

Million Hands Went up

The greatest human spectacle of today's Bangladesh ended on Monday with the customary and yet highly elevating *akhari munajat*. But for the *hajj* concourse, the congregation on the shores of the Turag must be among the largest assemblage of human beings on earth. For a very poorly performing state and society this shall act as an ambassador speaking with emotion and accuracy about the spirit of accommodation and efficiency, self-reliance and overall spiritually impregnated ambience that made the meet the success it was. Last year a ferocious nor-wester played havoc with the *ijtima*, hurting many devotees and devastating the site. Rather than that affecting the attendance, this year there was a rise of no less than 20 per cent to two and a half million.

There was no media centre on the site. Or publicity material of any kind. There was no advance promotional notice either on the electronic media. There was magic at work. Or, as devotees would say, the *rahmat of Allah, Rabbul Alamin*. There have been suggestions in the press that these lapses be remedied. But the *ijtima* that could grow to this size and following founded by a single Muslim missionary from Delhi back in 1966, as a study in self-reliance, should convince anyone as to which of the ways of motivation is more effective.

Twenty-five lakh people living together in the open for three days. Ask any government how much would be the bill. Not to speak of other things, the food bill alone would have cost close to half a billion taka. How much did the management of the congregation, if at all there be such, spend on food? Not a paisa. The *ijtima* thus revives in us a very ancient tradition of all-in participation. If one feels that one has come to the *ijtima* for one's own benefit, why should one then wait to be funded for? This is the way villagers had been doing big collective jobs like public works projects without taxing the king's coffers — for centuries. The musals came carrying their own provisions.

The *akhari munajat* is the summum bonum of the *ijtima*. Five million hands went up in supplication to seek God's grace in forging world peace and keeping it and in ensuring welfare to this nation and for the glory of Islam the world over. And the other important rite is the *tauba*, asking His forgiveness for all sins committed and vowing not to consort with evil in any manner anymore. How one wishes that this had a singular impact on the steady decline in our society of morals and values.

Facilitation Gap

We had to face facts about foreign investment and some country with working experience had to speak out to enable us to do just that. We are glad the Board of Investment has decided to hear the unpleasant truths and the country to come forward to utter these is South Korea. She is a big investor in Bangladesh, conversant with our ways for many years and a country to learn from. She was at the same stage of economic underdevelopment as were we just before our liberation but she is now ranked as a developed country while we as an LDC.

The South Korean entrepreneurs in Bangladesh are so disgusted over our frequent and abrupt load-shedding that they have demanded duty-free import of generators to tide over the situation. They expect at least the courtesy of being served with one-day notice before power distribution is snapped, so that they could make alternative operational arrangements in their factories. The energy ministry should feel embarrassed.

The South Korean chorus of complaints before the BOI chief on Monday was no less strident on the customs and banking procedures which remain lengthy and cluttered despite the resolutions galore to the contrary. Resultantly, procurement of raw materials, supply of orders overseas and materialisation of business are all delayed dampening the initiatives of the foreign entrepreneurs here. The possibility is their authentic words of actual experience could circulate and influence investment decisions of others.

The holding of documents, unceasing queries, variations in the services of private sector banks and NCBs are surmountable problems, but where we need a real push to make a difference is, of course, the energy sector.

Our standard for upgradation of facilities is: reduce the yawning gap between what you offer in the EPZs and what other industrial belts face as real-life experience.

Going to Dogs

How on earth would Biman even dare explaining the cancellation of an international flight due to the absence of the crew? According to press report, Biman's Singapore bound flight on Monday was scheduled to take off at 9:30 in the morning. At 4:30 in the afternoon, good six hours later, the authorities thought they owed the waiting, paying bona fide passengers at least an announcement. And what an announcement! After six hours of waiting you know you would not even get a move on towards your destination on the day!

We think this is terrible: irresponsibility at its height. Any international airline must have some sort of substitute arrangement to have its registered passengers flown to their place of disembarkation in the event of any unforeseen disruption.

Moreover the problem in this case — non availability of crew — should not have arisen at all. With most of its aircraft out of operation currently Biman should now have enough back up crew to press into service in case of an emergency. But the truth is there was no real emergency. The crew were not available reportedly because of traffic congestion in the adjacent road caused by the rush of homebound people from Bishwa Ijtima. Biman authorities should have known that.

