

# The Daily Star

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## Death plazas

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WHAT Shahbagh Chattar could not do in sixty days, Rana Plaza accomplished in sixty seconds: put Bangladesh on the front page of every newspaper of the world. Tragedies startle us and make us pause, and Rana Plaza might just make us pause for a long time.

Bangladesh is rich in tragedy. Borne of the bewildering dynamic of the delta, with its confounding flux and flow, and the seasonal gift of flood and the occasional scourge of cyclones and tidal waves, the people of Bangladesh demonstrate a resilience that others can learn from. For centuries, the people have learned to live with the extremism of nature that has tested their mettle, creativity and fortitude. And the people have faced all that with gumption and resourcefulness unparalleled by any other nation.

The people of the delta, however, do not know how to live with collapsing and burning buildings, of which they do not have any collective memory or folk knowledge. There is no shared history of being trapped, for the glory of GDP, in a five-story burning building or an eight-story collapsing structure.

Epic tragedy, natural or a product of human greed, has a way of bringing divisive people together that no moncho, morcha or majlish can. A Facebook log of recovery efforts from Savar's Rana Plaza reports: "Just now Ujjal and Bindu report that five more people have been found, and they are alive. We need more oxygen, more juice. Himel is rushing off with his team. Such news makes this sad morning a little sweeter. The eyes get moist..."

Is this a kind of "tragedy nationalism?" How long should we do this to reveal our inherent humanity, this manner of bonding together in a moment of collective concern and guilt?

There are some tragedies that come unannounced, like the shooting in an elementary school in Sandy Hook in the US, for which one is neither prepared

nor awaiting anxiously. And then there are certain tragedies for which humanity has no clear managerial measure or means, like the tsunami in Japan or the earthquake in China. But there are some tragedies that, as the New York Times editorial (April 25, 2013) writing about the worst industrial disaster of Bangladesh, aptly declared “preventable.” A key word. Not partially, not sporadically, but fully preventable.

As of now, more than 350 beautiful lives have been lost, and the count continues. The alive and the injured, and the maimed and the traumatised, are still trying to shake off the dust of the disaster. And, if preventable, is it not reckless endangerment? “It’s a murder,” the information minister has declared.

Where lies the responsibility?

This is the dark side of development, the bewitching side of magical economic growth and consumer capitalism. Shuttling somewhere between 5% and 6% growth rate, Bangladesh and the rest of South Asia are facing the conundrum of global “knit-work.” Allured by it and reaping its Faustian benefits, the Bangladesh garments manufacturing industry dances to the tune of being the biggest manufacturer after China. The New York Times writes (April 23, 2012) that Bangladesh will soon join the “7 percent club,” the elite group of nations enjoying a 7% growth. Honey will flow.

Where once the production of muslin created a global repute for Dhaka, now the manufacture of monitored fabrics promises to take the delta to new heights of glory and growth. In the meantime, blood springs from the pillars of a building, burnt sandals are all that remain of a young man who toiled in a stitching section, a delicate foot of a young woman protrudes between slammed slabs, the sad anklet a sign of a thwarted hope. Such too is the landscape of industrial globalisation.

All are complicit. Dhaka is replete with such plazas of death and destruction, a shabby show of growth in tottering structures flouting codes and regulations.

While an insensitive minister proffers a hilarious reason for the destruction, who is going to consider that death in the plaza is also a consequence of Dhaka’s irresponsible planning, part of an abysmal failure by city fathers to establish what should be built where and how. Rajuk, the ridiculous organisation entrusted with the planning and management of the toughest city in the world, is always caught with its garments down trying to say something sensible at moments like this.

The garment manufacturers — BGMEA and BKMEA leaders — have proposed overseeing of structural design and load management of every garment factory (who is going to check the quality of cement, amount of rods, and construction process?). After Tazreen (117 dead) and Rana Plaza (350 and rising), this is very little and not enough.

For once, the garment organisations should reorganise themselves not primarily for their own economic profit-making, for which they have always been vigilant and attentive, but for the social, physical and emotional well-being of the thousands of workers who make the owners' profit possible; workers who have little rights, little pay, and lackadaisical assurance of well-being in their work place.

Meanwhile, the big buyers and retailers in some distant shores act with a degree of impunity because the culprits are all elsewhere. And the state here, other than offering comedic explanations, performs various kinds of pirouettes and somersaults.

Shall we not invoke the double EE word that we pretended was banished to the museum: economic exploitation?

Garment factories through the city like cottage industry. There are really no planned areas for garment manufacturing with solidly built buildings with proper facilities and safe environments. Present-day Savar is the site of a once agricultural landscape that has been turned to “plazas” and “centres” overnight. Along the way to Gazipur, on the riverbanks towards Naryanganj, and on the road past Savar, concrete and steel rods replace the vernacular of bamboo and thatch. Multi-storied buildings — six, seven or nine-story high — hum with the music of a far-off Gap or Walmart. How many plazas are out there waiting to topple at the slightest shake?

The transformation of Dhaka and its regions, along with its physical and social landscape, has been relentless and brutal. At the fringe of the city, when an agricultural milieu rapidly transforms into a global “knit-work,” strange things will happen when nobody is taking notice. Nalas, dobas and pukurs will get filled to shore up tottering towers, without any basic recourse to safety and buildability, and petit goons with the blessings of political leaders will become crorepatas, and enter the mystical chain of globalisation. JC Penney, meet Sohel Rana.

Bangladesh is also a land of impunity: impunity from genocidal killings in 1971, political assassination (it was metaphorically called “indemnity ordinance”), killing of national leaders in jail ... the list is long. If the present government under Sheikh Hasina has shown boldness to correct such injustices, and clear the sins of an earlier generation, she should show equal audacity for taking care of the brazen impunity enjoyed by those from being complicit in industrial killings. For it is, as her information minister has described, “a murder.” Plain and simple.

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