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Spate of communal violence must end

There is a need for introspection, too

IT seems there is an evil force at work to stir up trouble and sully the laudable credentials of Bangladesh as a country of communal harmony. We pride ourselves on the syncretic nature of our society, where caste, creed, or religion is secondary to our ethnic identity. At least that's what we think it should be, except that we are given rude shocks sporadically through violence such as that which we've witnessed over the last few days—as if to prove the contrary.

Often, we find our otherwise peaceful ambience stirred up by acts that evidently are done with ulterior motives. Rituals, places of worship or objects of veneration for the minorities are targeted to infuse mistrust and disharmony. The purpose is well-understood, at least by the more perspicacious ones who can see through the game that is being played here. A disjointed society is a vulnerable society prone to machinations of internal and external foes.

It was, therefore, most disconcerting that the violence caused by the alleged desecration of Islamic scriptures in a Hindu temple in Cumilla has continued. Such disturbances have reportedly spread to various other parts of the country. We add our voice to the multitude of those who condemned the attacks against the minority community. It is sad to see that logic and judgment have been subdued by spite and rashness.

We also find it hard to believe that a minority community member would indulge in such an act of perfidy as to place the book that Muslims consider the holiest of all at the feet of a Hindu idol. This, as experts say, could be the work of a fifth columnist to rake up anger and hatred against the minority community. The purpose was to destabilise the society, and sow societal discord. And they have been partly successful at that.

While we hope that the law enforcing agencies would find out the actual culprits and administer the severest of punishments, we would also like to appeal that we as a society should pause to think why such incidents keep on occurring from time to time. These are not issues that can be explained away by applying a religious veneer to the incidents. Nor can the responsibility be laid entirely at the foot of our education system. The causal factors should not be glossed over. We need to understand the dynamics and inner workings of communal politics, and do something about it. We need to organise inter-communal and inter-faith dialogues to press home the message of communal harmony. Fixing this situation will need a whole-of-society approach, as experts aver, and which we endorse, rather than just a law-and-order approach.

E-commerce firms must pay back their customers

Commerce ministry should do more than just form committees

WE are concerned at the way the government is dealing with the issue of e-commerce scams.

Its efforts are mostly limited to preventing possible cons in the future, while tens of thousands of customers and merchants are yet to get any assurance of compensation from the government. As of now, we have seen no visible initiatives on part of the government to realise the money from the e-commerce firms to refund the victims. While the commerce ministry is saying that there is little scope for them to recover the money under our law, according to legal experts, the ministry can constitute a board or appoint administrators to run the errant companies who will work to refund the money to customers and vendors.

Reportedly, the commerce ministry has formed three committees and published standard operating procedures in a bid to stop future fraudulent activities by the e-commerce platforms and to safeguard the interests of consumers and merchants. The question is: Will that be enough? Should the government also not come up with specific plans to recover the funds?

The government is reportedly planning to assign agencies such as the National Board of Revenue and Bangladesh Bank to find out ways to recover the money from these fraudulent e-commerce firms. We think the sooner they do that, the better for the victims, especially given how delayed action may fail to curb the threat of their money being laundered abroad.

Recently, the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) has imposed fines on 17 e-commerce firms for failing to deliver products as promised and also for deceiving customers through false advertisements. Sadly, they could not fine big firms like Evaly, E-orange and Dhamaka Shopping because of some limitations in our law—the DNCRP can impose a maximum fine of Tk 50,000 and jail the offenders for a maximum of one year, or both. And this meagre amount of fine or jail time is just not enough for these big fraudulent companies. Therefore, there is an urgent need to bring some amendments to the law.

Some of the consumers have reportedly filed cases against Evaly, E-orange and other firms and are awaiting the court's directive to recover their lost money. While the court will give its decision in due time, the government should also focus more on recovering the money so that the consumers and merchants can be compensated adequately. Recovering the money may still be possible through tracking the transactions of consumers and merchants to the e-commerce companies, experts believe. The government should consider doing this.

Climate anxiety and the rights of future generations

BAREESH CHOWDHURY

I was around 10 when I first heard about the idea of, as it was then known, global warming and how Bangladesh will one day go underwater as sea levels rise. I was told I don't need to worry about it, because it wouldn't happen for many, many years. I don't know if that particularly allayed my fears. 50 years seems like a lot at that age, but it's still well within your lifetime. When you're 10, that's a scary thought. When you're 26, it's almost paralysing.

