FORTY YEARS OF
Bangladesh

A Journey of Hopes And Unfilled Aspirations

DDIN M. CHOUDHURY

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COVER DESIGN: IFTEKHAR CHOUDHURY

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 2011962109

ISBN:

HARDCOVER	978-1-4691-3344-7
SOFTCOVER	978-1-4691-3343-0
EBOOK	978-1-4691-3345-4

This book was printed in the United States of America.

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Dedication

To Roxana Choudhury for standing by me almost all these years.

Acknowledgement

Iftekhar Choudhury—Cover Design

Shanil Choudhury—Photo Design

Foreword

On December 17, 1971, the day following our incredible victory over the occupying forces of Pakistan, Dhaka was a city of mixed emotions. On the one had we had these spontaneous processions of joy of citizens who were suddenly released from confinement in their homes since the war began sixteen days before. On the other hand there were very disturbing happenings of random killing and looting in the city that shocked the citizens. Although some of the violence resulted from encounters of the Mukti bahini with the Pakistan Para Military personnel who could not retreat to the cantonment in time, there were other instances of violence where people suspected to be Razakars were given summary justice by personnel claiming to be Freedom Fighters. Shops and establishment that were believed to be owned by so-called Pakistan sympathizers (most cases Non-Bengalis) were attacked and looted. The situation was so chaotic for the first few days following liberation that it was difficult to tell whether the armed groups of civilians roaming the streets of Dhaka were Freedom Fighters or hooligans who had acquired firearms from fleeing Pakistani soldiers and the Para Military.

The jubilation of December 16 suddenly started to yield to fear and uncertainty for Dhaka citizens, for a good part of December and January that period. The owner of a snack shop at Dhaka Stadium, which I used to visit, captured the sentiment of the moment in the following sentence: "I lived through the terrible nine months with the hope that the Pakistani monsters would leave one day, and we will get our independence. Now that we have our independence, who will get us rid of these new monsters? They are from us!"

What the snack-shop owner saw and reacted to were the acts of violence and mayhem from some unruly elements who took the garb of Freedom Fighters. We thought the phenomena were temporary, which would go away as we stabilize as a nation.

Unfortunately, some forty years after that euphoric 16th day of December of 1971 we are still struggling with monsters in different forms and of different kinds. These are the children of the 16th Brigade (a term coined for the free lancing armed gangs

that roamed Dhaka city that time), but they have been raised without any values and nourished in a culture of corruption, political patronage, and absence of rule of law.

The founding father of the country Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had many dreams for his nation and his people. Among these were lifting his nation from poverty to wealth, and giving people a country that respects democracy, rule of law, and life and property. He did not live to see if his dreams of Shonar Bangla (Golden Bengal) were fulfilled and what stormy path his beloved country traveled in last forty years. His life was cut short early in a violent and cruel manner— an ironic end for a man who believed in non-violence.

Had he lived he would have seen some realization of his dream as the country has risen from an economic morass of the post liberation days to a moderately stable stage. Our industrious people have been resilient to come back every time they have been struck by calamities whether man made or natural. Our resourceful and talented people have devised ways to overcome adversity and use limited means to build for growth. We built a burgeoning garment industry from a practically non-existent base and competed effectively with our skills and productivity. We created a contingent of work force that now serves overseas as a model of skilled and dependable workers. Our people built models of micro credit that have been emulated globally as poverty eradication tools. Our people gave birth to ingenious ways to promote female literacy, reduce child mortality, and improve water supply and sanitation in rural areas. Our national wealth has increased six times in last forty years, our exports grew ten times, and the rate of literacy has grown.

But along with these happy statistics the Father of the Nation would have also seen how we have grown in corruption, violence, and absence of rule of law. Some of our brightest minds have put us on the world map with innovative ways to fight poverty and raise level of literacy. But the crooks and their political masters also have been put us up in the world map for endless corruption and mindless violence.

Few years ago we were dubbed as one of the ten most corrupt countries of the world by the International Watch Dog on Corruption—Transparency International. Our political leaders that time derided the evaluation by the world body as biased and untrustworthy. Instead of looking inward for correction, we blamed others for giving us a false image. The result is that we are still in the top quintile of nations identified as corrupt. We seem to have turned a blind eye to corruption in our bureaucracy, business, and politics despite knowing how injurious such a label is to our national image. It is equally appalling to observe how impervious our leaders have become to such accusations and tarnishing of national reputation. We may protest that corruption is confined only to a segment of our population; we may point to our neighboring countries and declare in somewhat righteous indignation that they are no better. The crude reality is that it does

not help to shake off this pariah image. Finger pointing of one regime to another, from one leader to another, as the origin of this evil does not free us from the consequences of the evil.

Violence in politics and social life has been another growth area in last forty years. Politically motivated violence has been on the increase over last several years. The pattern seems to repeat itself with every change in government with opposition party supporters claiming harassment by ruling party supporters. According to Odhikar, the Human Rights Watch Group in Bangladesh, 220 deaths were suspected of being politically motivated last year, compared with 251 the previous year. Extra judicial killing by law enforcing agencies also contributed to the increase in violent deaths. In Bangladesh we became familiar with a term called "Crossfire" during the previous political government when accidental deaths of "rogue "individuals were reported when confronted by police. However, this was no ordinary police. A special force was created by the government to combat crime especially in big cities. According to a report provided by this agency to the media, 60 people were killed in such encounters or Crossfire in 2009, and 83 people in the year before.

Our wealth has increased in last forty years, but nothing of value happened in these decades that could shake a stoical view that we cannot rid ourselves of corruption and political violence. With each change in political government there would be hope that the next cast of characters would make some efforts to stem the tide. Indeed, there would be election promises of sorts to that effect. In reality, the party that came to govern would use its new found power to chase and harass its political foes from the past regime – all in the name of fighting corruption. This charade would be so habitual with every new political government that even legitimate cases of corruption charges leveled against politicians became suspect in public view. They were seen as a vendetta of one political party against another.

Forty years in the history of a country is a small drop in the ocean. But for those of us who had witnessed the brutal war of liberation and the pitiful conditions in our fledgling years, this is a long journey. It has been a journey on a road that was not paved with roses. Our young democracy was mangled and mutilated within a few years of the country's birth. We had to suffer two decades of military rule and quasi-dictatorship before we regained the democracy. At the same time we also witnessed rebirth of the forces that we had to contend with to gain our independence. We witnessed birth of politics of corruption, violence, opportunism, and shenanigans.

Yet we have miles to go to sustain our hard earned freedom, and ways to find the keep the momentum of our economic the growth. The first step in this direction is to change the political culture rooted in corruption, nepotism, violence, and lack of respect for human life. Our leaders need to rise above their own narrow and short term political

gains and address these vices starting with themselves and their political parties. We, like Bangabandhu, had many dreams for our fledgling nation; but these did not include seeing the country's name muddied for corruption, violence, and politics of retaliation. As we enter into the fifth decade of our independence, we pray and hope that our leaders will guide the nation in the right direction so that along with economic growth we also can see growth in our core values.

Part I

The Dividends Of Independnce

Shonar Bangla—Golden Bengal Hopes and Unfilled Aspirations

My first visit to the US was in the infancy of Bangladesh, in 1973, as the junior most member of a delegation led by late A.H.M. Kamaruzzaman, then Minister of Foreign Trade. I have a special recollection from that visit, which is of a meeting of the Minister with Congressman Poage, then Chairman of Foreign Relations Committee of the US House of Representatives. Toward the end of the meeting in the Capitol, the Congressman asked the minister what were the chances that the newly independent Bangladesh could eventually merge with West Bengal since both regions spoke Bengali. The question took everyone by surprise, but Mr. Kamaruzzaman took the question in his stride, and calmly replied that there were no such chances. Language was not the basis on which Bangladesh was born, he politely reminded the Congressman. The Congressman hastily added later that he had meant no offense. But the point was noted by everyone in the delegation that time. Bangladesh would need a lot of hard work to be recognized abroad as a viable country.

I quote the incident to bring to surface the great amount of cynicism and uncertainty that surrounded Bangladesh immediately following its bloody birth. From such disparaging remarks as an "international basket case" of Kissinger, to the forecast of doom and gloom from our adversaries, we became accustomed to acceptance of a fate that could be avoided only with divine intervention. We inherited a territory that was depleted of its resources, an infrastructure that was destroyed from within, and a population that required rehabilitation in almost every part of the country. A nine-month war, which actually was not between two armies, but a war by an occupation force against unarmed civilians, left millions dead, and an umpteen number uprooted from their homes. Our economy was in a shambles, as every sector needed to be rebuilt.

For three straight years our nation building work was actually a reconstruction and rehabilitation effort. Our government's focus was attending to the basic needs, food,

shelter and medicine. The nation was actually was one large refugee camp. There was very little hope that we could come out of this morass, least of all develop the country economically and socially.

Even a decade after the birth of Bangladesh I would face a somewhat similar quandary in responding to questions on the viability of Bangladesh at Cornell University (which I was attending for my higher studies in 1981). How could a country that depended mostly on foreign assistance (over 80% of development budget that time) ever stand on its own and get moving? More importantly how would a country cope with a fast growing population that rose at an average of nearly 3% in the past decade? Would the country be ever able to meet its food gap that in a bad year ran into several millions of tons?

Just to put in things their perspective, it is worthwhile to note that our economy for the first ten years of our existence was mainly dependent on agriculture. It contributed to 60% of our gross domestic output, and employed nearly 80% of the total labor force. Our main export was jute and jute goods accounting for more than two thirds of our foreign earnings. Earnings from industry and manufacturing were at the bottom of the table. We had an adult literacy rate hovering around 30%, with much worse rate for our women. Over 70% of our population lived below the line of poverty.

It took a great amount of courage and optimism of a visionary to speak about the future prospects of a country in such a crisis in the seventies, and for much of the first half of the eighties. Our image abroad was that of a country waging an unending battle against poverty, mounting population, and natural scourges. We existed in the peripheral vision of the international community, appearing in full vision when natural disasters struck the country.

Where are we now some forty years later? Are we still a poster child of malnutrition, poverty, and hunger? Are we still considered an international basket case? Can we say that we have left that image behind us?

Let us review some results of our country's endeavors in last forty years. These are substantiated by both our government's statistics and those from international agencies including the World Bank and UN. In last four decades we raised our food production three folds—from less than twelve million tons in 1972 to nearly thirty million tons in 2009. Our food gap dropped from an average of four to five million tons to less than one million a year. We have halved the rate of population growth of the seventies. Our exports grew from less than half a billion dollars in 1972-73 to over fifteen billion dollars last year; our per capita income rose from less than a hundred dollars to nearly six hundred dollars at the same period (all in nominal terms). Jute and jute goods, staples our foreign earnings were replaced by manufactured goods—mainly

readymade garments that became new icons of our exports. Our total national income quadrupled over the same time. The number of people in abject poverty (described in economic terms as people earning less than a dollar day) declined from seventy percent of population to under fifty percent. But does this mean much for a nation of sixteen crores? Have these achievement really changed our people's life and their expectations?

In a trans-continental live call-in session (over phone) arranged by Voice of America that I had participated in (early in 2011) as a discussant a recurring comment from listeners that I had to respond to was viability of Bangladesh both economically and politically. It was in a sense déjà vu all over again. Majority of the questions that were asked were refrains of those we had heard nearly four decades before. It appeared that despite progress in many fronts, cynicism of future growth and economic self-reliance persists both nationally and internationally. There are good reasons for these questions and skepticism among many about our future. One is that the generation now living in Bangladesh is a post liberation product that cannot see or properly evaluate our relative progress since independence. The other major reason is that our current generation still finds the country impoverished, largely illiterate, and affected by large scale corruption and a feckless leadership in all fronts. Are there ways to sustain our success and forge ahead tackling these obstacles and challenges?

There is no magic wand that will suddenly eradicate all the ills and failures that we face as a nation today. We probably will be struggling with some of them even decades later such as a burgeoning population (even if we grow minimally), and demands for consumption expand. But there are actions that we can take to help us grow and sustain our hard earned success. I will name only a few.

First is education. In today's economy where knowledge and skills rule, we cannot achieve success and compete with other countries with half of our adult population remaining illiterate. We export a vast amount of manpower to other countries to perform low level jobs because they have no superior skills that come with education and training. We fail to attract foreign investors to our country because we have very little tradable human resources that have right education and training. We need more investment in modern education, good teachers, and appropriate training institutions.

Second is ending corruption. We seem to have been permanently clustered with the most corrupt countries of the world since the world index on corruption began to be tabulated. It is ironic that despite corruption becoming a buzzword in Bangladesh aid circle, despite corruption being a central theme of a World Bank publication (Government That Works), and despite corruption figuring as a major obstacle in the governance process of Bangladesh, we seem to make no headway in addressing it, let alone solve it. Quite a few of recent writings by a few of our thinking elites dealt

with corruption, its cause and effects, and ways to tackle these. Most of our people are aware what causes corruption, where these are, and some can even suggest how these can be tackled. However, all this knowledge is meaningless if the political will to tackle corruption is lacking. This will need a determination at all levels starting from the highest.

Third is establishing and sustaining good institutions. These are not merely educational institutions, but political and social as well. We need good institutions in politics, administration, economic development, and organizations to act as watch dogs over the actions or inactions of our leaders and bureaucrats. We established an autonomous Anti-Corruption Commission three years ago that thrilled the country at the beginning with some dramatic actions. However, instead of arming it further with power and authority, we are attempting to declaw it. We need institutions that people can have faith in, and see results. Building institutions must be separated from the volatility of our political scene. Governments may come and go, but institutions must continue.

As we take stock today of our success and failures of last four decades, we need to be fully cognizant that an alert and responsible political leadership is key to our future success. We attained independence with the sacrifice of millions, in lives and property. Those who are gone are neither beneficiaries nor witnesses of our achievement; but the generations that live now and those that will come will benefit or suffer from our collective actions today. I only hope that we learn from mistakes in the past, and do our best to avoid them. We must forge ahead.

Made in Bangladesh—Our Garments Sold Abroad

In a wintry morning of 1978 in my office in Chittagong Deputy Commissioner's house I meet this maverick ex civil servant now turned an entrepreneur asking my help to get his imported garment machinery off loaded from Chittagong customs. This was Nurul Quader, a senior colleague of mine, who had left the service to pursue his talent in the private sector, and had hit upon this rather adventurous concept of making readymade garments following South Korean model. There was some snag in clearing the equipment for the fledgling industry he had set up, which he called Desh Garments. This was done in no time, but for me the million dollar question to him was why at all he had landed in this adventure when he had scores of other opportunities to try his business acumen. The maverick that he was, Nurul Quader (known as Jhilu Bhai by us younger folks) told me tongue in cheek that it was because all other businesses were already taken. He had to try something untried. My next question to him was when we could see his industry take off. To this, Nurul Quader gave his characteristic response garbed in a story. He said my question reminded him of the urgency with which he would ask his mother as a young boy whenever he felt hungry, "Where is dinner?", when he fully knew that mother was still cooking. In his case he said that the he had prepared the stove and the pot, but he was still waiting for the cooks to arrive.

The cooks in the case of Nurul Quader's kitchen (the industry in this case) were the hundred plus workers that he had sent to South Korea for training in garment making. He had hoped that with the return of these workers not only he would start up his joint venture (with South Korea) in garments; he would also begin a new industry and open a new avenue of economic growth for the country. Even after a visit to his new plant later and watching all those new workers running electrically operated sewing machines, I was skeptical if an industry could run depending on workers training abroad. I would be proven wrong. Because, only in a matter of years the core group of trained workers and the trainers later brought from Korea, a new generation of workers would be unleashed into the country who would take Nurul Quader's dream to a new and unheard of level.

When Nurul Quader began garments were a mere specter in our exports. Jute and Jute goods still occupied a big chunk of our exports in the seventies, and fish and shrimp export was just growing. Consider this. In 1976 our country earned a paltry six million dollars by exporting manufactured garments. This was not even two percent of our total exports that year. Today more than two thirds of our export earnings — over ten billion dollars—are from garments. From the lone pioneer factory that Nurul Quader set up in 1977 we have now more than three thousand that help us make that kind of money from abroad. From a few hundred workers and later some more that Nurul Quader employed, we have now roughly three and a half million workers — majority of whom are women who work these machines day in and day out. When I first came to the US in 1981, I could never imagine that I would see in a garment the label "Made in Bangladesh". Today, thanks to Nurul Quader's efforts, it is impossible to step into a department store in the US and not find at least half a dozen varieties of garments labeled "Made in Bangladesh".

All of this is however, is the bright side, the happy side of the story. The Garments have brought us money, employed our otherwise unemployable workforce, and given us a new avenue of economic growth. On the darker side, the industry has also given birth to the evils of exploitation, poor working conditions, and profit maximization in the wake of development. When people see a thirty-dollar price tag on a shirt made in Bangladesh and sold in a US store, few realize that the average garment worker in the home country is paid less than this sum for a whole month. When people buy a designer outfit made in Bangladesh in an upscale, air conditioned department store here in the US, few people realize that the workers behind this garment toiled nights and days cooped up in hot and airless buildings with minimal sanitary facilities. The buyers overseas rarely read or knew about hundreds of workers who perished in factories housed in poorly constructed buildings in the past years in Bangladesh.

Our success in garments happened because the eager entrepreneurs who followed the coat tails of Nurul Quader were successful in creating a niche market for their products. It happened because our labor was cheap, and our price was right. It also happened, at least in the formative years, because the importing countries gave us a break with some favorable treatment. It also happened because our manufactures met the standards. But the cheap labor that ushered hundreds of entrepreneurs into this new industry has also been our bane. We may have gone to the limits of squeezing this golden goose.

Workers in the industry lured from rural areas for livable wages toiled for abominable wages and working conditions for years. After many years of a two-sided battle, the hapless workers on one side and their employers on the other, the industry recently agreed to a government proffered wage scale. The workers, however, found this less than their needed minimum. On paper the wages have doubled on average, but in reality it is still a lower than subsistence level wage. The industry argues that in

order to remain competitive internationally, further increase in the wages would be unsustainable.

While arguments can be made on both ends of the spectrum, the fact remains that garments are the bread and butter of our export earnings. To sustain this accommodation needs to be made by all sides. We need to find ways for this industry prosper and grow, but not all at the cost of the toiling workers.

Labor costs account for only 1-3 percent of the total cost of a garment. Raising it by another one to two percent will not reduce the profit margin or the competitiveness of our garments abroad. Increase in wages can be offset by raising productivity of the individual worker. This productivity increase can come from improving the working conditions of the garment workers, by taking care of their health and sanitation needs, and above all by housing the factories in safe environment.

A recent study of the readymade garments in India on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the industry (SWOT) recommended several measures to address these. Poor labor conditions and unfavorable labor laws were cited among the weaknesses. International labor and environment laws were viewed as threats. A quick scan of the industry in Bangladesh may reveal similar results. Our strengths may not be equal to those of India, but our weaknesses, and threats would be similar and we should be all aware of these. More importantly our entrepreneurs should seriously view the threats that are looming from other countries. The golden goose may not lay eggs indefinitely unless we wake up to the threats of competition, and find other avenues for diversification.

Our opportunities exist in fair and effective use of our labor that has ungrudgingly contributed to the success of this industry. Our entrepreneurs need to use this gift for diverse application, and not necessarily contain them within the garment industry. In today's globalization of trade investment has flown into countries that have offered a productive and skilled labor force, and created a supportive environment for growth of this force. It would be in their own interest and of the country if the industry owners were to assess the state of the industry and the people who keep it running. To paraphrase our Nobel Laureate Prof. Yunus, for every mouth that we feed we have two hands. All we need is to train these hands to produce. It took one Nurul Quader to create a new vision to give a new direction to our economy; it will take a thousand others to keep the economy expanding.

In Search of an Identity—The Bangladeshi Diaspora

Nearly two decades ago I met a young mother in a Bangladeshi get-together here in Washington DC area who took pride that her six year old son could not only read and speak Bengali but also could recite Bengali rhymes at ease. She also informed me that she took her son to various Bangladeshi cultural gatherings so that the child could learn and hopefully develop an attraction to the culture and heritage that she had left behind. The young lady had tutored her son herself taking a break from her professional job as an accountant, and was obviously satisfied that her sacrifice had borne fruit. I envied her success since my sons (by that time too old to learn rhymes) not only could not read or write Bengali, they also evaded speaking the language as they found English—the lingua franca here—more native to them. I complimented her on her efforts and wished her success.

I could not closely follow the linguistic and cultural growth of the child as the family lived away from us, only until recently, again in a Bangladeshi gathering. I could hardly recognize the lady as she had become more matronly. When I enquired about her son she gave a sigh, and told me in a low voice that her son no longer fancied these cultural gatherings. He was a full blown young man now who preferred the culture that he had grown with and is more accustomed to. What about reading and writing Bengali, I enquired. He had given that up too, she replied.

A second case that I would like to cite is that of a father who was convinced that the only way he could rear his children in this alien land (read non-Muslim) was to infuse in them the spirit of religion and its teachings. He took pains to take his two daughters to an Islamic school ran by a community of Muslims from the sub-continent, and Middle East. He was a regular practitioner and as such insisted that his children also do the same. He informed me that his daughters were proficient in reading Arabic, and would soon be able to complete reading the Koran. What about Bengali, I asked? He said for Muslims it was essential to know Arabic first. He was a Muslim first and a

Bengali later. The daughters could learn Bengali later if they wanted to, but it was not a priority.

I was not in touch with this father for a long time, but would learn about his daughters' progress in life from common friends. Both children finished their education in subjects other than religion. Both married of their own choice, and to the chagrin of their father, outside their religion.

The cases that I cited typify the dilemma and contradictions that all immigrant parents go through in raising their young in a foreign land. In the first case the young lady had decided that the only way to keep her son away from the "cultural pollution" of the foreign land was by immersing her son in the language and culture of the homeland. In the second case, the father had decided that the religious identity and adherence to its principles would inure his children from the malevolent influence of western culture.

All immigrant parents go through this quandary, and cross phases that eventually lead them to accept the choice of their offspring. What is missing in this cycle, however, is lack of empathy of the parents with the dichotomous reality that these children have to live through in their growth to adulthood, and the pains they suffer, which often times may lead to disastrous choices.

Over three decades or so that I have been living in the US there has been a surge in the growth of Bangladeshi population in North America surpassing UK – the choice of destination of our people in the fifties and sixties. A rather hospitable environment for settlement in these parts combined with a variety of legal means to immigrate (as well as illegal) have led to ten-fold increase in Bangladeshi population in the US alone in a matter of three decades. This migration has not been limited to one class or one category of people. Unlike the migration to UK, which was dominated by the working class in the fifties and sixties, the migration to US covered a wide range of people, from highly educated professionals (many of whom were educated and trained here), with well-paying jobs, to the barely educated in menial jobs who filled the lower rungs of the migration ladder. The immigrants have come from all corners and all sections of Bangladesh society (except perhaps the farming class). They carried with them a common language (although with regional variations), a common heritage and culture, and largely a common religion, but not necessarily a common interpretation of Bengali nationalism. While the large majority would like to identify themselves as Bengalis with language and Bengali culture in the forefront, a good number of the immigrants would like to be identified as Muslims first, and Bengalis later. This divergence would show itself in the way they have tried to raise their children. In their effort to shield their children from "pernicious effect of western culture" some tried to permeate them with their own language and culture, and others tried to inure them from western

culture by introducing them to religion, and its teachings. A small minority, however, let their children go with the flow.

