair in March, however, has its own relevance as this month will mark 50 years of the nation's independence and the birth centenary of Bangabandhu the Father of the nation. Thus it is most befitting that the Boi Mela would be dedicated to the martyrs of our Liberation War. The importance of the Boi Mela is amply demonstrated by the fact that the prime minister has inaugurated it virtually, launching an English translation of Bangabandhu's "Amar Dekha Noya Chin" (New China 1952) and her distributing the Bangla Academy Literary Award 2020 among recipients.

The Amar Ekushey Boi Mela is a tradition and symbol of our nationhood, our cultural identity and the spirit of our Liberation War. It denotes the supreme sacrifice made by young students during the Language Movement, to establish their mother tongue when it was under threat of cultural appropriation. It is representative of the resolute movement to free ourselves from the oppressive regime that was determined to keep us subjugated, powerless and deprived of basic rights as citizens. Having it in March has given the book fair greater significance as it has encompassed the spirit of the Language Movement and the Liberation War as well as paying respect to the leader who sparked the fire of resistance and led us to freedom.

This is why this is not just a book fair but a celebration of what we have achieved as an independent country, especially in giving the Bangla language the place it deserves. Started in an informal way in 1972 in the premises of Bangla Academy, the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela has become a permanent festival every year and hosted by the Academy. And every year the fair has been visited enthusiastically and spontaneously revealing the inherent love for books that Bangladeshis have.

The fair has had to expand its space with it now being held at both the Bangla Academy premises and Suhrawardy Udyan. The Boi Mela is an opportunity for publishers to showcase their productions and make good sales and for book lovers to acquire books by their favourite authors and poets as well as explore new talents. The festive mood and interactions of readers, poets and writers makes this an intellectually stimulating event that is truly unique among all the festivals we celebrate. Though the fair has started amid an unexpected surge in Covid-19 infections, the organisers are trying to ensure the health guidelines of physical distancing, wearing masks and keeping hand sanitisers at various points. We hope all visitors will comply with these guidelines so that everyone can safely enjoy the Boi Mela.

Bangladesh's air quality takes another nosedive

Urgent steps needed to clean it

A report published by Swiss-based air quality information company IQAir on March 17, 2021 has termed Bangladesh as the most polluted nation and Dhaka as the second-most polluted city in the world regarding air pollution. The fact that Bangladesh has ranked top in the list of the countries with the worst air proves once again that steps taken by the concerned authorities have not really changed air quality.

According to the aforementioned report, around 13-22 percent of deaths in the South Asia region are linked to the health effects of exposure to polluted air, while the economic cost of this menace is 7.4 percent of the combined GDP of this region. The Swiss company had collected data from 106 countries around the world and found out that the average annual PM 2.5 (fine particles found in polluted air) concentrations in Bangladesh was 77.1 mcg/m³, which is seven times above the tolerable exposure as stipulated by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The report has also pointed out that during the Covid-19 crisis last year, many locations around the world have observed visibly cleaner air, which shows that improvements in air quality are possible if urgent and collective actions are taken. Even Dhaka's air quality had vastly improved during the lockdown periods. A report by *The Daily Star* on March 18, 2021 mentions an official of the Department of Environment (DoE) echoing the same line of thought. Seeking anonymity, this official also claimed that the government has already taken up various steps to contain this public health concern which includes conducting regular mobile court drives against the polluters.

But, treating only the symptoms without diagnosing the root causes will not help in finding a lasting solution to the challenge of air pollution. The concerned authorities have to find out what were the reasons that led to the dramatic improvement in Dhaka's air quality during the lockdown and take necessary measures to turn them into permanent remedies to this problem. Over the years, numerous reports have identified the brick kilns around Dhaka city as the top emitter of elements that degrade the air, while a recent report by Dhaka University's Air Quality Research and Monitoring Center has found a new culprit, which is black smoke coming out of unfit transport vehicles.

The authorities have to get rid of these brick kilns and substandard vehicles to make Dhaka's air breathable again. Finally, existing laws like the nine directives issued by the High Court in 2020, the Environment Conservation Act 1995 and Motor Vehicles Ordinance 1983 have to be implemented strictly and also, the newly proposed Clean Air Act-2019 by the DoE has to be turned into an active law as soon as possible to make a clear difference in air quality.

The saga of a three-finger salute



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

NEWS of the pandemic waves of Covid-19 and political waves of the three-fingered salute is making the rounds. The confidence that we mustered with the advent of vaccines is being punctured by the rise in the number of affected coronavirus patients. At the same time, the hope of democratic process in the region is being shattered by the military coup in our neighbouring South East Asian countries; the antidote is an iconic salute. Taking their cue from popular culture, protesters first in Thailand, then in Hong Kong, and now in Myanmar, are trying to take a symbolic stance against respective authoritarian regimes. They have borrowed the three-finger salute from the literary and film series *The Hunger Games* and used this gesture to demonstrate an act of defiance. Like the vaccine, it has the potential to be effective, but its potency is yet to be tested.

