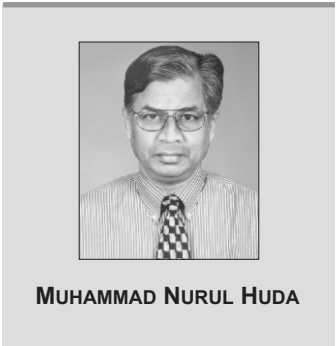


The needful is painful



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE chief of staff, Bangladesh Army, has said that the time is now propitious for effecting significantly beneficial changes in our body politic, and that such opportunities for real emancipation of the people will not be easy to come by.

Indeed, there is nothing more dangerous to public welfare than the apathy of a citizen in a democracy. There is no doubt that a bad government is the inevitable consequence of an indifferent electorate. Politics will never be cleaner, and our economic future will never be brighter, unless and until our citizens are willing to give of themselves to the land which gave them birth.

The foundations of our constitution have been shaken by the folly of the people, the corruption of our politicians, and the negligence of the elite. As a test case, can we find out how many of the nearly one thousand members of our parliament between 1991-2006 have taken advantage of the privilege of duty-free car import, and how many of them have utilised the same facility for their own convenience and comfort as stipulated?

The suspicion, consequent upon some recent media reports in this regard, is that many of those duty-free cars have been sold to private persons, thus enabling the sellers to obtain a hefty sum of money as profit and, thus, depriving the national exchequer of substantial revenues.

If the above reports turn out to be largely factual, then anyone can

STRAIGHT LINE

It has to be ensured that people's faith in the foundation of the society is not lost. Exemplary deterrent actions in regulatory sectors will have a favourable impact. Stolen and criminally plundered national resources must be brought back. Proper use of political power will be the guarantee for the return of fairness and a sense of service for others. Corruption will be controlled and contained in such an environment.

justifiably question the morality of our politician-legislators and reasonably demand that such legislators, who violated the conditions of duty-free import, be barred from contesting the next parliamentary election. Will this be achievable, even if one is ready to excuse the legislators for the unusual and untenable privilege of enjoying the waiver from payment of statutory duties that are compulsorily imposed on ordinary citizens?

Simultaneously, can we think of discontinuance of this much abused privilege as part of the house-cleaning? The needful, in order to be effective, may turn out to be extremely painful. Let us not forget that the majority of our legislators personify the arrogance of power, which is the exact opposite of unfeigned humility.

Since January 11, there appears to have been a sharp awakening of the political conscience of the nation. A realisation has dawned on the people that they are the only keepers of the constitution. However, politicians will not admit that. In the very recent past, many of them were wearing the nasty garb of constitutionalism only to cover their arbitrary exercise of power.

Many amongst our politicians do not realise that a democracy without discipline has no future. Similarly, undisciplined trade unionism is as dangerous as undisciplined capitalism, and undisciplined demagoguery is as dangerous as undisciplined student power.

Many well-meaning, decent citizens, along with a sizable segment of the continually suffering

common folk of our country, have often wondered about the unpalatable but stable relationship of a large number of our politicians with the rogue elements of society.

While the well-informed can deliberate effectively and convincingly on the dynamics of such a liaison, the not-so-informed may need to be informed of this unwholesome part of our body politic. This aspect acquires increasing significance, as the need to cleanse our public life brooks no further delay.

Political activities, partly on account of historical factors, have assumed a dominant confrontational character. Over the years, since after liberation and more particularly during the anti-autocracy movement in the eighties, leading to the fall of the military dictatorial regime in December 1990, political protests demanded crude physical courage from the field-level activists of the political movement.

As the dictatorial regime primarily depended on brute power and looked towards non-political quarters for its sustenance, it did not bother about the excessive use of force by the state apparatus. It had no qualms in utilising dangerous goons to intimidate, and if necessary liquidate, political party workers and leaders.

All in all, the political scenario became so desperate and menacing that only the very physically brave and intensely committed workers could dare to take to the streets to face the insensitive actions of a despotic government nearly bordering on megalomania.

