

An ‘Adarsha’ upheld

We should nurture critical thought, not censorship

We welcome the High Court’s order to Bangla Academy to allow publishing house Adarsha Prokashoni to participate in this year’s Boi Mela. This is definitely a triumph, albeit minor, for freedom of expression in the country, at a time of increasing censorship and muzzling of dissenting voices. However, it is still concerning that the court ordered the publishing house not to sell or exhibit three specific books to which the Academy had originally objected. It is particularly confusing as a press release signed by the Deputy Director of the public relations sub-division of Bangla Academy earlier stated that the publication was barred from having a stall on the grounds of only one of their books containing “political obscenity”.

The court also issued a rule asking Bangla Academy and the government to explain why the academy’s decision not to allow Adarsha Prokashoni to run its stall in Boi Mela should not be declared illegal. We would also respectfully urge the court to consider on what grounds the books were found “obscene” in the first place and whether such censorship goes against our constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression. Bangla Academy, we are saddened to note, has thus far failed to provide a consistent or convincing answer for its decision to bar Adarsha.

While the three books in question may contain criticisms and narratives that challenge dominant discourses with which one may not agree, we believe the answer lies in counter-criticisms and debates, not in bans and censorship. It is important for the health of a democracy to allow diversity of views and creative freedom(s), but we have noticed with increasing alarm how that space has shrunk over the past decade, leaving little to no room for divergent thoughts. From arrests under increasingly stringent digital laws, to attacks on writers, journalists and bloggers, to films getting stuck at the censor board, creativity and critical thought are now essentially under siege.

This incident, even if it is somewhat resolved, has contributed to the growing culture of fear and censorship that has left our media and intelligentsia crippled. New publishers will think twice before publishing content that may be critical of the dominant narrative in any way, while writers will find themselves having to navigate an even more tricky terrain of censorship simply to get published. It is all the more alarming that such censorship should take place in the month of February and at the Boi Mela, which for Bangladeshis signify the Language Movement and freedom of speech and expression.

We have noted with increasing apprehension the politicisation of the Bangla Academy, particularly with the enactment of the Bangla Academy Act 2013 which allows the government to nominate more members to the executive committee compared to those nominated by the general assembly and fellows of the academy. We hope that bans on books and publication houses from the Boi Mela will not be repeated in the future, and that, moving forward, the Bangla Academy will uphold the true spirit of the Language Movement.

Stop property flight

Why isn’t the govt doing more to stop property purchases abroad?

It is now an open secret that huge sums of laundered money are being used to buy property abroad. The infamous “Begum Para” – used to designate posh areas where Bangladeshi politicians, businessmen, government officials and others have bought luxurious apartments – has made the headlines on different occasions in recent times, but Canada is hardly the only country where vast amounts of property have been bought over the past decades.

According to a recent report by *Bangladesh Protidin*, Bangladeshis are reportedly topping the list of foreigners buying property in Dubai. They were the among the first to purchase real estate in that country during the pandemic, and invested at least Tk 346 crore in buying houses and flats from January 2020 to June 2021. Dubai has become a sought-after destination for billionaires, including money launderers, around the world, given that it has relaxed restrictions on foreigners buying houses, granting a “golden visa” if Tk 28 crore or more is invested in the country, and allowing 70 percent of the transactions to take place in cash. Meanwhile, Bangladeshis were ninth in the list of foreign property buyers in prime Central London, in the first nine months of 2020, with the average cost of the transactions being Tk 15 crores. The list includes properties registered anonymously as offshore properties as well as properties registered at Bangladeshi addresses.

While beating citizens of other countries is usually a matter of pride, we can hardly celebrate this particular “achievement”, given the unfortunate reality that an overwhelming majority of the money leaving the country and being invested in property abroad is being funnelled illegally. Money laundering has increased at an alarming rate over the past decade, with policymakers doing next to nothing to stop the capital flight, and in many cases bending over backwards to facilitate the free flow of illegal money. In its annual report, Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU), revealed that suspicious transactions and activities mostly through banking channels had increased by 62 percent in 2021-22, when the country was struggling to maintain its forex reserves amid a highly volatile economic climate.

