

Gross mishandling of melamine issue

Designate an authority to address public health crisis

WELL over a month since its appearance, the melamine scare refuses to die down. In fact, it's being propelled to a heightening state with each passing day -- thanks to a totally confused handling of the issue and an evasive approach taken to it. Basically, one gets the impression of deliberate waffling in taking a clear-cut decision about the public health hazard, with import and business considerations getting the better of public health concern, especially that of our children.

As a matter of fact, how not to handle a public health crisis has been demonstrated in galling detail by the health ministry, commerce ministry and the BSTI through their playing ping pong and passing the buck oblivious to the panic mounting among the parents critically dependent on imported milk powder. Just look at the long-winded travel of the 36 samples of powder milk collected in the local market since China's scare over melamine contamination hogged news headlines: BSTI, our sole standards and testing institution and a private research body finding one milk formula testing positive, samples were sent to Dhaka University Chemistry Department whose tests revealed eight popular brands being contaminated. The government perfunctorily advised people to refrain from consuming the eight brands 'temporarily'. When pressed for a categorical instruction to the public, the commerce secretary virtually washed his hands of it by stating to the effect that the responsibility is for the consumer to use or not to use the brands.

It is as confusing as it's ironic as to why the health ministry which should have played a key role in this and whose legitimate concern it ought to have been, remained a bystander to the whole series of developments centring around the melamine issue.

As controversy raged over differing test results and the BCSIR and Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission received some samples for testing, serious questions popped up about why the BSTI didn't have the rudimentary laboratory facilities to detect powder milk contamination and with such incapacity how much of hazardous milk must have been consumed in the country so far. Now, of course, samples of eight brands have been just sent to FAO for further testing, with the WHO and the UNICEF informing their readiness to assist us. Why was it not done initially to save time on determination of the milk's safety status? Then there is also the very cogent question as to why only eight of the 50 imported brands are being put through tests at the FAO? Doubts will creep about the reliability of other brands.

Given the experience, we urge the government to immediately have a centralised designated authority to respond to any public health crisis by providing appropriate guidelines, both for the citizens and the agencies concerned, in tackling the issue.

India aims for the moon

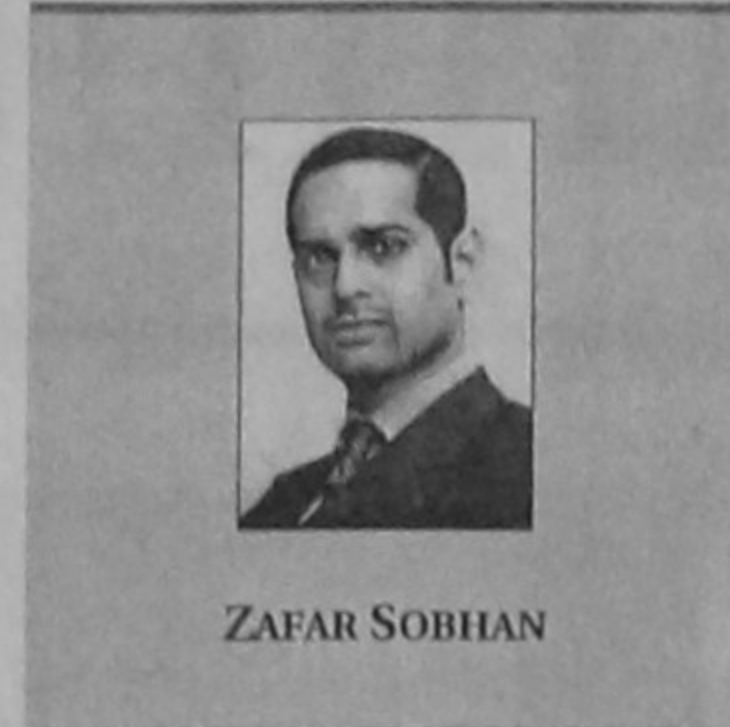
A technological feat by developing country scientists

WE take this opportunity to congratulate the people and government of India on the launch of the Chandrayaan 1 mission to the moon. One hardly needs any telling that, for a developing country like India and indeed for the region, the venture is cause for justifiable pride. That sense of pride as well as belonging is enhanced by the fact that India is an important component of SAARC. As a fellow member of the South Asian regional organisation, we feel that the stride Delhi has taken in space will have a positive impact on scientific development for Indians in particular and for their neighbours and for developing countries in general. The launch of the lunar mission is, briefly, one very powerful sign of the advances in technology that India has been making in recent years. It is at the same time a broad hint that where the exploration of space is concerned, the Indians have finally come of age.

