

## Removing sculptures will not bring food on your plate

### Fall in fuel prices welcome Monitoring needed to let benefits permeate all levels

ARE have been the instances where fuel prices have gone down in Bangladesh. But now that fuel prices have been slashed by anywhere between 10 and 13 per cent, we certainly appreciate the move. We do realise, of course, that such a reduction in the prices of fuel, having consistently gone up in the last few years, has come about owing to a decline in fuel prices worldwide. It can certainly be argued that the decrease in fuel prices here does not quite match the fall in prices at the international level. Even so, the decision to reduce fuel prices is appreciable and we hope it will set a precedent for the future.

As we understand it, there will be a regular review of fuel prices every three months. That is clearly a good decision and care should be taken that it is followed through instead of the idea simply fading away. The focus of such a review must be the promotion of a consumer-friendly price readjustment policy. Nothing should be done that ignores global trends in fuel production and sales and no room should be there for consumers in Bangladesh to feel that their interests are being undermined. In this context, it has to be said that the reduction of fuel prices should now lead to a lessening of transport costs for commuters. A new basis of how far the transport fares will have to be decreased has been made available. Its implementation will have to be ensured now. One beneficial aspect of the reduction in fuel prices is that it will provide relief in the matter of agricultural or irrigation inputs through a lessening of costs. Briefly, therefore, the idea is that the benefits that accrue from a fall in fuel prices should percolate down to consumers. It will be the government's responsibility to see that such an outcome is ensured.

One last word. In a society such as ours, even a logical price adjustment could lead to some temporary problems. On the first day when the new prices were to take effect, a number of fuel stations remained conspicuously closed, leading to suspicions that the decline in prices may not have gone down well with their management. If that is true, it would be most unfortunate. The bottomline is simple: let the authorities ensure that the new prices are implemented without any delay.

### Kidnapped Brac staff in Afghanistan

Make all out efforts for their immediate release

THE abduction of two Brac officials from the Afghan town of Ghazni last Thursday came as a rude shock to us, more so, when till the time of writing this editorial no trace has yet been found about their whereabouts. Ironically, the two men were engaged in development activities having nothing to do with Afghanistan's highly volatile, explosive political situation. Brac has certainly proved itself to be a development partner with welfare of the people it serves being its prime objective.

This is not the first time that any Brac official working in the country has been kidnapped by some militant group, though it is not clear what they want to achieve through such activities that violate all international laws and norms. True, the feuding groups are at war against each other, but there is obviously no point in targeting innocent development workers whose only mission in Afghanistan is to serve the country and its people. The abductors should not have been oblivious of the fact the Brac personnel are doing their job commendably, despite facing threats of abduction and even death in a country embroiled in seemingly endless conflicts. In fact, a Brac official was shot dead last year and another kidnapped and released later on.

We are hopeful that good sense will prevail and the two kidnapped Brac officials will be set free very soon.

We appreciate the Afghan government's assurance to our foreign ministry that all out efforts are being made to rescue the Brac officials. The release of Brac official Nurul Islam last year was possible when the government set about the task of freeing him on the basis of an elaborate strategy. We are hopeful that use of the tested methods will produce similar results this time around also.

Brac, as a matter of policy, is planning to gradually wind up its programmes in Afghanistan within the next five years. However, their far-sighted operation plan includes capacity building among the locals which will make it possible to perpetuate the good work done by them. So, it is really unfortunate that they are looked upon with suspicion by some militant outfits.

The Nato forces present in Afghanistan should also take note of the crimes being committed against people engaged in humanitarian activities. Security of such people should be high on the agenda of the countries and agencies striving to bring back normalcy to Afghanistan.

## Deregulation is disastrous



PAUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

### THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

The core problems can be traced to a single cause -- mindless deregulation fashioned after the US model. Paul Stephen Dempsey, an expert in aviation and the law at Canada's McGill University, has lucidly analysed this.

