

BCL in-fights take an uglier form

Rein them in or lose credibility

THAT the ruling party high command has lost control over its student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) in the academic institutions has once again been proven by the long drawn gunbattle in Jahangirnagar University on Monday into Tuesday.

When the student wing of the party in power engages in infighting and turf wars it hardly needs emphasising that congeniality of academic atmosphere goes out of the window as the pursuit of higher learning takes a huge drubbing. Besides, the danger is the contagion effect it can have across campuses thereby threatening to bringing down the entire educational edifice.

What happened at Jahangirnagar University was as surreal as it was mind-boggling. A whole series of violent outbursts that engulfed the huge JU premises originated in an incident of a lone student from one BCL faction being manhandled by a few students of the other faction. Firearms were openly used and allegedly unidentified persons were seen in action as the police virtually played a mute spectator. If professional goons take over the campus that will be the hara-kiri of higher education. The police could not seize any firearm on the first day. The question is: how could student factions gather weapons and ammunition, except through the blind eye turned by the university authority and the law enforcement people?

We are pretty much certain that people in administration and top leadership of the Awami League have now become fully conversant with what actually ails the BCL and pushes and pulls that make them act the way they are doing. We recall that the Chhatra League central committee having been driven by lawlessness among its student fold in JU suspended all its activities a month ago. And now they have had to slap another suspension on them for a month again following the latest eruption of violence. Our point is such piecemeal suspension of a renegade unit's activities is virtually offering them impunity.

What is, therefore, necessary for the AL is to delink itself from such elements altogether and bring them to book. We wonder, how the Prime Minister's repeated warnings to the students to behave and her directives to the police to act have gone on deaf ears. We urge the Prime Minister once again to rein in the wayward BCL elements if she wants to retain the credibility of her party and the government.

VVIP movements

The President sets an example

PRESIDENT Zillur Rahman's move towards easing road traffic during VVIP movements is admirable. Given the horrendous proportions that traffic congestion in the capital has acquired in recent weeks and months, the presidential action, especially considering the plight of SSC students, should make a difference in the way VVIP movements are organised. The presidential entourage in its movements will now keep the interests of citizens uppermost in mind. Even as we appreciate the presidential gesture, we would like all concerned authorities to take a cue from this and try and conduct movements of high dignitaries in a way, albeit with full attention paid to security detail, that public mobility can be eased on such occasions.

One hardly needs to point out that while Dhaka has evolved from the provincial town that it was in the pre-1971 period into the capital of a free nation, its road infrastructure has not grown commensurately. Add to that the enormous growth in the number of people who have over the years made the city their home. That has resulted in the setting up of new offices, academic institutions and business enterprises, to say nothing of the ubiquitous skyscrapers that have been sprouting all around.

Given Dhaka's burgeoning population and the high demand for public mobility vis-à-vis limited spans of road network, surely a greater sensibility ought to be shown to traffic management during movements of high dignitaries. President Zillur Rahman has by instructing the concerned people to look for ways to ease traffic during his movement has, we believe, led the way in this regard.

We suggest that, as far as practicable, the VVIP movements better be organised on Fridays and Saturdays. Basically, the idea should be to organise their movements during lighter traffic hours rather than the peak ones so as not to inconvenience the citizens.

Of men who misinterpret historical truth

Forty years after liberation, it is an outrage hearing some men trying Soviet-style revision of Bangladesh's history. And if C.R. Dutta and other Bengalis lend their voices to the urge for a return to the 1972 constitution, they have not only our sympathy but our active support as well.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A superannuated bureaucrat horrified us all the other day (and he was on one of those inane, live television talk shows) through his convenient forgetting of national history. Or was he deliberately informing us that what we went through in 1971 did not matter any more, that the distortions we have lived through since August 1975 are all?

To give you an idea of why he lost his cool, not long ago the respected freedom fighter C.R. Dutta had demanded that certain religious provisions which have made their way into the Bangladesh constitution since the rise of the defeated pro-Pakistan forces in 1975 be repealed. It is a sentiment millions around the country, those who recall the ethos of the war of the liberation, have not forgotten.

And they have not forgotten because in 1971 it was a pure, unadulterated Bengali war that brought together Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists and others in the armed struggle to eject Pakistan out of their lives. It was a secular state that the founding fathers enunciated and upheld in Mujibnagar. And that secularism was reinforced, resolutely and morally, by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman once he came back home from captivity in Pakistan.

Ah, the pity is that these noble ideas simply escaped the imagination of this bureaucrat. He raised his voice, to inform

us that ninety per cent of Bengalis happened to be Muslims and so our way of life would be patterned along that reality. And then he said something worse. If Bismillah could not be part of our lives, should we borrow something from Hindu scripture?