The sad and bitter memory left behind by the anti-autocracy movement was one of a government or authority that did not care a bit about legality and civility, and the anaesthetising conviction that organised violent counter-action, with readiness to sacrifice life and property, was the only alternative to effect political change.

It does not take a discerning observer of the socio-political scene to be convinced that, under the circumstances as narrated above, it is quite difficult for the saner and more sensible elements of the young population to join movements for social change.

Since nature abhors a vacuum, it is only practical that vacancies resulting from the unwillingness of the desired lot are automatically filled in by the ill-motivated desperados. The situation turned vicious and the training ground for constitutional politics witnessed detestable wheeling-dealing. Brawn took precedence over brain in the formative years.

No wonder, therefore, that our national level politics has been afflicted by this syndrome. It will be very difficult and painful to bring sanity in the political process.

The influence, positive or negative, of students and labour on national life is felt by all. There is, thus, a desperate effort to rise and cling to positions of authority in student and labour organisations. This is natural, as these two outfits are found to be frontal and instrumental in achieving the so-called political objectives through confrontationist and violent postures and actions. In such a scheme, and in

the situation obtaining in our environment, rash and indiscreet elements would obviously receive preference over sober and saner elements. It will be difficult to reverse the process.

We now see student leaders who are more known for their knowledge and application of the use and misuse of fire-arms, and are adept at negotiating the niceties of the tendering process and maintaining liaison with shady non-students. There is virtually no effort to discourage such immoral practices and, in course of time, these tainted youngsters turn into promoters/distributors of illegal favours, and mature as politicians. The required winds of change will be hard to come by.

Our labour leaders and the transport owners relish the reality that they can bring the government to its knees, and are never found wanting in flexing their muscles, howsoever detrimental that could be to public interests. There is an unseemly scramble for leadership in the transport sector, and there is preponderance of doubtful persons in transport operations. On account of its leverage in terms of money and organised manpower, with impact on mainstream political and economic activities, politicians have resorted to unethical and irregular practices to retain control here. The politician-goon connection is perhaps at its peak in this area. It will, indeed, be difficult to restore normalcy in this sector.

It is a sad commentary on our political reality that howsoever eloquent we may be on the subject of freedom of speech, assembly

and movement, we can be the worst of autocrats when, under a clear democratic dispensation, the government of the day would not allow assembly and protest gatherings of the opposition political party to venture beyond the immediate confines of the party office.

The untenable scenario is that the government would not issue prohibitory orders restricting or banning assembly of persons, but would transmit verbal orders to embarrassed law enforcement personnel to virtually quarantine the opposition elements within a limited space.

In such an exasperating situation, there is a desperate and frantic bid to defy the authorities, and such defiance requires lot of raw physical courage and endurance, in addition to willingness to bear hardship. Clearly, such functions can be effectively performed by those who have a greater gift of the brawn. These may sound funny, but are actually ground realities with which the political operatives are grappling. Breaking the ban, or being able to defy the quarantine, is considered a very important achievement. The goons are no small players in this game.

The question is, how will we be able to bring propriety in our political behaviour? This is no easy task.

All mature societies are characterised by enduring principles like compassion of the strong towards the weak, and the suppression of immediate gratification for the more rewarding goals of national glory and progress. However, in Bangladesh we are witnessing the arrogance of the kleptocrats in the national political scene. Riff-raffs who have risen from rags to unbelievable riches are posing as guardians of public morals.

Nobody seriously objects to the unacceptable use of political power as a medium to acquire riches.

It will, indeed, be difficult and painful to effect large-scale changes in the attitude and action

of the officials of the regulatory and financial institutions who actively helped the corrupt politicians to plunder the nation's resources. Without their connivance and abetment the malfeasance of the political leaders would not have assumed the gigantic proportion that it has now, particularly during the last five years.

The question is, how many such officials shall be booked under the penal law of the land, and how many of the lesser delinquents shall be disciplined? The task is very unpleasant, and painful too.