These disparate and often desperate efforts to raise children in a foreign land have often led to unexpected results. Our Indian counterparts have coined a term ABCD (American Born Confused Desi)—for first generation Indian Americans and their struggles to find a common ground between two very disparate cultures. At home they have been accustomed to seeing their parents act and behave in a certain fashion and asking them to adhere to it; while in schools they have been nurtured in a very different custom and norms that are more tuned to the western way of life. For female children the difference is more stark since some behavior and customs that they watch in school and work place (such as having male friends, dating, dancing, etc.) are not only frowned upon by their home culture, but even may be forbidden. Add to this the pressures that religious parents may have on their children exhorting observance of religious practices. It is no surprise that many of these children later suffer from an identity crisis.

Efforts of the parents to train the children in their favored ways have often led to rebellion among these youths. Some have embraced the western way in more ways than even the mainstream. They have married outside their culture and faith. They have dissociated themselves from the culture and heritage that their parents so painstakingly tried to teach them. There are cases on the other extreme also. A feeling of alienation from the mainstream, and often an inability to blend with the main stream because of cultural or religious inhibitions have isolated some of the new generation. In their bid to establish an identity separate from the main stream some youth have chosen identity with their religious faith over ethnic or national origin. It is not uncommon these days to see more young men of Bangladeshi origin sporting a beard or women wearing full hijab in public, and choosing apparels that have little to do with Bangladesh. It is ironic that this extreme religious makeover has happened more in the cases of children of religiously moderate or progressive parents than others who have consciously guided their children to this direction.

The surge in immigration of Bangladeshis to the US over last decade has also had some salubrious effect in bringing to fore the cultural heritage of the Bengalis. We have now more forums in bigger cities that host a number of events that celebrate our language and culture in a variety of ways, and the young parents make an effort to immerse their next generation in the culture and language of their country. Adherence to ethnic traditions and attempts to preserve these traditions are fairly common in the US. Nationalities that have migrated to these parts over last hundred years have tried to keep these alive by observing their national days and other cultural events. Attempts of the Bangladeshis in that regard follow the practices of other immigrant communities.

But laudable as these attempts are, most children will continue to face the same predicaments as the generation before them. Absent any clear understanding of heritage and culture how will they identify themselves when they grow up? Will they take pride in a culture and language that is distinctive to Bangladeshis, or will they identify themselves on a larger platform based on religion, as a sizeable part of this community tends to lean toward this? Will the younger generation in this country continue to suffer from a schizophrenic identity?

The sense of pride and belonging to national traditions and culture can be passed down only when the preceding generation upholds these by practice. We only confuse the next generation by seeking identity on religious platform, something that was tried in our country six decades before and failed. Our previous generation paid a huge price for this false identity by forming a geographically divided country connected by religion that was destined to doom from birth. It is ironic that years after the failure of a religion based nation hood, there would be resurgence of thoughts of identity on religion alone in this Diaspora of Bangladeshis thousands of miles away from. It is conceivable why we drive the younger generation to greater confusion when such thoughts and efforts are dangled before them.

Perhaps the simplest way this conundrum can be resolved is to fall back to the collective experience of millions of immigrants to this country over last hundred years. Each nationality and ethnic group had witnessed a period of great anxiety among parents to raise their children in their traditions, and struggles that went with their efforts. While the first generation may have enduring memories and everlasting connection to the culture and tradition they have left behind, it is extremely difficult to transmit these memories and attachment to a generation that has grown in a completely different environment. This can only happen if the next generation finds these of value, and something that they can proudly hold on to.

The Bangladeshi culture and tradition may also someday find a niche in this multi-colored fabric, but only if the next generation finds enough pride in these. And much of that pride depends on the image the next generation has of the home country in their mind. Culture and tradition of the country are matters of pride when the country they are rooted to is also a source of self-esteem to them. Seeking a separate identity based on a religious platform may not be necessary.

Our Migrant Workers—Hands That Feed the Country

In a recent VOA Bangla program on the Libyan crisis that I participated in, among many issues discussed was the fate of Bangladeshi migrant workers in that country. What will happen to sixty thousand odd Bangladeshis who like other hapless foreigners have been caught in the middle of a civil war raging in that country? At the time when the issue was being debated in that VOA program, some of the Bangladeshi migrants had been either been evacuated or were in the process of being rescued from there with help from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). But thousands of others who had traveled hundreds of miles using all kinds of transports to the Libyan borders were still stranded there.

It was not a pleasant site to watch the milling crowd of migrants in makeshift tents surviving on a minimal ration of food, and waiting for divine intervention for their rescue. This is a segment of our population who had staked their all to work in a foreign land for earning a livelihood, not only for themselves, but also for their entire families that had left behind in the country. A question that arose in that VOA discussion was what would happen to these thousands of displaced workers when they return home. Will government doles and IMO support compensate their losses? Will they find any employment back home?

The Libyan crisis once again brings to focus the sustainability of our foreign remittances and their continued support to income generation in the country. When a crisis as in Libya forces thousands of foreign workers out of that country and renders those jobless, what is the guarantee that our migrant workers in other countries may not face a fate of a similar kind at one point or another? What will happen to our golden goose that had been laying eggs to sustain our economy for the last four decades?

Foreign remittances, rather money sent by our migrant workers from abroad - -especially the middle east now account for the largest chunk of our export revenue. Today Bangladesh is among the top ten foreign remittance recipient countries of the World,

receiving over $11 billion in 2010. But this is an official figure. Unofficial estimates of remittance are nearly twice this amount since much of the remittance home is through private channels. These are earnings of our workers, close to seven hundred thousand, spread over 140 countries of the world, with nearly two thirds being concentrated in the middle-east and near-east. Forecasts for these earnings are rather cheerful. If the current growth trend continues (which has averaged nearly 20% annually in last thirty years), foreign remittances will be twice that of our foreign exports earning in next ten years. But will this really hold? What support do we have to sustain this source of revenue?

There were considerable worries of a dip in foreign remittances when global economic crisis hit the developed nations including the oil rich countries two years back. Apprehensions of millions of migrant workers rendered jobless and forced to return home were building fast. Experts viewed Bangladesh as one of the countries that would be hit hard if the predictions came true. Fortunately we have weathered that, as neither the number of migrants nor the remittances from them went on a downward spiral. In fact the cumulative growth in migrants and the level of employment in the Gulf Countries helped us to tide over the apprehended crisis. A new migrant worker on average adds about $816 to the foreign remittance annually.

Top Ten Remittance Recipient Countries of the World

2010

Country	Amount $ Billion
India	55.0
China	51.0
Mexico	22.6
Philippines	21.3
Bangladesh	11.1
Nigeria	10.0
Pakistan	9.4
Lebanon	8.2
Egypt	7.7
Vietnam	7.2

Source: World Bank Data

When and if the global recession ends as expected, we can be hopeful that Bangladesh will continue to maintain its predicted growth in foreign remittance. But is that a

bankable expectation? Should we not prepare ourselves in case continued large scale deployment of our migrants abroad does not happen, or we have hordes of such migrants suddenly returning home?

It may not sound possible in the current rosy environment, but it is plausible that thousands of workers like the kind stranded in Libya are repatriated home with no jobs at home, and little savings. The Libyan crisis has taught us that we need a national plan to deal with such unforeseen emergencies. We need a plan that not only caters to deployment of workers abroad, but also to their sustenance and gainful employment when they return home—either voluntarily or involuntarily.

While addressing this rather unpleasant and unwelcome scenario several obstacles come to mind immediately that we need to address and overcome. Key among these are lack of a national database on migrants (who they are, their skills, where they have gone, their employers, etc.), strengthening of the institutions that help the migrants in their deployment abroad (with rigorous supervision of the recruitment agencies), and lack of a national plan that can help rehabilitation of the workers once they return. Add to these continued reluctance of a majority of the migrant workers to remit money through official means, and lack of willingness to invest money in government sponsored institutions.

Today any estimate of workers abroad is mostly a guess work since the number is obtained by the Bureau of Manpower from recruiting agencies. The number of workers in Libya, for example, was cited anywhere from sixty to seventy five thousand. The total number of migrant workers is variously estimated at anywhere between six hundred and seven hundred thousand (a gap of one hundred thousand!). Official estimate of money received from these workers is $11.1 billion, but we are told the amount could be twice that since much of the remittances are sent by unofficial channels. Much of the investment of these workers is for unproductive purposes adding little employment opportunities either for them or for their fellow countrymen.

We set up a Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment many years ago for enhancement of overseas employment, and to ensure the welfare of expatriate workers. The objectives of this institution are all laudable, but none of these will be of value to the workers when they cannot respond adequately to a crisis as in Libya recently. The ministry perhaps has done a better job in coordinating recruiting agencies and working with foreign governments in labor supply than in finding ways and means to help the returning workers rehabilitate back home, and advising them on productive investment.

Our government and the institutions set up to serve the migrant workers interest need to do more. First, they need to set up a live, up-to-date functioning database of migrant

workers that can serve as a reliable source of information on the expatriates. This can be done with the help of IOM. Next, the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare should find ways with support from our commercial banks and the Central Bank to attract remittances through official means. The Ministry needs to examine if the reasons why the workers chose unofficial means because of rate difference, speed of remittance, or other bureaucratic hurdles. The Ministry also needs to see why the government sponsored financial institutions cannot attract investment from the expatriates. Are there other ways to help the migrant workers to choose their investment back home that they can fall back upon when they return? Can there be other ways they can employ their hard earned money back home? And above all, can we develop a plan to deal with the crisis of sudden lay off from work for thousands of workers?

Our migrant workers went abroad, most times because they had no productive employment back home. They went abroad at a great financial cost, and at times risking lives, for a livelihood. What they earned not only helped to pay off their debts and supported families, but also increased our coffer of foreign currencies. We owe it to them to help find them back on their feet when they return, either voluntarily or involuntarily.

The VOA debate on how to compensate a displaced migrant worker and rehabilitate him or her becomes all the more important when we accept that a repeat of Libya experience can happen anywhere where we have our workers. We can perhaps find alternative work places in another country for a few thousand, but we cannot expect hundreds of thousands to find jobs at a time if they are suddenly unemployed in the countries where they work. They will return and will be a charge to the government. It may not happen right away, but we must be aware that such a possibility may arise. We need to prepare ourselves for that.

Bumps and Grinds in Our Journey to Secularism

> *"My people are going to learn the principles of democracy, the dictates of truth and the teachings of science. Superstition must go. Let them worship as they will, every man can follow his own conscience provided it does not interfere with sane reason or bid him act against the liberty of his fellow men."*
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> –Mustafa Kemal Ataturk

I am quoting Kemal Ataturk—father of modern Turkey above with a purpose. Some five decades after Ataturk launched his country on a secular path, Bangladesh would be the second Muslim country in the world that would enshrine secularism in its constitution. It was a heroic leap for a war ravaged small country that was until independence a part of a country that blazoned religion boldly in its constitution. However, the secular constitution that Bangladesh gave to its people in 1972 and to the world at large was not a reaction to the vile manipulation of religion by our former rulers. Nor was it an angry response to suppression of our freedom movement or killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people in the name of religion. Our secular principle and the ban on forming political associations based on any religion in our first constitution had only one objective. The founders of our constitution wanted to guarantee that we do not have a repeat of the murderous acts of a band of zealots who took cover of religion to terrorize every nook and corner of our country running their "holy war" for nine months. This was done because our leaders believed such heinous acts and bigotry can be prevented only by putting the country on a secular path. This was done because they believed that secularity of the constitution is an important aid to support a country's claim of protecting of human rights that span all religious beliefs.

Following the great examples of other truly democratic nations, founders of fledgling Bangladesh incorporated secularism as one of the four state principles. True, the Bangladesh constitution of 1972 defined secularism as religious neutrality (Dharma

Nirepokhota), which is not quite the same as its classical definition (indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations). Still, one could say proudly that secularism was incorporated in Bangladesh Constitution well before India did it officially. (India introduced the word secular in its constitution through the 42nd amendment in 1976.)

The majority of the founders of Bangladesh constitution were Muslims, who were drafting a constitution for a country with an overwhelming Muslim population (about 85% that time). They could have easily opted for a constitution that recognized Islam as the state religion, yet they did not do so because they firmly believed that a democracy survived best when rights of every human being—irrespective of religion or ethnicity—are guaranteed by the constitution. The founding fathers of our constitution put Bangladesh in an honorable place among nations when they enshrined secularism (even at its narrowest definition) as a guiding state principle.

Despite the soft definition of secularism, very incorporation of secularism in Bangladesh constitution was enough irritation to the pseudo-Islamic consciousness of the governments that followed the coup of 1975. Step by step, the bold move by a Muslim majority country to uphold secularism as a state principle—be it religious neutrality—was removed from our constitution.

It was eliminated because the first military dictator turned politician wore the mantle of religion to please new alliances to maintain his stranglcholds on the power he was catapulted into. He succeeded in doing so by changing the constitution with the help of a sycophantic parliament dominated by a party that was patched together by him. It happened because he introduced religion into state politics, and for political support he leaned to religious rights. In April 1979 the Legislature in Bangladesh ratified the 5th Amendment legitimizing all amendments, additions, and modifications made in the Constitution during the period between August 15, 1975 and April 9, 1979. The 5th Amendment to the constitution in 1979, besides giving legal cover to all proclamations by the military government after August 15, 1975, also rang the death knell of our short secular life.

Some twenty five years later, in a watershed decision in August 2005 the High Court of Bangladesh declared 5th Amendment to Bangladesh Constitution as illegal and unconstitutional. It was a twist of fate, however, that this historic decision by the court was handed out at a time when the government would be led by the very party that had been the architect of the amendment in 1979. It is also equally ironic that the government that time was buttressed by political and moral support of a religious based party that had been effectively banned from the country by the secular constitution, and was rehabilitated by the 5th Amendment. No wonder the government of the time would challenge the High Court verdict and appeal to the Supreme Court to restore the

amendment. Our hopes for return to secularism seemed to disappear as the court order was moved to the back burner.

It would take us another five years and two changes in government (one interim) to get a final ruling from the highest court on the challenge of the High Court verdict. In February this year the Supreme Court dismissed two petitions challenging a 2005 High Court ruling that declared the constitution's Fifth Amendment illegal. We came full circle.

As we wait to see the new dawn in our bumptious secular journey, we cannot yet celebrate the court verdict until we all realize that secularism is not an abstract concept only to be enshrined in our constitution. This concept has to be embedded in our national consciousness and obeyed in its full spirit. This has to come through acceptance of diversity of all beliefs and creeds in our society, and safeguards against discrimination based on beliefs and religious persuasion.

There are many reasons for a country to have a negative image internationally, but the one reason that provides the most raw materials for such image is the absence of constitutional safeguards for people's rights. In a country where Islam has a following of nearly ninety percent, it does not require constitutional declaration to be recognized as the state religion. Rather it has some adverse results. It gives critics of Bangladesh a weapon to hammer the country with prejudice against religious minorities. The religious bias brought forth by the now repealed 5th Amendment also helped to fuel an international perception in the past years that our government that period had been tolerant toward growth of religious extremism in the country. We have had enough evidence of such elements in the country that were intent upon bringing about a coerced change in our political philosophy.

We should be thankful that the rational elements among us woke up in time to stem a vicious tide of intolerance. The court verdict is a stitch in time that should guide our legislators not only in upholding neutrality of the state in matters of religion, but also in ensuring that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise without their choice.

The Labyrinths of Budgets and Finances

Labyrinths are not something that one consciously steps into; one is caught in these somewhat unknowingly. Budgets are such labyrinths that are not intended that way, but they become so when you try to explain these to the people affected by it. Every home needs a budget (of what to spend and where the money comes from), and so does a nation. But woe betides the head of the household who cannot please anyone in his house with his spending plan and least of all try to get the money everyone in his or her family wants to spend. Now jump the screen to the national budget that has millions of lives hooked to it. Hapless is the person who finds himself in this labyrinth of unfulfilled desires of many and wrath of many others, and yes, like the poor head of the household he has to find the money he has planned to spend.

On June 8 this year Bangladesh Finance Minister presented the 40th annual budget of the country for a staggering Tk.1.6 trillion crores, about $22 billion in current exchange rates. The budget brought to my mind the very humble but historic first budget of our newly liberated country presented by Tajuddin Ahmed in 1972. The budget of a paltry Tk. 786 crores (about $684 million in then exchange terms) pales into insignificance when compared with this gargantuan growth. But the budget in 1972 was drawn in a country devastated by a nine-month long war, with millions of people still looking for food and shelters, with roads, bridges, and our buildings in utter ruins. It was for a population under eighty million. We have doubled our population since then; our revenues have increased, and so have our expenditures. We are coping with an ever expanding requirement to meet both basic needs of our people, and to invest to grow the economy. This is a tall order for any Finance Minister, and no budgets however well intentioned can meet the expectations of all.

How have we done in all these forty years since the first meager resource and spending plan of 1972? The budgets have grown steadily over time, each budget has promised growth and lofty revenue goals, and expenditures have accelerated both on running the business and investing for growth. Have these budgets brought enough changes in the life of an ordinary citizen, made their life a little more prosperous than before? Before

we get lost in the negatives let us take some stock of what has happened in the last four decades on the positive.

No economic miracle has happened yet, we are nowhere near any of our Asian neighbors; but there are a few achievements that our budgetary spending has helped us with in the last four decades. Economically we have maintained a steady growth of near six percent annually for last several years; managed inflation; and we have reduced income poverty gap. Socially we have seen increase in life expectancy, reduction in child birth, and growth in primary school enrollment.

The problem is most of these achievement are intangible to the common man. Despite our impressive growth in per capita terms and equally notable improvement in social indicators we have large level of illiteracy, high incidence of absolute poverty, poor resource mobilization capabilities, and poor capacity to withstand chronic natural disasters. Literacy rates for male workers 15 years and older still stands at 52 per cent, and those for female workers at 32 per cent. Forty percent of our population is still below the poverty line, with close to 25 percent living in absolute poverty. Even with substantial nominal growth in tax revenue in the last decades, it still remains at around 10 percent of GDP compared with nearly 20 percent for India. To add to our woes natural disasters continue to plague us from time to time undermining our modest economic growth and poverty reduction attempts. Climate change will likely aggravate this further in the future.

To navigate the labyrinths of our national budget and funding requirement to meet all these challenges we not only need a mastermind but also capacity building that would cater to these needs. I will leave the discussion on how to better manage our budgets and finances to the experts. For now I want address the issues that seem to paramount to the common man, which never seem to be resolved no matter how high the spending is, or how lofty the goals of development are.

To me the common man's lot cannot improve until we bring down the incidence of poverty significantly if not to eradicate it completely in the next decade. The common man's lot will not improve if we cannot bring down drastically the level of illiteracy, improve public health and sanitation, and provide protection from natural disasters. To do that we need plans in several fronts; removal of illiteracy, human resource development, large doses of investment in infrastructure, and a viable disaster recovery plan that can both anticipate and make provisions for quick responses to natural disasters. And to do all this we need to mobilize resources first and foremost of which would be to ensure that we can collect what we plan for. This is where we need to gear up our financing plans, and lay down the wherewithal to plug the holes in our revenue collection. These holes are our archaic tax collection system, a non-resilient tax structure, and incidence of tax avoidance and tax evasion.

This year's development budget of a staggering Tk.50.6 crore is predicated on sixty percent funding from domestic resources. This domestic funding is would come from our expected revenue earnings, which have been set at a record high level. Nearly a third of our tax revenues will come from indirect tax such as VAT, while income tax (corporate and personal) will account for about twenty percent or so. In developed countries income tax accounts for bulk of total government revenues.

How can we sustain a hugely expanding development need on such a low tax base even though the total revenue is growing? Is it conceivable to keep on funding our development expenditures simply by raising the indirect taxes only which affect the masses in general?

Taxation is integral to sustainable growth and poverty reduction. Tax receipts provide developing countries with a stable and predictable fiscal environment to promote growth and to finance their social and public investment needs. Combined with economic growth, efficient tax systems will progressively reduce aid dependency. More generally, taxation plays a supportive role in improving governance by promoting the accountability of government to citizens. The key challenge is to turn principles into action, to ensure taxation delivers on its promise as a core source of development finance.

The major reason why income tax in Bangladesh has stagnated at this low level is that our tax structure has not expanded over time with growth in personal income. The source and the amount of tax collected every year remains almost the same. The government is also not having any specific information on how many people are there with high income. Since the government has not been able to establish effective monitoring or information system, tax evasion has become easy and commonplace.

As our leaders promise a better and economically stronger Bangladesh that can uplift its millions from poverty, we need to focus on ways to find resources domestically to fund our development goals. Along with a viable plan to expand the tax base, we need to straighten our collection mechanism and better manage the resources that we dedicate to these efforts. Our external development partners have suggested several ways that we can do this. Notable among these are:

Improvement and modernization of our revenue administration, and expansion tax base;

Automation of tax collection;
Improvement of human resources management; and
Development of a culture of tax payer services.

The last item, probably the least known and least valued concept in Bangladesh, would require building a relationship with tax payers with regular consultation and providing information on policy changes and other services that government can provide to the tax payers.

Our goals are lofty, and intentions honest. But the mechanism and the environment where we work will not lead us to these goals or fulfillment of our intentions unless we reform the faltering system. A grand budget by itself will not lead us to eradication of poverty or meeting the basic needs of the common man. More hard work and political will are needed to bring about the institutional and policy reforms that will allow the realization of these goals. I sincerely hope that this will happen.

India Bangladesh Relations—A Forty-Year Retrospective

A challenge to those of us who arrived in the US in the fledgling years of Bangladesh independence was how to introduce ourselves to our hosts in this country. India they all knew about, and to a great extent Pakistan—thanks to the US interests in that country. The better informed segments in the US were aware of the struggle for Bangladesh—many in fact had lobbied for it. But it seemed to disappear in the mind of most people in this country as the memory of Indo Pakistan war of 1971 gradually started to dissipate from public mind. Who were we? A new country that separated from Pakistan, or a country that existed in the shadow of a much larger India that people here immediately recognized? It would take many more years for us to make a mark as a country and a nation in these distant shores. For this we have to be thankful, thankful to our patient and hardworking people, and to our well wishers across the Globe and our partners in progress. And this includes our gigantic neighbor in whose shadow we live, and with whose support we got our independence. We can never forget that.

The paradox, however, is that despite a fairly harmonious relationship that dates to the birth of Bangladesh, questions have often been raised domestically and abroad on the costs and mutual benefits the two countries have derived since the inception. Did India unwittingly create a third threat on its borders and a burden for its economy when it helped Bangladesh war of independence against Pakistan? Did Bangladesh undergo a change in economic domination from Pakistan to India when it gained its independence from Pakistan? Did India ever visualize that it would have to build hundreds of miles of barbed wire fencing along its border with Bangladesh to stop illegal crossing when four decades ago it had welcomed a sea of refugees into India? Did Bangladesh know that the alliance and friendship of 1971 could be replaced by a lack of trust and suspicion in last forty years?

The questions pop into our mind as we stand some forty years later down the road after the first historic visit of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to the newly born

Bangladesh in 1972—a birth for which she was referred to as the midwife in some quarters. These questions rise as we welcome another Indian Prime Minister to Dhaka after that historic visit. The 1972 visit led to the historic agreement of peace of 1972 between India and Bangladesh, which cemented publicly Bangladesh's deep gratitude to India for its support in 1971 war. The euphoria and optimism that surrounded that agreement have since given way to cynicism in both countries on intentions, deficits of trust, and ambiguity on future relationship. What has gone wrong.

Over the last forty years India has grown from a struggling underdeveloped country to a near middle-income behemoth defying the expectations of its critics of the seventies. Its economy has grown many folds, from a mere $480 billion dollars in 1970 to $1.8 trillion in 2010. It is recognized as an emerging economic super power that has posted an impressive 8% annual growth for last ten years in a row. It has become the principal supplier of information technology services in the world, and has become the major location for global support of information technology. Foreign investors have flown in droves to India; the total investment in last ten years was nearly one trillion dollars. India is the second most sought after destination in the World for foreign investment after China.

