

Liquor Poisoning Menace

THE intake of poisonous liquor is taking an indiscriminate toll of lives. Whereas in Gaibandha or Narsingdi modest income group people died in droves from ingestion of low-priced country brew we now have two perfectly solvent people, who could afford premium brands, dying from liquor poisoning anyway.

This makes us sit up and take note of the extremely worrying possibility that dangerous cocktails are being poured into bottles with foreign labels on them and marketed to an unsuspecting clientele of well-to-do people. It is, of course, a matter of expert investigation as to whether film director Awlad Hossain or the owner of the Chinese restaurant 'Magdonals' died from excessive drinking or the deadly impurities in the drinks or both; but the nature of the after-effect sounded like pointing the finger at the latter possibility. As for the poisonous content a lab test could easily reveal its actual chemical properties. The asking prices of the same brand of foreign alcohol differ from place to place, it is learnt, thereby raising doubts about the genuineness of its content, especially when it is sold on the cheap. We want these aspects probed thoroughly for the sake of undertaking properly educative public awareness building exercise against the brews on sale.

At the ground level, surveillance ought to be mounted over the licensed and the numerous unlicensed liquor sale outlets located all over the country. What they are mixing maybe even more dangerous than the use of methylated spirit and rectified spirit. Who knows?

The magnitude of alcohol consumption in the country will have to be faced as a fact and not bypassed as a taboo subject of sorts. There must be a clear identification of all the sources of alcoholic drink supplies, both external and internal, with a regulatory control mounted on the black-market just as in the case of drugs trafficking. Whatever licensed local breweries we have need to be checked on other products.

Above all, the designated authority over all these matters, namely, the Drug Control and Narcotic Department, is an unequipped, toothless organisation. Its capacity for surveillance and power of enforcement need to be enhanced manifold.

Upaban Robbery

MDNIGHT robbery on board the Upaban Express near Magurjhara, third in six months on the Dhaka-Sylhet track, has put a big question-mark on the security of railway travelling. Over the years, train has been regarded as the safest mode of transport, against the backdrop of an increasing incidence of robbery on the road and the waterways. However, it seems, the scenario has started to change for the worse, and authorities should not fail to take note of it.

The Upaban robbery has exposed certain loopholes in the railway security system. Although timely intervention by the railway police did lead to the killing of three of the perpetrators and arrest of one may suggest otherwise, there is, nonetheless, a general dearth of on-board vigil. With their outdated weapons and dishevelled appearance, the GRP personnel inspire anything but confidence among passengers. Moreover, 'routine patrol' seems to have become an antiquated terminology with them. Passengers hardly feel their presence, let alone see them. Immediate attention should be paid to the GRP's need to be strengthened with modern weapons and rigorous training.

Frequent unscheduled stoppages have also become a regular feature of railway journeys these days. These are often engineered by ticketless passengers in collusion with the attendants for smooth passage in and out of the train. The trend has to stop because it makes the passengers vulnerable to robbery.

There seem to be a number of places where train robbery has been frequent. The law-enforcers should identify the trouble zones and deploy more personnel there for tighter vigilance. The Upaban incident indicates that a lot needs to be done on railway security. The authorities will do the passengers a favour if they take it on that note.

Justice Delayed Justice Denied

SOME fifty cases of sensational murders and repression on women during the last eight years are still pending in the courts of law in the country, according to reports in an influential local daily on Sunday.

The main reasons cited for delay in completing the formalities are slow and traditional process of investigation, lack of witnesses, overcrowding of courts with cases and delay in pronouncement of judgments. Some of the cases that had raised considerable public outcry were transferred to CID or DB for investigation but it has been observed that these agencies did not approach their task in earnest. Many of the investigation reports sent back by the courts for reinvestigation for poor quality have not come back to the courts either. Through the loopholes in investigation many criminals just got away.

Except four cases including those relating to Yasmin murder and rape, and murder of Rubel in DB custody, the rest are proceeding in slow motion. Even with an understanding of the problems faced by the investigating agencies due to lack of manpower and logistics, and the limitations of the trial courts due to various factors that include lack of evidence, absence of witnesses and prayers of lawyers for longer dates, one has to ask the concerned parties, specially the investigation agencies, to speed up their process in the interest of the aggrieved people seeking justice. Try to feel the sorrow and suffering of the people who have lost their near and dear ones, and the consequent miseries that have been brought on their families. They have no place to go except the court of law for justice and fairplay, and once it is delayed it is as good as denied.

The Taming of the Press in Pakistan

The Sharif government's latest assault on the freedom of the Press — the arrest and detention of Nazam Sethi, the editor of the Friday Times has created unprecedented furor both at home and abroad. The Pakistani Press has come a long way in asserting its role and can hardly be browbeaten.

