

Rights of the disabled trifled with

Access to education virtually denied

IN the absence of any government census on the disabled children in the country their number is put between 1.6 and 2.6 million in varying estimates. The total number of the retarded, however, has been estimated by NGOs to be at least 10 percent of the population.

Out of these staggering numbers of children, only between 1335 and 1500 have been taken under the wings of government education programmes in 78 institutions. Comparatively, 10,000 to 15,000 are beneficiaries of education programmes run by around 400 NGOs. This access is only to primary schooling, to say nothing of obtaining entry into secondary, tertiary or vocational institutions.

Governments in some developing countries do not stop short of catering to the skill needs of the retarded in special schools, upstream they also help secure employment and rehabilitation for the disabled in both private and public sectors. By contrast, our governments traditionally have not only abysmally failed to provide required educational coverage to the unfortunate children but also turned a blind eye to their assimilation into the society as useful and productive citizens.

It is only lately that we hear of some quota being reserved for their employment in government services. The private sector may follow suit. But essentially, we are doing very little for the large number of physically or mentally retarded children languishing in the backyards of their families to be prepared for adult life.

The essential thing to note is that education and grooming of the retarded children has been a low priority on successive governments' agenda. This is borne out by the fact that the issue is treated as a matter of 'welfare' rather than one of constitutional and fundamental rights. True to the approach, according to rules of business, only one ministry, namely, the welfare ministry is in charge of educating the retarded which practically involves the ministry of primary and mass education, let alone the finance and planning ministry.

Let's not forget that our retarded have great talent to win laurels abroad. Only this year, disabled athletes from Bangladesh won 15 gold medals in the Special Olympics World Summer Games keeping to their reputation of bagging 37 gold, 22 silver and 19 bronze medals in the last three meets.

It is redeeming to learn from social welfare secretary MA Hye Howlader that 'the government has included ministries concerned in the latest action plan'. We have to wait and see if things start changing now.

From Hindu kingdom to secular republic

Nepal's democracy will need strong foundations

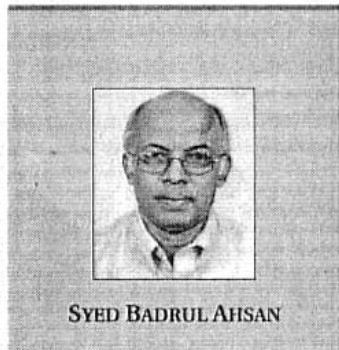
NEPAL'S monarchy is finally set to make an exit. The decision by the country's major political parties to do away with it, in line with the long-standing demand of the people, most vigorously articulated by Maoists, is a development that cannot but satisfy the Nepalese population and people of the Saarc region as a whole. That sense of satisfaction of course has to do with some recent actions of King Gyanendra himself. Since taking charge of the throne following the murder of his brother, King Birendra and his family, in 2001, Gyanendra has not exactly endeared himself to the people of Nepal. But it was his seizure of absolute power, through which he sought to impose grave restrictions on politics, that proved to be the last straw. In the end, popular discontent made the monarch eat humble pie.

The latest development should bode well for Nepal's democracy which, in many ways, is still a fledgling one. But one of the brighter aspects of all this effort to transform the Hindu kingdom into a republic is the willingness with which the Maoists have joined hands with the traditional parties. For all the hiccups of the past few months, when the Maoists quit the coalition government to demand that a clear decision be taken about abolishing the monarchy, there was hardly any doubt in the popular mind about the fate of King Gyanendra and his family. Now that a consensus has finally developed on the state of Nepal's future politics and Maoist leader Prachanda prepares to lead his party back into the government, it is a new, stable order that has become the priority in the country. Nepal's break with the past will be all the more remarkable considering that it will move headlong from being a Hindu kingdom to a secular republic. It will be to the credit of the politicians in Kathmandu, including the Maoists, if they finally succeed in laying the foundations of such a new order.

And yet there cannot be any illusions about the future. The Maoists, having waged a long, often terrifying guerrilla war in the mountains, must convince Nepal's people that they have repudiated the path of revolution in favour of a modern democracy. For the other parties, their internecine squabbles will need to end if democracy is not to descend into chaos.

However, we conclude by expressing our deep sense of satisfaction that when religious extremism is causing such havoc in many parts of the Saarc region, Nepal becomes a secular country from a religious one.

The case of the missing Vishnus ... and more



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

NOW that the scandal of the stolen artefacts has come to pass, there are some heads which need to roll. Let there be no question here of who is to blame and who ought to be hauled in for questioning. When Adviser Ayub Quadri acknowledged in so many words that he bore responsibility for the theft of the two Vishnu artefacts from the cargo space at the Zia International Airport the other day, he, in effect, admitted before the country that it was a sloppy job that people under his supervision had done.

