

Caring for Bhola

The September cyclone almost spared Bangladesh. Almost because it kind of brushed some thanas of Bhola with the fury recalling the April storm of 1991, did nothing beside. The government got an almost 24-hour notice and apparently got down to meet it on a national disaster scale. The Prime Minister involved herself with the preparations and understandably started on a vigil.

So far so good. What happened after the storm had passed is shameful. Worse, it cannot be explained. Why did the earlier government preparations on a national priority basis execute a vanishing trick, leaving little sign that the government had indeed mounted a high degree of alert beforehand?

Leave alone being a national disaster, the Bhola Deputy Commissioner Abdul Mannan Mia is on record to have reduced the problem to something less than a district level one. He told a Bhorer Kagoj correspondent that he did not feel the situation in the interior (Lalmohan, Tazumuddin, Borhanuddin, Daulat Khan and Zahiruddin Thanas — areas directly hit by the Friday cyclone) was such that it warranted his visit. He was satisfied that the thana administrations down there were doing the needful.

The question is, are the post-disaster needs in those devastated spots of a size ideal to be taken care of by thana administration? When did the government start dismissing newspaper reports and putting all their faith in the local administrative personnel? The post-cyclone Bhola situation is being painted on all leading national dailies with caring detail. And all the Bhola stories on these say one thing unanimously: nothing reached the devastated areas answering to the needs of the distressed people for an early recovery till the fifth day of the disaster. It is for the government to react to the emergencies directly and effectively. Well, newspapers have beaten government in reaction time.

The expectation was, very logically, the quantum of preparedness for meeting the aftermath targeting the whole coastal area of the Chittagong, Barisal and Khulna divisions would now descend on the Bhola thanas before even the sky has cleared and the affected ones would be overwhelmed by the variety and quantity of the relief items and material support reaching them. Why did not that happen? It was so easy to help the cyclone-hit out this time. When God spared, man chose to hurt man.

Untenable

City's sewage system is on the verge of collapse but the authorities are reportedly unable to get a move on quickly due to cash crisis.

This is an untenable situation. Repairing of the sewage system is too important a work to be put off on the pretext of cash crisis. WASA has to devise a way to arrange fund for addressing this vital city maintenance reality and that too urgently.

Much of WASA's financial problem however is due to its own doing. Wasteful, corrupt unionism has played havoc with the government sector agency. Of its total three thousand and 200 employees, one thousand are involved with the union and as the report of a leading vernacular daily says, do not work at all. Because of their links with the union there is no question of accountability for these do-nothings.

Majority of those who work are egregiously corrupt. It is mainly because of them that WASA's revenue in the order of Taka 800 million remains unrealised. While a large portion of the dues stays off WASA's rightful coffers because of the greasy ways of a section of its immoral employees, a debt of Taka 15 million remains unrecovered due to the procrastination of various government agencies in footing bills. Basically, WASA's systemic pilferage is a deadweight on it.

We urge the government to play a facilitating role in enabling WASA to mobilise the required fund. Besides, a task force should be formed immediately in order to probe into the culture of backlogged payment of bills among different government agencies.

WASA's problem is neither new nor being reported for the first time. The solution, probably harped for the umpteenth time, seems to lie in its being handed over to the private sector. The government knows it too. Yet, what amazes us is its lack of seriousness in prioritising the task on its list of reforms. Why it is not hastening the process of handing WASA and similar inefficient loss-incurring utility agencies over to the private sector?

Civic Matters

Invoking a general principle of law governing civic life, the DCC has recently issued a press release. This calls for voluntary dismantling of unauthorised structures of different political parties and removal of building materials heaped on road-sides impeding on public easement rights. Any construction work executed without a plan having been approved by RAJUK should obviously be regarded as an illegal act irrespective of the clout political parties may have in a wider domain of affairs.

