

Rape of Humanity

Death of Seema in jail custody has once again given us the horrific reminder how unsafe and vulnerable we all are in the 'safe' hands of police, the so-called guardians of law on whom lies the sacred task of punishing the bad and protecting the good.

The young, female factory worker who first drew public notice after the newspapers glaringly depicted the shameful story of her rape in the custody by the personnel of a police station in Raozan, died under mysterious circumstances giving rise to very authentic suspicion of a huge attempt within the local administration of the law enforcing agency to 'bury' the issue that has caused great and general public indignation.

We are afraid death of Seema, its timing and the speed with which the body was cremated (even though Seema had converted to Islam) forces us to suspect foul play of a very serious nature. The report of the enquiry committee which refers to the bleeding nose and loose teeth of a dead Seema strengthens our suspicion that the victim was subject to extra ordinary physical torture.

We commend PM's decision for quick inquiry into this affair, and urge her to respond to the demand for setting up an high powered judicial probe body. We also think that the practice of "safe" custody of innocent victims of crime should immediately be changed.

The sheer enormity of crime in the case of Seema's death can be viewed from two angles. While some members of the police violated the sanctity of the police custody — a place deemed as a sanctuary for the harassed or the oppressed by the civilised imagination, their peers in all probability used their power and position to silence the scope of protest or any prayer for justice. What has happened is not only the ultimate insult of humanity by desecrating a human body but also a clear attempt to hoodwink law and that too by whom? The law enforcers. People's faith in the institution of police is now at stake. More than anybody else, it is the police who should distance themselves from the perpetrators of this heinous crimes and take all measure to punish them, and correct the system. Since the PM has already given her directives, the home minister should take immediate steps to punish the culprits.

Hospitals or Death Traps

On the Eid day and the two following days Health Minister Salahuddin Yusuf went round several hospitals in and around the city. What he saw for himself was that his hospitals hardly offer any service. For on the Eid night he found the corridors of PG's ninth floor jet-black dark. Next day, he found only one doctor in the whole of the Cancer Hospital at Mahakhali. The same day at the Leprosy Hospital he found not even a nurse, not to speak of a doctor. And most of its wards were completely dark. The gigantic Chest Diseases Hospital also did not have enough attending medical staff. And on February 11 he found at the Government Employees Hospital at Phulbaria, luckily must be, one nurse and no doctor or any other employee. And the Azimpur Maternity, perhaps the biggest in the country, was in the charge of a health visitor when the minister went there.

Two days after the Eid, a staffer of this newspaper also happened to savour the nauseating and unsavoury reality of the biggest of government hospitals. Without an idea of what his experience was only an indication of, the minister's unpleasant impression would not complete even a part of the picture of government hospitals.

The Daily Star story in effect said the DMCH is a place not to fight death but hasten the impoverished and hapless patient come to their charge — to death and deliberately too. One hopes this is not all that the DMCH does. If the health ministry really means business, then it should take a few existing hospitals — like DMCH, Mitford and a selective few in other cities — and make them work well. A dramatic improvement in DMCH will go a long way in convincing us that the government is serious about improving health services. Please demonstrate that government means business.

Ibsen Seminar

The ten-day seminar on Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian trail-blazer in the world of modern drama is beginning in the city from today. Centre for Asan Theatre (CAT) has arranged the assembly of Ibsen scholars in association with the Norwegian embassy in Dhaka.

As a playwright Ibsen dwelt on evils of the nineteenth century Europe like subjection of women, hypocrisy, hereditary disease, seamy politics and corrupt journalism and his fearless criticism of them which created quite a bit of furor and uproar in his time is far from having lost relevance in today's Bangladesh.

