



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

The paradox of our time



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

A major paradox of our time came to light during the Nato summit that ended in Vilnius, Lithuania earlier this week: a proxy war does not constitute a real war. Even if people die for real in a proxy war, you cannot document them in your official book of accounts, lest they become real. The issue came to the fore when Western leaders shadowing President Volodymyr Zelensky's war had to remind him that they were not Amazon who would simply deliver weapons upon receiving orders. The issue became even more evident when the Nato summit proclaimed that a country engaged in an active war with Russia would not be accepted as a member, much to the ire of the Ukrainian president. Nato's "one for all, all for one" motto would make a conflict with one of its allies a conflict with all. The postponed membership of Ukraine allowed sanity to prevail. Nobody wants a conflict in Europe to escalate into a new World War.

The Great War in 1914 was one such decisive moment in history. For Milan Kundera, who passed away this week, the "misunderstood" usage of the word "world" in World War I has unwittingly trapped every local event in a common global situation. The Czech author asserted in a rare interview (I say rare because Kundera never relished discussing his writing) that "the adjective 'world' expresses all the more eloquently the sense of horror before the fact that, henceforward, nothing that occurs on the planet will be a merely local matter, that all catastrophes concern the entire world, and that consequently, we are more and more determined by external conditions, by situations no one can escape, and which, more and more, make us resemble one another" (*Salmagundi*, 1987).

Milan Kundera's work repeatedly returns to this paradox. As a card-carrying member of the Communist Party of Prague in the 1950s, he became aware of this paradox. He lost faith in their idealistic vision of a perfect society. When the Soviet

Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, he became critical of the authoritarian Communist regime. His work got banned, and he was eventually driven from his native Czechoslovakia. Kundera settled in France in 1975. He enjoyed his newfound identity as a French novelist with a form of lightness that is both bearable and unbearable, rather than letting the memories of his exile weigh him down.

"Do I consider my life in France as a replacement, a substitute life, and not a real life? Do I say to myself: 'Your real life is in Czechoslovakia, among your old countrymen?' ... Or do I accept my life in France - here where I really am - as my real life and try to live it fully? I chose France," he said, "I wonder if our notion of home isn't, in the end, an illusion, a myth. I wonder if we are not victims of that myth. I wonder if our ideas of having roots - *d'être enraciné* - is simply a fiction we cling to."

The binary of fact and fiction is one of the many opposites that he explored in his writings. By drawing the opposites closer together till they are interchangeable or indistinguishable, Kundera was able to avoid the line between them. We cannot distinguish fact from fiction, proxy from reality. He accomplishes this by revealing a world of excess: a world that simultaneously promises endless human possibilities and produces vast emptiness. Readers are left with the feeling that nothing is genuine. For instance, he says by playing music loud, people are becoming deaf, and because people are deaf, they now need loud music.

This example is from his literary masterpiece *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The novel is full of romantic adventures that put fidelity to the test. He uses his libertine protagonist Tomas, a married surgeon with many mistresses to explore some weighty philosophical issues. There are seven chapters in the book. The chapters with the titles "Lightness and Weight" and "Body and Soul" are chapters 1

and 5, respectively. The third chapter, "Words Misunderstood," is what gives the titles their mirror image. The book's seven chapters represent the seven days of the week, or rather the seven stages of life that Shakespeare describes in *As You Like It*. The sixth chapter builds up the anticipation of a Grand March before settling on Karenin's last smile. Kundera's humorous nature can be seen in the way he nicknames the dog Karenin after Tolstoy's tragedy *Anna Karenina*, and implies it as a source of eternal happiness. As the female heroine of the narrative comes to the dog for solace, we learn that dog time is cyclical as opposed to human time.