The achievement is but the latest step where progress in space related matters by Asian nations is concerned. China and Japan have already become part of what is now an expanding global space programme. Insofar as the Japanese are concerned, their status as a global economic giant has already catapulted them into a pretty advanced stage of space research. Against such a backdrop, although India has achieved a remarkable feat, as a developing country it has yet to go quite some way before it can climb on to the perch that other nations have attained as members of the space club. For all that, though, the step it has just taken promises to bring dividends specifically because of the role science has been playing in a modernisation of life. There is little question that its new-found status will now play a determining role in helping India shape more focused and broad poverty alleviation programmes.

It is our expectation as well as that of people in the bigger South Asian region that India's foray into space will yield social benefits common to all through a sharing of knowledge about space and a utilisation of such knowledge here on earth. Chandrayaan 1 will map the surface of the moon. What new facts about the lunar body such an exercise might throw up can only be imagined.

Autumn harvest



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ONE of the occupational hazards of being an assistant editor is that you don't get out from behind your desk to go out into the field nearly as much as you should. So when the chairman of Research Initiatives Bangladesh, Dr. Shamsul Bari, invited me and Daily Star photographer Amirul Rajiv to come with him to Nilphamari to see first hand how the people from northern Bangladesh are working to make *monga* a thing of the past, we didn't need to be asked twice.

RIB is an interesting organisation. It is determinedly not an NGO, and describes itself as a research support agency involved in participatory action research.

The research it does is called *gonogobeshona* (people's research) and is driven by the preferences and the decisions of the communities in which the research is carried out, not those of the researchers. The projects that it involves itself with are collaborative action projects conceived of to help support the research.

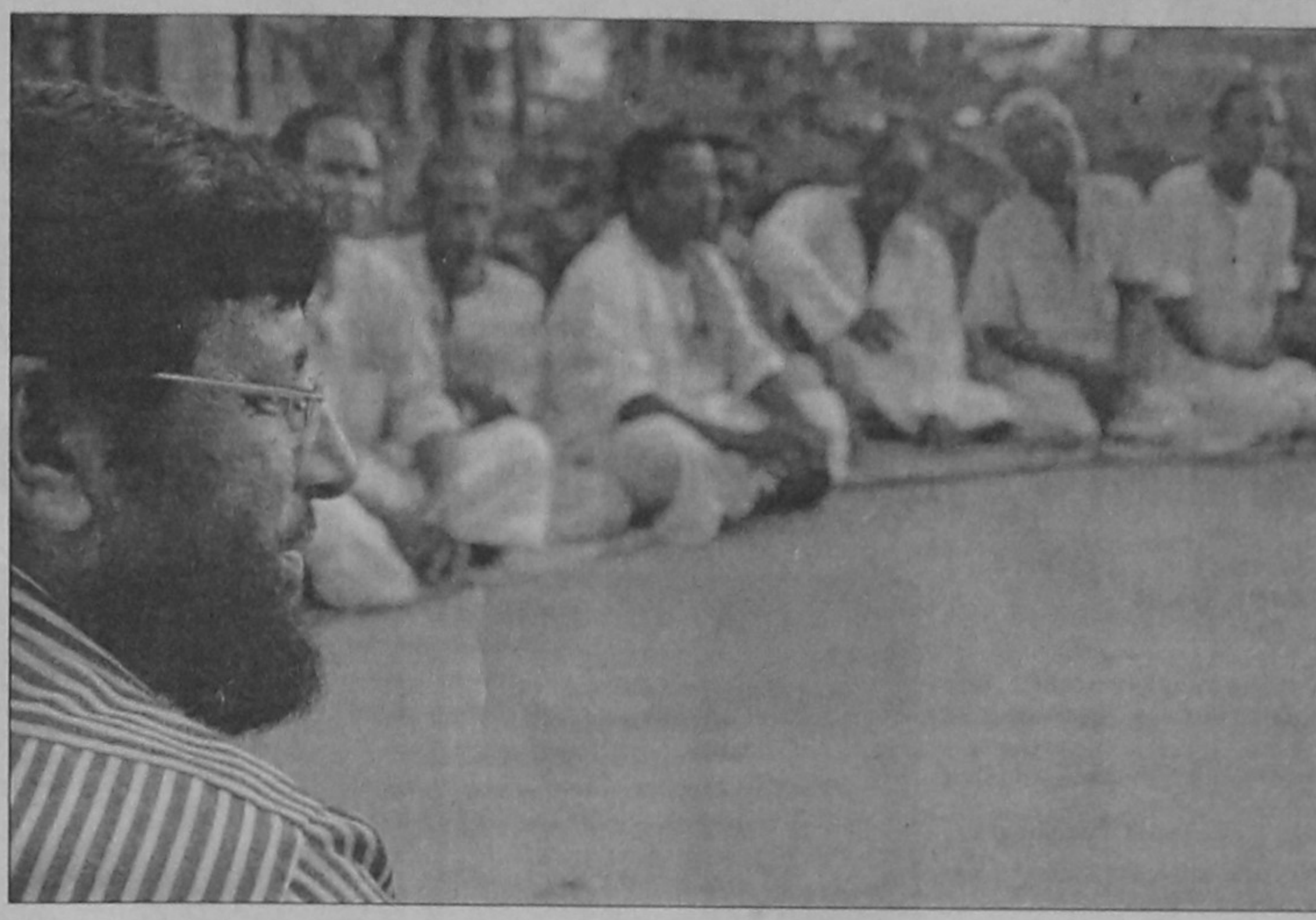
The focus is on full participation and ownership of the involved communities, with RIB only facilitating, and with the locals determining for themselves what research they wish to be involved in and what programs they wish to pursue in support of the research.