And when such an admission of responsibility over a bad happening is there before the country, it is only fair that the one making the admission take the graceful way out.

You might suggest here that on-going investigations into the affair preclude such an exit on the part of the individual at the top of the entire program of despatching our artefacts to the Guimet Museum in France.

That would be a misplaced suggestion, for investigations can be carried on and, indeed, in more

GROUND REALITIES

There are times when sensitivities prevent countries from losing their self-esteem or their precious historical possessions. And now we have an administration gone red in the face and a nation angry at the sight of an empty, broken box where the two Vishnus should have been. Let no one tell us that we are being unduly sensitive here.

purposeful manner once those responsible for having created the mess are safely out of the way. And it is not just the adviser in question who needs to consider, seriously, his position at this time.

There is also a need for other individuals in the Ministry of Culture and airport customs to be made to answer for the criminality that has already taken place.

At this particular point in our political life, there is hardly any need for men on the higher rungs of an organisation that has been remiss in its work to continue being there. This country needs to move away from the legacy left behind by such men as the late Akbar Hossain.

If you recall, despite all the allegations of corruption levelled at him even as he served as minister for shipping, despite the innumerable disasters on our rivers, Akbar Hossain remained steadfast in his refusal to take responsibility through voluntarily giving up his job.

It is such a tradition that needs to be broken in Bangladesh today. The fact that the present administration happens to be a purely caretaker, or an interim, one hardly matters.

Anyone who is in a position of responsibility and yet fails, con-

sciously or otherwise, to carry out that responsibility to the satisfaction of the nation should call forth in himself or herself the moral courage of calling it a day in the larger interest of the country.

Given the terrible exigencies of the situation arising out of the theft of the artefacts, as also the discovery of some other artefacts outside our frontiers, it is only natural to ask that those who failed to ensure the safety and wholesomeness of the items beings sent to France now do us all a favour by walking away from their jobs.

It is all a question of trust. And trust has now been broken, which is why some heads ought to roll. Some people should be paying the price for indiscretion. Meanwhile, let the investigations into the missing artefacts be carried on relentlessly and strenuously.

And now, let us try to come to terms with the indignation the charge d'affaires of the embassy of France in Bangladesh demonstrated on Monday over the stolen artefacts. He appeared keen to hold those gentle, conscious citizens of Bangladesh who have long argued against sending the artefacts to Paris responsible for what has happened. That was an extraordinary thing coming from a diplomat

based in Dhaka.

It is not the job of a diplomat to come up publicly with a picture of his pique at what citizens concerned about their national interests often do, indeed must do. And count among those citizens some of the very best of our men, the voices of our conscience, whose sole motivation in carrying on their long struggle against the transfer of the relics of our history to Guimet was aimed at preventing any damage being done to them, or the possibility of some of them not getting back to Bangladesh once the exhibition in Paris was over.

And their worries were based on a number of incidents earlier, when quite a few countries found their artefacts stolen or missing once they had made their way abroad.

No one is even remotely suggesting that the French authorities will not return, or would not have safely returned, our artefacts to us. But the real worry has been about the slapdash manner in which the Bangladesh government sought to have the items transported to Paris. And then came the legal arguments over the issue, before the higher judiciary.

Once the Supreme Court decided, though, that the artefacts, 187 in all, could after all go to Paris,

no one questioned the judgement. And no one will. But what has now occurred appears to have justified the fears of those who have all along been opposed to the whole Guimet Museum exhibition.

In a most bizarre manner, the fear that something would go wrong once the artefacts landed in France has now been overtaken by the shame of two of the items going missing even before they left Bangladesh.

It ought to have been for the French charge d'affaires to commiserate with the people of the Bangladesh over the loss of the Vishnu artefacts, which job he did. But then to try telling the people of the host country that it was the opposition of those unhappy with the Guimet experiment that was responsible for what has happened is not just unfortunate but appalling as well.

No man who considers himself part of the cosmopolitanism that today underlines life will be willing to live in isolation from the rest of the world. Bengalis, especially since the early part of the nineteenth century, have been going places and coming back home to tell their compatriots of the wider, culturally sophisticated world out there. That Paris has been, and remains, the world's cultural capital is a truism the people of Bangladesh have happily acknowledged and, indeed, celebrated.

But where the entire matter of the Guimet exhibition is concerned, Bengali worries centred on the pretty laid-back approach that both the Bangladesh and French authorities appeared to adopt on

the despatch of our artefacts to Paris.