Contrast these with the development in Bangladesh in the same period. True, our economy has grown also, but it is only a shade compared with India (about one twentieth in size). We have a large funding gap in our development budget for which we are still dependent on our foreign allies, and international development agencies. We still have a third of our population below extreme poverty; we have a large segment of our population (nearly 50%) who cannot read or write. Even with liberalization of the economy foreign investors are shy to put their money in Bangladesh. We had less than a billion dollars of foreign investment in 2010 compared with over forty billion in India. Surely, India cannot consider us an economic rival. Similarly for Bangladesh it is ridiculous to even to consider India as a competitor simply because it is too large to compete with.

The answers for the bumps and grinds in the bilateral relationship of the two countries have to be found elsewhere. Some of these may be just perception, but mostly these are rooted to ground realities and happenings over last forty years. As time passed conviviality and bonhomie of our fledgling friendship began to give way to cynicism and lack of enthusiasm. Several factors stood in the way.

For Bangladesh the relationship began to be affected by lopsided trade, unstopped smuggling across the border, contentious water issues, and the lingering problems with enclaves (Chitmohals) that never seem to be resolved despite the 1972 agreement. India on the other hand started to have second thoughts about Bangladesh's good will, some of which resulted from political changes in Bangladesh in 1975, and some on

India's conjecture in Bangladesh being a hideout for eastern India militants. India has also been fearful of rise of radical forces in Bangladesh under patronage of political parties that are openly inimical to India.

Let us look at the ground realities, and their impact on our bilateral relationship. Over 15% of Bangladeshi imports come from India while Bangladeshi goods are less than 1% of India's total imports. Illegal trade between the two countries amounts to 3-4 of regular trade. Ever since Bangladesh's independence there has been a substantial informal unrecorded trade across the India-Bangladesh land borders. Some of this trade has been termed as "informal" rather than illegal, because there is wide participation by local people in the border areas, and the field operators generally operate in liaison with the anti-smuggling enforcement agencies. Illegal trading of goods between two countries with a common border is a fairly old practice, but smuggling across the border in India and Bangladesh becomes almost a political issue when law enforcers on both sides become parties or facilitators of this "informal" trade. Smuggling will cease if the incentives for this operation cease. We need better understanding and agreement on tariffs, and if possible, doing away with them completely in both countries.

Add to this the perennial problem of criminal acts on both sides of the border, from cattle theft to more serious gang operations. Fence or no fence people living on two sides of the border continue to ply from one side to another deluding the law enforcing agencies. Shooting down of people suspected of criminal acts by the border patrols often becomes politically charged and acrimonious accusations of foul play fly back and forth. There is a need to have some ground rules and agreement at the highest level to stem these activities.

Next irritant in the relationship has been the perennial debate over our common rivers and perceived threats, real or unreal, of creation of barriers to regulate the flow of water in some rivers across the border. Since Farakka Barrage Bangladesh has been paranoid about possible water schemes across the border, and it has been trying to achieve consensus on a number of rivers that flow from upstream. A far reaching agreement has so far eluded both countries. We need to have continuous dialogues on water issues and agreement that no projects on both sides would be undertaken without complete agreement of both countries.

Chitmohols or the enclaves along the along Rangpur and Coochbehar border are another never ending problem that irks our relationship. The enclaves were part of the high stake card or chess games centuries ago between two regional kings, the Raja of Cooch Behar and the Maharaja of Rangpur. In 1974, both countries agreed to exchange the enclaves or at least provide easy access to the enclaves, but since then little has materialized. Talks between the two countries on the issue resumed in 2001, but the lack of a concrete timeframe has relegated the issue to the back burner. Residents of

the enclaves may only go to their respective countries on the production of an identity card, after seeking permission from the border guards, causing much resentment. We need a resolution.

Indian apprehensions about Bangladesh are more political than economic. The political apprehensions have developed since the violent changes of 1975 that ushered in a government in Bangladesh that was not eyed with friendly eyes by India. The apprehensions did not diminish for many years as each of the government following 1975 change caused concern to India by their policies and actions. The relationship would come to a critical test when India suspected and even accused Bangladesh of providing shelter and support to militants fighting in its eastern border. There would be counter accusation from Bangladesh of vilification by India. Barbs were exchanged, and the relationship went sour.

A successful bilateral relationship is based on trust, accommodation, and understanding. The relationship between India and Bangladesh spans nearly four decades. This relationship is rooted not only in the help and succor that Bangladesh received in its war of liberation, but also in the heritage and history that the two countries share. It has been a bumpy ride in our relationship with India, both sides irked from time to time by events that could have been better managed.

India Bangladesh relationship has not come at a crossroads now. We continue to travel along the same path despite occasional misunderstandings. Despite our relatively small size both in area and economy, India and Bangladesh can complement each other in many ways. Economically, instead of being a drag to India, Bangladesh can be a supplement to its growth, and vice versa. But for this we need equitable agreement on trade, transit, and access to each other's economy. A politically and economically unstable Bangladesh is just as bad for India's growth as for Bangladesh itself.

Politically, instead of harboring suspicions on each other we need to have dialogues on bilateral problems. Perceptions and misunderstandings can be removed only by exposure to realities on the ground. This exposure should not be confined at leadership level of both countries. This exposure could be made at all levels through organized visits to both countries by parliamentarians, political party workers, academics, and business people. Let opinion makers at all levels see for themselves the realities in both countries, and find out how much our ordinary people have in common in both countries.

Some forty years ago a brave and spirited Prime Minister of India gave us moral and material support in our war liberation against many odds. This she followed it with another agreement of friendship and support in our fledgling years. We hope that the spirit of 1972 is revived with the next visit of an Indian Prime Minister to solve all our differences and we march ahead.

The Art of Negotiations in Bilateral Relations

There is no last word in politics, just as there is no last word in diplomacy. In a complex world of international relations words do matter, but these are open to interpretations, nuances, and subject to changes with dynamics of time. No political leader worth his salt will ever say a final word on any subject; no diplomat will ever leave a negotiating table announcing that he was never going to return. Every discussion, every negotiation is a lengthy affair, particularly when it affects two countries in a discussion. This is more so when both parties want to bargain the best deal for themselves and yet make the other party not to appear as a loser. How do you perform this tango? The answer is negotiation, negotiation, and negotiation. You do not stop until you both agree on a common ground.

The recent failures to have an agreement with India on Teesta water sharing, and transit through Bangladesh have figured mightily in the media and political circles, particularly in Bangladesh. These failures put a sour note on a much hyped visit of the Indian PM, despite many other positive achievement including revival of the much delayed enclaves transfer between two countries. Our media and some of our political leaders have taken the failure on Teesta agreement as a litmus test of India's good will and good neighborly relationship to Bangladesh. The West Bengal Chief Minister has been portrayed as the principal saboteur of an otherwise "done deal" for her reported objection to the quantum of water sharing between two countries. Our collective disappointment over this failure to have an agreement on Teesta has been so great that many of us have not hesitated to call the entire visit a flop, a non-performer. This has given birth to a wide range of analyses in the media, in the civil society, and of course the political parties —our ineptitude to deal with a mighty neighbor, political weakness of our leaders, and bad faith. It would seem that a single lapse has cast a deep shadow over our forty-year relationship. Should Teesta agreement alone be the litmus test to judge our relationship with India? Have we reached the end of the road when we could not reach agreement on one subject among dozens of other important national interests for which we depend on India?

We may not have an exact log of the days and months that the countries have spent negotiating the two issues—river water and transit—over last several years. What we do know that large expectations had been built over time for a mutually satisfactory resolution of the issues in this last visit. To Bangladesh's chagrin the water agreement did not happen. We cannot confirm if the disappointment was equal for India for not signing the transit agreement. Were the two failures due to political reasons or inadequacy of our negotiating skills?

Politics is an important part of bilateral relationship; we cannot ignore that. No country would like to appear as appeasing a foreign country by foregoing its own interests. No deal should be shown as a sacrifice. Quid pro quo is the principle that guides a bilateral deal. You give me some; I give you some in return. I guess not signing the transit treaty by Bangladesh without the Teesta water sharing makes some sense in that regard. Should we hold on to that position, or separate the two and make progress through further negotiations and obtain an optimal result acceptable to both countries?

The debacles in the Indian PM's visit have unfortunately led to finding scapegoats instead of understanding the deep nature of international relations and complexity of negotiations. Treaties and agreements between countries take long years, and sometimes these may not even happen. Yet no country gives up on these simply because they are time consuming. They persist, and keep on trying.

Experts who have developed negotiations into a science agree on five keys to successful negotiation. First of these is to know what you want. The clearer you are on your interests and goals, the better your chance of success increases. Second, know the other party well. If one knows how to listen, one can also understand the other side better. Third, consider the timing and method of negotiations. Change the game to win-win problem solving by negotiating from a platform of interests, not positions. Fourth, offer benefits for accepting your offer; you are much more likely to close if you present the benefit to the other side. Prepare options for mutual gain. The last is to know how to walk away gracefully if no agreement is in sight without adversely affecting the relationship.

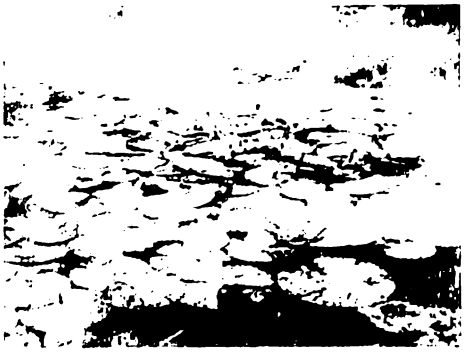
Experts also have commented on how to pick up stalled negotiations. Changing the way you think about negotiating (joint problem solving versus a series of compromises where one party may win and one may lose) is the first step towards getting better results. Recognizing the reasons why people act the way they do, and having the ability to communicate to a broad range of stakeholders and their behavioral styles offers the negotiator the ability to reach satisfactory outcomes more consistently.

In my rather short career in the civil service in early seventies I was exposed to two serious negotiations, one on trade with India in 1973, and another on repatriation of

Rohingya refugees to Burma (now Myanmar) in 1979. The first was almost a cake walk since in our fledgling days the relationship with India was cushioned with much compassion from India. Even then the agreement was preceded by months of negotiations at working level on both sides, ultimately resulting in signing by two Commerce and Foreign Trade Ministers. Drafts were written and re-written, words were changed, and offending paragraphs modified by both sides. In 1973 Bangladesh was only at the receiving end, but even then negotiations were important.

Relative to the Trade Agreement with India in 1973, the repatriation agreement with the Burmese authorities in 1979 was tough, fraught with great tension on both sides, and apprehension that talks might fail at the last moment. What sustained the talks and led to the agreement was a genuine desire on both sides to have an agreement satisfactory to both countries. Patience, listening skills, and personal rapport between participants on both sides at the working level played a great role in the final agreement. We were able to repatriate almost all of the two hundred thousand refugees back to their homeland by the end of 1979.

It is too hasty to term the recent inabilities to arrive at an agreement with India on both Teesta river and transit issues as serious setbacks to our mutual relationship. We will soon be back to discussing these items, and hopefully we will find solutions that are acceptable to both of our countries. In order to do that however, we need to have professionals who will do the ground work, because it is the professionals who lay the basis on which the policy makers make their decisions. This ground has to be built at working level by people who understand and have the competence and skills of negotiations that I have discussed earlier. We need good relations with India, just as India does; we perhaps more out of practical necessity than India. Let us not pander to our pessimistic thoughts and conduct because of what we could not achieve last month. With persistence, patience, and serious negotiations we can reach our goals.



The Vanishing Habitat: Challenge of Climate Change

The prime mover of this write up is a recent article in the much acclaimed National Geographic magazine on Bangladesh focusing on the impending threat to the country's landscape from climate change. Climate change is affecting different parts of the globe in different ways, from rise in temperature to melting of glaciers, to rise of water level. The most damaging impact on Bangladesh, however, is from rising sea level, the article warns.

The article took me back to my knowledge firsthand of what rising water level could do, and about shrinking of our land masses in the coastal areas of Bangladesh where I had the privilege to work decades ago.

The offshore Islands of Bangladesh often exist in the peripheral vision of the rest of the country. These are some names—Bhola, Sandwip, Hatiya, etc.—that strike national news only when periodic natural disasters like cyclones and tidal waves hit our coastal areas. We fear for these islands when warnings of impending disasters are broadcast by the weather service, and people wait anxiously until the disasters either descend on the shores or go away. We go about our ways once the disaster is over, and wait to hear about them when the next disaster strikes. It is because these islands do not usually lure your average tourist to their shores, nor are they specimens of some exotic places that other islands around the globe attract people.

One may ask then why I am alluding to these offshore Islands, forsaken by all as they are. I am referring to these Islands not because of their undiscovered tourism potential (which they actually have), or because they are neglected second cousins of the main land. I am writing about them because these islands are stark evidences of climate change with their gradually vanishing size and landscape. These islands are, in

a way, harbingers of a dire future that may await our own mainland as suggested by the National Geographic magazine, and other environment experts.

Consider these statistics of these islands to have some assessment of the ravages of climate change. In 1965 Bhola – our biggest Island (now a district) comprised a territory of about 3970 square miles; it is now half its original size. In the early fifties Sandwip was a large Island of about 150 square miles; it has now shrunk to about 80 miles. Kutubdia, a small Island in Cox's Bazar has also been reduced to half its size in the same period. Hatiya, another big Island off the coast of Noakhali has lost nearly one fourth of its land area over last thirty years. During last three decades, nearly 200,000 islanders displaced by erosion have fled to the Chittagong mainland including the Hill Tracts and elsewhere in the country.

In the sixties and seventies we took it to be a course of nature that resulted in erosion of land in one area and accretion of land in another side of our coast. I happened to work in two coastal districts of Bangladesh in mid and late seventies – Noakhali and Chittagong – where I would get familiar with almost daily depletion of two of our densely populated islands – Hatiya and Sandwip– from sea erosion. Farmlands, homesteads, and in some cases a whole village would be devoured by the sea in a matter of months. In some years, the erosion was fast; in other years relatively slow. But the shrinking would continue; by one estimate we are losing approximately 100 square kilometers to coastal and river erosion every year. If the erosion continues at the same rate, Bhola and few other Islands will completely disappear over the next four decades according to experts who carried out the research for the Dhaka-based non-governmental organization The Coast Trust.

River erosion is a perennial problem in Bangladesh which is criss-crossed by a network of 230 rivers; about six million people out of the country's population are displaced each year due to river erosion. What has exacerbated the erosion in coastal areas is the rising sea level.

About a third of our land area is in the coastal regions including the islands, with close to thirty percent of our population living in these areas. Add to this the fact the average elevation of this one third of our land is near or a few meters above sea level, with much of our land being only about ten meters above the sea. A mere rise of another two to three meters of the sea level would wipe away a fourth of the land area in a matter of years. Consider this further in a scenario where our population rises to double its current size, as it is expected to do naturally over next four decades (even with a low projected growth rate of about 2% annually).

Now the displaced population from coastal areas escapes to higher lands and urban areas. Where will this population go, if the doom's day scene really occurs? Do they

run further upstream to areas that have people living like Sardines in a tin can? Or migrate to India? In fact, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts exactly such a scenario. As the sea level rises, the panel estimates another 35 million people from Bangladesh will cross over into India by 2050. Shall we wait to see this end or do something now to prevent it?

Climate change is already a reality of life. Because of this change, world temperature is going up, glaciers in the North and South Poles are melting, sea water level is rising, drought conditions are spreading, freshwater supply is declining, and cyclones or hurricanes are escalating.

We have to face up to the fact that climate change will affect us more severely than other nations in ways more than we could imagine. The doom's day may not happen, but we will continue to be squeezed further and further in our already crowded speck of a habitat. We need to bring ourselves up to meet this challenge.

There are at least several fronts that we have to address to meet the challenges of climate change. These are more prudent land management, better planning and preparation for disaster management, training and of people for adaptation to changing habitat, relocation of erosion affected population, and management of population growth.

Things we can do nothing about are losing our land from rising sea level, or river erosion. What we can certainly do is make better use of the land that is left, and put to use land that is being added to the coast through natural accretion. It is said that newly accreted land takes several decades to become stable for cultivation in the natural process; but it could be accelerated if proper technology and efforts are used. A proposed structure to halt the erosion of Sandwip Island and Char Pir Baksh and induce the accretion new land did not materialize for lack of funding. We may look to revitalize this project if only to offset our losses of land in other islands.

While efforts need to be taken for better land management and more efficient land use, we need also to be cognizant of the unrelenting effect of climate change on our land, and its further damage from natural causes and calamities. Our people have shown great resilience and ability to adapt in the worst of natural disasters. We need to assist these people with better forecasting ability of natural disasters, quicker relocation when disasters strike, and innovative ways to make a living in semi-submerged habitats.

Our achievement in controlling population growth has made us a good model for other developing countries. However, even with current low fertility rate we are predicted to double our population is another four decades. It is still a tremendous challenge for Bangladesh that must be addressed on a high priority basis. We need to bring the growth further down, while at the same time pursue aggressively a universal literacy

plan that will train our people better to make living away from agriculture and other traditional vocations.

With a concerted effort from all sections of our society, I am confident we can meet the challenge that climate change for our country. To quote from the National Geographic Magazine, "*One commodity that Bangladesh has in profusion is human resilience. Before this century is over, the world, rather than pitying Bangladesh, may wind up learning from her example.*"

The Forgotten Women of 1971 War

A time honored tradition for civil servants working in the sub-divisions and the districts followed from the colonial days was to leave a confidential, "for your eyes only", write up for their successors in office. The write up would appear in a bound volume titled Notes to My Successor, mostly hand written, that would contain the previous office holder's personal thoughts, experiences, and travails that he had faced in the tasks of administering his domain—be it a Sub-division or a District. The Notes would range from mere 10-12 pages to over a hundred, but these would contain valuable information on the area, particularly the places and personalities that the new person in the office would most likely visit and meet. In our times, this was a must read document that was secreted in the residential office of the Sub-divisional Officer (SDO) or the District Officer (titled Deputy Commissioner). There were many volumes of such Notes dating back several decades, which served as eye opening information on the area, warnings on things to expect, people to watch, and do's and don'ts to avoid any mishap.

I worked as an SDO in two sub-divisions of then Dhaka district Munshiganj and Mankiganj—in the most turbulent period of our national history. I was first appointed to Munshiganj as Sub-divisional Officer in February 1971, where I lasted till June. Toward the beginning of July I was transferred to Manikganj at the Army authorities' behest after a month long enquiry against me on my suspected role in March 1971. I had begun my Munshiganj stint as a twenty-something young civil servant hoping to put into practice what I had learnt in the training academy and from my seniors in the field. The political air was getting hot by that time with clouds looming over the future of the country. I plunged into my civil service career little realizing that in a matter of weeks our country and people would be launched into the most traumatic and vicious war for survival, and I would be encountering atrocities and cruelties of the most horrific kind that would leave a deep scar on my young life. I had hoped that I would record my new found experiences in a new volume of Notes to My Successor, like many of my predecessors.

I could never write the Notes; the events moved too fast. Sudden turn of history and the traumatic happenings of the following months would fill me with so much despair

that I never thought that I would be alive at all. I thought we were inexorably heading toward a disaster that would probably wipe us all out. As I moved with the events I also wondered what message I would leave for my successor. My predecessors had left Notes for the Successors to guide them for a future, a future both for the Successors and the people they would serve. These were advice on how to succeed in the job, how best to serve the people in the area. What message could I leave at a time when we were witnessing great death and destruction all around? How could I warn my successor against atrocities that would be unleashed against unarmed civilians by government sponsored terrorists? What advice could I have for my successor when he finds himself a helpless witness to wanton mayhems, all in the name of saving the country by its self-appointed guardians? All I could have done was to leave a diary of those horror stricken days, the sufferings of our people, and my lament over my own fecklessness.

But this is not an account of the mayhem and atrocities that I would witness later in two sub-divisions. This is also not a narration of the brave resistance put up by our people in all walks of life during the torrid days of 1971. These Notes are a homily to that segment of our population that fought the same war, not in a frontal battle, but from behind many times sacrificing their honor. These are our women, and the valiant ways they supported our war efforts sacrificing their honor, family, and property.

Out of hundreds of thousands of these brave women, we have recognized only a few. Others have disappeared from our collective conscience, unknown, unsung, and unrecognized. We made some attempts to give some reparations to some of them for the indignities they suffered, but seldom have we made an attempt to record the valiant and death defying ways many of them worked to make our independence happen. This is a modest attempt at recounting a few of the valiant acts of our women during the torrid period when a marauding army was let loose on the villages of then East Pakistan.

The blitzkrieg with which the Pakistan Army attacked the civilian population on March 26 in the major cities of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) did not reach my little sub-division of Munshiganj until about a few weeks later. I would see however, the results of the havoc wrought by Pakistan Army in Dhaka city and the surroundings a week later when my motor launch anchored at Pagla Ghat. (The jetty was used as a harbor for all government owned motor launches, including the famed Mary Anderson that was used by the Provincial Governor that time.) Corpses floating in Buriganga river had choked the approach to the jetty such a way that my launch operators had to use poles to steer the corpses away to anchor the launch. Half burnt buildings and shops that were scenes of the recent rampage on my way to the Collectorate building gave the old city an eerie and almost surreal appearance. People of all ages and sex were still fleeing the desolate city in a panic mode clutching to whatever meager belongings they

could carry with them. As I moved along the ghost city I considered myself lucky, as Munshiganj had escaped the wrath of the Pakistan Army, at least up to that time. But it was only a matter of time that Munshiganj would be ushered into days of total mayhem and brutal operations that contingents of Pakistan Army would unleash through nooks and crannies of the country.

The Army arrived Munshiganj early May of 1971 in a company of 100 plus soldiers led by a middle aged Major from the Frontier Force. The company stayed in the subdivision for about six weeks. But it lost no time in terrorizing the entire sub-division by torching villages, indiscriminate shooting of innocent civilians, and arrest and disposal of young men suspected as freedom fighters. The Army routine included day "operations" in the adjacent thanas and villages and nightly sojourns in the relative safety of Munshiganj town.

As days passed the little town of Munshiganj started to resemble a ghost settlement as majority of the dwellers left it for villages in the interior. A significant portion of this fleeing population was Hindu minorities as soon as they realized that they were the targets of random capture and later disposal by the Army. Munshiganj had a good number of this population that time who belonged to the legal and business communities.

One afternoon the Army Major walked into my office and informed me that he had reports that a neighboring village was harboring a good number of "Hindu miscreants" with "arms". He said he had reports that the armed gangs were plotting to attack the army, and that it was necessary to sort the place out. I knew it was futile to plead with him without jeopardizing my own safety; however, I suggested that his report be further verified by police. He looked at me as though I had lost my mind!

My concern was also elsewhere. My second officer, a seasoned provincial service officer, was a Hindu. I had taken pains to keep him away from any possible encounter with the Pakistan army, as we were already acquainted with the penchant of this murderous force to summarily dispose of members of the Hindu community, government official or not. A week after the arrival of the Army in Munshiganj, the officer had stated his intention to me to move to a nearby village where the town Hindus had congregated. He moved his family to this village even though I had warned him that moving to a predominantly Hindu village might not be good idea that time. The army was more prone to attack such places in the pretext of miscreant cleansing, since according to the Pak Army all Hindus are suspected "miscreants".

That night the village went up in smoke. Over a hundred houses were destroyed by the Army in that operation. Ironically, a good number of the houses also belonged to the Muslims. After all fire cannot discriminate among houses based on religious

persuasion of the owners. None was spared. The army lobbed incendiary bombs into the houses, and brought out the occupants in droves. Sten guns fired randomly at fleeing people. The village was fully scorched, cleansed of the "miscreants"! I feared the worst for my Hindu Officer and his family.