We have to admit that the past political governments did not possess the required social capital, that is, they did not really enjoy the trust and cooperation of different segments of our society, which are so vital in ensuring the legitimacy of such government. In other words, the foundation of their moral authority and honesty was open to question. Bringing back, or restoring, legitimacy to our governments, howsoever representative they may be, shall be a painfully difficult task.

The ostentatious living and the conspicuous consumption of our arrogant new rich does neither raise an eyebrow nor does it prick anyone's conscience, not to speak of enervating the regulatory and financial state apparatus to identify unearned wealth. The proud display of BMW or Volvo cars that attracts charmed onlookers tells volumes about the nasty contour of corruption.

The question is, how complex and time-consuming would it be to bring such filthy rich in the clutches of the law? It would indeed be difficult to prove Oscar Wilde who said "I can resist everything but temptation," wrong.

It is no secret that more than a million individuals in Bangladesh are still not within the reach of the tax net. The question is how quickly shall we be able to compel a large part of our population to pay their social debt? It is not going to be an easy task.

We must not expect the anti-corruption drive to achieve wonders, because it would be less than pragmatic to think that our substantially corroded officialdom would be suddenly inspired by honesty and fear of God. The need is to exhort and encourage proper leadership in all organs of the state, and different sectors of national life, in order to obviate the myopic reliance on the Anti-Corruption Commission only to fight the major ills of our society.

It would also be patently wrong to assume that catching the big fish only would be salutary, because in believing so we would be, willy-nilly, fixing a permissible limit to corrupt practices. How can we be oblivious of the fact that quite a few of our kleptocrats and dons were petty thieves in the not-too-distant past, and how government patronage has turned them into despicable predators in the quickest of time?

The all-pervasive corruption has to be fought on several fronts in order to bring it down to a bearable state. The sectors catering to the basic needs of security, justice, education and health, amongst others, demand priority in the anti-corruption drive.

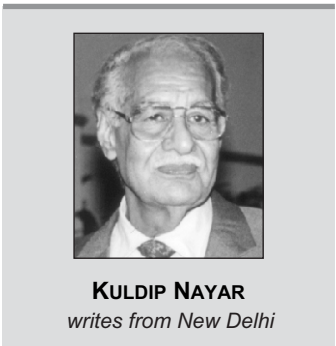
It has to be ensured that people's faith in the foundation of the society is not lost.

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Muhammad Nurul Huda is a DS columnist.

Corruption in high places



KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

CORRUPTION in India, or for that matter in any country, has ceased to be big news. Governments and societies have become so tainted at every level that people, although unhappy, take scams in their stride.

Yet, once in a while, a nation is rudely shaken by the disclosure of a scandal which it knew was there, but could not get hold of any details at that time.

A topmost retired official of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has provided flesh to the bones of the Jain hawala case in a book.

Ten billion rupees passed hands, and the people involved were the then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then chairman of Steel Authority of India V. Krishnamurthi and the ineluctable Quattarocchi, an Italian national who was known for his contacts.

The Jain hawala scandal rocked the country in the nineties and engaged the attention of even the Supreme Court for more than two years.

The then chief justice of India, J.C. Verma, said that he was under pressure and threatened to speak out. But his threat turned out to be a whimper. The case ended tamely because the CBI became "inert" when it came to taking action against the powerful sections of the society.

It was proved once again, if any proof was required, that the CBI functioned like any other government department, to carry out executive commands rather than work impartially and fearlessly to uphold the law of the land. The truth about the Jain hawala scandal is stranger than fiction.

The case began with the arrest of Ashfaq Hussain, engaged in funding terrorists in Kashmir. He received money from abroad through the hawala, a private channel which foreign banks used.

