

Godfather issue

Political parties should be tough on it

THE Awami League is giving the idea of expelling Joyal Hazari, whose activities caused much embarrassment to the party in the past, a serious thought. The final decision on the matter, we are told, will be taken at a meeting after a 500-page report on the much-maligned leader from Feni is scrutinised.

The AL is apparently giving due attention to procedural details before taking the extreme measure. True, every political party has its own way of handling issues pertaining to breach of discipline. But what one can hardly resist saying here is that Mr. Hazari's record as a politician is fraught with too many incidents of violence and belligerence that needed little elaboration or proof. He tried to execute the plan of crushing political opposition with brute force a point made clear by the criminal activities of his cadres which received wide coverage in the press. He had almost set a parallel administration in Feni when his party was in power no doubt a dubious honour.

There cannot be any second opinion about the need for clearing the political arena of the elements who pose a threat to peace and security. This is true about all the parties across the board, as the rise of godfathers, particularly within the party in power, has been a common phenomenon. The political parties should reach an understanding on doing away with the services of the godfathers who are always a long-term liability.

The damage that they have caused to society is too high to be gauged by the impact on law and order alone. In fact, all the traditional norms and values have been almost destroyed by politics of muscle-power in recent times. And whatever is left of them will be destroyed if the unruly elements are not reined in.

We believe the AL's thinking on Mr. Hazari, though belated, is correct. If democracy and the rule of law are what the parties have set as their objectives, there cannot be any place for men with known criminal records in politics.

Another 'tangled' death

Lessons for everybody

THE sheer gore of it -- in the open street -- has been mind-boggling beyond measure. But this is not the first time it has happened. Only six months ago, a physician was dragged to death, his feet having been ensnared in the extra bumper of a car. This time, Nahar Begum (25), a garment worker on her way to work is first knocked down by a Pajero utility van and then her *sari* is tangled with the back wheel cover.

Lethally, she is dragged to her death as a pedestrian chase by a crowd joined by a traffic policeman to holler at the driver to stop proved in vain. On other similar occasions, no amount of public hue and cry could persuade the driver to screech to a halt at the knowledge that someone had got entangled in his contraption. The moron-like behaviour on the part of drivers to turn a deaf ear to such SOS calls is explicable. Drivers are petrified at the thought of the likely consequences to follow if they should stop in response to public hollering. So they run for their lives.

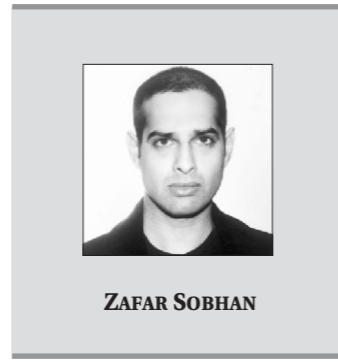
This is not to condone what the drivers do under such circumstances, but that is the street reality we cannot make a short shrift of. That under no circumstances, should anybody take the law into his own hands will have to be ensured through a public education programme.

Basically, we need to sensitise the drivers and the pedestrians about the supreme need for abiding by traffic rules. Given the lack of road spaces, speed-limits should be followed by the drivers on pain of punishment. In Nahar's case, there is reason to believe that the man behind the wheel could have slowed down so as not to knock her down in the first place.

For their part, the pedestrians need to use the Zebra crossing and over-bridges. We better have more designated crossing points and speed-breakers (not humps), especially at busy stretches of thoroughfares.

Nahar would have lost her life in vain if traffic managers, transport operators and drivers and pedestrians did not draw lessons from her death.

How important is assertion of identity?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

DON'T get me wrong. I understand as well as anyone the need to assert one's religious identity. There are times when you want -- when you demand -- to stand up and be counted. I have lived in both India and the US, and I know what it feels like to be a minority under fire. In both countries, I felt a real need to assert my Muslim identity -- to make clear to everyone where I stood and that I was proud of who I was.

I remember that Ramadan in my boarding school in north India took on an entirely different significance for me from Ramadan when I am home in Bangladesh. More than merely being a religious requirement, fasting helped create and foster a strong sense of identity and a strong sense of solidarity among the Muslim students at my school.

Studying, as we did, in a Christian missionary school within the larger Hindu-majority culture, we felt like a double minority. Fasting together was a way for all of us -- Somalis, Bangladeshis, Indian Muslims, Pakistanis, Iranians, Arabs, African-Americans -- to assert our Muslim identity and to express our solidarity with one another.

