

51 years of freedom

How much have we redeemed the sacrifices of martyrs?

BANGLADESH observed 51 years of its independence yesterday with a muted fervour, and understandably so. Every year, we visit March 26 with a mixed feeling of happiness subdued by the sadness associated with it. It is a day of elation as well as of mourning. The wanton death and destruction foisted on the helpless Bengalis by the marauding occupation army of Pakistan—from the night of March 25 till they meekly surrendered to the joint Bangladesh-India command—has left a scar that is difficult to heal. The price we have paid for our freedom was aptly articulated by a British newspaper following our victory on December 16, 1971, which merits repetition: “If blood is the price of independence, then Bangladesh has paid the highest price in history.”

Indeed, we have overpaid the cost of our independence, but perhaps no cost can be very high for the most precious thing in a person’s, nay, a nation’s life—freedom—if the sacrifices of the brave freedom fighters and martyrs are fulfilled. So after 51 years of living as a free nation, as we recall with gratitude their sacrifices as well as the contribution of national leaders and the visionary leadership of Bangabandhu, we must ask: Have those dreams been fulfilled?

We have many things to feel proud of. Our per capita income has increased manifold as we transited from a Least Developing Country to a developing one. But the distribution of wealth and opportunities has not happened in an egalitarian manner. The rich have gotten richer, the marginalised even more so. Yes, indeed there are fewer people below the poverty line now, but we ask whether the vision for attaining a poverty headcount of 14 percent by 2021 has been achieved.

While the economic indices have recorded many positives, democratic indices have left much to be desired. The strongest pillar of democracy—the people—have had their rights defiled, given the manner in which the last two elections were held. It is indeed a matter of disquiet that people’s confidence in democratic institutions, and interest in participating in the polls, have sapped to a dangerously low level. Political space for the opposition has shrunk dangerously, and the freedom to express opinions without fears of retribution is all but absent. Draconian laws have been formulated to stifle people’s voices. Repression against women has not abated, and corruption in the public sector—and consequently flight of valuable resources—remains unaddressed.

These are hard questions that we cannot help but ask, and we must address these with due diligence. Otherwise, the sacrifices of our martyrs and freedom fighters will go in vain.

Early diarrhoea outbreak is alarming

Investigate the reasons behind it and take remedial steps

IT’S quite worrying that the number of diarrhoea patients admitted to various hospitals in Dhaka has seen a sudden spike although it wasn’t expected to peak until April. According to a report, the disease has broken out in at least 10 areas of the capital city. The hospital attached to the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr.b) in Mohakhali alone has been reportedly treating around 1,200 diarrhoea patients daily for the past few days—the highest daily count in the 60 years of its history. Other hospitals, including the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), have also reported a growing trend.

Of the 10 areas identified in Dhaka, Jatrabari in old Dhaka is the worst affected, followed by Dakshinkhan and Rayer Bazar, according to hospital sources. Although we usually hear of children being affected more with diarrhoea, this time about 70-80 percent of the patients have been reported to be adults. Experts say that the germs that cause diarrhoea usually attack in April, causing a spike in numbers. Its early arrival this year may have something to do with people drinking contaminated water or street food containing harmful bacteria.

Whatever the reason may be, the sudden rise in the number of diarrhoea patients including adult patients is an unusual phenomenon that deserves to be properly investigated by the public health officials. Experts believe that only scientific research can identify the reason behind the quick spread. In this regard, it can be said that the water supplied by Dhaka Wasa in the old part of the city is notorious for having hazardous pollutants, which residents have to drink as there is no other alternative for them. Adults are also often seen consuming street food and drinks—including various types of sharbat, sugar cane juice, etc.—in their rush to go to work or for other compulsions.

An outbreak of this nature, at a time when we are still fighting with the Covid-19 pandemic, shouldn’t be taken lightly. All hospitals should be alerted to the danger and equipped to handle any surge in patient numbers. We also urge the health authorities and city corporations to do everything possible to ward off diarrhoea by addressing the possible reasons for its spread before it travels to other parts of the city or elsewhere, and becomes too difficult to handle.

