

Chittagong's Peril

Over the past few decades, the area stretching from the south-eastern coastline to the jungles of the Chittagong Hills Tracts (CHT) has become a playground for all types of criminal activities - from smuggling of drugs and other contrabands to firearms. This has also made the area a sanctuary for criminals of various shades, and triggered the growth of indigenous criminal activities of the most dangerous kind. The most worrying aspect of these illegal cross-border activities has been the proliferation of arms in the region itself and their impact on local law and order and political situation. Local power mongers as well as ordinary criminals have reportedly come to possess large number of sophisticated weapons in recent times, posing a serious threat to peace and security in the area particularly Chittagong city. These are happening under the nose of the law enforcing agencies, without any action being taken.

This proliferation of deadly weaponry in Chittagong has been possible because of the region's geographic location and characteristics. The long sea coast is not properly policed as neither the navy nor the recently-formed coast guard has sufficient logistics to do the job. On the other end, the terrain is hilly and covered with thick jungles. In many parts, these are virtually impenetrable and, therefore, extremely difficult to police. Bangladesh's borders with Myanmar and India are in large parts unprotected, with hundreds of miles without any security outposts. These border regions have long been infested with insurgent armies. These groups have become the driving force behind the illegal trade, particularly in arms and drugs. The influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar and activities by the erstwhile Shanti Bahini had also contributed much to this trans-border trade.

Given such a situation, it is obvious that the government has its work cut out. On the one hand, it needs to energise police drive in Chittagong city and adjoining areas such as the crime-infested Fatikchhari, Hathazari and Raizan thanas, in order to stifle the demand part of the arms flow. On the other hand, the military and para-military forces need to be deployed more extensively along the border to intercept smuggler gangs and choke the criminals' supply lines. There is little scope to take this matter lightly, because the security of the country itself is involved here. Effective use of security forces and adequate allocation of resources would be vital to control this dangerous trade.

Loan Default Monopoly

It is not much of a revelation that industrial loans are monopolised by 87 business families in the country. Nor are we surprised that the nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) and development financing institutions (DFIs) remain captive to the so-called industrial houses to dodge repayment of long overdue loans. How badly has this incapacitated the banking system is also a much known fact. But what certainly strikes as a startling revelation is the steep regression in the default scenario observed not before but after the reform measures had been put in place! We have it on the authority of Bangladesh Bank Deputy Governor Khondker Ibrahim Khaled that after five years of reform classified loans with NCBs and private commercial banks stood at 34 per cent and 43 per cent respectively of their loan portfolios in 1995 as compared to 29 per cent and 25 per cent in 1990.

There has been reform in the structure and functions of the boards of directors on the banks after 31st December, 1995 when the above statistics were compiled. Bangladesh Bank Deputy Governor would have done well if he had given some latest figures to provide an idea as to what impact the AL government-led reorganisation of the banks' board of directors has had on the default culture.

The seminar on industrial loans organised by Bangladesh Young Economists' Association and Bangladesh Institution of Administration and Management breathed some freshness into the issue as the key paper was read by a non-resident Bangladeshi economist, named Ziaul Hoque. He made two points with savvy: government's policy intervention and flawed borrower screening mechanism 'allowed concentration of bank loans in few hands.' The harder truth, however, is banks have traditionally been either a hunting ground for plundering depositors' money or for an extension of political patrimony by powers that be. The default loan is but a manifestation of crony culture in which several officials of the banks abetted reaping huge personal gratification, something which the task force on banking reform has recently underscored.

Close to elections, the tendency to favour supporters with bank loans had been commonly observed in the past. The AL government has to break this pattern. Apart from strict enforcement of laws against wilful big 'defaulters', we need to build conditions in which they feel socially unwanted. Let's also firm up the electoral laws so that those who commit breach of public trust cannot get elected to representative positions.

Unauthorised Rickshaws

For the past couple of years the number of unauthorised rickshaws has registered an alarming rise causing hindrance to smooth movement of motorised vehicles and thereby clogging the roads to create massive traffic jams at important and busy junctions all over the metropolis. This menacing trend may be attributed to two clear-cut factors: (a) migration of young workforce from rural areas for lack of local employment opportunities and (b) callous and corrupt practices adopted by the city corporation employees and law enforcing agencies. By the admission of BRTA itself 'more than four lakh non-motorised vehicles, mainly rickshaws are now plying on the city roads'. This is in sharp contrast to the figures given by the DCC which claims that there are only 80,000 licensed rickshaws in the city. How come more than 300,000 are using the city roads without proper authorisation from the DCC? These rickshaws have been crowding the roads with tokens procured from various Samities and Leagues on payment of some money, which pass as permits under the nose of authorities. This is a very recent development known to all but nobody wants to bell the cat.