Sometimes party or other offices, semi-permanent or makeshift ones, just pop up on the way-side — thanks to the enthusiasm of loyalists — which may not be even in the knowledge of the organisational top-brass. The very fact that a political party's hat has been worn may immunise one to the right of any legal action. The organisers of illegal constructions seek self-justification by pointing fingers at others having gone for these. Most of the acts of such impropriety that one sees in the city today are germane to the self-same variety committed by others in the past. So, the malady goes too deep for any exhortative circulars to set it right, spontaneous and wider respect for law and commitment to civic welfare are needed for a tangible improvement in the situation.

Another problem has been touched upon in the DCC press release: free-for-all parking of buses, trucks and rickshaws on the way-side exacerbating traffic congestion. We demand that mobile police teams clear the mess.

THE decision of the DCC to ban public meetings on the streets and the main opposition party's struggle to negate the ban resulted in a havoc. Leaving aside the loss of valuable property following rampages and hassles and other attended consequences, the country witnessed two consecutive hartals just within a week. The immense social dislocations and economic hardships are well known.

One needs to recall that the search for alternative venues for holding public meetings started during the time BNP was in power. They planted the idea and the present government went ahead with its implementation. So, the cliché by BNP that a ban on holding public meetings on the street is tantamount to curtailment of democratic rights, that it signals a come-back of "Bakslas" or some other allegations aired by them do not seem to hold enough water to justify their view-points. In fact, public meeting had always been held in the historic Paltan Maidan till late Ziaur Rahman turned that into a stadium and thus forced public meetings on to the streets.

Again, the allegation that DCC Mayor and for that matter, the ruling party Awami League took the decision unilaterally without paying heed to others' views does not seem to be correct. In fact, as newspaper reports tell us, the Mayor earlier convened a meeting of all political parties to thrash out solution on the thorny issue.

The Venues and the Vengeance

The citizens of Dhaka city and its suburbs are in favour of banning public meetings on the streets. There should be places, specified through consensus as much as possible, outside the main thoroughfares so that traffic congestion could be avoided... No doubt, there will continue to be jams in the city even if public meetings are pushed out side the main traffic ring. But the degree of severity must be far less than what is being experienced now.

We could learn that only few minor parties took part in the deliberation and hence in the absence of a multilateral participation which could be ensured by the presence of major political parties, the decision, allegedly turned out to be unilateral. 'Unilateral' decision and allegation against such decision are not surprising given the long tradition of our political parties that they always eye for political mileage over the opponents in the pretext of minor incidents, adventurously or inadvertently created by them.

It is very unfortunate that patience does not seem to carry any value to our politicians and political parties, on either side of the fence. To substantiate our hypotheses, let us pick up few episodes. For example, the Mayor is reported to have given a second call to political parties to resolve the crisis. Reportedly, barring BNP and Jamaat, all other political parties responded to his invitation. One could argue that the same Mayor could have done the same job before the administration embarked on tough actions against holding public meetings on the streets. This would have given him enough space to justify his cautious, right or wrong. If a second or third call is assumed to trim down the anger

and anguish of the fiery opposition, from government's point of view, that should have been the optimal path.

On the other side, BNP leaders are reported to have met the President twice within a week or so to lodge their complaints against the ban. They also requested the President to intervene and heal the hitch. But

BNP and Jamaat decided to abstain or agreed to participate on certain conditionalities. Critics of BNP and Jamaat could say that they would have refrained from attending the meeting on the same pretexts even if they Mayor had done the same before. In other words, BNP and Jamaat (and also other minor parties) would never want that

as possible, outside the main thoroughfares so that traffic congestion could be avoided, ambulance could run fast with patients, children could go to and come back from schools in time, rickshaw-pullers and other minor vehicle drivers could earn relatives more within a given time. No doubt, that there will continue to be traffic jam in the city even if public meetings are pushed outside the main traffic ring. But the degree of severity must be far less than what is being experienced at the moment, we suppose.

It has been noted earlier that patience does not seem to carry any price to politicians of our country. In consequence, it is the common people who tend to pay heavy price for the lack of value to patience. After all, just for an alleged 'unilateral' decision by a city Mayor the whole country should not have been ransomed. It was basically an issue relating to a particular city but the whole country was forced onto a halt.