Absurdists and paranoid worshippers of the cult of novelty may fall short of proper appreciation of Ibsen but the fact of the matter is that the plays of this Scandinavian guru of dramatic art mark the culmination of bourgeois drama-drama that deals with problems and conditions of the middle class. Ibsen then stays with us not only because he, through his realistic, nevertheless highly symbolic plays, tore the mask of hypocrisy from marriage, respectability, the rule of the 'compact majority' but also because he was an artist who managed to create, at his best, works of poetry which under the mask of their sardonic humour express his dream of humanity reborn by intelligence and self sacrifice.

Apart from a tribute to one of the greatest playwrights of all time and a delving into the relevance of his works in our time, this seminar also proves Dhaka's growing emergence as a city abounding in activities that speak of the aesthetic and intellectual propensity of a nation. Dhaka is no longer a backwater of intellectual and cultural exercise. While wishing success to the organisers we welcome this delectable change in Dhaka's face.

Glory of Birth, Nightmare of Death

Available statistics on maternal mortality rate is a pointer to the nightmare noted above. It is 28 in industrial countries compared to 600 per 100,000 live births in South Asia: 850 in Bangladesh, 1500 in Nepal and 1600 in Bhutan.

MORE often than not, children are considered as the future citizens and leaders of a country. The connotations of affixes are, possibly, that the health and wealth of such a country are closely linked to that of its child inhabitants. If the relationship is taken for granted then, sadly speaking, the future of South Asian nations are threatened by the inhuman conditions in which their children appear to survive. Let us look at some of the gloomy statistics on child survival in South Asia used by Dr Mahbubul Haq, the eminent economist of Pakistan, in his forthcoming book, 'Human Development in South Asia'.

At the outset, one needs to recognize the hard reality that the most deprived region in the world is South Asia and the scale of human deprivation here is nothing but colossal and catastrophic. The worst victims of poverty in this region are mostly children and women — the weakest and the most vulnerable segment of the society. A child born in South Asia is said to be subject of constant denial, deprivation and destitution. In the absence of trained nurses during deliveries of children, 70 per cent child bearing mothers face premature deaths leaving their beloved children motherless just at the time they (children) step into this world. Far too often, the miracle of births turn into nightmare of deaths.

Available statistics on maternal mortality rate is a pointer to the nightmare noted above. It is 28 in industrial countries compared to 600 per 100,000 live births in South Asia: 850 in Bangladesh, 1500 in Nepal and 1600 in Bhutan. Obviously, the frightening figures appear as "sad commentary on the status of women in these societies and on the prospects of confronting children at birth".

Leaving aside the monumental problems at the time of birth, the survival and development of children in this part of the globe tend to epitomize epidemic episodes. For example, half of the world's 83 million malnourished children, reportedly, can be observed in only three countries — India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The infant mortality rate is still 82 per 1000 live births. This compares with 63 in all other developing countries (excluding South Asia). More worrisome, 85 million children of South

pecially of the poorer segment, and (d) making available educational facilities to them. To make education the arbiter of growth and human development, political commitments should be marshalled immediately.

Another worrying and horrifying dimension of child survival in South Asia is the issue of child labour. An estimated 134 million children are employed — in inhuman condition and on paltry wage — as labour. India tops the table containing the largest number of child labour in the world. Bangladesh

is the growing sexual exploitation of children for profit. A survey of six urban cities in India (1991) showed that 15 per cent of the sex workers found to be children at the time of their entry into this filthy business. Over five per cent of the sex workers in India are reported to be from Bangladesh and Nepal. About 7000 new children are being trafficked into India each year — these exploited children have to face both the physical dangers of violence and torture and the medical dangers of contracting HIV or AIDS.

