

Murder most tragic

Apprehend the killers at the earliest

THE murder in broad daylight of a young graduate in front of a bank in the capital by some muggers on Thursday once again points finger at the lack of effective vigilance on the part of the law and order authorities around vulnerable spots like commercial banks. The unfortunate victim, son of an army officer, had withdrawn some money from the bank for his marriage but his life was cut short by the assailant's bullets. It is doubly shocking that the girl he was about to marry was accompanying him when the tragedy struck. We have no words to denounce the heinous act that not only took a life but also nipped a dream in the bud.

The horrifying incident on Thursday only substantiates the fact that muggers regularly crouch around banks and waylay people coming out with large amounts of cash. And there is a touch of the intrigue here as to how they get the information of large withdrawals and how they never fail to pinpoint the target amidst other clients. This fact only points towards the possibility that they have someone working within the bank to assist in the crime and it is equally intriguing why no such insider has ever been identified and the entire gang busted by the police. In some cases, one or two muggers have been apprehended by the people on the street after a chase but it is believed that they managed to slip through the holes in the legal system.

It is elementary knowledge that since commercial banks are easy targets of the armed gangs of muggers these should be kept under surveillance by the members of the law enforcing agencies during business hours. But it is evident that even after a number of incidents of shooting and mugging in the past no step worth the name has been taken by the authorities concerned to prevent such incidences.

Our sympathy goes with the bereaved family of the slain young man. And we can only urge the relevant authorities to do whatever necessary to arrest the killers and bust the entire gang operating in the capital. People have the right to safety and security and the government is duty-bound to provide it.

City's heritage buildings

Dont we have a preservation policy?

In recent times media has extensively reported on restructuring and renovating works pertaining to old buildings that happen to be a part of our national heritage. These include distinctive heritage sites like the Satgambud Mosque at Muhammadpur, Binat Bibi Mosque at Narinda including Ambar Shah's Mosque also located in the older part of the city.

It is supremely ironical that these structures should have come under assault at a time when extensive preparations are underway to mark the 400th anniversary of the city of Dhaka. Just consider the preparations for tearing down the magnificent 550 year old Binat Bibi Mosque at Narinda, the oldest one of this city. Apparently, it is being broken down to facilitate congregation of a larger number of devotees. The old structure has already been made into a newly built three storey building over its original structure of a single storey.

Like the Binat Bibi Mosque, Islam Khan's Mosque of no less consequence was also broken down on January 14, 2000. Dhaka's the then Subedar Islam Khan built this Mosque in 1608. Today's Islampur was named soon after completion of this mosque.

We understand that moves are underway to alter the structural uniqueness of the Ambar Shah Mosque too, located at Karwan Bazaar, in the name of renovation. Notably this mosque was built in 1679 by Subedar Shaista Khan of the Mughal Era. The Satgambud Mosque located in Muhammadpur also awaits the same fate. Already the very character and essence of the structure as a heritage building have been ruined due to the so called repair and renovation work.

We are also appalled by the fact that a number of other heritage buildings of no less consequence continue to lose their structural essence and grandeur, despite their being listed as heritage sites by the Department of Archeology including the largest palace of Dhaka, the Rupali House.

Heritage buildings and sites are not only representative of the country's history and culture but also help their preservation. Structures like these also happen to be the very symbol of our pride.

We thus strongly feel it is high time that the administration put a halt to such degrading acts. One of the major steps in achieving that goal would be to activate and empower the Department of Archeology. If need be assistance, financial and otherwise, could be sought from the UNESCO.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

FOR the past month and a half newspapers have been replete with reports of misgovernance in public universities. They have focused on abuse of authority, financial indiscipline, partisanship, politicisation and absence of a truly academic atmosphere. These revelations have shocked many and also prompted eminent educationists like Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury to state that they were 'ashamed' to find out about the corruption of some of the Vice-Chancellors at different public universities.

In our societal structure, teachers, be it at the primary, secondary, college or university level, have a special place. They are admired and held with respect. As in other countries this profession is described as noble and one that is supposed to inspire trust and create confidence in the hearts and minds of both students and their guardians.

I still remember my metaphysics classes in Dhaka University with the late Professor CC Dev nearly forty-four years ago. I recall how he helped to instill in the hearts of his students the need to be humane in their treatment of others and how to give importance to views that differed from one's own. I similarly remember with gratitude, the kindness and firmness with which important areas of our lives were addressed, and our queries answered in the tutorial classes supervised by late Professor Dr J Guhathakurta and Professor KS Moshref. These teachers and many other educationists helped to open windows of our imagination and taught us to appreciate values. They were standard bearers who outlined moral thresholds.

the situation that has existed in the Open University and in the Maulana Bhashani Science and Technology University. Charges against the Vice-Chancellors of these two institutions included a broad range of alleged irregularities – questionable appointments of teachers and staff, drawing huge amounts against mobile phone bills, misuse of authority and unacceptable expenditure with regard to furniture and furnishings. To say the least, the persons concerned, supposedly aided and abetted by a small number of university officials turned these universities into personal fiefdoms, where rules of audit and accountability were banished from the campus.

