

Cleansing operation

Spare no corrupt person

YESTERDAY we saw the first real sign of the process of accountability and answerability before the law of the land being reestablished in society. It seems a cleansing operation has begun through the non-party caretaker government as a number of former ministers and MPs of BNP and AL including a top industrialist have been arrested by the joint forces. Law at last appears to be catching up with them.

One would have expected though that an elected government had taken the move against corruption; but that was not to be. It has now fallen on an unelected caretaker government to be doing so.

There was even demand voiced by civil society leaders to make an example of indicting a few big shots with corruption and abuse of power rather than catching petty thieves of public money. For, they thought, this could only din the right message into the ears of people who have amassed tons of money without having to account for it to anybody.

They have bled the nation white as they splurge at home and abroad with reckless abandon that includes getting nominated and elected to parliament riding on their pile of black money.

Government should make public as to what damage they have done to society. Their crimes and misdeeds must be made known to the people and soon enough. Let's not forget, nothing like informed public supporting government's initiative for weeding out corruption.

Here we would like to use a word of caution in that in an enthusiasm to fight corruption, no innocent person should be a victim of circumstances. It is all about establishing rule of law so that due process of law is to be scrupulously adhered to.

Now it devolves upon the political parties to take a cue from the cleansing initiative and expel criminal elements from their folds.

Biswa Ijtema

A great occasion ending on a fraternal note

MILLIONS of hands of the devotees went up in prayer in the Biswa Ijtema yesterday on the final day of the three-day long religious congregation. The million-strong voice of the devotees rose up to the heaven seeking divine blessings for a better life here and hereafter. Devotees prayed for stronger bonding and everlasting fraternity among the Muslims all over the world.

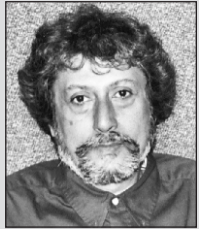
The congregation of the Muslims by the river of Turag at Tongi, popularly considered second largest after the Hajj, is looked forward to with immense enthusiasm by the devotees every year. Leaving all worldly pursuits behind for about one week the blessing-seekers come from far and wide within the country and also from various neighbouring countries to converge on the bank of Turag. Such close interaction creates the opportunity for them to learn about and impart knowledge on Islam and related subjects so that they can have a deeper understanding of the religion and perform their worldly duties with a greater sense of piety.

Since the seventies, Tongi Biswa Ijtema has evolved into a large yearly congregation of the Muslims. Though it was originally limited to smaller groups, over the years it gradually succeeded in attracting people from all walks of life with its simple message, non-political stance and social services like arranging marriage of poor men and women free of cost.

We feel the authorities concerned should give more attention to the comfort of the devotees as well as build semi-permanent structures to provide proper sanitation facilities, pure drinking water and medical assistance during the Ijtema. We also feel that the government could arrange discussion sessions with renowned scholars on the importance of mainstream education and enhancing knowledge on science and information technology in the light of the teachings of the Islamic scholars.

Finally, a word of appreciation must go to the organisers and the government security forces that the massive event passed off without any untoward incident.

Why not police reform?



SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE wind of change is blowing across the land, and people in general are now able to take deep breaths after living in a foul-smelling environment for decades.

Our foolhardy politicians, who still try to defend their corrupt practices and misuse in various talk shows or in the columns of newspapers, seem little moved by the sufferings of the people. As a result, people have rejected them outright. They are not shedding a drop of tear, not even crocodile's tears, hearing the news of arrest of some of the so-called big rui-katlas (big fishes) in politics. They say loudly... "Good riddance to bad rubbish." How pathetic! Rubbish they are,

Very recently we read the story of a mere OC of a thana who has amassed mind-boggling amount of wealth through the back door, and drives an 18 lakh taka jeep himself while his wife uses a ten lakh takas worth car. This officer was arrested in connection of accepting bribe for releasing rotten wheat and food imported by a big name in business.

indeed!

