

Four years of parliament

Both sides have disappointed

LOOKING at the record of the 8th parliament from an objective perspective, we feel compelled to state that it has not functioned up to the expectations of the people, and that it is both the government and the opposition who are to blame for this disappointing state of affairs.

We had hoped that with time democracy would have matured in Bangladesh, and the parliament would have emerged as a legislative body worth its name. Parliament is meant to be an august body for deliberation, to be treated with the utmost honour and dignity by both the members and the public at large, where the people's representatives get together to debate the issues of the day. This respect for the institution that we hoped would develop over time is still absent.

The ruling alliance has virtually ignored the parliament as a body for legislative deliberation. The parliament repeatedly found itself in quorum crisis, during which it could not muster even sixty members for a sitting, demonstrating the indifference of the ruling alliance to the functioning of the House. The main opposition, on the other hand, has boycotted the parliament since the start, undermining its very functioning as well. Together, they have done immense damage to the House and all it stands for.

The Speaker as the guardian of the House failed to rise above partisan considerations so that the opposition members were not apportioned the time of parliament they deserved.

In the last four years not one serious issue of national importance has been deliberated in parliament in a meaningful manner. A prime example would be the August 21 terrorist attack on the senior opposition leadership with a threat on the life of Sheikh Hasina which didn't feature the way it should have.

The opposition's persistence with the boycott mode meant that they abdicated the responsibility placed on them by the voters. They thus failed to live up to the public trust and to serve the interests of their constituents or the country as a whole.

The opposition has rightly complained of the limitations that it is unfairly shackled within parliament, but as we have said before, the complaint would sound more persuasive if the opposition had actually sat in parliament to make the point.

The consequence of this irresponsibility on both sides of the aisle has been a devaluing of the democratic process and a diminution of the prestige and importance of the parliament in national affairs. The government and the opposition have combined to undermine the image of parliament in the eyes of the public as the pinnacle of our democratic tradition.

An outrageous edict

Those who gave it must be punished

A direct assault on women's rights through issuance of an edict took place at a village bazaar in Sylhet district when some local influential people and religious leaders decided to declare a ban on shopping by women and selling of commodities to them. This is the height of obscurantism grossly undermining women's position in society.

It is no doubt the worst form of gender discrimination. Though women are yet to have all their rights established, it is really surprising that some religious fanatics could go to the extent of making an attempt to deny them a right to buy things for themselves.

Who has given them the authority to impose that kind of a ban? How could they have the temerity to act as the self-appointed guardian of the society? They are reported to have cited prevention of 'anti-social activities' as the reason for their edict. Well, it is the duty of the law enforcers to protect women from indecent behaviour by any quarters whatsoever. It is the police who are entrusted with the job of keeping anti-social elements at bay. So, who are they to obstruct free movement of women? They are not only undermining the status of women but also taking the law into their own hands. They are also defying the local authority. Without question, the obscurantists now feel confident enough to impose their tyrannical interpretation of religion on others.

We are happy to learn that the local police are now investigating the matter. They should bring the culprits to book and take stern action against them. The point that must not be missed here is that the tentacles of religious bigotry will grow longer and longer, unless any new dimension to it is nipped in the bud. This is a form of extremism that must be severely dealt with.

Garments blame game

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

IT has now become customary in Bangladesh to search for scapegoats for our structural and organisational problems. Such an approach does not help to solve real problems. Therefore the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' Association (BGMEA), which represents one of the major industries in the country, should not fall victim to this tendency. It is expected that when certain violent incidents occur affecting its members that BGMEA would impartially and objectively inquire into and assess the causes. The interest of the industry, and indeed the public interest, is best served by identifying the real causes, which can be quite complex. If there is any lapse or fault on the part of a member it is in the industry's interest to frankly acknowledge it and to take effective remedial measures. The current tendency to lapse into a "blame game" that seeks scapegoats in external factors is not likely to solve the problems of the industry.

Some of the comments made in a recent statement by the President of the BGMEA reflect this unfortunate tendency. They came in the wake of two violent incidents at Savar on October 14 and in Kanchpur on October 19. Newspaper reports suggest that in the first incident violence spilled over in some Savar factories after some workers were

killed in an accident caused by a bus on the main Savar highway. It is not unusual for emotions to run high leading to irrational violence. In the second instance in a garment factory in Kanchpur, the security guards allegedly tied a worker's hands, beat him, and suspended him from the ceiling because he did not have an ID. A woman worker who protested was also beaten. This led to a massive

role of the garment industry in building the national economy is widely recognised. We all acknowledge the contribution that the garment industry has made to our foreign earnings and to opening work opportunities for over 1.5 million workers. The BGMEA president himself acknowledges that the credit for this is not exclusively that of the employers, but results from

are counter-productive. Several non-government organisations and trade unions have supported workers' demands for health and safety conditions, for regular payments, maternity leave, health insurance, etc. because these are essential for a healthy, productive work force. Last June at a conference organised by UNDP, at which foreign buyers, BGMEA, government, NGOs, and

with their workers. But then last April when the Spectrum Sweater Industries collapsed due to engineering defects, how were the workers compensated? A mere 100,000 takas was promised to families of dead workers. BGMEA and the owner did offer partial financial help to some grievously injured workers, while the Spectrum buyers donated 300,000 Euros for their treatment.

takas. Perhaps our response should now be: why do workers need to eat onions?