Next morning like a miracle the Second Officer came to my bungalow, ashen faced and unshaved for many days. With tears pouring down his face he narrated his escape from near death. Not only him but a dozen other Hindu families had also survived the catastrophe. And the person responsible for this heroic act was none other than his wife. His wife had gathered knowledge about this impending attack from a Muslim servant the two days before the attack. She passed word to several families, assembled them in a common house the previous night, and walked all night back to the town, safe and sound. She was the hero to the saved families! I could return the emotion only with more tears. Tears of joy that he was still alive.

The Army would remain in Munshiganj for a total of six weeks during which the carnage in the villages would go unabated, some of which we would see, but others we would hear of much later. I myself was a subject of investigation by the Army during the period, but at the end I was let off with a warning by the Major. (The main charge against me was that I had "allowed" the students loot the armory earlier in March and had attended a rally.) I was let off on condition of "good behavior" and was asked to report to Dhaka Cantonment to the Battalion Commander every week, and be subject to questions on my conduct. I would do that for next several weeks until I was reassigned to Manikganj Sub-division in July.

Unlike Munshiganj where the Army was on a short mission, Mankiganj had a more permanent Army presence. The local Army commander, a Major, had the impressive designation of Sub-Zonal Martial Law Administrator, and as a civilian SDO (and Bengali to boot), I would be at his beck and call. He would call meetings at random at any time of the day or evening at his camp office, which was the local Dak Bungalow. In one such meeting I found also the Superintendent of Police of Dhaka, a Pakistani expatriate, who was also an ex-army officer. However, it is not the presence of the SP that surprised me; it was the presence of a young Bengali woman in the camp office with a small child sitting next to her. The Major jubilantly told me that the young woman was no other than the wife of an absconding miscreant, one Rabi Roy (not his real name), a suspected leader of the resistance force. The officer further informed me that Rabi's wife had volunteered to lead the Army to the place of her husband's hiding.

This was news to me as I had heard from local sources that Rabi, an activist youth leader of Manikganj, had escaped with his family. I could not fathom how the Army got hold of the wife, and why on earth she would volunteer to do such a thing! I tried

to look at the woman in the eye, but she kept her gaze lowered avoiding my eye. The two officers present there discussed their plans with the young woman's volunteering effort since we discussed other matters affecting local administration. I departed with a disturbing thought that the woman was being kept there against her will, and the price she must have paid already in the army camp.

Two days later there one big raid by the army on a village in neighboring Shivalaya Thana with severe casualties on the army side. I myself saw wounded soldiers clambering out of a jeep in front of the Manikganj Jam-e-Masjid when returning from evening prayer. The story of the attacks and counterattack were revealed to me later by the Circle Inspector of Police.

Apparently the army contingent was told of a gathering of "miscreants" in the village by a "source" in its custody. However, as they approached the village they were surprised by a counterattack that took the army off guard. The counterattack came not from the village, but from country boats along the river firing on the convoy. The same source that gave the army the information also tipped off the other side. Fortunately, the retribution that the "source" suffered later from the Major was limited to her being incarcerated in the camp for a few more days as she pleaded total ignorance. Also the army officer had some second thoughts about summary disposal of the young woman—she had been seen in the Army camp by others including me. She was let off with her life, but not with her honor intact.

A few weeks after the Shivalaya attack the Manikganj Army commander decided to keep small Para military contingents (the dreaded militia from Pakistan) stationed in two water bound thanas of the sub division instead of ferrying them from the sub division. A contingent of about thirty people would remain in each Thana for a month, and they would be replaced next month by a fresh contingent. In one such replacement in early August when a contingent was traveling to Saturia in an engine boat, it was fired upon by the guerillas from the bushes along the river. There was no casualty, however, and the boat returned to Manikganj headquarters instead of proceeding toward Saturia.

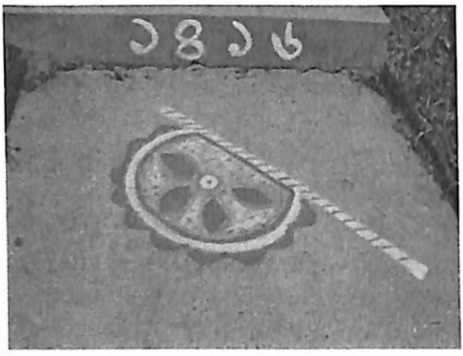
The following day, the Armed Forces with reinforcement from Manikganj arrived at the village near the incident in large motor launches. They sprayed the village with machine guns, killed a large number of people by random shooting, and of course burned houses as an additional punishment.

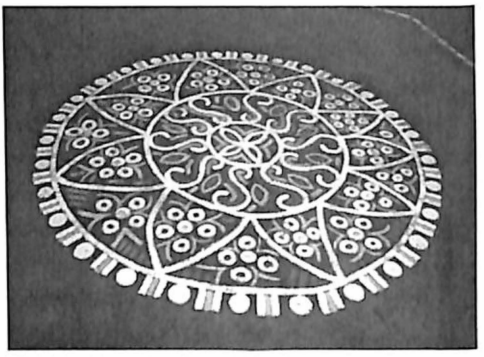
The Army, having concluded the operation, thought they had secured the river route to Saturia, and sent the replacement contingent to Saturia the same route. As the motor launch carrying the contingent neared the same village, which was pillaged by the Pakistan Army a few days earlier, it received volleys of machine gun fire from freedom

fighters, this time with greater intensity and accuracy. The suddenness and intensity of fire took the small army contingent by surprise, and the operator of the launch lost control. The small boat capsized mid stream with the hapless soldiers in the river most of whom did not know how to swim. They managed somehow to hang on to the boat, which was floating and paddle ashore only to find themselves surrounded by angry villagers with machetes in hand—their weapons of choice. None of the two dozen soldiers survived the wrath of the village.

The incident would have been one from legion of attacks by the freedom fighters on Pakistan Army had it not been due to the difference in the gender of the attackers. I was told by the Circle Officer of Saturia later that the gun shots from the river shore were meant to hit the launch operator and capsize the boat. The whole attack later was led by the women of the village who took upon the soldiers with whatever weapons they had in their hands. A revenge by the house wives of Saturia!

The liberation war of 1971 was not fought in one sector or by trained soldiers and freedom fighters alone. Our freedom came because everyone in the country, across gender, religion and race, fought a common enemy and a common repression. As I said before, these are Notes not necessarily to a Successor in Office, these are Notes of reminder to our succeeding generation on the pains, sufferings, and tribulations that our people went through in the most turbulent period of our history. In particular these Notes are a salute to our women who sacrificed their blood, honor, and dignity in support of their men – husbands, sons, brothers. We may not have a repeat of another occupation army and a reprisal of the mad and ruthless acts of 1971. If there are any lessons learnt from these terrible days are that we as a nation can move forward only when we guarantee the basic respect for lives of all human beings and protection of the rights across gender, religion, and ethnicity.





Basant Festival and Nobo Borsho— Our Bridge across Culture and Religion

In mid sixties I spent a few years in Lahore, Pakistan, first for my graduate studies and later as a Civil Service trainee. The years in Pakistan, especially those in my student period, evoke memories that are laden with images of the grand old city and its magnificent structure, famous eating places, and a generally amiable, friendly people that we mingled with. But the memories also carry some poignant reminders of debates that we as Bengalis would have with our "fellow countrymen" from the Western wing on our "cultural" traditions. The debate was further fueled by a media campaign in the press in Pakistan that period on our love for Tagore and festive observance of Bengali New Year, which according to this press were unbecoming for Muslims. This castigation of our cultural tradition was further enhanced when the then Pakistan Information Minister termed Tagore Music as essentially a Hindu heritage. Fed by such propaganda and suffering from a great lack of knowledge about people and culture of the Eastern Part of Pakistan, majority of the population, including student bodies in Western Pakistan that period were led to believe that what we Bengalis did were essentially un-Islamic.

An irony in this politically motivated debate came fortuitously our way when one late February day during my fist year as a student I was invited to a gathering of my Punjabi friends in the campus to a festival in the city. When I enquired if it was a religious festival I was simply told that it was a festival to welcome spring. We went to the historic Lawrence Gardens (later named Bagh-e-Jinnah) in the heart of the city to see the festival.

To my great amusement and delight I found that the festival—known as Basant—was no different in spirit from our Nabo Borsho or Pahela Baisakh celebration back home for which we were reviled and criticized by our then fellow countrymen from the West. Men, women and children draped in colorful shilwar and kameez, were pouring into

the Garden wearing colorful dress. Aroma from food stalls selling local delicacies everywhere invited my insides. Women crowded stalls of vendors selling bangles and other lady's stuff including Henna. Other stalls sold locally made craft. All told it was an awesome sight of people gathering and fun that was a nostalgic reminder of our own Baisakhi melas back home.

The most attractive part of this fanfare that would last several days was kite flying. Day and night there were kites galore some already flying in the sky, other waiting to be bought. White kites shimmered at night soaring and diving as rivals jousted from their respective areas, and observers took sides. People from different cities flocked to Lahore for the kite festival.

After my initial euphoria and elation over this pleasant gathering, I asked my friends if the event had any religious connotation. This gave them a shock. Why this cultural event rooted in local traditions should have any religious connotation, they asked. But did they know its significance, how this tradition developed? Almost all of them had no answer except the assertion that this was a festival that they had known, and participated from their childhood. They had no idea if it was rooted to any other tradition, culture, or religion. All they knew that this was celebrated in spring time. The all have a very good time, wearing colorful clothes (men and women alike), fly kites, have lots of traditional food, and never worried about its origin or any conflict with religion.

I would find the answer later through my own research and discussions with more informed sections in the academia that I would meet later. Basant is rooted to the welcoming of spring that coincides with the first month of Sakabda—the Hindu calendar dating back to AD 78. The Muslim Sufis adopted this festival in the thirteenth century as a way of participating in the community activities of the area they had settled in. By the Mughal period, Basant was a popular festival at the major Sufi shrines. Spring festivals were reportedly arranged around the shrines of various Muslim saints. Lahore, which housed several Sufi shrines, also acquired these traditions and turned these into popular local traditions. Amir Khasru, the famous Sufi-poet of the thirteenth century, even composed verses on Basant:

Rejoice, my love, rejoice.
Its spring here, rejoice.
Bring out your lotions and toiletries,
And decorate your long hair
Oh, you're still enjoying your sleep wake-up,
Even your destiny has woken up,
Its spring here, rejoice.
You snobbish lady with arrogant looks,
The King Amir is here to see you;
Let your eyes meet his,
Oh my love, rejoice;
Its spring here again.

In the pre-partitioned Punjab, especially Lahore—people celebrated the Basant mela Panchami with week—long festivals, and by flying kites. Muslims of Punjab also celebrated the Basant although it was considered as a local (Hindu or folk) festival. The younger Muslim folk did participate in kite flying as an event. At the time of partition in 1947, population of Lahore city was almost equally divided between Muslims (52%) and Hindus/Sikhs (48%). After partition of India, almost all the Hindus and Sikhs had left West Punjab/Lahore for India, but their tradition of Basant remained. People in Lahore continued to take pride in Basant mela and fly kites from their rooftops with the same enthusiasm. The celebrations of spring known as 'Jashn-e-baharaan' in Urdu, are carried on in the entire Province. Lahore being the historic capital of Punjab celebrates Basant with a lot of vigor and enthusiasm. Although traditionally it was a festival confined to the old-walled city it spread all throughout the city.

I enjoyed my day in Lawrence Gardens that afternoon. I came to have a new perspective of the culture of Punjab. But it also passed over the question why Pakistan establishment disparaged Bengali Nobo Borsho as un-Islamic when Basant a tradition that had nothing to do with religion as such was celebrated all over in Punjab in such gusto? My young friends in the campus did not have an answer. Either they did not know, or they did not care to know that like the Basant celebration in Punjab the Bengali celebration of Nobo Borsho had also little to do with religion. The officially launched media castigation of the Bengali tradition had to do more with the politics of the time than the reality of the celebration itself. Our political masters in the West believed that the Bengalis needed to be weaned away from their language and culture. We were expected to be reoriented to a culture and tradition based on a common religious platform for the sake of national unity. Instead of hailing Bengali culture they interpreted it as a counterforce to the so called national unity. Much to the dismay of the political masters this unity would be dismantled in a violent manner only in a few more years later.

Basant in Lahore and the rest of Punjab never ceased to be celebrated by the people of those areas. They observe this with as much as fun as before. It is ironic that in last few years some elements in Pakistan were clamoring for a ban on Basant on grounds of its non-Islamic origin. There were even reports of attacks on the observers of the festival. The authorities did not bow down to this because the popular sentiments favoring the festival were more powerful and overwhelming. The authorities claimed the unreal demands came from the radical elements that did not necessarily represent the broad populace. Basant is a non-religious and secular local tradition. When I read these reports I was reminded of the statements from then Pakistan authorities maligning Nabo Borsho and Bengali music (Rabindra Sangeet) as un-Islamic. I am glad that some forty years later the authorities in Pakistan have come to realize that religion and culture need not be in conflict. You do not become less attached to your religion when you observe your own culture.

Diversity of the human race across the Globe is not brought by difference in shape and color alone, also by culture and traditions. Religion provides a common set of beliefs, but culture provides continuity with our past and heritage. We cling to our Bengali culture just as other ethnic communities cling to theirs for their identity. We fought a war to preserve that. Our former masters and rulers tried to deny us that privilege and paid a great price for it. Religion and culture are not antithetical to each other; they are complimentary. I hope the current revisionist forces that are seeking to dismantle hundred years of traditions in Pakistan in the name of religion are thwarted by the more sensible sections of the society there. As I also hope that our own culture and traditions are not threatened ever by similar forces that seem to bob their heads from time to time. I hope Pakistan Basant lasts forever and continue to please the people of Pakistan, as will our Nabo Barsho. Esho He Baisakh!!

Part II

The State Of Our Governance, Politics And Bureaucracy

The Woes of Governance

In a recently completed World Bank report on governance 209 countries were surveyed in six dimensions to measure improvement in the quality of governance over time (1996 to 2004). The dimensions are: (1) Voice and Accountability—*measuring political, civil and human rights;* (2) Political Stability and Violence/Terror—*measuring the likelihood of violent threats to, or changes in, government, including terrorism*; (3) Government Effectiveness—*measuring the competence of the bureaucracy and the quality of public service delivery;* (4) Regulatory Quality—*measuring the incidence of market-unfriendly policies;* (5) Rule of Law—*measuring the quality of contract enforcement, the police, and the courts, including judiciary independence, and the incidence of crime; and (6)* Control of Corruption—*measuring the abuse of public power for private gain, including petty and grand corruption).* It is worthwhile to note how Bangladesh fared in the six dimensions.

That Bangladesh will figure well below average in all of the indicators is not a revelation—what is revealing however, is the country's steady deterioration in all six dimensions of governance in last eight years (1996 to 2004). The mean statistical value for all 209 countries is zero in scores that ranged between minus 2.5 to plus 2.5 in all six indicators. In case of Bangladesh the scores have fallen much below zero in all cases. Voice and Accountability indicator slipped from minus 0.33 to minus 0.69; Political Stability fell from minus 0.53 to minus 1.24; Government Effectiveness from minus 0.67 to minus 0.72; Regulatory Quality from minus 0.54 to minus 1.15; Rule of Law from minus 0.68 to minus 0.86; and to top it off, Control of Corruption slid down from an index of minus 0.47 to minus1.09, a drop of 62 basis points.

All our neighboring countries have indices below norm (the indices are mostly in the negative), but few have consistently slid down in all six fronts over time like Bangladesh. India has either improved or has marginal decline in some indicators. It has greatly improved in accountability, government effectiveness, and control of corruption. Even Pakistan, which fared badly in most aspects of governance (not as bad Bangladesh though), it has shown improvement in control of corruption in last eight years.

The point of all these statistics and comparison is not to belabor the hapless state of our governance that is much bandied about in the development circle. The point is demonstrating by number how we have embarked on a steady downhill ride in all six fronts of governance, and do not seem to realize it. We do not realize that these statistics are available to anyone who has access to information, who can form judgment on us based on this information, and make decisions whether or not to do business with us. These people are our development partners, potential investors, and of course friends in need. It does us no good when we take recourse to denial, and attribute the negative reports to ill motivation, and international conspiracy against us. As though the international community has a grudge against Bangladesh – an impoverished country of 140 million people that had a lot of international good will not too long ago.

Bangladesh is a country of survivors. Despite adversities, both natural and man-made, the country has made enormous progress in universal primary education particularly female literacy, infant mortality, and maternal health. In Human Development Index (UNDP) Bangladesh figures among the medium human development countries of the world, above Pakistan and Nepal (which are grouped in low human development countries). Yet we are getting a bad rap all because we have not been able to demonstrate to our people, let alone the international community that we care about our governance, and its building blocks.

We serve ourselves poorly, in fact hurt us, when we do not engage our development partners in constructive dialogue to improve our governance process, and inject transparency in that process that can be seen by all.

What matters is a determination to change the perception with a plan to improve government effectiveness, ensure rule of law, and combat corruption. To enhance government effectiveness we need radical measures that will augment both quality and competence of the civil service; make the civil service free from political pressure, and foremost, make government policies credible to people. To enforce rule of law we need to instill confidence of people in the laws of the land by bringing down incidence of crime against life and property, and ensure predictability and effectiveness of our judicial system. Corruption leads to lack of respect for both the corruptor and the corrupted, and the country which seemingly indulges in it. We need action and not just plan to bring an end to use of public power for private gain.

Political rhetoric to rebut the charges of corruption or poor governance will not change the perception of Bangladesh that has been gaining ground internationally, nor will it change the indicators that have been made available to all. We can only hope that we will the read the signs on the wall and embark on remedial actions before it is too late.

Politicization of Our Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is not an obstacle to democracy but an inevitable complement to it.

—Joseph A. Schumpeter

A few months ago I had an opportunity to meet and sit with some visiting senior civil service officials of our country. These officials were taking part in a World Bank Institute sponsored training program in leadership development. The specific program related to building of leadership that could facilitate and manage the process of design and implementation of economic development and poverty eradication programs.

This was an informal meeting, and I was conversing with officials who had entered into civil service several decades after me. However, they were not young—the junior most among them told me he had already put in twenty years in government service. All of them had done a considerable amount of work in the field, and had years experience of working at the grass roots. Some of them were quite articulate, others less so but appeared to be knowledgeable when they responded to a question. What was striking however was their inability as a group to see themselves as possible leaders in implementing government programs. This would be the responsibility of the political leaders or ministers, in their words. They viewed themselves as officials who followed instructions on specific tasks within given bounds of responsibility.

Since my discussions with the civil service group from Bangladesh I was pondering if the downbeat response from the group was a result of lack of adequate preparation for the tasks they are entrusted with or if it was the environment in which they were working. I had been a civil servant, albeit some three decades ago. I had seen some qualitative deterioration in the civil service that time (nineteen seventies), but mainly at the lower levels. However, I had not witnessed a lack of willingness or capability in our senior civil servants that period to take on tasks of leadership to implement programs that the government had initiated. Many of them in fact had contributed to the design of many such programs, even conception of some. Have things gone so

much wrong in last thirty years that senior civil servants no longer feel connected to economic growth and development outcome of the endeavors that they are supposed to implement?

In a later discussion with one of the civil servants I would find some clue to this cautious approach to public programs and public policy, and their role in implementing these programs. In their view zealous pursuit of government programs has often led to identification of a civil servant with the political party in power with disastrous consequences to the career of that civil servant after a government changeover. They had cases in mind in not too distant a past where civil servants who had pushed a government program or policy with passion were viewed by the successor government with suspicion and had been sidelined or even let off early. They were identified as belonging to the "other party".

We have a civil service that is steeped in a system that is supposed to observe strict political neutrality in official conduct. Political governments may come and go, but the civil servants give continuity to governance of the country. In countries that have a long standing tradition of a permanent civil service, the civil servants are considered the government's back bone. They are assumed neutral because they have been recruited through competition based on merit rather than political connections. They have been looked upon as impartial upholders of law with no affiliation to the party in power or in opposition.

Unfortunately, this image of the civil service is slipping fast in our country. It is arguable however, how much of this undoing has been done by the civil servants themselves, and how much by the political pressure cooker under which they have been operating.

Impartiality and neutrality, two distinctive qualities demanded and expected of civil servants, begin to erode when there is a disconnection between reward and performance. In a merit based system where recruitment is solely based on competition for the best, the expectation of future rewards for the civil servants is naturally a vertical progression in career. When job performances and career progression of civil servants are based on criteria separate from merit or other time honored traditions (such as experience and job qualifications), the civil servants also tend to bend and find ways of survival. The civil service operates within some norms and rules. When these are thrown aside, they compete with each other in finding innovative ways to benefit their career. For many it is going with the flow of the time. History of our bureaucracy of last forty years amply illustrates this phenomenon.

Immediately following the breakup of Pakistan, the bureaucracy in Bangladesh comprised two distinct groups. The civil servants who had formed the government in exile (referred to as Mujibnagari) and those who had remained in then East Pakistan.

The number of the latter group was augmented later by the repatriates from Pakistan. The civil servants from the government in exile had an upper hand initially as they continued to hold on to some to key top jobs given to them by the political leadership in exile despite the fact there were people more qualified than them (years in job and experience). But then there were more senior jobs to be filled as the new post liberation government was still forming with civil servants who had stayed back. This is when the jockeying started, and all norms were abandoned. There was competition among the senior bureaucrats to prove to the new leadership their loyalty to the newly emerged country. In this competition, much of which was unseemly, many civil servants deliberately chose to define loyalty to the country as fealty to the political leadership. Civil servants who had the benefit of having worked or known the top leadership in their earlier career seemed to prosper better than others. Civil servants who did not have this benefit would woo their more fortunate colleagues to plead their cases to the political leadership for assignments or even retention in government service.

One expected that with the change in the political leadership in mid seventies under rather tragic circumstances and ushering of a non-political government (at least at the initial period) the incentive structure in the bureaucracy would return to norm. None of that happened. The competition would now begin in foreswearing any loyalty to the previous leadership, and vowing allegiance to the new regime. Senior bureaucrats of earlier time were sidelined in favor of the ones who were ditched before. Officials sacked before on suspicions of disloyalty to the state (read political party) were reinstated in their jobs, many dislodging the ones favored before. The loyalty this time was judged not directly by a renewed pledge of allegiance to the new government or the new strong man, but indirectly by proof of disassociation with the previous government. They were assumed loyal to the new regime because they had been dismissed or by passed in promotion by the previous government. Civil servants retired prematurely by the earlier government were rehired, and many of those who were catapulted above were pushed aside or sent to oblivion.

The seminal events of the seventies would form a watershed of relations between the civil service and politicians for the upcoming period. The stance of our politicians that the civil servants belong to one political camp or other would shape both civil service conduct and the attitude of the politicians to the civil servants for next decades. At each national election the party in opposition feared that the elections would be manipulated by officials suspected of "loyalty" to the party in power. I myself had heard top political leaders (here in abroad) air their fears of manipulation by civil servants even when the elections were conducted by politically neutral caretaker government. It was because they believed that the civil servants were no longer neutral. They were presumed to have been promoted to senior or otherwise important positions because of their "bend" towards the party in power. Hence, once elected to power the newly elected party

attempted to cleanse the government of such "dis-loyal"elements. The cycle would repeat with every change.

The emergence of this political ethos would permanently change performance incentives for the majority of civil servants. They would avoid decision making in matters pertaining to policy or take leadership in nation building efforts. They would push upward the responsibility for making decisions. They would avoid any attempt at reforming obsolete practices. Obviously all of these were done to avoid close identification with the government in power, and later retaliation by a successor government. These self serving actions will eventually have a cumulative effect on the governance of the country in general and morale of the civil service in particular. No wonder the clutch of civil servants that I ran into appeared dubious about their role in putting into action what they had learnt in their leadership training program.