The situation in some of the public universities has become critical. The fact that they are under investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission has made matters worse. It has created a sense of panic. This, in turn, has affected the possibility of finding replacements for controversial university officials.

According to published reports, this Interim Administration and the University Grants Commission are facing problems in finding educationists willing to take over as Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors and Treasurers in certain public universities.

Apparently, the cloud hanging over some of the public academic institutions and the controversy generated there have persuaded educationists from Dhaka University, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology and Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology to turn down offers of appointment. This is indeed very serious, given the fact that we have 27 public universities in Bangladesh and that many of them need the stern hands of reform.

contributed to the weakening of the educational infrastructure. This has also affected accountability.

In addition to this, there is also the question of the continuous upgrading and being up to date among the teaching community. Unfortunately, incremental improvement appears to have receded to the background.

Professionalism requires that teachers carry out original research and publish their findings in well-known and recognised journals. This trend appears to have declined.

POST BREAKFAST

The deterioration in our universities can and must be stemmed. What we require is bipartisanship, the right will and better coordination between the Academic Council, the Senate and the Syndicate. It also needs drastic de-politicisation in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors and making them responsible and accountable for their actions and decisions to the University

the use of students. I was informed that this was unfortunately not always available due to resource constraint. This was sad. It also underlined the need for capacity building (more computers and online facilities in each department of the university) and greater resource generation.

I also need to refer to the Order issued in 1973 related to the public university. It was originally framed consistent with principles of Fabian socialism and based on a set of

public universities. Those responsible within the matrix of the public universities need to set up, with the aid of the University Grants Commission and the Ministry of Education, a Commission in each public university to detect the existing flaws and deficiencies and then chart out measures on how to remove them. The Commission could be autonomous and constituted of educationists (including retired professors) respected for their commitment, wisdom and neutrality. The Commission could be given the mandate to complete their investigations within 60 days. This could include hearings, held in public, to ensure transparency. The hearings carried out also need to be positive in approach and not aimed at only finding faults of individuals. Both students and guardians in addition to teachers could participate in this identification process. What we need is to see the broader picture and come up with suitable recommendations with regard to the syllabus, teachers' training, criteria for promotion of teachers and a better uniform grading system.

This Commission will also have to direct itself towards the difficult question of raising monthly tutorial fees to an acceptable level (if necessary to at least 10 percent of private universities). Right now, it costs more to collect the fees than what the university gets as fees. We have to remember in this regard that public universities and higher education, in this day and age, are not meant to be almost free. We cannot afford such subsidy.

The deterioration in our universities can and must be stemmed. What we require is bi-partisanship, the right will and better coordination between the Academic Council, the Senate and the Syndicate. It also needs drastic de-politicisation in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors and making them responsible and accountable for their actions and decisions to the University Grants Commission and Accreditation Council.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at nzamir@dhaka.net

However, teachers-cum-administrators living up to expectations is not the only problem in public universities. There are also other factors that are affecting the level of education, opportunities for education and the quality of education imparted in these educational institutions. I will now touch on some of them.

The current sorry state of affairs has emerged because of many reasons. It has infected even institutions like the Dhaka University – the oldest among the public universities in Bangladesh. The Rajshahi University and the Chittagong University are also no exceptions.

Meritocracy, in many cases has been sacrificed to promote expediency. Administrative irregularities have and are still taking place because of political considerations. Rules are followed more by neglect than by observance. Partisanship in the selection of teachers, allotment of residential accommodation, approval of educational opportunities to continue further studies abroad, the process of granting leave (either to teach in private universities on higher pay or in the carrying out of consultancies) and failure to take the designated number of classes per week have all

in some public universities it is negligible and of inferior quality. One way to enhance the importance of original research (not on the basis of cut and paste) might be to link publications (subject to scrutiny by the Academic Council) with promotion for teachers.