We start the day with a visit to a couple of the RIB-facilitated primary schools, two of the 150-odd schools that RIB has helped local communities to set up to support action research projects on the educational needs of children in the country's poorest communities.

The philosophy behind the program is simple. RIB provides

STRAIGHT TALK

The magic of BRRI-33 is that it grows to maturity and can be harvested in 100 days, fully two months before typical varieties of rice that have been cultivated since time immemorial. Not only does this allow the farmers to harvest and cash in two months earlier than they otherwise would, thus completely avoiding the traditional two months of hunger, it also allows for a third harvest of winter vegetables, maize, wheat, potatoes, or moog dal, before the planting of the boro rice crop early in the next year.



Dr. Mazid and the farmers talk it over.

the teaching material and whatever guidance the locals ask for, but the locals themselves must take the initiative to set up the school, make all the relevant organizational decisions and arrangements themselves, and fund everything from the school building to the teacher salaries from their own pockets.

The idea is that each community can thus take control of its children's educational destinies and not have to depend on either government or NGO support which can be taken away at any time.

The parents we meet all seem happy with the schools. They give

often showing up for class hours ahead of time, with those who have graduated on to class one in local government schools doing very well (or so they proudly tell me).

The next program we look at is the *lakkha* (lacquer) cultivation and production program. The idea is to support the northern farming communities in the production of additional cash crops to help supplement their income from more traditional farming.

Lakkha is actually not a crop. It is derived from insects that infest and can be cultivated on boro trees. The methodology is simple-

ity itself: the locals buy (and now produce their own and even sell), for Tk 3-5 each, insect-infested branches, which are then tethered to their boro trees, allowing the whole tree to become infested.

Roughly 100 days later, the insects are scraped off the trees and ground up into a fine powder that is heated in small clay ovens in tiny one-room factories. The process produces a liquid that can be used to make dye/stain/polish and a clear, hard shellac that sells for anywhere from Tk 1,200-1,600 a kilo. All told, one can earn up to Tk 2,500 a tree each year, and the demand for the shellac and dye is more or less endless.

After our brief tour of the *lakkha* factory (actually a small tin-roofed room), we drive to Laxmichap to talk to the local farmers about their experience cultivating BRRI-33 rice.