There is no way the authorities can hide Monday's shameful act of unprofessionalism. It is another vivid example of how much it has gone to dogs. People responsible for the passengers' harassment and the wastage of their valuable time should actually be punished. Biman needs to be administered with an iron hand.

The West May Find Our Predicament Baffling

We, in the subcontinent, do not see through peepholes. Boudoirs or bedrooms are a hush-hush topic. No politician has been hounded from public life because of his illicit relations... It is the corruption in public life that raises the hackles. The West may find it difficult to comprehend our moral standards.

I was caught in the midst of sex scandals when I went abroad briefly to participate in the Republic Day celebrations, held by Indian communities. The media in the US was obsessed by the allegation of a sexual relationship between Bill Clinton and a White House aide, Monica Lewinsky. The discussion in the UK was comparatively at a low key. A mere foreign secretary was involved and his lapse was not unforgivable. He had only openly preferred his perky secretary-cum-mistress to the 27-year-long wedded wife.

What amazed me was the absence of distinction between serious and tabloid newspapers on the treatment of the two scandals. It is difficult to recall which of the classy papers excelled its yellow counterpart. But there was no dearth of lurid details in either of them. Still not long ago, the American press was highly discreet. For example, none ever wrote that President Roosevelt breathed his last in the company of another woman, not his wife. The escapades of President John Kennedy did not see the ink of print long after his death. The British, with their supercilious attitude, were never reconciled to the bedroom behaviour from Henry VIII, former minister Perfumo to Princess Diana. There was, however, a tacit understanding among serious newspapers to stay away from such scandals. Alas, that restraint is gone. Responsible press may have been the last one to give in. But it has.

This does not, however,

mean that America and Britain are a stickler for a virtuous life. They react the way in which their readers do. People's revulsion to bawdy public behaviour spurred them to articulate the Clinton's scandal. Institutions were no less horrified than the leaders of opinion. It is common in the US and the UK that once a scandal hits the headlines, the effort is to strip it of all covers and to take it to the legal end.

We in the subcontinent, do not see through peepholes. Boudoirs or bedrooms are a hush-hush topic. No politician has been hounded from public life because of his illicit relations. The press generally stays away from such involvements. It is the corruption in public life that raises the hackles. The West may find it difficult to comprehend our moral standards. But who sleeps with whom, however distasteful, is considered a personal affair. Our anger rises when we find a minister or a civil servant pocketing public money or misusing his authority to benefit himself, his relations or friends.

Take the stink that the corruption of the Bhutto family has created. Some of the best statues of Buddha, belonging to the Ghandhary school, have been taken from the Peshawar museum in diplomatic bags for sale abroad. The Bhutto family

is's wealth is a whopping figure of Rs. 45000 crore, stashed in different foreign banks. The Pakistan government has done a commendable job in tracing the accounts. We, in India, have not been able to find out even after 12 years where the kickbacks of the Rs. 64 crore deal for the purchase of Bofors guns have ended up. Maybe, the difference is that the Nawaz Sharif government was not distracted by political considerations, while the successive regimes at

Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, involved in the Rs. 5000 crore cattle feed scandals, is fighting on behalf of the Rashtriya Janata Dal, a breakaway group of Janata Dal. So is BJP Chief L K Advani, whose name figures in the hawala diary, which listed contributions to scores of politicians. Ajay Singh was implicated in the murder of his new wife's husband but the BJP has given him ticket from UP.

Then there are candidates like Satish Sharma, Balram

the list of candidates. No party is above reproach. In a way, political parties have taken revenge on the public by putting up the same old corrupt and condemned faces.

Parties have taken the voters for granted. It is quite on the cards that the electorate will ventilate their anger and defeat the corrupt. Even if they do not do so, their predicament is that they have very little choice, often between the tweedledum and the tweedle. They have no alternative to the three formations in the field: The United Front, the BJP and Congress. It is the same old wine in the same old bottles. The choice is confined to jumping into either a river, lake or the sea. Political parties had promised not to field criminals. The election commission had also made some noises. All this has been of no avail because the criminals, who have no scruples or have been involved in some case or the other, are in the field. Who with what caste and local pull can win has been the criterion for selection, not clean credentials.