We cannot but see the anger when some politicians protest our calling them corrupt. They try to blame it all on the bad politicians. We want to ask them -- where have you been hiding the good politicians all this time? Why didn't you goody goody politicians raise your voices, come out in the open and join the public, seeking their help to drive out the bad ones from the country? Why did you protect the bad elements in your party and keep quiet all the time? Aren't they some pathetic humans who have descended to the lowest stratum of morality ever comprehensible to the decent humans who live in the same society?

Well, today we are going to talk about the buzzword -- REFORM.

The wind of reform is blowing all round us, and it really feels good. We do need reforms right and left, up and down, everywhere, and every nook and cranny of the society. The political garbage has piled up too high and the stench is unbearable. Catch those thug politicians, give each one of them a cleaner's uniform, give each one of them a sholar jharu (mop) and tell them to clean up their own garbage. This should be the first step before launching the reform agenda.

We are thankful to the caretaker government for having on the agenda: Election Commission reforms; Anti-Corruption Commission reforms; Public Service Commission reforms; political party reforms (like making registration manda-

tory) and so on and so forth. There is no denying that massive reforms from top to bottom in these vermin-infested organizations are the call of the day. And they are doing a good job at that.

We welcome the reforms that are already seeing heads rolling in the above-mentioned organizations, but we are yet to see or hear about top to bottom reforms undertaken in a vital state organ. And that is the police department. Yes, brothers and sisters, to this writer, reform of this organ is of paramount importance, since crime and criminality are directly linked to this department.

Many of you have no idea how all the things called good, such as; values, respect for law, justice, ethics etc have been destroyed by a large section of

corrupt-to-the-bone police officials of the past and present. The propensity for criminality, the lack of ethics, morality and qualms among the members of the police force has now taken an epidemic form and unless the rot is stemmed right now we shall have no semblance of a just society left to boast of.

The low-level criminals operate in the locality under the protection of the thana level officers and constables. And most of the high and middle-ranking officials, along with their trusted uniformed gunmen, are indirect partners of the gold smugglers' syndicates, heroin dealers' syndicates, consumer item hoarders' syndicates, timber terrorists' syndicates, rotten food-grain importers' syndicates, prostitution promoters' syndicates and so on.

Very recently we read the story of a mere OC of a thana who has amassed mind-boggling amount of wealth through the back door, and drives an 18 lakh taka jeep himself while his wife uses a ten lakh takas worth car. This officer was arrested in connection of accepting bribe for releasing rotten wheat and food imported

by a big name in business. This police officer is only the personification of everything evil that goes on in the police department. The binge of corruption goes on quite blatantly, and anyone daring to protest gets picked up by the goons on their pay-rolls.

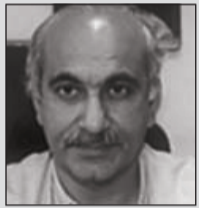
No one can penetrate the walls of the police stations and no one can know what's written in the first investigation report prepared by them. Hence, one may go to jail even for doing no crime. Such power corrupts them to their marrow. In fact, the tales of toll collection and other crimes are only too well known and need not be retold. What is important now is to remodel the structure of the police department.

What is most important is to make the entire department accountable to a higher, and independent, authority. And we believe the present caretaker government will overhaul the department.

Only some top-level transfers will not serve the purpose.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

A prattler's rattle



MJ AKBAR

DEEP into Dr Ashok Mitra's new book, A Prattler's Tale: Bengal, Marxism and Governance (Samya, Rs 595), I began to feel a growing sense of irritation. Here was this virtually ceaseless, seamless sequence of the most wonderful political anecdotes I had read in years, and so many of them lost the last-mile edge because the author had refused to name names, although the descriptions took you near enough the identity.