This was in the late 80s -- before Babri, before Gujarat, before

Hindutva propelled the BJP to national power and prominence -- but we still felt that it was important to stand up and be counted.

I draw a parallel with my Sikh room-mate at the time. For him, being turbaned was a religious requirement -- but it was more than that. It is also a way for him to assert his Sikh identity and to demonstrate his pride in who he was.

It's good to be proud of who you are. Everyone should be proud his/her country, culture, religion,

in character for him -- but that he would feel so strongly about asserting his Muslim identity and his pride in it.

This is not a religious man. This is a man who probably hadn't given much of a thought to his religious identity in over a decade. But in the aftermath of 9/11, living in New York, he felt the need, as we all did, to assert his pride in his religion and his pride in who he was. Muslims in the US were not about to let ourselves be defined as others saw us. We were not going to be ashamed of who we were or our

But of course the trouble with such assertions of identity is the context. When we assert our Muslim identity in Bangladesh it has a totally different connotation from asserting it in India or in the US.

Here, we are not an embattled and besieged minority. Muslims are in the majority in Bangladesh, and so in this context, assertions of identity take on an entirely different meaning.

Let's take the current debate over whether to say "Allah-hafez" or "Khuda-hafez." Now although

But the problem lies in the fact that within the context of Bangladesh, to say "Allah-hafez" is exclusionary. It excludes by implication anyone who is not Muslim. How do you suppose it makes minorities feel to hear "Allah-hafez" substituted for "Khuda-hafez" in popular parlance?

It is a small thing, and I am sure that the vast majority of people who say "Allah-hafez" are perfectly tolerant and decent individuals and do not mean to be discriminatory or exclusionary in any way. They mean no harm by it. They see

pen when an assertion of religious identity goes too far.

I am speaking of the weekly demonstrations demanding that the government declare the Ahmadiyya community non-Muslims.

Think for a second, what purpose would be served by such a declaration? What difference can it possibly make to anyone whether someone else is or is not to be considered Muslim? The only difference it can possibly make for the demonstrators is psychological. By declaring the Ahmadiyya community non-Muslim, they can assert their own sense of Muslim identity.

The demonstrations against the Ahmadiyyas are a classic example of people asserting their Muslim identity. And in this context, such an assertion of identity is extremely damaging.

In this context it serves only to further marginalise the Ahmadiyya community and to deprive them of their constitutional right to practice their religion freely without interference from others.

Now of course there is a big difference between saying "Allah-hafez" and demanding that Ahmadiyyas be declared non-Muslims. But the difference is one of degree not one of kind, and I would urge all those who prefer the use of "Allah-hafez" to spare a thought for the effect it has on the nation's minority communities and how it must feel for them.

In and of itself, the adoption of "Allah-hafez" is of little significance, but in the context of the continuing marginalisation of the minority communities in this country, it can serve only to further exclude them from the mainstream of society.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

It is a small thing, and I am sure that the vast majority of people who say "Allah-hafez" are perfectly tolerant and decent individuals and do not mean to be discriminatory or exclusionary in any way... But in the context of Bangladesh... it further marginalises the minority community. The demonstrations against the Ahmadiyyas are examples of people asserting their identity.. but it serves only to further marginalise the Ahmadiyya community.

identity. It's who you are.

In the US, where Islam has been so demonised and where a large percentage of the population has a negative impression of the religion, it seemed even more important to assert one's Muslim identity -- especially after 9/11.

Shortly after 9/11 my brother was harassed on the street by someone looking for trouble.

"You Palestinian?" he was asked.

"No, I'm not. But I am Muslim and proud of it. You got a problem with that?"

Now, if you ever met my brother you would understand how astonishing and out of character this exchange was for him. Not that he would stand up to someone who was trying to give him grief in the street -- that actually is very much

religion because of the actions of a tiny minority of so-called Muslims whose actions were in direct contradiction to Islam as we understood it.

So I understand fully the impulse, the desire, the need, for Muslims to assert their religious identity.

It is perhaps more necessary now than at any other time in history. When Islam is condemned as a religion of terror and Muslims are demonised for their perceived backwardness and violence, when Muslims are under siege from Iraq to the West Bank to Afghanistan to Gujarat, when it seems as though everyone is hostile towards us and has such a negative impression of Islam -- it seems more important than ever to assert pride in our identity.