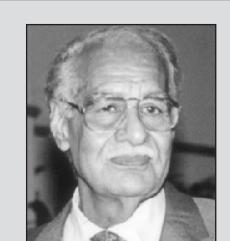
It would also be pertinent to note here about the extremely poor quality of the libraries of these respective institutions. Books and manuscripts are poorly maintained and rarely updated. Important professional journals published by different foreign institutions, which used to be available forty years ago, are not there any more. I went the other day to see if I could obtain details on certain conventions pertaining to international law. There was a vacant stare in the eyes of those charged with the responsibility of maintaining records in the Dhaka University library. Someone tried to salvage the situation by remarking that hard copies of legal magazines were no longer maintained because they were expensive and that I should try to download them from different web pages. I thought, there was some merit in this argument. So I asked if there were adequate computers with necessary connections for this purpose in the library for

values that today is probably misused rather than observed in the spirit meant to be. Politics as reflected in the elections carried out within the body of the public university has tarnished the educational process. I hold national political parties partially responsible for this. This unfortunate trend needs to be cleared up. This is not only affecting the quality of education but also introducing the 'masti' muscle-power culture within university dormitories.

Some of these student politicians are taking their area of influence one step further with the connivance of some of those associated with the university administration. I am referring here to reports of influencing admission, allotment of seats in residential halls and participation in tenders for procurement of necessary supplies for the university. One could also add to this the question of appointing teachers – not on the basis of merit but political backgrounds. It is now commonly alleged that the required transparency is mostly absent in a decision-making and corruption has replaced accountability.

I feel that time has come to undertake a positive and constructive engagement within the ambit of

The unwanted brew



KULDIP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

THE Sikhs are a brave and courageous community, but easily excitable. Transparent as it is, it does not nourish grievance. It ventilates it whenever and wherever the community feels hurt. But it is too emotional. What has happened in the last few days in Punjab in India reflects the same trait of pouring the heart out, and getting square with those who hurt the community. But its anger is like the flood which breaks all the banks and even dykes.

Take the case of Dera Sacha Souda, a monastery of sorts, where thousands of people, particularly of low castes, throng to meditate or to listen to its chief, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, who purposely named himself so to convey the message of pluralism. Yet he does robes like that of Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th guru of Sikhs, and even imitates him in distributing amrit, call it by the name of sherbet hayat (syrup for life).

The Dera chief goes beyond that. He inserts an advertisement to publicise his reception, where he is shown in a flowing robe and with a

plume pinned on his turban, like Guru Gobind Singh. This instigates a large number of Sikhs. Several thousands come out on the streets with unsheathed swords, and there is a clash in which state buses and some buildings are set on fire. There is vandalism and destruction. No doubt, the Dera chief is to blame for the violence. But the Punjab government sits back and does nothing for the first two days. Is it because the Dera chief had issued an edict to his followers, in the recent state election, to vote for the Congress?

I do not know why the Dera chief was adamant on not issuing an

they did. While the state was in the throes of one of its worst crises, the government waited for the word to come from the political affairs committee of the party.

The Dera chief could have doused the fire if he had gone to the public to say that he never meant to present himself as Guru Gobind Singh. The Dera later issued a press release to express regret. But it was too little, too late. An apology would have been in order.

I do not know why the Dera chief was adamant on not issuing an

particularly Punjab, has suffered in the past because the Akal Takht had mixed religion with politics. It has been once again found doing that. Ordering the closure of deras is the government's job, not that of the Akal Takht. These are not religious issues.

The Sikh faith in miri and piri is interpreted wrongly in today's context, and politics is mixed with religion. When Guru Hargobind Sahib who, when abominated the concept, rationalised the joining of politics with religion, his purpose

I do not understand why every time there is trouble in Punjab, some elements collect in London to raise the demand for Khalistan, a separate state. This happened last week as well. And, as usual, two Muslim MPs of Pakistani origin were there to denounce India. Pakistan has its own troubles, and they emanate from the same malady: mixing religion with politics. Take the case of Lal Masjid at Islamabad, which has become a centre of fundamentalists trying to dictate the Pakistan government.

The Sikhs, by and large, have come to accept provincial autonomy like the rest of the Indians. But the problem with the Sikh community is that it tends to mix religion with politics. It is not opposed to secularism but it overemphasises the religious identity. Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikh religion, preached pluralism and put together the sayings of Hindu, Muslim and other saints in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book. It is pluralism the Sikhs should be pursuing and upholding, not religious jingoism. When they get carried away by

passions, as has been seen again and again, they exhibit a trait which only impairs the community's image. I wonder if the Dera Sacha Souda incident is the beginning of the era of Giani Zail Singh-type politics. Then, the Congress found the extremist Bhindranwale, and lured him to fight against the Akalis. Things went beyond control and the result was disastrous. One, the army attacked the Golden Temple where Bhindranwale had tried to build a state within a state. Two, the Sikh guards assassinated Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

This retaliation led to another fiendish kind of reprisal: the killing of innocent Sikhs in broad daylight, 3,000 in Delhi alone. What is called the Sikh problem got more aggravated. The elevation of Manmohan Singh as prime minister has solved it to a large extent, and that Mrs Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi,

has brought about the support to secularism. Turkey is a brave exception, where people marched through the streets to avow their support to secularism. Take the case of Lal Masjid at Islamabad, which has become a centre of fundamentalists trying to dictate the Pakistan government.