The position of this columnist has always been against hartal. Even during BNP's rule, the author attempted to calculate the costs of an eight-hour hartal/day. Roughly, it costs Tk 162 crore per day. In a recent programme on BTV titled Aitmat (view point), the partici-

pants equivocally urged upon all political parties to evade this out-dated mode of ventilating grievances. Side by side, they also floated alternative ways to combat the urgency of calling hartals. These are, for example, allowing a fixed time schedule in the TV/Radio for the opposition to speak out their allegations, holding of frequent debates among government and opposition parties on major issues in the parliament. But what the same programme failed to air with emphasis is the non-economic and non-quantifiable costs of hartals — that the author has been hammering on so long and that still remain unfolded to the public in general. Hartal programmes tend to depress minds of public, tarnish image of the country outside and appear to create non-work ethics (non-workaholics). The ramifications of these non-quantifiable impacts, according to our view, are more biting in the long-run and can hardly be compensated. This is the main reason we have been opposed to hartal even when BNP was in power, remain to be so when Awami League is in power and hope to carry on with the same even in future.

We earnestly hope that the vengeance with the venues would end soon. The government and opposition parties would display utmost restraint and far-sightedness. Politicians should be for people. It should not be the other way round, and never forcefully. When Dhaka city roads are rocky, it is a rocky road to power.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

could not the learned leaders do the same before creating the havoc and calling two hartals within one week? They seem to have gone to the fire brigade after igniting the fire by themselves. We strongly feel that after the announcement of the 'ban', BNP leaders should have met the President and called upon his interventions, if they deemed it so fit.

It could be learnt from newspaper reports that, despite a courteous second call by the Mayor for resolving the crisis,

meetings should be held on selected places other than on streets. Given this attitude of negative politics and double standard, it does not fetch much in exchange whether you meet the President for amicable settlement or the Mayor goes for another six or seven rounds of talks.

But we, the citizens of Dhaka city and its suburbs, are in favour of banning public meetings on the streets. There should be specified places, based on consensus as much

Some of Them on Prowl

Effort to sow the seeds of difference can have dangerous repercussions. Our country's strength is the manner in which an array of religions in the country have developed a sense of accommodation, without giving up our identity.

their liking. They have not only denounced secularism but also those Muslims who have faith in it. In a way, they joined issue with the rest of the country.

It is not surprising to note that they have ventilated their ire against Maulana Abul Kalam Azad because he stood like a rock on the side of nationalist forces at a time when people in the country had come to be divided as Hindus and Muslims. The Milli has attacked Azad for the "decision to annul the idea of a separate Muslim political party in 1948 Lucknow convention. The convention, according to the Milli, was a political blunder of unprecedented magnitude which, in the latter years, paved the way for the political supremacy of Kuffar-o-Mushrakeen."

That there is no bar on expressing such and other preposterous propositions is a tribute to the open society India has. But the Milli is only strengthening the hands of Hindu chauvinists and even driving those sitting on the fence to the lap of RSS and its parivar. The burden of their argument, too, is precisely what the Milli is saying: The Muslims in the country hate Hindus and do not accept India as their own. What the Milli adherents propagate may not draw any attention, much less belief, among the Muslims. But the resolution may come in handy to Hindu communalists to foment more hatred against Muslims, confining them to the ghettos and the atmosphere of desperation such places create. The Milli's parliament, ob-

essed by fanaticism of its own stripe, does not accept even Pakistan a reality. The resolution says, "...From shariat point of view, the idea of India's division was never a valid judgement (because) the present-day Pakistan is a deviation from our political tradition. Admitting this deviation, today we Muslims, barely recognise Pakistan as a nation state." Their denunciation will not make Pakistan disappear. But it shows that the Milli people want their version of Islam, not the one which Islamabadd professes.

Mad caps as they are, they should be ignored. The Muslim community will not be taken in by them. But the government must find out who they are. I believe some of them constitute a loyal force of former Bihar chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav. They have access to several other political leaders in the country. But the real thing to find out is who finances them.

