

Food for the Hungry

Heed it please and in time. On Thursdays the population of Bogra city gains by a few thousand. The increase is constituted wholly of beggars. Last Thursday the volume of the inflow was inflated by a factor of at least four to five. The newcomers to the town were not beggars but they were in Bogra to beg. From early morning the new beggars started doing the round of the streets and business centres in droves. Some of these itinerant groups looked like protest processions. But protest was very far from the minds of the women and children and the aging, almost disabled, ladies in these groups. Physical survival till the next day was their only concern.

As in Bogra so in Rangpur. In fact, it is traditionally Rangpur which first shows the sign of a famine condition. But this year the distressed people in the interior, specially from the 50 identified disadvantaged areas, have rushed more to Bogra, perhaps with the thought that a bigger and more prosperous city could afford to be more generous. This thought is a sign of enterprise — but can this see them through in a nightmare situation so familiar to the country on the other side of the Padma and Jamuna? Dinajpur has never had a hunger march. It falls outside of the band of famine towns. This year the legendary Dinajpur of the fragrant rice has joined Rangpur as the town of attracting thousands of people going about its streets in a daze, induced by acute hunger. A correspondent writing to a national daily on Friday described Dinajpur as being suddenly reduced to a town of beggars.

If such is the situation in Bogra and Dinajpur, what must have been the picture of Rangpur in the past week! News from that once prosperous town said that from afternoon onwards of the visible population of Rangpur the hungry visitors form the overwhelming majority. From Gangachara and Sadar areas they come walking. And from Kaunia-Pirgachha on the east and Badarganj-Shyampur-Kholahati on the west they come by their thousands by train. None in this new wave of the hungry ones accept small coins. They want food.

And food they must get why shouldn't they? Bangladesh is not very adversely placed either in food production or food stock. In the past presence of food stock has failed to prevent famine tolls, time and again. That cannot be allowed to repeat. It should be a puny little affair for the government to arrange food for these people and prevent a takeover of the northern towns by sheer panic. And then it will devolve on the government to go to the spots where hunger takes its direct toll, into the interior, and save the people there who are all producers of this nation's wealth.

This sudden development of a famine situation in the northern districts is a short-lived seasonal phenomenon caused by drought and it will be over the sooner the government moves to meet it. The government would be well advised to preempt food marches and agitations by opening free-food centres in the northern towns including Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat etc. The term gruel kitchen or *langarkhana* has so much bad association of both horror and degradation that government would do better not to bring them back to use. Let the term go but the real thing start functioning without delay. The Prime Minister has been seeing the situation for herself over the weekend. She should be one of the first to be convinced of the need of the free-food centres.

Repeated Road Deaths

Hardly a day passes without the dailies splashing news of road deaths involving vehicles. The frequency of these fatal tragedies dulls the mind and turns all attempts at commenting meaningfully on these futile. Only on Wednesday morning a minibus skidded off the Dhaka-Munshiganj road and plunged into an eight-foot ditch killing four on the spot and injuring 30, some of them grievously. Everything contributing to such package unnatural deaths has been pointed out time and again. There seems to be no point in adding more to miles of what already have been written about these — and specially when there seems to be nobody anywhere responding to our pointers.

The vehicle-related road deaths have long been spared the searching probe of a high-level investigation and all such have been relegated to the point of being dismissed as unavoidable, beyond-control accidents — leaving the field open for repetition of similar deaths without any hindrance or let-up. The society seems to have entered into a kind of stupor otherwise how can these deaths be left to pass unchallenged and unaddressed.

There cannot be any question of an accident when the case is one of overloading or criminal infringement of law. What was this minibus doing with its 40-plus passenger load? And very few of the plying buses are roadworthy, what if this one was unworthy? How to throw out of the road these unworthies? There seems to be no effective mechanism for that. This is where the authorities' share of guilt in these unending processions of deaths starts taking shape. Do the authorities think of ever coming to control the speed of the vehicles and is there a speed limit? If the answers are in the negative, these road deaths are no product of accidents — these are built into the system of inefficiency and indifference that rules the movement sector of this nation. And, the curse of it all, no one seems to care.

