

Impose punitive fines on delinquent transporters

Have compensation paid to accident victims' families

WITHIN a matter of eleven days we have seen two highway accidents of such tragic proportions taking place as in another clime or country would have had not only a few heads rolling but some guillotined as well with no tears rolling down any onlooker's cheeks. Let's jog the memory a little. On December 27, a 26-seater bus carrying 75 passengers slipped to the roadside of Dhaka-Rangpur Highway near Bogra with the spring plate of its front wheels crashing down while it was letting another speeding vehicle overtake it. That was not all; minutes later, a bus from the opposite direction, i.e. Pabna, speeding in on the stuck up vehicle knocked it off. Result: 36 passengers died, 30 of them instantaneously while 40 were injured. Overloading, speeding, overtaking, derelict state of the vehicles and no cops around to apply rules were all stark omissions and commissions to invite punitive action. Yet nothing has been heard of any of the transport owners, operators, or law enforcement people being questioned on their lapses or made to answer for their neglect, far less punished.

Most of all, the question that keeps haunting is this: have the victim families been compensated for their grievous losses, including the loss of sole earning members of many a bereaved household? The obligation to the dead and living couldn't have ended with funeral arrangements made for the deceased or medical treatment accorded to the injured -- and that too nobody knows how adequate were these really.

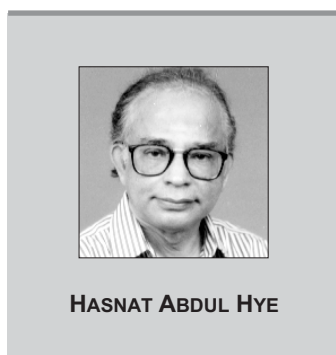
With such a burden of unanswered questions on our collective conscience we face the deep anguish over Aminbazar accident of January 7 on the Dhaka-Aricha highway with some new trepidations. Twenty-eight lives were lost in addition to the 36 killed in the Bogra accident putting casualties of train disasters to shame!

First-hand information from Shalepur bridge, where the 30-seater bus with 50 passengers onboard skidded off the road to fall into a ditch with tragic consequences reveal that the bridge was in perfect condition. There was neither any engineering fault in it nor any jutting open-end to allow any free fall. The accident occurred entirely because of the so-called driver; for he was an imposter with no driver's licence on him and yet put in charge of so many human lives by the transport owner. Little wonder, the upstart of a driver turned a deaf ear to the frantic protestations of his helper that he must cease the reckless driving he seemed hell-bent upon continuing and thereby risking a wholesale disaster. No compunctions on his employer's part, and more importantly, without anyone in authority ever probing the true status of the driver or the road-worthiness of his vehicle as such.

The moment a transport organisation sells a ticket to any commuter, the former enters into a social contract to offer a comfortable and safe journey to its client. The transport owners' obligations include proper maintenance of the vehicles to retain their road-worthiness, selection of safe and trained hands as drivers and strict compliance with road safety standards and highway traffic rules. They should have roving staff to ensure there is no overloading, overtaking or speeding beyond the limits permissible on the highways. In order to instill such a sense of responsibility in them two steps need to be taken: first, they should be required by law to pay compensation for deaths or injuries occurring from road accidents; and secondly, there should be police placements along the highways so that the transport operators are kept on the tenterhooks to abide by the rules.

Our bottom-line recommendations to the government will be that starting with the recent cases, punitive fines should be imposed on the bus owners and a precedent firmly established for payment of compensation to the accident victims' families. It will be patently unfair and unjust on the part of the government not to compel the transport owners to pay compensation for the death and injuries of accident victims. The road journeys would eventually need to be insured.

The long and the short of it



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

BUt for its regularity and characteristic youthful exuberance the event should have passed without comments and an overview. The Seventh International Short and Independent Film Festival was held recently without much pomp and panoply. Modesty and simplicity have been the Festival's signature hallmark since inception and it was no exception this year. The festival has successfully steered clear of the glitzy razzmatazz usually associated with film festivals. Instead the focus has been on showcasing short films in different genres-- documentary, fiction, animation and experimental as a continuing effort to firmly establish the new aesthetics of audio visual. This year independent films were included in the programme expanding the scope of the Festival.