THROUGHOUT the country's existence over more than half a century the Pakistani rulers have been known of their common proclivity for absolute power. From Mr Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the nation's founding father, to General Ziaul Haq the last of the country's military dictators, all were temperamental imperious. Mr Ghulam Muhammad, the ambitious governor general of Pakistan played havoc with the country's nascent democracy by dismissing the Prime Minister and dissolving the constituent assembly during the early fifties. Although a titular head of the state he behaved more like a British viceroy of colonial time. Iskander Mirza, the country's president under 1956 constitution, conspired to concentrate all state powers in his hand and masterminded the military takeover of 1958. Ayub Khan, who seized power from Mirza with a iron fist and obviously allowed no dissent. Given the military-bureaucratic background of these rulers and their little exposure to any democratic-nationalistic movements the behaviour pattern they displayed in politics is not desirable.

But it was a total disappointment both for the Pakistanis as well as outsiders when the democratically elected rulers of the country upheld the same legacy. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a leader of stature, also succumbed to the temptation of concentrating power and had been out and out an authoritarian. His daughter, Benazir

After forcing the Judiciary into compliance, placing his own trusted man in the Presidency and removing an apparently nonconformist Jehangir Khan, the military which was becoming increasingly restless over the country's drift towards anarchy and economic collapse, Sharif now has his grip tightened over all centres of powers. He has effectively crushed his main political opposition through the trial of Ms. Bhutto who will now be legally barred from holding public office. After having removed all the checks and balances required for the functioning of a democratic system Sharif is now left with the last road block on his way to establish a family dictatorship in the country: a defiant Press.

Now the Sharif government

seems determined to remove

this last irritant to its authority. It's antagonism to press

stems from the latter's scathing

criticism of the government's disastrous economic policies, corruption at the high places and the prime minister's authoritarian trends. Nawaz Sharif has been repeatedly lashing out at the press in the public meetings and has accused it of trying to destabilise the government and being unpatriotic. The government dangled carrot and sticks before the journalists in persuading them to the official line. It is alleged

belonging to the group to submit to the government demand of sacking the journalists blacklisted by it. Maleeha Lodhi, the high profile editor of *The News* was among them. *Jang* being the largest publication group may have been the main target of the assault but others also were victimised.

The famous *Newsline* was also served with a tax notice when it ran an investigative story on Sharif family's Rai-

sterial displeasure. The independent minded journalists came under surveillance and increasing official intimidation. As per the Sharif government's perception of democracy the checks and balances are impediments in the way of speedy implementation of policies. The debate and dissents in a democratic polity are considered by it as the causes for chaos and confusion. It's equation of government's interests with those of the state translated into an official culture of intolerance also explains a lot about the administration's obsession with the straight reporting by an emerging breed of journalists committed to the defence of civil society. The government's refusal to admit that its mounting difficulties of governance were not the results of an adverse media coverage remains another serious problem of the Sharif government with regards to its relations with the press.

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A pitched battle, as one that is

raging now between the government and the press — as during its tussle with the former president Farooq Leghari, or with the judiciary or when the Army chief of staff demanded a formal role for the military in the power structure — the frequency of the government's restriction, censors and 'advises' accelerated for the press. When such steps were resisted it only reinforced official antipathy towards the press. Maleeha Lodhi of *The News* was targeted for removal from 'Jang' group for her alleged penchant for creating a crisis syndrome her paper's front page. The news papers' resistance to publishing 'motivated' official stories had been particularly the source of 'min-

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

that public funds were copiously made available for buying their loyalty and patronising pliant publications.

The Sharif government's showdown with the press came almost a year ago in the wake of its tussle with 'Jang' group of publications. The trouble ostensibly started on a tax dispute and resulted in the withholding of the supply of newsprint to the 'Jang' group. But it was viewed more as a pressure tactics to bring the publication's policies in line with those of the government. It is alleged that the tax notices were served as a tool to blackmail the newspapers

wind farm and the use of public fund to develop the property. The Special Branch of police swooped on its office when it reported that Senator Saifur Rahman, the head of the Ehtas Bureau did not pay any income tax. The tax notices were served and personnel from Intelligence Bureau and Special Bureau sent also to other newspapers and magazines which published stories of corruption and tax evasion involving the Sharif family and other top government leaders.

The concentration of power

in Sharif's hand has already seriously undermined the

To be or Not to be without Sonia Gandhi

The development in the Congress has come at a very critical time as it was hoping to return to power after a long gap... Sonia's alleged role in the 'Bofors arms scandal' when Rajiv Gandhi was the prime minister and the involvement of an Italian in the shady deal will also come in the electioneering although the allegations have not been proved until now. This and the 'foreign origin issue' will play a part in the coming polls.