Faulting the driver of the death-trap and making him liable capitally rather than the present soft touch would be no way to fight the road deaths. Finding a scapegoat cannot help matters; the driver is most of the times a victim of so many things — poor road conditions, transport operators' insistence that he make do with junk of a vehicle, to name only two. Whatever the government proposes to do to mitigate this absurd nightmare, if it does at all, it must first do a bit of sincere heart-searching. Have they in the government ever thought of seriously addressing this problem? Our guess is 'no'. They have agreed to the misleading label 'accident' and washed their hand of any responsibility in the matter.

For a government of a civilised people, this won't simply do.

PERHAPS it is time to realize that the current political stalemate is clogging the simmering progress in Bangladesh's politics and economics that was in evidence over the last couple of years. The declared show of an uncompromising stance on the part of both the treasury bench and the opposition is possibly pushing things to a point of no return. One may recall, it all started with government's alleged unwillingness to accommodate opposition's views in the parliament and it is said that the alleged election rigging only helped to exacerbate the prevailing mistrust. Thus pushed to the fence, the opposition in the parliament seems possibly desperate to impose its conditionalities on the government by hook or by crook. The only historic moment that both sides converged to each other was, perhaps, the time of a decision on the form of government. Since that glorious moment, both the parties appeared to have opted to stand poles apart on different national and international issues, as if, divided we stand and united we fall.

The Hartal Card

In the international fora, Bangladesh has long been known as a country of extreme poverty, frequent natural calamity, continuous political turmoil and fragile governance. Recent addition to this basket of characteristics seems to be that Bangladesh is a country of frequent hartals. Hartal, like its other cousins, is believed to tarnish Bangladesh's image outside and thus to discourage domestic and foreign investments in this country. It is opined that the costs of hartals are not often accurately measured and correctly grasped by the learned politicians residing on either side of the fence. Had not this allegation been true then, so goes the argument, the present ruling party of Bangladesh would make sincere efforts to avert some of the hartal calls by the opposi-

To Whom Hartals may Concern

by Abdul Bayes

tion and the opposition could also choose a different mode of resentment without jeopardizing the normal socio-economic workings of the populace.

Let's take the example of the most recent consecutive 3-day hartal call by the opposition that followed the Dhaka siege programme on 10 September. Most of us were waiting to watch a possible dialogue between the contending parties to avert the miseries of the 10th. Unfortunately, however, it seemed that the government was hardly keen on this, possibly, to see opposition's limit to this end. Furthermore, it is being alleged that the deployment of troops and the application of the transport card gave the impression that government itself was relatively more interested in sieging Dhaka than the opposition. The feeling of a failure so clinched might have led the opposition to resort to consecutive 3-day hartals. It is, however, not clear as to why the innocent millions should suffer by three days of hartals for the government's alleged fault of that day.

Costs and Benefits of Hartals

The severe costs of hartals are recognized even by those who go for it. Interestingly enough, the government owned media never project hartal episodes and the losses therein. Conversely, we tend to watch and listen how normal government offices, mills and transport premises were during "abnormal" hartal hours! There are two types of costs of hartals that we can think of. The first type of costs are purely economic and can easily be quantified under certain assumptions. Assume that (i) an eight-hour hartal is observed throughout the country on a particular day; (ii) the output

of agriculture and public services sectors are not affected by hartals and if at all, the amount is negligible; (iii) the output of transport, communication, power and gas is totally denied by such hartal and if not, the output taking place is very slim and (iv) the output of other sectors are adversely affected by varying degrees e.g. industry 70%, commerce and other services 60%, house building 20% and other construction works 40%.

We know that the annual GDP of Bangladesh is around Tk. 80,000 crores. Assuming eight hours work a day and 280 working days in a year, the daily GDP of Bangladesh then amounts to about Tk. 282 crores. Taking the sectoral contributions to GDP, if we now blow up the losses of output as per the distribution of sectors above, the total output on a hartal day comes to about Tk. 115 crores. The difference between the normal daily output (without hartal) and the hartal day output thus stands at Tk. 167 crores (282-115). This is 59% of the normal daily delivery. If hartals prolong for three such occasions, as it did on the last occasion, the total loss would be Tk. 502 crores.