Questions were raised about the insurance covering the departure and return of the artefacts. Besides, with reports of some of our artefacts sent abroad earlier having gone missing, it was legitimate to argue that foolproof measures be taken about the Guimet exhibition if at all the artefacts were to be sent to Paris.

And then, of course, there was a bigger concern. Over the past two decades, a good number of items relating to the various periods of Bangladesh's history have been pilfered or destroyed or smuggled out.

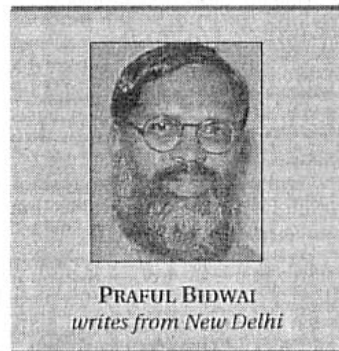
Our security forces, with little to show for efficiency and expertise in protecting the evidence that substantiates our history, have naturally failed to make much headway in recovering the artefacts that have regularly gone missing. Small wonder then that our defensive instincts about our historical objects going abroad arouse our sensitivities.

And, mark you, being sensitive is not always a bad thing. There are times when sensitivities prevent countries from losing their self-esteem or their precious historical possessions.

And now we have an administration gone red in the face and a nation angry at the sight of an empty, broken box where the two Vishnus should have been. Let no one tell us that we are being unduly sensitive here.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Preventing a dangerous arms race



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

AMONG the many dubious ideas that former United States President Ronald Reagan embraced, two were particularly dangerous. The first was that "a limited nuclear war" with the Soviet Union could be fought and won. The second held that the US could reliably secure itself against nuclear weapons by building a Star Wars-style ballistic missile defence (BMD).

BMD would detect the launching of nuclear-tipped missiles by using satellites and radars, and intercept and destroy them. This would render the enemy's nuclear deterrent ineffectual.

If the US took the lead in BMD, it would acquire supreme, unmatched power, including the "freedom to attack" an adversary with nuclear weapons, and "freedom from attack" by his weapons.

Peace-minded scientists sharply criticised these ideas. They showed that a "limited nuclear war," deploying only 100 of the world's then-existing arsenal of 70,000-plus nuclear weapons, would create a cloud of soot and smoke

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

India must not waste scarce resources on BMD. Nor should Pakistan get lured into this sordid business. We already spend too much on the military in relation to health, education and social security. The result is our falling Human Development Index ranks. BMD will further distort South Asian priorities -- without producing security.

which would block sunlight for years.

This would cause a prolonged "nuclear winter." Global food production and forestry would be devastated, creating climate havoc and large-scale hunger. This critique was fused into the great global peace movement of the 1980s.

Reagan eventually abandoned "limited nuclear war" and negotiated with the former USSR the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987), the world's only agreement to dismantle a whole class of weapons -- 2,700 missiles, with a 500 - 5,500 km range, and their nuclear warheads.

However, Reagan never gave up on BMD. Spending \$120 billion, the US developed rudimentary capability to engage missiles in all phases of their flight: soon after take-off (boost phase), at the height of their trajectory (mid-course), and as they descend (terminal phase).

However, Reagan's successors desisted for long from actual BMD deployment, deferring to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty of 1972 with the USSR, which prohibited its deployment.

Things changed with George W. Bush's election as president. In 2001, he announced plans to deploy a BMD shield against about 100 - 120 missiles. In 2002, the US withdrew from the ABM treaty and gave its Missile Defence Agency (MDA) a free hand to develop BMD and space-based weapons, including lasers, kinetic-energy weapons, etc.

The world was horrified. But BJP-ruled India welcomed the announcement -- ahead of America's own allies. India had for decades opposed Star Wars and the militarisation of space.

The US's BMD is triggering new rivalries. The MDA has built two bases, in Alaska and California, for missile interceptors, costing \$26 billion. It's planning to spend \$250 billion. It's also building a smaller missile defence system in collaboration with Japan.

The US has just announced a BMD program in central Europe, with radars in the Czech Republic and interceptors in Poland. Washington claims this will guard against strikes from "rogue" nations like Iran.

But Russia believes the shield is meant to undermine its nuclear

deterrent, and has threatened to target it.

The ABM treaty recognised that BMD deployment would introduce uncertainty about the workability of nuclear deterrence, on which all nuclear weapons states (NWS) ostensibly base their security.

Deterrence assumes that NWS won't attack each other because they know their adversary can retaliate and inflict "unacceptable damage" upon them. This creates "balance-of-terror"-based security.