THE Indian National Congress, which led the independence movement of India and remains a pre-eminent political organisation of the country, is in crisis once again. Three senior leaders of the 112-year-old party have been expelled after they questioned the rationale of projecting their Italian-born party chief Sonia Gandhi as the prime ministerial candidate for the coming national elections. Three senior leaders urged the party to suggest amendment to the country's constitution debarring people of 'foreign origin' from holding high public offices like president, vice-president and prime minister. Sharad Pawar, former defence minister and leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) till the dissolution of the house last month, leads the pack of three. The other two A. P. Sangma, former speaker of the Lok Sabha, and Tariq Anwar, former president of the All India Youth Congress, are no less powerful. The three fired the salvo that took many by surprise since many thought no Congress leader would raise the 'foreign origin' issue although it has been the major topic of discussion in the political circles. Mrs. Gandhi reacted with anger and disdain, and resigned from the party presidency. She said in her letter of resignation to the party that she has dedicated her life for India and its people, and will continue to live in India and serve its people till death but would no longer remain at the helm of the party since some people have questioned her credentials.

The scenario that followed, however, was predictable. Scores of Congress leaders and workers responded hysterically to her resignation as they consider the Nehru family almost synonymous to the Congress. Motilal Nehru was the senior leader of the Congress while

his son Jawaharlal Nehru was the first prime minister of independent India and continued in that position till death in 1964. His daughter Indira Gandhi also became the Congress president and the prime minister in 1966. She was the head of the party and the government before being killed by a Sikh body guard in 1984. Indira was out of power and also from top party positions but she bounced back. She had groomed younger son Sanjay as political heir but his death in 1980 in a stunt plane crash brought the elder, Rajiv, a commercial airline pilot, to the forefront, and he eventually became the prime minister. He too was killed in a bomb blast on May 21, 1991, in southern Tamil Nadu state by Sri Lanka's separatist Tamils while on an election campaign as the opposition leader. Rajiv's death almost snapped the bond between the Nehru with the Congress and Indian politics as his daughter Priyanka and son Rahul were still young to step into their father's shoes while Sonia was a foreigner who was then not much favourably disposed to policies.

The Congress, shocked at Rajiv's sudden death, exhorted Sonia to join politics but she politely declined. The Congress, mainly riding the crest of sympathy caused by Rajiv's assassination, won the elections and remained in power for five years. Meanwhile Sonia remained a political and social recluse although many senior Congress leaders maintained contacts with her. The party was not in a good shape under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. Towards the end of Mr.

Rao's tenure, Sonia started taking interest in politics and finally joined the Congress. When she decided to campaign for the organisation in the 1996 elections, many Congress leaders were relieved to find their cherished Nehru linkage restored.

Now her resignation has

certainly pushed the party to the precipice of another crisis.

The Congress has gone through similar crises before.

During the days of Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Sanjiva Reddy and S. N. Nijalingappa also broke away and

the backbone of the organisation no matter how many leave the party or side with the rebels.

Whether Mrs. Gandhi

withdraws the resignation or not, she will indeed remain the main attraction. However, she is likely to take back the resignation letter as the All India Congress Committee (AICC), the larger body of the party, is expected to make an appeal to her formally and ratify the expulsion of the three leaders done by the working committee.

With the national polls

knocking at the door, the organisation

can not afford to be without her.

In the extreme case,

she may defer the withdrawal of resignation if Sonia

nurtures the indignation

and insult meted out by three

leaders and makes an alterna-

tive arrangement. If she re-

turns, her Italian origin will

continue to dog the Congress.

Opponents like the BJP will

certainly seek to take advan-

tage from Sonia's foreign

origin and has already floated

an allusion for Sonia's coun-

try of origin Italy or India.

Other parties like the Akali Dal, which is an ally of the

BJP, went to the extent of saying

that India is a nuclear

power and it will not be wise

to leave the 'sensitive' issues

of the nation with a prime

minister of 'foreign origin'.

Even Mr. Pawar said that an

Indian Sonali Dasgupta was

not allowed to run for a mu-

nicipal election in Italy be-

cause she is not an Italian by

birth and wondered how

could Sonia become prime

minister of India. Sonia and

her children Priyanka and

Rahul are visibly upset by

such views. They said Sonia

remains a part of the family

that ruled India for many

years but has she ever be-

trayed on any national issue?

These issues are divisive

in nature and it remains to be

seen how they affect the

minds of the Indian electo-

rate in the coming polls.

True, Sonia's foreign origin

could be a factor in the ballot-

ing because her case is differ-

ent from rest of the members

of the Nehru family. She may

have to bear this burden of

being not a natural-Indian

till daughter Priyanka or son

Rahul joins politics although

she enjoys tremendous sup-

port by virtue of being widow

of Rajiv Gandhi. She is trying

her best to acclimate with

Indian traditions and lan-

guage but this may not be

enough when she is seen as

future prime minister