

That mango tree

It is in *baisakh* that the blossoms give way to the maturing mango, soon to ripen. Far better than the *panta bhat* that is nowadays eaten ceremonially, it is the mango tree that ushers in the new Bangla year with its promise of luscious abundance.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

Nothing symbolises *baisakh* better than the mango tree. The flowering mango groves in *magh-falgun* are a delectable sight. The fragrance of the mango blossom has found its place in our poetry and our national anthem. And rightly so.

It is, however, in *baisakh* that the blossoms give way to the maturing mango, soon to ripen. Far better than the *panta bhat* that is nowadays eaten ceremonially, it is the mango tree that ushers in the new Bangla year with its promise of luscious abundance.

Away from home, I miss the mango tree on the first day of *baisakh*. I miss the young tree on the east of our village *bhita*, the larger one on the south and the big one spreading its moss-covered branches on the tin-roofed house we slept in. But most of all I miss a mango tree that was known not for its fruit but for something more profound.

It stood in front of the large two-storied building that housed the arts faculty of

Dhaka University till it was moved to a new campus in Nikhet. For anyone who was a student of the university in the early nineteen fifties, and even to many who weren't, and now reading this reminiscence, this would already have thrown open a floodgate of memories. And what memories they are!

It was a small tree that barely rose to the roof level of the first storey of the lofty building. It was certainly not what one could call a *mohiruha*. But it was a fine, well-shaped, tree, with dense foliage and no unwieldy branches. The grass was green and fairly thick even in its shade. And the tree saw history made.

This is where, under the tree, one late February morning students of the university and from afar gathered to continue their call for recognition of Bangla as a state language of the country. The campus rang with slogans: "*Rashtr bhasha Bangla chai*." This is where they decided to resist the imposition of a police ban on protests, and to march to the Provincial Assembly, the seat of the provincial legislature, to press home their demand.

The day was February 21, 1952. Chanting full-throated slogans, the students began to march out of the campus in groups of ten in deliberate defiance of the law. They were promptly arrested and hauled onto waiting vans. Suddenly, the police charged into the campus, lobbing teargas shells, and clubbing the crowd. The students scattered, many with wet handkerchiefs pressed against their eyes, trying in vain to ward off the sting of teargas. The mango tree saw it all.

The police left, the students regrouped and began scaling the wall that separated the campus from Dacca Medical College to rush to the college hostel compound, where the first martyrs of the language movement fell, and history was made.

Another February came and with it another protest. That was 1955. Again the police brutalised the students milling around the mango tree, chanting "*Rashtr bhasha Bangla chai*" and preparing to march out to the street. They were tear-gassed, many were beaten up and many more arrested. The tree witnessed it all. The tree witnessed the first marches to Bengali nationhood.

Some thirty-five years later, on one of my trips from abroad, I went looking for the mango tree. The old arts faculty building had been taken over by Dhaka Medical College. The ground was squalid and grassless. And empty.

Excepting for the dark, mutilated trunk of a tree sticking out of the ground and forking into two short, lopped limbs,



Ushering in *Baisakh*.

like two amputated hands trying to reach into the void. Mutilated and dead. That was the mango tree I had been looking for.

How did it die? Nobody could tell me. It could not have been a natural death.

Mango trees are said to live very long. Some live hundreds of years. And they are evergreen. That tree must have met a violent death. There is no commemoration of its death. Today not even the remnant of that tree stands.

Today, the first day of *baisakh*, the beginning of the season of green fruitfulness, I celebrate that mango tree.

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The dark side of student politics

A group of criminals and armed cadres in the student wings of the parties now ravage the peaceful atmosphere of the campuses. They operate in such a funny circle that those who had affiliations with the ICS or JCD belong to BCL today. They just change their colours at their convenience.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the closure of Dhaka Medical College (DMC) after factional clashes in BCL that left Rajib Ahsan, a BCL leader and a 4th year student of DMC, dead and several others injured, the dark side of student politics has been exposed. Eight educational institutions have been closed, following clashes involving BCL factions, since the AL-led mohajete came to power.