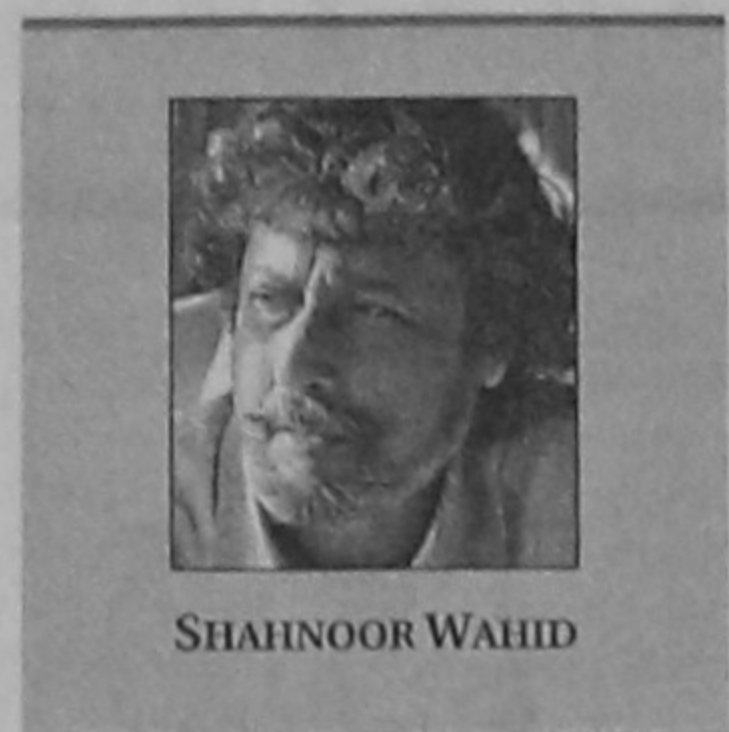
ET Airways, India's largest private airline, decided to sack as many as 1,900 employees just two days after it announced an "alliance" with Kingfisher Airlines, India's second largest private carrier. Both decisions have a common cause: overcapacity and mounting losses in civil aviation, triggering desperate cost cutting.

Jet Airways reversed its decision to retrench the workers, including 850-cabin crew, after they launched protests. But the Kingfisher alliance, with greater implications for civil aviation's future, stands. It'll create an undesirable monopoly.

What impelled Jet's chairman Nareish Goyal not to sack the employees? He says his "conscience." Mr. Goyal is less known for his conscience than for his sharp business dealings, including money-laundering charges levelled by former minister Arun Shourie.

Apart from pressure from civil aviation minister Praful Patel, the factor that probably weighed the most was middle class sympathy for the cabin crew, which represents what might be called the ambitious glamour component of this white-collar workforce.

The Indian elite shows no compassion for poor workers, especially unorganised ones, who lose their livelihoods under the impact



SHAHNOOR WAHID

A section of people in this country who have taken the responsibility of "protecting" their religious beliefs on their own shoulders are doing so of their own volition. No one has told them to do so, but then again there would be no problem if they would educate themselves with the history first and then try to preach and practice the essence of religion, remaining within the entire gamut of the society they belong to. It is essential they take into consideration the ethnic, socio-political and cultural matrix that shape the mosaic of that society because no group can progress and prosper by remaining hostile to society.

Therefore, trouble begins to brew when some zealots mislead youngsters and incite them to rebel against certain accepted cultural practices, norms and values of the society they live in. The elders cleverly talk of divine directives but we know that, in reality, they have their eyes fixed

### SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

But you know what? We have never seen such huge energy and such huge potential diverted against real evils that grip our society today. We have never seen the zealots coming out on the streets demanding an end to acid violence. We have not seen them preaching to young men during religious congregations about the evil practice. We have not heard of them bringing out processions against drug peddlers or phensidyl smugglers. We were not told that the zealots organised anti-trafficking rallies and held community meeting in vulnerable areas.

on the throne where they want to sit some day. The zealots brain-wash the youngsters by telling incredulous tales picked from various unconfirmed sources and goad them into carrying out acts of violence against the citizens of the state.

The youngsters are constantly fed with the false notion that their religion is under threat and that they would have to fight the "enemy" and give their lives, if necessary. The youngsters are told of many divine gifts awaiting them in the afterlife, which, to a poor, jobless young man often sounds more lucrative than the temporal life full of misery. The zealots hardly organise vocational training programmes for the youngsters and engage them in economic activities to help improve their socio-economic conditions. They only exploit the anger and frustration of the poverty-stricken young men for their own

gain. What does history tell us? History also tells us that whenever a group of people wanted to seize the throne of the country they used religion to force the common people to subjugation. The poor and illiterate fear the power of the unknown more than they fear the laws of the land. Hence, the powerful rulers of the past often presented themselves as representatives of the Omnipotent on earth. The histories of Egypt, Rome and the Middle East is strewn with such stories. We all know what had happened to Caligula and Nero.

