

This is a single chapter from *Make Or Break: Bangladesh In The 1990's*

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Not Why Bangladesh Is Poor

“We’re a bad race.” Actually the word used for race is as hard as “somaj” to define, since although “jati” can equate to race in the skin colour sense, it (like somaj) more often refers to religion. “We’re a bad ‘jati’, we have two mouths. We say something with one mouth and five minutes later you’ll hear us use our other mouth to say the opposite.” This recently heard teashop opinion varied only in its poetical hyperbole from a common theme. “Maybe out of a hundred people you’ll find one you can trust” (Of the too-many times I’ve heard this dismal self-assessment I’ve always balked from asking whether the speaker considered himself of the 99) Bangladeshis show their notably low self image repeatedly when judging (as above) and when jesting. Whereas the French aim their humour at the Belgians and English target the Irish, Bangladeshis largely laugh at other Bangladeshis. It is true that Pathans or even Punjabis may occasionally still be the butt of jokes, recalling Pakistani prejudices that prevailed until 1971 when Bengal ceased to be that country’s Eastern wing, but generally Bangladeshis prefer self-inflicted laughter. As exemplified by this story, recently told on national TV.

“A Libyan, a Swiss and a Bangladeshi were travelling by plane. After some time the Libyan put his hand out of the window and told the other two that they were currently flying over his country. ‘How do you know?’ they asked him. ‘My country is hot, and it’s hot outside’ he replied. The Swiss was next. He put his hand outside the window several hours later and said ‘we are now flying over Switzerland.’ ‘How can you tell?’ the other two asked. ‘Because my country is cold, and it’s freezing outside.’ Predictably, the third traveller next had his turn. ‘Not only can I tell you that we are passing over my country’ said the Bangladeshi, putting his hand out the window, ‘but I can tell you the exact location. We are currently just above Gulistan Bus Station.’ ‘That’s amazing’ said the other two, ‘how can you be sure?’ ‘Well,’ said the Bangladeshi ‘when I put my hand out I was wearing a watch and now it has gone.’“

Gulistan is indeed a place where pickpockets operate efficiently, providing a neat demonstration of social Darwinism. Only the skilled survive. Thieves caught are usually beaten to death. The police’s job is to collect and dispose of the body. Gulistan itself is wryly named. It’s a Persian word literally meaning “Rose Garden” but more famous as the title of one the best known Sufi love/mystical/religious poems. A name denoting peace and caring grace is therefore used to describe a place of battered buses, contentious conductors and crowds choking in the dust, diesel, and detritus of too many people in too small an area. Indeed, the only poetry likely to be heard there is the peculiar sing-song chanting rhymes of political protest marches.

“Hindu Musulman bhai bhai
Amra Christiander rokto chai”
(“Hindus and Muslims are brothers
We want the blood of Christians”)

These rough few lines were heard all too often during the Gulf War days and carried a sad irony. It was only a few months earlier that the Hindus had served as the unwanted third of the chant,

targeted because of sectarian tensions in the giant-beside-us, India. There, the on-going problem of whether the Babri mosque was initially a Hindu temple or not had slowly escalated as Hindu fundamentalists tried to enforce their viewpoint. The inevitable outbursts of violence in India provoked instant reactions here and Hindu-owned gold shops in old Dhaka were raided while Hindus' houses in Rayer Bazaar (a poorer section of the city near the river) were burnt. How many people died wasn't publicly documented, but bazaar talk suggested only double rather than triple figures this time. The issue is still hanging, so

“Amra Hinduder rokto chai”

will likely again storm the streets in days to come. Unless, of course, Western nations cause prior offence and the Christians get scapegoated first.