Even though the PM, who was the organisational chief of the BCL, had asked the troublemakers to desist from such dastardly acts, they paid no heed. The clashes resulting from sharing of extor-

tion money caused loss of lives and property and tarnished the image of the government. Having failed to rein in the criminal elements in her own party wing, the PM has given up her role as patron of the BCL.

While we condole the tragic death of Rajib and sympathise with the bereaved family, we can only ponder over the consequences of the unbridled rise of gangsterism in the campuses as a result of the indifference of the administration and the patronage of the political godfathers. The irony of the whole situation is that we have clowns masquerading as leaders.

Let us not forget how quickly yesterday's mastans and some fake student

leaders have become today's political leaders. Declaring a ban on student politics has been a battle cry since long. The government's assurances raised hopes that here was a different kind of leadership ready to take on the terrorists and crackdown on the trouble mongers wherever they might be. But the law enforcers have yet to come up with a plan that can appease public outrage.

The people are demanding that those at the helm of affairs put their words to action. After Rajib's killing, the tormented family as well as the nation waited for days to see the killers arrested. The administration's responsibility is not merely to dispense justice but also to dispense it swiftly.

The situation has come to such a pass that if the PM does not quickly get back to governing the country we could find ourselves ruled by thugs instead of a democratically elected government.

The first 100 days are very crucial for any government. Backed by some tainted party leaders from both wings, a group of criminals and armed cadres in the student wings of the parties now ravage the peaceful atmosphere of the campuses.

Ironically, they operate in such a funny circle that those who had affiliations with the ICS or JCD belong to BCL today. They just change their colours at their convenience.

With violence surging, extortion unabated, and the economy in bad shape because of the worldwide recession, the administration cannot play second fiddle. Is it that the massive election victory has caused the leadership quality and political bondage to atrophy instead of radiating the guiding spirit that people demanded and craved for so much?

The student wing, far from being an asset, is destroying the party image, and the prime minister can restore the party's sullied image. As death stalks every innocent citizen, whose only craving is the development of the country, such killings challenge the ruling party with a moment of reckoning.

In the worst of times, draconian laws are framed. But when it comes to implementation, precious little is done. Since this government came to power, people saw in stunned disbelief the most audacious acts of terrorism. The police in most cases stayed away from the scene. In

Jahangirnagar University, six students were expelled for six months only after about one month of their involvement in violence.