"Khuda-hafez" has been in currency for as long as anyone can remember, today a considerable proportion of the population feels happier saying "Allah-hafez."

If you ask them, they say that it is more Islamic to say "Allah-hafez" -- more in keeping with their identity as Muslims. After all -- anyone can say "Khuda-hafez" -- it is a fairly non-denominational farewell. But "Allah-hafez" is something only a Muslim could or would say.

What is it then, other than an assertion of one's Muslim identity, to say "Allah-hafez"?

Like I said, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with assertions of one's identity. Indeed, in today's world, I can understand Muslims wanting to assert their identity ever more strongly.

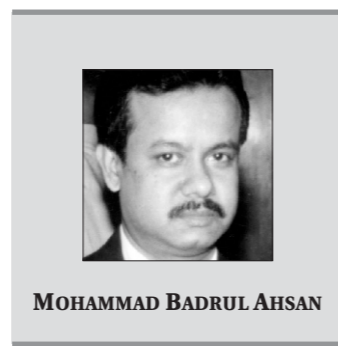
nothing wrong with simply asserting their identity in this way.

But in the context of Bangladesh it is harmful. It further marginalises the minority community. Just as these are difficult times for Muslims around the world, these are also difficult times for minorities within Bangladesh. It is hard for minorities to feel secure when entire families can be burned to death and the situation in the CHT remains precarious.

In this context, the substitution of "Allah-hafez" for "Khuda-hafez" serves to remind minorities of their minority status in the country, and that even though we are supposedly all equal in the eyes of the law, some are more equal than others.

It is important because right here in Bangladesh we have a perfect example of what can hap-

Nothing but mad



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

To define true madness, What is it but to be nothing but mad?

-William Shakespeare, Hamlet

SOMEONE I know has lost it. The signs were there for several years. She avoided people, mumbled to herself, lost appetite, couldn't sleep well and became withdrawn. Soon she started to talk incoherently and laugh without control. Her parents felt embarrassed and tried to keep her away from guests and visitors. Out of sight she went out of mind, and the world soon lost interest in her. Now, she has also lost interest in the world.

Her long flowing hairs are gone, hairs, which once banged over her forehead holding, in their tangles, the dark splendours of a cloudy sky. Her shorn hairs stand erect on her head like stubbles, reminding of the desolation of a paddy field after the harvest. Her face is swollen like a pumpkin, and her teeth are stained like damp neighbourhood walls. She doesn't take care of herself anymore. It doesn't matter to her.

She doesn't recognise people, or greet them. She doesn't smile at them or respond to their queries. She sits in her bed like a block of flesh with a deadpan face and blank stare. From time to time she breaks into frenzy, watching TV, listening to music, talking into the air, shouting, singing and dancing, all at once. At other times, she slumps into depression, shuts the door, sobs in bed and sits like a stone.

She no longer speaks to me when I see her. We grew up

once asked me to talk to her about a young man whom they had chosen for her. She agreed to marry him, but changed her mind next day. I was annoyed with her and concluded that she was hopeless. I didn't want to have anything to do with her for a long long time.

Sometimes I wonder if her reticence is deliberate, if she is avenging silence with silence, shutting out the world, which had shut her out first. She was a sprightly girl, who loved make-ups, new clothes, romantic novels and

everything everywhere. At first we used to feel amused by what she said, joking that she could hear the voice of her conscience on detached speakers. She would get upset, and argue with us like someone who couldn't get her point across other people.

Nobody knows what happened that led to her insanity. Some relatives would say her parents should have got her married before the anxiety of youth fried her mind. Neighbours would say that she must have caught the evil wind,

clean, but madness makes it a clumsy mess. I would have wished her alive if she were dead. Now I wish she had died instead.

I also wish I could rewind our lives, my life, her life and start from the scratch! Only if I could keep a close watch and understand where her life started to go wrong! I don't know what the mind looks like. But I suppose it's a complex circuit of delicate feelings, where thoughts and emotions are processed to cope with life. Right now that process doesn't work for the per-

some time with her, looking at her from a distance like people watch birds or animals in a zoo. We never talked, although I tried to pick up a conversation with her without success. It seemed to me that there was no warmth left in the world that could thaw her frozen heart. She glanced at me a few times with her icy eyes, her face stilled under the burden of silence that filled her life. I thought perhaps she was trapped inside a bubble and a prick of memory could set her free. I talked about our childhood days, about the funny things we had done together, the jokes, the people, the fat tailor with a knobby nose, and the cobbler who used to keep his tongue clenched in his teeth while doing his stitches.