The sudden change of attitude of the DMP on the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr to nab unauthorised rickshaws has caught media attention. There has always been a certain intrusion of additional rickshaws from the adjoining areas like Savar, Aminbazar, Manikganj, Tongi during the Ramadan with the already bad traffic congestion of the city getting worse. We strongly feel that the DCC and the DMP should honestly perform their assigned job of keeping the roads free from unauthorised vehicles.

The Looming Danger of Rewriting History

As India's freedom struggle intensified communal tendencies surfaced due to a complex set of dynamics of the history. But it goes to the credit of an enlightened leadership of India's independence movement that even after a 'communal' partition and its gory aftermath they recognised and upheld India's multicultural inheritance.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

study in India. On the contrary the language of Sanskrit had never been a unifying factor either in India's historical experience or in deeply divided castes' perceptions and was often looked upon as a symbol of Brahminical hegemony.

Nevertheless, the BJP's diabolical move suggests that it, in spite of its leaders' mealy-mouthed liberal talks on national issues, has not totally abandoned the programme prepared for the party by the RSS (Rastriya Swyamsevak Sangh) of which none other than Prime Minister Vajpayee had once been an activist. The RSS wants BJP-led government at least to adopt an idiom of governance that would ultimately serve the purpose of the larger project of establishing a Hindu Rashtra. To doubly ensure the success the RSS ideologues have done something more - an attempt to rewrite India's history.

Unmistakably in keeping with its tradition the RSS has, according to a recent press report, set up a body to correct the history of India. The project considers the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas to be the source material for reconstructing India's historiography. In another ominous move The Indian Council of Historical Research has been reconstituted with persons of lower scholarly repute but known for their particular bias in interpreting history. The undue political interest in the composition of what is eventually an academic body signals a dangerous trend of appropriating history for political purpose. It was such political interpreta-

tion of historical facts that led to Vishva Hindu Parishad's (VHP) highly abrasive campaign against Babri Masjid and its ultimate demolition in 1992. The consolidation drawn from the BJP setback in recent state assembly election and its dwindling fortune as compared to its upsurge in the '80s and '90s seems illusory in view of the communal situation prevailing in the country. If the BJP wings have been clipped in a coalition government the other components of 'Sangh Parivar' are still potent and active across the country. The Siva Sena's Muslim bashing in Maharashtra, Bajrang's attacks on the Christian churches in Gujarat and VHP's threats of constructing Ram Temple at Babri mosque site are prognostic of a turbulent communal scene. Although all minority communities are targeted by BJP for blatant discrimination its ire is particularly directed against the Indian Muslims in whose hands India's Hindu rulers suffered their medieval defeats. But the defeats were suffered by Indian rulers in the hands of invaders belonging to myriad other races and religions from Alexander the Great to Britishers. Why then the Muslims who ruled India for eight hundred years and made India their

permanent abode have to be treated as stranger in their homeland? Who gave 'Sangh Parivar' the absolute proprietary right of the country? To whom does India really belong? What 'Indian' culture the sangh people are up to protect? Which 'Indian Civilization' are they talking about? As tensions escalate afresh a fresh debate rages in the country to address these questions.

In a rare deliberation of its kind the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has raised some fundamental questions on the origin, scope and nature of Indian Civilization in his recent UNESCO lecture in New Delhi. Contradicting the Hindutva zealots who look to India's pre-Muslim period as an era of parity for the unalloyed Indian civilization he has questioned the existence of such era of homogeneous Hindu culture in Indian history. Because the only pre-Islamic pan-Indian ruler capable of fostering such culture was Asoka who was a Buddhist. Dr Sen argued that the major world religions other than Islam were already represented in India well before the advent of Islam. During the seventh century when Islam was born India had large communities of Christians who already

lived in the sub-continent at least for 300 years then. After the fall of Jerusalem the Jews in diaspora found sanctuaries in India. Parsis came to India after the defeat and fall of Sassanide dynasty. And, of course, the Buddhists and Jains were quite well entrenched in India for a long time. The Muslim arrival merely filled up the spectrum. Also racially India has been a melting pot of the people and races of varied background from the Aryans, Huns, Sakas, Kushans to Turks, Afghans, Mongols and so on. So, obviously no single people or religious influence could have built up Indian civilization whose charm lies in its diversity.