Bangladeshis are so ‘senti’



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is senior deputy editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

BENGALIS are well-known for being unusually driven by emotion, a trait that has brought about many great things—our right to speak in our mother tongue, our right to be independent. But there are also emotions that cannot even be translated—like “obhiman”, an emotion shared by our other South Asian friends, which could be described as hurt pride that crops up at the drop of a hat. This is amply displayed in old Bangla (and Hindi) films or dramas where the protagonists stubbornly indulge in this emotion to ensure that characteristic tear-jerking ending. In general, it is quite natural for us to become “senti” (sentimental) over the smallest things—like someone forgetting to acknowledge a “big brother’s” position in the social food chain by not giving him the mandatory reverent “salam”, which, in the contemporary context, may lead to dismemberment or a painful death.

Now that we have reached the digital age and are hell bent on embracing it with a vengeance—we have also acquired the ability to be digitally sentimental. Even what I have written so far could be considered “harmful” or “offensive” or even racist despite the fact that I belong to the race I am poking fun at. Poking fun? Are you out of your mind? We no longer believe in humour anymore didn’t you know? In fact, sharing a cartoon may cause grievous injury leading to death. Sorry for the constant death references but our lives often do have an air of The Godfather trilogy.

We are so serious about our sentiments that we are not satisfied with having one choking legal instrument—the Digital Security Act (DSA) to deal with troublemakers. Now we are planning to give it some added support like an unnecessary second corset to pad the first one and make sure that above all, no one dares to hurt anyone’s sentiment. Yes, we’re that serious about our emotional health. Hence the BTRC (Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission) regulation applicable for digital platforms, social media and OTT - Over the Top platforms. So anything you publish digitally is open for scrutiny by the powerful BTRC ninjas and may lead to long term incarceration. Even with just the DSA, people have found themselves in jail for what people in other countries may consider strange to be seen as crimes—such as singing a song written by an acetic who may have made philosophical observations about spirituality, for being a concerned citizen, or for trying to expose corruption of public officials. If you thought you were safe sending videos of Putin and Zelenskyy singing that catchy Hindi film song “Jati hu mey..” to



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKRABORTY

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your buddies on WhatsApp, think again. Someone important enough may feel “hurt” or “offended” on behalf of either one of them or feel this may sour relations with another country and so is “anti-state” and wham... The notion of back to back encryption no longer holds with the DSA and the BTRC regulation. It has become a myth just stated to make you feel you

are a valued client whose privacy matters. Actually privacy of a citizen has become an endangered species and it would be practical to just consider it extinct and get on with life. Let’s not get emotional about everything shall we?

Speaking of misplaced emotions, a coalition of around 45 organisations that still believe that human rights are inalienable and sacred have sent an earnest letter requesting BTRC to reconsider this regulation that “imperils people’s freedom of expression, and right to privacy, undermines encryption and weakens online safety”. They further say: “If enforced, the regulations will have a deleterious impact on human rights, and put journalists, dissidents, activists and vulnerable communities, in particular, at greater risk”

These organisations are also not too happy about the government’s plan to adopt a code of ethics which all media would have to comply with (or else...) which would give the Ministry of Information a free rein to control content, something that violates international law. International law my foot, they scoff.

To make things more interesting, the new regulation requires registration of all online platforms and we all know how easy

it is to get official registration for anything through regular routes. And think of all the OTT platforms. How will we exist if our favourite Netflix shows—our mainstay in terms of mindless entertainment—are considered “harmful” or “incite hatred” and “hurt all kinds of sentiments of all kinds of people”, and just censored out? Then of course there are local platforms

where popular shows, films and drama serials are aired which may have content that will embarrass or irritate someone or some entity—should we just tell our directors and actors and production people to pack up and try for BTV jobs? That seems the safest bet—at least they will survive even if their creative souls will shrivel up and die a premature death.