The exploitation of the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the name of religion by the rulers from West Pakistan is but a recent history written in blood and sweat. While the Pakistani rulers delved in debauchery and deceit of the worst kind, they foamed at the mouth while talking about religion being under threat. And they never missed an opportunity to call the people strongly practicing and promoting Bengali culture as non-Muslims. Does religion, with its divine sanctions, really need some half-literate people to protect it? History tells us that it does not. All major religions have survived on earth for millennia without the help of such frenzied zealots. Then why some people are always bent on implanting such notions in the brain of others in the name of protecting religion? It is obvious -- only to perpetuate their hold on power.

It is happening in Bangladesh too. In the name of protecting religion the zealots have divided the country into two camps - 1) their kind and 2) other kind. According to them, none in the other camp follows religious rituals as strictly as they do, hence, those people are either full or half heretics, hence they ought

to be either brought into their camp or sent to graves to suffer eternal damnation. They are implanting this grotesque concept in the brains of thousands of young men and women of the country.

In such a state of ignorance their young followers confuse idolatry with appreciating sculpture. In such a state of confusion they are joining the zealots in demanding dismantling of all the sculptures in the country. Amazingly, they are getting more and more vocal everyday. They are bursting with energy to launch country-wide wave of destruction and anarchy. And unless they are stopped they would possibly succeed in attaining their goal.

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More questions. Do they sit down with the drug addicts to demotivate them with advice and

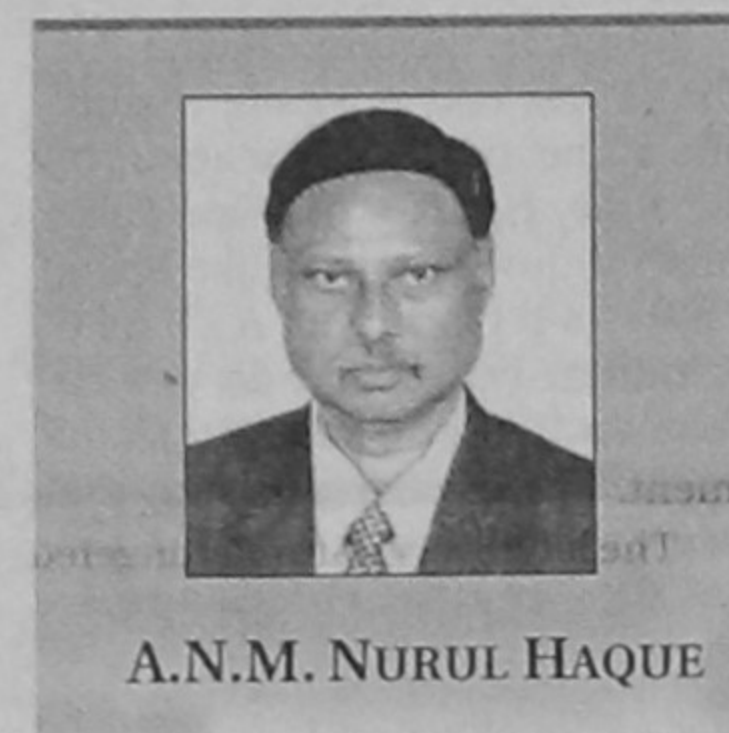
real help? We never heard of such social services offered by the zealots and their followers. Again, do they ever come out strongly against the illiterate people who dish out anti-people *fatwas* to make the victims suffer physically and mentally? Do they speak against the evils of child marriage, dowry, divorce and rape? Do the zealots and their followers offer voluntary services in our efforts to reduce child and maternal mortality?

We know some imams of mosques have been included in awareness building programmes, which are initiated by the government. But we want to know what the so-called politico-religious leaders who threaten the country with dire consequences for not removing the sculptures are doing as part of their commitment to society where they breed and survive today.