The paddy fields are gorgeous, an endless checkers-board of green on green, already harvested BRRI-33 fields, the few remaining fields of 4-foot high stalks that will be harvested in a day or two, and the smaller stalks of BRRI-11 and other local rice varieties that will be harvested in two months' time.

It is the month of *Kartik*, known in the North as "*Mora Kartik*" -- the *monga* season -- the season of hunger, the days of privation as the entire region waits, its food stocks dwindling, for the winter harvest.

There is not much else to do but agricultural work in this part of the country, and once the planting season is done, the farmers and their families have to settle in for a long wait before they can fill their bellies again at harvest time.

The magic of BRRI-33 is that it grows to maturity and can be harvested in 100 days, fully two months before typical varieties of rice that have been cultivated since time immemorial. Not only does this allow the farmers to harvest and cash in two months earlier than they otherwise would, thus completely avoiding the traditional two months of hunger, it also allows for a third harvest of winter vegetables, maize, wheat, potatoes, or *moogdal*, before the planting of the *boro* rice crop early in the next year.

The farmers are thrilled with BRRI-33. The yield is good, any-

where from 12 to 16 maunds per bigha, the price they receive for it is good, some Tk 600 a maund, due to the fact that stocks of rice are now dwindling in the days before the winter harvest. Their next project, they tell us, is the setting up of a BRRI-33 seed bank so that they won't have to buy the seeds in the future.

This has all been made possible by the dedication of the world-class scientists at the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute. Not only has their ingenuity developed the 100-day BRRI-33, but the BRRI scientists and economists have worked closely with the local farmers to ensure that BRRI-33 is a workable solution to their needs.

It is an inspiring sight to see the BRRI team, led by the institute's chief scientist, Dr. M.A. Mazid, sit in a circle with the local farmers, listening to their feedback, together planning out what needs to be done next year to improve, replicate, and scale up the program, working together to ensure the success of this initiative.

This is the best of Bangladesh, no question about it, our farmers and rice scientists, working hand-in-hand to make hunger a thing of the past.

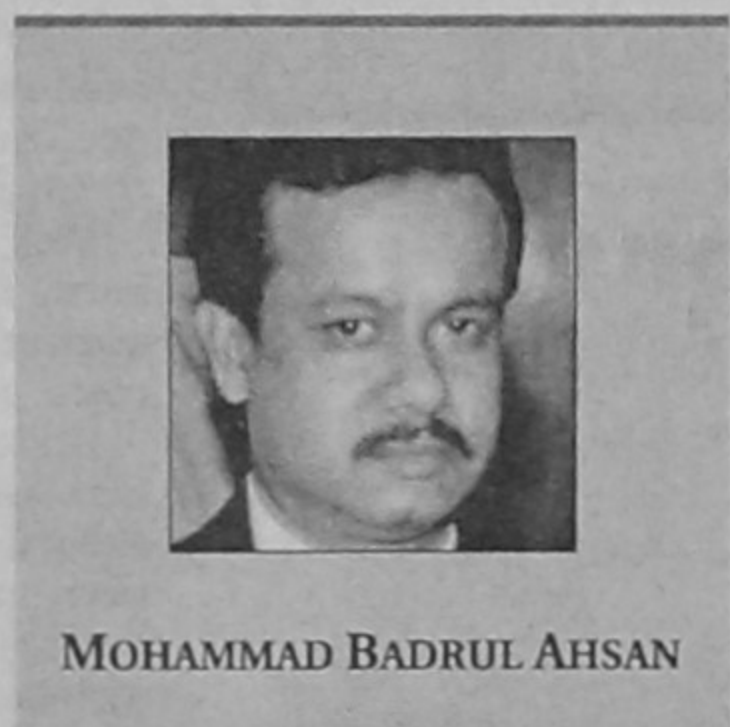
As the sun sets, the *mela* to celebrate the transformation of *Kartik* in this region from a time of want to a time of plenty, picks up steam. There are literally thousands of people, come to enjoy themselves and to allow themselves to dream of a happier future.

In addition to the food-stalls that one typically sees at such *mela*s, there are stalls explaining the initiatives that are being undertaken in the area, so one can see the ploughs and drum seeders that have been developed to facilitate the planting of BRRI-33, the wool rugs the sale of which that provide another source of income for farming families, the work of the *polli totho kendro* (village information centre), the bio-fuel and fertiliser that is being developed locally.

