

## Apparel buyers' message

### Corrective measures have been long overdue

REPRESENTATIVES of apparel buyers and labour organisations on a mission here have sounded a note of warning that if working environment in our garment factories does not improve, they might have to rethink their choice of countries to import ready-made garments from.

We shall have to realise as a garments exporting country that Bangladesh has been catapulted into a highly competitive world business environment following the end of the MFA regime. We are passing through a critical phase when any loss of ground in the international market will be a blow to the RMG sector.

There have been a series of fire incidents in the garments factories which might have sent out negative signals about worker safety in them. The media has from time to time covered issues pertaining to working conditions in the garments factories and the hazards that workers face. The leaders of the BGMEA have also discussed the matter with owners of the factories. But things have not really improved.

Even the issue of paying compensation to the workers and their families in the case of Spectrum factory building collapse has not yet been settled.

The government has also drawn criticism for not strictly enforcing the rules and guidelines. The problem with violation of universally accepted norms and standards is that the country's image abroad is tarnished. And our space in the international market may shrink despite the high quality of our products.

The members of the visiting delegation of apparel buyers and labour organisations have made it clear that they are primarily concerned with payment of compensation to the victims of accidents, investigation of structural soundness of all the multi-storied factories, and compliance with international labour standards. These issues have been brought to the fore by the Savar factory collapse. Indeed, providing humanitarian assistance following a disaster is not enough.

Establishment of workers' rights is something that Bangladesh is fully committed to as a nation. The point becomes doubly important when it concerns people working in the premier foreign exchange earning sector. The government, BGMEA and factory owners should work together and create the conditions where workers' rights, which are recognised in principle otherwise, will be fully established in practice as well.

Let nobody forget that we are dealing with the question of survival of thousands upon thousands of garment factory workers, most of them under-privileged women, who must get all the consideration they need.

## Enforcing rates more important

### Move to fix fares welcome

NOT just bus fares but also those for launch journeys have been jacked up following the increase in fuel prices. Normally, there would be a justification for adjusting the rates to any increase in the input price. But where it hurts is when the fare hikes outstrip the increase in fuel prices. Every time the fuel prices rise, transport operators of all descriptions take it as an opportunity to upscale their profit margins. This, without any doubt, impinges on consumer rights.

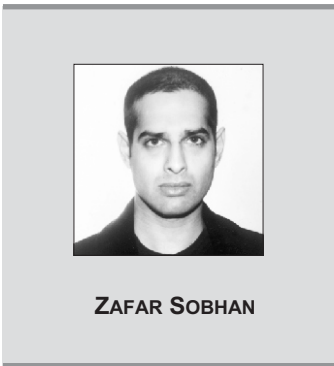
Let's not also forget that the cargo carrying charges also increase, which translate into higher prices of daily necessities leading up to a rise in the cost of living index. The consumer rights, under such cumulative circumstances, thus end up being doubly negated.

We would like to suggest some corrective measures: first, let there be a standard formula for a revision of fares to be exactly proportionate to the increase in operational costs. This would rule out arbitrary fixation of fares by any quarters.

The government has formed a body to re-fix bus and truck fares in the light of the fuel price increases. This is a step in the right direction, although it should have come on the back of diesel price increase itself without allowing any space for confusion. We would like to see a similar body constituted to deal with the question of launch fares gone haywire lately.

It is essential to bear in mind the fact that fixation of fares by itself cannot effectively address the issue of passengers' rights. What is equally, if not more, important is the monitoring of the application of the rates chart so as to ensure that nothing extra is charged from the passengers on surface and river routes. What good it would be if the transport operators continue exploiting the passengers even after the rates have been carefully fixed by the authorities in consultation with owners of buses, trucks and launches?

# Rescuing our universities



SOME of the problems of the country seem insoluble, and others by their very nature would require years of concerted effort and millions if not billions of taka in expense in order to resolve. But then there are the problems that are very much within our ability to fix, and it is these micro-level issues that we should perhaps be focusing on. One has to start somewhere.

One such problem is the steady deterioration of the country's universities, and in particular the domination of the nation's campuses by the armed cadres of the political parties.

The recent incidents on the Dhaka University campus in the aftermath of the death of student Shammi Akhter Happy have brought the issue of campus terrorism into sharp focus.

For the past week, we have seen JCD cadres, aided and abetted by the police, impose a reign of terror on the DU campus.

It is true that the unrest started with students protesting Happy's death by throwing stones at and attacking passing motorists and the police, and that the scenes following her death did no credit to the students involved or to the university student body as a whole.