We believe the government has to draw the line for such zealots who are trying to bake their cakes in the oven as long as it is hot. They have political ambition behind whatever they are doing today. The government should stop them by all means. Can we help those poor, illiterate young men by organising more vocational trainings to become worthy citizens? They should be told that removing sculptures will not bring food on their plates.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## Thus far and no further



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE removal of *baul* sculptures from the roundabout in front of the Zia International Airport by the Civil Aviation Authority, under threat from religious bigots, has aroused a deep sense of anger among the conscious people because of the government's indirect encouragement to bigotry.

A sculptor tasked with the project on the basis of designs approved by the concerned government body erected the sculptures, which were almost nearing completion. Now, in the face of threat from the religious bigots, the government has backtracked and removed these on the lame excuse that the sculptures were not built as per the approved designs. But the real reason for which the government tore down the sculptures is crystal clear.

Emboldened by this success,

### BY THE NUMBERS

Having come this far because of tolerance from the government, the religious bigots are now raising their heads in an extremely disturbing way. These elements have got no appeal for the great mass of people as they always hide behind religion to achieve their nefarious political agenda. Therefore, the conscious section of society must raise their voice against such malignant acts of bigotry and proclaim strongly: "Thus far and no further."

Mufti Fazlul Haque Amini, the chairman of the Islami Oikya Jote, has threatened to demolish all sculptures and statues in the country, even if those are dedicated to our glorious war of independence. He also branded the *Shikha Anirban* at Dhaka Cantonment as anti-Islamic.

The religious bigots in Barisal have also demanded that construction of a sculpture named *Bijay Bihanga*, being set up in the city marking the liberation of Barisal from the Pakistani occupation army in 1971, should be stopped immediately. Barisal Mayor, Shawkat Hossain Hiron, said that the demand of the bigots was illogical as the design of *Bijay Bihanga* was earlier discussed with and approved by the religious leaders.

Their next targets will be other monuments and sculptures in the country erected in commemoration of our glorious war of independence, including the *Aparaja*

*Bangla* and central *Shahid Minar*.

Everybody will clearly remember the pitched battles that some radical Islamist groups fought in April with the police for two consecutive days around the Baitul Mukarram National mosque to protest against certain provisions giving women equal rights in the National Women Development Project (NWDP). A large number of students from *madrassas* across the city participated in pitched battles with the police. They acted on instructions from their teachers who were staying inside the mosque. At that time, their leader Amini also threatened the government, saying: "If our demands are not met, the fire ignited today will spread like wildfire across the country."

The radical Islamist groups also went rampant and brought out a procession in the city, almost without any resistance, to protest against the Sector Commanders

Forum's move for trail of war criminals, defying the state of emergency.

A group of *madrassa* students vandalised the office of the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University on October 18, demanding cancellation of the university authority's decision not to allow admission to students who did not study English and Bengali of 200 marks each in their HSC or equivalent courses.

When the Taliban destroyed two *Bamyan* statues in Afghanistan in 2001, there was an outcry across the world, as the statues carved in the third century were considered to be the world's tallest standing statues of Buddha. But the Taliban government in Afghanistan decreed that the statues, that had survived for over 1,500 years, were idolatrous and anti-Islamic. Religious bigots also destroyed

statues of Buddha at Swat in Pakistan in 2007 under instructions from their leader Mollah Fazlullah.

Islam only prohibits idolatry, but this prohibition is not applicable for the sculptures and statues erected to showcase national pride, culture and heritage. Erection of sculptures portraying culture and heritage is in no way a defiance of any tenets of Islam. In fact, there is hardly anything antithetical between religion and culture, while many aspects of culture are rooted in religion.

A clear distinction also exists between a sculpture and an idol. Sculptures are commemorative of history and heritage while an idol is an iconic object of worship that prevailed in the pre-Islamic faiths.

The demolition of the *baul* sculptures, dedicated to the humanist ideology of the great mystic poet Lal Shah, in the face of threat from the religious bigots, should not be seen as an isolated instance. It is a potent reminder of the greater threats to our rich culture and heritage, as the bigots have already threatened to shut down *Pahela Baishakh* and observance of *Ekushey*.

