

Burning issues



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

There is no shortage of live footage of the fire that engulfed a Bailey Road building which housed a number of popular eateries. Too many onlookers with mobile phones became citizen journalists. Now that the firefighters have defused the flames, the extent of the damage in terms of lives and property has become painfully clear. As of writing this piece, 46 people have reportedly died, and tens of others are critically injured.

Thursday night, which ushers in the weekend, is always a popular time for social outings. The extra day of February on a leap year adds to a calendrical curiosity that had probably prompted many others to make the evening memorable. But the leap day became unforgettable

to come down or break through the sealed glasses, as is customary in air-conditioned construction.

Authorities have issued their wise after-the-fact observations regarding the building—that it was not following the safety code, and that it had just one staircase which, too, was tucked in among a series of gas cylinders that stood like silent sentinels of peril. Imagine a city road decorated with commercial and residential high-rise buildings, all decked with gas cylinders, with the potential of becoming unwitting accomplices in catastrophic disasters. The city's uncontrolled expansion has transformed it into a ticking bomb, just one trigger away from erupting.

The unsuspecting customers



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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snuffs out life in an instant, tears apart families, and puts us at the mercy of fiery fury. But there seem to be no lessons that we can learn from past tragedies, as we helplessly resign to the inevitability of disasters.

In a country that is smart enough to widen its surveillance net to detect any unholy expression, how do we justify the violation of safety protocols in a public place? As common sense demands, one cannot block the lone staircase of a commercial building, that too with gas cylinders. But apparently, nobody saw this as a problem. Even if someone did, they were probably silenced, ignored, or managed. Violation of rules gives those in power the ability to demonstrate their "might" in public. They are not shy about showing off their prowess

with hooters, flag stands, firearms, sidekicks, lackeys, and fancy smartphones. Accidents expose the absurdity of our haughtiness and the fallacy of our existence.

Prior to the fire, an undated Google Maps image of the ill-fated shopping mall's facade showed the lined-up cylinders visible even from the main road. Yet, nobody sensed any danger. In the days to come, the audacity to publicly denounce safety protocol will surely haunt the owners. It will also haunt the naive people who prioritised personal convenience over public safety. They will recognise the fact that this accident could have been easily prevented, and scores of lives could have been saved.

These days, in most cases, the usual culprits are unsafe gas

cylinders and faulty electrical appliances. The government's late realisation of the need to protect our natural gas reserves has given rise to pressurised gas containers for both household and commercial usage. Only a handful of manufacturers control the market. A notorious group fixes the price of these bottles, charging way above the approved rate. This has tempted businesses to cut corners to increase their profit margin. Then there are the handling and transportation fees. But even that isn't the end. There is also a growing tendency to tamper with gas cylinders. Authorities have found suppliers or their middlemen guilty of employing dangerous tactics such as adding sand, water, or other substances to cylinders in

order to increase their weight and thus the profit margin. The greed of suppliers turns these gas cylinders into inflatable devices. Then, there are the issues of lack of storage space and a dearth of knowledge about the proper handling of gas cylinders. The Bailey Road building likely erupted in flames on Thursday due to a combination of all these factors.

But it is not enough to point out the obvious. The public is tired of the recurrence of avoidable accidents. The enforcement of public safety protocols is a need of the hour. Businesses must comply with the operational code of conduct without any compromises. But on a civic level, we too must do our share. We need to warn the authorities whenever there is an anomaly. We need to educate ourselves with the knowledge and tools to protect our communities.

For instance, often, firefighters cannot carry out their duties because of the presence of too many curious onlookers. Emergency vehicles cannot access the accident site because most of us on the road are not willing to sacrifice our comfort for the sake of a fire truck flashing red lights. We convince ourselves that all flashing lights signal fake hooters, devoid of reason and rationality. This mindset must be changed. There is also no harm in improving our safety gear and measures. Each kitchen should be protected with sprinklers, fire blankets, and protective doors to save time in case of emergencies. These technologies are now easily available. Government subsidies can make them affordable, too. We need sincerity and integrity to implement the basic safety rules.

We can collectively sigh and moan about the ticking bomb that the city has become. But we must realise that the power to defuse such threats lies in our collective hands. We must heed the warning signs and take action before tragedy strikes once more. Together, perhaps we can prevent the next spark from igniting an all-consuming conflagration.

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for all the wrong reasons. A fire that started on the ground floor did not wait long to spread up the seven-storey shopping outlet, ironically named the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall. There was no way for those stranded on the top floors

gathered, hoping for a good time. Any of us could have been there at the wrong time and in the wrong place, to be featured on the list of victims. Quite often, we revisit such accidents to identify the negligence that reduces our homes to ashes,

Chhayanaut at 60: In remembrance



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SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

Baishakh, at open air venues like Ramna, were electric: there was great diversity but a oneness of spirit. As the chorus filled the sky with melody, I saw that spirit soar to the heavens. These were our nostalgic times, whether it was at the Baldha Gardens, the ghorowa events, the *probbhat pheri*, *Amar Ekushey*, or other similar events.

Chhayanaut was also an ecosystem of wonderful, highly respected, and talented people with deep values and remarkable

we have been together now for nearly 50 years. Playing the sitar (may have) found me a partner whom I cherish deeply.