Indian civilization, Prof Sen observes, evolved substantially with the absorption of Islamic culture as an integral part of it. In fact, the arrival of Islamic influences only furthered the heterogeneity which was already there and the result was enrichment of Indian culture and its indelible mark on Indian life. Of Islam, which later became almost a native religion of the sub-continent, Jawaharlal Nehru says that 'it introduced vitality and an impulse for progress' in moribund Indian society. Indeed, the simplicity of Muslim creed and outlook tremendously influenced the Indian life and became indistinguishable in course of time. It is not surprising that a communal rift had been unknown in Indian history till about 1857 when Hindus and Muslims joined hands and mutinied against the British rule. Awed by the upheavals, the British

decided to divide and rule, thus sowing for the first time the seeds of communal rivalry.

As India's freedom struggle intensified communal tendencies surfaced due to a complex set of dynamics of the history. But it goes to the credit of an enlightened leadership of India's independence movement that even after a 'communal' partition and its gory aftermath they recognised and upheld India's multicultural inheritance. With the remarkable presence the framers of Indian constitution predicated the success of free India on its political capacity to carry along the minority communities. The articles 29 and 30 which are often under assault by sangh people were incorporated in the constitution essentially as safeguards of minority rights. Now after half-a-century the proponents of Hindutva projects are trying to skillfully reduce those noble deeds of the founding fathers and their struggle to preserve the pluralist character of Indian civil society to a banal conflict between the Hindus and Muslims. And once again their weapon is distortion of history.

But can the history be distorted or rewritten as planned by the RSS? Can India be bereft of its Muslim heritage? Anyone visiting Delhi - the great Indian capital will be overwhelmed by its Muslim symbols - its Redfort, Qutb Minar, Jame Masjid as well as its numerous tombs and shrines. Not only Delhi, but also the whole country is wrapped in the memory of Muslim heroes - both awe inspiring rulers and humble saints. One can hardly pass an Indian city where a couple of domes or minarets do not silhouette its night sky. After Ayodhya the VHP will have to exact innumerable such drama if the history is to be corrected to its desire. It is a task impossible.

Entering the New Millennium

The decrease of employment opportunities has caused friction amongst the various communities because the resultant economic hardship has led to perceived discrimination. This in turn has resulted in severe nepotism of the worst kind, in the process merit has been made disqualifier instead of being the touchstone of success.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

shifted from the rural to the urban areas. There is severe pressure on our available national resources. Even then we seek jobs in the manufacturing sector at a high starting price instead of reforming the services sector. The decrease of employment opportunities has caused friction amongst the various communities because the resultant economic hardship has led to perceived discrimination. This in turn has resulted in severe nepotism of the worst kind, in the process merit has been made disqualifier instead of being the touchstone of success.

The overall result has been a deterioration in the quality of our performance in each and every discipline of life. Moreover because nepotism breeds on itself, the net effect has been a severe erosion of merit-based society. Nepotism is the twin soul-mate of corruption, we face this evil everyday of our lives in each and every field.

This cancer is such that honesty has become rarest of commodities and instead of hiding an ill-acquired wealth we consider the display of it fashionable.

On the contrary people who

eke out the existence of meager pay and allowance are viewed with contempt, not fit to be involved in the farcical society of the so-called elite in existence in the country. For this state of affairs we have only to blame our leadership, whether political, military or bureaucratic. Whereas it is fashionable to say that Pakistan has lived almost 25 years under Martial Laws, the fact remains that never at any time did the bureaucracy leave the controls over financial sectors, the area that really matters in governance. The same thing happened when politicians took over control in our imperfect democracy. The bureaucracy has always been involved in day-to-day governance, meticulously teaching the rulers, whether military or political, how to become partners in crime, manipulating rules and regulations at will for personal benefits.

The recent spate of defamatory articles about senior retired officers is being initiated for one reason only, to disparage the credibility of the Armed Forces and to bring their leadership into disrepute. Gen Jehangir Karamat, former Acting Chairman JCSC and COAS and Lt Gen Ali Kuli Khan, Power CGS were highly maintained before relieved, why have they

suddenly become persona non grata? And who will be interested in defaming their character and ability? In Pakistan we never worship the setting sun.

The Army's rule is well defined in time of war, when it comes in aid of civil power doing peace it does so (or should do so) in short surgical manner. The Army must never get involved in the business of running civilian institutions. First of all they are not professionally equipped to do so, in any cases they lack the technical know-how. Their total involvement should be to carry out accountability of the professionals carrying out their own professional task. The best employment *modus operandi* is seen in Sindh where Military Courts are indirectly policing the Province by meting out justice in a short and swift method. Instead of trying to induct 35,000 people into WAPDA, maybe a thousand Military Courts or so should have been established in support of WAPDA throughout the country to investigate the cases of electricity stealing, bribes, pilferage of stores etc.

