

Bangladesh Police: Need for a Paradigm shift

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A Paradigm shift, in common parlance, suggests a radical change in an existing model of thought or action. It involves a rejection of a set model, whether in a region of science, philosophy and other areas of human knowledge, or in everyday interactions. A paradigm shift therefore points both to the past and the future; past, because the shift, to be a quantum leap, has to be radically different from past practices; and future, because this shift is all about the future. A paradigm shift fundamentally changes social thinking and practices, with the result that people's desire for change finds fulfillment and new momentum. In the end though, a paradigm shift announces its own demise as another shift, after a while, becomes inevitable in the relentless march of time.

If we look at our politics and governance, to choose a significant area where change is of vital importance, we will have little reason to celebrate. Our governance is based on regulations which are at odds with the expectations of a young country and the new century. Bangladesh, after independence, inherited, lock stock and barrel, the Pakistani model of governance which in turn, was a legacy of the British colonial administration. There have been very few attempts to reform the structure of governance, or its operative principles. There has been no overhaul in support of people friendly and democratic paradigm and despite democratically elected government running the country for most of Bangladesh's forty-one year history, the governance has remained closed and opaque, and strangely oblivious to popular expectations. Our administration, both civil and military, our law and order forces, our judiciary, our education system all operate according to an outdated, colonial model. As a result, people's rights are easily denied, the nation progresses at a slow pace, and inequality and disparity between population groups and classes multiply. It is no wonder that our governance vocabulary is replete with terms such as shahok (ruler) proshahok (administrators) or manoniyo (honorable). Even our small airports have VIP enclosures, where ruling party functionaries have an unrestricted entry. I once went to a small upazila town on an invitation from the upazila administration for a literacy meet. The UNO, a young man in his late 20s and a former student of Dhaka University was with me. As our bus stopped at the upazila town. We got down. The UNO was carrying a small luggage which he could easily have carried himself. But he waited patiently for five minutes for a peon to emerge, who in his fifties, looked older, and emaciated, with spindly legs and feeble arms. Yet, it was this unfit man who had to carry the bag. The UNO later explained with apologies that since this was the system, it would have dented his authority if he carried the bag himself. I smiled as I remembered seeing on television the US President always carrying his own briefcase every time his helicopter transported him back to the white house. The US president also is addressed as Mr. President yet he is the powerful man in the world!

Our police force is substantially constrained in its governance by its antiquated operative structure. It derives its operative rules and regulations from the 1861 police Act, which the British formulated in the aftermath of 1857 uprising (which was incidentally quickly dubbed as a 'mutiny' to dismiss any associations of the uprising with Indian's first movement for independence). The 1857 uprising in the ranks of Indian soldiers in the British army and constabulary was the first serious challenge to the colonial administration. The British of course knew this uprising was just a beginning, and that there would be many more in the future. It felt a strong need to police the Indians more vigorously and sternly. The police act reflected this desire as its main mantra is control. Terms like controlling, enforcing, preventing, restricting, profiling or disarming informed the functional philosophy of the police. Application of force, unlawful confinement, torture and denial of rights of those arrested, even on suspicion were the norm.

The system of questioning an accused on remand was a sure shot way of extracting information, as it was frequently accompanied by dire physical torture. The presence of a lawyer while an accused is being examined by police interrogators was an unheard of concept (it is still unheard of, even four decades of our independence). The British made maximum use of the police act's provision ensured that countless young men were rounded off from their home and sent to person on suspicion of being terrorist. These terrorist were idealistic young men (and women) who dreamt of freeing their country from colonial rule. The police act of 1861 thus worked perfectly for the colonial administration.

But after 1947, when the subcontinent was divided into two new nations, people expected that the colonial models would be thrown off in favor of pro-people ones; that the police, which was seen by the poor as a tormentor, would assume a more friendly role. But Pakistan kept all the colonial structures and trapping intact. The civil service kept its elitist bias the military remained a meddlesome institution more interested in political power than the defense of the nation and the police remained sentinels serving power. In 1952, the way the Pakistani administration used the police to suppress the language movement, left no doubt as to the colonial nature of this prime law and order agency. In fact, the police was seen to be even worse than their British predecessors, as they were out to kill their own kind and countrymen. For the next nineteen years, the police, If anything, became more oppressive. Under the military strongman, Gen. Ayub, the police simply became an extension of the army. Its mission was not to enforce justice, but to enforce discriminatory laws to perpetuate Pakistani colonial enterprise.

The Bengali members of the police understood the contradictions in the fore's policies and management, but because the top hierarchy was named by the Pakistanis, who alone had the power to make and enforce policies, Bengali police officials were in no position to bring about any changes. For them it was a matter of simple choice; accept or resist. Resisting meant losing the job, and subsequent harassment.