Nuclear deterrence is a flawed doctrine because it makes unrealistic assumptions about transparency, rules out accidents or miscalculations, and demands rational, cool-headed conduct from fallible, panic-prone decision-makers. It cannot generate sustainable security, although it can provide limited short-term stability.

However, BMD makes nonsense even of this limited stability by creating false illusions -- and new insecurities and dangers.

Globally, BMD will trigger off a qualitatively new arms race and militarise space. Ethically, the human race has no business to militarise space. Strategically,

militarisation will prove utterly disastrous.

With today's technology, BMD cannot provide a remotely reliable defence against missiles. It's near impossible to hit a bullet travelling at 24,000 km/h with another bullet travelling at the same speed with certainty. Even cloud cover can cripple BMD.

Existing interceptors have had too many failures. Although the MDA claims that 29 of its 37 interceptors tests have been "successful," experts from the well-regarded US-based Union of Concerned Scientists say most of the tests involve some "rigging," like giving interceptors advance warning.

Further, any number of inexpensive countermeasures can neutralise BMD, including cheap decoys like balloons. It cannot discriminate between real and fake targets.

Similarly, real warheads can be enclosed in radar-reflecting balloons. Besides, infra-red jamming measures can be used. These can be mastered by the 30-odd countries with missile programs. Finally, an adversary can "overwhelm" BMD with a large number of missiles.

Yet, Russia, China, Japan and India have also entered the BMD game, besides the US.

On December 6, India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) fired an interceptor to destroy a Prithvi missile launched five minutes earlier. In November 2006, the DRDO had used a modified Prithvi

to intercept another Prithvi.

The DRDO boasts that it can develop a fully indigenous BMD shield in three years.

These claims must be taken with a pinch of salt -- and not just because Israeli radars were used in the latest test.

The DRDO's record inspires no confidence. All its major projects, including the Main Battle Tank, Light Combat Aircraft, and Advanced Technology Vessel (nuclear-powered submarine) have failed in some measure or other -- sinking thousands of crores. Its missile program, too, has run into serious difficulties.

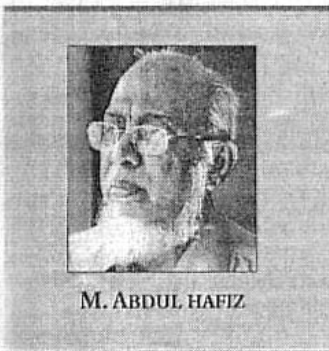
However, it's even more important to recognise that BMD is strategically dubious, destabilising, and harmful to regional security. Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee admitted as much in October when he ruled out joining the US-led BMD program. The DRDO is working at odds with this.

India must not waste scarce resources on BMD. Nor should Pakistan get lured into this sordid business. We already spend too much on the military in relation to health, education and social security. The result is our falling Human Development Index ranks. BMD will further distort South Asian priorities -- without producing security.

The world must put an end to these fancy -- and dangerous -- programs before they get the better of it.

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Civil society in Bangladesh: Rhetoric and reality



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

IN the wake of Ershad's fall there was growing clamour for civil society, which gradually became louder in those days. Perhaps the bitter memory of protracted military rule, with its concomitant curtailment of basic rights, provided an incentive to civil society messiahs to articulate their demand. Yet, expressions like "civil norm" in our administration, "more civility" in the governance, and a vow for the firm founding of a "civil society" as voiced in some of the civil-military discourses rang an optimistic note for the nation's progress.

In other words, there were signs that even after long years of military and quasi-military rule in our country a craving for building up an enduring civil order existed.

PERSPECTIVES

The making of a civil society is not just an empty slogan. Knowledge, vision, and a perspective will have to be combined for this, with moral power on the part of various political institutions and agencies to exercise control over any social force and professional groups, including the military, challenging their authority. Their political control of and supremacy over all others will have to be convincing and acceptable.

However, there was also a gross misperception that persisted in this regard. The notion of a civil society had been taken to be something opposed to the military, and the whole range of efforts to achieve it seemed directed against an imaginary military society. It was the society, which was not only blamed for usurping state power but also condemned for not bestowing on the politicians their rights, to be exercised unhindered in statecraft. But is that all about civil society in a country?

On the contrary, civil society is much wider a concept in social and political thought, finding its origin in as old a source as Greek city states, where the genesis is of democracy is also to be found. In some sense, both are akin, indeed, to each other. During the 18th century, when both were revived

and revitalised in Europe, they continued to mean simply the state, seen as encompassing, like the Greek Polis, the whole realm of the political. At least, civil society also meant a civilised society that ordered its relations according to the system of law rather than the whim of a despot.

