

Corruption in bureaucracy

Independent anti-corruption commission brooks no delay

TRANSPARENCY International's report last year on Bangladesh was pointed and revealing, exposing corruption in the country.

By hindsight, the report on the state of affairs in 2000 highlighted our topmost ranking among the corrupt countries of the world. Resultantly, the expose stormed into the centre-stage of political controversy with the then AL government contesting its veracity on the ground of methodology used by TI and the opposition BNP seizing it as an issue in an election year.

Despite all the commotion and recriminatory diatribes generated by the TI report, 2000 the bottom-line message of it all sank in the minds of the people easily: one of the poorest countries in the world was plagued by the worst forms of corruption conceivable.

That was an indictment on misgovernance expressed in ranking terms. Insofar as the TIB's latest report, 2001 goes, it is the huge sense of loss and denial from corruption that has been quantified in monetary terms. Taka 11,000 crore representing 4.7 per cent of the GDP got drained away through corruption last year. Earlier, we heard of a World Bank report lamenting that 2 to 2.5 per cent could be added to the annual GDP growth rate had corruption in Bangladesh been kept at the level of what prevailed in some middle income countries.

Law Minister Barrister Moudud Ahmed, on being approached by BBC Bangla Service for a comment, said something to this effect: the time covered by the TIB report included only two months of the present government's rule, implying thereby that it basically applied to the previous AL government to answer for.

We think that's where basically the problem of corruption lies. It is the holier-than-thou political attitude to the deeply entrenched malaise on the part of major political parties that has ruled out any serious effort to curb corruption. This attitude could nowhere have been more pronounced and evident than in the charade of corruption charges invariably played out by an incumbent government against ministers, state ministers, deputy ministers and MPs belonging to the former ruling party. We call it the musical chair vendetta game-play; for, while a lot of hot air will be blown around the not-so-sensational 'spilling of the beans', the real task of punishing the corrupt, as named in the disclosures, would be forgotten as soon as the dusts will have settled. In our context, who ever heard of any ex-minister serving jail sentences following prosecution on corruption charges pressed again them by the government in power?

Many would like to believe, however, that if scooping investigations were made to substantiate charges and the prosecution prepared accordingly, quite a few of the corruption cases launched would have resulted in handing down sentences to the accused.

So, the moves against corruption in high places have proved abortive, as though by a tacit consent behind the scene between two mutual appreciation societies in alternating cycles of going to power and losing it.

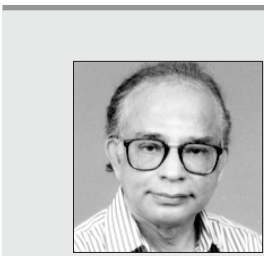
At the other pole, it is the incidence of petty corruption at the lower rungs that made news. But only a lip service was being given to the truism: when the head rots the rest of the body rots too.

Anyway the opaque focus on the whole gave the mid-to-high level bureaucracy a field day in terms of practising corruption. The latest TIB report brings out the fact of a bonanza that class I government officers are making out of public funds.

Added to this is the abuse of power by the police, arguably one of the most atrocious in the world by the universally acknowledged human rights standards. Corruption has been quantified by the TIB. But what about the abuse of power, the co-traveller with corruption, which does incalculable harm to the society and yet which cannot be monetised?

It is time we have an independent anti-corruption commission and the office of ombudsman before it is too late for salvation.

The good, the bad and the ugly



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

It will be an understatement to say that the political parties in Bangladesh have momentous roles to play to make democracy work. This is notwithstanding the fact that odds against them have been heavy. The fact of the matter is that they have to rise to the occasion in spite of the millstones around their neck. They have no alternative if they are committed to the ideal of democracy.

The forces that are undermining democracy in the country are now well known. Like the cartoon character Pogo the parties also can mutter in a fit of contrition: "We have seen our enemies; they are us." It not only takes experience but also moral courage to make a clean breast of such fundamentals. If political parties face the truth it will make them strong and not weak. The period of adjustment may prove uncomfortable, but it need not be long.