While conducting raids on a hawala dealer at Delhi, the CBI came to seize some diaries. They contained the abbreviated names of serving and former ministers

BETWEEN THE LINES

Some CBI directors have been more loyal than the king. They did not want to take any action against people who were either in authority or had connections with those in authority. For example, the retired CBI director K. Vijaya Rama Rao did not want to move against Narasimha Rao. The present director Vijay Shankar seems to be dragging his feet in the case of Lalu Yadav. It is apparent that the Manmohan Singh government, which has the CBI under it, does not want to displease Mayawati and Lalu Yadav, the allies at the centre. The Congress-led coalition needs to keep its brood together. It cannot afford to alienate any of its supporters.

and bureaucrats.

The amount passed on to them was indicated against their abbreviated names. These were kickbacks the officials and the politicians holding high offices had received for favours shown to Jain in various projects and economic deals.

The case was registered against 115 people. J.K. Jain was the main culprit. He told the CBI about the mechanism: how he was managing sanctions of various projects at inflated rates and distributing money thus earned among the high-ups.

Quattarocchi worked at the highest political level -- that of the Prime Minister's Office as well as the prime minister.

During the interrogation, according to the top retired CBI official, Jain said that he had passed on Rs 3.35 crore to P.V. Narasimha Rao who took over as the Congress president after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, and subsequently became the prime minister.

On the direction of Narasimha Rao, the money was moved to his account through Captain Satish Sharma, Chandraswami, etc.

A total of 10 percent was passed on as kickbacks. Jain got three percent and Quattarocchi seven. The latter was helped by the government, first to escape from India and then to get the kickbacks which the banks abroad had frozen at New Delhi's request.

The Supreme Court has caught up with the CBI and asked how Quattarocchi got the money. Krishnamurthi was the chairman of the Steel Authority at the time when Durgapur Steel Plant was being modernised at high cost.

A Russian firm gave a cheque of Rs 15 crore as kickbacks under the cover of payment for a consignment of some cast-iron equipment that was taken from India but shipped back in the form of com-

ponents.

The firm inflated the cost of the consignment to be able to pay Rs 15 crore. But the whole transaction was all on paper. The top retired CBI official says that he wanted to "investigate Narasimha Rao, search if need be, and charge-sheet if the evidence so warranted."

The then CBI director not only stopped him from going ahead, but shunted him out of the agency. I corroborated the facts when I met the retired official. He is a forthright person who was transferred 23 times in twelve and a half years.

A few days ago, when the present CBI director told newsmen at Delhi how the agency had functioned successfully last year, he could not naturally talk about pressures.

But he was quite embarrassed when asked why the CBI was tardy in taking action against BSP leader Mayawati for the Taj Mahal corridor scam.

However, since his press conference, the CBI has filed a case, even though after the Supreme Court's admonition.

Again, the director had no cogent defence for not filing an appeal against the acquittal of former Bihar chief minister Lalu Prasad Yadav and his wife in the case of accumulating disproportionate wealth.

When needed, the director admitted that the central government would have to give permission for filing the appeal.

True, some CBI directors have been more loyal than the king. They did not want to take any action against people who were either in authority or had connections with those in authority.

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Lalu Yadav.

It is apparent that the Manmohan Singh government, which has the CBI under it, does not want to displease Mayawati and Lalu Yadav, the allies at the centre.

The Congress-led coalition needs to keep its brood together. It cannot afford to alienate any of its supporters.

Lalu Yadav's acquittal may still be challenged because the Bihar government, headed by Nitish Kumar his political rival, proposes to file an appeal. Still the National Human Rights Commission's suggestion to have the CBI on the Concurrent List has merit.

Federal crimes are increasing, and New Delhi is feeling helpless because the CBI needs the permission of the state concerned before instituting even an inquiry.

There is only one inference: the CBI should be made autonomous if it has to be effective. Even the proposal of supervision by the Vigilance Commission has been shot down.

By changing masters, the CBI could not become independent in its functioning. An important investigating machinery like the CBI has to be directly under parliament. Only then would it perform.

Whatever else is done will only be a palliative. The malady is too deep. As long as the chief ministers are the ones to decide who will be prosecuted by the CBI and when, corruption at high places will not go.

