

Heightened concern over river pollution

High time for the government to act

WE are gratified to see that when it comes to the issue of combating river pollution, the pressure does not seem to be letting up, and that the issue continues to dominate the people's agenda.

This is as it should be, as there is no more pressing concern for the government of the day, and if it does not act swiftly and with efficiency and effectiveness, then soon the damage to our environment might become irreversible.

This issue has long been one that environmental organisations such as BELA and BPA have attempted to bring to the fore-front of people's consciousness, and of late, The Daily Star has led the charge on the issue with serialised front page coverage of the toxic river pollution.

There is every sign that the advocacy against pollution and to clean up our rivers has reached a tipping point and that the average city dweller is both acutely aware of it and anxious to see something tangible done about it.

We note with satisfaction that earlier this week the parliamentary standing committee on land ministry asked for urgent action by the industry and environment ministries to save the rivers. Now the government has been served a legal notice in a public interest litigation to take steps to stop encroachment, earth filling, and illegal structures in the Buriganga, Turag, and Shitalakhyia rivers. We await results now.

Let's repeat, river pollution is deadly serious and requiring of an immediate and coordinated solution. This is essentially a multi-disciplinary challenge. It is thus imperative for the government to form an inter-ministerial taskforce with private sector experts co-opted in it to go into the matter at length and come up with a concrete and doable action plan to stem the tide of pollution. International expertise and assistance can only be forthcoming on such a mission.

Grisly road accidents

Alarm bell set ringing again

THE death of a police sergeant, and a female university student sustaining multiple injuries that might cripple her permanently, are the latest reminders of how dangerously exposed citizens are to grisly road accidents in this city of traffic chaos and peril.

The police sergeant was trying to chase an errant driver when he was overrun, and the girl student was knocked by a bus when she was returning home after attending her classes. So, it is evident that they had little control over the situation and were victims of reckless, almost insane, driving that has become so common in the city these days.

The tragedies that we have just witnessed are clearly the results of traffic rules being flouted with impunity. It is really disturbing that buses and mini-buses are allowed to overtake each other in a mad race, while posing a grave danger to both the passengers and pedestrians. Even at crowded intersections, the mini-buses seldom bother to slow down, and pedestrians are often seen hurrying across the roads and avoiding, very luckily, fatal accidents by a fraction of a second or so. And this continues throughout the day in the city. Furthermore, makeshift bus stoppages create insurmountable problems for all other vehicles and pedestrians. The commuters are content to set their feet somehow on any space near the door of a bus and keep themselves hanging as the bus moves at a high speed. A moment's loss of concentration or loosening of the grip can lead to instant death in all such cases. But who is there to caution these people and ensure their safety?

Now, let's have a look at the worn-out vehicles and the untrained, arrogant drivers. The buses and mini-buses, in particular, often look like contraptions that should have been scrapped long ago. And drivers are always a source of worry as they have no regard for traffic rules or human lives.

The BRTA which issues fitness certificates to all these vehicles should explain to citizens how the buses and minibuses having no road-worthiness could make their way to the streets. How did the untrained drivers manage to get licence, and if they do not have it, whose responsibility was it to stop them from driving in busy Dhaka streets? These questions need to be answered to prevent accidents that account for such a large number of casualties.

Physician, heal thyself!

We have our shortcomings, and we must, as a nation, work to overcome them. But to be preached by those that are less than qualified to do so is comical. "Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country." Whatever one wants others to do must do it oneself.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

NOT often do we find our actions emulated by others. At least not acts that we can be proud of -- except perhaps for the Grameen Bank, the concept of which we find being replicated in many parts of the globe.

Gone are the days when the world thought to follow our lead both in example and precept. But things are changing. We can feel "happy" that at least in one instance some of our former MPs, to be exact three of the highest officers of our legislature, by a stroke of fate or coincidence, find themselves in the exalted company of their British counterparts.

Neither the former Speaker of the 8th parliament nor his deputy, nor the former ruling coalition chief whip, should feel let down by what has been revealed about their financial misdemeanours while they were in office. What our politicians do today others do the day after, if not tomorrow.

The only difference is, in the case of the British parliament, the speaker has chosen to step down, charged not with misuse

of public money but blamed for failure to exercise proper oversight. In our case, the misuse is not only being justified, the call for them to account for their deeds is also being seen as witchhunt.

But it is not the purpose of this article to compare the level of morality, or the absence of it, of the politicians of the two countries but to expose the double standards of some of our friends and development partners when they dispense homilies about the need for us to conform to universal standards of morality.

Living by the book should be an indispensable part of anybody's core values and his or her way of life, but it pains us to see those that criticise us for our lack of probity, and make it a factor in determining whether we deserve a particular tranche of aid or not, themselves set poor standards of morality.

But that does not absolve the former speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad and the two co-accused from the allegations brought against them. Their acts of willful disregard for financial discipline, if what we hear and read in the media is true, must pain all those that want to see our law-

makers set the highest standard of behaviour.