BGMEA as an association is mandated to promote the interests of the manufacturers. It is time that it sees the logic of acting as a monitoring and regulatory body to ensure that laws are not transgressed by its member factories. The absence of safety provisions, training in fire drills, and locked gates has led to endless number of fire accidents and workers' casualties. Has BGMEA or the government seen fit to penalise the owners and to assure compensation to the workers? If they had there, would have been fewer industrial accidents.

It can hardly be disputed that absence of proper industrial management leads to many of the problems in the garment industry. BGMEA can and should do even more to improve management so that the garment industry gains the reputation of being responsible employers and are not seen as fly-by-night industries for quick profits, without adequate responsibility towards workers. There is now greater awareness amongst workers, and a commonality of concerns shared by trade unions and human rights organisations. BGMEA will have to demand more responsibility from its members to observe the laws of the land and to treat their workers with dignity and respect.

Dr. Hameeda Hossain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

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protest by workers, which led to use of bullets and batons by police, causing extensive injuries. The question here is: was there not a failure of the security system? Was the situation not mishandled by the security guards which led to the escalation of violence? The management needs to assess its security system and to remedy identified defects. BGMEA should ensure that there is an accounting for such arbitrary acts of violence against workers.

BGMEA is expected impartially to inquire into the causes of the violence and to make these public. It is not helpful for the factory concerned or the industry as a whole, to put the blame on a conspiracy by unnamed, unidentified conspirators.

co-operation between employers and workers. We cannot forget the major contribution of the workers who work long hours to meet delivery schedules, under conditions that do not always assure their safety, and are likely to be injurious to their health.

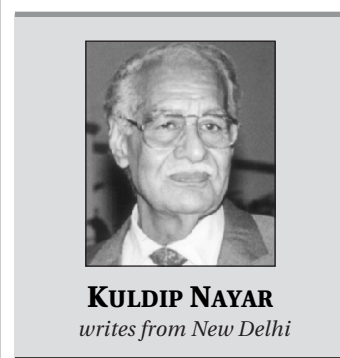
In the press conference Mr Annisul Haq, without presenting specific facts or evidence, made general insinuations about a conspiracy against the garment industry. Since BGMEA is officially committed to engage in a process of consultations involving constructive interaction with worker and their representatives, and other organisations concerned with the rights and welfare of workers, including NGOs, such general criticisms

workers' representatives were present, the BGMEA recognised the need for compliance with specific international labour standards and Bangladesh's labour laws. A task force was formed, supposedly with representatives of all sectors. It was agreed at the conference that the buyers would prepare a common list of compliance conditions, and the BGMEA would try to implement the doable in stages. The responsibility for allocating different tasks was given to the task force, but unfortunately this seems to have met only once, and that too without adequate representation. This calls for urgent attention, to ensure a continuity of export orders.

Mr Haq has said that no employers want to maintain bad relations

And INCIDIN and OXFAM (two organisations which were unjustly maligned by a participant in the press conference) used these funds to pay for further treatment and rehabilitation in the trauma centre. The BGMEA promised to send a few workers abroad for treatment, but were they finally sent? Many workers of Spectrum and its sister firm lost their jobs. How were they compensated? Only a few days are left before Eid, yet there are daily protests by workers demanding back pay and Eid bonus. This is indeed a gross contractual violation, and shouldn't BGMEA call up its defaulting members? The minimum monthly wage fixed at 930 takas in 1998 has remained unchanged even though the price of onions has gone up to 50

Gujarat Muslims await justice



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

ONE more court case failed this week at Baroda, Gujarat, to award punishment to rioters. Once again the judge questioned the role of the police and indicted them for failing to prevent the violence. Lack of evidence has been the cause for the failure of cases in Gujarat, where the BJP-led government had instigated the killing and looting of Muslim residents as a reprisal to the Godhara train burning incident.

Roughly 45,000 cases were filed nearly three years ago after the carnage. Half of them were closed within days of filing due to lack of evidence. Many have been dismissed since, like the one in Baroda. In fact, only 75 cases are being pursued vigorously. There are no funds or volunteers to take them up. Hindu lawyers are reluctant while most of the Muslim lawyers are charging hefty fees. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine that the guilty in the Gujarat carnage will get the punishment they deserve. It may well be a repeat of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, where only a couple of persons have been convicted after 21 years.

