

The plot against MKA : A son's protest

Seeing that the High Court would not be easily convinced by fake charges, the government decided to bypass due process altogether; hence, we have a homegrown system of summary tribunals, extended right to detain, no right of bail, little scope of appeal, and lots of intimidation. In that system, it became hard to find lawyers. Some politely refused, saying that they are scared to defend the accused, for the government would unleash its anger on them.

JALAL ALAMGIR

THE much-publicized graft trials in summary courts have just begun. Who's the first one being put on the stand? No, not someone who has embezzled millions from state coffers, nor one who has lived in inexplicable luxury and drives expensive European cars, nor one who has stolen relief materials meant for the poor.

The case that the government has prioritized is that of my father, Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir. And the official charge is that he had failed to disclose in his wealth statement fixed deposits held in IFIC Bank's Karwan Bazar branch, amounting to around Tk 1 crore.

For the moment, leave aside the amount, which is tiny compared to the amounts implicated in corruption charges against others. Don't inquire, for now, why the same government that is hunting down Dr. Alamgir has allowed seven businessmen to quietly return Tk 270 crores of "laundered money" and face no

charges.

And don't be bothered by the fact that the previous BNP government had left no stone unturned to find evidence of corruption against him, torturing him in 2002 and then persecuting him for the next five years, to no avail.

Just ask, where exactly is the corruption in this particular case?

Corruption implies abuse of power for private gain. Can a simple omission made in a financial statement by a 66-year old man, jailed in solitary confinement, be considered corruption, or even a crime, by any reasonable definition of the terms?

While in jail, my father was told to prepare and submit within 72 hours a statement detailing his life's income and assets, or risk seizure of his property. He was denied access to any of his documents or to lawyers. He was kept in darkness from sun-down to sunrise. Still, he wrote down an estimate spanning 40-plus years, as best as he could from memory.

Under these conditions, it's simply impossible to be accurate,

even for the most meticulous. But that's precisely why the government created these conditions. It wants to generate these types of forced inconsistencies, so that it can have a pretext for convicting whomever it hand-picks, pretending smugly that justice has been served.

And so prosecutors have gone to claim that my father's omission indicates mala fide intent. I saw the draft statement he wrote; the poor man tried to calculate even tables of compound interest entirely by hand.

So I ask myself, do our leaders forget that people are not so easily fooled by their arguments? Even our ordinary wage-earning folk, like van drivers, fruit sellers, peons carrying files -- they all know very well whose intent is malicious here.

They don't speak, but their respectful salaams, their sympathetic nods, and their everyday acts of courtesy tell my father that they know his case is a farce. They willingly take risks that highbrow round-table talking heads won't, and we get rewarded with an occasional letter, or

if we are very lucky, a hushed one-minute phone call.

A few days ago, I spoke with my father for a minute, after three months. "Abba, *shunte pachho* (can you hear me?)," I asked.

He just managed, "Baba," and he choked up.

Then silence.

But through it I heard a deafening question: why this injustice again, why are they still after me?

People know. During a raid to our house, while one government agent declared in bravado: "*Ponchash takar gormil peleo dhorbo* (we'll get you even if we find a fifty taka discrepancy)," another one sincerely apologized for what they were doing, but added that they had been ordered by higher ups to find something, anything, whatever it took.

The government's first plot to frame Abba was "conspiracy against the state." A Bengali daily published parts of the hearing. The prosecutor was trying to convince the judge that Abba was conspiring at night, but the prosecutor failed to give answers to the judge's repeated questions on what exactly he was conspiring.

"Are there witnesses? Is there proof?" The judge asked.

"Yes, we have all of that in a secret file," replied the Deputy Attorney General.

"Show me that file," demanded the Honorable Justice.

The prosecutor kept silent. Then,

unable to show anything, he protested, "My Lord, we are in a state of emergency."

That, the prosecutor believed, trumped all arguments. But the High Court later dismissed the case as false.

Seeing that the High Court would not be easily convinced by fake charges, the government decided to bypass due process altogether; hence, we have a homegrown system of summary tribunals, extended right to detain, no right of bail, little scope of appeal, and lots of intimidation.

In that system, it became hard to find lawyers. Some politely refused, saying that they are scared to defend the accused, for the government would unleash its anger on them. Many journalists are scared too; we've all read about the press notes and the SMSes that the government has sent from time to time, barring them from carrying certain types of news.