Foreign Minister Abdul Momen had commented in 2020 that it was bureaucrats who were purchasing the lion’s share of property in Canada, following which the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) had asked the government to provide a list of its officials who own homes in “Begum Para”. As per usual, those lists never materialised. We cannot help but wonder if this failure to identify the culprits is a question of lack of capability of our institutions or willingness, given that a huge number of those involved in such purchases are powerful people in the government itself or rich businessmen with close links to political quarters. The government must make active efforts to stop property flight in these constrained times, engaging with foreign governments to increase transparency and cooperation in identifying those hiding behind shell companies or third party buyers.

Shaking of the ground

Earthquakes do not kill people, bad buildings do



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND
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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

We were travelling back to Istanbul with a Turkish tourist group when the news of a 7.8 magnitude quake reached us. We asked our fellow passengers whether members of their families were safe back home. Most of them hailed far from the Syrian border towns in the southeastern provinces and seemed unperturbed by the news.

My wife, who attended a training in Turkey in 1999, recalled the catastrophic earthquake of 7.6 magnitude which claimed over 18,000 lives. Our tour guide sounded defiant. “Well, we are more sophisticated technologically now. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” “We have been paying earthquake tax ever since that incident. We better be prepared for such calamities,” another one added with a hint of irony.

From our cruise ship, access to the outside news was rather voluntary. Unless you have paid for your roaming data or WiFi hotspots, there was little reason for one to be aware of what was going on back home. The extent of the disaster was yet to be known. Behind the facade of our indifference, little did we know that our ship, too, was vulnerable to a potential tsunami as an aftershock to the quake. The instant reactions of our Turkish friends intrigued me, but it was something to which we could all relate.

As Bangladeshis from a hotspot of disasters, both heaven- and human-made, after every tragic incident in the country – be it a launch capsize, a factory fire, a flood in the plain, or a storm in the forest – we get calls from friends from abroad asking about our safety. In most cases, we nudge our shoulders to suggest that our country is not that small where we need to be affected by every “unnatural” event. We allow our pride to speak for us. Nobody likes to be reduced to objects of pity and misery, although nature regularly reminds us of our smallness in the grand scheme of things.

The fault, however, in this instance, lies in the shifting tectonic plates on which we have garnished our lives full of consumption. On the early morning of February 6, when residents of Turkey’s Gaziantep province were sleeping, many of the buildings that stood tall to poke the skyline “pancaked” or fell like a deck of cards. The Turkish authorities estimated that over 5,600 buildings have collapsed in the southeastern provinces. The death toll in Turkey and Syria has already climbed above 21,000 as rescue crews look



An aerial view of residents, aided by heavy equipment, searching for victims and survivors amidst the rubble of collapsed buildings in the village of Besnia near the town of Harim, Syria on February 6, 2022.

PHOTO: AFP

for survivors trapped under toppled buildings. Freezing winter weather has impeded the rescue efforts, and the actual figure of losses is likely to grow eight-fold, according to WHO.

The series of earthquakes is a grim reminder that we should never let our guard down against nature. Scientists keep telling us about the seismic gaps; there is usually a pause between ruptures – especially in the fault zones. If you live in an active seismic zone, disasters can strike anytime. The tectonic plates under the earth’s surface keep adjusting, causing us to feel minor tremors now and then. During major shifts of the plates, the punch gets mightier. The Anatolian Faultline was one such ticking time-bomb. The visual manifestation of the disaster could be seen through the demolition of buildings and roads as if a giant earth was wiping off dust and fleas from its crust. The debris both give rise to and hide human stories. The challenge now is to stay alive in a hostile environment, help others to find shelter, heal the wounded, and bury the dead before we prepare for the next jolt.

As they say, earthquakes do not kill

buildings, primarily for public places like schools and hospitals? Have there been efforts to remove the relatively weaker portions of the buildings?

These questions are equally valid for Bangladesh. Located at the borders of several active tectonic plates, we face the risk of a similar or greater earthquake. Our placement in the world’s largest river delta close to sea level also makes us prone to major tsunamis which could be triggered as an aftermath of an earthquake. The human tragedy in Turkey serves as a warning for all of us. Nature, indeed, is a great leveller. Images of the disaster remind us of our interlinked fate. The wailing of surviving relatives, the helplessness of rescue operators, and the plights of the dead touch us on so many levels.