Dr Mitra's career is packed with "former" designations -- chairman of the Agricultural Prices Commission and chief economic adviser to government of India when Mrs Indira Gandhi was prime minister (she called him Ashok), finance minister to Jyoti Basu after the Left Front triumph in Bengal in 1977 -- and his memoirs are a treasure house of incident, perception, analysis, and sheer good fun, replete with the kind of story that is a highlight of the epicurean adda, or gossip, sessions that were and are a preferred privilege of the Kolkata Bengali elite.

This book will be exploited by the intelligent historian and should be enjoyed by anyone remotely interested in public affairs. Dr Mitra has a justified reputation for fearless honesty. So why had he hidden so many names?

And then, ouch! I came across a comment about me that was sharp

to the point of being merciless. Relief followed: Ashokda, which is how I have called him for well over two decades, did not mention my name.

I went down on a metaphorical knee to offer thanks to God, in whom Dr Mitra does not believe, and the author, in whom Dr Mitra does.

Was the comment accurate? Yes. It was absolutely correct and I fully deserved the toxic barb. Dr Ashok Mitra is honest, but he is not ruthlessly honest. Phew.

Mine was a case of trivia, but the absence of names in one story was of serious import. Dr Mitra has a startling revelation about the surprise appointment of Dr Manmohan Singh as PV Narasimha Rao's finance minister in 1991.

This is his narrative: Foreign exchange reserves had shrunk to a point where they could cover only a fortnight's imports. India was "fast approaching bankruptcy."

The US administration, in coordination with the IMF and World Bank, sent a "categorical message" to Delhi through "secret talks" that began as soon as the Lok Sabha results were known: obey and save yourselves, or object and go hang.

Delhi agreed to obey. But wary of similar assurances that had been belied in Latin America, Washington sought an implicit guarantee. It was decided "the IMF and the World Bank would nominate the finance minister of

the country after consultations with the US authorities."

It is an astonishing assertion in the words of the author: "the prerogative of naming the new finance minister was also transferred to Washington."

This is followed by a second bombshell.

"The first person whose name was proposed by Washington DC, thought things over and declined the invitation to be the finance minister." Who was this person? We are not told. This is a serious gap in information, because the credibility of such a damaging revelation dwells at least partly on the name of this first offer-and-decline.

We all know who the second choice was; today he is prime minister of India. Dr Mitra describes this as an "ignominious surrender" and asserts the "high noon of that state of affairs continues."

Dr Mitra has seen power in Delhi and Kolkata; he has no political ambitions left. Two of his mentors, Indira Gandhi and the CPI(M) guru, Promote Dasgupta, have passed away.

The third, Jyoti Basu, is 93 and has retired. Anyone who knows Dr Mitra will vouch for his integrity. He describes Dr Singh as a once close friend, and is disillusioned only when he realises that "Manmohan had meanwhile matured as a skilled politician" who could sidestep facts with political rhetoric.

He is not charitable about

Manmohan the politician: "I am afraid there is little scope for politeness here: his timidity is the product of his civil servant's mind, which many mistake as humility."

Dr Mitra is experienced and mature enough to measure each word he writes, and if he claims that Dr Singh's sudden rise to eminent political office was at the instructions of Washington, he definitely means it.

I have no information against which to measure this claim, and must take it at face value. But my view is of no consequence.

The more important question, given current political equations, is, whether the CPI(M) believes the man it made finance minister of Bengal in 1977, and who could have continued as finance minister till the end of the last century.

Dr Singh cannot remain prime minister without CPI(M) support.

A further question: does the American establishment believe this? The present American ambassador, David Mulford, is gauche enough to admonish Delhi on the eve of Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Iran through a press conference.

Even if he had to convey a message, what was the need for a gratuitous press conference? Would Mrs Indira Gandhi have tolerated such an indiscretion? I think not. Will Pranab Mukherjee and Manmohan Singh accept it? I hope not.

Their response does not have to be belligerent; that is always unwise. But their actions should

BYLINE

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speak louder than Mulford's words.