In recent years democracy in Bangladesh has been held hostage by various acts of omissions and commissions of political parties. Mostly these are their own creation, sometimes made under compulsions, sometimes as a matter of habit and through inertia. But what they are doing as prisoners of the past, can also be undone by the imperatives of the present. There are telltale signs that a thaw is about to take place on the political front. But unlike nature, changes in human affairs are not automatic and as such cannot be taken for granted. The will to change must act as the spur. Breaking out of the mould is of the essence.

Prominent among the acts of commission that have threatened democracy intermittently is hartal called by political parties, mostly when they are in opposition. Ostensibly, the immediate goal of hartal has been articulation of grievances over various issues. A concomitant goal has been to destabilise the government with a view to toppling it before the designated term. But parties organising hartals know very well that there are better and constitutional ways of expressing views and giving vent to criticisms. They also

thrive, it cannot even breathe, in such a rarefied atmosphere. Die-hard optimists would like to believe that such atrocity has not set in and there is still room to extricate the nation from the morass.

After the last general election the main opposition party Awami League, vented its anger and indignation criticising right, left and centre. This is the manifestation of conditioned reflex of a defeated party. Any other party would perhaps have trodden the same path shouting 'foul' at the top of voice. Though unfortu-

degrees. It is time that all parties realised the political futility of hartal and its insidious impact on public interest. On balance, the advantage of keeping party workers active and united should be seen as being outweighed by public resentment. The argument of paying back in the same coin also does not hold water. The government, against which hartal is supposedly directed, is not hurt by it in any significant way.

Just as all parties have found it expedient to resort to hartals, abstention from parliament as a form

things in words and actions to assure the opposition of being fair and cooperative. The onus is on them because they are in a more advantageous position, politically and psychologically. Giving adequate time to opposition to talk, allowing them to discuss issues of national importance and going out of the way to show courtesy will benefit the alliance in power and the government ultimately. It gives them legitimisation of the second kind. They can take credit for saving parliamentary democracy from a precipitous fall. The more time the opposition has to articulate their views and criticisms inside parliament the less they will be inclined to fall back on extra-constitutional and undemocratic means. It is because of these considerations that the furore in the Jatiya Sangsad over allocation of time and decision on certain issues gives cause for concern. The Awami League has so far staged two walkouts, first in protest against allocation of time and the second time as a reaction against refusal by treasury bench members to discuss the subjects raised by the opposition. This is not a good omen and the parties in power can exercise it in item before the cause of democracy receives another setback.

Much, however, depends on what is said both inside and outside the Sangsad and the manner of saying. Insinuation to smear character or dishonouring the dead is not in good taste. It bespeaks of misdemeanor which is shocking. Similarly shocking diatribe made in response that is disproportionate and inappropriate to the cause of action. Decency and decorum cannot be dissociated from leadership. This is because people expect leaders to be role models. Many of them may not be so right now, but this lapse and inadequacy should not be taken insouciantly nor with equanimity. The good should continuously struggle against the bad and the ugly. As long as the urge is there, there is hope.

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are aware that except by a rare convergence of events hartals alone cannot force a government to relinquish power. But in spite of having no such illusion hartals are called mainly for one reason by political parties: to keep their workers busy and united. In a political culture where power of number in the street or a public meeting override merit of issues, organisational aspects of politics assume strategic importance. But if hartals promote parochial interests of parties in a dubious way they also harm them by alienating neutral citizens, not to speak of intensifying antagonism of opponents. If the cynics' view that the neutrals are a rapidly vanishing breed becomes widely prevalent it will be a bad day for democracy. This is because in a highly polarised polity, there is no one to judge and give verdict without bias or an axe to grind. In this scheme of things allegiance to one's own party and opposition to others are seen as given and become written in stone. Democracy does not

ne that is expected, particularly in a country where elections have been held not too regularly, at least not under democratic dispensation. The question then appears to be not one about the reaction of the defeated but boils down to the duration and nature of reaction. Having made the point after the general election, the Awami League should have picked up the pieces and gone about its business. Because life goes on, so should politics.