The salute became popular in the wake of an earlier Thai military coup in 2014. The coup coincided with the release of the first part of *Mocking Jay* based on Suzanne Collin's last book of the trilogy *Hunger Games*. In the movie, the young female protagonist Katniss Everdeen (played by Jennifer Lawrence), led an uprising against the tyrannical rulers of a fictional country called Panem. In the manner of Katniss, Thai political activist Rittipong Mahapetch flashed this now-famous three-finger salute standing on a pedestrian overpass in Bangkok against the backdrop of soldiers occupying the streets. The image caught the imagination of the protesters around the world.

In the novel, Katniss explained the salutes "an old and rarely used gesture of [her] district, occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love." Talking to the newsmen, however, Rittipong equated the spirit of the salute with the three principles of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Rittipong's colleague Sombat, who is also credited for popularising the gesture, added, saying, "It's not about one country, it's a symbol for all people who want freedom. It's universal." It needs to be mentioned here that generations of Boy Scouts and Girl Guides have been using this three-finger salute since their inception in 1908 to reiterate their oaths of keeping themselves physically, mentally and morally straight. For this new generation of youth, it seems, the salute has a new political significance. It is a spin-off from the popular culture that enters the political domain with new possibilities: "Umbrella Protests" in Hong Kong used it as a demand for universal suffrage, and now the anti-coup demonstrations in

Myanmar are using it for their free Suu Kyi movement.

This is a classic example of culturalism where the culture becomes a political ideology. The meeting of the three middle fingers with the thumb crossed over to meet the pinkie is a symbolic confluence of youth-led movements against authoritarianism. It symbolises the way these young people devise their strategies against powerful enemies, render support for one another, and add momentum to their efforts. The *#MilkTeaAlliance* is a case in point that

and eventually to realpolitik suggests that change is inevitable and natural.

The pandemic has been a hot seat of change. The Tom and Jerry chase involving the virus and the vaccine is akin to the way the oppressor and the oppressed are acting and reacting. We are living in a world where we have espoused many abnormal elements as the new normal. Lockdown is a good example; self-isolation is another. Many cynics who follow the Thai political scene believe that the lockdown there is largely political. Despite the heavy economic toll, the Thai government is

plenty.

Then there are other kinds of realpolitik. One may argue, why the younger generation of Myanmar did not speak against the same military junta when they exterminated an entire ethnic community in the Rakhine province? Why did one action of the military receive endorsement by the protesting mass, while the other one did not? How are antibodies created within a body? What prompts reactions? What does not? If we are to talk of democracy, then should we not think of all members and groups living in a democratic society?



A pro-democracy student raises a three-fingered salute, with 'freedom, equality and brotherhood' written on their hand and a white ribbon around their wrist.

PHOTO: REUTERS

emerged as an online campaign through which Asian activists from Taiwan to Myanmar expressed solidarity with each other. The activists from this region are using new technologies to form regional, albeit global alliances. One of the key figures of the Hong Kong movement Joshua Wong, for instance, was invited to address a protest rally in Thailand to add momentum to their efforts. But the Thai authorities deported Wong before he could give his speech. Wong found more traction online as his live-streamed address via Skype reached more people than originally anticipated.

The meeting of the fingers is therefore a symbolic meeting of cultures. It is an act of solidarity and resistance. More importantly, it is a sign of adoption and adaptation. The journey of the three-finger salute from scouting to a fictive resistance

not relaxing its health restrictions as it is important for them to arrest the political unrest.

The subtle politics is symptomatic of the sophisticated authoritarianism that the military governments in these countries employ. They too have evolved from the crude form of martial law. They now get involved in the electoral process and try to give legitimacy to their military rule by producing proxy civilian figures. When their puppets stop serving their purposes, they are thrown into jail or removed forever. Think of the former State Counsellor Suu Kyi going to the Hague and defending the genocide of the very junta that has now brought in charges of bribery to end her political career for good. Vigilance against such anomalies often turns violent: the streets of Yangon and Bangkok are replete with examples a

Can we be selective in lifting our fingers or pointing fingers at someone?

I am intrigued by this politics of fingers. The three-finger salute is a recognisable gesture, thanks to the massive popularity of *The Hunger Games*. The western world can immediately relate to what is being said through those raised fingers. Through this salute, the east meets the west. Then again, this gesture has been appropriated to serve a very local purpose. It is both an action and a reaction. Analogous to vaccines, it promises resistance, it promises hope. The only danger is that the enemy has many strains, too; and it has the equal power to constantly mutate and mutilate its enemies. We await a day when the three-finger turns into two to signify victory.