Dr Mitra does not let political animosity -- and no one could be more animus than him -- interfere with his judgment. There is an evocative and almost sympathetic portrait of the RSS titan, MS Golwalkar. The two met when Indira Gandhi appointed both to the cow-slaughter committee, set up after the famous march to Parliament by sadhus in November 1966.

The Jagatguru Shankaracharya of Puri was also a member. Golwalkar, says Dr Mitra, was "extraordinarily intelligent, modest in manner, soft-spoken. (He was) fluent in all the fifteen languages recognised by the Constitution, and made it a point to converse with me in the most chaste Bengali. It was the Jagatguru who was single-handedly capable of driving us to desperation."

Later, Dr Mitra met Golwalkar on a train to Bhopal: "We embraced each other and exchanged many stories" until the train picked up speed and the men brought out their books. "Suddenly I noticed that Golwalkar was reading a juicy novel by Henry Miller." Dr Mitra adds, as well he might, "Inscrutable India!"

It gets more inscrutable, with gossip about a Bengal governor's wife carting away the excellent wine cellar from Kolkata's Raj Bhavan on her husband's retirement.

Apparently, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Jawaharlal Nehru's sister, seemed to have similar tendencies. When she returned from Washington, where she had served as ambassador, she brought back expensive carpets, which she "forgot" to pay for.

Any interest in what Ramakrishna Hegde thought of his fellow chief minister NT Rama

Rao's sleeping costume? I am not going to supply the answer.

The book is spiced with one-liners that could form an independent manual. The one I particularly liked was: "Parents without an adequate dose of humour are a social menace."

The context is extremely funny: fortunately for the publishers, who would like to sell copies, there is no space here for this wonderful episode from the day on which Dr Mitra was first elected. No space either for the reasons that compelled Dr Mitra to resign as finance minister. Suffice to note that conscience, now a stranger to politics, played a key role.

A close encounter with death is dealt with the light touch of a master. He recalls his impressions when his pulse rate, fluttering between 25 and zero, would drop towards the death zone: "[M]y whole consciousness would be wrapped in a steady, serene, very comfortable purple glow and the feeling would be of excruciating happiness." He does not go beyond this, but that sentence is heavy with possibilities for an atheist.

If there is one fault, then it is the coy and cloying intrusion of nicknames. But nickname mania among the Bengali elite is also a message of inclusion; only the outsider uses the formal nomenclature.

Ashok Mitra might have been a Marxist-rebel, but that does not mean he was excluded from the elitist club. Indeed, the prodigal is always enhanced by a touch of glamour.

Don't wait for details about the withering reference to me. I might be a fool, but I certainly am not an ass. If you do want to play hide and seek with seven fascinating decades, buy the book and open it anywhere. You won't put it down.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Bush's dangerous illusion



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EARLIER, US president George Bush, in spite of being badly bruised in Iraq, wanted to stay the course. His defeat in the mid-term election, as well as the report of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) headed by James Baker, a former secretary of state, perhaps had a sobering effect.

There was, for a while, a flicker for changing course. He is again for a "surge" in Iraq by sending fresh troops to gain ultimate victory. Although the ISG admitted in its report what the whole world already knew: that the occupation of Iraq was disaster, and that the

America's security interests are not served -- let alone the question of curbing terror -- by remaining indefinitely as an occupying power in Iraq. Yet George Bush is tempted anew to seek a military victory which is unrealistic. What America faces today in Iraq is precisely the trap the enemy of Bush & Associates laid when Bush rode into Baghdad with his posse.

situation was getting more hellish every day.

George Bush's paranoid proclivity is to escalate the war. Escalation is always a seductive option when war aims go haywire. After taking casualties of around 3,000 dead, losing ground, and bringing Iraq to the verge of a multi-dimensional civil war, the occupying army can, at times, be tempted by the prospect of reinforcement.