Short films are not new but it is their elevation to a movement or development as a parallel to the mainstream that distinguishes them from the past. Being a movement and a trendsetter short films are being made on a regular basis throughout the world. It is particularly strong and vibrant in third world countries, perhaps because of the many freedoms in filmmaking. Both short and independent films emerged as a reaction to the commercialization of the mainstream filmmaking. They constitute a protest to the 'commodification' of an art form by capital turning it into a profit-seeking industry. The rupturing of the nexus between studio and the distribution-cum-exhibition network at the turn of the century succeeded only to loosen the stranglehold of the oligopolistic control of the studios. The film industry managed to retain its profit-making orientation. As long as films were more or less realistic in theme and presentation and had both edifying and entertaining roles there was little more than grumbling

about commoditization by capital. Commercial exploitation of sex, violence and special effects drastically changed the general tenor of films. Very soon wild fantasy was added to render films totally void of realism. Far from being an aberration this subversion of film making by capital became the norm. As a result the flood of tasteless, violent and sexually explicit films gave rise to revulsion among the discerning filmmakers and audience. The search for alternative cinema began.

opt for films of short duration in the eighties. By then short filmmaking had also become an established genre in many other countries including the capitalist west. Though short film format was initially used for documentary and advertisement, its potentials as a medium for fictions and experimental themes were utilized successfully. Short film, with the various genres, has now become so diverse, rich and versatile that it can claim to be an alternative to the mainstream films. Joined by independent films of less than the

whelming majority of audience now come from the working class and the poor for whom cinema is mainly an entertainment and the only one to boot. The more intense and outlandish is the entertainment the greater is the scope offered to them to escape the reality of hardship. Enjoyment of fantasy only heightens their addictive excitement. It should however be realized that the masses are compelled to see commercial films because of their socio-economic circumstances. Being the main clientele mainstream cinema

life and challenge market forces. The short-term redemption for films from banality and prurience can come through strict enforcement of the censorship against the use of lurid sex and rampant violence. If this oversteering by the guardians of public morality is accompanied with steady improvement of the standard of living of the masses it can save our film industry from total degeneration. Meanwhile, the need of the middle class for realistic and artistic films has also to be met. Short and Independent films

outrageous and fantastic action films may not wither away as is demonstrated by the experience of the developed countries. But this is a case of "supply creating its own demand" and therefore filmmakers can be castigated for debasing popular taste and distorting the outlook of viewers when socio-economic context affords little justification for such downgradation. Apart from being an indictment of crass commercialization short and independent films can provide an alternative on a permanent basis. But this can happen only when there is a regular outlet for exhibiting them.

Making short and independent films is challenging because within a limited length both the subject and narrative have to be condensed. Short films particularly calls for experimentation and innovative techniques while independent films have the freedom to be flexible with length within the self-imposed restraint of realistic and aesthetic narrative. Because of this each short and independent film is unique, bearing the signature of the director very much along the auteur theory of the sixties. Perhaps it is the unpredictability of each short film and their novelty that draw the audience in large number even when they know that run-of-the-mill entertainment will not be offered. They are attracted by suggestiveness, brevity, density and puzzlement are the outcome of the aesthetics of short film. For such films to survive by sustaining audience interest there is a great need for a regular exhibition which is possible when there is a network outside the commercial cinemas. To promote short films the government should build multiplexes in each of the district towns and in Dhaka. Such multiplexes would enable all the parallel streams to co-exist under one roof promoting the hope that one day the cinegoers of different film categories (commercial, short, independent) would merge through intermingling. The goal of a healthy cine movement is not cultural apartheid but promotion of affinity and solidarity among the viewers. Short films aspire to reflect life truthfully without boundaries. It is therefore within the domain of public interest.

The writer was chairman of the 6th and 7th International Short Film Festival.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

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Neo-realist films made in Italy in late forties and fifties by directors like Rosellini De Sica, Visconti and New Wave films made by French Directors like Goddard, Bresson, Chabrol in the sixties challenged the juggernaut of commercial mainstream films for a while. But they succeeded in adding realism and art to film making only at the fringe failing to make permanent inroads into the mainstream films. Films made in the Socialist bloc had the promise to continue as alternative to commercial films churned out on the assembly line of studios in the west. Films by Polish, Czech and Russian directors demonstrated the power and beauty of stories told in celluloid. But they were fortunate to enjoy state patronage and an audience who were conditioned to berate sex and violence as elements of entertainment. Countries of the third world had their few rare geniuses who sought to breakout from the mainstream temporarily. But mostly filmmaking was held in thrall to capital and its exploitation of the baser instincts.

