

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 pre-empt 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-

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

by Abdul Bayes

non-quantifiable costs could turn out to be far more damaging than the pure economic losses. These are, for example: (i) the mental pressure on people during hartal days; (ii) the frustration among people centering on the future of the country as a result of frequent hartals; (iii) the loss of country's image reflected by several questions by foreign investors; (iv) gradual erosion of work ethics and (v) growing work aversion by the workers etc.

The benefits of hartals are largely pocketed by the opposition. A successful hartal tends to give them a moral boost but, at the same time, it tends to provide a psychological blow to the party in power. During the hartal day, as we know, government and governance do not seem to exist in the country and the hartalist appear to take over. People tend to view the views of opposition more seriously than before. Such a situation goes to unnerve a government and also probably makes it less credible to the public. Thus, while the costs of hartals are totally borne by the economy and the government, the benefits so generated are monopolized by the opposition.

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

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Second, it is being argued that hartal outlived its utility as a means of protest once we got an elected parliament, elected government and 'democracy' in the country. In that case, so argues the anti-hartal lobby the parliament should be the citadel of resolution of conflicts. This argument is, perhaps, more convincing than the earlier ones. But here again, one needs to note that, more often than not, the treasury bench allegedly has not been showing respect to the views of the opposition. The leader of the house is alleged to have a track record of long absence from important deliberations. The opposition's bills could hardly get sympathy from the treasury bench. The law and order situation in the country, campus violence, rampant corruption in the society, electoral rigging etc. hardly had any fruitful berth in the deliberations of the 'expensive' parliamentary sessions. The government news media, seemingly, continue to be a hangover of the autocratic regime and devoid of democratic norms. Thus, theoretically, hartals should outlive utility as a means of protest but in reality, the situations so created tend to make the opposition inclined to resort to hartals.

Alternative Way Out

Should we then treat hartal as a necessity and continue to encourage it? The answer is 'no'. The main reasons are: first, frequent use of the same instrument tells upon its effectiveness and credibility. Given that opposition has very few options to ventilate their grievances, such an instru-

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 and the Human Rights commission are observed to have been openly indignant and alarmed at the fast waning situation here. Ironically, the Prime Minister and the Home 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.

To Whom Hartals may Concern

by Abdul Bayes

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Of Fanaticism and Fundamentalism

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

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 and a very strong citadel for the true believers.

This is the premise from which I intend to scan the current religion-based political scenario in Bangladesh. Here I can distinctly recall how Islam as a religion was so frequently being used by our Pakistani masters before and during the War of Liberation in 1971. The so-called 'learned' moulanas and self-styled 'professors' turned politicians took this as an unflinching bait to mislead the uneducated, innocent rural Muslims. Politicisation of Islam was at its dizzy heights

true believers of Islam. In fact, they were a bunch of 'munafiqs' and Allah hates *munafiqs* clearly and unambiguously in the Holy Quran. The soil of Bengal has been a hybernating hatchery of many a 'mirja'far' through different ages joining hands with aliens. History tells us that though they achieved preeminent successes they had succeeded more in writing down their names in the annals of history with the blackest of hue of eternal condemnation.

In the Holy Quran, Allah has categorically forbidden excesses of any type, be it with the religion of His liking or with anything else. This is indeed a part of the fundamental principles he has specifically asked the believers to follow. The deviators will be taken care of only by Himself. In this context, the fanatics joined by a number of condemned politicians, armed criminals who are thriving on unearned

hypocrisy is so nakedly and ruthlessly devouring human values.

Fanaticism and extremism in Bangladesh over the past several months have spread their tentacles like a vicious octopus. It has assumed an alarming proportion much to the dissatisfaction and disgust of the international community. The illiterate and half-literate headmen of the villages are found to have been holding local trials of helpless girls and women on grounds of illicit connections established by wayward youths belonging to the wealthy and powerful landlords. They are taking primitive and predatory measures to punish the female victims whereas the actual perpetrators of the crimes move freely untouched and unpunished. Such a dastardly process started with Shab Meher, Nurjahan etc. and continues even now unabated.

The emergence of Taslima

patting in the population control and family planning programmes. Women are being openly discouraged in their pursuit of self-employment. The massive benefits that the poor, hapless rural community started deriving at the behest of these NGOs and voluntary social service organisations are being frequently interfered with and campaigns raised against their operation in Bangladesh. Consequently, many NGOs and donor agencies here perhaps have been seriously thinking of closing down their shutters. The impact of such a decision will be simply disastrous. It is a pity that the government is yet to be harsh against such anti-development forces.