Journalists were also barred entry to the courtroom on May 6, the day that the court took cognizance of my father's case. The reason? Well, it's anybody's guess; maybe there were secret files with terrible truths that could not be made public.

All told, this is what the present courts are like, operating opaquely in a legal outback. With basic rights and due process dumped, and the watchful eye of the High Court sidelined, the government will try to ram its case



through summary tribunals, and then put my father behind bars for crimes he did not commit.

The plot against MKA has the makings of a deliberate miscarriage of justice. It also portends a broader tragedy.

2,500 years ago the Greek playwright Aeschylus, the founder of tragedy, wrote famously: "In war, truth is the first casualty." The way the government is starting off by framing my father, it seems like our

precious war on corruption will be no different.

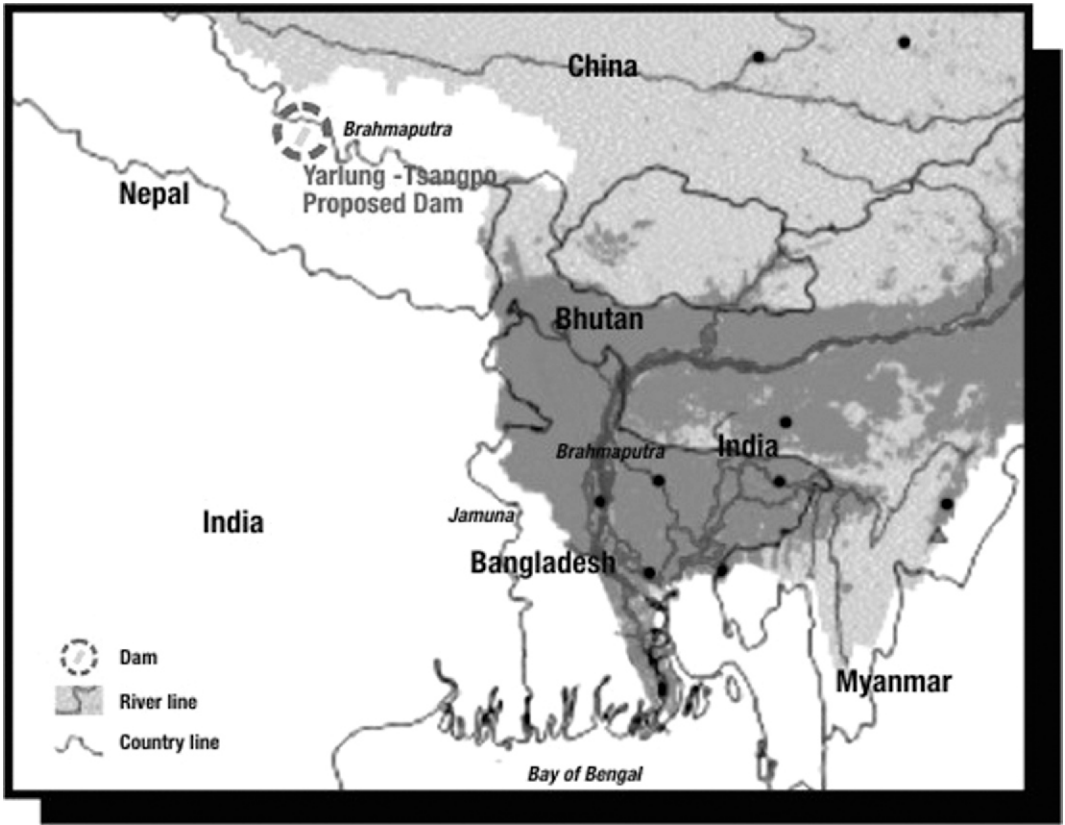
And if you're still unsure about mala fide intent or want to uncover a tragic "conspiracy against the state," this is where I suggest you look. After years of theft and abuse of power, our interest unquestionably is to secure justice, but some within the government are trampling the integrity of that effort by once again using it as a boxing arena to carry out their personal vendetta.

Next time I talk to Abba, whenever it may be, I will tell him, "They may hurt you now with their newfound muscle, but people know who is right. You'll be able to tell by their salaams."

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China's new dam

In view of the above, there are still options for a solution by the concerned countries by taking the matter to the negotiating table. If a river water treaty could be signed between India and Pakistan despite their hostile relationship, in the early 1960s, a similar agreement can be negotiated between China, India and Bangladesh in order to ensure an environment friendly solution as well as sustainable futuristic regional development of the co-riparian countries.