While children are so plunged, some of the South Asian governments are trying to tighten their belts in terms of devising stricter child labour rules and regulations. These do not seem to be that much of a sort of required rules and regulations. What is, in fact, lacking in these societies is strict adherence to the rules and proper implementation of the rules. If such vices grow unabated, the potentials of these innocent children could be plundered and the nations could be robbed of the opportunities of a pleasant society. No doubt poverty is a strong contributory factor to it but it is just one of the many reasons which push children onto the rocky roads, others being — economic disparities, lack of education, irresponsible male sex behaviour, gender discrimination and harmful traditional practices etc. Civil societies, NGOs and governments need to arouse public sentiment against child abuses and force the society to care for them. As the poet once said: *Ghumiey Achhe Shishur Pita Shab Shishu Antare* (fathers of the child is sleeping in the heart of the child). Let's awake the children and their parents. And it is not by taking mere resolutions but by marshalling effective implementations so that the nightmare of deaths could be turned into glory of births.

Of the total child labour, 70 per cent are engaged in agriculture and the rest in hazardous industries. The agricultural labours are 'mainly victims of an entrenched system of bonded labour where whole families are enslaved in order to pay off debts'.

The most daunting and disturbing problem in South Asia

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



Asia have never seen the interior of a school. Only half of the school aged children are enrolled in schools and 42 per cent of them drop-out before reaching grade V. Conventional wisdom adduces these drop-outs to family circumstances and the compulsion to provide economic support to the household. But beneath the surface, lies another important but generally overlooked and under-estimated reason: the realization by the students and their parents that the quality of education is poor and unfriendly to their needs and aspirations. So, to reduce the extent of drop-outs what South Asian nations need to ensure are (a) focusing on quality of education rather than on the number of schools; (b) devoting more resources to training of teachers and its monitoring; (c) re-setting curriculum keeping in view the growing needs of the society, es-

Govt Employees' Image is Way Down

The system of noting by various grades of people is a system which has been done away with in other countries. Normally, there should be one note in the file and that by the officer who can take some action on it. Previous nothings are a hindrance because they pin you down to some unfortunate precedent.

IN initial days of space technology, when 'Sputnik' was a failure, it was compared with a civil servant. People would say that you cannot make him work, nor can you fire him. I am reminded of that because there is once again a spurt in meetings and statements on how to make government servants work.

Prime Minister Deve Gowda told the state chief secretaries the other day at Delhi that they should help build an efficient, open, accountable, clean and dynamic administration. The Department of Administrative Reforms has followed up the speech with a paper it has circulated to chief secretaries. Three questions have been posed: (1) how to ensure a responsive administration; (2) how to clean-up the civil services; and (3) how to make civil services more committed to the constitution. These are important points. But the most important one, which has not been raised, is the strength of bureaucracy.

There are too many hands. Cut to half, if not to size, they will perform better. The same exercise is covered by a clerk to a secretary through notes. The file stops at every table, clogged to justify work. If the numbers are reduced, papers will move faster.

How to decrease the strength? It will have to be done in stages. Let there be a freeze on recruitment. The retirement age should be reduced to 50 and the present crop at that age be pensioned off. At 50, an employee has still energy to start afresh. He or she should be given full pension. In fact, the rule that entitles the IAS hands to draw full pension after having put in 20 years should be applicable to all public servants.

The government has economy crises off and on. They are a farce. Some unfilled vacancies are shown as the number of employees reduced. All stays on paper. Civil servants have developed a vested interest in a large bureaucracy because it offers higher positions or jobs with perks. All attempts to cut the bureaucracy are defeated by the bureaucracy.

I had a personal experience about it when I was India's High Commissioner in London (1990). There were 250 Indian

employees. Some among them admitted that they did not have enough work. The Supply Mission, for instance, was there from the day the high commission opened. I suggested it be closed as the initial flood of purchases had become a trickle. Practically every ministry has a niche in the high commission where its senior officers, by turn, get lost to enjoy a cushy tenure. An employee from India is given, apart from his salary, a foreign allowance, furnished accommodation, medical benefits and free passage for his wife and dependent every two years. Some officers are entitled to washing allowance as well, a perk from the days of Raj.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

My proposal, forwarded to New Delhi, was to reduce the staff to 180, axing nearly 70 posts. It would have meant a saving of £1 million (Rs 5 crore) annually. But I faced opposition from practically every tier of the bureaucracy. The Expenditure Secretary in the finance ministry, Geethakrishnan, was in London at that time. I discussed the proposal in detail with him. He wanted his No. 2, Gopal Tandon, to visit London to examine the proposal further, the justification for which I could not understand.