She picked up a little pouch and fished out some betel nuts, lime and chewing tobacco, rolled them together in the palm of her hand and then threw it into her mouth like some delectable stuff. She then whistled in the air and hummed a tune as if the concoction had done wonders to her taste buds. She made faces towards me although her eyes never made contact with mine, and suddenly got up and ran out of the room like a ballet dancer.

As I looked at her vanishing frame, I wondered what was lost if she could still feel happy like that! Then it occurred to me that perhaps she could become sad just as quickly, and madness was a disorder when mind lost its grip. She had lost nothing but herself in the altered state of her jumbled thoughts. The loss was mine alone. Someone I know doesn't know me anymore.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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together in the same neighbourhood.

We played, fought, argued, and did everything children do when they grow up. We collected comic books, stamps, pictures of movie stars, and shared a common passion for icecream and tamarind. All those sounds of my life have now folded into her silence. She exists just like a relic of my lost world. It saddens me whenever I try to think about her.

I never took time to know what was happening to her. Her parents

lots of dreams. She wanted to be married, have children and a happy life. She often claimed that Indira Gandhi and Golda Meir visited her in dreams. She had ambition; she wanted to be like them. We listened to her, and never sensed that her mind was crossing into minefields. Most young people I knew wanted to become like somebody when they grew up. Parents encouraged them to think like that.

She started to hear things after some time. She could hear a voice whisper into her ears every time on

while walking alone on the roof at night. Others blamed it on the bad genes, tracing that some of her granduncles had also gone mad. There were many conjectures that she had a silent heartbreak, the shock of which blew her mind.

I don't know which of these is true. I don't know why the person I grew up with has lost her mind. But I can't help thinking that someone I know has become a mental case, that one of the products of the same batch as mine has turned out to be flawed. I could accept her better as dead. Death erases life

son I know. She has a malfunctioning mind.

I have talked to some psychiatrists and they couldn't give me hope. They said it could be anything from bipolar disorder to acute dementia and advised that the patient should be taken to a mental home. But the parents don't think a mental home would be a nice place for their daughter. They believe that their daughter needs their love more than anything else.

Lately, I have tried to spend

OPINION

Election manifesto, subsidy and farmers

A M M SHAWKAT ALI

IN its Election Manifesto for the parliamentary election of 2001, the BNP recognised the need for farm subsidies for the welfare of the farmers as well as agricultural growth (para 3.16 of the Manifesto). It pledged that the party would consider providing subsidies for fertilizers, seed, irrigation etc. It also affirmed that the party would pay special attention to ensure that the benefits of subsidies reach poor and marginal farmers. It is perhaps necessary to look at where things stand now.

In this context, it is also necessary to point out that unlike BNP, the AL specifically pledged in its Election Manifesto of 2001 that the policy already initiated for providing subsidy would be continued. It did not say it would consider provision of farm subsidy (para 5 of Election Manifesto).

The Election Manifesto of Jamaat-e-Islami, BNP's close ally, is conspicuously silent on agricultural sector. It referred to rural development and poverty alleviation but has not mentioned anything about farmers, let alone subsidies ([www.bangla2000.com/Election -- 2001/Manifesto -- Jamaat-e-Islami.shtm](http://www.bangla2000.com/Election--2001/Manifesto--Jamaat-e-Islami.shtm)). No wonder that the issue did not engage the attention of the Minister for Agriculture who belonged to this party.

It is possible, however, that he might have tried but the details are not known. At least during his tenure in office, the issue does not appear to have received much attention.

BNP took two years to decide on providing subsidies to the farmers. It is only recently that some information in this respect has been published in the press. It is difficult, however, to make a full assessment of the operational guidelines relating to farm subsidies.

Inquiries and investigations made in this respect have led to the following results in terms of approach taken by the government to provide subsidies to farmers.

It is apparent from the above that all the cost items relate to agricultural support services rather than subsidies for farmers per se. It is also not known why Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI), which provides support services to the farmers in respect of soil testing has been substituted for DAE. SRDI is already involved in executing a project titled "Establishment of Soil Testing Laboratories." In this context, it is necessary to point out that the AL government during the mid-nineties introduced Soil Health Card for the farmers on an experimental basis. It is felt that budgetary support in this area of activity could have benefited the farmers.