THIS is in response to a news item published in the Daily Star on May 8, where the map contains gross anomalies, and some information are not quite correct. It is unfortunate that the CEGIS, being a top GIS user and mapmaker, should allow a morphologist (geomorphologist) to publish a map where international boundaries have been mistaken as rivers.

In the present case, Nepal's northern boundary has been shown as the Brahmaputra river, and that of Bangladesh near Kushit as the Jamuna. The proposed Yarlung-Tsangpo Dam is located on the mid-northern Nepalese boundary with Tibet (China).

In fact, the proposed dam is going to be at Namcha Barwa in the eastern Tibetan plateau, having no link whatsoever with Nepal's international border with China. Having said so, the following piece may give the current situation on the proposed dam.

The Tsangpo-Brahmaputra river

The Tsangpo River originating in the western Tibetan plateau runs east then, bending acutely around a mountain knot called the Namcha Barwa, enters northeast Arunachal Pradesh as Siang, flowing south for a brief stretch, and then flows southwest into the Assam valley as the Brahmaputra.

In its upper part, the river system passes through one of the longest and deepest canyons in the world. It enters Bangladesh near Rajshahi Upazila in Kurigram district and flows south retaining this name, but as it departs its old course as the Old Brahmaputra near Dwarganj (Jamalpur) it is known as the Jamuna.

Owing to the extremely active geodynamic condition of the terrain, characterized by frequent earthquakes, even a slight interference with the ecological-geological balance can initiate an enormous environmental change. It is in this set-up that a giant dam, expected to be the biggest plant ever made in the world, is to be constructed near the Namcha Barwa by the Chinese, within a few years.

It is expected that the dam will

generate 40 million kilowatts per hour of hydroelectricity (double the Three Gorges Dam over the Yangtze) once its 26 turbines begin operation. The electricity produced could be exported to India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. In China, the diverted water would irrigate the northwestern part of the Gobi desert in Xinjiang and Gansu provinces of the country, aiming at crop production, and ease overpopulation in the east.

The dam

The Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics asserts "we can certainly accomplish this project with nuclear explosives." Its chief planner, Professor Chen Chuanpu, described the plan to drill a 15 km tunnel through the Himalayas to divert the water before the U-turn (at Namcha Barwa) and direct it to the end of the bend.

This would shorten the approximately 3,000 meters altitude drop, from 100 km to just 15 km. The hydropower potential could be used to pump water to northwest China over 800 km away. This multi-billion dollar project is scheduled to begin in 2009.

The environmental and socio-economic consequences of this dam, and the diversion of water to northwestern China, are multiple and far reaching, not only for the Tibet region but also for India and Bangladesh.

India and Bangladesh would be at the mercy of China for release of adequate amount of water during the dry season (as has happened to Bangladesh with the Farakka dam on the Ganges), and for protection from floods during the rainy season. Precipitation in northern India (particularly in Assam-Meghalaya region) and Bangladesh is very high (80%) during the monsoonal months of June to December, and low (2%) during the remaining months of the year.

China, in her own interests, could withhold water for power generation and irrigation during the dry season and release water during the rainy season, with catastrophic consequences for the lower-riparian countries. Further, this whole region would be starved of nutrient-rich sediments that enrich

the soil, but which would be held up in the reservoir instead of reaching the downstream GBM delta.

Further, if the Tsangpo project is implemented a large part of the RLP of India would become redundant, and perhaps the most serious environmental disaster could ensue as this area is located in a highly active earthquake prone zone where breaching of the dam could cause devastating floods both in China and Indo-Bangladesh.

However, Chinese scientists hold that this dam would alleviate floods and erosion in the Brahmaputra. But this makes little sense, since flooding could actually get worse due to relentless silting which, will be accelerated by the slowing down (reduced velocity) of the river flow.

It may be noted that flooding normally happens not as much because of snow-melt waters in the Tsangpo section, but more from the monsoon rains from the southern side of the Himalayas carried down by the tributaries.

On the other hand, Assam uses little water for irrigation purposes, and there is no commercial navigation in this section of the Brahmaputra in India. Therefore, Assam's economy might not be affected in any marked way, but the economy of Bangladesh would be affected very badly because its agriculture and inland water transportation are very much dependent upon the sustainable flow of the Brahmaputra. Bangladesh has reasons to be concerned about the Chinese design about the Tsangpo.