These Military Courts would ensure that not only WAPDA men do their jobs properly but the element of corruption that influence with their performance would have been eradicated. Where the Army has been used successfully in long term institutions are the Anti-Narcotics Force which was set up as a very successful combatting unit by then Maj Gen (now Lt Gen) Salahuddin Tirmizi. While the NLC idea should have been a short term proposition, the fact remains it is a continuing success story.

The biggest problem being faced by the country is revenue shortages and loan default. This is having a crippling effect on the economy. All development work has come to a halt, revenue is short, even meeting salary commitments. As a former Prime Minister and other political leaders have suggested, the Army can be used for investigating and carrying out trial of defaulters whether it be tax default or loan default. In fact that is the best role for the Army. Even in this the Army should not get involved directly with the defaulters but should first try bureaucrats and financial executives because of whom the default has taken place. The Military Courts should only handle cases directly which are of very influential people who manipulate and influence their way out of trouble. In this manner the Army would ensure that those people whose job is in the Revenue Department. To levy and collect taxes as well as those senior executives in the Banks who have dishied out loans lavishly without proper collateral and who must collect those loans do their work in a professional manner rather than in the biased corrupt way they do so now. 1999 is the year that civil government must judiciously use the one remaining institution left to it for good performance of the country. There is after all the need to guard one's borders, we cannot undercut that capability. In case civilian government fails then we should be left with no alternative but that the Army should step in to save the country from destruction and disintegration. This may be a very extreme view of the situation, unfortunately it is the only correct perception of the state of the country as it enters the last year before the new millennium.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

BRTA rule

Sir, After reading the news item in Daily Star, I tried to visit the GPO for necessary papers despite my busy schedule. Being a lady, I thought that I would get a chance quicker in the queue than my driver. For the next days I could not get the time due to the never-ending traffic jams. Meanwhile I inquired at the Muhammadpur post office (which is nearer to my house) and they said they would get the papers on the 15th January.

Later, I realised that 15th was the start of the Eid holiday. I saw on BTV that from the 4th of January, car owners would be fined if they did not have the stickers by then, that is we have been obliged by one extra working day. On Dec 31, leaving aside all my other works I went to the GPO. I realised to my utter dismay that they had not yet received the stickers.

What should a law abiding citizen like me do now?

Dilruba Huq
Dhaka

If I'm not mistaken...

Sir, What follows is a verbatim text from BNP advisor M.M. Rezaul Karim's post-editorial titled 'Pabna 2 By-election: A Preliminary Evaluation' in the DS on Dec 19, 1998: "...in the absence of a suitable local candidate, they brought in the reluctant Air Marshal, who had lost in both 1991 and 1996 elections from a neighboring constituency with the assurance that campaigning and all other necessary arrangements for winning would be undertaken by the Party."

If I am not mistaken, he meant that A. K. Khondaker

had lost both 1991 and 1996 elections as an AL candidate from Pabna 5 (Pabna Sadar) constituency. So far I can remember, AL lost all 5 seats of Pabna in 1991 general election, but Khondaker was not a candidate from any of the constituencies there. Present BNP MP Rafiqul Islam Bakul contested as the AL candidate from Pabna 5 in 1991 election and was defeated by a Jamat candidate Maolana M. Abdus Sobhan. Bakul joined BNP later and won 1996 election against AL candidate A.K. Khondaker. The other 4 AL candidates who lost 1991 election from Pabna were: Pabna 1 - Prof. Abu Sayeed to Jamat leader Matu Rahman Nizami; Pabna 2 - Ahmed Talif Uddin to BNP candidate O.G. Khan; Pabna 3 - Waji Uddin Khan to BNP candidate Group Captain (ret.) S. H. Azam and Pabna 4 Habibur Rahman Habib (now a BNP leader) to BNP candidate Sirajul Islam Sardar.

A. Latif Sarker
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Hybrid rice seeds

Sir, In my opinion, government had taken the right decision to import hybrid rice seeds because there was no easy way to grow food-grains in large quantities within a short period of time immediately after the devastating flood which caused serious damage to crops and losses to the overall agricultural structure of the country.

What the government couldn't maintain was that, taking elaborate suggestions from the agri-experts and scientists and arranging plant quarantine for the arrivals. Anyway, still we have time

to make observations on the field situation and to impose restrictions on mode and method of cultivation of these imported hybrid varieties. The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) and the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) and also the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) should work unitedly towards mitigating the problems arising due to import and cultivation of the hybrid rice seeds.