The way the proposal was stalled for seven months, till I left, is a good example of how determined bureaucrats can defeat all efforts to economize. My appeal even to the prime minister and finance and foreign ministers were to no avail. I am convinced that one of the major reasons the Indian government cannot cut its expenditure is that the bureaucracy has come to like and enjoy in a large apparatus.

It is ironical that the same bureaucracy carried out the whims of Indira Gandhi's son, Sanjay, during the emergency. Desire for self-preservation, as admitted by a number of public servants before an inquiry commission, was the sole moti-

vation for their behaviour. Fear turned them into willing tools of tyranny. Is there no other way they can work? I believe one officer heading the supplies department left ultimately. But he felt so bitter that he said whatever he could against me before the one-judge commission, appointed to look into the circumstances leading to the death of Chief Justice Sabyasachi Mukherjee at London. This official is, however, a typical example of bureaucrats who never take blame on themselves and find some scapegoats for their acts of omission and commission. Most civil servants are careerists, nay opportunists, now.

They have little idealism left in them. They may have nourished some vision when they began the service. But within five years they become part of the furniture that is in their office. Now they are a set of determined people, who will break any rule, tell any lie, or carry out any order if it means out of turn promotion or better emoluments. Cumbersome procedures are there because they give them an alibi to delay or even default, some say.

I am in favour of completely overhauling government procedures. In fact, the strangling hold of red tape was bad in Jawaharlal Nehru's time, worse in Rajiv Gandhi's and worst in Narasimha Rao's period. The system of noting by various grades of people is a system which has been done away with in other countries. Normally, there should be one note in the file and that by the officer who can take some action on it. Previous nothings are a hindrance because they pin you down to some unfortunate precedent.

Nehru invited an eminent expert in public administration, Paul H Appleby, in 1952 to advise the government. Appleby pointed out that governmental procedures were 'cumbersome, wasteful and dilatory.' In par-

ticular, he laid stress on the difficulty of fixing responsibility in such an exercise.

Nehru discussed Appleby's conclusions in his cabinet and followed up with a note to the Home Ministry. 'We... have worked too much in the rut and carried on old traditions which have little significance today. If we are to work for a welfare state, the whole of our administrative service has to function somewhat differently and, indeed, has to think differently... I think that one of the major issues that we should face, and face soon, is a reorganisation of our administrative structure.'

It was not done soon. Shastri attended to the problem after 12 years of Nehru's note by appointing the Administrative Reforms Commission to suggest how the government could function quickly, efficiently and economically. But Shastri's main purpose was to mollify Morarji Desai, who was standing in the wings for a chance to take over the stage. By making him chairman of that reforms commission, Shastri killed two birds with one stone. But the reports of the commission have only accumulated dust on the shelves of the home ministry.

In fact, we are in such a critical time that a reorientation, retraining of our entire civil service has become necessary. The world over, in the management of administration, they are retraining everybody, because the society has become more technological. If you have got a job, the only way you can maintain it is not to sit at the desk and doing the job in the old way you have been doing it, but to learn new jobs and new ways of doing them.

And it is important that the image of civil servant is improved because it has had a battering in the recent years. At present, he is imagined as a person who is least helpful to the public. He draws his salary without putting in work for even two hours a day and he is, as usually alleged, willing to be purchased at a pittance. A recent public opinion poll held in the UK showed that only 29 per cent of citizens have trust in civil service. In India, it is far less. No government can afford to live with that kind of impression about civil service.