In march 1971, when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced his non-cooperation programmed in his landmark speech of 7 march at the race course ground in Dhaka, The Bengali members of the police force found an opportunity to stand by the people. Most of them joined the non-cooperation, and refrained from carrying out repressive orders from the Pakistani administration. On the night of 25 march, in shat Pakistanis so hypocritically termed operation searchlight, the police were one of their first targets. After that, the door to the past was shut. As many policemen joined the war of liberation, the British and Pakistani models of police administration appeared to be things of the past. Bangladesh lost an opportunity in the years following our liberation to come out of the colonial mould and carry out reforms in all areas of governance for realizing the aspirations of the people. The governments lacked a firm commitment to initiate the long due overhaul in administration and politics. There was unnecessary foot dragging and continuation of the status quo. The police force, over the last 41 years, has been used by successive governments in the same manner it was used in the Pakistan time; there was no attempt to present it as pro-people and a partner of progress. The fault does not lie with the force, the fault lies with government policy maker and leaders.

However the police cannot keep its eyes closed to the winds of change that are sweeping the country. The 21st country is of one of new awareness about rights; it is also a technology- driven century. Globalization has created opportunities of instant sharing of knowledge, and communication has taken entirely new dimensions. The young generation is restless as ever but it is now demanding change. The Arab spring and its many variations throughout the world (including the occupy Wall Street movement) have been made effective by the availability of cheap and instant IT connectivity. The emergence of social network sites and blogs, and mobile phone cameras have meant that nothing can be hidden from the public any more. The 21st century is one of transparency, accountability and easy access to information. It is a

century that has seen an end to old-style politics in many countries. The society of Bangladesh has also changed. It is no longer possible to keep people in the dark and to lord over them. People demand that their rights be respected and that justice be even-handed. If the old world politics that justice be even-handed. If the old politics that is practiced in our country even now does not heed to these demands, people will reject it in favor of a more democratic and forward looking politics. The young generation of today cannot be taken for granted. They want honest leadership in every sphere of our administration. And honesty, in a very old fashioned sense, still is the best policy. If Bangladesh police has to be an effective force and trusted by the people, it too has to change. The paradigm shift I talked about in the beginning of my articles has to happen. It can best happen through a change in the orientation of the people- it has to be a service –oriented force, rather than one that believes in control as its credo. The 1861 police Act has to be replaced with a new one- one that addresses the imperatives of a new time and the demands of a new generation. Along with the transition from control and enforce to service the paradigm shift will have to include and address the falling issues.

The police force has to be a truly independent entity which will be answerable to the state, the government and the people, but not to the political party in power. Its members should not also work to implement any particular party's programmes and agenda.

It has to respect the spectrum of rights that the constitution of the country enshrines.

It has to come up with a clean and a trustworthy image, which means it, has to show zero tolerance to corruption within its ranks, and has to be accountable for all its actions.

It has to respect all legal provisions in the processes of arresting, questioning and prosecuting people suspected to wrong doing.

It should not be a privy to any design by any quarter of the country in carrying out extrajudicial activities, including secret killings and abduction.

It should be women and children friendly. It should respect minority and ethnic rights and work for their protection. The police force should seriously attempt to achieve men-women parity in its ranks and leadership.

The police force should gear up to the new challenges of the century like drugs, and drug related crimes, women and children trafficking, cyber crimes, hate crimes, fundamentalist threats, environmental crimes, (filling up rivers and wetlands, unchecked industrial pollution etc.), extortion and toll collection, and highway robberies. There should be specialized units to deal with these crimes.

To achieve these targets, the police force should have all the required funding from the government, so that its members enjoy increase pay and facilities. The force should have sufficient logistics, ammunition and technological support to fight even the most sophisticated crimes. It should have helicopters, amphibian vessels and SWAT teams for quick deployment, a full-fledged anti-terrorist wing a strong environmental unit, and other specialized units, such as tourist police and industrial police.

Training facilities should also be vastly improved. Sardah can be the hub of all training activities, and efforts should be made to bring it up to international standards. There should be well-equipped crime laboratories and efficiently solving crimes. In other words, the police force should have all the facilities made available to it for policing should also be given a new meaning; policing should be seen as provision of service that citizens need to live in peace, and in a community where crime is not tolerated.

I am not an expert on matters relating to crime, crime prevention and policing, but as a citizen of the country I have a genuine desire to see Bangladesh rising as a prosperous, educated, tolerant and democratic country where citizens feel safe in and out of their homes. Link millions of my countrymen, I also visualize a country where truth, justice and fair play prevail, where the evil are punished, and the

good are rewarded. To reach that state, we need to make a paradigm shift in all aspects of our life. The police force can be a change agent in that collective nation rebuilding effort. But for the police to change, and be a change agent it has to get rid of outdated operating systems. The 1861 act needs a serious revision. A new version was made a few years ago, and public opinion was sought for improving it. I too gave my opinions. The revised versions is now lying somewhere in a cold chamber. I hope the government retrieves it, and offers it for further public discussion. But after a certain time, the the government has to go ahead and implement it. That, in my mind, will signal a movement towards a paradigm shift.

I congratulate Sardah police Academy for clocking a century, and for being one of the top training academies in the subcontinent. I hope the academy grows from strength to strength in the coming days and attains global recognition for the excellence of its service.

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