The tendency all over the world is to mix religion with politics. Turkey is a brave exception, where people marched through the streets to avow their support to secularism. I wish such a thing could happen in what was once the Indian subcontinent, now divided into three nations, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The region's forte is pluralism.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

What is called the Sikh problem got more aggravated. The elevation of Manmohan Singh as prime minister has solved it to a large extent, and that Mrs Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi, has brought about the support to secularism. Turkey is a brave exception, where people marched through the streets to avow their support to secularism. I wish such a thing could happen in what was once the Indian subcontinent,

His behaviour, particularly the advertisement, gives life to militants and hardliners, lying low practically for the last decade or so. They take over the law and order in their own hands, and the Akali Dal-led government is a mute spectator.

Comes into action the Akal Takht, the highest spiritual and temporal seat of Sikhs, and it acts like the government and issues ultimatums. Had the state government taken timely action against those who went about unchecked, particularly in the countryside, things would not have reached such a pass which

apology. The Pope did it when he realised that some of his words had hurt the Muslims. We, living in the land of Mahatma Gandhi, should never have any hesitation in saying "sorry," especially when we find that we have, wittingly or unwittingly, hurt some people.

What has disconcerted me is the role of the Akal Takht. It supplanted the state government. Calling a bandh was none of its business. This is the job of political parties. The Akalis should have done it if they had felt the need. Bandh is a political term, not religious. India,

was to instill the sentiments of social service among his followers. He wanted the Sikhs to pay attention to the lowest in the land. No doubt, the Sikhs are far ahead in this field as compared to other communities. Still their contribution is not in proportion to the wealth at their command. Why the cannot community channelise money to productive avenues so as to absorb lakhs of unemployed Sikhs who are prone to drugs. One cause for the last militancy in Punjab was the unemployment of Sikh youth. The situation has not improved.

the Sikhs should be pursuing and upholding, not religious jingoism. When they get carried away by

and, all too often, the ruled were viewed simply as material for exploitation.

A study by Transparency International, an anti-corruption campaign group, reveals that recent governments of both the BNP and the Awami League were almost neck-deep in corruption and scandals, but the Awami League government was better at keeping dodgy business under wraps. The autocratic habits and deep mutual loathing of their leaders were the main cause of the mess. Most political observers squirm to think how badly the leaders had messed up the politics and democracy of this country. They may be basking in the belief that they are above the law, because they know that in our country there is one law for the rich and powerful and another for the poor and the forlorn. They perhaps also believe that money plus access to power equals impunity.

We hope for a Bangladesh where rule of law governs the conduct of the politicians. Unsurprisingly, on December 14th 2006 Tony Blair became the first serving British prime minister to be questioned by police conducting a criminal investigation. This was a part of an investigation into the murky business of party financing. If British police can question a sitting prime minister on criminal charges, why caretaker government should shilly-shally to bring to trial ex-leaders, when most people know or believe beyond a shadow of a doubt their involvement in misfeasance.

Bangladesh has long turned a blind eye to the bribery, fiddles, frauds and cancer of corruption. Fortunately, the Chief of Anti-corruption Commission is denouncing sleaze and piously promising to clean up corruption and establish good governance. Accordingly, the present caretaker government has already ratified the United Nations Convention against corruption and

capital, it can be hard to say where ultimate ownership lies anyway. The real test is whether a foreign buyer manages the investment well and improves productivity. Moreover, the Americans cannot take our port back with them. In electoral politics, good policy often becomes hostage to politics.

The proposal to open up our common borders and provide transit facilities to India is a highly controversial and politically sensitive issue for the policymakers. Supporters of Islamist parties, specially, BNP's coalition partner the Jamaat-e-Islami mistakenly assumes that India harbours hegemonic design in this region. It will take brave and imaginative politicians to persuade the nation that if we allow such facilities to our near neighbours, it will be a win-win situation for all the countries

of the region. Foreign toll road companies and toll operators will be tempted to invest heavily in Bangladesh to develop infrastructures and build motorways and expressways to link our seaport with India and Myanmar. The advantage of toll roads and bridges is that they raise money from car users instead of general tax-payers. Most economists think that a road with a toll is better than no road at all.

In spite of the country's good macro-economic performance, unemployment and poverty remain widespread and many people feel left behind by the government's economic policies. Strangely enough, most of our lawmakers are not politicians, they are political businessmen and their only interest is self-interest. They seem incapable of realising the depth and complexity of

Anam A Choudhury is a former investment banker.