Which, unfortunately, is quite likely. Expecting badness from themselves may explain why Bangladeshis often attribute worse to others. Or perhaps this tendency to blame “them” arises because despite their low sense of national esteem, Bangladeshis also carry a stubborn counterpoint of pride. (Paradox is not unknown here as many before me have noted - usually citing the cheek by jowl extremes of wealth and poverty as illustration. “The obvious is a guide to the true”, as Jalal Uddin Rumi puts it.) Sigmund Freud asserted that a single person - a single psyche - could simultaneously love and hate someone centrally important to them. So it is that Bangladeshis' self doubts seem to coexist with their high self regard; which revolves around three distinct elements.

Language may well be the most obvious. People here delight in convoluted discussions about regional variations in Bengali, each speaker eager to tell the next an example of how they enunciate in Naokhali or Feni or Sylhet. And few countries revere their poets more than this, with Rabindranath Tagore's winning of the Nobel Prize for literature being a constant source of pride despite the fact that it was eighty years ago. In fact, the less formal - and older vintage - Lalon Fakir has more grass roots popularity, but in one form or other, the Bengali language is a well respected one by those who speak it.

Their language also intrudes on the second cause of Bangladeshi assertiveness, their long struggled-for and bloodily-won independence. Nationalism was provoked to perhaps an irreversible extent as early as 1952 when the government (then located in Karachi) tried to force Urdu as the state language onto the then East Pakistanis. The deaths that resulted from the (West) Pakistani put down of mass local rejection of this attempt at imperialism is remembered every February in a moving ceremony.

It is known as “Ekushey February” and it begins with people gathering in the pre-dawn winter chill, remaining barefooted out of respect to the martyrs. I first witnessed it in a country town some hours from Dhaka. The singing woke me; waves of laments as the surrounding villages disgorged their remembered, ritualised, grief into the town centre. The songs, as I then couldn't understand but discovered later, seep with images of blood and brotherhood, sacrifice and pain. What I did know even then, as I followed the swollen streets to the memorial (now transformed

by wreaths of flowers) was that suffering centred and governed this shared occasion. There was a huge crowd, restless but not unruly. Single minded, but with no overseeing directors orchestrating their service. No uniforms, no-one watchful on a remote elevated stage. It was a noisy, emotional, flowing moment; totally peaceful but somewhat eerie and other-worldly. Certainly it showed me, blinking on the fringes, that this is a society stitched together differently from Western models. Emotional frenzy, order, grief, interest in the outsider, peacefulness, - these aren't elements that mingle easily in all societies. But as has already been noted, Bangladesh has many of these apparent oil-and-water mixtures that seem paradoxical. Ekushey February repeats the pattern not only in its performance but also in its very naming.

Of the three calendars in concurrent use here (the Bengali, with its six seasons, predominates in the villages: the Arabic marks religious events: the Western increasingly dominates daily urban living), it is the Western system which is used to name a festival recalling when Bengali self determination linked with Bengali language to begin defining what it meant to be Bangladeshi. In the calendar common to the 80% uneducated, February the 21st gets labelled 'ostom Falgun', yet the festival itself is called by its English equivalent. Whether the actual words we use alter how we perceive reality is a long unresolved linguistic question (e.g. does an Eskimo see snow clearer than the rest of us because they have dozens of detailed words to label the stuff). So whether the use of English, and not Bengali, to name a festival central to Bangladesh's sense of identity really hints at a subtle undermining of the nationalism "Ekushey February" promotes is unprovable. But it does seem odd.