In view of the above, there are still options for a solution by the concerned countries by taking the matter to the negotiating table. If a river water treaty could be signed between India and Pakistan despite their hostile relationship, in the early 1960s, a similar agreement can be negotiated between China, India and Bangladesh in order to ensure an environment friendly solution as well as sustainable futuristic regional development of the co-riparian countries.

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Getting serious about education

A demonstration of the seriousness of government intentions to address the unhappy realities in education will be to engage in a genuinely open and participatory exercise to re-examine and modify, as necessary, the major on-going development programs in education, including primary education development program (PEDP II), the secondary education initiatives (TQI and SESDP), and the non-formal education projects (PLCE).

MANZOOR AHMED

HALF of the children in primary school and 80 percent of those enrolled in secondary school do not complete their respective stages of education. The education system, instead of being a vehicle for social mobility, reinforces the divisions and inequalities in society. Adult literacy rate stands somewhere between 40 and 50 percent. Bangladesh is not on track to achieve the international Education for All goals for 2015.

These stark realities about our education system may or may not come as a surprise to an average reader. It was disconcerting to this writer that the facts noted above appeared to surprise some participants, who should know better, in the high level policy roundtable on education.

The roundtable on April 28, organized jointly by Campe, Unesco, Brac University Institute of Educational

Development (BU-IED) and The Daily Star, highlighted the situation in education in Bangladesh and indicated priorities for action.

Over thirty civil society leaders, former education ministers, former and current senior officials and academics engaged in the high profile discourse (mostly on pre-university education) for the first time in the tenure of the caretaker government.

A briefing note recounting essential facts about the education situation, especially at primary and secondary levels, and the literacy status of the population was provided as a backdrop for the roundtable.

Some participants found the background paper on the theme of "education as a human right" too pessimistic. Indeed, one could, of course, describe the same glass of water as half full or half empty.

But when it concerns questions of such fundamental importance as fulfilling the right to primary education for children, or the literacy rate of

the population, surely either description is equally unacceptable.

Participants who were until recently at the helm of affairs felt a strong urge to justify their record, and were inclined to be defensive about the current state of education. At least one suggested that the caretaker government had no business discussing education policy issues.

This non-interventionist school of thought clearly did not reflect a sense of urgency about the state of national education. The caretaker government has not been reluctant to deal with major political and economic issues. It could hardly avoid doing so, and put all policy matters on hold, even if the election of a new parliament happened within the minimum possible time.

A former high-level policy-maker strenuously argued that Bangladesh was the leader among the developing countries in achieving progress in literacy rate. The right of anyone to question government statistics,

because they were published under "the prime minister's signature," was challenged.

It was claimed that Unesco corroborated the official figures. However, the Unesco participant explained that they only compiled and published the data the governments provided to it.

In fact, Unesco's EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, which presented Unesco's own assessment, cited literacy rates for Bangladesh, which were consistent with the independent surveys.

A culture of obfuscation of realities by authorities contributed to lack of clarity about basic facts. Another example, besides the confusion about the literacy rate, is the percentage of children enrolled in class one completing the five grades of primary education.

Official documents have been mentioning for several years the figure of 67 percent as the completion rate in primary education. At the same time, data collected from the field by the Directorate General of Primary Education have shown this to be closer to 50 percent. This statistic was confirmed by a separate survey, commissioned under the government's primary education development program known as PEDP II, in 2005.

Fortunately, in spite of the reluctance of some of the roundtable participants to face up to the current realities, substantial commonality of views was expressed about major action priorities.

The key action points on which agreement was expressed included: guarantee of minimum quality in all streams of education including the mainstream schools, madrasahs, and private English medium schools; major decentralisation with area-based local planning and greater school level authority with accountability; access to information for accountable governance; increased resources for education and their better use in the public sector; expansion of relevant vocational/technical skills and lifelong learning; and professional capacity building in the education system.

There was also discussion about the organisational mechanisms for addressing these goals, which included a statutory permanent national education commission and one national ministry of education.

The acting secretary of primary and mass education, Mr Musharraf Hussain Bhuiya, the ranking official representative in the roundtable, had no basic disagreement with the overall diagnosis of the problems and expressed the willingness of the gov-

ernment to work collaboratively with the non-government actors in addressing the problems.

A demonstration of the seriousness of government intentions to address the unhappy realities in education will be to engage in a genuinely open and

participatory exercise to re-examine and modify, as necessary, the major on-going development programs in education, including primary education development program (PEDP II), the secondary education initiatives (TQI and SESDP), and the non-formal

education projects (PLCE).

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