When the Administrative Reforms Commission appointed by the Manmohan Singh government says that the prime minister should not be brought under the ambit of Lokayukta (ombudsman), how does one deal with the corruption cases of prime ministers like Narasimha Rao?

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Of Shiva Chaturdashi and Sitakunda

PREM RANJAN DEV

AN International Vedic Conference is being held from 15th to 17th February 2007 at Sitakunda Shrine Estate in Sitakunda Chandranath Dham, Chittagong on the occasion of Shiva Chaturdashi, a Hindu festival in worship of Lord Shiva. Chandranath Dham at Sitakunda, Kanchannath at Fatikchhari and Adinath at Maheshkhali have been honoured from time immemorial for having Vedic roots and are profoundly regarded as holy places of pilgrimage. The Sitakunda Chandranath Dham is, of course, among the most ancient holy places.

Millions of Hindu pilgrims, devotees, tourists and representatives of shrines and temples all over the world especially from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Bali, USA, UK, Australia and other countries assemble at Sitakunda on the occasion. In this International Vedic Conference of Hindus, a healthy and fruitful discussion continues on Hinduism, a religion of tolerance and service to the mankind, as well as on problems of shrines, temples

and places of pilgrimage in different countries by the saints, religious leaders and other dignitaries of the community. Besides these, religious and cultural functions including Kirtan, Bhajan are arranged with the spirit of total surrender to God and the hope to receive the divine blessings.

Sitakunda Chandranath Dham is a holy place of pilgrimage known all over the sub-continent for centuries. It is mentioned in the puranas that Lord Ramchandra visited this place during his exile in the forests. The great sage Vargaba, brought into existence by his supernatural powers a reservoir for Sita Debi (wife of Ramchandra) to bathe in, which was called 'Sitakunda' after her. Later, when people came to live around it, the whole locality took the same name.

We know that there is no unbroken history of the Hindu holy places. None is available of Chandranath either, specially because of the long conflicts between Hindus and others in Chittagong, the destructive work of which has made the collection of evidence for a complete history impossible. In the Sanskrit Rajmala we find that in 610 Bengali era, that

is to say about 800 years ago, Raja Biswambhar Sur, a descendant of the famous Adisur of Gour, made an attempt to reach Chandranath by sea. We find in the Nigamkalpataru that poet Joydeb Goswamy lived for a long time in Chandranath. We also find in the Rajmala that at the time of Dhanya Manikya, ruler of Tripura and a votary of Shiva, Chandranath received almost all its endowments. Dhanya Manikya reportedly attempted to remove the icon of Shiva from Chandranath to his own dominion but failed. Whatever the stories of Chandranath, the place is known to the people for time immemorial.

In the 8th century, Sankaracharya advanced greatly the prosperity of Hindu places of pilgrimage by establishing the Sanyasi Sect and setting up four principal monasteries in four corners of India. Of the ten different sects of the Sanyasis, 'Tirtha' and 'Ashram' were founded by Biswarupacharya, the first disciple of Sankaracharya. From his third disciple Padmacharya came 'Ban' and 'Aranya'; from his 3rd disciple Trotkacharya 'Giri', 'Parbat' and 'Sagar'; and from his forth disciple

Sarupacharya, 'Saraswati', 'Bharati' and 'Puri'. Biswarupacharya was at the head of Sringeri Math at Rameswar in the southern India, Trotkacharya of Joshi Math in Badrikasram in the North, Sarupacharya of Saroda Math in Dwarka in the west and Padmacharya of Gobordhan Math in the East. Chandranath is within the jurisdiction of Gobordhan Math.

Now, as ever, traditional rules regulate the work of this Shrine. And through the munificence of the pious rich of this country as also the devotion of the late poet Nabin Chandra Sen for improvement of this beautiful and unique place of pilgrimage, the work proceeds and progresses as days pass and the glory of the shrine grows. The place is easily accessible today. The natural beauty of this place is excellent. Water from the spring is available night and day, Sitakunda Shrine Committee is vested with the responsibility for managing the said Sitakunda, Adinath and Kanchannath shrines. And Shiva Chaturdashi happens to be main or one of the main occasions for these shrines.