It is time that our government took steps to stem this downward slide. No government program can succeed, however strong the political leadership is, without an efficient and productive civil service. The only way that this can happen is by return of the civil service to true professionalism that is expected of the service.

I am not aware of any current civil service reform activity being undertaken in Bangladesh. But one important aspect of any reform should address the current deficit in mutual trust between the civil service and political leadership. Among developing countries Bangladesh is among few that inherited a civil service system that relied on an impartial, competition based, patronage-free recruitment system. It is a pity that we allowed this system to degenerate into a feckless bureaucracy that is proving to be unable to handle the onerous tasks of economic development. No amount of training in leadership development can instill in our civil servants the zeal and enthusiasms to run with a program and implement it without fear or favor unless the basic conditions where they work are set right.

The main principles governing a professional civil service are that it should be merit and competition based, and its members should be protected for their political neutrality. Fortunately we do not have to reinvent these wheels; we already had them as our guiding principles. What we need is a strict following of these principles in administering our civil service. If we want our civil servants to be efficient, politically neutral, and productive we should create the proper incentive structure for it away from the deleterious environment that it has been sucked into. The incentives should be simple and straight forward. Keep entrance to the service and career progression entirely merit-based free from political considerations. Ensure protection of civil servants for their political neutrality, and from arbitrary removal. Make transparent all decisions on rewards and punishment. And foremost, make it mandatory that dabbling in politics by civil servants, and currying favor to politicians would be viewed with utmost severity and consequences.

Between Rock and a Hard Place

It is not an easy task being a civil servant these days in the country, I guess. For that matter it never was, only it has become tougher. In the forty of years of our existence we have seen many times tussles over turf, roles and responsibilities between civil servants and elected officials. It has always been challenging to work with a fine line of distinction between local politics and administration. Yet people went to work for the government in droves. It was not simply because the government was the biggest employer, but a government job also carried the stamp of authority, safety and security—although not much money. Most important of it all, however, was dignity and respect for civil service that attracted most people to these jobs despite the subsistence level wages. These are also values that professional civil servants were expected to display in their conduct with the people they served. It now seems that we have reached a precipice where all these values are headed downhill.

The Pabna incident and the whirlwind of protest and counter protest that followed is a grim reminder of the crisis that we face today. This is a crisis of confidence in people who are expected to uphold law and order. This is also a crisis of confidence in those who are expected to lead and protect the enforcers of law. The image of an administrator and his colleagues breaking into tears flashed through the media spoke not of dignity, but of helplessness. Helplessness that arose from their inability to discipline a section of people with political connections who stormed into the Collector's office and disrupted a recruitment examination in progress for hiring low level employees. The helplessness was stark because that unruly section of people was seemingly allied with the party in power, and the officers found themselves in a corner. Could this incident or the subsequent helpless image have been avoided?

Political interference in administration at local level is not unknown in our country. This has happened before, and probably will continue in the future so long as we have vague definitions of roles and responsibilities of legislators and administrators in local decision making. Interferences came in many forms and in many dimensions in the past. Some were requests for award of procurement or construction contracts, some for jobs, and others as trivial as transfers from one job location to another. Some seasoned

civil servants viewed such requests not so much as interference, but as necessary job hazards and handled them with tact. In some cases, the requests would really turn out to be testy and the matter would escalate to higher authorities. Sometimes this would lead to the removal of the civil servant from the scene, but never the civil servant and his cohorts would be a target of abuse or harassment.

Have we ever wondered why there is political interference in such mundane matters as local recruitment for a government office? Is it because this is an avenue for finding jobs for unemployed political supporters? Or is it simply an attempt by a local party boss or legislator to reward party workers with government jobs? In a spoils system where the government party in power can and does fill many government jobs with party loyalists this would not be a problem at all. But in a government that draws its employees through an impartial and competitive recruitment process a demand of this nature would pose a serious problem to administration.

Civil servants often face a stark choice of either disregarding pressures from political leaders at their own peril, or yielding to these pressures and lose their neutrality. Refusing to yield to political pressures by a civil servant is often viewed by a political boss as disloyalty to the party in power, and hence the government. It takes a statesman to separate government from the party, and to separate a government job from party work.

In the mid seventies when I was working for a cabinet minister a party boss from the minister's district came to him one day with a demand that the Deputy Commissioner of the district be removed. His complaint—the official did not care for the party as he never listened to the many requests that the party boss had made to him. To this, the sage minister's response was that the official was assigned to the district to do government work, not party work. For party work the party boss should come to the minister, for government work he should go to the official. In simple words, the minister would draw the line between politics and duties of a government official. The Deputy Commissioner was never even informed that there was a complaint against him.

This has been long journey for the civil servants and political leaders of our country since then. In the interregnum of the democratically elected governments of early seventy and nineties when we had military dictatorships and autocratic rules tussles between bureaucracy and political leaders were rare. The civil servants in the districts were much of the time left uninterrupted to do their jobs. But these are transitional times when we would expect to see a greater devolution of work and responsibilities to elected officials and more well-defined role of elected officials in local administration. However, until that happens the professional bureaucrats who would continue to provide the traditional services at local level would need protection and safeguards for performing their jobs to the greater good of people they serve. They should not appear helpless nor their performance feckless because they are prevented to do the job they are tasked to do by mob.

Deaths by Cross Fire

The Central Bureau of Investigation of India (CBI) arrested recently Amit Shah, a close aide to the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi in connection with a fake police encounter case leading to the death of one Sohrabuddin Sheikh. Shah was the Home Minister of the State until he resigned from the job recently after the accusation surfaced. The Sohrabuddin case is as follows.

In November 2005, Sohrabuddin was picked up by the police of Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh from a bus on their way from Hyderabad to Sangli in Maharashtra, along his wife Kauser Bi and another person. He was later gunned down in a fake encounter by the Gujarat police's Anti-Terrorist Squad which claimed he had come to the city to eliminate Modi. The accused policemen also killed Kauser Bi and their accomplice Tulsi Ram Prajapati to destroy evidence.

The matter remained under wraps for some time and no one really knew about this case. In 2007, nearly two years after the incident, Rubabuddin, Sohrabuddin's brother, filed a petition before the Indian Supreme Court claiming that that the Gujarat police's encounter was fake and demanded to know his sister-in-law Kausarbi's whereabouts. In March 2007, an inquiry was ordered, and on March 23, the Gujarat government admitted that the encounter was fake and the senior police officers involved would not be spared. On April 24, the Gujarat police arrested its Deputy Inspector General (Border Range) D G Vanzara and Rajkumar Pandian, superintendent of police with the Intelligence Bureau, and M N Dinesh Kumar (Rajasthan police) on the charge of murdering Sohrabuddin Sheikh. Rubabuddin asked the SC judge to direct the Gujarat government to produce Kausarbi in court. On April 30, the Gujarat government admitted before the Supreme Court that Kauser Bi, wife of fake encounter victim Sohrabuddin Sheikh, has been killed and her body burnt. In addition to the senior police officers to date another six police officials have been arrested and named as co-accused in the case.

Police encounter is a euphemism used widely by police in India when explaining the death of an individual at their hands who was deemed by them to be a militant

or "subject of interest". In reality these are extra judicial killings or executions not authorized by a court or by the law. Earlier such encounters went by the name of "staged encounters", where weapons were planted on or near the dead body to provide a justification for killing the individual. The National Human Rights Commission of India reports that since 1993 there have been 2560 cases of such police encounters in India, of which 1224 cases have been fake encounters.

In Bangladesh we became familiar with a term called "Crossfire" during the previous political government when accidental deaths of "rogue "individuals were reported when confronted by police. However, this was no ordinary police. A special force was created by the government to combat crime especially in big cities. According to a report provided by this agency to the media. 60 people were killed in such encounters or Crossfire in 2009, and 83 people in the year before.

This special or elite force to combat crime is actually a formal institutionalization of the ad hoc measure that the government took in 2003 called Operation Clean Heart to crack down on crime. The operation jointly launched with all branches of armed forces and police that lasted about four months reportedly led to arrest of several thousand alleged criminals and 44 deaths either in custody or at the time of encounters with law enforcing agencies. The governments halted the operation after four months citing success, but actually due to severe criticism by the Human Rights watch groups both internally and externally. I do not think there were any later follow up of the charges of extra-judicial killings that period. Instead we had a new force to deal with crime and criminals.

The stories above and the statistics of extra judicial killings in India and Bangladesh are not presented to show any comparison between the two countries or to demonstrate who is ahead in extra-judicial killing. That is not the intent of this write up. It is not about how many of the killings were justified, and how many criminals were apprehended by such extraordinary measures. The point is to what extent a legally constituted and democratically elected government should go to deter crime and apprehend criminals. To what extent a legally constituted agency could go and carry out its mandate in cracking down on crime? What are the checks and balances?

In Bangladesh we had many incidents of extra-judicial killings many years prior to the creation of the elite force or the joint forces operation. Two of these that come immediately to my mind are the one in 1974—a joint army and BDR operation in 1974 to combat across the border smuggling, and the other in 1975 to combat "anti-social elements" with the newly created Para military force called the Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini. Both had led to apprehension of thousands and "accidental deaths" while the law enforcing agencies were "pursuing" them.

I have vivid memory of an incident during the joint forces operation against smuggling in 1974 in Dinajpur district. As Additional Deputy Commissioner I was the civilian coordinator of the anti-smuggling campaign in the district. One morning the commander of the operation, a Lt. Colonel of the army, informed me over phone in great agitation that he was facing an irate crowd in the area of his work and that he needed police intervention as he could not use his armed forces for crowd control. When I enquired about the reason, he informed me that his forces had gunned down some smugglers earlier at dawn, and this had enraged local people. He did not tell me whether the people gunned down were armed and if there was any armed resistance by them. I sent a magistrate along with a police contingent who brought the situation under control, at least for the time. An enquiry later revealed that the group of six that was shot to death was "suspected" of smuggling near the international border, and the group included a boy of fourteen. A "discreet" executive enquiry was held later that gave the army benefit of doubt. It was extra-judicial killing par excellence, but we let the army off for the greater good of the country through an enquiry.

The extra-judicial killings would continue in the country with the launching of similar "cleansing operations" in later years. Some we would know of through newspapers, but many we would never know. Yet, the irony of it all is that these killings are in the hands of agencies that have been officially established to protect life and property of people, not by under-world, under cover entities.

Any killing is a violation of human rights. When murders are committed by private individuals against others, there is recourse for the aggrieved persons provided by the laws of the country. The law enforcing agencies can and do apprehend the perpetrators of the crime, and prosecute them in the courts of justice. But what recourse an aggrieved party has when the crimes are committed by an agency which has been officially empowered to deter crime?

An alert and active judiciary usually would be recourse for seeking redress for these wanton activities, as has been the case cited above in India. Recently a Bangladesh court also brought to book several police men for alleged killing two years before. The court interventions and the consequent judicial convictions of the perpetrators are however small reparations for the human lives that have been lost and the impact that these have on the families they left behind. Countless lives have been lost for probably for no reason in last four decades in our country in what has been termed as encounters or cross fires. These lives would never be returned. We may bring to justice over time a few of the perpetrators, but will never be able to retrieve the lost lives.

Democracy is not simply the right of the people to elect a government they want. It is also a right of the people to live the way they want to live, and make sure that the government they elect guarantee that this right is protected by law. It also gives them

the right to demand that agencies that are created by their elected government provide transparency and accountability for their actions. I have no doubt in mind that the majority of the personnel of our law enforcing agencies are guided by rule of law and respect for human life. Yet we have elements among us who may transgress the laws either in over enthusiasm in chasing crimes and criminals, or by momentary intoxication of power given by the arms in their hands. The way to address such wayward conduct is to have strict accountability of these forces in all their campaigns and transparency of these operations. In parallel we also need that our political masters do not use such forces to fight their battles. No one would want a Gujarat like occurrence where law enforcing agencies reportedly became willing perpetrators of a politically motivated "police encounter"

Professional Conduct and Our Civil Service

Back in the seventies when applying for a government scholarship for higher studies abroad (as a civil servant) I was required to state in one of the application forms whether I was in a professional or a non-professional cadre. The question nonplused me as I was not aware that there was any job in the government that qualified as non-professional. When I raised this issue before the officer who was helping me in the application process, he replied sagely that the erstwhile Civil Service (by that time christened as Administrative Service) was not deemed as a professional cadre. He further informed me that the word "professional" only applied to engineers, doctors, and other technical specialists. Members of the civil service—that group of officials who represented the generalists—were not "professionals". They were simply civil servants. I could not persuade my interlocutor to realize that civil service is also a profession, and that we all are professional civil servants.

This may sound facetious, but could it be that this gratuitous definition of "professionals" given by the Section Officer is the bane that afflicts our generalist civil service? Could it be that this definition actually helps a good many of our civil servants not to act as professionals, let alone grow or to follow the discipline of professionals?

I am led to this hypothesis from the news reports that I have seen of late of the remarks made to the press or public by two civil servants—both still employed by the government. One—a very senior civil servant has been reported to vent his spleen on his superiors after reassignment from a high-profile job. The other, a very junior officer in the totem pole, has reportedly expressed his outrage in public at the loss of the magisterial power that his position had accorded to him following separation of judiciary from the executive, and directed his tirade at the highest court. Both were reacting to government decisions that as "professional" civil servants are obliged to obey, and not question, least of all challenge in public.

Who do we blame for this "unprofessional" behavior? The individuals who started to consider themselves as celebrities rather than government employees doing their jobs? The media that offered them this opportunity? Or is it the cumulative result of

years of politicization of the bureaucracy, which allowed such utterances that befit only political leaders? I guess it is a blend of all.

Adherence to professional conduct should be the hallmark of a civil servant. That professional conduct comes from tradition, training, dedication to work, and overall, from the belief that people judge civil servants them by their work ethic and values — not by the power or authority they wield.

Unfortunately the erosion of social and moral values that we have witnessed over the past two decades has impacted our civil bureaucracy as much as other branches of the society. Political manipulation of the civil service, use of official power for personal gains, and partnership in corruption with political blessings have denuded the civil service of its pride, and fostered a culture of survival of me-first above everything.

This did not happen overnight. This has happened from years of neglect of the civil service, highly flawed recruitment process, equally flawed training, and substitution of merit with political sycophancy. We cannot expect professional conduct from officials who have had no tradition to follow, no training in what professionalism entails, and who have been reared in an environment of self-promotion.

The combined result of these deleterious trends has presented us with a civil bureaucracy that can produce elements with behaviors that more befit political beings. This is why it is possible to have, from time to time, individuals who can translate their fifteen minutes of media fame to false assumptions of personal glory, leading to their hubris. This lack of training can also lead to equally false assumptions that the public offices they occupy are like fiefdoms. Thus, they are shocked when they are moved from their powerful positions. They react strongly, they are in constant denial.

We cannot expect a Tariq bin Ziyad (conquering General of Spain), or a General McArthur among our civil servants who bowed their heads and gave up their positions at the command of superior authorities. The tradition of our civil service has been badly mauled by political manipulation and political pressure in the past decades. Absent reform of the recruitment process, rigorous training in professions and professional conduct, and strict enforcement of discipline in each profession, we cannot expect a sudden transformation in the code of conduct of our civil servants. But we surely can expect to stop recurrence of such behavior in the future, if efforts are made now from ground up. The current environment seems to offer the most appropriate setting to fix a system that has been crying out loud for repair.

Political Cost of Corruption

The Transparency International (TI) report branding Bangladesh as a leader of the pack of ten most corrupt countries, and the finger pointing at each other by two major political parties of our country as the architects of this national infamy bring to mind the analogy of recent meltdown of WorldCom (the now infamous telecom giant). On June 26, 2002 U.S. regulators charged WorldCom Inc. with fraud after WorldCom admitted it hid almost $4 billion of costs, bringing it to the brink of bankruptcy in one of the biggest accounting scandals ever.

The scandal pushed WorldCom stock to an all time low of just 5 cents after being over $16.00 this year and over $60.00 just a few years ago. Even though the US Securities and Exchange Commission stated in its civil lawsuit that the scheme was "directed and approved by WorldCom's senior management", both current and former Chief Executives and Chief Financial Officers denied knowledge of any wrongdoing. They would not own up to the financial wreckage of the company, or the financial disaster that was wrought upon to the company shareholders, its employees, or to the US economy in general. Someone else was messing up their books, not them.

Like the WorldCom senior management, our political managers also seem to suggest that the corruption in Bangladesh is not their creation. Someone else did it.

The TI report did not bring about any havoc in Bangladesh finances, nor did it lead to any legal action; but the report was published internationally, and we as a nation were labeled as the most corrupt country in the world. We may lament it, but the word got around very quickly.

I like to take the WorldCom analogy a bit further to analyze the Bangladesh situation. The alleged fraud in the Company was the handiwork of a few swindling employees in collusion with conniving managers, but its impact was devastating to the Company. Akin to the WorldCom predicament, corruption in Bangladesh is the handiwork of a minority – namely its bureaucracy; but its effect is more overwhelming and far more damaging. The SEC report has damaged financial wealth of a company and

its shareholders: the TI report has tarnished the reputation of a whole nation. But the analogy should stop here.

In the US, the SEC has been able to bring to book the major perpetrators of the fraud in WorldCom. In Bangladesh we are looking for scapegoats for this national disgrace. Instead of admitting that there is something "rotten in the state of Denmark", instead of taking measures against the pernicious evil of corruption and its deleterious effect on our economy, our government leaders are quick to put it squarely on the "shenanigans" of their predecessors, or are totally ignoring the whole issue by labeling the TI report as a deep international conspiracy. Our opposition leaders are rejoicing over this national ignominy celebrating the report as an international stamp of disapproval of a government they would like to see fall. No one has cared to catch sight of the long-term effect of this branding, nor has any one voiced any demand for a probe into what led to such a scathing report. Government leaders hate to admit that corruption exists lest it affect their own party or themselves.

It is lamentable to see how the avarice and greed of a fraction of our people have blanketed the entire country with the stigma of vice. It is equally appalling to observe how impervious our leaders have become to such accusations and tarnishing of national image. We may protest that corruption is confined only to a segment of our population; we may attract others' attention to our neighboring countries and declare in somewhat righteous indignation that they are no better. The crude reality is that it does not help to shake off this pariah image. Finger pointing of one regime to another, from one leader to another as the origin of this evil does not free us from the consequences of the evil.

It is not that we were actually surprised by the TI report. We had reached the nadir last year. We defended the title the second time. It is ironic that despite corruption becoming a buzzword in Bangladesh aid circle, despite corruption being a central theme of a recent World Bank publication (Government That Works), and despite corruption figuring as a major obstacle in the governance process of Bangladesh, we seem to make no headway in addressing it, let alone solve it. Quite a few of recent writings by a few of our thinking elites dealt with corruption, its cause and effects, and ways to tackle these. Most of our people are aware what causes corruption, where these are, and some can even suggest how these can be tackled. However, all this knowledge is meaningless if the political will to tackle corruption is lacking. This political will need a determination at all levels starting from the highest. If this does not happen soon, we will not need a crystal ball to predict the winner of the most corrupt country title in the next TI report.

Public Office for Private Gain

In 1972 after forming the Constituent Assembly with members of the former National Assembly and the Provincial Assembly (elected in then East Pakistan in 1970), Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman boldly expelled in two installments some forty-five or so members of the Assembly from the Awami League. The expelled party members automatically lost their Assembly seats since the constitution mandated so. While some of these members were expelled on charges of collaboration with Pakistan and other political reasons, a good number of them were expelled on charges of corruption. Perhaps I should say "reputation" of corruption, since I do not think any of these expelled members was later prosecuted in a court of law. To the contrary, most of these "corrupt" members thrived very well using their ill-gotten possessions to buy political influence and expand their wealth.

There is a special reason for this anecdotal reference. This was a classic case where a political action taken in apparently good faith failed or was allowed to fail because there was no administrative follow up. I do not believe the 1972 action of Bangabandhu was a political hype, or a rhetorical act to chastise fellow party members and warn them against political dissent, although lack of any serious follow up to this bold act may have us think so. It was an earnest act taken in response to mounting criticisms of corruption and other foul charges against many of the Awami League members by a vociferous section of the party that were widely believed to be true.

The dramatic nature of the act, and the public euphoria that it had generated, however, fizzled out as the expelled members would strut their stuff in public no sooner than the initial noise had died down. We can only offer some conjectures why there was no follow up to this bold act. These could have been internal resistances from the political party, fear that the expelled members would join a growing opposition or simply a change of heart in the leader himself. Whatever be the reasons, the lesson that we take from this abortive "clean the house" campaign is any good faith action will derail without right back up.

I believe the 1972 action did not succeed because it lacked three important steps in an anti-corruption move that follow sequentially. These are probe, prove, and punish. In fact, the last step featured first, that is if we take expulsion from the Constituent Assembly to be a punishment. In reality, however, it became the opposite. The expulsion became a seminal event for the bent politicians' later transition to enormous wealth, wielding of political influence, and for some, eventual return to the parliament.

It will perhaps be unfair to cite the1972 incident as the only cause for the burgeoning corruption industry that would characterize our politics and bureaucracy in later years. But it is a good starting point. It shaped the thinking of the political parties and a majority of the politicians that public offices are not for public service, and definitely not for altruistic acts. These are lucrative, because they offer easy channels to private gains. Politics henceforth would be dominated by people who were in search of acquiring wealth at public expense. People, the ultimate victims of these shenanigans, also gradually began to accept this stoical view that politics and corruption are inseparable.

Unfortunately, nothing would happen in the subsequent three decades that could shake this stoical view. With each change in political government there would be hope that the next cast of characters would make some efforts to stem the tide. Indeed, there would be election promises of sorts to that effect. In reality, the party that came to govern would use its new found power to chase and harass its political foes from the past regime—all in the name of fighting corruption. This charade would be so habitual with every new political government that even legitimate cases of corruption charges leveled against politicians became suspect in public view. They were seen as a vendetta of one political party against another.

This cynic view resulted not only from past public experience but also in the inherent defect in the process that was followed in pursuing cases of corruption. In the three "P"s of pursuing corruption cases that I mentioned earlier—probe, prove, and punish, it is important to follow their sequential pattern. In 1972 the end result came first—expulsion from the Assembly. Had this been otherwise, if the charges were first investigated, then proved before a court of law, the punishment would have been automatic. And this punishment could have gone beyond expulsion from the Assembly, with some jail time and other financial retribution. Perhaps there was no political will to do so. Perhaps the party leader was constrained by circumstances. But our political future would have been curved in a different platform, had this action been handled another way.

The country is now hearing with awe the unfolding stories of some of our elected officials' unbounded greed, and unabashed amassing of wealth using their offices. Using public office for private gains takes a new meaning when the gains aim at

amassing wealth at the level of King Croesus. But it is not just the officials: the gainers from their offices are their factotums and underlings—perhaps more so. The Pandora's Box has been laid open.

All this happened because we lived in a culture that considered use of public office for private gain as normal, almost as a perk. We may have a thousand and one rules that regulate a public official's conduct, that expressly prohibit a public official to use that office to benefit himself or those with whom he has a relationship outside the office. But these have no meaning, nor have they any impact on the conduct of our officials because they know the mutually supportive environment they have created would help them transgress these rules blithely. Hence we have these cases, and we will continue to have these cases unless we have a way to stem this tide now.

There is a glimmer of hope that the opportunities that we have now in the new environment will be used toward not only effectively pursuing the cases of sleaze that have surfaced, but also end in results that forbid repetition of such criminal conduct in the future. Three essential parts of anti graft measures are investigation, prosecution and education. We are witnessing only the first part. But we will await with eagerness a successful follow up with the next two parts also.