The tragic aspect of Milli's resolution is that it gives a bad name to Islam, the religion which is against aggression and

which respects all ways to seek the absolute. The false propaganda against Islam has already inculcated wrong impression among Hindus. The Milli's resolution will only provide grist to the propaganda mills. No organisation has ever done more disservice to Islam than the Milli has.

Its effort to sow the seeds of difference can have dangerous repercussions. Our country's strength is the manner in which an array of religions in the country have developed a sense of accommodation, without giving up our identity.

Time is a mute witness to the spell that India cast on the outsiders, who came to enslave it but made it their home. The Al-lahudins, the Begum Razias or the Mughals, all were absorbed in the composite society as were the Buddhists and the Jains hundreds of decades earlier. The rulers and their subjects became the warp and woof of the same tapestry, drawing strength from the different threads that have been interwoven over the years, resulting in a texture which has come to reflect diverse shades in a

smooth, sturdy fashion.

There may be a tendency in each of us to mock the unfamiliar in other men's faith and worship. Such words as 'heathen', 'idolatry', and 'superstition' are often used as insults. We hurl them at others; we seldom apply them to ourselves. Yet every man should command respect in the moment when he bows before his god. We may believe that his view of the divine lacks valuable, even essential, elements. His forms of worship may appear to us strange, sometimes offensive.

But in that moment of prayer, every man is at his best. If we are as wise as we like to think ourselves, it is then that we will try to understand him. Every great religion has noble teachings and lofty moral goals. Yet in each religion these high standards are often far removed from what that religion seems to be in the actual throughout and practice of most of its followers. Do most Muslims, for example, really live up to the teachings of the Prophet?

In this year of the Golden Jubilee of independence, we would do well to remember na-

tionalists like Khan Abdul Ghaflar Khan, Sheeb-ullah Khan, Prof Hafiz Syed, Dr Zakir Hussain, M C Chagla, Asaf Ali, Sir Akbar Hydari, Obeidullah Khan (a mollah leader of Kerala) and several others who loved India as much as they loved Islam. National integration will be promoted more by their example than by those who pamper fundamentalism of one kind or another to raise barriers between different communities.

One hopes that the Milli will meet a natural death as fundamental organisations have in the past. As back as on July 15, 1947, Jayaprakash Narain had said, "The parties based on communal lines would be unhealthy, and they would not be able to run the government smoothly...The parties in future ought to be based on social, economic and agrarian programmes."

Man is a religious being. His religion has taken endless forms. His names for gods and goddesses are numerous beyond counting. The rituals through which he has sought protection or blessing vary from the horrible to the sublime. But wherever and however he lived, from the time he became man, man has worshipped and has often shown a belief that he possesses an immortal soul.

Child Rights: Make it Meaningful

by Abu Imran

CHILDREN are considered as the future citizens of the countries. Hence the people the world over are almost duty bound to ensure their minimum rights, and as such, ambitious plans and programmes are taken. Accordingly, this year too Child Rights Week is being observed from Sept 30 to Oct 5, and Oct 6 is going to be observed as the Child Rights Day. But by and large what do we observe? Anniversaries are observed in a befitting, rather colourful manner. On such occasions arrangements are made for convergence of almost all classes of children including the poor ones too. Lofly speeches and promises are made and a better future particularly for the poor children is wished for. But it is an irony that no sooner than the day or the week pass, the lofty promises and paper programmes all passes away into thin air leaving the children, particularly the poor ones, to undergo the usual ordeals they were subjected to. We find small children doing house-hold chores, working as shop assistants or the tempo helpers and not uncommonly begging on the streets just for their survival. Their basic needs like education, health care, modest food, pastimes (playing and rejoicing) — all denied. They grow up under unusual conditions which often breeds corruption in them so much so that they get involved in criminal and anti-social activities when they grow up. For, regrettably, during their childhood while working on odd jobs, they are subjected to harassment, humiliation and even abuses by their masters or mistresses. It is not uncommon to find reports in the newspapers about atrocities committed on the persons of small children, particularly the girl children. Long before, I had read a report which said that the wife of an engineer had put a spoonful of acid into the private part of a girl maid. This was the news B what happened to the child victim or what punishment was perhaps never reported back. With all certainty, it could be presumed that the criminal being the wife of a well off man, might have escaped punishment as has been observed in such other cases. The one recently known was that of Seema Choudhury's case. There the alleged rapists, the policemen were let off since the cases were presented in such a way that the judge had little to do. This has led the human rights