And the three gentlemen must not fail to avail the chance offered them by the parliamentary committee probing into the matter to present their case. It is not Mr. Sircar as an individual that is being held to account for his acts of commission, it is the second highest office of the country that risks being tainted by his actions.

We are also being cautioned, this time by an ambassador, that if the trial of war criminals did not conform to international legal standards it may not get the seal of international approval.

The basic premise of the statement cannot be contested but, coming as it does from the US ambassador, one finds it very interesting. In fact, the US is one of several countries whose ambassadors in the past didn't pass up a chance to offer their advice on matters that did not fall strictly within the specified terms of reference of their ambassadorial duties.

The dangerous aspect of this is that not only have we gotten used to this behaviour, it seems that some envoys have become so used to this manner of conduct that it has become almost their second nature.

But one should have no reservation if the advice comes from a country whose own record of human rights at home and abroad was above board. Even without going into historical instances, US actions since the start of the so-called war on terror hardly qualifies it as a spokesman

for human rights and moral and legal norms.

What legal standard are we being asked to uphold? The one we saw applied to the Abu Ghraib prisoners? Or the standard applied to the inmates of Guantanamo, most of whom were left to rot without having any charges brought against them all these years. Is the standard that the US would want us to demonstrate the one it displayed by incarcerating children under 16 in Camp Delta?

Amnesty International (AI) described the conditions at Guantanamo Bay as "cruel, inhuman and degrading." The US action was characterised by AI as "a shocking indicator of how cavalier the Bush administration had become about respecting human rights." No wonder that President Obama has thought it fit to block the court-ordered release of photographs depicting abuse of detainees by US soldiers. It would have not only inflamed international sentiments, the principles of morality and ethics, so often flaunted by the US administration, would also have appeared hollower.

We have our shortcomings, and we must, as a nation, work to overcome them. But to be preached by those that are less than qualified to do so is comical. "Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country." Whatever one wants others to do must do it oneself.

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BJP, Left face existential dilemma

Both the BJP and the Left now face an existential dilemma, and will require honesty to pare away that part of the dogma that has checked the growth of one and undermined the success of the other.

M.J. AKBAR

IT may be difficult to deal with defeat, but the regret of a drowned dream is quickly overtaken by the compulsions of survival. Both the BJP and the Left now face an existential dilemma, and will require honesty to pare away that part of the dogma that has checked the growth of one and undermined the success of the other.

The BJP might want to consider a fundamental fact about our country. India is not a secular nation because Indian Muslims want it to be secular. India is a secular nation because Indian Hindus want it to be secular.

It would be wrong to dismiss everyone in the BJP as communal. But L. K. Advani's efforts to sustain the inclusive image fashioned by Atal Behari Vajpayee were constantly undermined by the rhetoric of leaders who did not understand that the language of conflict had passed its sell-by date.

The turning point came with Varun Gandhi's immature speech. The BJP condemned it but did not disown it completely, for fear of losing the extreme in its search for the centre. What seems obvious now did not seem so clear then. Varun Gandhi should have been dropped as a candidate. Worse, Varun Gandhi fell in

love with his new pseudo-aggressive image, and projected it in statements and pictures that went into every home through television.

This young Gandhi even began to fantasise a future as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. It is interesting that regional BJP leaders understood that this was toxic. The Madhya Pradesh party bluntly told Varun Gandhi he was not needed, while the Bihar unit was relieved when Nitish Kumar refused hospitality to both Narendra Modi and Varun Gandhi.

The national ethos is shaped by one predominant desire: the hunger for a better life. Prosperity is impossible without peace, so the passions of sectarian politics, whether based on community or caste, have been replaced by the clear understanding that peace is non-negotiable. Prosperity, on the other hand, has always been negotiable, since it has never been a universal fact. India remains a poor country with rich people rather than the other way around. The poor want to be part of the India Rising story.

It is odd that the Marxists should have missed this. They lost the Muslim vote in rural Bengal, not because of Islam but because of poverty. The message from Nandigram and Singur was that land was being taken away from the poor in order to create jobs for the middle class. Nitish

Kumar has won because he created peace, and took his promise of prosperity to those at the very bottom of the top-heavy caste ladder. He will be the envy of his peers at the next meeting of the nation's chief ministers.

It might be even odder if one draws a potential parallel between Bengal and Gujarat, but Narendra Modi's industrialisation just might become a problem if he does not take corrective action. Taking the Nano that Bengal lost is only one chapter of a more complicated story. The poor are sensing that this cosy relationship between politicians and industrialists is benefiting either the rich or the middle class.

The landless and peasants could turn against Modi if he does not resurrect rural Gujarat with the high-profile vigour he has offered industry. The DMK survived in Tamil Nadu because it gave the poor cheap rice and free entertainment. Buy shares in television companies. Every political party is soon going to hand out free television sets to voters.