Islam, of course, provides the third prompt of Bangladeshi pride. "Somaj" was defined as, at times, referring to religion. Hindus rarely marry Muslims (and other religious communities are so small they verge on invisibility, glimpsed only when clumped together); hence Muslims can be said to form a separate society within Bangladesh as a whole. Or rather, since nearly 100,000,000 of its 110,000,000 citizens are Muslim, Bangladesh is an Islamic society wherein Islamic thought patterns dominate and other ways are tolerated. (If the trend of Hindus leaving for India - albeit surreptitiously at times - grows, then the percentage of Muslims will increase accordingly). Islamic festivals punctuate the year. The 1952 language martyrs aren't yet forgotten (although fewer people each year, in Dhaka at least, seem to follow tradition and spend the morning respectfully barefoot), while Hozrat Ali's martyrdom appears to occasion a less restrained display of emotion every year. Mohorrum, the festival by which Muslims world-wide remember his defeat in a battle 1400 years ago, is the time of sword-waving, clumsy-dancing enthusiasm. This despite Bengal's vast separation in time, space and culture from sixth century Arabia. "If it's Islam, it's ours" is the tacit claim. Paradox, again, presents itself, since Mohorrum recalls the foundational event that split Shi'ites from Sunnis (Ali is the founder of the Shi'ite line of descent) and Bangladesh is overwhelmingly Sunni. There are times when the distinction between the two sects cause friction; there are also times when to be a Muslim is enough to provide unity. "I and my brother against the neighbour", as the Bedouin saying puts it. .

So, can uncountable tea shop opinions be erroneous? Are Bangladeshis "a bad race"? Is their dominant gloom more to be believed than their three cornered pride? If it is valid to generalise, for example, that "Bangladeshis are family orientated", how then to quibble with a "we're an untrustworthy jati" type of statement? Because it's uncommon? Just the opposite: a spare half hour in any tea shop can collect a cluster of such comments (while concurrently a lesser number

of opposing thoughts could also be gleaned, but this, as was said, is paradox plagued Bangladesh). Of course, it's preferable to shy away from overtly negative generalisations since they tend to be so contentious, but the successful trick of politicians everywhere in using such generalisations -with varying degrees of subtlety - to finger scapegoats and deflect blame, shows how widespread they are. Contentious or not, truth deserves free expression. If my friends' gloomy assessments are just, they must be agreed with. Are "we are bad race, unreliable, always liars"?

Unwilling though I am to break ranks with my more experienced neighbours, I can't accept their view. This is despite too much evidence of how appallingly local behaviour can get - or, more accurately, how little care is taken locally to hide behaviour when it does become appalling. Thieves, as has been said, are routinely beaten to death when caught although the only times I've become involved in such roadside courts the thief was left alive.

An example slips into mind. Well-dressed, well-fed strong young men, fists and sticks flaying a scrawny, scruffy, bleeding, weeping, terrified individual. The well-fed blatantly enjoying their pack sanctioned exercise of power. One, inspired by some dark domiciled devilry, cleared his throat, spat on the ground, and demanded the thief lick it up. The prisoner's compliance amused the group. His humiliation, plus the wounds littering his body, was deemed payment enough for the two pieces of cloth taken. His gait as he loped away was reminiscent of the mysteriously stabbed stranger whose blood time had blackened only metres away from this fresh sacrifice.

Despite the still-growing almanac I carry in my head of Bangladeshi ruthlessness, my doubt of their self assessment also grows. We - Bangladeshis - are a bad race is wrong; or rather it is superseded in my thinking by the conviction that we - all -are capable of stupefyingly brutal behaviour. Many of those living in more benign societies would resort to bribery and beating, too, if circumstances changed. I, for example, don't need under-the-table payments in my daily transactions in the way a Bangladeshi does. My foreignness is read as an exemption. I'm simply deemed too dumb to heed the signals to pay up. I'm sure that if pressure to bend was as strong in the country of my birth as in this country where I now live, people there would equally rarely be straight.

That is hardly an original thought, of course. Our shared capacity for evil forms the theme of William Golding's "Lord Of The Flies", for example but it is more comfortable to confront such things in a book rather than in reality. Least comfortable of all is to find them within yourself. Bangladesh forces such questions of ethics from theory into daily negotiation. Should you beat the captured thief in the total absence of any honest police force or judiciary? Do you sentence your only son to a life of pedalling a rickshaw for (albeit bare) survival because a bribe not given curtailed his education? Should you pay any of the subsequent bribes that would get him a job/contract/ licence/examination/ad desperation? Not to pay in any instance means not to proceed. When an individual is surrounded by such all-pervasive bribery what becomes the "right" thing to do? The cost of even a slight attack of honesty is almost certain to be massively expensive. What the compounded effect of so many individual corruptions amount to is more simple to say; while it persists, Bangladesh will remain poor. Until, oedema'd from within and weaned from Western aid (that growing cynicism will increasingly result in) it will get even poorer (again, a euphemism for mass famine eludes me).