activists to agitate for the realty of the case. Hopefully it will be done. Whether, the culprits would be brought to book is now a question of secondary importance, since Seema Choudhury would not come back whatever may be the verdict. Nevertheless, proper justice of course has a deterrent effect in curbing crime. Before this and that of Yasmin's rape cases could be disposed of, on 15th Sept '97, another report of similar nature, i.e. rape by an ASI of police of a girl (Roksana) in a launch has surfaced. This is more unfortunate because, the children are not being spared even by the guardians of law. Then how come we can expect that children's rights be secured?

Besides their deprivation and destitution etc within the country, another gruesome crime committed against children is their trafficking across the border by organised gangs. They take children out and sell them into prostitution or for other heinous purposes. This is a very painful for both the children and their parents. While the lost children suffer their whole life, so do their parents and relations.

The problems of children have long been identified, but very little has been done to help out them, particularly the poor ones. Hence it is necessary that effective steps are taken in this behalf. And perhaps, the Child Rights Week/Day would serve a good occasion to take plans and programmes in this behalf. The following actions are thus suggested:

(i) Poverty line being wider, the poor parents do not like to send their wards to school. So, the FFE (Food for Education) programme already in existence, should be replicated/extended to uncovered or poorly served areas.

(ii) Most of the children suffer from malnutrition. So, along with FFE, nutrition intake programme for the children can be integrated. They also suffer from various diseases because they lack resistance. Some become paralysed, experience night-blindness, and other ailments. There should be special arrangement for the children to meet their health demands by extending necessary treatment through existing clinics/hospitals/health complexes and these should be properly strengthened both in terms of

manpower, equipment and supply of medicines, at least essential medicines. It may be mentioned that of the total population, children (0-15 years) constitute nearly 45 per cent. Their need should be understood in terms of their number. The allocation of money in the health sector is too inadequate compared to the need.

(iv) Education is considered as the prime mover of the development but most of the poor children, particularly the working children, are denied this facility. A fraction then have been brought under some sort of education programme following imposition of government ban on their employment in formal sector like garment etc. But that has not solved the problems of the bulk in the informal sectors. A devise has to be found that the informal employers take the responsibility of educating such children.

(v) Recreation facility for the children (poor) should also be extended in line with the facility available to them in the Children's Park in Dhaka. Wherever such facilities are available, poor children should be allowed in at least once a week so that some smile are brought on their faces too. This may be small yet will help them get to their childhood pastime which every child has a right to.

(vi) There should be effective campaign against child trafficking. Laws in this behalf are rather flouted and culprits spared. Outside Bangladesh, the Embassies/High Commissions should be up and doing in keeping strict vigilance and as and when any case is found, it should be sympathetically followed rather than go the lax way, and subject the incumbent to the minutest details of the negative aspects. Once they are convinced that the person was illegally trafficked and needed help he/she should extended that without raising ifs and buts. They should know that humanitarian problems are solved by extending such consideration even by ignoring some formalities.

(vii) Officially, the government has debarred child labour in the garment sector. But as said, children have found haven in odd jobs and as domestic help. A humane treatment is needed to be extended to them. This should comprise a package of modest pay, food, rest, education and health. It is

normally observed that when a domestic aid gets sick, he or she is sent home where there is little arrangement for treatment. The quasi employer, therefore, in consideration of their services and on moral and humanitarian ground, should take the responsibility of her/his treatment when sick.