That was not only hitting below the belt. It was at the same time a throwback to the arguments used long ago by the old Pakistanis. But then, why take matters all the way back to a Pakistan we ran out of town all those years ago? The problems, those we are burdened with today, are here in our own living rooms, in our backyard, of our own making.

There are people who tell us they love music, men who have enjoyed being elitist in their perception of culture. But then something bizarre happens to them. They falter, they stumble. Why must you then blame Ziaur Rahman for bringing communalism back into our lives, excoriate Hossain Muhammad Ershad for the religious identity he gave this proud state of secular Bengalis?

If these men, these bureaucrats called to nearly every television channel for whatever wisdom, or the lack of it, they spout, now tell us that we are no more secular Bengalis but Muslim Bangladeshis, you have a sense that somewhere their comprehension of history has simply turned upside down.

They leave us embarrassed, for what they are doing, despite knowing what the Pakistanis and their local cohorts went



The Freedom Fighters fought for a secular Bangladesh.

around doing nearly four decades ago, is to inform us that Bangabandhu was wrong, that the Mujibnagar men were wrong, that the three million men and women who died in defence of Bengali nationalism were fools who simply had little business putting up armed resistance against a marauding foreign power.

Forty years after liberation, it is an outrage hearing some men trying Soviet-style revision of Bangladesh's history. And if C.R. Dutta and other Bengalis lend their voices to the urge for a return to the 1972 constitution, they have not only our sympathy but our active support as well.

We were part of that war. We have remained committed to the principles that underpinned that war. Which is why we register our disgust at those who seek to pass off the war of liberation as a civil war. Which is why when retired bureaucrats think it is a Muslim country, we pin them down to a

serious argument on the realities of history.

Which is why when some people think President Obama should visit this "Muslim" country, we need to remind that this happens to be a Bengali state. And when some foreign diplomats seek to make us happy through eulogising us as a moderate Muslim state, we tell them they are wrong, they are blissfully unaware of our history.

That is about all. And yet there is a little more. Some people reminded us the other day that the late lamented General M.A.G. Osmany was a great democrat. He was, up to a point, the point being January 1975. And then, in August 1975, he linked up with Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed, stayed with him till November of that year.

It is now for you to make up your minds -- about irascible bureaucrats, about dead soldiers.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanareq@yahoo.co.uk

All fundamentalists are the same

All religions are not the same; but all fundamentalists are. They share an aversion for modernity and a hatred of gender equality. It is entirely logical that the Ram Sene should find an ally in the Jamaat-e-Islami; their ethos is not dissimilar, no matter how different the imagery their rhetoric might contain.

M. J. AKBAR

GIVEN the staggering backlog of cases that clog the Indian judicial system, is it necessary to put Sri Ram Sene chief Pramod Muthalik through the full rigours of the wrench? Here is a suggestion for cruel and unusual punishment that can be administered immediately: he should be forced to see a collection of item numbers from Hindi movies.

Alternatively, he could be subjected to six hours of solitary confinement in front of MTV. A study of pole dancing to the strains of Kaal kaal mein hum tum kare dhamaal might open his eyes, when he might recognise that popular culture in India has moved far beyond pubs.

Every government in the past two decades has endorsed this advance: the once-beady eye of the censor board now winks merrily at the exploding screen. The censor cannot lag behind the audience, or the entertainment industry will become defunct.

All religions are not the same; but all fundamentalists are. They share an aversion for modernity and a hatred of gender equality. It is entirely logical that the Ram Sene should find an ally in the Jamaat-e-Islami; their ethos is not dissimilar, no matter how different the imagery their rhetoric might contain. The same mindset persuades some maulanas to issue a fatwa condoning divorce through triple talaq even when the husband is drunk.

The very clerics who will damn you to eternal hellfire for touching alcohol are ready to rationalise any diktat that amounts to subjugation of women. Eminent Islamic scholars have repeatedly proved that instant triple talaq is bad in Islamic law, and such variations even worse. Islam institutionalised the rights of women; such distortions are at variance to its liberating spirit. But the issue is not law: it is conservative, male domination over women.

Sex, or an ugly offshoot, vulgarity, is not modernity. Since sex began with Adam, it

must be as old as existence. The pub, or tavern, can claim a bit of antiquity as well. The four principles of a modern society, which is a necessary prerequisite of a modern state, are gender equality, political equality, religious equality and economic equity.

India is one nation among the many that emerged from the ruins of the British empire capable of claiming the mantle of modernity. This is not because Indians are superior to their neighbours, but because the idea of India is better. Democracy, secularism, equality and freedom are an Indian's non-negotiable birthright. There is only one serious weakness: poverty has to be reduced at a much faster rate than the growth in prosperity.

As long as we are burdened with this wretched malaise called poverty, we cannot call ourselves a modern nation. Economic equality is a fantasy; but an equitable distribution of national wealth is a compulsion. A civilised nation cannot divide its people by a hunger line. Citizens must live in various categories of a comfort zone, and the most basic comfort is a full stomach. Freedom is incomplete without freedom from hunger.

