

Save the Buriganga

There is no need for explaining the importance of rivers in any country's trade and commerce. Since "Dhakabashi" has raised the demand for protecting the Buriganga to the head of the caretaker government, it is believed that the matter will get the importance it deserves.

NURUL HUDA

A delegation of "Dhakabashi," an organisation engaged in preservation and promotion of traditions of Dhaka city, at a meeting with Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, among other matters, raised the demand for saving the river Buriganga, the lifeline of the city of 12 million people.

The delegation members deserve appreciation for raising the demand because saving the Buriganga has become a matter of concern for the entire nation, whose interest is not only the protection of the Buriganga but also of other rivers and water bodies, including the Balu, the Turag and the Sitalakha. Water is the most crucial element for survival of all living organisms, which is why it is the main reason of our interest.

Meanwhile, a front-page photograph in The Daily Star (June 1) showed some people hanging a signboard of a mosque at Shaheed Bagh in a water body which was once a part of the river Buriganga.

This is an example of encroachment of rivers and water bodies by organised groups; using different strategies.

The rivers that surround Dhaka are the lifeline of the capital. The population of the city, which was merely one lakh in 1906, has jumped to over 1 crore 20 lakhs now, but the authorities have so far failed to prepare and implement any effective plan to keep the rivers free from pollution and illegal land grabbers.

The authorities, as we have witnessed, launch drives to remove unauthorised structures from the riverbanks; more for publicity than for any tangible result. During the last several years, series of drives had been launched for clearing unauthorised structures, but gradually those were rebuilt.

There have been repeated demands from different non-government organisations to protect the recovered water bodies so that land grabbers cannot recapture such land. But the demands have apparently fallen on deaf ears. It is widely believed,

and not without basis, that there is an understanding between the land grabbers and a section of employees working with the concerned government agencies.

Encroachment and pollution of the rivers surrounding Dhaka, including the Buriganga, continue despite the existence of more than a couple of dozen government agencies involved in the management of the rivers and water bodies.

Bangladesh is the lower riparian country of the Ganges-Padma, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna (GBM). But those rivers are being increasingly degraded by untreated domestic raw sewage, industrial effluents, and run-off pollution from chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

Dhaka city, which was established by the Mughals on the banks of River Buriganga in the early 17th century, has been serving the purpose of our people with all its resources.

With the passing of time, the river has now been turned almost into a "septic reservoir" in absence of proper supervision

and management by the concerned agencies, as about 22,000 cubic meters of toxic tannery wastes are directly dumped into the river everyday.

The Turag has also been facing identical problems from land grabbers and owners of different industrial units. The Sitalakha, a major tributary of the Buriganga, is another victim of encroachment and pollution. The Department of Environment (DoE) has identified more than 1,000 polluting industrial units in the country.

Each industrial unit should have an effluent treatment plant (ETP), according to the Environment Conservation Act 1995, to get clearance from the DoE, which is a prerequisite for getting power and gas connections.

The owners of the industries were asked to install ETP for their respective industries by October 31 last year, or face disconnection of gas and power. But the warning, as it appears, had fallen on deaf ears. In most cases, the owners of polluting industries did not install ETP, defying the directives of the government. But no action was taken against the defaulting industrial units.

The government also enacted the Environment Court Act 2000, which was followed by some



Sounding a note of warning, K Gopalakrishnan in his feature said: "Unless waste dumping is controlled soon, pilgrims will take some vials filled with an increasingly contaminated and virulent fluid. Already a source of much illness, the Ganga's water of life threatens to become a focus of lethal infection on an as yet unwitnessed scale."

I would like to fully endorse the views of ANM Nurul Haque, expressed in his article "Rivers of Poison," published in The Daily Star on May 11. His suggestion for creating a powerful body to free the rivers from the clutches of the encroachers and polluters, instead of having so many non-functional ornamental bodies, deserves praises. It can be added that there is a need for devising ways and means so that the land or water bodies, once recovered from the land grabbers, cannot be recaptured.

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Nurul Huda is a Special Correspondent of BSS.

Minority report

Bangladesh is regarded as the most moderate Islamic state. What is needed is a composite plan to ensure economic, political and social security to the ethnic minorities. The CTG is in the best position to formulate a plan so that real justice can be done to them.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

IN policy-making we have not yet been fully careful about considering the various aspects of life of the ethnic and religious minority communities in Bangladesh. As Hindus are the largest minority we try to keep them in focus. In case of others like the Christians, Buddhists, and indigenous people we do not bother as much as we should.

If we are aiming at good governance, if we claim to be a moderate Muslim state, it is time to formulate state policies which will cover the interests of the whole of the population. In fact, it is desirable to be more careful and lenient in the case of the indigenous people, who are poor and vulnerable.