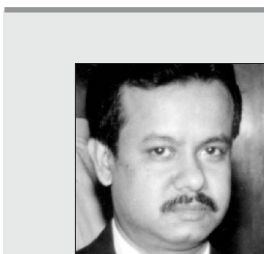
If the Awami League can be faulted for taking a rather long time to nurse their wound, they should be credited for avoiding blitz of hartals. Mercifully the number of days on which hartals were called after the general election has been few and far between. The latest one last month was for six hours only, which, though undesirable in itself, was more tolerable. This gesture of being considerate on the part of the Awami League may be indicative of a change from the bad habit of the past, shared by all parties in varying

of protest has been used by the major parties almost in equal measure. Sometimes, this has been done to press demand for change in the constitution. Sometimes boycott has taken place as a protest against treatment meted out to opposition in the parliament. Whatever the reason, boycott of the Jatiya Sangsad must rank as the highest and most severe act of commission that undermines parliamentary democracy. If hartals bleed democracy by fits and starts, boycott of the Sangsad strikes it at its very roots. In the absence of opposition parliament loses balance in its deliberations and fails to perform the pivotal role. The first casualty is accountability of government which can be ensured most effectively only through parliament. Under the present tradition of party politics treasury bench members are not expected to be too critical of government actions, particularly, in respect of its failures. Like well-behaved children they are to be seen and not heard, at least on awkward occa-

harms public interest immensely. For this opposition has to share a major blame.

There is also the basic issue of representing the constituency. When MPs remain absent from parliament the contract with those who elected them is violated. Once elected there is no other choice open to an MP than either to join or to resign. To hold onto the office through legal quibbling like registering attendance from time to time is unethical and unfair. The decision of Awami League to join the budget session not only for the sake of retaining membership but also for full-fledged participation in parliament has been welcomed by all those who care for parliamentary politics. This augurs well for democracy as well. It is equally encouraging that the Prime Minister asked his party men to show opposition all courtesy. This is important because the opposition can always exploit lack of civility and consideration as an excuse to boycott or walkout. The alliance in power should do every-

Love beyond death



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HE put the rose in a glass of water and watched it for three days and three nights, until it withered into a dark shade of red and looked like a floating lump of clotted blood. He fished it out with his fingers, and noticed a tinge of red in the water. That is when it occurred to him that the unfortunate rose had bled to death during its confinement in the glass.

He said to his girlfriend that he was unworthy of her because he couldn't save that rose to enjoy the fragrance of her love a little longer. She smiled and told him not to be silly because a rose was only a rose, and by no means was it meant to be a test of his ability to love her. He said nothing in response, but stared at the sky as if to survey the vast expanse of nature to find the departed soul of that luckless flower.

For few days since the death of that rose, he took a vow of silence and refused to talk to anyone. His girlfriend wondered if she was in love

with an abnormal man, who could go into mourning for a withered flower. She thought he was a sensitive man who was not ready to face the hardship of life. She wrote to him during his silence that life was more than a rose and she was not going to see him again.

When he recovered from his silence, he didn't try to see her again, behaving like a perfect gentleman to grant a lady the honour of her wish, and showed no signs of grief or

another man until she understood the entire race of men much better. When friends came to tell her that he was sighted under the mango tree, she told them that he should be asked to hang himself from that tree in the shame of mischief he did to her.

His friends advised him to patch up with her, and cautioned him that the sigh of a wronged woman was going to bring him sorrow. He quoted from her letter, arguing that she was the one who had left him because he

had saved her from having to spend the rest of her life with a man of stone, who could sit under that mango tree without her and still not miss her enough to think of her. Man was made of peculiar clay, which hardened as soon as moulded into his shape.

The pond near the mango tree overflowed soon and water flooded its banks. He could no longer go to the bench and sit under the mango tree. A damp cold weather created

civilisation as boats plied on the streets and children swum in city squares. People were dispersed to secure shelters in the waterlogged city. Schools and offices were closed as spreading epidemics and nauseating stench of water threatened to disrupt the lives of people.