There is, however, one glaring difference: the Sikh victims have been given Rs 300,000 per family for rehabilitation, but the Muslims have not got even a penny by the government. In the first case, the Delhi government took no time to pay. In the case of Gujarat, the state government refuses to pay anything at all. Muslim victims await the generosity of individuals or non-governmental organisations. Both are fewer than before.

fulfilled the conditions laid down and withdrew the FIR and other statements. Still, the local youths made his life so miserable that he had to quit. They did not want a Muslim in their midst.

Hundreds of villages in the state proudly display a board: Hindu village in the Hindu Rashtra! There is hardly any protest against it. Social and economic boycott of Muslims continues. No Gujarati hires them. Bureaucrats are tainted, the police

been written off. It is a growth for the Hindus and by the Hindus. Since the rest of India measures success on the scales of economics, it believes that things are all right.

That the Modi-headed government is hostile is understandable. But the centre's ambivalence is beyond comprehension. The Atal Behari Vajpayee government had its political compulsions because Gujarat was ruled by the BJP. But why has the Congress government

those candidates who had led Muslims at the time of the carnage. The Muslims' reasoning was that a known communalist was far better than a secularist who was communalist at heart.

The biggest disappointment of Muslims in Gujarat is that secular forces have caved in. They recall how even the tallest among them did not stand up to defend them. Founder of the Amul Cooperative movement Verghese Kurien issued orders to his

reconciliation and feels sorry for the wrongs done to the Muslim community. But he is afraid to speak because of the "repercussions." Leaders of civil society, the RSS and the BJP followers continue to preach separation as if Gujarat is a laboratory that will help them experiment with methods which they can apply elsewhere in the country.

The Left and its trade unions are conspicuous by their silence. The Gandhians who were initially afraid have come in the field. But they are only a few and have very little resources to disburse. However, a ray of hope has emerged in an otherwise somber environment. A few people, mostly Hindus, have constituted themselves into a group. Harish Mandir, a former IAS, is one of them. They have drafted one-year plan to help Muslims regain their confidence, if not property.

Unfortunately, the Muslims in the state are entrapped in a situation from where they see no escape. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots have not gone into oblivion despite the efforts of the Congress to the contrary. India is a secular country. This is the reason why people defeated the BJP in the last general election and returned the Congress. They have pinned their hope on the party to retrieve the nation from the creeping shadows of communalism. The failure of the Congress will be the biggest betrayal.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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As a matter of fact, no aid is coming to Muslim victims. The government is hostile and the local population biased. The international agencies wound up their last office some months ago. The 2 lakh Muslims, ousted nearly three years ago from their homes during the carnage, blink on nobody's radar. Saffronised state administration has turned its back on them. Over one lakh people have migrated to other places. But the rest live at Ahmedabad on a strip of land, along the road, stretching into graveyards. They want to return to their places, but cannot do so. One of them, Ibrahim, went back to his village Marghi, near Anand. He even

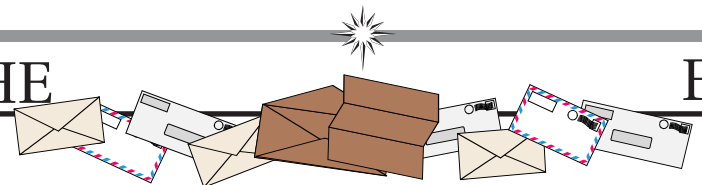
one-sided, and liberals indifferent. The worst is that the intelligentsia has taken no time to get integrated into the communal segregation. It does not even talk about Muslims -- as if they don't exist. It looks as if Chief Minister Narendra Modi has changed the people. This has happened in dictatorships, but he has done it in democratic system. "We have to get on with life," is the rationale given. The fact is that nobody wants to recall the carnage because it probably weighs in the conscience one way or the other. Abnormal economic growth in Gujarat should give a message of peace. But the reality is different. Muslims have

led by Manmohan Singh remained distant? True, law and order is a state subject. But the relief and rehabilitation of Indian citizens is New Delhi's responsibility. Since the Gujarat government has refused to pay anything for rehabilitation, the centre has to bear the burden. Either it should bring a law to force the states to accept the responsibility of rehabilitation or it should foot the bill. Anger against the Congress is the reason why the Muslims have voted for the BJP in the civic polls, not because they have turned towards the party as BJP chief LK Advani has claimed in a public statement. The Congress put up

employees not to take part in the rehabilitation work. One senior employee, a Muslim, who had toiled for Amul for years, resigned in protest. Leading social activist and chairperson of voluntary organisation SEWA, Ila Bhat, did not raise a finger to help the carnage victims. In fact, she accepted the chairmanship of the Modi-constituted rehabilitation committee which is now in the midst of controversy. True, she has resigned now but she has hurt the Muslim sensitivity beyond redemption.