Certainly, the police need to take action to restore order in

situations like these, and I am not defending the students who took out their wrath on innocent passers-by, nor do I condone their riotous response to the traffic accident, regardless of the provocation.

But it is clear that very soon after Happy's tragic demise, that the JCD cadres, supported by the police, were using the unrest as an excuse not only to terrorise opposing cadres and expel them from campus, but to even target everyday students whose only

during a gunfight between two JCD factions. Earlier this year Rajshahi University descended into chaos with JCD and Islami Chhatra Shibir factions waging war over the appointment of a new VC. And now this.

Enough is enough, surely.

Nor is the violence and the fact that campuses remain under the effective control of armed cadres the only problem.

What we are now seeing is that every facet of our educational institutions is being corrupted due

to their domination by gangsters and criminals. Needless to say, the quality of education on offer has plummeted and due to disturbances and shut-downs it takes on average seven years to complete a masters degree.

Now things are even worse. The integrity of the examination process and the degrees that are awarded have now been compromised by the corruption that permeates the campuses. The mass cheating in public examinations that is now rampant strikes at the very heart of higher education in the country.

No prizes for guessing who is behind the corruption.

The university authorities are no help. In fact they are part of the problem. The fact is that most university administrators are picked for their fealty to the ruling party of the day and are notable only for the depths to which they

are willing to stoop in order to curry favour with their political masters.

This translates into permitting the cadres a free hand. The authorities do not lift a finger to protect the student body from the depredations of the cadres, and in fact are the ones who ensure the protection of the cadres. In some cases they even use the cadres as their own personal bodyguards and enforcers.

The entire system is rotten from top to bottom and rigged from the

start. First year students coming from far-off districts are not ensured a place in hostel and are thus easy prey for the cadres who are in a position to help them find digs and provide other services -- at a cost. Thus they fall in with the cadres and the corrupting process begins.

This is what is behind the corrosion of the moral fabric of student life. Incoming students are quick to see that all advantages from accommodation to exam questions to future employment accrue to those who play cadre politics. Those students who play by the rules and try to do their best are increasingly being left behind.

This week I met with some leaders of an estimable organisation called the Jatiya Chhatradhara who have been organising and campaigning to take back our university cam-

pus es since 2000. They are a non-partisan and non-political organisation with over 1000 active members and a presence all over the country.

Their ethos is straightforward. They want cadres -- be they BNP or AL or Shibir or whatever -- off of campus. They want a terrorist and arms free campus. They want the corruption stopped. Simply put, they want a normal university life.

Their demands are something that we should all be able to get behind. We all have a stake in

rescuing our universities. Perhaps even supporters of the main political parties can see that a truce at our universities would be to the benefit of all.

If influential people raise their voices and if this becomes a non-partisan national rallying point, perhaps we can achieve something. Right now, the only prominent leader who has supported them in their efforts is Dr. Kamal Hossain and they are a part of his Jatiya Oikya Moncha.

Of course, change must come from the top down.

Dhaka University, for instance, is controlled by the JCD. The VC is their man. The only way that things will get change is if orders come from the top.

I understand that no one wants the other party to get the upper hand. Fine. But let the police do their job and secure the campuses in an impartial manner. This

is a law and order question. Let the police free the campuses of arms and terror. Let the campuses again be seats of learning. The nation as a whole will benefit.

So will the government. The political capital gained by cleaning up the campuses would be immense. People will remember this come election time.

The same goes for the AL. If it were to make this an issue and also pledge to remove its own cadres, it would gain considerable political capital. And, frankly, since its cadres have been more or less decimated by the JCD they have little to lose.

As for the cadres, it should be easy enough to find somewhere else for them to ply their trade. I would rather see cadre politics eliminated altogether. But being realistic, let us at least move them away from campus.

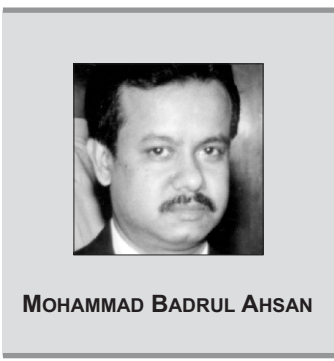
The Jatiya Chhatradhara are brave and impressive young men and women. They have done a great job organising students on campuses the length and breadth of the country. But since the campuses remain under the control of the cadres there is only so much that they can do on their own.

Let's get behind this movement, starting from today.