Dhaka Day by Day

Toys at Astronomical Prices

by Fayza Haq



In my days I was over the moon if I got a home made rag doll with eyes and nose stitched on with black thread. Scraps of materials from my aunt's sewing table made the tiny saris and I felt I could ask for no more. Today the children at Dhaka have a different standard of happiness where toys are concerned.

Murad, a thirteen-year-old lad living in DOHS area, Dhaka, has two huge boxes of outer space giant dolls. His parents go to Europe every six months and bring back these toys with which the plays for hours. He has enough dolls to open a toy shop. One would think his parents are spoiling him but they feel he deserves every bit of the gifts. 'If I don't keep my child busy with healthy toys he'll turn to things like drugs. That's why I don't discourage his interests in rock music and videos either.'

There are three little girls in Maghbazar-Ambreen, Mehreen and Naushan and among them they have sixty dolls which they line up in their huge nursery. Most of them are plastic and some of them are rubber. Some have their hair and faces in a mess, a few have their limbs and dresses torn and slightly askew. But most of the 60 dolls are in good condition and could easily enter some beauty competition. The mother is not the least embarrassed about the display of wealth. 'They get most of the dolls during their birthdays. I don't have to buy their toys very often. Since I go to work, the children need something to occupy them and they are all under nine.'

Although the mother believes her daughters deserve the toys which don't take into account the balls, skipping ropes, tennis rackets, xylophones, toy telephones, toy trains, video games, I find the children a little blasé about their collection of dolls. Sometime back someone gave the children a doll each for Eid and written minutes on the limbs were pulled out and their hair covered with shampoo. The clothes too were crushed and crumpled beyond recognition. The dolls must have cost Tk 500 each but the mother condemned them by saying 'What more do you ex-

pect from cheap Chinese make!' A single mother of two boys living in Purana Paltan says, 'I spent my entire saving of six months on getting equipment for cricket and tennis for my sons. A good cricket bat is no less than Tk 2,000 and getting them dressed in white for the game costs more. It is not easy to bring up children these days. They don't play with old milk tins converted into drums any more. When other children have expensive toys it is only natural that they too should crave for the same.'

The other day I went to a four-year old's birthday party at Kathal Bagan and found the living room covered with battery operated toys. None of the toys were for less than Tk 500. With twenty pieces on the floor imagine the money being spent — and two of the dolls were huge porcelain ones: There were buckets of leggo, circles of speeding trains, jumping and skipping bears, boxes of beauty sets and kitchen comestibles, crockery, furniture and untold wealth in toys, including walkie-talkie dolls.

I know of a young woman, on Indira Road who spends half her month's salary for toys for her two nieces. Every time Seema comes home, the children cry out 'Phupi, what have you brought us?' When she goes abroad for seminars and workshops more than half her luggage consists of teddy-bears, pollywogs, cabbage-patch dolls and what have you in range of toys.

Another five-year-old boy, Salim, in Dhanmondi, has a room of his own packed with toys like a life-size Boy Scout camp hut, aeroplanes of all sizes and shapes, musical boxes and soldiers, apart from his story books and collection of children's videos.

While the eight-year-old flower seller and sweet vendor on the streets can never dream of real toys, the well-to-do children in the city have a full store of these playthings.

Are these expensive toys from overseas really necessary for the happiness and contentment of a growing child? Keeping up with the Joneses, parents and well-wishers go on a buying spree and hope for the best.

OPINION

Well-done, DMP

SHI

We wish to give the city police administration a big hand for presenting us with a virtually mugging-free shopping experience during the pre-festival time. Snatchings were few and far between both at the market-places or on the way to, or back from these, a most pleasant rarity in civic atmospheres prior to the biggest Muslim festive occasion by past standards.

Even the extortionist scrambles on the way-side, sometimes forming arcs impinging on the roads to the utter suzerainty of the rickshaw riders and automotive commuters which one had got used to seeing year after year turned out to be almost forgotten memories.