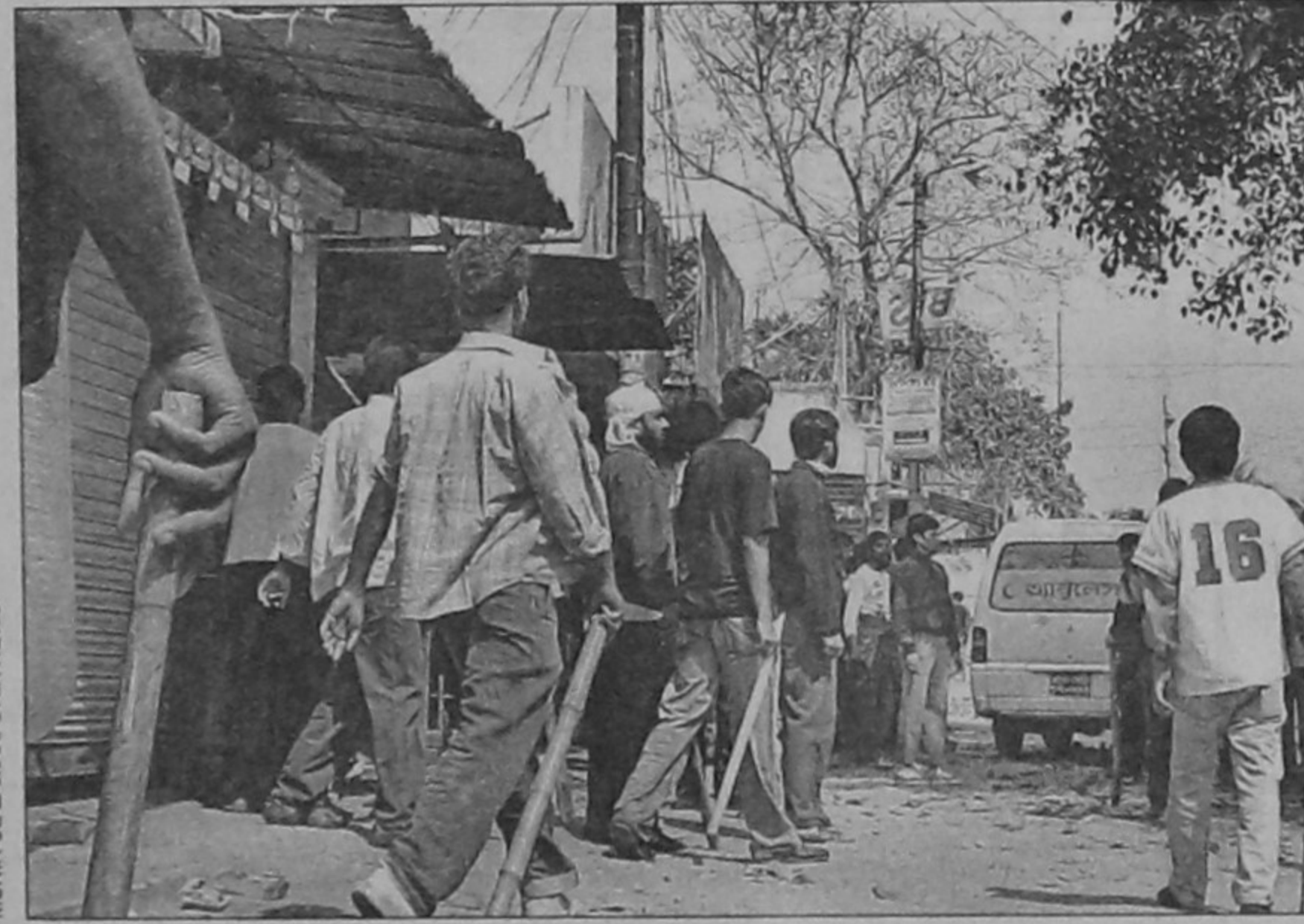
Despite the PM's stern warning, violence in the campuses continues, and some criminal gangs masquerading as students are operating with greater ferocity and vengeance. Jagannath University campus was again rocked by factional feud in the BCL, leaving 25, including the assistant proctor, injured. It has been learnt that some ex-BCL leaders, who were barred from continuing their activities, are pulling the strings from behind.

Reports have it that police played the role of silent spectators, though they were present in the campus. Is it that the high officials are incapable of taking actions against those involved in clashes and against the law enforcers who are so openly insubordinate? The PM must have noticed that there is a general disenchantment with the government's inability to do anything that goes beyond the motions of governance.

Student organisations are extensions of the political parties, and are busy collecting money from any source possible instead of concentrating on issues related to student welfare. Using the signboards of different parties, these armed hooligans have sown the seeds of a new brand of politics that uses terror and corruption to consolidate power. Without exception, colleges and universities have turned into dens of criminals.

Student politics these days means getting involved in tender manipulation, admission trade, toll collection, gun-toting and killing another. Tagar and Muki, who allegedly killed Sony, a brilliant student of BUET in 2002, were the by-products of such tainted politics backed by influential godfathers belonging to the ruling party. All the political parties must think seriously about de-linking the student wing of their parties in the hope that the wounds will begin to heal.