DAE maintains as many as 37 Horticulture Development Centres

not easily understood for several reasons. First, BARC is not directly

upward to Tk. 549.5 million. The status of the project is revised

Subsidy Amount (m.illion Tk.)	Purpose of Subsidy	Agency Beneficiaries
16.0	Setting up of soil testing laboratory	Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE)
5.0	Development of Horticulture Centre	DAE
100.0	Research and Development (R&D) on oilseed, pulses and spices	Bangladesh Agriculture Research Council (BARC)
2.0	Technology transfer on improved variety of jute seeds	Bangladesh Jute Research Institute (BJRI)
5.2	Technology transfer on high yielding variety (HYV)	Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture (BINA)
70.0	Technology transfer on improved variety	Bangladesh Sugarcane Research Institute (BSRI)
198.2	Total	

in different locations of the country. The paltry allocation of Tk. 5.0 million, therefore, will mean Tk. 135,135.00 per cent. Is this going to help? On the other hand, the possibility of running the Horticulture Centres on commercial basis or even at breakeven basis should have been explored.

Tk. 100 million is said to have been allocated to BARC to conduct R&D on oilseed, pulses and spices. The rationale for such allocation is

involved in research. Its primary job is research management and coordination of the different agricultural research institutes (ARIs) collectively called National Agricultural Research System (NARS). Second, as far as spices are concerned, a separate project has been undertaken for execution by Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) since 1999. The project cost initially was Tk. 179.88 million, which has been revised

unapproved (RU).

As far as pulses and oilseeds are concerned, the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) has a Crop Diversification Project with an outlay of 1,547.2 million. It has a research component covering pulses and oilseed and the allocated amount is Tk. 238.9 million for BARI. Finally, there is also the project called Agricultural Diversification and Intensification Project (ADIP) exclusively for the north-west

region of the country. The total project cost is Tk. 1,264.0 million, which is funded by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and Bangladesh Government. It is supposed to promote production and marketing of high value crops other than rice.

The document called Bangladesh NARS-2020, which provides the vision of agricultural research (BARC, 2000) has listed a number of pulses and oilseeds varieties already developed by BARI and BINA. The current status of adoption of these varieties by the farmers before going for further research should have been assessed. Tk. 2.0 million has been allocated to BJRI for technology transfer of improved variety of jute seeds. In fact, technology transfer falls within the domain of DAE and it is not understood how an insignificant amount of Tk. 2.0 million will achieve technology transfer.

Similar incongruity is visible in the allocation of Tk. 5.2 million for technology transfer of HYV to be executed by BINA. Next comes Tk. 70.0 million for BSRI. The purpose is to achieve technology transfer of improved varieties of sugarcane. A number of studies conducted in the recent past indicates that there is no comparative advantage for production of sugarcane. At the same time, it cannot be denied that

while only 25-30 per cent of the total sugarcane produced is used for the sugar mills, the remaining 75 per cent is used for Gur making. Consequently, withdrawal of support from sugarcane production may adversely affect the livelihood opportunities of millions of farmers, manufacturers of Gur and traders.

During the mid-nineties government supported a technical assistance project executed by Bangladesh Agriculture University (BAU) to advise the government on sugarcane production as well as diversification of sources of sugar. Earlier than that a number of other committees including the one during mid-nineties led by Member of Parliament submitted a report on the future of sugar production and sugar industry. The wisdom or lack of it of all such reports ought to have guided decisions to support sugarcane production.

The analysis presented above leaves lot of questions unanswered. On the face of it, there are overlaps and duplications on allocation of funds said to be provided from the revenue budget when there are a good number of projects to cater for the same activities under ADP. To top it all, these allocations are more in the nature of agricultural support services that fall within the frame-

work of the concept of public good as envisaged under World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreement. The expenditure envisaged cannot, by stretch of imagination, be called subsidy for farmers.

Administration of agriculture subsidy and its management is a more serious than a mere political game. It is all the more so in the context of WTO agreement to which Bangladesh is a party. The Aggregate Measures of Support (AMS) need to be more clearly understood in order to make meaningful choices of the use of different boxes (Green Box, Amber Box, Blue Box). Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) with support from food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) completed a study in 1999 suggesting determination of the trade-off among types of subsidies within Amber Box and between Amber Box and Green Box measures to determine the most cost-effective support to agriculture while making it more competitive to take advantage of increased production in view of restrictions imposed on agriculture in other countries. Without this approach subsidies for farmers will remain far removed from reality.

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