On the third floor of a building, the ground floor of which was submerged in water, the parents worried that their daughter's head was being in the clouds from time to time. The

his circle of friends, many of whom had scattered to escape the rolling water. By the time they all returned and got together, she got married and left for USA with her husband. The wedding was done in a rush and with less ostentation, inviting only a few people from both sides, because her husband, a meritorious young man from a needy family, claimed he could use some cash to settle down in a new country.

A friend called him eight days after she had left the country and gave him the news. He didn't say much except regretting that he couldn't see her for one last time. The friend consoled him that, if god willed, he would see her again, but he should go ahead with his own life and build his future. He is said to have showed rare confidence for the first time in life and replied that there was nothing to worry about the future since in the end every man would prove to be a joker in the circus of life.

Exactly two months and three days after she got married, he died of cancer. Few days before his death, he told his mother that he wished he could see her for one last time. He handed over to her mother an envelope with several photographs, few letters and some mango leaves he had collected during his last trip to the bench. He wished that the materials should be returned to their rightful owner, who also should be told that he would continue to love her until the last star dropped from the sky.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

IT RAINED HEAVILY THAT SUMMER IN THE MIDST OF SWELTERING HEAT, AS IF THE NATURE REFLECTED THE AGONIES OF WOUNDED LOVE... SHE OFTEN CONFIDED IN FRIENDS THAT GOD HAD SAVED HER FROM HAVING TO SPEND THE REST OF HER LIFE WITH A MAN OF STONE, WHO COULD SIT UNDER THAT MANGO TREE WITHOUT HER AND STILL NOT MISS HER ENOUGH TO THINK OF HER. MAN WAS MADE OF PECULIAR CLAY, WHICH HARDENED AS SOON AS MOULDED INTO HIS SHAPE.

anxiety. Nothing lasted forever in this world and all things were controlled by destiny, he told his friends. He went about the normal business of life, except occasionally sitting on the bench in the park under the mango tree, where he used to have peanuts with her.

She occasionally suffered from a dull rancour and drowned herself in disquieting tears. Man was a treacherous animal who could tear away the heart of a woman while keeping her in good humour. She convinced herself again and again that she was not going to have anything to do with

wasn't worthy of her. Then he told them about the rose, how it withered in the glass being held against its will. True love flourished in the uninhibited flow of emotions between two hearts, not under the compulsion of how one must feel for the other.

It rained heavily that summer in the midst of sweltering heat, as if the nature reflected the agonies of wounded love. She refused to eat mango throughout that entire season lest it reminded her of the tree under which she had spent the most memorable moments of her first love. She often confided in friends that God

distraste for life and he sank deeper into his silence. The drenched grounds, wet buildings and dripping trees created an odour of despair in the air around him, and he realised that it was under similar circumstances that man thought of death. He felt lonely and helpless in a cruel world, which made every man a plaything of fate!

A terrible desolation descended on the country as the floodwater, moving into village after village, finally inundated the cities. For the first time in their life, city folks saw one of the greatest upsets of urban

ecology of a calamity had aggravated the devastation inside her as she claimed that she was hearing and seeing things. The parents consulted other elders of the family, and decided to give away her hands to a suitable boy before her condition got any worse. The wedding was to take place as soon as the floodwater receded and life in the city returned to normal because the boy they found was going to leave for the USA.

Meanwhile there was no talk of him as he became increasingly withdrawn, no longer sighted under the mango tree or spotted amongst

'Snoopers Charter' shelved, but...