The *mela* will continue all night with singing and dancing and a drama put on by a troupe of local farmers. Sadly, we can't stay till the end: we have a train to catch back to Dhaka.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

The ghost of Bamyan



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

A number of madrasa students, some of them still smelling mother's milk in their breath, gathered in front of Zia International Airport last Wednesday, and demanded the removal of five baul sculptures which were being erected on a roundabout. In a striking coincidence, the Civil Aviation Authority removed the sculptures on the same day.

The special assistant to the caretaker government in charge of that ministry, a sewing-machine magnet, stitched together an explanation. He said the sculptures were removed because the sculptor had failed to conform to the specs. Most of us are convinced, he couldn't be further from the truth.

That, however, isn't the end of the story. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has decided to throw away the baby with the bath

water. Now the sculptures will be replaced by a fountain, a ludicrous reaction to the sculptor's goof-up, if that's what really happened. In that case, why not showcase the sculptor? Why not ask him to make amends at his own expense to conform to the agreed standards? Why drop a project like a hot potato when so much time, energy and money went into it?

The answer is that the CAA has burned its face hiding behind a scalding skillet. It must have got nervous under threat. It must have been ordered by an even more nervous higher authority to come up with a fix. The fix, as it was quickly fixed, proved to be inept.

Beyond this slapstick comedy performed by the CAA, lurks something of real concern. The incident has the smack of what happened in Bamyan of Afghanistan in 2001, when the Taliban destroyed two Buddha statues dating back to the sixth century. Their leader, Mollah Omar, set out to rectify in a few

CROSS TALK

The ghost of Bamyan whispered last week. Never mind if you like to cast stones at the sinner, but it manifests sin if you gather those stones and build the image of a righteous soul. Huh!

hours the transgressions proudly suffered by Afghans for over fourteen hundred years.

In 2007, a similar thing was repeated in Swat of Pakistan. The Buddha statues were blown off with dynamite under the instruction of a religious leader named Mullah Fazlullah.

I suppose a similar act of rectification was underway when the students came to demolish those statues. Their leader, a Mufti, is a man of vision. He saved us from hellfire and damnation by ensuring that we didn't commit the sin of even looking at the finished work.

But why did their wrath target those stones? Islam prohibits idolatry in the sense of worshipping human or animal forms in statues or paintings. Ibn Abbas gives us the basis of this prohibition according to the Holy Koran. In Noah's nation, a number of statues were built and placed in key locations to honour some righteous men after they died.

As time went by and nobody remembered the purpose of those statues, Satan started encouraging people to worship the statues, because that was what their ancestors did to herald rains. Over a period of time, the statues transformed into idols, objects of worship that misguided people.

That didn't happen though in Afghanistan. Its people didn't worship those Buddha statues so far as we know, except occasionally visiting them for a picnic on holidays, marveling at the craftsmanship of their ancestors, awed by the dimensions larger than life, posing for photographs.

It hasn't happened in Egypt either as the country gradually emerged from a polytheistic background to a monotheistic religion, its fields, streets, public squares and shops strewn with statues of Ramses, Anubis, Nefertiti, Isis, Sphinx, Tutankhamen and Akenaten. These are testaments to a proud civilisation, telling us more

eloquently than thousand history books that the faith of mankind succumbed to the gravitational pull of a unitary God.

In Islam, idolatry is shirk, which is the sin of associating things or beings with Allah. It also includes worship of wealth and other material objects. Many Islamic theologians extend the sense of worship to include praying to some other being to intercede with Allah on one's behalf. Any act of piety whose inward goal is pride, caprice or desire for public admiration also comes under the concept of shirk.

There is something called minor shirk, which is when people show off their fortunes. Even when a man gets up to pray and strives to beautify his prayer because people are looking at him, he commits what is known as secret shirk.

It means there are more ways than one to commit idolatry or shirk, and in most categories idol worship is more pronounced in the flesh of living bodies than the stones of deadweight statues unless those statues are erected with the explicit intention of worship. The baul sculptures, in so much as they could have breathed life into our cultural heritage, were by no means going to be worshipped by any sensible person. They couldn't be more damning to our faith in God than it already has been in our greed and lust.