Recounting an episode, I left for the United States in 1974. That year, Pandit Ravi Shankar performed live at MIT's Kresge Auditorium, which I attended. When I went up to him at the end of his performance and said I was from Bangladesh, I recall his warmth and grace while conversing with me for a few moments. He must have



A Chhayanaut cultural programme at Ramna Botmul in the 1960s.

PHOTO: RASHID TALUKDER

footsteps, several of them clambered down the adjacent balcony to avoid chastisement or even a drubbing. As Ustadji recounted the story, he burst into a laugh because the disciples had used their *dhoti* to climb down from the second floor. Of course, we all rolled in laughter with him!

Among my compatriots learning the arduous art were (Aminul Haque) Badshah bhai (press secretary to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman), (Sheikh) Kamal bhai (the effervescent son of the beloved Bangabandhu), Barkat bhai (who worked for an architectural firm), and others. I still remember with fondness our performance on Dhaka TV at the former DIT Building. Ustadji choreographed the programme centred on Raga Malkauns, which I can still recount in my mind clearly. It was an exquisite programme and the four of us produced beautiful music!

Chhayanaut was not just sitar lessons for me; it was a unique and iconic institution that represented a harmonious unity. The public functions, especially Pahela

ideals. Their love for Bangladesh and its people was always in overflow mode. The camaraderie and fellow feelings at the institution created deep bonds that are strong even today. Among the inspirational figures were Sanjida apa and Waheed bhai who were the heart and soul of the institution. Being with them was like being a very part of them. Their graciousness and serenity still remain firmly embedded in my memory.

I sometimes marvel at my audacity of youth. Competing at Dhaka College in 1970, when I was barely playing a *gat* (*bandeesh*) in slow tempo and some *jhala*, I took first place! Then came my first public performance in 1972, deeply etched in my heart. It was the Freshers' reception at the Teacher-Student Center (TSC) of Dhaka University. I played Kirvani and even a little *sawal-jawab*, assisted graciously by Aslam bhai, which earned me many accolades. But what stands out about that day is the stem of rose I'd received in appreciation from a young lady from the English department:

remembered The Concert for Bangladesh organised by him and George Harrison of the legendary The Beatles during Bangladesh's liberation movement. Next year, I performed at the same venue when the Bangladesh Association of Boston invited me to play there: what incredible acoustics!

Chhayanaut has given me much. Even today, to my utter surprise and joy, someone will ask, "Do you still play the sitar?" Beyond the *raga* lay a treasure trove of lessons: discipline, hard work, perseverance, and resilience. I also learned to appreciate my culture more deeply, to be creative, and to explore artistic expressions. The ambience of Chhayanaut taught me about compassion, understanding, and responsibility to society and nation.

I am profoundly grateful to the institution which helped me evolve both as a music lover and as a human being. May the institution continue to enrich ardent minds, touch inviting hearts, and enlighten yearning souls.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

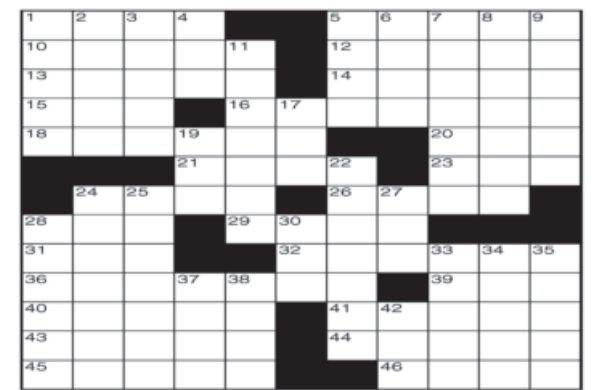
ACROSS

- 1 Rosary unit
- 5 Makes do
- 10 Tribal leader
- 12 Wise words
- 13 Singly
- 14 Burn a bit
- 15 Knight's address
- 16 Unthrifty sort
- 18 Sore to the touch
- 20 Lyric poem
- 21 Adam's grandson
- 23 Curtain holder
- 24 Ludicrous
- 26 Verve
- 28 Wallet bill
- 29 Be thrifty
- 31 Drama division
- 32 Basis of some discrimination
- 36 Kitchen device
- 39 Outback bird
- 40 Roofed patio
- 41 Improvise on stage
- 43 Banks of baseball
- 44 Espresso order
- 45 Elite Navy group

46 Physics amount

DOWN

- 1 Monster
- 2 Carl's wife in "Up"
- 3 Decorate
- 4 Cub's cave
- 5 Job for a lawyer
- 6 Norse god
- 7 Famed box opener
- 8 Incited
- 9 Be furious
- 11 Bristles at
- 17 Debate side
- 19 Dict. Entry
- 22 Quite a few
- 24 Affirm
- 25 Dish, perhaps
- 27 Cariou of "Blue Bloods"
- 28 Restaurant fixtures
- 30 Historic time
- 33 River feature
- 34 Gives off
- 35 Yokels
- 37 Finger feature
- 38 Conks out
- 42 River stopper



12-22

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

W	I	N	T	E	R		B	I	A	S
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