There are many things that as mere citizens we are powerless to do anything about. But we do have the power to put pressure on the political parties to clean up university campuses. We may not be able to change the world or even the country as a whole, but if we create a national consensus to save just this tiny quarter of it, then the benefits to all of us will be incalculable.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

# A superstitious mind



WHEN he wakes up in the morning, he blows his nose before he opens his eyes, squeezing left side of his nose with left thumb to drive all the air through its right side. If it is clean as a whistle, he likes to believe it is a good start for the day. But if the air is blocked due to unclear passage, he gets worried and reviews the day's schedule to leave out important work. A clogged right nostril in the morning is a warning that it will not be an easy day to come. The days he has cold and a stuffy nose, he feels frustrated like a navigator, who has lost his compass.

Then he slowly opens his eyes and tries to sense if he is lying on his left or right side. If he sees a dream at night, its implications depend on which side he wakes up. But he has learnt one thing over the years. Dreams which come in the wee hours of the morning come from the future. When he was a student, he used to see the same questions in his dreams, which appeared in the tests. He always dreams of being in foreign countries, before he knows he is going to travel. If he sees disturbing dreams, he knows

troubles are waiting him just around the corner.

Every morning he blows his nose, opens his eyes and wonders how life is a rhythmic experience of dreams and nightmares. There are some dreams which come again and again. He sees himself swimming when stars fall from the sky and float in the water. Sometimes he sees himself drowning in a swamp, screaming with a searing voice that has phantasmal resonance within the

boundaries of heaven and earth. Those nights he pays special attention to which side he wakes up and carefully blows his nose so that he doesn't miss any portentous signs.

When the body is relaxed, its gates are left open so that the soul can enjoy its freedom. He has always thought that dreams are when the soul gets out of its prison cell and goes for a walk. The soul is like a servant in the house, who goes to see the town when the master is taking a nap. It sneaks out of the sleeping body and returns as quickly as it wakes up.

It is important to follow the signals of the body to understand what is happening in the soul. One must discipline the body to

control the mind. He compares his habits to the practice of yoga, entering the house with the right foot first, advancing the left foot to step out of a toilet. He discards broken comb, cracked mirrors, tattered clothes, chipped plates, and worn out shoes, because a deprived body can deplete the soul.

But the body does not always keep up with the soul. Fear, anxiety, uncertainty and sorrow reverberate through the body like

quivering eyebrows, and also by sheer thoughts which fortuitously cross his mind like drifting clouds.

The days his nose is clogged, he flips coin or deals cards to take decisions. He takes two of the three outcomes, and in worst cases uses his intuition. But intuitions cannot be right unless the conscience is clean and the body is pure. So he will wash himself and say his prayer before he consults with the soul. He hates to look at upturned shoes or

sandals, undergarments of women and swept dirt gathered in front of doors in the house. If crows caw in the morning near his doors or windows, he is almost certain that he will hear the news of someone's death.

If anything, life is an elusive beast that lives and dies in its own fury. Doubts, inhibitions, hopes, expectations, ecstasy and heartbreak, everything percolates through life's longing for itself in the same manner a rocket soars while burning out its fuel or a candle burns down in the excitement of bearing the flame. He is careful when he eats, and picks up every grain of rice he drops. He believes he will be accountable for the food he wastes, because it is God's grace that some have

enough to eat while others starve for days.

He believes butterflies are harbingers of wedding bells, be them fluttering in the house or alighting on someone who is not married. He believes when someone sneezes before a journey is commenced, it is the sign of good luck. He does not like dogs walling in the middle of the night, because that is the ominous sign of an imminent danger. His notion of people

with splay foot is that they come of low stock. Women who laugh aloud annoy him because it is the unmistakable indication of loose character. A man wearing his wristwatch on the right hand sends clear message that he is of frivolous nature.

In his mind, life works out its own balance. He who laughs by day goes to bed crying at night. Early success brings late distress. Pride has its fall. What goes around comes around. If anything goes up, it can only come down. He who endears endures. A stitch in time saves nine. Forty rounds to the knave, one round goes to the brave.

At times his mind grows weary of reading those signals, observing and analysing every-

thing he sees, hears, reads and captures. But then these signals are everywhere and people do not always get them right. People dream all the time and have nightmares all the time, just like the stars which are out there in the sky but can be seen only at night! Life is talking to us every moment, in every move, every gesture, every tickle and every itch. Everything is an expression of existence, life whispering through the blowing wind, like the humming sound of ripples in the leaden silence of a profound stream.