Those who have come up with this regulation have decided that vague, arbitrary ideas of being snubbed or having one’s religious sentiments trod upon are far more injurious (to certain privileged groups, not all and sundry please) and must be deterred by having citizens locked up in jail for years or having their voices gagged rather than uphold archaic concepts like “freedom of speech”, human rights and freedom of expression. In the digital world, we just need some bots or humans who act like bots, religiously following the commands fed to their systems, with no deviation and no attempts to act too clever. This way everyone, I mean those that matter, will remain emotionally happy and can carry on their lives with their sentiments intact and without the nuisance of pesky citizens with the gall to have opinions of their own.

A town with no plastic bottles or polythene bags



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NAWSHAD AHMED

RECENTLY, while visiting a small town in the south called Raozan, I was impressed to see how there were no empty plastic bottles or used polythene lying around. Thanks to the initiatives of the municipality mayor and the local MP, the town has been rid of any public display of polluting material. With a total population of about 80,000, it is a clean, relatively calm town—a feast for the eyes for anyone visiting from outside.

The municipality council headed by the mayor has been supervising the collection of used plastic materials for the last one year. The mayor, twice a week, encourages the collection by providing cash incentives for anyone bringing these non-degradable materials to the municipality premises. I was present at one of these occasions when about a hundred people gathered on the premises, bringing about 300 sacks of plastic materials. The mayor paid Tk 200 per sack. He is trying to get Raozan officially recognised as the most environmentally friendly town in the country. With thousands of sacks now piled up near the municipality office, which from a distance looks like a small mountain, the next goal is to use them in a plastic recycling plant which the mayor is reportedly going to establish soon.

In addition to this, the mayor and the councillors, the MP and the upazila

The mayor and the councillors, the MP and the upazila chairman regularly interact with local people to raise awareness of the environmental consequences of polythene and plastic materials.

chairman regularly interact with local people to raise awareness of the environmental consequences of polythene and plastic materials. They’re mobilising the students, local administration, boy scouts and girl guides to keep not just the municipality area but the entire upazila clean. Local leaders have also encouraged people to plant about two million trees in recent years. All the roads in the upazila are lined up with trees planted by local people. The tree plantation campaign is a regular phenomenon here, its message being—“Clean and Green Raozan”.

Public representatives have also been campaigning against illicit drug use and other social evils with remarkable success. Once a hotbed of crime, the upazila is now a peaceful place to live. Local businesses and private enterprises are encouraged by the overall improvement in the law and order situation in the upazila. It is also a food-surplus area. The importance of social harmony and communal peace in unleashing productive forces is clearly demonstrated by these positive efforts. This can be an example for other local governments as well.

Another aspect of Raozan’s local leadership is their efforts to encourage small businesses by donating boats, vans, rickshaws and sewing machines to the poor. Local businessmen have also been donating money for building infrastructure in the town. This is keeping the roads and drains in operation. Due to its small size, being an upazila-level municipality, Raozan has a shortage of revenues and receives little government funds. Therefore, private initiative has become crucial for maintaining municipality services, including the cleanliness of roads. A fleet of garbage vans, donated by a local businessman, is seen regularly collecting household waste.

Due to a wide range of economic and business activities, the town attracts people from rural areas, most of whom are poor. With the growth of the population, the demand for public utilities and services has been growing. The poor live in squatters without health, water or drainage facilities (the municipality recently provided houses to one hundred poor families). There is a shortage of roads, street lights, drains, playgrounds, etc. The town has an area of 32 square kilometres and is an “A Class” municipality. The Department of Public Health Engineering is currently building the first water supply network there. So far, people are fully dependent on underground and pond water. The municipality has a total drainage network of only 10.5 km including 8 km of kutchra drain. The combined challenges of domestic water supply, street lights, sewerage, garbage collection and disposal are enormous. Most of the internal roads are narrow and not maintained properly, and the drains are open.

Raozan municipality has prepared a master plan and an urban development plan taking into account land use, drainage and environmental management, traffic and transportation management, and industrial and recreational facilities. These plans are very comprehensive and have been drawn up to build a potentially healthy city. The city still has a large area of agricultural and hilly land which is expected to go towards other uses with the growth of the population and establishment of new houses and businesses in the future. However, the hilly land and water bodies must be preserved at all costs to preserve the city’s environmental balance.

If properly developed, there is a good prospect of Raozan growing into an aesthetically beautiful city in the future.