The images get transferred from one media to another. Media gurus know which images work better to get the attention of humanitarian appeals. A wailing dog holding on to the hand of its trapped master or a trapped young girl trying to comfort her brother shelved between concrete slabs shake the core of our human selves. Then again, would I be okay with

frameworks, we realise that certain images are foregrounded at the expense of others. The coverage of an incident has a proven effect on how a story is remembered. Some stories thrive, while others fade. Some stories continue to develop in the imagination of others, garnering power and prompting positive energies for change. The reverse can also be true.

Pundits keep on referring to Bangladesh as an active seismic site. The onus is on us to learn from these stories to better prepare ourselves.

The gesture to stand by our brothers and sisters in need by both the government and the public is laudable. We should also be concerned about handpicking disasters. Say, for instance, the victims of the trouble-torn Syria should not receive lesser attention – like the media has given it. The frequency and curation of images construct our memories and responses. We should be alive to the way stories of disasters are told and retold. Above all, we should be aware that our plight as a human race is interconnected. We keep human stories alive by being humane.

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF VIETNAM-BANGLADESH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

A bond developed over our love for independence



Ashraf ud Doula
is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to Vietnam.

ASHRAF UD DOULA

Those of us who were born in the 50s grew up with the Vietnamese’s struggle for national independence. Vietnam’s victory over French occupation in 1954 was a household story in the mid-and-late 50s, and we felt a natural sympathy for the underdog and fellow third-world country. Our interest in Vietnam intensified after the US launched in 1963 a full-scale war against North Vietnam, which began a spate of killing and maiming an umpteen number of people by indiscriminate bombing and spraying of agent orange from the air.

As young people, being proselytised by the global events of the 60s, we embraced the Vietnamese tragedies as our own and any reports of US new aggression agitated our adolescent minds. For instance, the My Lai massacre would never erase from our consciences.

The names of the great Vietnamese leaders – Ho Chi Minh and General Giap were firmly embedded in our hearts and minds. Little did we realise that the humbuggery of that January

wintry afternoon at our youthful age indeed planted the seeds of patriotism in our conscience. And, only three years later, in 1971, when my country came under such an ordeal, it didn’t take a moment’s hesitation for me to join our Liberation War as a freedom fighter to liberate the country from the hands of the enemies. Indeed, General Giap’s book “*Dien Bien Phu*”, was my most valued possession during the Liberation War. What was even more fated was that one day I would come to Vietnam as the Ambassador of my country.

In September 1945, the great leader and the founding father of modern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, known as Uncle Ho, declared the independence of Vietnam in front of a mammoth crowd. In his independence speech, he thundered, “We, (the) members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country, and is so already.

The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilise all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property to safeguard their independence and liberty”.

One could find an echo to Bangabandhu’s March 7 speech calling upon his people to be ready to fight the enemy with whatever they could lay their hands on: “The struggle this time is the struggle for independence. The struggle this time is the struggle for freedom. Once we have spilled our blood, if necessary, we will spill more blood. Yet we will snatch our independence. I ask you all to prepare yourselves to fight the enemy, with whatever you can lay your hands on”.

In my mind, the above sentiments, expressed by the respective leaders in words coming from their hearts, are the philosophical foundation for building strong ties between Vietnam and Bangladesh.

In February 1973, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh established diplomatic relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and then with the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam – a formal governmental structure to the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam representing the Southern people. Right after that, Vietnam opened its resident mission in Dhaka in early 1974; however, it closed its Embassy in 1982 due to economic constraints. Vietnam reopened its mission in Dhaka in 2003. On the other

hand, Bangladesh opened its Mission in Hanoi in 1993.

In the past 50 years, the bilateral relations have prospered by leaps and bounds, covering the entire gamut of cooperation: political, economic, cultural and people-to-people interaction. There have also been several high-level visits, including at the highest level, between the two countries over the years. These visits have added fresh impetus to the already excellent bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Vietnam.

The two countries share common membership in a number of international and regional organisations. They have also signed several agreements, protocols, and MOUs related to trade and other areas of mutual interest.

The bilateral trade between the two countries is currently valued at nearly USD 1.5 billion, which has the potential to surpass USD 2 billion in the next couple of years. Bangladesh’s exports to Vietnam consist of pharmaceutical products, jute and jute goods, and scrap iron, while Vietnam exports to Bangladesh communication equipment, cement and clinker, gravel and crushed stone.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Vietnam, given that we have multifaceted similarities with Vietnam, our relationship could also be expanded, encompassing several areas for mutual benefit.