The exasperation of the NRIs is no less because their prestige abroad is in proportion to India's stock. Their general sympathy is with the BJP. However, when it comes to particular candidates, they too feel that cleanliness, not the community's name, should have been the

decisive factor. There is strong resentment against corruption. They want their leaders to be accountable and they are expecting the defeat of tainted faces.

In this context, the Sonia factor is not seen making much difference. She is associated with the kickbacks from Bofors gun scandal. They openly say that till today, she has not denied the direct access that Ottavio Quattrociocchi, the middleman, had to her and Rajiv Gandhi. It is, however, intriguing that she is keeping Italian press correspondents at distance.

Indian Muslims abroad are doubly worried. Corruption is one point. The second and the bigger point for them is the possibility of the BJP coming to power with its allies. The Muslims fear that whatever the party's assurances or Atal Behari Vajpeyi's cooling, Hindu fundamentalism will come to prevail. They with secular elements to come together and not divide the anti-BJP votes. They are right. Still corruption will stand us in our face. People of impeccable character are somewhere in India. Until they come to the scene, it will be the duty of voters to fight against corruption, communalism and caste.

The West may find our predicament baffling. Many whom I met said so. But they have at least stopped talking that the democratic system is not suited to India's genius. How the 550 million voters go to the polling booth is mind-boggling for them.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Human Rights Report at Press Conference

Why State Department Ignored Diplomatic Norms?

by A R Shamsul Islam

Our country is poor in resources, poorer in honesty and poorest in governmental governance and political leadership. The exact problems are the last two.

WHEN the US State Department released human rights report 1997 on Bangladesh through a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club, there sprang some novelties. It is not the contents. It is the mode the US chose to make the report public. This is for the first time that the release of the human rights report synchronised with a press conference. Few will like to believe that it all came about casually or carelessly.

The government reacted sharply the very next day stirring some sensations. It is not so much the substance of the protest as the guts of the government to ask why did the US State Department convene a press conference without prior permission of the government.

Understandably, we are used to pay unduly more respect and care to the US embassy. Our politicians enjoy having more than required parleys with the US Embassy chiefs. The parleys snowball in the wake of a change of political scenario. During political intransigence, which are almost a periodic affair in our country, the political leaders of the major parties are seen shuttling between foreign, particularly the US, diplomats in feverish excitement. The ears of nation get glued to what the US Embassy prescribes to resolve the crisis. They way the leaders of the Awami League and BNP implored the US diplomats for help to tide over the caretaker government issue in 1996 and the air in which the diplomats behaved exposed our political bankruptcy and pathetic dependence on Embassy men for internal reforms even. Believably, it had not the sophistication of a remote command.

The contents of the report and the government's remonstrances have been widely focused. It is better to avoid a repeat exercise. Repercussions on other quarters than the government and some other relevant factors may be taken into account.

It is interesting to note the BNP commented that the description of violation of human

rights by the government as contained in the report was only a fraction of the actual dimension and remained silent over the issue of prior permission from the government.

It is assumed that majority of the people of Bangladesh will not disagree with most of the substance of the report though they will seriously object to holding press conference violating diplomatic courtesies.

Why the State Department behaved so?

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Jhunjhunwala and V C Shukla, whose corruption is a by-word in the country. Congress has the distinction of putting them again as if dishonesty is an added qualification. The Rs 19000 crore bank scam during the Narasimha Rao's government had put a question mark against many ministers at that time. Sixteen of them faced one scam or the other Congress has fielded nearly all of them. The Samajwadi party and the Bahujan Samaj party have done no better. Men and women with dubious reputations dominate

political leadership. The exact problems are the last two.

The present world suffers from a lack of balance of power. There is no country to match the might of the US. However, the situation is not unprecedented in history. Napoleonic France shattered the balance of power. Hitler's Germany bullied it. What a cataclysm followed on each occasion! But the balance of power was restored each time. It was, as it were, Shakespeare's moral order of the universe ordained by God. The Americans are certainly more sagacious than many to have read the truth.