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Respect and responsibility

The spread of lack of respect for human rights, the most basic of which is respect for human life, has become a defining feature of our times. The effort to reinstate values of respect and responsibility must begin in earnest locally, nationally, and globally.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

BAKGLADESH suffers from many deficits, from material goods to abstract virtues. Bangladesh lacks infrastructures, steady and reliable supply of electricity, safe and modern transportation system. Bangladesh lacks efficient civil servants, decent hospital beds, doctors, nurses... the list can fill the space of this column easily, especially when such a litany of complaints comes from an expatriate. Even home-based citizens are rarely in short supply of such gripes. Dhaka traffic. Road accidents. Should I say more?

However, deep down, Bangladesh

suffers from the absence of two Rs, which accounts for most other deficits. The Rs are respect and responsibility. I single out Bangladesh but much of what I say applies to the rest of the world as well.

Every time I read about a fatal road accident in Dhaka or Abu Dhabi I can imagine an irresponsible driver behind the wheel, with little respect or even capacity for respect for either his own life or those of the others. A responsible driver will show respect for the traffic laws, a responsible government will set the rules of road safety and enforce them responsibly. An irresponsible, dishonest, petty bureaucrat will issue a

driver's license to a non-driver for a bribe.

The lack of respect has become infectious in Bangladesh. The resignation of Lt. Gen. (ret'd) Hasan Mashud Chowdhury is a case in point. Albeit small, it is an illustration of a larger national trend. In democratic regimes, resignation of top public officials is common following changeover of administrations. However, the manner of his departure was disturbing.

An honest soldier, who served the nation with sincerity and devotion, was sent off without a word of thanks. The fact that his departure delighted politicians on the both sides of the aisle speaks volumes about the general's integrity. I salute the general for his war on corruption.

My teacher, the late Professor Nazmul Karim, once complained about the medical fees in Dhaka. However, when he went to Madras for treatment, the attending doctor, upon discovering that he was a professor of Dhaka University,

waived the medical charges out of sheer respect for a teacher. The late professor narrated this to make a point about declining social values in Bangladesh.

I was thinking of the uprising of the soldiers of the Bangladesh Rifles and the wanton violence inflicted on the officer corps and their families. The future will tell us who were behind the carnage, but who did it is not difficult to ascertain despite the conspiracy theorists -- the soldiers with guns. In that cruel act we see an extreme lack of respect for human life, or for the officers by the men they commanded and trained. The cruelty was also an act of boundless irresponsibility.

Following the tragedy, the exchange of allegations also displayed a conspicuous absence of responsibility on the part of politicians and journalists. Wild accusations were exchanged in the media and in the Parliament, as if it was a competition for proving who was more irresponsible.

In this riot of irresponsibility, the

participants showed disrespect for the martyrs as well as the intelligent public.

As the financial crisis unfolded, the blatant acts of irresponsibility on the part of the fund managers, highly paid bankers, and regulators were exposed. This cabal of the corporate elites showed no respect for the millions of investors, not all of whom were the likes of Mr. Warren Buffett. The hardworking small investors were not bailed out, the big corporations were.

The lack of these two Rs also helps in understanding -- if not fully explaining -- the wars and violence in the world today. The death of 5 US soldiers in Mosul is just one tragedy in an endless chronicle of tragedies in Iraq and Afghanistan and now in Pakistan. Had former President George Bush acted responsibly, this tragedy could have been avoided.

Neither the former US president nor the cheer-leaders of his campaign showed enough responsibility, nor did they show any respect for the lives of

ordinary Iraqis or Afghans or Pakistanis or Americans or Canadians who are shedding their blood for reasons that will always remain vague at best. What is not vague is the tragedy, tears and agony of the parents and loved ones left behind.

The Hamas, who created more pin pricks than havoc, showed lack of responsibility. So did the Israelis, by killing 1290 Palestinians, including 222 children, in Gaza. The IDF and the Israeli leadership showed little or no respect for the lives of the helpless Palestinians. It was, in the brilliant coinage of Avi Shlaim, an Oxford scholar, "an eye for an eye-lash."

The spread of lack of respect for human rights, the most basic of which is respect for human life, has become a defining feature of our times. The effort to reinstate values of respect and responsibility must begin in earnest locally, nationally, and globally.

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