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Cheap marketing tactics only hurt the brand



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BANGLADESH is an ever-growing hub of business. We see businesses of every kind—from e-commerce businesses such as online shopping platforms and ride sharing companies (like Uber), to simple brick and mortar businesses, such as food joints—lining our streets and occupying our virtual spaces. Among all this clutter of a myriad businesses, marketing your brand to potential customers and prospects is necessary, especially if you want to stand out. And the more your business stands out, the more word of mouth, and thus free marketing, you get within the market.

Unfortunately, in this rush to get attention, there are a growing number of brands that use deceitful or unsavoury means on online platforms, such as Facebook, and conventional televised/print media platform. These include misleading campaigns that have been reported to have swindled customers out of their money, to vulgar or sexist campaigns that are simply distasteful to say the least.

When the term "marketing activities" is used, the responsibilities associated with that term does not stop at advertising. It spans around all the sections of the supply chain, up until the product (whether it is a good or a service) is in the ownership of the final consumer.

To start off with a recent and very blatant example, there was an advertisement of a pizza restaurant that went viral all over Facebook not too long ago. The advertisement grotesquely announced their 21-inch pizza with a suggestive image of a woman kneeling down while looking up at a piece of their pizza. It is shocking that such blatant objectification of women could even be considered to have been approved for an advertisement. Unfortunately, this is not the only such advertisement. There have been many more examples of women being objectified for the sake of marketing a product, and we do not even have to look too far in the past to notice those examples.

Another cheap marketing tactic is the act of misleading the consumers with false promises. For instance, there are several allegations of defrauded customers who bought products from online shopping platforms. An article in the *Prothom Alo* talks about how e-commerce sites in Bangladesh make use of several loopholes in their terms of services.

According to the article, Bangladeshi e-commerce businesses are able to loosely allude to how late delivery dates can go way past the stated delivery date,

Unfortunately, this trend seems to be on the rise because of the unbound attention these strategies seem to rake in. The term "any publicity is good publicity" seems to be the driving factor for these brands, and they could not be any more incorrect.

When you market your brand under the methods of such questionable campaigns to the public, the public has a notion of viewing your brand under the image you portrayed with the marketing campaign. Sleazy marketing campaigns will mark your brand with the tag of "sleazy",



how orders can be randomly cancelled by the online shopping platform, etc. A condition of one of the online shopping platforms justifies these terms by stating that an order can only be fulfilled if the product is in stock, while still listing that product to be available for sale. The article also pointed out that the Directorate of National Consumers' Rights Protection (DNCRP) received 4,091 complaints from e-commerce consumers alone from July 2020 onwards, where consumers felt misled about the services the e-commerce sites offered.

These are just a few examples of the many cheap marketing strategies brands have used in the Bangladeshi market.

misleading campaigns will tarnish your brand's image in the future with the "fraudulent" tag, derogatory campaigns will have retaliation—whether it is from the competitor(s) or the segment of the consumer base being made fun of.

An advertisement follows a set trend of the Hierarchy of Effects model—from noticing a brand through advertisements to purchasing products from the brand. There are three stages to this model: the cognitive stage (awareness and knowledge) where customers perceive the brand and keep it in mind, the affective stage (liking and preference) where the customers consider the pros and cons of purchasing the brand's product, and the

conative stage (conviction and purchase) where customers are convinced to purchase the brand's products.

The notion of "any publicity is good publicity" does not hold up as strongly as it used to. In an era of more socially conscious consumers, negative publicity often does not get past the cognitive stage of the Hierarchy of Effects model in the long run. If the brand is lucky, a cheap marketing tactic may make customers jump to the conative stage, but it will often not last for long, as the brand only gets past the cognitive stage because of the brand becoming a "trend". Trends do not last long. There are plenty of alternatives for a customer to consider within any of the Bangladesh markets, competitors are always ready to capitalise on any mistakes the competition makes. And consumers can shift their attention at any time on trends once realisation sets in.

The only way for a brand to save itself from backlash is proper PR activities and, if the situation goes too far, rebranding. PR activities do work, but they are tricky to carry out—since there are a lot of stakeholders to appease (like consumers, authorities, suppliers, communities, etc.). And not every company can afford a PR team. Rebranding, if things go too far, is much more expensive and focuses on completely changing the image of a brand. Smaller firms cannot afford rebranding and renowned brands often do not retain as much clout after a marketing fiasco.

While what marketing campaigns should be cannot be set in stone, since marketers should aspire to pleasantly surprise a customer base with any offerings a brand puts forward, there must be a code of ethics when marketing a brand. Themes of love, familial bonds and patriotism often strike a good chord with customers. Cultural celebrations like Ramadan and Pohela Baishakh stand as opportunities to market your brand too. The point is, unethical marketing methods that promote sexist notions, that misrepresent a product and that uses cheap tactics of demeaning a competitor do nothing but damage the image of the brand. The campaigning brand may enjoy its cheap thrills for a short while, but it does not last.

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