The writer is retired Principal, Govt. Mohila College, Pabna.

OPINION

"Admission Rules in BUET Architecture Deptt."

Munirul Haque

any university for admission in architecture undergraduate course — and he should not try to delude the readers to think that someone who excels in drafting or drawing, considers himself to be an outstanding architect! Also it's not clear what 'scores' the architect teachers are trying to settle with the BUET Academic Council?

While Mr Zaman refers to Schools in Architecture in most advanced Universities his list refers to very few! And the 'spectacularly clear chart' prepared from information through a source which only Mr Zaman appears to have access to, should have correctly appeared as shown below (chart).

The readers are also being led to believe that the teachers of the Architecture Department who are 'waging a war' for a 'lame duck cause' have not even heard of, let alone studied in many advanced Universities in UK, USA, and elsewhere! Students seeking admission to Architecture are tested for 'aptitude' rather than skill', and 'potentiality' is assessed rather than 'performance' — and who else are judges of that but architects, irrespective of how many sheep graze in the pasture and how many cattle! If majority were always right, then mobs would rule!

Extreme stands driven by sentiments' has given us the right to our mother tongue, and established us as an independent Nation — sounds most pragmatic and must be appreciated by all.

The writer is an architect.

To the Editor...

Point to ponder

Sir, I have read the news item published in your esteemed daily on February 10 in which our Foreign Secretary Mr Mostafizur Rahman was alleged to have dishedonored the court by terming one Col (retd) Farooq a self-confessed killer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

I remember that a few years ago, my grandpa, dad and I watched a video interview presented by Granada Television in which the said armyman, while talking to an Indian journalist confessed with aplomb to the killing of the Father of the Nation.

I think Mr Mostafiz has called a spade a spade. So, what is wrong with it?

Ishrat Shaheed
Willes Little Flower School,
Dhaka.

Eat more potato

Sir, Politics on food is detestable. We must save our people. Due to abnormal fall in current Aman rice production the price of rice is increasing day by day. We are required to import food about 30 to 35 lakh tons. Moreover because of devaluation of our currency, the price of rice is likely to shoot up further.

Unfortunately we have a scarcity of rice but fortunately we have a plethora of potato in the country. The average quality of rice is being sold at rates of Taka 18 to 20 per kg whereas one kg of potato costs only Taka 5 to 6.

We must eat potato as substitute for rice and meet at least 50 per cent of our rice demand with potato.

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street,
Wari, Dhaka-1203

Why "cry in the wilderness"?

Sir, From the core of my heart I would like to thank Dr. Sabrina Rashid for showing her concern and expressing her genuine feeling for the people of this country — Bangladesh, our

beloved Bangladesh — by writing very frequently touching various subjects and topics. But, it is sad that in order to air her views she has been portraying only one side of a story or event.

Yes, an honest government officer not only can dream of owning a car but also owns one because the government service rule book allows him to buy a car against a loan. Dr Sabrina Rashid's surprising remark "Only the dishonest ones are able to live like an officer" is indeed in very bad taste. May I ask her what she has done till today to help the needy or the poor and what prompts her to 'cry out in the wilderness' and for what purpose? It is about time she tried to look at both the sides of 'Life' and 'Living' and stopped accusing a section of wonderful people who wish to live and do live, a decent life.

Mujibul Hoque
Dhannondi, Dhaka

ways thought that BJP president was LK Advani with L K standing for Lal Krishna. But when I hear (or read) Ramkrishna from a person who once was our High Commissioner to India then I get confused.

Abdul Muhith
Maghbazar, Dhaka

The name of BJP president was inadvertently printed as Ramkrishna Advani.

Expecting the police to behave?

Sir, Recently, I had a shocking experience regarding a police officer. I went for shopping at Arerni Plaza, and when I came out of the complex and was getting on a rickshaw, I suddenly noticed a police officer hitting the rickshaw tire with his stick, and in the process puncturing it. I understand that the rickshaw-puller was not supposed to leave his vehicle there, but certainly such behaviour should not be accepted.

Policemen in our country think that they have the power to do anything they want to with the poor rickshaw-pullers. Well, when the rickshaw