The poor are never unreasonable. They do not believe that there is any magic wand that can suddenly make them wealthy. But they have every right to economic justice. When they find India rising, but they are not rising along with their country, there is

envy and anger. The young men who become the club-wielders of socially regressive organisations are motivated by more than one reason, but a principal cause is denial of the liberties and pleasures that a disposable income brings. They may not realise it, but they want what they seek to destroy. It is a familiar paradox.

Social reform has not come to all Indian communities at the same pace. Groups like the self-appointed All India Muslim Personal Law Board have used evocative sentimentality and identity politics in order to block reform and gender equality among Muslims. They have received patronage from politicians with a vested interest in the status quo. But there is a new murmur among Muslim youth, who are ready to reject this false equation between identity and regression.

This is an age of information. If they cannot go out to the world then the world can come into their drawing rooms through the television set. They want to be a happy and creative part of a modern India: engineers, managers, technocrats, writers and sportsmen building the emerging nation around them. They will not be held back by the discrimination of others or the frozen minds within their own. For evidence, read the story of cricketer-brothers Yusuf and Irfan Pathan. They are the flavour of the present and the prescription of the future.

M. J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Covert

In defence of standard Bangla pronunciation

There are still arguments about what constitutes standard written Bangla. Writers often deviate from promita, or prescribed Bangla spelling, and argue about it. Still, one can recognise standard written Bangla when one sees it. There is a "standard" written Bangla that is broadly followed, at least in literature.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

IMAGINE writing this in English. But bear with me. It is not that I could not have written this in Bangla. I could, and would probably have done at least as good a job as anyone who writes in the vernacular. I could write an article in Bangla. But I would have remained as anonymous as ever to editors and readers of Bangla newspapers, and my labour would have been in vain. Let me therefore stick to The Daily Star and its readership.

Spoken Bangla, properly pronounced, is one of the pleasantest sounds, next to good music, that enters my ears. It is something worth striving for. Many years ago, our Bengali teacher at Dhaka College said: "You know, I am doing *sadhana*." We asked him what it was. He said: "It is to master correct Bangla pronunciation. You know, I come from Barisal and I have this horrible

Barisali accent. But I am determined to speak standard Bangla." That was Professor Hishamuddin Ahmed, and *sadhana* was the word he used.

This might sound trivial to many, but we shed blood on that unforgettable February 21, 1952, when we fought for our language. The slogans we wrote were the ones we also shouted. We shouted *Rashtra bhasa Bangla chai* with more gusto than we wrote it on posters and badges. And we pronounced it correctly, uniquely, in unison.

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Why is the standard not followed when it comes to spoken Bangla? Why is it treated

with so much disdain? There are two possible responses to such questions. One is to suggest that there is no standard and so none needs to be followed. Some will follow this up with the suggestion that the "standard" I am speaking of is the one our fellow Bengalis in West Bengal use.

Such objections are, of course, nonsense. There is something called standard spoken Bangla, which has nothing to do with its being spoken more often in West Bengal than in Bangladesh. Linguists and phonologists on both sides of the border, without regard to regional phonetic propensities, have painstakingly constructed the standard. The two valuable pronunciation dictionaries I have used are entirely in digenous: *Byabharik Bangla Uchcharan Abhidhan*, Anisuzzaman, et al. (ed), Jatiya Shaitya Prakashani, Dhaka, 1988 and, *Bangla Uchcharan Abhidhan*, by Naren Biswas, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1990.

The other response is to ask, what is wrong with our regional pronunciations? The answer, of course is, there is nothing wrong with them. On the contrary, the diversity of Bangla pronunciation across Bangladesh adds colour to what would otherwise be a monochrome language.

Standard Bangla pronunciation is not

"superior" to its regional variants. But it is not merely distinct either; it is crucially different in that it is one of the finest fibres that bind us as a nation. Functionally, this is evident in many walks of life. A speaker from a particular region addressing others from outside the region almost always tries to shed part of his regional pronunciation and almost subconsciously goes for a version of "standard" Bangla. The problem is that in most cases he falls far short of the standard.

One sees that failure everyday and everywhere. Some of the worst offenders are the lawmakers. When they are speaking in parliament, for example, they are heard by the entire nation and not just by their constituents. Listen to their speeches in the current parliament and you will immediately see what I mean.

One should not expect everyone to be an Ajit Guha or a Munir Choudhury in Bangla elocution. But we can do far better than we are at present. There are some bright spots. Television newscasters and radio newscasters in general speak excellent Bangla. They should be an example, if not inspiration, for improvement.

But what, in the end, is needed is old-fashioned *sadhana*.

Mahfuzur Rahman is a former United Nations economist and occasional contributor to The Daily Star.