Why should we go after the statues only, when we have propped up countless icons of sacrilege in our hearts? Why should fledgling believers be incited to destroy inanimate objects and misplace their anger? Why not send them after those who put carbide in fruits, formalin in fish and melamine in milk? Why not send them after those who worship their children and wealth, those who are more hardened in their souls than the flinty stones shaping those statues? Why not send them after corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, who have no consideration for others? Why don't they go after those musclemen who terrorise people in their hearts?

Because the statues are soft targets, which don't retaliate if attacked. They don't fire back if fired at, strike back if struck. They don't protest, they don't agitate, and they only crumble if hammered. Speechless, sightless and devoid of life, these are the punching bags, which bear the brunt of our irreconcilable madness.

The ghost of Bamyan whispered last week. Never mind if you like to cast stones at the sinner, but it manifests sin if you gather those stones and build the image of a righteous soul. Huh!

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Keeping economics real

Before he became known for his controversial New York Times columns trashing the Bush administration, newly anointed Nobel laureate in economics Paul Krugman changed the way we think about trade, overturning 100 years of conventional wisdom that assumed rich and poor countries would trade equally with each other (in fact, a handful of richer countries end up dominating the system). He sat down with NEWSWEEK's Rana Foroohar to discuss the new economic era, politics and the prize.:

Foroohar: So, of course we need to know: what was your reaction when you heard about the prize? KRUGMAN: I was in a hotel room in D.C., stepping into the shower. My initial reaction was, "That's an obviously fake Swedish accent; this must be a practical joke." Then

there were more Swedish accents, and I figured it must be real. Most of your work was around trade: are you concerned about a push-back against free trade? I'm pretty mild about it. World trade is already so free, we're really talking about stuff at the margins. I

don't think protectionism is going to turn out to be a big deal. Whatever politicians say on the campaign trail, when you get to the White House, who wants to open up what would happen if the US seriously went back on its trade commitments?



2008 Nobel laureate in economics, Paul Krugman.

How did we get into the financial crisis? Regulation didn't keep up with the system. As the shadow banking system evolved, more and institu-

tions that were not subject to traditional banking regulation conducted more of the world's transactions. And because of the ideological environment of the times, there was no attempt to expand regulation.

I think now it will be expanded, and securitisation will be reduced, and mortgages in South Florida won't be held in Norway. I think it will be interesting to see just how much of the financial innovation we've seen turns out to be regulatory arbitrage. Someone once said that buying these derivatives (which brought down the banks) was like buying insurance for the Titanic from someone on the Titanic. What will the fallout be in the real economy? You'll see tighter lending, obvi-

ously. We'll also see compression of income at the top, which was dominated by people in the financial industry, so society may become a little less unequal. It will be pretty bad for New York as a whole.

Is it true that you believe the perfect socioeconomic model is Sweden in 1980?

In the summer of 1980, actually, winter there is terrible. But yes, it was very egalitarian, and democratic, with a high standard of living for all. I'm assuming you aren't advocating a 60% Swedish tax rate. How would you change the tax system? We need more revenue, but I don't think that further soaking of rich people is necessarily the way to get it. Many countries with strong

social safety nets rely largely on VAT tax, which is more broadly based.

What's your view of the bailout?

It makes more sense than it did before, but implementation is problematic. The recapitalisation doesn't come with enough conditions for banks. There's too much ambiguity. Markets don't yet believe that Fannie and Freddie debt is government debt. Paulson is still a disappointment, but a bit less so than three weeks ago.

Where does US capitalism go from here? Do we become more like Europe? Or Canada. Basically, we're going to become less exceptional and more like a normal Western country. We're going to converge, but hope-

fully not in every way -- we don't want to screw up our retirement system the way the French have.

What advice would you offer to a new US administration?

On the economic front: we need a big fiscal stimulus plan, and fast. Also, pass legislation to increase health care. Don't let the crisis put that on the back burner. Politically, they should open up the records and see what actually went on over the last eight years. One of Clinton's biggest mistakes was not airing what really happened in Iran-contras. And then, the Iran-contras guys come back to do it all over again. Let's stop that this time around.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.