The above situation was not acceptable to filmmakers and audience in Bangladesh and in many other countries. They organized film societies and guilds for exhibition of good films, film appreciation and also to a limited extent, for filmmaking. Financial constraint led young Bangladeshi filmmakers to

feature film length short film is now poised for regular exhibition wherever outlet is available. The enthusiastic participation by audience in the short film festivals in Dhaka leaves no doubt that such regular screening would be well attended. It goes to the credit of the film societies, the Bangladesh Short Film Forum and the International Festivals that such a discerning audience has been created. Film appreciation promoted by Film Societies played a pivotal role in this regard and now short films are keeping their interest alive. The process thus has been interactive and mutually reinforcing.

The opposition of short and independent films to mainstream commercial films is not confined to length. This difference is superficial. Short and independent films depart from the crass commercialization that exploit elements like sex, violence and overall fantasy. If fund was available to make feature films eschewing these formulaic ingredients short film makers would turn to feature length films. But neither the supply side (capital) nor the demand side (audience) allows this to happen. In fact there is a symbiotic relation between demand of the lowest common denominator and supply of feature length film matching the same. This is because over the years there has been a big change in the composition of audience in cinema halls. The over-

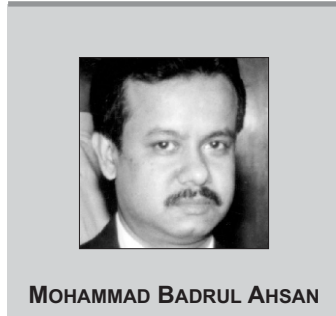


A scene from The Unwanted, Bulgaria

caters to their need adding its own recipe of entertainment. However much decried the commercial filmmakers will not abandon the formula of sex, violence and fantasy which assures them of popularity with the masses and success in box office. As long as the working class and the poor are held captive to a life of illiteracy, poverty and crude enjoyment by the prevailing social order there is little chance of their turning against commercial films. The middle class cine goers can be appalled at the crudity of commercial films and condemn the film makers for promoting vulgarity and dumbing down of film art, but their indignation will not alter the reality of

can fill up this void as they are trying to do at present modestly and sporadically. It is not an either or situation. Commercial mainstream, short and independent films, all have to co-exist until the context changes. But the long-term objective should be to integrate all streams as much as possible into one, veering away from vulgar exploitation of the medium towards a socially and aesthetically more acceptable standard. This is an undertaking that will cut across social, political and economic boundaries. Only social and economic emancipation of the masses can bring them nearer to the cultural standard patronized by the middle class. Even then demand for

Character and destiny



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

"CHARACTER is destiny" writes George Eliot in his novel *A Mill on the Floss*. Greek philosopher Heraclitus called a man's character his fate. Friedrich Von Hardenberg, a German poet and novelist, felt that fate and character were the same conception. Last week a billionaire businessman died in the city in a gruesome convergence of the two. His fate caught up with his character when the man who loved to lock up money and women inside his tightly secured house, was shot and butchered along with three of his maids. The money he kept in his locker was mostly stolen, the rest of it strewn in the house perhaps in the haste with which the criminals had to flee the scene.

One can say that the reasons why he lived were also the reasons why he died. Money and women were his two primal passions, and in his own special way he had managed to get plenty of both. English novelist Charles Reade explains that if you sow an act, you will reap a habit, if

you sow a habit you will get a character, and if you sow a character you will get a destiny.

It is hard to tell which of the two between money and women was the first act he sowed or the first habit he reaped. Whether money tempted him to get women or women tempted him to make money we don't know, but one thing must have led to another like bait to hook until they became his character and pushed him towards his destiny.

By then he had lived a reasonably long life. He made lots of money,

success and wealth.

Former US President Ronald Reagan said that you could tell a lot about a fellow's character by his way of eating jellybeans. What do we tell about the character of this man? Do we judge him by the way he lived or by the way he died? If character is the roadmap of personality, how do we consider the journey, which ended in an atrocious tragedy? Those who killed him also killed some of his women and looted his money and valuables as if they wanted to destroy both the traveler

sorted with women, smoked hashish and worshipped Kali.