These are the bitter fruits of fanaticism. It is rapidly ripping off the serene fabric of our social, economic, political and religious environment. The infernal Pandemonium over the inconsequential state-

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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 disillusioned. 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 Dinu Kum Waliadin' has been a divine deterrent 'enjoined upon the true believers of Islam to meticulously 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 Qadiyaniyas 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 'fatoh' everyday forbidding village girls and women from partici-

ment of a hitherto obscure Taslima Nasreen to a reporter of the Calcutta-based Daily *Statesman* which she later disowned, followed by a wild demand by the fanatics to hang her or to kill her for a ransom. The gruesome murder of six innocent persons by the Jamaati armed hoodlums in Chittagong 'rather before the eyes' of the law enforcing agencies, are some of the harrowing tales that have rocked also the world community. Even President Clinton of the United States has expressed his indignation on such threats to human rights and civil liberties by the extremists. The EEC in particular has expressed great concern on the 'indulgence' being meted out to the fanatics by the administration which it links with the government's trick to divert peoples' attention from the opposition demand for a neutral, caretaker government to conduct all general elections

To the Editor...

Uncalled for

Sir, I happened to be present on invitation at a seminar on 'Role of Educated Youths in Mass Literacy Programme of Bangladesh for Poverty Alleviation' organised by a local NGO in cooperation with United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) on September 8, 1994. The keynote paper was very well-written and the discussions that followed were all illuminating and the participants were undoubtedly enlightened.

I was enjoying the deliberations with avid interest. But the whole thing, in my opinion, was perhaps marred to a good extent by the speech of the gentleman, who took the chair of the Chief Guest in the absence of the originally invited personage — a Government Minister — who was unavoidably away from the city on the day.

What intrigued me most

was that he, who happen to be an ex-diplomat, could resort to this forum which was to discuss a non-controversial subject, to unabashed political maligning of the ruling party government. He went so far as to dub the Government a 'fraud' for what he called 'hood-winking' the public in respect of fund allocation for education vis a vis other sectors. I do not belong to any political party. But I have no hesitation to say that the use of such unsavoury remarks at a neutral place was simply uncalled for, and also spoke of bad taste.

T Hussain
Dhaka

So many stars!

Sir, In the recent years, especially after introduction of objective-type questions worth 500 marks in SSC examination, we have seen plenty of star-mark achievers for whom

this glory perhaps brings so little. In fact, the question patterns, level of difficulty, rigour in marking — all have tremendously changed since when the 75 per cent bench mark was set. Today, a reasonably serious student who reads his text books thoroughly (for which a 2-year time period is given) can expect to score almost 100 per cent. One who scores even 90 per cent on the objective questions needs to score only 300 out of the rest 500 marks in order to get 750 in total. With so many 'stars' around us, star-mark perhaps has lost its cutting edge and the fame.

Last year, in a government college in Mymensingh the cut-off point for applying for admission to science group was set at 780. During a recent intake at IBA, a guardian came up with an apparent complaint that how his ward could not get a chance in the BBA programme when he got star-

marks both in SSC and HSC examination results. These are not isolated cases.

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.

Reza M Monem
Assoc. Prof. IBA, Dhaka
University

Stranded Pakistanis

Sir, The repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis is no more a political issue but it has now become a burning humanitarian issue. How long would these stranded Pakistanis stay in a sub-human condition at the various Geneva Camps in Bangladesh? Isn't the moral

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

I draw the attention of all the concerns to this human issue. At the same time I would request the all the editors, journalists of the print media to kindly write editorials, features highlighting the inhuman condition of the stranded Pakistanis with a view to draw the attention of the international community and to create pressure on the government of Pakistan to expedite repatriation of these stranded people without further delay.

M Zahidul Haque
Asst Prof. BAI, Dhaka

Discrimination against women

Sir, By tradition or edict of the ulemas (upper echelon of the Muslim clergy) a woman in an Islamic society cannot be a member of the clergy, head of

the government, or a member of the judiciary. All these have nicely barred women from interpreting the tenets of Islam. Whenever a 'fatwa' adversely affects the rights of women, they can protest only at the risk of being declared a deviant or a heretic. The law that evidence by two women equals that of one man is an insult to any woman. Are women intellectually or morally inferior to men? Our family laws governing inheritance, divorce, alimony, custodianship of children, polygamy etc are certainly discriminatory against women.

As long as laws discriminating against women exist, there will be protests. Hanging one or one thousand so-called heretic will not make the issues wither away. As history testifies, nothing is ever settled unless it is settled right.

Abdul Ghafur
BIDS, Dhaka