For the political warlords of a war going badly, escalation carries an immediate appeal by raising hopes of ultimate victory, as the enemy is expected to collapse in the face of increased forces and

firepower. In the case of the Iraq war, the appeal of escalation is linked to the widespread, if erroneous, belief that the US never committed enough troops to handle the insurgency.

Arizona Senator John McCain, the chief proponent of escalation theory, argues that only through the escalation of the war can Americans, for the first time, have a bright chance to win. With the US forces facing defeat in Iraq, and the Iraqi civilians suffering even more terribly than the foreign occupiers, McCain's escalation scenario holds out the possibility of lowered American casualties as a consequence of their numerical

strength, as well as a safer Iraq for the locals.

The perils of escalation can, however, be found in the history of the Americans themselves. That escalation can backfire was vividly demonstrated in the Korean War waged by the US from 1950 to 1953. In the first half of the twentieth century Japan conquered Korea, and with Japan's defeat at the end of Second World War the victorious allies, the Soviet Union and the US, split Korea into the North and the South. Under the aegis of the Soviet Union, North Korea adopted communism as an ideology and attacked South Korea. The US intervened to save

the South by evicting the North Koreans.

The US then had a momentous decision to make. Having resolved the state of two Koreas, as they were prior to the war, should the US military now stand down? Or should the US escalate the war in the hope of forever ending any threat from the North?

Under the leadership of General MacArthur the US invaded North Korea with the stated aim of liberating it. The escalation tragically backfired, with China joining the fray on North Korea's side. China sent posse of battle-hardened troops who wreaked havoc on the Americans. For a brief period when China threatened to overwhelm the Americans and MacArthur was famously sacked for his over-reach (somewhat resembling Rumsfeld's recent humiliation as secretary of defence), the war then settled into a bloody stalemate.

Even today, more than 50 years later, the two Koreas remain in perpetual tension. The escalation solved nothing, but cost too much,

tens of thousands of Americans were killed in the war, which finally ended through negotiation.

The Vietnam War saw two escalations. Like Korea, Vietnam was a small Asian nation divided in two as a consequence of decolonization at the end of World War II. Also like Korea, Vietnam was invaded by the Japanese who supplanted France as the colonial power.

With Japan's defeat in 1945 the French returned, only to find a diehard nationalist Ho Chi Minh entrenched in the North of Vietnam. Minh was renowned for his resistance to the Japanese invaders, and could possibly have united the southern part of the country under his rule had not the French resisted. When France got tired of fighting in Vietnam it gave up, and the US took over where the French left off: reinforcing the South Vietnamese government.

After the assassination of President Kennedy the US policy of training the South Vietnamese to fight the northerners failed. Faced with the triumph of Ho Chi

Minh, the new president Lyndon Johnson vowed: "I will not lose in Vietnam." In 1965 he made good on his promise by vastly expanding the presence of US troops in Vietnam. At the peak of this escalation the troops in Vietnam rose first to 300,000 and finally, in 1968, to 500,000. Johnson also ordered massive aerial bombing -- using more tonnage than was used during World War II. With more troops and more bombing, Johnson confidently spoke of "light at the end of the tunnel" in Vietnam. That light never lit up.

The failure of Johnson's escalation was a double tragedy, since not only did his decision cost many American lives (58,000) and much money, it also undercut support for his campaigns against institutionalized racism and poverty in America.

Worse still, a second escalation came after President Nixon entered office in 1968. Nixon campaigned on promises to end the deadly war, and he tried to do so -- by escalating. By secretly bombing North Vietnamese supply

lines in Cambodia, he destabilized that country and catalyzed the rise of the dreaded Khmer Rouge.

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The Pentagon swallowed its doubt about the achievability of Bush's goal back in 2003, but not this time. As revealed in the media, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are resisting proposals to surge as many as 21,500 additional troops into Iraq. They might have realized that an escalation scenario should only be met with dread -- and the hoary reminder that people who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.

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