Prem Ranjan Dev is a research worker.

Is Rice taking a back seat?

IMRAN KHALID

IS she losing the luster? Has she lost control and influence over her main domain -- formulation and execution of foreign policy? Is she deliberately keeping a low profile after the foreign policy fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan? Is she under pressure from her boss?

These kinds of questions, about the recent low-profile approach of Condoleeza Rice, US Secretary of State, have been increasingly making the rounds in the world media for quite some time.

When, in February 2005, riding high on the wave of ecstasy after his re-election, President Bush pitched his close associate and national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, to take charge of the highly ambitious second-term foreign policy agenda as secretary of state. She kicked off her stint with very loud -- and rather pompous -- claims about making a difference and running the show with more authority and insolence.

Already a star of the Bush cabinet, who had a major say in shaping foreign policy, she assumed the charge of her new assignment on the high note of charisma and glamour. But two years down the road, today, she seems to be drifting towards insipidity and confu-

sion.

Ever since the departure of a heavyweight like Donald Rumsfeld, after the poor performance of the Republicans in the mid-term elections, over the Iraq policy Rice has been keeping a relatively low-key profile.

Particularly, the last two months have seen unprecedented intrusion from others into her domain. Robert Gates, new US defense secretary, within days after taking charge, was in Baghdad on a fact-finding mission.

He was followed by Hillary Clinton, the new aspirant for the Oval Office, in mid-January. During this unofficial visit, Clinton held detailed sessions with Iraqi Premier Nouri al Maliki, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, as well as the President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf.

Her visit was followed by another very hectic tour to the region by Robert Gates, who covered seven countries in five days. During this extremely hectic tour, Mr. Gates remained involved with the national leaders as well as with Mr. Tony Blair -- apparently stepping into the domain of Rice.

As Mr. Gates reached Washington after completing this tour, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi embarked upon a yatra of the region. Just like Hillary Clinton,

Pelosi also visited Baghdad, Kabul and Islamabad along with a delegation of lawmakers including Tom Lantos, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Ike Skelton, Chairman of the Armed Forces Committee and John Murtha, chairman of the subcommittee that oversees the Pentagon's appropriations.

This kind of freelance diplomacy is obviously not a new phenomenon in US history, but its intensity and timing have certainly given birth to various queries regarding an indirect attempt by the opponents to erode and challenge Rice's influence.

Interestingly, at a time when Robert Gates and a string of American lawmakers are busy exploring diplomatic channels in Iraq and Afghanistan, and directly invading her territory, Rice has kept herself away from the two hot-spots and remained relatively silent. Even her advocacy of Bush's new Iraq policy lacks her trademark enthusiasm.

Perhaps it is this "low key" approach that is being taken by the media as a sign that she is losing luster and influence. One explanation for her low profile on Iraq and Afghanistan can be traced to her intention to divert attention from the two mega -misadventures of the Bush administration that have

seriously bruised the Republicans.

Apparently, President Bush and his team have reached the point of exhaustion over their ill-planned Iraq and Afghan adventures that have so far yielded nothing but loss in all the possible forms -- be it human lives, billions of dollars, or the Congressional defeat.

Rice's growing interest in the Palestinian issue is a further corroboration of the fact that she is now trying to cool down the current thrust of the anti-Bush drive by "changing the subject."

This factor aside, the fact of the matter is that Condoleeza Rice has certainly lost influence over foreign policy in general. The incessant series of failures in the realm of foreign policy has naturally taken its toll and demoralized her.

Gone are the days of her bold and -- literally -- bullying propagation of Bush's belligerent agenda, now a defensive tone is the most visible feature in her communications. Indubitably, the unabated failures have their own impact, and are pushing her to take a back seat to Robert Gates, who has literally become a globetrotter for propagating American foreign policy.

Dr Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.