

Stampede deaths: Martyrs of mismanagement

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



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WE are not even five days into the pall of gloom cast by the alms-giving incident at Satkania, Chittagong causing nine deaths, mostly of women and

children, and injuries to several others. Yet, attempts are being made to shield the truth and shirk responsibility from what has been an abysmal management failure.

Different versions are coming into play beneath the surface apparently depending on which side of the fence one is sitting on. An atmosphere of hush-hush prevails as people prefer to talk on condition of anonymity lest they fall foul of the potential or real benefactor.

This reminds us of a Graham Greene quote from the novel *The Heart of the Matter*: "In human relations kindness and lies are worth a thousand truths." That it befalls us to unravel some such truths is as much a professional duty as it is a social obligation for us.

It is claimed by people apparently close to Kabir Steel Re-rolling Mills Limited (KSRM) that "heat-stroke" took the lethal toll. But the doctors who treated the injured victims have marked bruises and scars on their bodies put down to *lathi* charge. This cruel method resorted to by the mills' security staff apparently "to reduce

crowd pressure" had the opposite effect on the alms-seekers. They took fright of the ham handedness resulting in them tripping over each other and being trampled underfoot, many of them lethally.

Of course, it was a given that the public on such occasions get impatient, and desperate by a demonstrative effect to get hold of the receivables. They could have been persuaded to wait for their turn and not attempt to jump the queue.

Essentially it must be realised that

the brutality was entirely out of character with the noble purpose of distributing Iftar commodities and Zakat money.

Spiritually, however, acts of piety in Islamic parlance are enjoined to be performed quietly. If, however, a wealthy benefactor should choose to be demonstrative with his pious giveaways, he needs to measure up to the standards of management matching with the scale of event.

It wasn't also a closed space (but a field adjoining an orphanage) where

distribution was planned, so that it admitted of orderly entry, receipt of deliverables and exit—provided the volunteers were deployed and active at the right places.

Were the police in adequate strength at the venue under specific instructions to discipline a potentially chaotic situation? According to one version, the police didn't consider it a matter of security!

It must be said in all fairness to police's reactive dynamism that they are pursuing a case filed by

the husband of his deceased wife Hasina Akhter against KSRM's executive director Shahjahan Mian along with three others. The officer-in-charge of Satkania Thana, Rafiqul Hossain, pointed out "lapse and flaw" on the part of the mill authority.

We are perhaps the quickest to unlearn from the previous experiences of deaths in stampedes. On December 18, 2017 ten persons died and many were injured at the Rima community centre where non-beef

dishes were served to Hindus during the Qul Khawani for the deceased Mayor of Chittagong Mohiuddin Ahmed. Entry to and exit from the community centre entailed negotiating a 10-foot slope where the stampede occurred.

Late mayor Mohiuddin's relatives owned up to the responsibility for the accident. They paid each of the family of the dead Tk 1 lakh, bore the medical expenses of the injured, apart from granting Tk 5,000 to the wounded.

Now it is for the re-rolling mill owners to follow that precedent in taking responsibility for the tragedy and adequately compensating the victims.

In October 2005, a similar trampling incident had occurred at the same spot in Satkania killing five but obviously to little avail. In July 2015, as many as 27, all of them women and children, died in Mymensingh where they had gathered for free Zakat clothes. In March 2015, 16 persons were killed during the Hindu rituals of bath at one of the sites of Sitalakhya.

In more recent years, we have stacked up quite a legacy of management failures when crowds swelled out of control, and as people jostled for space, they would be crushed, mangled and pummelled.

"When one is killed, humanity is diminished"—we would do well to remember that and save life from the avoidable accidents galore.



PHOTO: STAR

Nine women died in a stampede during the distribution of Zakat and Iftar items at Satkania on May 14, 2018.

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