What is there to learn from his character and destiny? We know that one who lives by the sword also dies by it. But how did the way he lived carry the seed of the way he died? He had the prized possessions of a material man, the purchasing power and the sexual prowess, which were sustained by the mystical power of devil worship. He used to bathe himself and the deity in blood and milk, chant in a secret chamber of his house where

combined together into a success story that included wealth and women in an undying ceremony of sensual explosions. One wonders if this man ever believed in a life after death, if there was ever a trapdoor that let in the lights of wisdom into the dark basement of his mind where devotion and desire had a deadly mix.

In the end ethos led to eros to chaos to pathos. It ruined his family, and then led to his own death in the manner of a Greek tragedy when character compounded into compulsions that became destiny. Perhaps one day we will know who killed him and for what he died. But the killers treated him like a Pharaoh. They killed his maids with him and scattered money and precious stones as if to turn his living quarters into a catacomb so that his lifestyle would remain uninterrupted even after death.

Character is the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of a person. Destiny is something that is to happen to a person through a pre-determined course of events. One cannot tell which is what, whether the traits of a person determine the course of events in his life, or it is the other way around. The businessman who was killed last week could have been born with traits that evolved his destiny. May be he was born with a destiny that shaped his traits.

Either way, let us pray may his soul rest in peace.

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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acquired a great deal of property, set up many businesses, mosque, and madrasah, consorted with all the women he wanted, married twice, fathered eight or nine children, generously gave to charity, smoked hashish, and worshipped the Hindu goddess Kali. This high-energy super-lucky man ought to be the envy of every ambitious man, successful on so many fronts of life at a time as if in one life he had lived the success of many lives. He also lived in the twilight of faith, a Muslim man who worshipped the Hindu deity for

and his vehicles as a way to destroy his journey.

But he had already turned seventy when the killers destroyed his journey. Not many people live that long, not to say that even fewer people enjoy their ride in the manner he did. He lived entirely in the thick of his flesh, his carnal instincts saturated in creature comforts, which had separated him from his wives and children and left him in the care of his maids and the deity. In the end his life was reduced to four simple rituals. He counted money, con-

he worshipped the formidable Hindu goddess, and scatter money and precious gemstones on the floor as a ritual of that worship.

How do we judge this man, if we want to do so? Where do we place him on the moral plain or ethical terrain, his success, philanthropy and business in the face of his grisly acts, the sexual promiscuity, idolatry and the perversions? Which of the two did he satisfy more between his flesh and Kali with a life that worked like magic? It is said that a certain holy man had blessed him with two

tion of his character, or his character was the reflex of his life? Between lust and lucre, where did he place his lord? Between the mystical and material, where was the spiritual man? How did he compromise faith with felicity, soul with sensuality, and rituals with rancor?

It is interesting how he used mystical force for material gains as if he and his deity had entered into a deal to share it all between two of them. He revered Her and She rewarded him, the sordid and the sacred, the grotty and the goddess,

Bangladesh-Japan relations: A brief preview on the thirtieth anniversary

MONZURUL HUQ

BANGLADESH and Japan are to celebrate this year thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Although the exact date of the anniversary falls in February, various programmes are to be held throughout the year, both in Bangladesh and in Japan, to mark the important occasion. The year 2002 also marks fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of Japan's diplomatic tie with India and Pakistan. As a result, the year will be an important one for the south Asian region as a whole as far as its tie with Japan is concerned.

Fifty years of bilateral tie is a relatively lengthy period in international relations to build a strong foundation on which to develop that relationship further. Yet, from the Japanese perspective South Asia in general remains a somewhat neglected region compared to Tokyo's economic and political tie with some other parts of Asia. For example, Japan normalized rela-

tions with China in the same year that Tokyo recognized Bangladesh. Yet, economic and political tie between Beijing and Tokyo have by far surpassed the level being marked in Japan's tie with India or Pakistan. The anniversary year, therefore, might provide important opportunity to look back at the process in general and to find out ways to bring South Asian region closer to Asia's most important economy, which in recent years is also playing significant role in international as well as regional politics.

For Bangladesh the importance of Japan all along remained vital as Tokyo continues to offer important economic assistance considered crucial for country's advancement. The two nations never faced any serious problem in their dealings with international issues, except for a small irritant back in 1980 when Dhaka was elected non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council defeating Japan in a voting at the General Assembly. But cordial goodwill gesture towards each other, as well as

mutual understanding between the two nations by far supersede any such minor irritating factor. Dhaka extended its all out support and cooperation to Tokyo in 1977 when a group of Japanese extremists hijacked a Japan Airlines' passenger plane and forced it to land at our now abandoned Tejgaon airport. Despite a looming coup threat, the government of Bangladesh successfully mediated the negotiation between the Japanese government and Japan's Red Army faction and the problem was eventually solved with the release of all passengers on board. The policy makers in Tokyo did not forget this goodwill gesture of the government of Bangladesh towards an important friend and in subsequent years Dhaka enjoyed a prominent place in Japan's foreign aid policy. Bangladesh till today remains one of Japan's leading aid recipient countries.