The novel begins with a reverie. Leaping through a book on Hitler, the narrator recalls his family members who died during the Holocaust. While the burden of death is heavy, its recollection is relatively light. He ponders if the concept of the eternal return of the German philosopher Nietzsche is right, events will have to recur again and again infinitely. Does it mean the Holocaust or the French Revolution will return? He makes light of the "weighty" historical events, and turns to Greek philosopher Parmenides to celebrate lightness. People who value the lightness of being acknowledge that life has some limitations and no true purpose. They thrive on fleeting beauty and freedom.

In his novel, Kundera examines this conundrum by creating an ensemble of characters who are on a mission. "What possibilities remain for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight? ... That life is a trap."

In one of his oft-quoted lines, Kundera pronounces, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. I think, therefore I am" is the statement of an intellectual who underrates toothaches. The unbearable lightness of being."

I take a look at a picture of the Nato summit, where President Zelensky is shown standing by himself while the others mix and mingle. I think of the paradox. I think of the thousand words this image captures. The great war that weighs on us and the unfathomable lightness of being with which that lonely being stands in a crowd. And we owe it to the great Milan Kundera to remind us of the paradoxes of life.

Rest in peace, Kundera!

RTI: A law that can bring joy to citizens

Dr Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are chairman and assistant director (RTI), respectively, at Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). Email: rib@citech-bd.com

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

Today, we share some personal stories to show the power of law to warm the hearts of citizens who deign to use it. Often, we perceive law as something impersonal and removed from the individual, and we forget that at its heart, the law is human and personal.

Right to Information (RTI) activist Khairul Islam from Taraganj, Rangpur heard about some corrupt practices of the local Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) office from his wife who worked there. It was related to the fixed deposit accounts of employees managed by the office. He quickly dispatched an RTI application to the designated officer (DO) asking for information on the amount accrued so far in the accounts and some related matters. The DO refused to provide the information, citing Section 7 (r) of the Right to Information Act, 2009, which exempted disclosure of information of any person protected by the law.

Dissatisfied with the answer, Khairul appealed to the higher authorities of the office and got the same response. Next, he filed a complaint to the Information Commission, which initially also agreed with the DO's decision. However, Khairul insisted that Section 32 (2) of the RTI Act overrides the exemption raised by the DO, because this was related to corruption, and he had evidence for it. The commission relented in the face of this legal argument and decided in favour of disclosure. It made many happy.

In nearby Dinajpur district, journalist Harunur Rashid from Nababganj upazila was pleased to find that the Dinajpur-Fulbari-Ghoraghat regional highway was being widened into three lanes. Signs were erected quoting a directive from the High Court that no construction should be made within 50 feet of both sides of the road. To his dismay, he found that soon after the road work was completed, construction of shops and other structures had begun. He immediately sent an RTI application to the DO of the Executive Engineer's Office of Roads and Highways Department asking what measures were being taken about enforcing the High Court directive. The response came within the stipulated period, assuring Harunur that action would be taken in the shortest possible time to demolish the new structures. He was happy to have contributed to respecting a directive from the High Court aimed at serving public interest.

In Dinajpur's Chirirbandar upazila, a group of RTI activists were upset to find that trees providing shade along both sides of the road in their area were chopped

down by the Forest Department. In December 2021, they sent an RTI application to the DO of the office asking for copies of the official decision, the tender notice, and related papers. They received only some of the requested information and were told that the office did not have any other information as the concerned decision was made by the local upazila parishad. The activists appealed to the higher authorities but received no response. Finally, they complained to the Information Commission. At the hearing, the DO claimed that the



requested information was not available to them. To the utter dismay of the complainants, the commission accepted the claim.

The applicants felt aggrieved by the Information Commission's decision since it could have asked

Despite general apathy of our citizens, particularly of the more knowledgeable and educated classes, to the tremendous potential of the RTI Act, there are a handful of RTI activists and enthusiasts in the country who persevere to take the law forward with their zeal and determination. The results reveal the power of the law to bring awareness to public authorities that, under democracy, they have a responsibility to ensure that the laws of the land are respected by all concerned to serve the people and safeguard their interests.

the DO to find the information from whichever other office that had it, as provided under the law. How could it be that information related to such a well-acclaimed programme in the country would not be available to the relevant public offices? And the law of the land also requires that all such information be duly recorded.