What do the Muslims of Gujarat do? Whom do they turn to? Fear stalks the land. An average Gujarati wants

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Plight of women workers

The plight of our daily labourers in different construction sites goes unnoticed. Lot of lives had been lost due to the negligence of the owners and hazardous working environment. The plight of women workers is even more conspicuous. The other day while passing through a real estate site, I came across a pathetic scene a bunch of women, some of them very old, working together. The elderly and the tender aged women were breaking bricks in the scorching heat. It was very shocking. Moreover, there is no guarantee / insurance for their welfare, rather they always become victims of injustice. I strongly believe that we all have something to do for them and urge the politicians and civil society to come forward in this regard. Otherwise, the façade of our civility will soon

collapse.
Rafiqul Islam Rime
Agrabad, Chittagong

Violence on DU campus

Recent violence on the DU campus created panic among the students. Bangladesh Chattrra League (BCL) and Islami Chattrra Shibir (ICS) were involved in serious violence on the campus. BCL is resorting to violence in the name of keeping the campus environment congenial. On the other hand, Shibir is trying to pursue its politics in the name of Islam. The Jatiyotabadi Chattrra Dal is also playing a role in the overall degeneration of the university climate. These student organisations are actually destroying the academic atmosphere of the university. General students are usually the victims of this violent student politics which leads to session jams and

all other types of academic ills. The government and the university authorities should find a way out of this intolerable situation.

Hasan
BBA in Finance
University of Dhaka

Disgruntled students

I am a student of an international school situated in Dhanmondi. Our school is quite famous for its size and strength. But it is not sympathetic to the students. It gives no games period to the students. The classrooms are so small that some students compare them with prison. It has also earned a bad name for taking too many students. My request to all the school authorities in Dhaka would be: Look at these things again and take some steps to solve the problems that the students are facing.
Mohammed Akkas

Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Campus politics

The BCL and some other left leaning parties are trying for some days to resist the activities of their rival parties on Dhaka University campus. My question is: who are they to decide who will do politics on the campus or who will not, since the freedom of assembly and freedom of association is granted by our constitution as one of our fundamental rights.
Akhi & Himel
Dept of Law, DU

Harassment of Bangladeshis at KL airport

Nowadays it is often learnt from different reports in the dailies that all types of skilled and unskilled workers from Bangladesh are harassed, jailed or tortured on

different grounds while they work in foreign countries. We do not exactly know whether the government of Bangladesh is aware of it or has done anything to solve the problem.

Now I would like to be specific on a certain matter that happened to me along with other friends in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia on 22 October 2005. Myself and some of my friends and relatives with their families were returning from the US on board a Malaysian Airlines flight. We arrived in Kuala Lumpur at 6:00am on 22.10.05. We had previous hotel reservations from the airlines, so we approached the immigration counter in the airport for transit visa to avail the hotel reservation. As we had done on many occasions in the past. We had the connecting plane with the same airline for Bangladesh on the same day at 10:00pm at night.

As Bangladeshi citizens we were rather shocked to know that no

Bangladeshi passport holders would be allowed to leave the airport. We tried to explain our difficulties, but to no avail. On the other hand, passport holders from different countries coming from the USA in the same flight like India, Pakistan etc were allowed to go to the hotels in the town outside the airport.

We tried to convince the immigration authorities saying that we had enjoyed these facility earlier and wanted to know why it was being denied all of a sudden. They informed us that restrictions had been imposed recently only for the Bangladeshi passport holders.

May we know from the government department concerned why we were harassed at the airport and what was our fault? Is it that we had Bangladeshi passport with us? I request the government of Bangladesh to kindly learn about the issue in detail from its Malaysian counter-

part; so that other travellers may know the exact situation and plan their flights accordingly.
Mazharul Haq
Lalamatia, Dhaka

Follow the building code

Today the importance of following the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) for civil construction cannot be overemphasised if we want to improve the skyline of Dhaka and other cities. The code should be strictly followed to protect human life endangered by violation of the code in the form of manipulations in construction design and supervision. Weakness of any structure mainly occurs due to lack of uniformity in work including design, masonry, and supervision that do not follow a code. It gives birth to a structure that does not show a regular integrated behaviour

under specific loading condition. Due to this non-uniformity the failure may occur at any point. On the other hand, a structure that is built in compliance with the code has uniformity between its various parts and exhibits a definite integrated behaviour. In this situation the failure at any point is supported by the adjacent part.

The Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) is acceptable and should be strictly followed as the most prominent Philosophers of Civil Engineering worked on it when it was formulated. Unfortunately, it hasn't been further refined after its birth.

The civil engineering society of Bangladesh should invite their (the top civil engineers) attention to the matter to protect the structures in the city from earthquake.
Md Zahangir Alom
BUET