Japanese assistance to Bangladesh traces back to the period of country's brief history as eastern part of Pakistan. Despite Japan being a relatively newcomer

at the time in the field of overseas assistance, the policy makers in Tokyo did not hesitate to express their desire that they would like to see a significant part of their assistance to Pakistan channeled for the benefit of the people of East Pakistan. With the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in December 1971, the flow of Japanese aid to the country marked a continuous increase. Based on cumulative net disbursement of Japan's Official Development Assistance, Bangladesh is the sixth largest recipient of Japanese bilateral aid. Moreover, Japanese assistance to Bangladesh is quite visible as a large chunk of Tokyo's aid goes for building infrastructures like roads and bridges. Bangladesh by now has two Bangladesh-Japan Friendship Bridges along the country's most important motorway. This visibility of assistance is obviously helping to improve the image of Japan in Bangladesh among country's ordinary citizens.

But we all are aware of the fact that the important economic tie between nations in this age of

globalization has its two different sides. If Official Development Assistance from a rich donor to a poor recipient reflects the dependency side of that relationship, investment is the other one, which, despite criticism of its exploitative nature, might bring mutual benefit to both parties involved. Japanese investment in Bangladesh till today remains at a significantly lower level compared even to some of our other south Asian neighbors. As a result, it still remains a long way for Bangladesh to go before the country can claim to have graduated in the field of mutual partnership. But fortunately for Bangladesh, Japanese investment is slowly flowing in to the country in recent years and the establishment of a zipper factory near Dhaka by one of the internationally renowned Japanese companies, YKK, can pave the way for others to follow the example. But much would obviously depend on how China acts after her joining the World Trade Organization. The anniversary year, therefore, could provide opportunity to our official as well as unofficial channels to con-

vince Japanese investors about the importance of moving part of their industrial sector, which is facing the process of being hollowed away, to Bangladesh, whose cheap labour force has by now proved its worthiness and diligence by working illegally in different parts of Japan.

The total number of Bangladeshi workers in Japan is anybody's guess as almost all of them are working without having any legal status to stay in the country. Being illegal also means remaining out of the official statistical figure. Estimated figure suggests their total number between 7 and 10 thousand. A predominant majority of them are men and working in sectors know in Japan as "three K", which is difficult, dirty and dangerous. Some of them have simply slipped into Japan without having any proper document and others overstayed their visa obtained through different channels, mostly by paying exorbitant amount of money to the so-called "agents".

If illegal workers are successful in improving the image of our country at least to their

employers, the so-called "agents" are mostly responsible for not only damaging the image of the nation, but also that of the other side too. With the ulterior motive of attracting potential clients from whom it would be easy to reap off money, those so-called "agents" are involved in spreading gossip that Japanese visa is something that can be purchased. In fact, in one of my article published in September last year I referred to such gossip and by doing so also probably mistakenly expressed my feeling in relation to what was then happening at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo. There is no falsification of any fact in the article, but the expression of feeling is something that created misunderstanding. The intention was obviously not to hurt anyone and least of all to fuel the irritating gossip further.

The anniversary year would also definitely provide wonderful opportunity to clear out such misunderstanding about a friendly country, which is a very important partner of our economic development. To do anything like that successfully, a

meaningful involvement of people's level exchange might prove to be helpful. Important and timely messages of what is true and what is not can reach the people in general only through meaningful exchanges at such levels, not by means of celebration for celebration's sake only.

Japan's foreign office has gone through a process of important changes since my article was published in September. An internal investigation report submitted to the minister has recommended punitive measures against almost 300 bureaucrats of the ministry and also proposed a plan to change the system of evaluation for higher-ranking officials. All these changes are helping the ministry to gradually regain its lost image in Japan. Hopefully by the time the anniversary is going to take off, a clear wind would not only blow away all other remaining taints from the Kasumigaseki headquarters of the Japanese foreign ministry, but would also help people of Bangladesh to differentiate clearly gossips from real facts.