As decisions of the commission are final and can only be challenged at the High Court under its writ jurisdiction, it is not certain if the matter will go any further. It falls once again to the RTI community in the country to intervene in such cases and take the law forward. In last month's column, we cited a decision of the Central Information Commission of India in a similar case, which stated, "Claim of file missing or not traceable has no legality as it is not (recognised) as exception by RTI Act. By practice, 'missing file' cannot be read into as exception in addition to exceptions prescribed by RTI Act. It amounts to breach of Public Records Act, 1993 and punishable with imprisonment up to a term of five years or with fine or both." In other words, "I cannot find the information" is not an acceptable response.

In our next case, also from North Bengal, Nowshad Hossain of Boideshir Haat area in Chirirbandar was unhappy about sand excavation on riverbeds, causing environmental hazards. Nowshad was proud of the beauty of the area bordering the Atrai River, on which Boideshir Haat was located. He was therefore aghast at the damage to the area from continuous sand excavation by a private enterprise, which had obtained a lease for the purpose from the district administration. In August 2022, Nowshad sent an RTI request to the DO of the District Commissioner's Office asking for measures the authorities intended to take to stop the damage being caused to the area and to the surrounding riverbanks. As he received no response to his request, he sent an appeal to the Divisional Commissioner's Office. The latter, to the utter delight of the applicant and the local population, promptly replied that the excavator's permit was being cancelled.

Despite general apathy of our citizens, particularly of the more knowledgeable and educated classes, to the tremendous potential of the RTI Act, there are a handful of RTI activists and enthusiasts in the country who persevere to take the law forward with their zeal and determination. The results reveal the power of the law to bring awareness to public authorities that, under democracy, they have a responsibility to ensure that the laws of the land are respected by all concerned to serve the people and safeguard their interests. It is heartening that a number of dedicated NGOs are also continuing to bring awareness to the people about the law. We hope that the above stories will inspire others to make use of the law and take this important instrument of democracy forward.

/Opinion
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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Insertion symbol
6 Sounds from pounds
11 Assumed name
12 Customary
13 Do a pre-meal chore
15 Player's peg
16 Sick
17 Put in stitches
18 Attempts
20 Correct
23 Safari sighting
27 Smell
28 Like a desert
29 Majorette's prop
31 Soda flavor
32 Roll into a ball
34 Hoopla

37 Stage signal
38 Fuming
41 Describe a situation
44 Cookout spot
45 Critical asset
46 Feeds the pigs
47 Twitch

DOWN
1 Group of actors
2 Out of the wind
3 Solemn act
4 Consume
5 Summer top
6 Manor worker
7 Dry - bone
8 Messages
9 Leafy vegetable
10 Whole lot

14 Yale student
18 Fling
19 Staff symbol
20 Hold up
21 Lupino of film
22 Obtained
24 S&L offering
25 Tiny taste
26 Poem of praise
30 Cantina snack
31 Party group
33 Word on a bill
34 Egyptian serpents
35 Start a hand
36 Director
38 Butte's kin
39 Picnic pests
40 Consider
42 Pointer
43 Upper limit

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

RAMA ATOZ
FEDUP RAPID
ATOMS TRIPE
TIPPED APE
ANTS ROUTED
LAS BIASED
RUNUPS LAMO
MINUTE SUMO
APT DRIPPED
SPREE DRONE
SEUSS LANDS
DEEP EYES

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

GOOFING OFF AGAIN? IS THAT ALL YOU EVER DO?!

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

IF ANYONE NEEDS ME, I'LL BE IN THE BATHUR

YOU MIGHT AS WELL HAVE SENT AN ENGRAVED INVITATION.