Thus a one-day-eight hour hartal goes to cost us a Meghna Bridge and two like this would cost. In addition, a Meghna-Gumti plus almost a Katchpur Bridge. However, the total cost in this case excludes the loss in the informal sector output and cost of property damages, if any. Needless to mention, inclusion of the last two items would enlarge the loss figures.

In the second type are those costs which can hardly be quantified and which also are rarely placed in common discussions relating to hartals. Whereas, in terms of long-term productive capacity of the economic agents, these

Talk of Wastage

Usually, the current maze of anti-hartal notions centres only around the loss of national output per hartal day. This aspect is vividly projected to turn people against hartals. However, in a country where severe wastages of resources are already taking place throughout the year even without hartals, needless to mention, such a concern can hardly win over people's heart. For example, the yearly loss of a Sector Corporation is estimated to be Tk. 400 crores which is equivalent of about three eight-hour hartals. The

ment could possibly be made more productive by calling in very fewer hartals and (say one or two in a year) also under very grave circumstances. Second, since to-day's opposition may be to-morrow's government and vice versa, it is not only the current party in power that is forced to pay the tolls, but also the future governments have to share a part of it. Third, hartals should preferably be substituted by more rallies, demonstrations and marches. Keeping people inside home via hartals is likely to be less effective than pulling them out through other means. Lastly, the non-quantifiable costs of hartals (those we earlier considered as long-run stakes) are generally higher in the case of hartals than otherwise.

From government's side, it is not merely by closing the doors that anti-hartal sentiments could be promoted. Access to different channels should be given to the opposition to speak out and that could possibly make hartals less attractive to them. In developed societies, these stem from unregulated media, faith in the parliament and on the opposition (as development partners) to have frequent dialogues. In those societies, since the governance is more accountable and transparent, the opposition tend to have few things to place outside parliament. In Bangladesh, this would necessitate, *inter alia* (i) viewing opposition as a part of the government and thus having more frequent dialogues on different national and international issues, (ii) making TV and Radio more accessible to the opposition's views and news, (iii) making parliamentary standing committees more effective (ministers should not head these committees) and (iv) putting an earnest dose of faith on parliamentary parleys which is, generally, reflected by the Leader of the House taking floor on national and international issues.

heretofore.

Pitifully foreign minister ASM Mustafizur Rahman doesn't believe that the situation has reached the extent to feel despondent. On the other hand, his cabinet colleague and finance minister Saifur Rahman had expressed his deepest concern on the ignominious rise of the extremists at a time when the potential foreign investors were poised to make massive investments here. Knowledgeable sources inform that within the party in power members are palpably divided over the alleged sinister concessions being given to the Jamaatis and other anti-liberation forces.

Bangladesh is currently passing through an all-time low profile in the international arena. Her image has been soiled and stained. The Diplomatic Missions in Dhaka have also expressed disgust at the passing events. They are constantly reporting the developments to their respective home governments. Even a special Emissary from Norway representing the European Communities came down to Dhaka, reportedly on Taslima Nasreen and other issues born out of fanaticism. The democratic community of the world, Amnesty International, PEN

Of Fanaticism and Fundamentalism

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

AT the outset let us take a look at the literal meaning of the words 'fanaticism' and 'fundamentalism'. Webster describes a 'fanatic' as "an extremist; often applied to followers of a religion or a political party" and 'fanaticism' denotes for "excessive zeal or unreasoning fervour, especially religious or political" or "behaviour marked by such zeal or fervour". 'Fundamentalism' on the other hand, denotes "a belief that the Bible is to be accepted literally as an inerrant and infallible spiritual and historical document". The term itself is a derivative from the word 'fundamental' meaning "pertaining to or being the basis, root or foundation of something; essential; elementary; primary".

So, we find that these two terms are not synonymous. Rather, they are diametrically opposite both in meaning and spirit. Now against such clear appreciation of these two terms, we may make an attempt to measure the torments that have seized the Bangladesh scenario.

It is curious to observe that fanatics and fundamentalists have been bracketed together.