(viii) Children in orphanages though have some security for food, board and lodge and education but the quality is far from satisfactory. Those who manage, particularly of private ones, can't also be blamed because they have limited resources. If a modest sum can be given to them perhaps they will be able to improve the quality of service there. Further they can also take more boys and girls from the waiting list. The advantage with them is that they have infrastructure. If they are allowed say a 20 per cent monetary help over their present expense, it is very likely that a 10 per cent more children would be benefited.

(ix) Inter-country adoption of children, by and large is discouraged for valid reasons. But as the children, particularly the destitute ones, are supposed to suffer here since hardly anybody would like to take care of them, perhaps in appropriate cases this may be allowed after due verification of the antecedents of the foster parents abroad with a condition that the child to be fostered would be reared in such a way that he/she is not detracted from his/her roots.

(x) In line with the inter-country adoption programme, there is another concept known as in-country adoption programme, practised by some NGOs. Here the local affluent people are encouraged to adopt distressed children not necessarily physically but by agreeing to contribute for their proper upbringing in their own family.

The idea may not be new but it's novel because in this case, children are not needed to go to an orphanage rather grow in their own family of relations and friends. The proposal made above is not exhaustive but just an indication as to how the children's rights in the existing situation may be secured. But to do so, a concerted effort of all — the government, the NGOs, the people as a whole and as individuals will be needed. And only then the observance of the Child Rights Week or the Day will be meaningful.

To the Editor...

Public meetings

Sir, Mayor Hanif's initial announcement of 7 venues for political public meetings brought no strong protest from the opposition at that time. It is because they wanted to make an issue out of it? Why did they not go to the Mayor, as the BNP has gone to the president? After all, the Mayor was there when the BNP were in power, or is it that they have no wish to talk to the Mayor at all?

As for Mayor Hanif, since 'government by consensus' is practically the motto of his party, why did he announce the 7 venues to the public without first getting the venues agreed upon with the signatures of those major parties which reportedly did not attend his decision-making meeting about the venues? Specially since AL has earned a reputation for making a stream of one-sided decisions and then letting everyone involved know about it. Is this democracy?

Mayor Hanif was present on the janatar maancha when, not only AL but others as well, were already on the streets. Besides, no fixed venues, for meetings had been declared by BNP at that time. If BNP does not like the venues how come they have not suggested any alternative? Is it they desire to be always in the streets where they can force shops to close and hurl brick bats at the police?

Sultana Wares
5 Frere School Street
Dhaka

Freedom of speech

Sir, The essence of democracy, I think, lies in allowing one to express oneself thoroughly. No freedom no creation, no freedom no innovation. One may not follow his on her all dimensions, but one should be made sure that he or she is free to relate his or her thoughts and ideas. What will happen if one is not allowed to enjoy freedom of speech?

Be it Rusdi, Taslima and soon everybody should be allowed to express themselves un-

less they are not forcing their audience to follow their ideas as must.

Freedom of speech is quite different from that of performance. If one is allowed to do whatever he or she likes the world will be more hellish than the hell itself. But, if one is not granted to say whatever he or she intends to say, the world is bound to be paralysed.

I cannot but express one of my personal experiences. I was severely beaten at midnight on the university campus only because I was suspected to have a political opinion that differs the miscreants. Wounded with bleeding, I was taken to the hospital and survived only due to the proper treatment of the doctors and the very wish of the Almighty saved me. I believe, like many others, I am an extrovert and a man of creativity, but unfortunately I feel I am heartbroken and imprisoned in my very dorm in the university residence.

However, my personal experience makes me realise that without enjoying freedom of speech, no contribution to the mankind can be made by those intends to do so.

Let us guide ourselves by the notion — we may not follow one, but we would try heart and soul to allow one to express oneself.

Mohammad Rajik Miah
Jahangirnagar University
Savar, Dhaka

Gymnasium and police

Sir, Rajshahi University is the second biggest university in the country. Its gymnasium is very capacious and its apparatus are very well. Everyday about 500 students used to visit the gymnasium. But recently here exercising activities are hindered owing to police camp.

So, we, therefore earnestly appeal to the concerned authority to take steps to call off the police from the gymnasium.

Mr Faruk Hossain
Sher-e-Bangla Hall
Rajshahi University