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

WITHIN days after the British government's plans for widening the scope of the Regulation of Investigative Powers Act, which would bestow on huge numbers of civil servants and local council and quango officers the right to check people's Internet and telephone records, were made public, Home Secretary David Blunket was forced to postpone the plans in the wake of widespread protests from civil liberties groups, MPs and media editors. The draft order will not be presented before the House of Commons for debate until the autumn at the earliest, but informed sources claim that the facility to 'snoop' on private communications is already being widely used by the police, the security services, Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise, and the e-mails of more than 100,000 people a year are being spied on despite the government's humiliating climb-down. And the people whose private Internet accounts and telephone records are being accessed by the police and the security services are blissfully unaware of the fact that their privacy is not sacrosanct. Internet providers and telecom companies are in fact obliged to hand over data to officials who have the power to demand the information. However, the confidential data thus handed over cover only details of the senders and recipients of e-mails including the times and dates they were sent, but not the actual wording of messages. In order to gain access to more detailed information, the concerned officials

have to seek a warrant from the Home Secretary. In the year 2000 for example, two thousand such warrants were granted but the individuals had no idea that their e-mails were being read.

Many of the existing powers are in fact used by the police and the security services to combat terrorism and crime, paedophilia in particular. According to informed sources, Internet firms receive as many as 400 requests daily for information on suspects and a very high level of secrecy surround the procedure. A form known as a Section 293 Exemption, under the Data Protection Act, is issued and it requires only the signature of a senior police or intelligence officer. Internet firms, fearing that their business could be damaged if their co-operation with the authorities became public, are unwilling to talk about these secret dealings. A spokesperson for the Internet provider AOL (America Online), perhaps the largest in the business, said: "We work with the law enforcement agencies within the legal framework." The Home Office too refuses to divulge anything about the system of e-mail interception, claiming that no records of the use of this kind of investigatory technique exist. But communication industry sources say that firms are increasingly being asked to track e-mail traffic in inquiries into paedophilia and pornography as well as areas like thefts, frauds and threats of violence. The independent body called Surveillance Commission alone has the power to exercise some check on this kind of official snooping and individuals can apply to them to find

out if their private communications are being monitored, but they say that they do not have enough sufficient manpower to properly deal with the growing workload.

The general consensus seems to be that in an era of lethal international terrorism and organised paedophilia, it is obviously necessary for a government to have the powers for legitimate suspicions. But the public certainly are entitled to be sceptical if such powers are used too freely. The police and the security services must be required to justify the use of secret surveillance to the Parliament, because all experience shows that it is unhealthy and unwise to leave such bodies to monitor themselves.

Is Britain racist?

A couple of weeks ago, Prime Minister Tony Blair pledged to 'rebalance' the criminal justice system in the UK towards the needs of victims of crimes in order to restore their faltering confidence in the government's intention of bringing all criminals to justice. To that end, the government is getting ready to launch a White Paper on criminal justice reforms, set to be the most radical and far-reaching for many decades. Some of the key measures outlined in the White Paper include plans for a sweeping administrative overhaul in an attempt to bring the system's disparate elements in line with one another, as well as important

changes in the rules governing the legal process. This comes in the wake of statistics that reveal that criminals today stand a much higher chance of getting away with a wide range of serious offences than they did twenty years ago. Figures for such crimes as rape, burglary, robbery and serious violence - crimes the public fear most - show huge increases, while the proportion of crimes leading to conviction in courts are at an all-time low. The prime minister's latest pledge follows the government's 1997 pledge to be 'tough on crime, tough on causes of crime' which has failed to live up to its expectations and Labour strategists fear that the party may have to pay dearly for this failure.

Other measures proposed in the White Paper include a right for the prosecution to appeal against judges' rulings while a trial remains in progress, abolition of the 'Double Jeopardy' rule that does not permit the trial and conviction of a suspect for the same offence more than once, and imposing obligations on the defence to disclose the substance of its case before a trial. However, these proposals are likely to trigger strong opposition from defence lawyers and civil rights groups.