M. Zahidul Haque
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Who will compensate us?

Sir, Ours is an export-oriented factory. We had been negotiating with a foreign firm for two years for export of our products to them. Finally, they said that they would visit Bangladesh to inspect our production facilities on 10th Nov '98.

But unfortunately, we received another message from them that they would not visit Bangladesh because of hartals on 9th, 10th and 11th November, 1998 and also declared that they had abandoned their plan to buy from Bangladesh because of its uncertain political situations, especially hartals. Thus, we have lost a potential buyer whom we worked for two years and spent a lot of money.

Again on another occasion our firm could not pay a telephone bill in time and therefore the line was disconnected. As per rule, the bill was required to be paid within 59 days from the date of disconnection, without reconnection charge of Tk 7,500.00. We had the money to pay on 9th November, 1998 but could not pay as the receiving banks were closed for hartals. The 59th day was over on 10th Nov '98. Now, we have to pay Tk 7,500.00 as reconnection charge, without any fault of our own.

Now we ask the government and also the opposition parties: "Who will compensate us?"

An Exporter
Dhaka

OPINION

Harassment in DU

Recently the conscience of the country has shaken by repeated events of sexual harassment in Jahangirnagar University and later in Dhaka University. Being a faculty member in the University of Dhaka, I am anxiously following all the news items from here, Bloomington, Indiana, USA. Unlike many others, I am not willing to take a stand against or for the event. But I felt an obligation to say something about the current issue.

My experiences suggest me to confess that we, the teachers of the Dhaka University are not doing right in many instances. Sexual harassment as a term may be too strong, but gender bias, maltreatment of students and so forth have been taking place for a long time. During my student years in the late eighties and early nineties, we had known to many such untoward developments in the campus. Almost entirely, all the victims were not bold enough to face adverse social reaction for filing sexual harassment cases. In contrast, there were also some students who were willing to take their gender advantage to get a few extra points, and there had always been a few faculty members who also took advantages of the situation.

These types of events have always been an "open secret" in all the departments, at least among the students. Of course, many stories are simply rumour. Nevertheless, no mechanism exists to check these events. Therefore, all the teachers who are involved in such unethical and unconscionable misdeeds continue their activities unquestioned and unpunished. On the other hand, unlike other generations, nineties

generation of students of the universities is brave enough to reveal their own cases.

This is of course a positive development. But we have to remember that there is always room for harassing teachers by raising an allegation of sexual harassment against a teacher. During 1996-97, I expelled almost 30 honours and masters' examinees due to duplication, misconduct, and other reasons. Most of the expelled students did not even say a single word except requesting for a minimal punishment. A few students threatened me to assault physically. The then president of one of the two major student organisations (who is elder brother of my classmate and friend) one day stopped by in my room to advise me to move carefully and asked me to inform him if situation worsened. But what unsettled me most was not threat of physical assault. At least in two occasions, two students threatened me to raise allegations of sexual harassment.

Fortunately, though I did not drop my charges against them, they did not raise any false allegation. Readers might suppose that why should I be worried since I was not involved with these types of misconduct? Our society is framed in such a manner that everybody is ready to believe sexual or any sort of misconduct without verifying reliability of the news. For example, in early 1997 a complaint was filed against a student, of the Department of Political Science that she took her honours final exams in the room of a professor of the department. In 1996-97, a lecturer in the Political Science

Department, and I were officially assigned to guard, and therefore, were present in all the exams and we knew that there was no such misconduct. Eventually the complaint was dropped, but I met many people who believed that the complaint was right. I hate to mention but it has been proved that sometimes faculty members are also involved in conspiracies to destroy personal images of their enemy colleagues by raising allegations of sexual misconduct.

Our psyche is inclined to accept sensational news more readily. Therefore, news media is also eager to publish negative news only, and rarely, if ever, pays similar attention if the event is being proved wrong. From here I can only urge not to let one's conscience be a slave of media sensationalism. Please don't try to crucify someone wrongfully accused.

Of course, I am not saying that Dhaka University is moving towards the right direction. Rather I do believe it needs a rigorous re-organisation to ensure quality education. The question is intertwined with the issue of teachers' accountability; however, I have no intention to discuss the issue here. But investigating and trying only this case will be like closing our eyes like camel to avoid sandstorm. What we need is to establish a permanent structure to mitigate all types of harassment, including sexual harassment, of the students by the teachers.

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