The Berlin Wall has been breached in Kolkata. Is it only a matter of time before the Communist bloc collapses? Are Prakash Karat and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee the problem or the solution? Is there any alternative chief minister in Bengal who can fashion correctives and implement them with a hammer?

The CPI(M) politburo meeting on May 18 was meant to be a celebratory event in the game of thrust and parry that was supposed to follow the results. It will now have the excitement of a dirge. Prakash Karat summed up this election pithily when he said: "We failed." It was not an individual's failure, since Marxist deci-

sions are collective.

It is easy to sneer at the defeated, but a paradox needs to be noted. The Left may not be missed in Kerala and Bengal, but it will be missed in Delhi, since it injected serious debate into economic and foreign policies. It is not important that the Left was right or wrong. What is important is that it generated a debate.

It is obvious that governance is being rewarded, and Naveen Patnaik's vindication is sufficient evidence. But there is also a model profile for a politician that has emerged. The voter wants three qualities in his leader: honesty, competence and modesty. This is what he saw in Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Rahul Gandhi added the flavour of the future to the Congress offer. He has won his place in power through this election. In all likelihood there will be a transition within the foreseeable future, particularly since the Congress has silenced its allies as effectively as it has neutered the opposition.

Chief ministers like Nitish Kumar, Naveen Patnaik, Shivraj Singh Chauhan and Raman Singh delivered on all three qualities respected by the voter. Others got by on two, but they should not confuse reprieve with victory.

The dangers of success are more dramatic than the perils of failure. Complacency is an easy trap. Arrogance is seductive. Dr. Manmohan Singh has been given freedom to govern, but his first watch has to be on a slippage by colleagues. By giving him freedom, the Indian voter has denied him an excuse.

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Formulating an education policy

The need for a suitable education policy to build a strong nation is immense. It is unfortunate that we haven't yet been able to introduce a full-fledged education policy since our independence in 1971, though nine education commissions were formed and nine education policies formulated during the period.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

THE need for a suitable education policy to build a strong nation is immense. It is unfortunate that we haven't yet been able to introduce a full-fledged education policy since our independence in 1971, though nine education commissions were formed and nine education policies formulated during the period. Till now, the nation has been deprived of a realistic education policy.

The new government is pledge-bound to introduce a good and acceptable education policy in the country. Our indifference towards adopting a modern science-based, non-discriminatory, secular and people-oriented policy has created divisions in our society. If we are to be united to achieve digital Bangladesh by 2011 we shall have to concentrate hard on formulating and implementing a suitable education policy.

An 18-member education policy for-

mulation committee was formed on April 8 under the chairmanship of National Professor Kabir Chowdhury. Very rightly, the education minister, Mr. Nurul Islam Nahid, has allowed only 3 months' time to the committee to complete the recommendations so that they can be analysed properly in time to enable the government to build digital Bangladesh.

We have seen that, except for the AL governments failed to show any education policy though we had 10 years democratic rule under BNP and BNP-led alliance government and 14 years of military rule under presidents Zia and Ershad.

During these 24 years we saw stoppage of the implementation of the Kudrat-e-Khuda Commission recommendations, and production of reports for announcement but not for implementation. This brings up the suspicion whether these governments believed in keeping the common people uneducated because

knowledge and education could prove to be a spark for the people to raise their heads against all injustices.

We hope that the new government will present us a realistic education policy. However, it has to be careful about fulfilling the needs of our society. We are lagging behind even India and Sri Lanka in this regard. We do not as yet have adequate facilities for imparting scientific and technical education.

The quality of our education needs vast improvement. Our teachers, particularly primary school teachers, are of poor quality. The standard of English and mathematics is particularly very poor, mainly due to inadequate number of qualified teachers. For a sound education both these subjects are essential. To solve this problem the concerned teachers should be imparted intensive training for a reasonable time (say 6 months).

Modern education means secular education, which means education not related to religion. If education is not based on logic it cannot create unity of conscience and creative work. Unity based on blind faith, at best, can create a religious community but not social cohesiveness. Thus, the education curriculum should be based on secular principles.

Bangladesh aspires for establishing a true democracy. Setting up democracy without a high level of education is virtu-

ally not possible. The quality of education imparted should also be good.

For good governance, or efficient democratic administration or balanced social and economic progress, education is essential. This is why huge investment was made in the education sector by advanced countries like USA, Japan and former USSR. It may be pointed out that there will be remarkable increase remittances from our workers abroad if we are able to export more skilled personnel instead of unskilled hands.

Our democracy would have been more effective if the level of education of our voters could be improved. With the spread of secular education the covert activities of Islamic militants may diminish.

The new government appears to be concentrating on increasing the facilities of teachers to attract brighter students to accept teaching as their career. It is also striving to introduce a "one channel education system" for the unity of the nation.

We are hopeful about adoption of a good education policy because it is learned that the new education policy is going to be based mainly on the well-thought-out recommendations of the Kudrat-e-Khuda Commission.

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