Meanwhile, as crime soars and convictions plunge, the man in charge of bringing criminals to justice has made some rather disquieting observations. In a recent interview

with BBC Radio 4, Sir David Calbert-Smith, the head of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), suggested that British society was institutionally racist, by referring to the official definition of institutional racism - "unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people" - while adding: "It has been painful for us and the police to be the only organisations in public life that have actually had the courage to admit we have a problem (regarding racism). Whether we are talking about asylum, about sport even, there are various stereotypical assumptions made. What I'm saying is that people are institutionally racist and they must consciously try to change that." His comments came on the very day that damning Home Office figures showed the justice system - and the CPS in particular - failing disastrously in its job of catching and punishing criminals. Sir David has been the head of the CPS for three-and-a-half years and received his knighthood in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in June this year. He has made a crusade to eliminate racism from the CPS one of the key elements of his leadership. He obviously enjoys favour with the Government because it appointed him, and although his remarks are likely to cause grave embarrassment to the Government, ministers would find it difficult to turn

on their own man. And since he took over, Sir David has enormously improved his own position by his willingness to use the charge of institutional racism against his own organisation, at the same time causing concern within it. Last year he commissioned an internal report which labelled the CPS institutionally racist, then launched a controversial drive to combat the situation.

Sir David's claim, naturally, provoked immediate and widespread criticism from various quarters. A Tory MP who is a member of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Home Affairs, called his racism charge "preposterous", adding that "something serious now needs to be done about the CPS." A spokesperson for the Metropolitan Police Federation said that Sir David was talking "utter nonsense. The whole thing flies in the face of common sense. I wonder if he includes Tony Blair and Gordon Brown." A prominent barrister said: "When you start saying that everyone in Britain, all British society, is racist, it is deeply worrying because as an argument it is obviously false." But Sir David's crusade against the spectre of racism in the CPS has both deflected criticism of its real failings and made him a hero to the anti-racism lobby.

Royal wedding in the offing?
PRINCE Charles, heir apparent to

the British throne, and his ladylove Camilla Parker Bowles, could be allowed to marry in church by the next Archbishop of Canterbury. The Church of England's official rules regarding matrimony currently forbids marriage between divorcees, and because of a British monarch's unique position as the traditional head of the Church, the Prince (when he becomes king, that is) would not be able to ignore the rules. Camilla Parker Bowles would also currently be unable to marry in church because her former husband, Andrew Parker Bowles, is still alive. The Church of England's stand on the subject is recognised in law in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1965. More and more of Prince Charles's (would-be) subjects, however, tend to flout the rules these days and more than one in ten Church of England weddings already involves a divorcee.

Dr Rowan Williams - currently Archbishop of Wales - has been recommended to Prime Minister Tony Blair as the next Archbishop of Canterbury from a shortlist of two made by the Crown Appointments Commission. Dr Williams, who will be taking over from retiring Archbishop Dr George Carey, is in favour of changing Church of England rules to allow weddings for divorcees with a former spouse still alive. After the recommendation about his appointment was made public, one of his spokespersons said: "The archbishop is very happy with the idea of remarriage after a divorce unless it can be shown that there is a neglect for the meaning of marriage by the parties involved. He accepts the idea that marriages do break down and

believes it is better that people remarry rather than live in inappropriate relationships." Informed sources also suggest that the Queen would almost certainly approve of her eldest son's wedding and she has, of late, increasingly welcomed Camilla into the family, allowing her to play a greater role in royal life. The recent demise of the Queen Mother has also increased the possibility of a wedding, as she had been somewhat opposed to the idea of her grandson remarrying.

Tribute to Satyajit Ray

THE renowned Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa, a close friend of Satyajit Ray, once said of him: "Not to have seen the films of Ray would mean existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon." Now the National Film Theatre, or the NFT, in London is presenting a two-month tribute to Satyajit Ray when most of his films, including documentaries and short features, with be exhibited throughout July and August. It was the NFT that first championed Ray's work in the 1950s and brought it to the attention of British audiences by screening his breakthrough film *Pather Panchali*, the first of the Apu Trilogy. The current Satyajit Ray season forms a key part of the NFT's 50th birth anniversary celebrations, jointly organised with its sister body the British Film Institute (BFI), which is launching its own ImagineASIA Programme at the same time. And as the session continues, a poster carrying the face of Bobita, the Bangladeshi actress who played the principal female lead in the film *Ashani Sanket*, adorns the billboards in most underground stations in London.