The Burden of Corruption Fighters

In November 1999, shortly after his takeover of the government of Pakistan as President General Pervez Musharraf established the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) through promulgation of an ordinance to combat corruption and graft in the country. The first two Chairmen of NAB were retired army officers (with rank of Lt General), the most recent appointee is a retired Civil Servant.

The agency was charged with the responsibility of "elimination of corruption through a holistic approach of awareness, prevention and enforcement." But mainly the immediate job of the new found agency was to hound out people suspected of siphoning off the country's exchequer to augment personal wealth – people who held high public office.

Among the famous public figures arraigned by the agency were Nawaz Sharif, the immediate past Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Benazir Bhutto, the prior Prime Minister.

In the first few years of its operation, the primary modus operandi of NAB was acting on information on incidents of graft and corruption by public officials or report of abuse of office by public officials. The source of information was usually a complaint. According to the latest annual report (2005) NAB received on average about 13,000 complaints annually, of which about 600 were enquired into, about 160 investigated, but less than 50 cases were presented in the court. And this was done with an annual budget of about 55 crores (Pakistan Rupees) and manpower of hundreds of officers and men spread all over the country. Despite its resources the agency was stymied by sifting through the enormous volume of complaints to establish their veracity, follow an arduous process of collecting evidences, and finally arrive at a prima facie case that could lead to prosecution.

By its own acknowledgement, in its initial years the NAB could not follow its main mission of "elimination of corruption through a holistic approach of awareness, prevention and enforcement" because of its primary focus on investigating and

prosecuting cases of graft and corruption involving important public figures, and government officials. There have been mixed results of this campaign. The agency was able to recover crores of rupees from "voluntary" returns of graft money by several accused including a former Navy chief, and also successfully prosecute several law makers. But it has also either dropped or shelved cases started against important public figures (such as Nawaz Sharif) for political reasons.

Despite some impressive achievement by NAB in first six years (conviction of some 400 people, return of over 13 billion of rupees), there have been several criticisms of the agency as well. Some of these were that several of its cases were politically motivated, that it had been selective in prosecution, and that it lacked transparency in its process. The agency refutes these by stating that it is an independent, constitutionally established body that is answerable only to the President, which under current circumstances makes the defense questionable. Recently, the government appointed a retired civil servant as Chairman, perhaps to deflect another criticism that the agency is army dominated. Responding to the agency's original mandate, the agency also started to work on a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy aimed at creating public awareness and prevention of corruption. International agencies including OECD and ADB have chipped in to make this strategy a success.

NAB experience is a subject to ponder in our country that is awash with complaints and reported evidences of mass plunder of resources by public officials with a newly found public agency charged to address these mammoth tasks. According to news reports we have about 150 politicians and business men at national level who have so far been rounded up on complaints of corruption and misuse of public office, investigations in a majority of which are still ongoing. To this we have added two other high profile cases of public corruption that have attracted international attention.

There may be numerous other cases at district level where a plethora of complaints are being received and inquired into. Number of the pending cases, and the time it is taking in their disposal may make people wonder if the substantive hard work of the new agency will bring the much desired result that we all seek.

The burden of corruption fighters is onerous, in particular when it is unbiased. The cheerleaders today can become stern critics tomorrow if the fighters slip. If NAB experience is any guide for us, we need a transparent process in our anti-corruption fight that would establish credibility and faith in the adopted measures – both for us in the country and the international community that is watching all our actions. As I see it going forward the steps should include a fast completion of investigation of the pending cases, following a due process for prosecution, and promoting an environment that supports a long lasting, durable anti-corruption agency free from any political pressure or overtone. For the first two we need to help ourselves; for the third we may need help and expertise from others. International aid agencies and our partners in development will be more than willing to help in this.

Running with Hare—Hunting with Hounds

Raj Rajaratnam, a hedge fund billionaire, was convicted this Month (May 11) by a New York Jury of insider trading after 12 days of deliberation. Rajaratnam faces up to nearly 20 years of prison when he is sentenced. The term insider trading is frequently used to refer to a practice in which an insider or a related party trades based on material non-public information obtained during the performance of the insider's duties at the corporation. This is in breach of a fiduciary or other relationship of trust and confidence or where the non-public information was misappropriated from the company. This conviction may be the tip of an iceberg as several as Wall Street stalwarts have been identified by the US government as co-conspirators in the case. We will wait to see.

However, this is United States where regulators watch the financial world like hawks, and even though people like Rajaratnam slip through the watch sometimes, they are eventually caught. They are caught, given a public trial, and eventually punished. In last thirty months US Government was able to successfully prosecute fifty people for manipulation of the stock market. Alas, we wish we had the same level of surveillance, and punishment in our country for the villains of our financial world. The two economies—US and Bangladesh—are not comparable even in a remote sense, but the ways the crooks work are similar. The only difference is that crooks in USA are caught and punished, our crooks get away.

Our government put a high powered committee to probe the most massive Dhaka Stock Market collapse in its 55-year history. In its report on April 7, 2011 the committee found massive stock manipulation, and bad decisions of the regulators that brought about this fall. According to news published in the media the probe committee on share market debacle made a series of recommendations for a major overhaul of the Securities and Exchange Commission, including replacement of its current Chairman. We also read how apart from the SEC, the Stock Exchange itself, market issue managers, issuers, auditors—in fact anyone who had anything to do with the Stock Market had role in this massive collusion.

The report also gave specific examples of insider trading impacting share prices. We learnt that around Tk. 4,000 to 5,000 crore went to private pockets through direct listing. Specific companies and individuals have also been cited in the report for market manipulation.

We have yet to see the full fallout of the probe and the committee recommendations. So far as we know that the Security and Exchange Commission, the main watch dog of the Stock Market, is being overhauled. A new SEC Chairman has been appointed. The whole entity is likely to receive new appointees. But this is house cleaning for the regulating agency only. We have also learnt the Government will ask the anti-corruption commission to investigate into other allegations and charges made in the report. We genuinely hope these will be pursued.

What I do fear, however, that as in the past the powerful names and individuals with political clout may remain untouchable. It has happened before, and it may happen again. It is because we live in a society where political and social connections to power are keys to flouting of laws by individuals, such an expectation is not unrealistic. It is because we staff the agencies with people who run with hare and hunt with hounds. They alternate the roles fitting the occasion. There is neither a political guidance nor a political will to let these agencies run properly.

Mere overhaul of a government entity that is staffed with individuals who survive on government support cannot rid us of the evils and corruption that are indulged in by politically powerful sections of the society. We may be able to single out a few individuals for their incompetence and inefficiency and remove them from office, but we cannot ask an organization to wield real regulatory power without teeth.

What good is a regulatory authority if its work is stymied by political clout of the very people the authority is supposed to regulate? What trust it can generate from people if it cannot enforce its own rules and regulations in the arena it is asked to regulate?

No government agency or regulatory body can perform effectively if there is no political backing for its independent operation from the top. We may select the most skilled professionals for an agency, but they would be powerless if the entity they are tasked to run cannot operate free from political pressure. Our lawmakers can ensure this by guaranteeing the regulatory agencies their independence, and making them accountable only to a Parliamentary Committee comprising members from government and opposition parties. This way while the activities of the agency will be transparent and subject to scrutiny by a body of lawmakers, the law makers themselves will also have a responsibility to see that the agency works to meet its objectives. The law makers must ensure that the agency reports to them regularly, and bring to book culprits who flout the laws. The agencies cannot run with hares and hunt with hounds.

We need people of integrity run the regulatory agencies as much as we need individuals with the right skills to oversee the tasks they are asked to perform. They also need independence and protection for doing their jobs. This independence and protection can only come from the lawmakers who represent our people. To prevent another stock debacle and future manipulation of the market by the privileged few, I hope our government will do the right thing by all of us.

Debate over Democracy

Sir Winston Churchill once famously observed, "Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." We need to ponder on this celebrated statement now that our country is in political cross roads, and we have new debates on the "type" of democracy suited to our needs. We need to ponder as we have questions posed before us whether democracy as we have practiced so far has caused more grief than happiness. Above all, we need to reflect if there is any alternative to unfettered, unadulterated parliamentary democracy that provided voice to our people, and actually led to our freedom struggle and birth of Bangladesh.

Apparently we have begun to question this form of democracy because we have found to our dismay that the people we chose to represent our interests in the parliament have chosen instead their own interests, wealth and pursuit of happiness at our cost. Hence we have this debate, whether this democratic way that we have followed is right for us, right for the country. It is worthwhile at this juncture to recall how many times in the past we have misplaced our accusations and have thrown away institutions built over time for misdeeds of a section of the people who abused *these institutions*. It takes only a day to demolish edifices that have taken years to build.

Our first strike at parliamentary democracy occurred at the infancy of our nation, in 1975, ironically at the hand of the person who gave it to us in the first place. Confronted with a fast deteriorating economy, rampant corruption, and collapse of law and order, our leader amended the constitution to allow for a Presidential system of government and one-party rule with a rump parliament. Sad to say this action came from the leader who had declared only two years before that he believed in "(parliamentary) democracy, supremacy of the will of the people; government on the consent of the governed". So disenchanted he was with his own Parliament and distrustful of its members that he readily threw away three years of hard work that went toward building a constitution that had made preservation of civil liberties its topmost priority.

There were two catastrophic fallouts from this political action. First was the assassination of the father of the nation by a group of disgruntled military officers, and second was the sequence of military coups and counter coups that ultimately brought to power General Ziaur Rahman, and imposition of Martial Law. Parliamentary democracy went south.

We welcomed the military intervention as we had bitter taste in our mouths from three years of chaotic parliamentary politics, franchising of local government to the leaders of the ruling party, rampant corruption, and a fast deteriorating law and order caused largely by the goons patronized by the ruling party. Martial law from a military leader who was also closely associated with our freedom fight was viewed as a godsend. With General Zia at the helms, we willingly put aside any thoughts of democracy. We even blamed democracy as the root of our misfortune since we identified our past parliamentarians and political leaders as the source of our misery, people who were the products of the democratic system.

But the tide would turn soon toward the democracy that we had decried earlier for our woes. A democratic rebirth that became necessary due mainly to external pressure, would now lead us on to the praetorian politics that would dominate the country for the next decade. A new political party rose from the ashes of old Pakistan with help from some political turncoats with political neophytes in tow, and directly aided and abetted by the military establishment. The amended constitution that allowed a Presidential form of government came handy in supporting this praetorian politics.

The military led democratic rebirth would again prove to be short lived as the jerry-built political party would be mired in internal squabbles, and allegations of corruption. As he was trying to bring a chaotic house to order General Ziaur Rahman would fall in the same tragic manner as the great leader before him—again in the hands of a few disgruntled army officers.

Assassination of Ziaur Rahman, and the later intraparty factionalism and strife would enable the armed forces to be back in the driver's seat. We would have the third demise of democracy with General Ershad in power and the second coming of the Martial Law. This would be followed by a return to quasi-democracy with the new military leader heading a new party that would include political opportunists, turn coats and state managed elections. The results of this political shenanigan would be similar to those that happened before. The cast of characters assembled by the carrot of power would soon cash on that power until corruption again became a byword for politics.

It took the country long ten years to get rid of the praetorian politics bestowed from above. It took years of struggle for people's will to return, and have people's rights restored to elect their own representatives. We have had three popular elections in last

fifteen years that led to three elected governments. These were free elections, albeit there have been the usual charges of biases from those who lost the elections. But they have been largely fair. The products of these elections did not come through a praetorian political system, they were not foisted from above by a coterie. Some of the choices may not have been good, but then we have second chances to discard them if we wanted to.

It takes years of practice for parliamentary democracy to succeed. India has had it for over sixty years, and yet it has its pitfalls. Often we see and hear of members of the parliament, and state legislatures in that country hauled away for offences as dire as murder, and yet the country chooses to remain with a system that in the words of Winston Churchill may be "the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". India chooses to remain in the path of parliamentary democracy because it has right safeguards, rule of law, and checks and balances. We would have no need of this type of debate today if we also had similar rule of law and right checks and balances.

Criticism and Democracy

Among many famous statements that Winston Churchill made, I cannot think of any other more appropriate in the current environment of our country than the following. "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things." The significance of this statement becomes more relevant when we remember that this statement was in the context of parliamentary debates that characterize the traditions of British Parliament, which we apparently are enamored of, but rarely try to follow.

Debates are essential parts of the democratic process, and facing criticism in the debates is an indispensable element of this process. Debates in the parliament are discussions on issues that affect the nation on wide ranging issues; these are supposed to put on the table views from a wide spectrum of constituencies that the parliamentarians bring to this legislative forum. The statements are not necessarily sugar coated to soothe the ears of those who are discussed or criticized, and in many cases the statements may represent partisan interests to convey a contrarian point of view. Yet, the norms of parliamentary debates dictate that all parties listen to the opposing views and respond to them in a fashion that respects the statements and provide a suitable answer. The parliamentary norms do not dictate that we chastise the critics nor try to stifle any debate with extra-parliamentary admonitions.

We began our parliamentary journey based on British traditions forty years ago with high hopes, but the journey was cut short within a few years, and we had to suffer several bouts of dictatorship and pseudo-democracy with rump parliaments. We got back to parliamentary government after an interregnum of nearly two decades, and yet after four successive governments based on parliamentary democracy since then we still have not come to grips with accepting the fundamentals of this democracy. Our leaders seem to be impervious to the high traditions and principles that govern this type of democracy. We are still enveloped in a mindset that abhors criticism of our policies, our action, our party, and our party men.

Running a government is not an easy task, especially when it is run on a parliamentary system that depends on team work, and consensus of a wide body of legislators. The Team Leader, which in this case is the Head of the Government, needs support of the whole team to carry the tasks. Yet, successful leaders keep their eyes and ears open to see that the team is doing a good work by listening not only to what the team has to say, but also the people who observe the team's work. In a democracy the legislative bodies provide the appropriate forum to evaluate the work of the government, and avenues to the Head of the Government to take corrective measures. A successful leader is also a good listener, a listener to not only praises but also criticisms.

Unfortunately we live in a culture of politics in our country that rewards sycophancy and fawning, and frowns upon negative appraisals or comments. Brown nosing from the workers and colleagues becomes the norm and our leaders become so accustomed to it that any negative comment or critical assessment is taken personally with serious consequences for the critic. Flattery replaces honest critique. The result is that gradually the leader is dissociated from reality until disaster happens.

The United States does not have a parliamentary form of government. The President is both Head of State and Head of Government. He does not go to the Congress, but the legislations and policies that he wants implemented have to be passed by the Congress—the Senate and the House of Representatives — which is split between two parties—the Democrats and the Republicans. One would imagine that for a President elected on Democratic Party ticket, legislations that the President wants would be welcome to his party followers in the Congress. To the contrary, some of the toughest opposition that the President faced in some recent legislation came from the members of his own party. In fact, many Democrats in the Congress voted against the recent Debt Ceiling bill. But this is what democracy is all about. Everybody is allowed to have his or her own opinion. And everyone should listen.

It is said that the greatest threat to democracy is absence of criticism. Without criticism we become blind to reality. We fall prey to false confidence and dissociate ourselves from truth. Flattery is a blinder that keeps one away from the reality one needs to know and act upon. As Jonathan Swift said "it is the worst and falsest way of showing our esteem." The sooner our leaders know this the better it is for our country.

Old Habits Die Hard

One of the most outstanding outcomes of the recently concluded India visit by our Prime Minister was the agreement with India to fight terrorism and organized crime. This has been long overdue, and we should be grateful to the Prime Minister that she had agreed with India on an array of agreement that includes extradition of criminals and elements charged with terrorism.

We are all aware of the specter of terrorism that haunted us in the early part of this decade, and Bangladesh was in the brink of becoming of a safe haven for the elements that have wreaked havoc to another country in the subcontinent with which we were yoked four decades before. Close to our country, eastern side of the border, we have elements that not only threaten peace in the neighborhood, but also can potentially bring down our own stability. For years the earlier political government either turned a blind eye to this threat or indulged in the growth of these elements for short term political gains.

In not too distant in the past, we witnessed helplessly as these malignant forces terrorized parts of the country and mowed down many innocent lives. The foreign press was telling us how we were allowing our territory to be used by religious militants' intent on bringing about their version of government by coercion. Yet our government that time chose to turn a deaf ear to these alerts, and continued to claim that we were safe and that these calls were nothing but false alarms. It is only after repeated pressures from our external donors that our government that period made some half hearted moves to contain the extremist elements.

To our great dismay and distress, however, we find again a similar mindset surfacing to oppose the agreement that seeks to prevent the terror threat from rearing its ugly head. The agreement to save the subcontinent from the threat is being attacked along with other mutually beneficial agreement of collaboration between our two countries by the current government's opponents in false pretense of patriotism. A pragmatic, timely, and beneficial agreement is being painted as a sellout and an anti-national accord by the opponents.

To me nothing is more anti-national and more self destructive than pandering of old politics that gives sanctuaries to the armies of death and destruction created by the elements bred by hatred and bigotry. This kind of politics has been responsible in the past for the emergence of groups like *Harakatul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh*, *Jamatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh*, *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* and *Ahl-e-Hadith Andolon Bangladesh who* infused political violence in Bangladesh with the language of *jihad* and tactics borrowed from terrorist groups abroad. It created an enabling environment for the emergence of militant groups by normalizing the use of violence to express political disagreement and promoting a culture of impunity. It gave sanctuaries to the elements who were working across our border to destabilize their own government. This kind of politics thrived on only one slogan—that of a perceived conspiracy hatched across the border with internal agents to destroy our "religion". Mark the word "religion"—because the politics of this kind put religion above the country.

There is opposition for opposition's sake, and there is opposition because of some fundamental differences in belief and ideology. The opponents of this kind articulate their differences in political debates in the established forums such as the Parliament as we can see other established democracies around the world. The most dangerous kind of opposition is of a third kind. It comes from people who indulge in politics of agitation and instigation by fomenting phobias, and raising slogans to stoke people's base instincts of fear and suspicion. The easiest of these instigations—and we have seen it in the past—is rumours of conspiracy against religion.

From Pakistan days we had seen repeatedly efforts by our masters to lay out conspiracy theories to prevent a better understanding with our neighbour and accommodations for mutual benefits. The policy of confrontation based on a publicly fed fear of an invasion by that country of our "religion and culture" allowed our masters to arm and equip a military to its teeth. Any opposition to this policy was muzzled or termed as anti-national. In fact, our first attempt at seeking equality for our language and culture was dubbed as nothing but a compromise of our national sovereignty. Any attempt to befriend the neighbour was viewed as downright anti-national.

Living in peace and harmony with a neighbour is a cardinal aspect of a nation's foreign policy. One of the pre determinants of this concept is to weed out causes of common woe, and the threat of terrorism of late has been a common woe of both our countries. Our political leaders on the other side of the fence would serve the country better if they were to understand the fundamental conditions of survival, and show more pragmatism in their choice of slogans. They should learn that the slogans of xenophobia and threats to our religion, and stoking of fears of invasion from other countries do not show political maturity in an age of globalization and bilateral cooperation for mutual benefits. But old habits die hard!

Bangali Settlement in the Hill Tracts and the Peace Accord

> *"A treaty, in the minds of our people, is an eternal word. Events often make it seem expedient to depart from the pledged word, but we are conscious that the first departure creates a logic for the second departure, until there is nothing left of the word."*
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> **—Declaration of Indian Purpose (1961)**
> **American Indian Chicago Conference**

Sometime in later part of 1979, most probably around October, I was asked by the Chittagong Divisional Commissioner that time to attend a meeting in his confidential chamber at the Commissioner's Residence. Meetings at the Divisional Commissioner's residence were not unusual, and therefore, I never asked what the topic of the meeting was. When I arrived at the bungalow later in the morning I found there was also the Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts. No sooner than I had entered the meeting room, the doors were closed, with only three of us in the room. Without much ado, the Commissioner broke open the subject of the meeting, but with a caution that the matter remain for the moment only within the four walls. The subject, he said, was relocating people affected by erosions in Sandwip and Kutubdia islands of Chittagong district in the Hill Tracts.

The Divisional Commissioner startled me with this information. Erosion of Sandwip and Kutubdia islands (and neighboring Hatiya Island in Noakhali) had been going on for years, with hundreds of people losing their homesteads. The affected people had been moving inland mostly with no government support. We in the district administration had been coping with the affected people's request for help in whatever way we could. It was good to learn that the government was directing its attention to this problem, but relocation of these people in Chittagong Hill Tracts? What about Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulations that govern and restrict non-Hill people settlement in that district?

In answer to my questions the Commissioner simply stated that the government had decided that people of islands who had lost their homestead from erosion would be settled in designated areas of Hill Tracts. The Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts had identified the areas of relocation. I was required to find volunteers from the displaced persons of the islands, who would later be transported by trucks to the designated areas. They would be given cash and housing materials for constructing their new homes in the transported areas.

I found the news not only astounding, but incredible. I could not believe that we were participating in a plan to destroy the very foundation of a regulation that the government had been following, at least officially, for last so many decades.

It was not that there were no Bangali settlements in the Hill Tracts in the decades prior to 1979; but there has never been a massive transplantation of people in the area. The proportion of Bangali population had been increasing steadily, in particular following the 1971 war of liberation. Officially these settlement required permission from the Deputy Commissioner, and with limitation on leases for land holding. But even with these restrictions, the non-Hill population had been rising due to growth in trade with the main land, land grabbing, and often illegal settlement in forest lands at the connivance of government officials.

However, I was very disturbed that we would be shipping loads of non Hill people to the tribal areas and thus officially flout a regulation that had governed the area for such a long period. I was particularly surprised that this plan was being thought of at a time when the government was battling an insurgency in the Hill Tracts that had been going on for last three years mounted by the Shanti Bahini. How could we think of transporting civilians to the mouth of this Vesuvius, and sacrifice their lives, I asked. I was told in answer that the government had already drawn up and agreed upon this plan to counter the insurgency. I was informed that the settlers would provide a base of local support to the law enforcing agencies in counter-insurgency operations.

I told the Divisional Commissioner that I would let him know about our participation in the "Settlement Program" as he put it. A few days later I informed the Commissioner that there were no volunteers from my district for settling in the Hill Tracts, and Chittagong district be kept out of this program. Little did I know that time that it mattered very little whether I agreed with the program or not; it was well on its way to implementation.

The Commissioner said nothing to me about the program after that day; but I knew he was under strict instructions from President Ziaur Rahman to make the program a success. I would learn a month later from the Sub-Divisional Officer of Cox's Bazar

that the Commissioner had personally conducted a meeting of local UP Chairmen of Sandwip and Kutubdia and had asked for a list of volunteers to settle in the Hill Tracts. In similar manner the district authorities in Noakhali and Comilla were also asked to send list of volunteers for settlement. I could not make this an act of defiance any longer; as I knew well I could not stop this politically motivated operation even if I were to leave the government.

Starting from the end of 1979 and through 1980 hundreds of families from the coastal areas of Chittagong and Noakhali, and river erosion affected areas of Chandpur would be transported by trucks to the Hill Tracts. The first settlements would be in areas closer to Chittagong district, and then to the more interior parts of the Hill Tracts. The families were would be housed in make shift camps first, and there after they would be given housing materials and cash. They would be given land for cultivation under the land lease laws. They were located in what became known as cluster villages for security under watchful eyes of the Army and Armed Police Battalion who would camp nearby. (The Armed Police Battalion had been deployed in the Hill Tracts since 1976 in support of the Army to contain the insurgency.)