Even in the eye-blink area of traffic-jams these were not as bad as those of the water-logged days anyway.

The hand-frisking overcrowding into the shopping arcades and enclaves notwithstanding, festival-time mugging dropped off to a new low which obviously pays an extra-bit of tribute to the policing ingenuity. The fact is, police presence was not only an intelligently deployed one but also very widespread — possess being in full view on the major thoroughfares, approach roads, interior roads and of course, near the shopping centres. The most ingenious aspect of police vigilance was the placing of cops on the road-dividers with rifle butts resting on stools kept by their side. They stood there hours looking over either side of the roads as if on a top security assignment with VIPs.

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To the Editor...

Updated road and city maps

Sir, The city maps and the national road maps have to be updated every second year for general public use. The official versions may be made available to the publishers in the private sector regularly. All of the maps sold in the market are several years out of date.

The survey of Bangladesh should show some interest in market orientation. Service to the publishers is fast using computer technology for updating. AZ Dhaka

ABCS

Sir, The Association of Bangladesh Commonwealth Scholars (ABCS) is a unique forum of the commonwealth

scholars. The ABCS has now more than 500 life members who are serving in different educational, research, management, industrial and non-governmental organisations of the country.

Recently, in a message from the Commonwealth Secretariat addressed to the ABCS President, Mr M Faizullah, the in-charge of the Asian Desk on behalf of the Secretary General has welcomed the formation of the association. The ABCS in its recently-held annual general meeting has adopted the resolution to give ABCS an institutional shape for promoting educational and cultural understanding among the scholars of the commonwealth countries.

Any scholar who has availed of any training in the commonwealth countries under the sponsorship of the Commonwealth, British Council or any other agency

under the commonwealth family can become member of the ABCS.

At present, the ABCS is preparing a directory of its members. So I would like to request all the members to send their bio-data to ABCS Secretary, Mr Md Shahidullah, Secretary, University Grants Commission, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207.

Scholars for membership are also requested to contact the Secretary, ABCS, M Zahidul Haque, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207.

Gauge, or gauze?

Sir, A few days ago the DS has front-page the photograph of the use of 'gauge mask' in the streets of Dhaka.

Although pictorially the

message is clear, yet linguistic interpretation is rather confusing. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the meaning of 'gauge' is: standard measure especially of capacity or content, fineness of textile, diameter of bullet, or thickness of sheet metal; instrument for measuring or marking parallel lines, capacity, extent, criterion, test, etc.

The appropriate word should have been 'gauze' which means: thin transparent fabric of silk, cotton, wire etc.

I believe it should have been 'gauze mask' and not 'gauge mask'. S A Mansoor, House 23, Road 10, Gulshan, Dhaka-1212

Beggars and destitutes

Sir, Public thoroughfares are already overcrowded in

Dhaka with thousands of hawkers, vendors, rickshaws, trucks and buses. Every year on the occasions of Shab-e-Barat, Shab-e-Miraj, Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha Dhaka roads and streets have to bear the additional burden of hundreds of poor and destitute who are half-dressed, half-naked and maimed men, women and children. Who come to the city from distant villages for begging from door to door for food, alms and clothes. They roam around from one corner of the city to another throughout the day and spend their night on the open streets and roads. They also use public thoroughfares as toilets.

Unfortunately, there is no authority in Dhaka to look after their welfare, security, healthcare, sanitation and supply of pure drinking water. The poor and poverty-stricken people from the villages pass a very deplorable and sub-human life

in this city. We are surprised and shocked that most of our political leaders of Awami League, BNP, JP and JI hold public meetings and rallies on the public roads and make high promises for the welfare of the masses and hold lavish parties in palace-like buildings, but none of them come forward to extend a helping hand to the poor and destitute.

We would request all concerned including Dhaka City Corporation and the NGOs to kindly provide all possible help and assistance to these people on humanitarian ground without fail. O H Kabir, 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203