Hegel, to whom we owe the modern meaning of the concept, preferred, however, to see civil society as the sphere of ethical life inter-posed between the family and the state. To Tocqueville, it is only the "political society" for any human living, where there is primacy of political forces.

The concept has, however, been radicalised in the twentieth century when, during its early half, Antonio Gramsci identified civil society to be that part of the state which is not concerned with coer-

cion or formal rule. It is, in fact, the sphere of cultural politics, and Gramsci's concept of civil society found favour with those who wanted to oppose the ruling structure of the society, not by direct political confrontation by waging a cultural war, as the "Solidarity" people did in Poland to bring about change of the government.

Nevertheless, the western world, where the notion of a civil society finds currency, is still grappling to acquire the best standard set by 18th century theorists of the concept: that is, to effect the supremacy of the civilian authority in statecraft which needs to be an exclusive turf for the politicians.

With the progress of civilisation it was a universal human urge to live in an ambience conditioned by rule of law, norms of civility, and exercise of fundamental rights. In a

civilised society all physical forces are supposed to be subordinate to ethical and moral values. Reason and rationality guiding the destiny of mankind is one of the ultimates in human civilisation.

So, the civil society is more of a civilisational objective to be achieved by a people, and not just given on a platter by anyone or from any quarter. Even in the western democracies, where civil societies are in vogue, the process of their achievement has been far from easy, and often turbulent. In Europe, the Renaissance, the great enlightenment, a series of discoveries as well as the proliferation of nation-states all of which, provided its intellectual and civilisational base preceded the establishment of civil society.

The nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance, accompanied by an unprecedented intellectual awakening, largely explains the civil character of Indian polity even to this day. It could, thus, be found that to agitate for bringing down a military regime to be replaced by a civil government is one thing, and to be able to build up, bit-by-bit, a stable, enduring civil society is another. A civil government may not necessarily produce a civil society.

Notwithstanding the lack of an historical incentive or civilisational support, the people of Bangladesh have been known for their penchant for the rule of law ever since the British in this part of the sub-continent introduced a legal system. They are on record to have successfully developed, nourished and sustained institutions like political parties, parliament and legislation -- some of the essential ingredients of civil rule. A vibrant local government grew, and an independent judiciary was upheld.

As a matter of fact, democracy, an inescapable prerequisite for a successful civil society, took root in undivided Bengal, which was one of the few presidencies enjoying fundamental rights in British India. Even during the initial stage of Pakistan, the experimentation for the establishment of civil society continued. But that experimentation suffered a shattering blow when, for the first time, Martial Law was proclaimed in Pakistan by Ayub Khan in 1958, one of the first in the post-second world war period.

The Bengalis, however, gave a glorious account of themselves in resisting Ayub's military dictatorship, and mainstream political leadership in erstwhile East Pakistan remained defiant to his

rule. General Yahya's Martial Law culminated in the genocide of 1971, against which Bengalis stood like a rock till they achieved independence. Our war of independence was, in essence, to assert among other things, our resolve to establish a civil order. The flame of that desire still burns.

The intriguing questions, however, remain. Why couldn't we establish a society we cherished? Where were the impediments? Why, instead, the military could so easily grab state power and rule for so many years? Where did our civilian leadership falter? Soul-searching enquiries need to be made into these disturbing questions in our country.

As has been indicated earlier, the establishment of a civil society is an enormous intellectual and emotional commitment. Despite a promising beginning we, as a nation, have so far miserably failed in this regard. Even our brave generations of politicians, who defiantly stood not only against a redoubtable Ayub Khan but also against his "Language of weapon" and led the nation to freedom couldn't deliver it.

It was a pity that the heroes of the anti-Ayub uprising, as well as veterans of our independence war,

panicked and gave in at the sight of a few rumbling tanks with their gun-chambers empty in 1975. Again, in 1982, another brand of politicians succumbed to a wind-bag general.

The military has often been blamed for intervention in politics. It is an irony, however, that seldom has anyone blamed the politicians for abetting or even inviting the military to intervene so that they could derive some share of the spoils. Few condemn the judicial patriarchs who give a measure of legitimacy to military takeover by adorning the titular position at the apex. People tend to overlook the administrative abuse, which is seldom possible without the active collusion of the civil bureaucrats.

The making of a civil society is not just an empty slogan. Knowledge, vision, and a perspective will have to be combined for this, with moral power on the part of various political institutions and agencies to exercise control over any social force and professional groups, including the military, challenging their authority. Their political control of and supremacy over all others will have to be convincing and acceptable.

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