The whole operation of Bangali Settlement in the cluster villages was conducted under the guidance of the Army. As the commander of the counter insurgency operation in Chittagong Hill Tracts, the GOC of Chittagong (Maj. General Manzoor that time) had a major role in planning and execution of the settlement operation. It is interesting to note that in this operation the Army was following US counter insurgency model in Vietnam. In 1962, the US had developed a system of resettlement and population security that would eventually become known as the Strategic Hamlet Program. In Vietnam, strategic hamlets would consist of villages consolidated and reshaped to create a defensible perimeter. The peasants themselves would be given weapons and trained in self-defense. Moreover, the strategic hamlets would not be isolated; instead, they would function as a network. The hamlets were to be used as an administrative tool to institute reforms and to improve the peasants' lives economically, politically, socially, and culturally.

In their zeal to implement the strategic village concept, and urgency to build some kind of local support base to contain the insurgency, the planners forgot the lessons from Vietnam. In South Vietnam, the government was moving local people from their homes to the outskirts of the village to create a defense perimeter against Viet Cong guerillas. These were movement of local people within their known territory, not transplanting a people from one geographic area to another. Even then the program failed because most people did not like to be moved, and were reluctant to take up arms against their own people. In Chittagong Hill Tracts the settlers were not only unwelcome to the insurgents, but also to the local people. The only friends that they had were the law enforcement authorities; but they could not guard them twenty four hours.

It is a credit to the relocated people, to their courage, and grit but also due to the fact most of them were practically homeless, that they volunteered to be bused to the harsh environment for settlement. They would soon find out that their fate was worse than what they had originally bargained for.

The first attack on a Bangali settlement happened a few months after the settlement in an area not too far from Kaptai. In a brazen nightly attack, the insurgents killed several settlers, burnt the newly built thatched houses, and drove hundreds of men, women and children out of the "strategic village" to Rangunia in Chittagong. As Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong I had the misfortune of witnessing these refugees roaming like people caught in a trauma, and offers them relief. They were again huddled in make shift camps, and again taken back to the Hill Tracts in a separate camp, under police security.

Unfortunately, the "settlement operation" would not be stopped by this or many other insurgent attacks that would follow in other parts of the Hill Tracts on "cluster villages". The Shanti Bahini militants would easily garner support for their insurgency among the locals, because the entire program of "forced settlement" was an anathema to the Hill people. As retribution the army and the Armed Police Battalion would undertake combing operation in the surrounding villages further alienating the local population and baiting the insurgents in yet bolder acts. These acts of insurgency and counter-insurgency would dog the Hills for full two decades.

I thought we had come to some respite to these battles of retribution between Hill and non-Hill people after the Hill Tracts Peace Accord that protracted more than a decade. I thought that our political leaders in power a decade ago and were opposed to this accord would finally come to realize the value of preserving and promoting amity between the majority population and our ethnic minorities. To my sadness, however, I find that in the name of national solidarity and sovereignty these so-called leaders are again bent on fomenting suspicion and sowing seeds of division in the Hill Tracts. Instead of allaying fears of subjugation, destruction of culture, and forced assimilation of the minorities, they are encouraging reappearance of the same ideological forces that led to our predicament in the Hill Tracts.

Bangladesh has a tiny land mass for an overwhelmingly large population. I can realize why there would be a mad rush for open space in every direction. But in doing so we have also to learn and educate our people in respecting rights of others to life, property, and culture of their own. Respect for rights and liberties of other human beings are an integral part of nationhood. The sooner our leaders inculcate these feelings and impart these trainings to their followers the better is the prospect of peace for all who live and occupy our motherland.

The Curious Case of Rohingya Refugees

Typically we in Bangladesh are used to seeing our people migrate to other countries in search of work, a better living, or simply to escape harsh economic conditions. We are used to emigration from our country, and not immigration. That perception was changed abruptly when we faced a large scale influx of people in our eastern border, from the state of Arakan—a large swath of land in Burma, now Myanmar, in April 1978.

I had joined Chittagong (greater Chittagong that included Cox's Bazar) as Deputy Commissioner toward the end of March 1978. As I was getting to know my new district I was suddenly sucked into this maelstrom in the south eastern corner. From the middle of April a seemingly unending flow of people started to cross into that region through Ukhiya-Teknaf border with Burma. In no time the influx that started with a few hundred swelled into several thousand. The fleeing families complained of evictions from their homes in the Arakan by the military, loot, rape and murder. Our border guards could not turn families with women and small children away. So the tide began with thousands spilling into the country with their belongings—clothes, utensils, and domestic animals.

We neither had the means nor the logistics to handle such a massive flow of people from across the border. What we did however was to stop the human traffic going deeper into the district. The police and the border guards restricted their movement further into the district, but we had to make some impromptu shelters with materials that were locally available—largely tarpaulins. This was augmented with some relief materials available in the district warehouses. However, soon it became apparent to us that with the never ending tide of human crossings our local efforts would be mere drops of water in a sea. The central authorities were notified, and in a matter of weeks, the whole incident became a scene of human misery on a grand scale that would need international support.

We would end up finally with over two hundred thousand of the refugees in that influx that we were able to contain in thirteen camps—spread along much of the 117 mile

long land border with Burma (Myanmar). Relief came from international organizations as well as foreign NGOs. The government amassed an army of civil servants and law enforcing agents to administer relief and security of the refugees. Along with that the government also mounted parallel efforts to repatriate the refugees back to their homes in the Arakan. This involved opening dialogue with the Burmese authorities, and engaging with them patiently for a solution of the problems.

The root of the problem in repatriation of the refugees was their identity. Who were the Rohingyas? Although Muslims have lived in the Arakan province of Burma since the 13th century with the arrivals of Arab traders in the Arakan/Bengal coast, the Rohingyas were relatively recent settlers. They were ethnically Bengalis from Chittagong region who had migrated to the Arakan over many decades in search of work, and had settled there. They were different from the Arakanese in that they were Muslim, spoke Chittagonian dialect (with some variation), and followed the culture of the land they had migrated from. The local Arakanese, who are called Rakhines (ethnically Moghs), and Buddhist by religion, used the migrants as farm workers, and over time allowed them to settle in groups in the villages. More recent migrants maintained links with their extended families in Cox's Bazar region and frequently traveled between two territories. The Burmese treated the Rohingya people differently terming them as foreigners and sometimes as illegal immigrants.

The crisis of 1978 began when the Burmese government undertook a major campaign against the Rakhine opposition groups, particularly the Arakan Communist Party, the Arakan Independence Organization and the Arakan National Liberation Front, as well as the Rohingya guerrillas, then referred to as the mujahidin. This was followed by a major military operation in Arakan called "King Dragon." People in small villages were uprooted and concentrated in fenced stockades. The result was that we had over two hundred thousand of the so called Rohingyas in our hands, and we had no way to settle them in our already overpopulated lands.

In dealing with the crisis, we focused on three aspects: (a) confining the refugees in designated camps and keeping them under strict security to prevent their melting away into the neighboring villages; (b) ensuring food, shelter, and medicine in the camps enough for survival; and (c) arranging the repatriation of the refugees with the Burmese authorities without internationalizing the issue. But these were not easy tasks.

The Burmese initially denied any responsibility for the refugees as in their eyes they were illegal immigrants into Arakan and therefore, could not be taken back. We in Bangladesh on the other hand insisted that the refugees were Burmese citizens from Arakan state who had been forcibly thrown out. The Burmese first balked at any whole sale repatriation insisting on taking only "genuine" citizens back. But with hardly any

documentation with any of the refugees except "ration cards" the Burmese realized it would be difficult for them to separate the "legal" from the "illegal". The situation was further complicated with ongoing strife of the authorities with other insurgents in other parts of Burma.

With some astute diplomacy, and umpteen numbers of meetings between the two governments with officials at different levels spread over several months, we agreed on a repatriation schedule in July 1978. But implementation of the agreement was made difficult, not by the Burmese, but by the Refugees by raising fears of renewed persecution once repatriated. This was further exacerbated by the activists of the so-called Rohingya Liberation Front and similar Guerilla outfits who insisted that the Refugees not be repatriated until the land was secure from their perspective. (These entities had been fighting for a Rohingya Land in the Arakan with financial support from some foreign elements.) The United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which had become involved in the relief operation, also stipulated that there be no involuntary repatriation.

However, despite these obstacles and resistances, we were able to begin the repatriation early 1979. I myself escorted the first batch of refugees across Gundum border to Burma after foiling an attempt by some refugees to stop the repatriation. This first success opened up the road for an uninterrupted repatriation for the rest of the refugees. By mid-1979, well over half of the refugees had returned to Burma and by the end of the year, nearly all had gone back.

Unfortunately, the tide would turn again a decade later, and we were back to square one. We would again have an influx of over 250,000 Rohingyas crowding our borders along Cox's Bazar—Teknaf corridor citing the same complaints of forced labor, land confiscation, religious intolerance, rape, and other forms of persecution by the Myanmar military regime. The difference between the crisis of 1991 and the one ten years before was that we were able to solve our 1978 problem tactfully within a year, but we are still struggling with the subsequent adversity even to this day. Officially we have been able to repatriate to Myanmar nearly 200,000 over last several years, but we still have a large number staying back as unregistered refugees some in camps, but majority in squatter camps in the border villages. Why, because they refuge to be repatriated. They refuge to back expressing apprehension of persecution in the land they left behind. But this is only for the registered refugees who are only a small percent of the whole. The uncounted thousands are difficult to identify, and they will not leave.

How do we deal with this problem? We can neither absorb this surplus population in our crowded land, nor we can get rid of them, at least so it seems. On the one hand Bangladesh has acceded to several of the existing international rights Covenants and

Conventions, and we have provisions within our Constitution that uphold the rights and duties within the UN Charter and further safeguard the legal protection of non-citizens within our territory. As a result we recognize a body of international law which provides the framework for protecting refugees. We cannot therefore forcibly repatriate any refugee to a land where they apprehend persecution of any kind. On the other hand we have the terrible reality of overcrowding our already crumbling infrastructure and physical facilities to take care of this burgeoning Rohingya population. We have done what we could in official repatriation of some of them, but they keep on coming back. Since the refugees are ethnically and linguistically similar to the local population it is difficult to identify them as foreigners unless they are pointed out by the locals.

We have few options, but what I do know we have to stop this unending saga of Rohingya migration in our eastern border. We have to realize that there are elements across the border who would like to keep the issue alive for their own goals of having a separate land for their kind. Neither economically nor diplomatically are we in a position to support such "goals" of people however lofty they may be without jeopardizing our existence. This should start with closing any remaining official camp, and securing the borders to stop any further migration. This should be followed by registering the other refugees in squatter camps and villages, with help of local Unions. We also need a close watch on some religion based non government organizations that have sprouted in the area who lend their support to the Rohingya activists, and provide incentives to the Rohingyas for migration. If necessary, these organizations need to be banned from operating in the area if found engaging in such activities. We need also to keep on engaging in continuous dialogue with the Burmese authorities to prevent recurrence of happenings that force the Rohingyas to emigrate. I cannot vouch that these will actually solve all our problems in the eastern border, but at least these are worth considering since the Rohingya problem is a ticking time bomb.

Part III

The Looming Threat Of Religious Extremism

Sowing Wild Oats of Religious Militancy

Almost every week these days we find in the news reports of arrests made by police of elements that are associated with religious militancy. Some of them have been in the wanted list for having direct connections to acts of assassination or other destruction, some for suspicion of connection with militant organizations and bodies. This should not surprise us as for long we had nurtured these elements, even coddled them for short term political gains. I say short term with some hesitation, as I am not fully convinced that among some of the political patrons of there are elements who do not indulge long term goals of establishing an alternative system of governance in the country. Nevertheless, we should be thankful that there is now a genuine effort in containing the radical forces that were set loose in an earlier period.

What should concern us, however, is the presence of a mindset among our political leaders that could be opposed to building a society that is free from religious bigotry, intolerance of religious and political differences, and violent imposition of religious doctrines. History is a witness that profession of this school of thought had led to acrimonious debates within the community, and ultimately to civil wars.

Within a few years of our hard fought independence we saw a premature demise of the ideals of secularism, and dream of a pluralistic society built on the beliefs and cultures of multiple faiths. We had witnessed contemptible attempts to denigrate our nationhood based on our language and culture, in favor of religious identity alone that was mightily unsuccessful in keeping us wedded to a geographically dispersed entity before.

Unfortunately, these malignant forces, contrary to the values for which we fought, did not take birth in a vacuum. They have been always present with both internal and external help.

Internally these forces have been sustained by elements that had always aligned themselves to a political ideology based on religion alone. These elements were dormant in the initial years of our independence, but were stoked back into life after the founder of our nation was cruelly struck down. People who date back to the early

seventies will remember that among the first to embrace General Ziaur Rahman as the savior of the country were the leaders of the Madrassa Board and other religious organizations that were practically defunct immediately after the independence.

Externally, the forces have been aided and abetted by the proselytizers of a political philosophy that seeks a forced imposition of religious dogma on our life and politics. A principal way to propagate this ideology has been through financing of institutions for religious education, and religious charities. The prime example being the exponential growth in private madrassas in the country in last two decades, and the upsurge in religious charities (NGOs) that have little audit of the sources of their funds. In the case of Bangladesh, however, one of the ways the seeds of external encroachment to guide and assist the radical forces were sown from across our eastern border.

I believe the foot in the door for the global network to proselytize the radical version of religion was made possible in our country by the first influx of the Rohingya Muslims from Arakans in Burma (now Myanmar) to Bangladesh in 1978. As Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong that period I was on the receiving end of the influx and had toiled over months with my colleagues to provide food and shelter to hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children. In the first week of this exodus about ten to twenty thousand refugees arrived all of whom were accommodated with local help in schools, cyclone shelters, and make shift tents. However, as time passed and more and more shelters were established along the Burma border after international agencies got in to help the number of refugees swelled to around two hundred thousand.

Our initial thinking, when the first wave of refugees arrived in the borders in tattered clothes, was that they were victims of a brutal ethnic cleansing effort launched by a junta. The refugees claimed that they were driven out of their villages by marauding Burmese army intent upon killing all "Muslims". I had no idea until that time Arakans had a substantial Muslim population. However, the stories given out by the refugees were not consistent. While a good number stated that they were hounded by the army for their religion, some others stated it was because of their ethnicity. The only consistent story was that that they had left behind their hearth and homes out of some fear. The ethnicity part appeared more credible to me as the refugees were of Bengali origin, a large number of who had actually migrated to Burma only a generation before. Moreover, the claims by the Burmese authority that period were that these refugees were mostly illegal, and the effort of the government was only directed against the illegal citizens only.

In the midst of these conflicting stories about the reasons for the mass exodus of the Arakan Muslims I received some astounding information from a traveling journalist of the Far Eastern Economic Review (now defunct) on these events. The journalist,

a British reporter, was visiting the area like many other international journalists who came to witness and report on the mass migration. While interviewing me, the journalist stated that the he had visited the Burmese side before coming to Chittagong where he had interviewed the main leaders of the Rohingya "guerillas". I was struck to no end by hearing the word "guerillas" as I had assumed like many others, both within and outside our country, that the refugees were hapless victims of a brutal ethnic cleansing. I was to further learn first time about Rohingya Land for Muslims in the Arakan state that the guerillas stood for. He further informed me that although many refugees had fled Arakan to escape the immigration check by the Burmese authorities (called Operation Nagamin), a large number had been persuaded to leave by the Rohingya Liberation Front (aka Rohingya Solidarity Organization), the main guerilla organization that time. I found the information so alarming, but useful at the same time, that I alerted our government to this additional dimension to our mounting refugee problem.

The new information notwithstanding, we could not stop the wave of refugees crossing daily our eastern border, and we could not help but continue to shelter them. Our law enforcing authorities had no way to verify who among these refugees were actual guerillas as none carried any weapons, at least openly. The involvement of UNHCR and other international aid agencies also made it difficult for us to discriminate based on suspicions of affiliation of any of the refugees with any armed guerilla group. Our government's intention that time was not escalate the problem to international level, but to repatriate the refugees negotiating with Burma, in which we succeeded.

With the number of refugees growing every day the government allowed more and more foreign organizations to come forward with assistance, including Rabita al-Alam al-Islami, a religious charity based in Saudi Arabia. The nexus of the Rohingya guerillas with our own radical elements first came to my attention when the Sub divisional Officer of Cox's Bazar stated that he had received an application for lease of government land in Ukhiya (a Thana bordering Burma where the majority of the refugees were camped). The lease requested was for establishment of a mosque and hospital with financing from Rabita al Alam al Islami. Since the charity organization was foreign, the application for lease was made by a local resident. Normally this would not pose a problem since the sponsor was a known International Charity Organization. But the problem was the applicant who according our records who had been an active member of the student wing of Jamat-e-Islami, which that time was a banned organization. The applicant was prosecuted under the Collaborator Ordinance, but unfortunately the case was dropped along with others when the general amnesty was proclaimed by Bangabandhu. Nonetheless I had no hesitation to ask the SDO to reject the application knowing about the applicant's identity. I knew also well that there would be consequences to this decision.

There were consequences. The applicant had friends in higher places, particularly in the Ministry of Home Affairs that period, who asked the SDO the reasons for denial. The ball finally rolled to my court, and I had to defend our decision citing serious local opposition to the applicant who was still remembered in the area for his criminal role during the war of liberation. I believe the matter went up to President Zia who for reasons best known to him did not want to pursue the case of the collaborator, at least till he was alive. I say till he was alive because shortly after the takeover of the government by General Ershad, permission was given to the same person and his allies to establish the Hospital and Religious Center in Ukhiya under Rabita banner. A center was established right across our border that would provide relief and support to a militant organization that was fighting an ongoing battle with their own government.

Unfortunately it would take us more than a decade to realize to our peril that in the wake of showing our hospitality to the Rohingya refugees we had also invited a group of militants who would be allies to radical extremists in our country. Reportedly, the Rohingya movement not only fed arms to our militants but provided a fertile ground of recruitment of religious militants world wide as far as Afghanistan and Bosnia.

If last several years experiences are any lesson we should do well to follow the trails of destruction and hound out all elements, past, present, and future to weed out the threat of militancy that our country had been exposed to. There have been some laudable actions in the last two years. The most salient features of these had been arrest, prosecution, and meting out of exemplary punishment to some of these radical elements. But the looming fear is that with the continued mind set in some of our political leaders to gain support from these elements for political power we may fall back to these hands and expose our society, and country at large to possible anarchy.

My fear is because we have yet to identify and unearth the real forces that were behind the arms smuggling of Chittagong because of the unseen political hands that prop the radical elements. My fear of the resurgence of the radical forces grows when I still see that some of our political leaders are out to muddy the prosecution of the war criminals on pretext of political opposition to the party in power. All I can hope is that our leaders rise above their narrow goal of short term political alliance with a force that we all know does not believe in a pluralistic society or liberal democracy, ideals that we want our nation to be built upon.

Tackling Religious Militancy

The Government of Pakistan has recently (2005) come down with a heavy hand on several of the country's religious organizations on charges of breeding terrorism in the name of religion. The offices and several hundred educational institutions or Madrassas, run by these organizations have been sealed, banned and the organization themselves outlawed. The Pakistani agency in charge of the operation claimed that the organizations were extremist outfits; in the name of religious education the seminaries run by them were busy producing militants. It is ironic that a decade ago a different government agency of the same country was itself helping some of these organizations to produce the very elements that the government is now trying to snuff. But that is a different story. Important thing is that the government of Pakistan has awakened to combat the breeding grounds of religious militancy and the threat it poses to the country's political stability.

Not too long ago in Bangladesh police had discovered explosives and other items unconnected to "religion" in several Madrassas in the country. I have also seen news reports very recently associating Madrassas run by some religious organizations with training of militants. I am not aware if these reports are getting the attention of the quarters that need to be mindful of these activities, and be wary of their consequences to the government, and the country at large—not to speak of the international repercussions. It is also possible that we are still at denial and are continuing to delude ourselves that a "moderate" country such as ours does not have any extremist groups among us. May be we do not want to find out if there is a tumor in our body politic for fear that it will tarnish our image of good health; for fear of the surgery that we may need to remove the tumor.

Pakistan's government has gone out on a limb, politically that is, to tackle its international reputation of allowing religious militancy fomented by its religious schools. It is everyone's knowledge that majority of the redoubtable Taliban leadership was trained and educated in the seminaries of Pakistan frontiers. Critics may argue that the counter measures taken by Pakistan now to control this militancy result from foreign pressure. But this argument ignores the fact that a government of a predominantly

Muslim country could not have taken such bold measures to ban and outlaw religious organizations unless they were seen as pernicious not only by the government, but also by the silent majority. May be these actions should have come sooner; but at least the government is now acting.

I do not know if actions would be taken in our country to identify and isolate religious organizations that subscribe to the principles of the types in Pakistan. The sole objectives of these institutions are to enlist and train impressionable youths for religious militancy with a long-term view of destabilizing the country and ushering in government of their choice—one run by religious bigots that we saw in Afghanistan. If we think that we are nowhere near Pakistan was or is now, we may need to rethink the potentiality.

Madrassas in Pakistan accounted for about 10% of the school going population in 2002. In the same year the Bangladesh religious system represented approximately 15% of the total school going population (primary through higher secondary). While the student statistics by themselves may not indicate that we in Bangladesh are a notch higher than Pakistan in religious zealotry, we cannot ignore the potentiality of misuse of this vast youth population when trained in the wrong institutions.

Thanks to the Taliban and the western press reports that followed their ascendancy and fall later, Madrassas in the western eye came to be associated with training in militancy. No one has ever gone back in history to say that original Madrassas were set up in the Abbasid period (Golden Age of Islam) for pursuit of rational sciences, and that *Ijtihad* or independent reasoning was a special feature of these institutions. With demise of Muslim ascendancy in science and literature, and rise of orthodox Islam the road of *Ijtihad* was closed. The radical trends gave birth to religious schools founded on teachings exclusively focused on Koranic teachings. In the subcontinent, the impact was even worse. The Madrassa system here took upon itself opposing the western culture and education imposed by the British. The British tried and imposed some changes in the curricula through government sponsored Madrassas; but the vast majority of the seminaries were guided by the syllabus created in the seminary at Deoband, India, an institution started in 1867 that continues to influence most Madrassas in the subcontinent even today.

The obscurantist syllabus promoted by Deoband made Koran and Hadith the focal points of learning, with emphasis on proper understanding of the tenets of Islam including Shariah laws. Majority of the private Madrassas in Pakistan and Bangladesh today follow the Deoband syllabus (in Bangladesh these institutions are called Quomi Madrassas). Modern sciences are not taught. The preferred languages are Arabic, Persian and Urdu. In addition, many of these Madrassas teach Islamic behavior as opposed to modernity as the only accepted form of conduct for a Muslim. This finally

led to indoctrination of the students, particularly in Pakistan, against western culture, and western domination.

The founder of the Deoband School (Maulana Thanvi) scrupulously avoided associating politics with his religious movement, which he started for spreading proper knowledge of the tenets of Islam. Ironically, however, some 130 years later many of the schools inspired by Deoband would not only indulge in politics, but also train a cadre of Mujahedeen who would be called upon to wage war or 'Jihad' against the 'infidels'. Culmination of this training would be creation of the Taliban who would take over Afghanistan.

According to analysts the main reason why there was enormous growth of religious schools or Madrassas in Pakistan was the failure of the government to provide enough secular schools to accommodate a fast growing population. Madrassas filled in where the secular system failed. They even became more attractive with their relatively less formal structure, easier access, and cost-free education. Their call to serve the cause of religion would make inroads into the heart and minds of rural millions. There is no need for further analysis to draw a parallel of the Pakistan experience to Bangladesh. Situations are similar, and the lot of the village population in two countries is fairly close. What is different, however, is the will to recognize the potentiality of exploitation of these institutions by politically motivated organizations for lethal purposes. In Pakistan, they have recognized it.