The CTG, despite its heavy agenda, has given some attention to redressing the sufferings of the ethnic communities. On May 18, the High Court ruled that around 30,000 Biharis living in Bangladesh were citizens of Bangladesh. It has also directed the Election Commission (EC) to include Bangladesh-born Urdu speaking people as voters.

As per a publication of the

Refugee and Minority Movements Research Unit of Dhaka University, the Biharis first moved to Pakistan from India in 1947. Out of these, 74,000 migrated to the former East Pakistan, and the migration continued till 1952. Around 4.26 lakh Biharis left Bangladesh during and after the Liberation War in 1971. Around 4 lakh opted to stay on. As per an agreement in 1974, Pakistan took back over one lakh of them. The number of Biharis repatriated so far is 1.61 lakh. Later, Pakistan stopped accepting them.

The Biharis are living in a pitiable condition in Bangladesh. In the former East Pakistan they were regarded as good technicians in railways, telegraph and telephone and electricity. They had a good reputation as technicians even before 1947. In 1948, the government of India, in fact, invited them to go back if they were willing, to fill in the deficiency in technicians in the Indian railways.

The government of Bangladesh also felt their absence, and about 4,500 Bihari technicians were reabsorbed in the railways in 1976. Even now, the stranded Biharis are running repairing shops of motor vehicles and tri-wheelers. In fact,

without them the business of tri-wheelers could not have prospered. These facts were not brought to the notice of the public because the media did not take enough interest due to political reasons.

The problem of rehabilitation of Biharis arose from mishandling of Biharis by the then Pakistan government. Some Pakistanis had the foolish notion that by making the Biharis anti-Bengali they could continue indirect control over the then East Pakistan. The Biharis were gullible enough to

become the agents of West Pakistan. However, it would be wrong to assume that all Biharis are anti-Bengali. There were a large number of marriages between Bengalis and Biharis.

Those Biharis who opposed Bangladesh and supported the then Pakistan army have more or less left Bangladesh. However, even now a majority of the stranded Biharis would like to be repatriated to Pakistan because of cultural affinity with Pakistanis, separated families, and lack of educational facilities, employment and civic amenities that are available to regular citizens in Bangladesh.

Around three lakh Biharis are stranded in Bangladesh. They are living in sub-human conditions. It is an irony that the Pakistan gov-



To boost country's image

Cooperation between NRBs, officials of Bangladesh foreign missions, and the government, is needed to boost and uphold the country's image. Only then will everyone be welcomed everywhere, like the Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

YOU guys are fools, inefficient, and disgusting," said one Bangladeshi expatriate to the consulate people at Bangladesh Consulate in New York. The expatriate, who had a backpack of the Hunter College of The City University of New York, possibly was a student. He was rough towards the consulate people as, according to him, he was not informed before that the extension of any passport is usually done from the date of expiry.

He was angry because after renewing his passport for two years, his passport just got six months validity as the date covered from the last date of expiry. The consulate people were mild in the beginning, saying that everyone should be aware of his/her passport's expiry date, but hearing such language from him they became rough too.

This is not a matter to worry about. But what is important is that Bahrain has stopped issuing work permits to Bangladeshis, that there is a Bangladeshi on death row in Bahrain, and that Malaysia has tightened visa rules for Bangladeshis; because this is not only a matter of losing remittance or losing the reputation of Bangladesh workers worldwide, but also of losing Bangladesh's international image.

Whether by bringing business to Bangladesh, advising the government, or continuing to represent Bangladesh abroad, Non-Resident Bangladeshis (NRB) have so much to contribute to the land of their birth. They are bringing a new attitude born out of their rich experience in different countries. They are the representatives of the country to the world. NRBs are very important contributors to the country's exchequer.

During the liberation war, when the Bangladesh government-in-exile formally announced the Proclamation of

Independence on April 17, 1971, or in the observance of International Mother Language Day, or in their campaign and views against the last political turmoil, they have always played an important role in the country's political and economic arenas. They have been assimilated into the country's economy, policy, and planning.

From 1976 to April 2007, around 4.751 million Bangladeshis went abroad, and their remitted money is now the main earning source for Bangladesh. Many of them are skilled and non-skilled workers, professionals, or businessmen. With continuous growth in remittance, Bangladesh's inflow reached \$561.92 million in May, 2007.

The central bank expects the remittances to touch \$7.5 billion by the end of this fiscal year as steps have already been taken to facilitate increased inflow from some selected countries. NRBs send roughly \$7 billion every year,

but a significant amount still comes through Hundi.

In spite of setbacks due to some steps against lawbreakers, misdeeds of a section of private recruiters since January, and amid widespread fear of deportation, remittance inflow from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where about 1.75 million Bangladeshis are working, continued to increase since the beginning of this year. In the July-December period of 2007, the average monthly inflow from the KSA was about \$158 million, but it surged to \$242 million in April.