People laugh at him. They blame him for being too finicky and eccentric, a man who has become a slave of his irritating habits and mannerisms, a superstitious, supercilious, silly man, who hears the sound of future even in his farts. People think he is obsessed with life, wasting his chance to live by worrying too much. They say he is like the fool who stays up all night trying to find out how he goes to sleep.

He wakes up every morning, blows his nose, opens his eyes and goes about the business of life. Two recurring dreams come to him from time to time. In one he swims in the water with floating stars. In another he sees himself drowning, listening to the uncanny echo of his own voice, crying for help.

Life is either a dream or a nightmare. Superstition is when one is obsessed with either.

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# Making buildings safe

IFTEKHARUDDIN M. CHOUDHURY

BUILDING codes are legal documents that provide a means to safeguard life and protect the public welfare through regulating the design, construction practices, construction material quality (including fire performance) location, occupancy, and maintenance of buildings and structures. For thousands of years, building codes and regulations have protected the public. The earliest known code of law -- the Code of Hammurabi, written more than 4,000 years ago -- assessed severe penalties, including death, if a building was not constructed safely. Today, thousands of jurisdictions across the world adopt and enforce codes developed to guide the safe construction of buildings.

Building codes and regulations help to ensure that homes, schools, workplaces and other buildings are as safe as possible.

Codes address all aspects of construction including structural integrity, electrical, mechanical, plumbing systems, and property maintenance. Safe buildings just do not happen by chance. Passed into law to protect public health and safety, building codes are rules that control design, materials, and methods of construction.

Building codes are in place in most of the countries of the world. Universally accepted building codes are usually modified to accommodate local needs and conditions. In order to ensure that codes are adhered to within the corporate or municipal limits, the political subdivisions normally require various kinds of permits, field inspections at different stages of construction, and test reports on materials and installations. A general building permit requires the filing of complete drawings (architectural, structural, mechanical, electrical, etc.) and specifications prepared an architect, engineer, or both with a

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designated public office. The documents are reviewed for design conformance with the applicable codes by the responsible building authority.

Legislative measures for the control and regulation of construction works in Bangladesh were taken much before the liberation of the country. Known as The Building Construction Act, it was enacted in 1952 and amended a number of times after liberation. The act provides for "the prevention of haphazard construction of buildings and excavation of tanks which are

likely to interfere with planning of certain areas in Bangladesh." All construction works in urban areas of Bangladesh are supposed to be governed by this act and the ordinances and regulations promulgated under the provision of the act.

However, these regulations under the act are very rudimentary, covering only the basics. It works only as a framework for formulation of detailed building codes covering all aspects of the construction process. Presently, in order to apply for a building permit, one has to turn in draw-

ings that include a site plan showing setbacks, floor plan(s), elevations, and a section. No structural design is required for buildings less than seven-stories high, and design of no other building sub-systems (electrical, mechanical, plumbing, etc.) are required for buildings of any height. In order to make the control and regulation of construction works meaningful, the building codes should address all aspects of construction.

A comprehensive building code has, in fact, been prepared and published by the Housing and Building Research Institute,

Bangladesh in collaboration with Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution. Known as Bangladesh National Code and published in 1993, the code is very comprehensive and includes all aspects of construction mentioned above. The document comprises of requirements for: (1) general planning and architectural design, (2) building materials, (2) structural design, (4) fire protection and safety, (5) construction safety, (6) water supply and drainage, and (7) mechanical and electrical systems in buildings. The code has been prepared

in light of internationally accepted minimum construction standards and safety. The government should take positive steps to implement the provisions of the code under the provisions of the Building Construction Act.

In order to enforce the code, the government will be required to establish a building department team consisting primarily of building officials, building document reviewers, and building inspectors. Charged with enforcing the adopted code, the building officials will set the standard for the level of enforcement in their jurisdictions. The principal staff will be the building document reviewers, who will be responsible for reviewing the building plans (architectural, structural, mechanical, etc.) and specifications for compliance with all aspects of the code. The building inspectors will observe the field construction to ensure that it conforms to the documents approved by the docu-

ment review staff.

The purpose of a building code is to provide objective regulations that economically provide minimum levels of public safety in the built environment. We should strive to achieve this purpose through exemplary standards of quality and ethics in the design, review of construction documents, construction supervision, and inspection processes. Utilising the most current code ensures that appropriate technologies are being applied to provide the highest level of safety both to the users and the built environment. The building professionals and users must work together as a team, bearing in mind that everyone involved in the construction process plays a vital role in the construction of buildings that will continue to perform safely.

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