Presumably, it is intended to tell us that whosoever is a fanatic, a religious fanatic rather, is essentially a fundamentalist and vice versa. In my opinion, a religious fanatic acts on impulse and allows himself to be guided by wild emotions. He is practically blind-folded and yet he enjoys a sort of mirthful sojourn in the dark alleys of ignorance, superstition, intolerance, vengeance and such other ignominious overtures.

On the contrary, a believer in the fundamentals of religion is supposedly an enlightened person having better exposure to its basic principles. And once he has had such an exposure he shall have no scope to pervert his thinking or twist any of such basic principles. I think, whatever is true for Bible will be equally true for the holy books of any other religion. Our Holy Quran is replete with innumerable but fundamental principles on which Islam, as the religion of God, is strongly founded. Besides, it could be a most

potent guide to the entire humanity irrespective of individual religious affiliation. For, the Quran is a complete code of life bequeathed to the believers by God Almighty. So, strict adherence to the fundamentals of Islam, as adequately stated in the Holy Book, cannot be a crime. It would, rather, be a panacea for all ills, an impenetrable shield against all evils.

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during the War of Liberation when, even the half-educated Pathan soldiers of the Pakistani occupation army were trapped. They were most maliciously tutored that Muslims in East Pakistan were all converts from the low-caste Hindus and that they did not have any faith in Allah and His Rasul. Praying in mosques was also unknown to them — so the soldiers were briefed. Later, when they were here and were seized by an abhorring hysteria of mass killing — precisely a genocide — they were disillusions. We heard many stories of Pathan soldiers cursing the high heavens and the Punjabi politicians for their having told blatant lies. Many of the soldiers found that Islam was very much alive here.

So, those who believed and those who did not, were in the same parenthesis and became the targets of bullet, bayonet, rape, arson, inhuman torture. And those who set the targets were indeed Muslims' but not

incomes from clandestine sources, are the most vicious elements defiling Islam.

Tragically again, our mosques — the most sacred place of worship for the Muslims are by and large turning into seats of political intrigues. The Quranic verse 'La Kum Dunuun' has been a divine deterrent enjoined upon the true believers of Islam to maticulously follow. Unfortunately, the conglomerate comprising anti-liberation forces, patrons of moral turpitude, non-believers in an independent and sovereign Bangladesh, etc. are observed also to have been demanding of the government of Bangladesh to declare Qadiani as non-Muslims. The Jamaat-e-Islami Party of Golam Azam has its active patronage and support to such a demand in the same manner it did in early fifties when its mentor and chief Moududi organised a mass killing in Lahore. Indeed

Nasreen episode at this stage made things more cloudy. This extra-smart medico cum novelist and women lib activist most unwittingly sought to vindicate the rights of women at such a time when the so-called village mullahs and urban fanatics were preparing themselves to make a bigger assault on the innumerable poor girls and women working with different NGOs operating all over Bangladesh. The largest NGO BRAC became their first target. Later other NGOs and donor agencies financing different development projects in rural Bangladesh came on their list. They are now raising a crusade against the NGOs for their alleged 'anti-Islamic' activities. NGOs are also being accused of converting poor people into Christianity although no specific case could so far be cited. They are cooking up 'fatafat' everyday forbidding village girls and women from participating in the hitherto obscure

and the Human Rights commission are observed to have been openly indignant and alarmed at the fast waning situation here. Ironically, the Prime Minister seemed unmoved and unconcerned, most other ministers and party leaders perhaps playing the second fiddle being grossly contented with their own position in the cabinet.

All seem to have closed

their eyes while a national calamity is brewing to precipitate a crisis that will put the country, maybe, to a point of no return. The religion of

peace, harmony, tolerance and beauty, the religion of Allah, the fundamental basis of existence of the Muslims all over the world, will in that crisis be the first casualty. We seek His infinite mercy to rescue and protect us from such fanatics as are blatantly twisting Islam to achieve their heinous political ends.

and religious obligation for the Pakistan Government to take back their stranded nationals?

I would request the Education Boards and the government to seriously consider revising the benchmarks immediately for star and for all divisions at SSC levels. I propose that the benchmarks for star be set at 85 per cent, first division at 70 per cent, second division at 60 per cent and third division at 45 per cent.

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