The Bangladesh army started its peace-keeping activities during the first gulf war in 1991 with a 2,193 member team that monitored peace in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. As of February 2008, Bangladesh was the largest contributor, with 11,200 troops, to the UN Peacekeeping forces. In those missions, they sometimes worked to curb cross-border terrorism or clear illegal dwellings and establishments, or to restore democracy as they know how important it is for a civilised society.

Along with the Bangladesh army and Bangladesh police, the UN is now interested in involving Bangladesh civil servants and

professionals in its ongoing or upcoming missions and projects.

Is there anyone who cares about the image of Bangladesh's work force? The man who was fighting with the consulate people in New York has a mindset that the Bangladeshis working in different embassies and consulates aren't helpful at all, without realising his own responsibility. His bad attitude gave foreigners who were present at the consulate premises a wrong impression about Bangladeshis. On the other hand, the way the consulate officials handled the visitors raised their customer service ability and professionalism.

The reputation of thousands of Bangladeshis and the image of Bangladesh were tarnished when a Bangladeshi killed a Bahraini national. Bahrain has stopped issuing work permits to Bangladeshis from May 26 in response to the demand of some members of parliament to expel all Bangladeshis. Bangladesh's exports to Bahrain frozen food, agricultural products, chemical products, jute goods, melamine crockery, garments, fabrics etc. may be affected.

The introduction of new Malaysian visa rules for

Bangladeshi and Indians, which require a two-week pass obtained in advance from their home countries and a return ticket before entering Malaysia, is an example of the government's lack of interest in maintaining equal diplomatic relations. A few months ago, the South Korean government cancelled visas-on-arrival and port entry, whereas both countries have a significant number of businesses in Bangladesh.

The government announced it would take stern action against officials of the commercial wings of the different foreign missions, who are not concerned about their export targets. According to the decision on May 26, Commerce Ministry officials will visit the commercial wings and report back to the ministry on their performance. Cooperation between NRBs, officials of Bangladesh foreign missions, and the government, is needed to boost and uphold the country's image. Only then will everyone be welcomed everywhere, like the Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus.

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The naked truth about those original Olympic athletes

JAPANESE swimmers are secretly wearing Speedos to beat their best times by almost a second, the Asia business correspondent for The Times of London reported.

Athletes fear that swimming costumes made by Asian firms such as Mizuni and Asics slow them down. This follows reports that swimmers wearing UK-made Speedos have an unfair advantage. Asian swimmers are hoping for technological breakthroughs by top Japanese swimwear firms such as Descente (which strikes me as a terrible name for a company which makes garments which wearers desperately hope will stay up).

Don't worry, lads. Readers of this column have come to your rescue. Vince A, writing from the Philippines, said: "Those of us in technologically backward countries have no chance to compete. I vote that all swimming henceforth be sans any swimwear to even things out."

Other readers supported this idea, and pointed out that it would boost television viewership and be more true to the original Olympics games, at which participants were naked.

Vince's year idea is perfect in every way, except for the fact that it just won't work. Most television channels would simply refuse to show the Olympics if athletes appeared as nature intended.

It's a strange thing. The human being is the only creature to think that its own body is weird and disgusting. It is the only animal, which will arrest itself for seeing itself naked. This is somehow taken as a sign of our sophistication as a species.

Whoever it was among our forefathers who decided that what humans look like naked was some kind of secret clearly did not realise that anyone could blow it by simply undressing. As far as I know, seeing yourself naked in the privacy of your home is not yet

illegal anywhere, except perhaps in more conservative parts of Singapore.

On the subject of nudity, reader John Wilson received a letter while preparing for a stay at the Hong Kong Eye Hospital. "You may consider to bring your own clothes," the letter advised. Perhaps patients, expecting the hospital to supply everything, have been turning up naked. "I'll follow the advice," he said.

I also heard from a historian who said that the Olympics were not originally naked, as widely believed. What actually happened was this. A runner called Orsippus of Megara, sprinting along at the Olympics in 720 B.C., lost his shorts in the middle of the race. This must have been horribly embarrassing for his clothing sponsor, which was probably some early Greek sportswear firm with a name such as Reebokos, Nikos, Pumos or Adidos.

Orsippus stepped out of his shorts, kept on running -- and won the race. From then on, everyone followed his example of competing naked.

It's also not true that women were not allowed to watch the original Olympics. The rules said that any married women found in the audience would be thrown off a cliff, but single girls were allowed to watch. Perhaps the organisers thought young women would find it educational.

Anyway, this little history lesson leads us to a clear answer to the swimwear conundrum.

Swimmers who don't have Speedos and have to wear slow, draggy swimming costumes, can take inspiration from Orsippus of Megara and "accidentally" lose their trunks after starting the race.

And since Japanese swimwear already has the word "Descente" printed on them, it will all seem rather apt.

Descend even lower by visiting our columnist's website at www.vittachi.com.