A recent survey of 10,000 young people around the world suggests that I'm not alone in feeling this way. At least 60 percent of people reported that they were "very worried" or "extremely worried" about climate change. Only 5 percent

many young people growing up now, the effects of climate change are no longer something that could happen many, many years from now; it is extremely real, already happening and is something will only get worse during their lifetimes.

After all, why wouldn't children be anxious? For many, a changing climate world is all they have ever known. Bangladesh, as one of the most vulnerable countries in the world, knows this all too well. The children of coastal regions in Bangladesh have lived through a plethora of climatic and natural disaster related problems already. Bombarded by tropical cyclones that cause yearly loss of life, livelihood and property, many in these regions are robbed of their childhoods. Then think of the regular flooding, land erosion, reductions in groundwater and

has undergone a marked shift within the last half a decade or so. The phrasing around impacts has gone from "possible" to "already happening", from the future to the immediate. It is no longer even referred to as climate change in many cases, but rather as climate crisis, climate emergency and climate catastrophe. Much of this shift is due to the relentless activism of young people around the world, who have mobilised to demand urgent and decisive climate action from governments.

Children are one of the least-spoken-about, politically marginalised groups of people. Especially in Bangladesh, there is a cultural air of dismissiveness towards the concerns of children. It is seen as disrespectful for them to challenge their elders. Yet the children of today

The precautionary principle is a concept that is being pushed in the human rights framework as it relates to environmental laws and especially when it comes to the duties of states to future generations. As defined in a draft memorandum prepared by the Yale Law School, it is defined as the principle that, "States have an obligation to take steps to reduce or eliminate threats to the protection of fundamental human rights even if the degree of threat is uncertain." In the same document, it is said of the duty to future generations: "Obligations to future generations are implicit in customary and conventional international human rights law. States have a duty to respect the rights of future generations by taking immediate measures to prevent climate change and to address its consequences."

While these concepts are still developing in international human rights law, they have a long history of being implicit and acknowledged. Even in Bangladesh, these duties are recognised and reflected in Article 18A of the Constitution, which states that: "The State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to preserve and safeguard the natural resources, biodiversity, wetlands, forests and wildlife for the present and future citizens." As acknowledged elsewhere, climate change presents an unprecedented threat to human rights around the world, and this concerns the future generations as it can negatively impact their most fundamental rights including, but certainly not limited to, the right to health, right to a healthy environment and most importantly, their right to life.

While it may seem almost a luxury to consider the welfare of those who have not yet been born when faced with the already catastrophic effects of climate change—in the form of extreme weather events, climate-induced migration and rising temperatures and sea levels—the reality is, increasingly, children are being born into a dysfunctional and terrifying new world. Thousands of cases have been filed over the last half a decade on arguments of intergenerational equity and the rights of future generations, and the legal framework around these concepts will only be enriched and developed quickly through those actions. As mentioned earlier, climate change has not only been ravaging the lives of young people materially, but it has contributed to an epidemic of anxiety among them as well.

For the millions of young people who are already here, and for the countless ones that will arrive in the coming years, these developments are of paramount importance. Those who may not be alive to see the devastation of a worsening climate owe it to those who will, to do everything in their power to prevent and prepare for our new reality.

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Students demonstrate at Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka on September 20, 2019, urging world leaders to act against climate change.

PHOTO: TDS

reported that they were not worried. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said the thought of climate change made them feel "sad" and "afraid", while 63 percent said it made them "anxious" and 58 percent "angry". The largest proportion of worried young respondents were from the Philippines, India and Brazil—developing countries already grappling with the adverse effects of climate change. This study validates a phrase that has increasingly entered the popular lexicon and one you will see pop up a lot more in the coming years: "climate anxiety."

Climate anxiety has become a catch-all term used to describe emotions including anger, worry and insecurity stemming from an awareness of a warming planet, increasing natural disasters and extreme phenomena, as well as the future consequences of climate change. For

encroaching salinity that have plagued many in rural areas across the country. And when faced with such frequent traumatic devastation, how are children expected to cope? Can they really lead normal lives, go to school, play with their friends and grow up as functional members of their community when there is such uncertainty and insecurity in their lives? In addition, the loss of traditional livelihoods in these areas has led many to abandon their lands and move to cities for employment and income. Those that stay, risk losing their homes and compromising their health, and often find themselves increasingly losing income too, as fish disappear and lands become less arable. The effects of poverty on mental health have long been established and correlated—it is not farfetched to consider the same for climate change. The discourse around climate change

are the ones who will be alive to see the devastation of climate change unfold. And increasingly, these are voices that must be heard and amplified if climate action is to preserve a functional biosphere for their future.