Most Madrassas in Bangladesh are perhaps way removed from becoming launching pads of religious militants. But Pakistan experience presents a unique example of how things can go wrong if the religious education system is not monitored properly. There have to be effective ways to regulate flow of funds, monitor syllabus, and to control spread of hatred and deleterious politics from these institutions. To prevent Pakistan experience, several actions are needed. One, recognition at all levels, particularly at the top, that an unmonitored and unregulated religious education system has the potential of breeding radicals. Two, institutions and organizations that promote terrorism or militancy need to be identified, and isolated. Three, strong deterrent measures need to be taken against any sign of militancy or bigotry in the name of religion. It is never too late to take actions.

The Roar of the Radicals

The disturbing happenings in Baitul Mukarram Masjid square of April 11 (2008) are a stark reminder to all of us that the specter of religious extremism continues to hang over our head like the proverbial sword of Damocles. It is a serious threat to our social fabric unless we deal with it firmly now. Thanks to wide media coverage, a worldwide audience watched with awe video footages of hirsute young men in white robes chasing police armed with sticks, and hurling missiles of bricks and stones that were presumably stored near the mosque. Few people who watched this encounter from abroad had any knowledge what led these people to such violent encounter; but they saw with their own eyes who they were, and that they were challenging armed law enforcers to a show of strength.

This may sound a bit over dramatic, but to underscore a point I must say that to some of us the incident at Baitul Mukarram brought back uncomfortable flashes of the Lal Masjid incidents of Pakistan last year. True, the Lal Masjid had ultimately turned into a war zone with disastrous and murderous consequences. But we must remember that the forces that had challenged the law enforcing agencies of Pakistan from that center originally started their crusade against the authorities with sticks and stones, and ended up with machine guns. And we must also remember that like the Baitul Mukarram mosque, the Lal Masjid was also a government owned religious institution.

To explain away the April 11 incident as another instance of bigotry by a small group of fanatics is a cop out. This was not an impulsive act by a group of people misled by any propaganda that hurt their religious feelings. This was not a spur of the moment protest against any political rhetoric. This was a planned incident orchestrated by people who want to impose their interpretation of religion on others, and along with it their political ideology.

I say this because there has been a pattern of behavior of a section in our country in last few weeks over a putative legislation concerning women's property rights. This started with noise by this section that it was beyond the government's legal power (*ultra vires*) to have a policy that allows equal rights to women since it would go against religion.

The noise was followed by public utterances and protests by some people following that line of thought that such actions would violate religious dictates on the subject. No one cared to explain how a policy espousing equality of human rights, men and women, would militate against our religion. These utterances went unchallenged since we, the educated majority have delegated the responsibility of interpreting religion to the clerics. The culmination of this silence was the April 11 incident.

Our worries and concerns would have been minimal, had the efforts of this school of thought been limited to interpretation of religion only for religious purposes. Unfortunately, these clerics, products of largely unchecked religious institutions, not only act as guardians of the religion, but they now want to ensure that our legislative agenda also carry their seal of approval.

To me the implications of this incident are far wider than the protest over an issue of legislation that may have "religious" connotation to a group of people. Although in minority, this school of thought is rarely challenged as most of us tend to shy away from topics that touch religion. Our political leaders in the past either avoided these issues, or embraced the proponents of this line of thought as political partners for short term gains. Our reluctance to deal with topics of religious sensitivity through public debates, and often coddling of some leaders of this radical line of thinking have made this section of people take lead on these issues and insinuate themselves in formulation of public policies in the name of religion.

The Lal Masjid happenings of Pakistan taught us that religious militancy can grow at one's door step when state power nurtures radical elements either through negligence or for short term political gains. It has shown how radicals can proliferate at state expense when young minds are tutored and trained to implement radical ideologies with wrong interpretation of religion.

There are two parts to tackling any looming threat of religious extremism. One is treating it as another law and order concern; and the other is treating it as a potential threat to our goal to establish a pluralistic and democratic society. A law and order concern is addressed when the law breakers are contained and order restored. But a potential threat by religious radicals cannot be stopped by simply police actions. This needs first a full awareness of the potential threat, an acknowledgment by all that it exists, and engagement of all righteous sections of our society in opposing such ideas and ideology

Coddling Religious Extremists for Political Gains

The headlines hitting the news media recently in Pakistan and elsewhere put a hitherto unknown Lal Masjid—a mosque and seminary in Islamabad and its denizens in the world map (July 2007). The horrific incidents surrounding the mosque and the resulting mayhem were an object lesson how things can go awry with disastrous results when government coddles religious elements and religious institutions either for political reasons, or for fear of public backlash.

The Lal Masjid is a seminary that provides religious education based on Deobond curriculum to about 7,000 students studying in the male and female sections. The mosque constructed and funded by the Pakistan government was originally the main mosque in Islamabad patronized by government officials including top army brass. Its central location placed it within close proximity of various government offices, the ISI among them. A senior government official originally served as the Imam of the mosque. But that was Pakistan before the incursion of religious extremism into Pakistan politics led by General Ziaul Huq.

With General Ziaul Huq leading the country in the heady days of US assisted fight against the Russians in Afghanistan, the Lal Masjid turned into a madrassa, training students who would be cannon fodders for the holy war. This happened during the time when Abdullah, the father of the current Lal Masjid imam Abdul Aziz, was the Mosque prayer leader. General Ziaul Huq was reportedly a great admirer of Abdullah who was known for his fiery "jihadi" speeches.

Abdul Aziz succeeded his father as the Imam of Lal Masjid after the demise of Abdullah in a sectarian strife in 1990 or thereabout. Trained in a renowned madrassa in Karachi, and having worked closely with the Afghan mujhaddins that his father's madrassa had trained both Abdul Aziz and his brother Abdur Rashid became firebrand radicals who would later use the Lal Musjid to train young minds in their school of thought.

However, the clash with government would not occur until much later. Abdul Aziz, his brother, and his wife would carry on their agenda under the very nose of ISI.

The first brush with the government occurred in 2005 when Abdul Aziz issued a fatwa against the army officers who were fighting against Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas close to the Afghan border. For this reason he was dismissed from his mosque position by the government, but he refused to vacate the mosque. With his baton wielding acolytes (men and women) in the madrassa he turned the mosque and the adjoining seminary into a fortress daring any law enforcing agency to oust him. The government relented.

Next came protests by the madrassa students against the government campaign to demolish illegally constructed mosques in Islamabad. They followed these protests along with their teachers threatening the owners of video and music shops in Islamabad to close down their business or face dire consequences. The female students of the seminary assisted by the male students raided an alleged brothel house, kidnapped three women from there and held them hostage for three days before releasing them after securing confessional statements saying that there were involved in "immoral activities". All this happened under the watchful eyes of Pakistani and international media.

The most egregious of the unlawful activities was, however, when the students and their teachers abducted three policemen when they went about their duties in search of students who were breaking law. This time also the government relented. Instead of carrying out any massive attack the police negotiated the release of the three policemen. Another victory for the radicals and their leader.

It took several months for the Pakistan Government to realize that it was time to take the bull by the horn. The demon it was nurturing close to its core was giving birth to hundreds of radicals who were being shipped to fight its army and botch its war on terrorism from within. Ironically, it was fighting the very elements that were born out of direct government subsidy, and later of sheer neglect. At the time of this writing, the siege of the mosque is still on with uncertain outcome. Still, the action taken now is far better than later when the radicals bred by the seminary would have spread much wider preaching and practicing their violence all over the country to implement their goals.

Is there a lesson to be learnt from all this? Use of religion for short term political gains is not unknown –at least that we know from the history of Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the 60s Ayub Khan gathered the support of the ulema for his regime. General Ziaul Huq not only indulged in the religious elements, but considered himself as the new messiah. Pakistan is still reaping the harvest of the seeds that he had sown. In

Bangladesh, in the early seventies General Zia was blessed in a national gathering of the Mudarreseen (Association of Madrassa teachers). Later, we saw the repetition of the blessing by the dictatorship of General Ershad of the same elements.

Ironically where the military leaders had stopped short of embracing the religious elements as their political partners, the political leaders who followed the military dictators sought them as allies to spurn their opponents. This dangerous gambit of political opportunism supported later the growth of the kind of religious extremism that we would see later with shock and disbelief. We came out this time with a low price for this political shenanigan, but we may not be so lucky the next time around.

Our political party leaders often speak of conspiracies against our democracy. Few of them seem to realize that these conspiracies do not come from without, but from within the party. These come from their inability to recognize that forces that seek to usurp state power with violent means and work silently with connivance of allies that they set up in powerful quarters. We need be watchful that Lal Masjid experience does not repeat in Bangladesh.

Compromises of Disaster

In July 2007 the Pakistan Army engaged in a war that aimed to cleanse Swat valley in the country's north-west of the religious extremists who had laid claim to one of the most picturesque areas of the world for the better part of previous two years. The place, as it appeared from hundreds of pictures published in various media, had been rendered into a horrendous battle scene with battered homes, and other devastations all around. Thousands of innocent civilians were forced to flee the battlegrounds for uncertain destinations beyond their picturesque valley, while the army tries to ferret out the militants and their ferocious leaders from the mountainous areas.

In a final attempt to maim and decimate the Swat militants, the Pakistan Government announced a bounty of fifty millions rupees ($600,000) on the head of its most fearsome leader, Maulana Fazlullah. This was the man who was notorious for his sermons that denounced Pakistan Government as un—Islamic and called for establishing his version of Sharia in the valley. This was the leader whose disciples flogged a young girl in open public view for alleged behavior unbecoming a Muslim woman. This was the cleric who condemned music as evil, and asked his followers to burn shops that sold TVs, CDs, and computers since these were "major sources of sin". Yet, this was the man with whom the Government of Pakistan negotiated and compromised with only a few months earlier to cede the place to Sharia court at his behest. The compromise with one of the most iconic leaders of religious extremism was yet another example of fecklessness that had characterized the government of Pakistan's response to religious extremism that had been overtaking that part of the country for past several years.

Our attention was riveted on Pakistan as it launched its efforts to uproot the religious extremists from Swat, and rid the area of its fearsome warlord and his disciples who had led to such horrendous events in that area. (Ultimately it succeeded in getting the upper hand over the militants, but at a great cost of lives and property.)

Unfortunately, however, Maulana Fazlullah was but one of the many such diabolical clerics who had grown and was tolerated in those parts in last several years either because of government apathy or coddling for short term political gains. Maulana

Abdul Aziz, the firebrand cleric of Lal Masjid of Islamabad, whose actions finally led to a bloody mayhem in and around that mosque two years back, is another product of political compromise. This bigoted cleric had converted his mosque into a seminary of "holy warriors" or "jehadis", all within a square mile of the highest seat of government power in Pakistan, had preached his violent sermons in the presence of high government officials, civil and military, and the government had turned the other way. It was not until his disciples actually launched an attack against the police and the army that government took upon him, like the actions against Maulana Fazlullah that the government of Pakistan is taking now. That action too was too late, with disastrous consequences.

Many in Bangladesh thought for years that we were immune from the poison that was slowly numbing Pakistan, as if our physical distance from that country worked as a firewall. We dismissed even a suggestion of the proclivity of some of our own citizens to tend the way of Pakistan clerics, even though the signs became too apparent to ignore such suggestion. This was the mindset of our political leaders few years ago, until the phenomenon of "Bangla Bhai" would demonstrate to us that in the tryst with religious extremism he was no less a formidable figure than his Pakistan counterparts. Again, the final grappling with this nemesis of ours, albeit transient, would not happen until much damage had been done to life and property. This needless loss could have been avoided if our political leadership that time had not sought to use this force, however locally, to settle political scores. Rise of elements like Bangla Bhai and his ilk was possible because our leadership chose the path of compromise, political expediency, and use of means fair and foul to retain political control.

Fortunately there seems to be a tide of events that is opening our eyes to the dangers of coddling religious extremists and the consequences of giving indulgence to such fanaticism for short term gains. In Pakistan this had been possible as military dictators found support for their hold on to power from these radical elements. The leadership used them, and in return for their support gave them a long leash, which unfortunately later proved to be their undoing.

Ironically in Bangladesh the radical elements grew and survived when a democratically elected government ruled the roost in early part of this decade. They were the by-products of an alliance of political convenience the main goal of which was to countenance the country's progress in establishing a moderate, religiously tolerant, democratic country. They flourished because they were not challenged, or as we would recall their existence was even denied by some leaders that time. It would take several killings, and of course much external pressure on our leaders that time to arrest the growth of these elements. And actually we do not know if justice would have come at all to wind up some of these elements, including Bangla Bhai, had there not been a new government.

We are exposed daily now to new revelations from the national press about the shenanigans that was in play in the infamous arms smuggling in Chittagong in 2004. These incidents are reminders how deep a nexus of radicals can work, and the level of danger that a nation could be dragged to when the political leadership looks the other way. The point of raising these incendiary issues is really to bring home the need for realization for our political leaders that a line has to be drawn in all polities that separates democracy from bigotry, hatred and violence from free speech, and love for humanity from obsession with religion. We hope we call can remember these.

Stemming the Tide of Radical Backlash—An Unrelenting Battle

The ominous incidents of this week (April 2011) where the radical forces again showed their muscle to protest the government's National Women's Development Policy once again remind us the nascent strength of these forces. The incidents also bring into stark focus the vulnerability of our democratic ideals against these forces. Three years ago we had a similar show-down by the same forces when the then care taker government had contemplated implementation of the same policy, but had backed down. Those of us who may think that the radical forces have taken a back seat with the resurgence of a democratically elected government should stop deluding ourselves. The radical forces are there, and will continue to grow unless we take measures to plug the wellspring of religious radicalism, and tackle the elements who nurture this well.

In analyzing the rise of radicalism in Pakistan and the alarming spread of violence in the name of religion few years back, a writer in a Pakistan journal commented how these were aided and abetted by the proliferation of religious seminaries in that country and the type of education these institutions imparted. From a few thousand when Ziaul Huq seized power in 1977 the writer estimated these seminaries grew to over 25,000 in less than ten years. He viewed these religious seminaries as the spawning ground for the foot soldiers of jihad.

The reasons were straightforward, the writer argued. Here, thousands of young children are taught little but rote learning of the scriptures. People unqualified to teach had assumed the responsibility of indoctrinating young minds. And while governments after Ziaul Huq (particularly Pervez Musharraf) vowed to reform this sprawling, unregulated system, they failed because words of the leaders did not match action. On the one hand they castigated the radical elements as fomenters of extremism and religious intolerance, but on the other hand they did nothing to stem the tide of growth in the seminaries. These institutions thrived with financial support both from inside and outside the country. There was no mechanism in place to regulate either the curriculum or financial flows to the institutions. The institutions thrived also because

they offered free education to the rural masses subsidized by foreign donations (from the Middle East) because the donors thought their philanthropy was paying to educate poor young Pakistanis.

How do we compare with Pakistan in terms of growth in religious seminaries in Bangladesh? We have two main lines of religious schools in Bangladesh, Aliya Madrassas and Quomi Madrassas, providing primary and secondary levels of education. Outside these two main lines are two types of institutions — Maktabs (Nourani Madrassas), and Hafezia/Forqania Madrassas that provide basic Koran reading skills. While the Aliya Madrassas are government regulated and their number is known, there are no official figures either on the Quomi Madrassas or the other institutions since they operate entirely in the private domain. Absent any government statistics on the number and student population of the private madrassas in Bangladesh, the only number that I have is from a recent World Bank report on Madrassa Education (2009) where existence of about 48,000 non-regulated Madrassas in Bangladesh is estimated. Now, this is a huge number by any measure when we consider that there are a little more than 78,000 primary schools in Bangladesh (UNICEF statistics). According to a latest estimate non-government Madrassas had grown to nearly 40,000 by 2008 in Pakistan; but we beat that number. According to some report, Bangladesh ranks second to Indonesia in the number of religious seminaries.

We cannot wipe away the reality that private religious seminaries (Madrassas) have come to occupy an important role in the education of our masses. They have filled gaps that our government provided educational institutions could not cover. At the same time we also cannot wipe away the perception of religious extremism that has come to be associated with such institutions. The images of threat and violence last week as well as those from three years ago flashed through the media only enhance this perception. These are forebodings of more acts of intolerance and violence in the name of religion unless the tide is stemmed now.

This requires a well thought out plan to arrest the runaway growth in private seminaries by requiring registration; monitoring of financial flows to the institutions; gradual introduction of a standard curriculum for the Quomi Madrassas; and providing financial and regulatory incentives to the institutions to abide by the curriculum. These are challenging tasks. But for the future of our democracy and future of our youth these need to be taken. Pakistan experience should be a warning for all of us.

Image of Bangladesh in the Foreign Press: Our Not So Righteous Indignation

The Washington Post op-ed article of August 2, 2006 (A New Hub for Terrorism?) by Selig Harrison, a former South Asia bureau chief of the Post, had some of our expatriate Bangladeshis astir with indignation. So much so that one activist lawyer - for whose social work I have a lot of respect—has suggested that someone write a fitting response to "refute this rubbish" with another op-ed in the Post. It has been even suggested that the article is nothing but an invitation to the new-colonial powers "to override the sovereignty of a nation and intervene to root out terrorists". Echoing the sentiment in the internet a few others have come up with conspiracy theories behind such articles that "smear" our country's reputation, and called for wide scale condemnation of such nefarious acts. Before we display our enraged sentiments, and shed copious amount of indignant tears on this "outrageous" article, let us review our reactions to similar articles that had appeared in the foreign press in the past.

In April 2002, Bert Lintner's article in the Far Eastern Economic Review (Bangladesh-A Cocoon of Terror) caused a major stir in and outside Bangladesh. The article was the first to point out the threat of militant Islam in Bangladesh, and the grave prospects that this threat held for the country. Instead of taking preemptive actions to stem such a threat, the government as I recall, banned the magazine. Zealous party workers made a bonfire of the magazine in Bangladesh while outpourings of mail and write ups, largely from Bangladeshi expatriates jammed the cyberspace and some journals accused the writer of the article of bias, and of collusion with the enemies of Bangladesh.

Six months later after the Lintner article Alex Perry came out with a similar article that appeared in the Time Magazine (Deadly Cargo, Time Magazine October 2002). The article referred to Bangladesh becoming a safe haven for religious terrorists with transnational links. I do not know if there were any investigations conducted by our country on the allegations made in the article, but I do know that the magazine was banned, and copies were burnt by people in the streets of Dhaka to express their fury at the magazine. Likewise the foreign based patriots of Bangladesh took out their

anguish by expressing venom at the magazine and the writer in the forums available to them, all except the Time magazine itself.

It is unfortunate that despite the liberal environment that they thrive in, despite the benefits that they derive from a free and open media, our expatriate community is prone to act with indignation at any critical appraisal of the political and social reality of Bangladesh that appears in the foreign media. We jump at any attempt to criticize the country that many of us probably even do not how it has changed over time. We label all negative reports on Bangladesh as biased, results of conspiracies hatched by spooks of neighboring countries to denigrate us. We are in constant denial that the land of Sufis and saints, the land of poetry and music lovers, land of and peace and harmony could ever change.

In none of the cases anyone cared to find out whether the country was actually being politically manipulated by the religious right. No one cared to reflect that the burgeoning number of religious institutions, unregulated and unchecked, could potentially create a pool of resources right for picking by the religious extremists for their "cause". Our foreign-based patriots had concluded that these are nothing conspiracies. We had to wait two more years to watch these conclusions of our so called patriots blown to bits, when the forecasts of the two articles became terribly true. We had to wait till hundreds of bombs were blasted from corner to corner in the country like independence day fireworks, when judges were assassinated in broad daylight, and threats of further assassinations became common place from the very elements that the two articles had alluded to.

What appalls me now that despite the recent capture of the religious extremists in Bangladesh, unraveling of their long gestating plans of spreading militancy in the country, and their proud ownership of the assassinations in the country, our expatriates are finding the article in the Washington Post as another attempt by the foreign media to malign the country. Malign the country with what? The Post article is not a revelation of unknown facts. It is actually a compilation of events and facts that appeared in news and commentary in our national media over last few years. To dismiss an analysis based on hard realities on the ground as a smear campaign against Bangladesh is another glaring instance of our denial syndrome.

Let us not close our eyes to the reality that there is a strong grass root movement in Bangladesh toward taking the country to a political path that is not ingrained in religious pluralism or secular democracy. Jamaat did not win 17 seats or so (in 2000) in the Parliament by accident; it won because it is a highly organized party with committed workers at grass roots. The political alliance that this political party will seek is not simply with the intention to have a seat in the government; its alliance is aimed at a higher objective. Elements who share this objective are not enemies of the

party. Sooner we realize this the better it is for all of us who still cherish a Bangladesh, a moderate country free from religious intolerance, and a home for peace, prosperity and tranquility. Instead of wasting our energy venting not so righteous indignation at these reality checks such as the Washington Post article has provided, let us concentrate on confronting the ideology of intolerance, hate and violence with words and actions that will prevent the spread of this venomous movement.

Book Summary

Forty years in the history of a country is a small drop in the ocean. But for those of us who had witnessed the brutal war of liberation and the pitiful conditions in our fledgling years, this is a long journey. It has been a journey on a road that was not paved with roses. Our young democracy was mangled and mutilated within a few years of the country's birth. We had to suffer two decades of military rule and quasi-dictatorship before we regained the democracy. At the same time we also witnessed rebirth of the forces that we had to contend with to gain our independence. We witnessed birth of politics of corruption, violence, opportunism, and shenanigans.

This book is a collection of essays that were published earlier in Bangladesh Magazines and Dailies reflecting on our national achievement and failings in the past years. The articles pay homage to the millions of our people who have toiled unfalteringly to take us to the place where we are now. Some articles also reflect on the vices that affect our growth such as unbridled corruption, political violence, and lack of leadership. Some articles also are grim reminders that the path to democracy is also fettered by threats that may emanate from politics of religious bigotry and extremism that are not always open to the eyes. The founding father of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had many dreams for his nation and his people. He did not live to see if his dreams of Shonar Bangla (Golden Bengal) were fulfilled and what stormy path his beloved country traveled in last forty years. His life was cut short early in a violent and cruel manner – an ironic end for a man who believed in non-violence.

We have miles to go to sustain our hard earned freedom, and ways to find the keep the momentum of our economic the growth. The first step in this direction is to change the political culture rooted in corruption, nepotism, violence, and lack of respect for human life. Our leaders need to rise above their own narrow and short term political gains and address these vices starting with themselves and their political parties. We, like Bangabandhu, had many dreams for our fledgling nation; but these did not include seeing the country's name muddied for corruption, violence, and politics of retaliation. As we enter into the fifth decade of our independence, we pray and hope that our leaders will guide the nation in the right direction so that along with economic growth we also can see growth in our core values.

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Ziauddin Choudhury joined the Civil Service of Pakistan in 1968 and spent his early civil service career as Sub-divisional Officer in Munshiganj and Manikganj of greater Dhaka district in 1971. After independence, he worked as a special assistant in the Prime Minister's Secretariat under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for a brief period. From May 1972 to August 1975 he worked with Minister A.H.M. Kamaruzzaman as his Private Secretary (with a break of about a year in between). Subsequently he worked as Deputy Commissioner in two districts, Noakhali (August 1975- March 1978), and Chittagong (March 1978- August 1981). He left Bangladesh for higher studies in the US in late August, 1981.

On completion of his studies in the US, Ziauddin Choudhury joined the World Bank in Washington DC. At the World Bank he initially worked on Bank operations in Nepal, and Sri Lanka. He later moved on to other areas of Bank activities including policy and research, resource management, and management of information and communication technology, working in different capacities including project manager and advisor.

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ISBN 978-1-4691-3343-0
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9 781469 133430

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