Yet “we are a bad race” is a bad explanation for the poverty around me. It has two major flaws, which could be labelled, somewhat sardonically, as the “Heisenburg and Hindenburg Principles”. Many decades ago, Heisenburg was exploring the structure of the atom when he discovered something more fundamental. He found that the very act of observation altered the object under scrutiny. If you fire electrons at a proton to ascertain the latter’s shape, the bombardment of the electrons alters the very thing being studied. The observer and the observed aren’t entirely separated.

The social echo of this phenomenon is called “The Experimenter Effect”. In essence, this refers to the fact that in answering a question there is a tendency on the listener’s part to meet the questioner’s expectations of the answer. The questioner’s bias somehow communicates itself to the questioned. Thus the interrogator and interrogated aren’t totally apart. If the questioner expects the questioned to tick box “x” there is a better than chance possibility that “x” will be selected.

In effect, the Heisenburg Principle says that the closer you get, the less distinct things become. Defining “bad” is equally apt to slip off the pin-point of sharp definition. Is it “bad” to embezzle some money so a daughter/son/nephew/niece can attend a school that (in turn) demands a bribe for entry? If an employer has been consistently cheating an employee over many years does that give the underling a right to get something tacitly back? Is that wrong? Is selling for a tobacco company bad? There are no illegal payments, after all, only profitable addictions. And what about selling weapons (“...couldn’t sell them if no-one wanted them, and if I didn’t sell them someone else would”). It is undoubtedly lucrative, but is it “good”? Should I admire a hard bargaining Western business person, able to buy cheaply and sell profitably because the commodities were made under Dickensian work conditions. Are such deals good? Bad? The continuum from the one to the other has a large grey area that living in Bangladesh only widens. I couldn’t advertise cigarettes but people I respect falsified election results. How, then, can I be confident that my response to the pressure that warped them would have been different from theirs?

God is good; both Christianity and Islam agree on this theological point. But discerning an infinitely good God’s perspective in this finite, flawed world is as hard as finding the right price in the vegetable market. Doesn’t happen first time and even after agreement you’re still not sure all is as it should be. Demarcating between good and bad in daily living is a type of ethical Heisenburg-ism. The closer you look the less clear everything becomes until finally the effort of searching for answers becomes too taxing and sheer expediency replaces even the pretence of morality when making decisions. Prophetic calls to repent are replaced by political slogans. 1990’s Bangladesh is negotiating this threshold.

The “Hindenburg Principle” (my second objection to Bangladeshis’ dismal “we are a bad race” claim) was the German airship that crashed on docking in America after a successful trans-Atlantic crossing. It was mid 1937; 36 people died. As catastrophes goes, minor league, particularly compared with the loss of life soon to come. And yet it is remembered, probably because of a famous crackly-sound, cracking-voice radio broadcast backed up by an equally well known photo that predicted the Challenger Shuttle disaster in all its fiery frightfulness. The Hindenburg’s failure was too hideous, too publicised, to ever think of a repeat attempt. Sixty

years on, occasional entrepreneurs assert the airship's viability and pilot runs to prove it. While the machine may fly, the idea won't. Some failures shut the door.