The rights of future generations is a murky concept, even within the international human rights framework. By its nature, much of the human rights law is reactive—a violation must occur before it can be tried. Climate change, thus, often becomes hard to bring under conventional jurisprudence—the effects, although increasingly visible, are still often projected, and attributing blame for emissions becomes difficult due to its transboundary consequences, as emissions from one country affect others on the other side of the world. However, there is increasing momentum to take on these legal challenges.

Bangladesh RMG must be more resilient after Covid-19



RMG NOTES

THE world might look a very different place 10 years from now. If the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that nothing can be taken for granted—in life or in business.

Bangladesh's RMG industry entered 2020 primed for further growth. Our main concern as an industry at that time was the unrest around the new minimum wage and workers' rights. While such issues can never be ignored and we must take them seriously, they look like nothing at all compared to the tsunami we as an industry have undergone these past 18 months.

I won't lie, the first year of the pandemic was extremely tough—as RMG factories and many of our major export markets were in lockdown. It was difficult to get raw materials. Brands and retailers were cancelling orders left, right and centre. And there was a general level of uncertainty and chaos in the air, the likes of which I have not experienced in more than two decades as a business owner.

It is only as we have gotten further into 2021 that our industry has begun to find some breathing space. Several things have been in our favour. The first is the global vaccine rollout, which has led to the opening up of major markets and the removal of lockdowns across the US and Europe. The second is the "bounce" we have seen as shoppers return to shops and make up for lost time in purchasing clothing. Many are calling this "revenge" spending. The last issue is that our rivals in Vietnam and China have had harsher lockdowns of their textile industries than Bangladesh. This, combined with the fact that Myanmar—another competitor—has

had a military coup has led to brands and retailers placing more orders with us. In a world of uncertainty, Bangladesh is seen as a "safe bet" right now for fashion retailers. We cannot, however, rest on our laurels.

Throughout this past 18 months, Bangladesh's RMG industry has shown strength in adversity. The relative stability of our political environment coupled with our pragmatic management of the pandemic—allowing factories to

which some forecasters are predicting, could quickly derail things.

So how can we build this resilience in the months ahead? How can we ensure we are prepared for the next crisis or to ride out any future recession?

I can think of three ways. The first refers to the current situation we find ourselves in. We are picking up extra orders due to complications in the supply chains of some of our competitors. We need to make these



Throughout the past 18 months, Bangladesh's RMG industry has shown strength in adversity.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

remain largely open was a smart move by our industry leaders—means we are well placed to capitalise on future opportunities.

But we must use this time to build resilience in our RMG sector and not let our hard-won gains go to waste. To return to the point made at the beginning of this article, none of us can be sure of what is around the corner. A recession in 2022,

orders stick and turn them into long-term business opportunities. We must see it as an important feather in our cap that buyers have turned to us in their hour of need, at a time when all retailers are struggling to secure product in the run up to the festive season.

All of us need to go above and beyond to illustrate that Bangladesh is a safe pair of hands—a true thoroughbred when it

comes to textile and garment sourcing.

The second issue relates to logistics. One thing we have seen in the past few months is how a few small issues in terms of moving cargo about can soon mushroom into much larger ones. A problem in one part of the world can spread like a virus, and supply chains can quickly become unstuck.

More than ever, we need to invest in our logistics infrastructure—our roads, our ports, our rail network—to make moving product about slick and seamless. There is talk of a 10-fold increase in the global cost to move a container from one part of the world to another this past 12-months. Nobody can live with this kind of uncertainty long-term. China has been particularly hard hit, but these problems can strike anywhere.

All options must be on the table. I was delighted to see the major projects being undertaken by our government recently for upgrading airports, including the construction of a third terminal at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. This will help to meet future demand of air cargo transportation and contribute to further economic growth in Bangladesh. More of this please.

Finally, we must continue to lead on sustainability in line with the demands of buyers. The presence of Bangladeshi representation at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) is critical for our industry. Our buyers, more than ever, are turning to us for solutions to their emission challenges. The environmental crisis will not be solved in the shiny stores of our buyers—for instance, the products in the stores need to be manufactured back in Bangladesh using renewable energy.

The solutions lie in resilient, future-proofed, garment supply chains.

We know what we need to do.

Mostafiz Uddin is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).