The radical Islamist political groups, who have positioned themselves as a counter-force to culture and enlightenment, want the country to be fashioned

according to their dictates and to be eventually turned into a theocratic state. The issue of the *baul* sculptures, of course, is not Islamic but political use of religion. Religion is misused to implement their ulterior political designs.

The conscious people across the country are really incensed as the government has capitulated in the face of threat from the religious bigots and torn down the *baul* sculptures. This disturbing development of the religious bigots multiplies the need for correcting all the mistakes so far made by the government in tackling these elements. This government must not show weakness in tackling them, as it has no obligation to the vote bank.

Having come this far because of tolerance from the government, the religious bigots are now raising their heads in an extremely disturbing way. These elements have got no appeal for the great mass of people as they always hide behind religion to achieve their nefarious political agenda. Therefore, the conscious section of society must raise their voice against such malignant acts of bigotry and proclaim strongly: "Thus far and no further."

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

travellers. But rail travel is cheaper and ecologically superior.

At any rate, most Indians cannot afford to fly. At the peak of the ultra-low fare regime, only three percent of the Indian population was flying! Now a significant proportion has naturally gone back to the railways.

By last year, thanks to aggressive pricing and overcapacity, several airlines became unviable. Jet bought Sahara and Kingfisher acquired Deccan. Such anti-competitive mergers shouldn't have been allowed, but they sailed.

Then 2008's sharp rise in aviation fuel prices came. Airlines formed a cartel and levied a minimum fare of Rs. 2,800, mislabelled as "fuel surcharge." That ended the low-cost aviation era, but not the industry's problems.

The core problems can be traced to a single cause -- mindless deregulation fashioned after the US model. Paul Stephen Dempsey, an expert in aviation and the law at Canada's McGill University, has lucidly analysed this.

He concludes that barely a decade after the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act was implemented; the US airline industry

lost all of the money it made since the Wright Brothers' inaugural flight in 1903.

After 150 bankruptcies and 50 mergers, the US now flies the developed world's "oldest and most repaired fleet." Among the 176 airlines which deregulation spawned, only one remains, and that's bankrupt. Deregulation has led to greater monopoly and concentration, with just four airlines controlling two-thirds of the market.

Rather than leading to a reduction in fares, as *laissez-faire* economists had forecast, deregulation led to a fare rise and a decline in service. Social time worth billions has been lost because of time-consuming hub-and-spokes operations to which many airlines resorted to cut costs.

India has learnt no lessons from the US experience. It continues to rely on deregulation, even after it has manifestly failed on its own soil, as evidenced by the bankruptcies of *Mohitluf*, *East-West Airlines* and *Damania Airways* in the 1990s, and confirmed recently.

Mr. Patel wants to retain the model after giving a generous Rs.

5,000-crore bailout to the industry, including reduced duties on fuel, and other undeserved concessions.

He sees himself as an industry promoter and representative, not a maker of rational policies or a regulator in the public interest. Worse, he supports the *Jet-Kingfisher* "alliance," although it's obviously anti-competitive. The alliance will control 59 percent of the market, which is way higher than the 7 to 15 percent market-share which attracts anti-monopoly or anti-trust action in most countries.

Of course, India is unique in this regard. Under Dr. Neamoh Singh's ideology-driven liberalisation, India deranged the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Commission, but she has failed to appoint the promised competition commission. So, monopolies merrily thrive under "free-market" policies!

The ruling elite continues to repose blind faith in neo-liberal free-market ideas, even as these get discredited in the developed capitalist countries because of their contribution to crises, instability,

destruction of wealth, inequality, and undermining of social cohesion.

As the economics Nobel for Paul Krugman demonstrates, heterodox ideas questioning market fundamentalism have again become respectable, and many conservatives now want state ownership and strict regulation of banks, transportation, telecom, and oil and gas.

Many mainstream Western commentators are already declaring "the end of conservative dominance" in economic policymaking. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is calling for a new Breton Woods conference to renew global economic institutions, and numerous governments are nationalising chunks of private banks.

Many South Asian conservatives continue to play down neo-liberalism's loss of legitimacy. They live in a time warp and will inflict more pain and suffering upon us. The quicker we get them out of the warp, the better for all of us.

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