The "bad race" theory is just such an example. One needn't move out of either Germany or the 1930's to explain why (although it is ironical to invoke Adolf Hitler's infamy to discredit racism -albeit anti-Bangladeshi self-directed racism. He is actually quite admired by many I've spoken to for his uncompromising anti- Semitism). From a dispassionately scientific viewpoint, the "bad race" concept - compounded by its inevitable, sinister corollary, the "master race" idea - has two massive liabilities. It is both ultimately unprovable, and it doesn't generate any useful exchange of ideas that would (in turn) prompt an overall growth of knowledge. The "inequality of races" concept remains unproven despite the "nature versus nurture" debate's success in being one of science's longest running soap operas. The plot is well known and simply stated. Are we individually who we are because of our genetic make-up or the peculiarities of our upbringing? (The escape route of answering "both" immediately collides with the follow up question of "how much does each contribute?") Despite studies of identical twins, parallel societies, DNA structures, etc, the jury remains out. Where it likely will remain, alongside other such "what is the sound of one hand clapping" unanswerable questions. Science is littered with them, from "what is the smallest possible particle of matter" to the already mentioned "does our language modify the way we perceive reality".

Equally unprovable, then, is whether the differences between us have arisen because of genetic variation or learned behaviour. Genetics can account for our varied appearance but it is dangerous to believe that it impacts on morality or ethics. Anyone raised in Bangladesh as a Bangladeshi is likely to fully adopt Bangladeshi norms. How fully we become moulded by those circumstances we find ourselves in was most frighteningly told in Erich Maria Remarque's "All Quiet On The Western Front". Emotions were so cauterized after the enemy's unrelenting bombardment (he wrote) that were his own grandparents to be at the head of the inevitable ground attack he would have unblinkingly shot them down. The extremities of war so animalised those it caught that the bonds most cherished between people became fractured and mangled. We are what we meet.

We are, after all, a single "jati", a single race; the off-spring of Adam and Eve. Another point of agreement between Christians and Muslims (although Muslims place Eden in heaven, Christians on Earth, and post-Christian societies treat the story entirely as myth). Despite behavioural variations our ability to understand each other - given time and effort - points to our underlying similarity. And our shared future can't afford too many "my-race-is-better/worse-than-yours" disasters.

Social Hindenbergism: floating too high for safety on something too frail to sustain you and all too likely to blow up. In my teashop conversations there are many opinions I slide warily past, my disagreement being so wide and deep that any dissention would probably become explosive. But I rarely let the often heard "we are a bad race" sentence pass unremarked, it's too pernicious and too pervasive.

A final word, for now, about bribery. I haven't been in a poor country yet where it wasn't a contributing factor. Conversely, I've enjoyed being in some countries that have avoided the

possibility of becoming poor by building up a reputation for reliability. Singapore is a good example. It had every chance to slump into poverty: too small, too few resources, potentially at odds with its neighbours. Instead it founded its economy on its honesty and used its harbour to provide a link along trading routes that have spread throughout South Asia. Singapore is, to borrow Thatcher's epithet of Gorbachov (I hope it hasn't yet been privatized) "a place you can do business with". Its ability to remove the gap between what is promised and what is delivered has thus been pivotal in its development. Were the world business community to find Bangladesh equally reliable, this country's other advantages would then become relevant and pull the nation forward.

Bangladeshis themselves have a prompt answer to pass off the extent of corruption in their nation's daily life. "It's because we're so poor that we have so many 'opportunities for advantage' (as the local phrase glibly calls bribery)." Such an answer is more than simple, it is simplistic. All agree that corruption is more prevalent amongst the rich than the poor, yet were poverty the major cause of corruption the poor, surely, would be more corrupted. Others respond "it's because we are lazy" (olos) then agree that farming all day in the summer sun is extremely hard work. Again the dictionary's definition is inadequate in equating olos to lazy rather than inefficient. Bangladeshis talk constantly about solving their country's problems but (by looking in the wrong way and in the wrong places) their efforts bear little fruit. They aren't lazy but they are olos.

Corruption and low productivity together cripple the country. Yet people are neither "bad" nor "lazy"; there is no need to invoke the twin spectres of racism and nationalism. Admittedly though, many Bangladeshis (all too often influential) do display behaviour that works against development. We now need to examine these traits in detail - after a quick review of how we will measure them.