

Print media merits continuing support

Demand for hundred percent duty on imported newsprint untenable

THE Bangladesh Paper Mills Association has raised a demand that we find on close examination to be not only unmerited but also one seemingly designed to subvert the growth of newspaper industry. The association has ostensibly sought protection of the local industry by demanding that newspapers buy 50 percent of their total requirement locally and the remainder 50 per cent through import carrying a 100 per cent duty.

On top of the sheltered market, regardless of the quality of newsprint and the price at which they sell, they are asking for the import cost to be prohibitive. In other words, they want to eat the cake and take it home also.

Back in 2001 a quota for local purchase was fixed along with a high duty on imported newsprint. This preferential arrangement for local paper mills continued until 2007-08. In spite of such assured market and concessional treatment for seven years the quality of local newsprint didn't improve but its price increased all the same. Monopoly market far from helping industrial growth hinders it and the lack of competition also leads to higher price.

The national budget 2007-08 adopted a policy of zero tariff on imported newsprint carrying 30 per cent duty up until then, yielding dividends. It would raise the number and quality of newspapers while the readers could buy these with more pages at a reasonable price.

The fact of the matter is that the price of poor quality local newsprint is Tk 50,000 per tonne in contrast to Tk 42,500 for improved quality foreign newsprint. Besides, the local newsprint is such a poor stuff that its use entails a lot of waste. As for the imported newsprint, even with a zero duty, the newspaper industry has to pay 19 per cent levy to the government exchequer as VAT and other dues.

The cost of running newspapers has increased manifold including the mandatory requirement of implementing the seventh wage board. Since newsprint constitutes 80 per cent of the production cost it needs hardly any elaboration that if the price of newsprint is nearly doubled, as would be the case if the demand is acceded to, the publisher, journalist, news organisation and reader will all stand to lose.

Newspaper is not merely an industry; it is indeed being increasingly looked upon as a vehicle for free flow of information, a medium for advocacy, spread of education, social consciousness and catalysis, cultural and emotional expressions, articulation of public grievances, and above all, as a feedback mechanism for the government on its policies and actions.

We are all for promotion of local industry, but this must be based on improved quality of product and competitiveness in pricing. If any segment tries to pressurise the government into obtaining any undue advantage tantamount to striking at the root of newspaper industry it will not only be counter-productive but harmful for the nation as well. While fully echoing the NOAB's concern that if the demand in question is accepted it will not only impede free flow of information but also jeopardise the fate of all those associated with the industry, we urge the government not yield to the pressure of any vested quarter.

Manmohan Singh begins his second term

Neighbours expectations for good ties grow

A 20-member Indian cabinet led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been sworn in. While India's people look forward enthusiastically to a further strengthening of democracy in the days ahead, India's neighbours hope for more developed and concrete ties with Delhi in the coming years. In one of his early pronouncements, Mr. Singh made it known that his intention was to focus on improving ties with countries in the region. A rejuvenated Manmohan Singh can now look forward to an implementation of that goal in South Asia.

As the predominant power in South Asia, India can certainly play a significant role in the development of regional cooperation through such bodies as SAARC. On a bilateral basis and given the sweeping changes that have been taking place around the globe, India can give itself a boost by moving forward to resolve the issues between it and its neighbours. It is upon a resolution of those issues that closer ties between Delhi and other nations can be forged. The dividends that can accrue from such an approach are easy to foresee. A spirit of generosity on India's part can surely contribute to good neighbourly ties. Where India's relations with Bangladesh are concerned, in terms of specifics, there are certain crucial areas where both Delhi and Dhaka must take a deeper look into the issues.

Of the issues, the question of a sharing of the waters of common rivers surely is of the utmost concern. The Indian authorities, especially at a time when the Tipaimukh dam is a major source of worry for many in Bangladesh, should be able to adopt a positive attitude to the issue. Another issue requiring quick and mutually acceptable resolution is the maritime boundary problem. In the economic area, the trade imbalance between Dhaka and Delhi has been a constant source of worry for the former. It is perhaps time for a fresh new approach and a major breakthrough to be made to the issue. Besides these issues, the vexing question of border skirmishes and the matter of undemarcated frontiers should be a matter of priority for the two governments.

Over the next five years, a spirit of purposeful cooperation should define the ties between Bangladesh and India. Such cooperation, carried on a wave of new expectations in the region, can be symbolic of the broad canvas of regional inter-linking South Asia can truly attain for itself.

Taking on sexual harassment

There is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that several premier seats of learning in the country have acquired a dubious distinction in terms of sexual harassment, where the female students instead of feeling secure under the wings of their revered teachers, find themselves vulnerable.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE High Court, in an epoch-making move, issued a set of guidelines on May 14 to plug a gaping hole in the country's existing laws through introducing a first-ever ban on any kind of sexual abuse and harassment of women, girls, and children at their workplaces, educational institutions, and other public places including roads.

A HC bench came up with the guidelines, directives and ruling as an interim measure until new laws could be passed in the parliament against sexual abuse and harassment of girls and women.

The HC has also directed the concerned authorities to form a five-member harassment complaint committee headed by a woman at every workplace and institution to investigate allegations from girls or women for any mental, physical, or sexual harassment and recommend to the authorities for taking action against the accused persons.

According to the guidelines, nobody can touch with any bad intention any part of the body of a woman or girl. No indecent word or comment can be made to them and no unknown woman or adult girl can be addressed as a beautiful one with any bad intention.

The HC has also criminalised teasing girls and women through e-mail or telephone and ordered that any kind of provocation or character assassination will have to be stopped. The HC has, however, prohibited the concerned authorities from

disclosing the names and addresses of the complainants and accused persons until the allegations are proved.

Sexual abuse and harassment against girls and women in their educational institutions and workplaces have been endemic as they often feel helpless and ashamed to speak out if they were harassed in the absence of any specific law to punish the perpetrators of harassment.

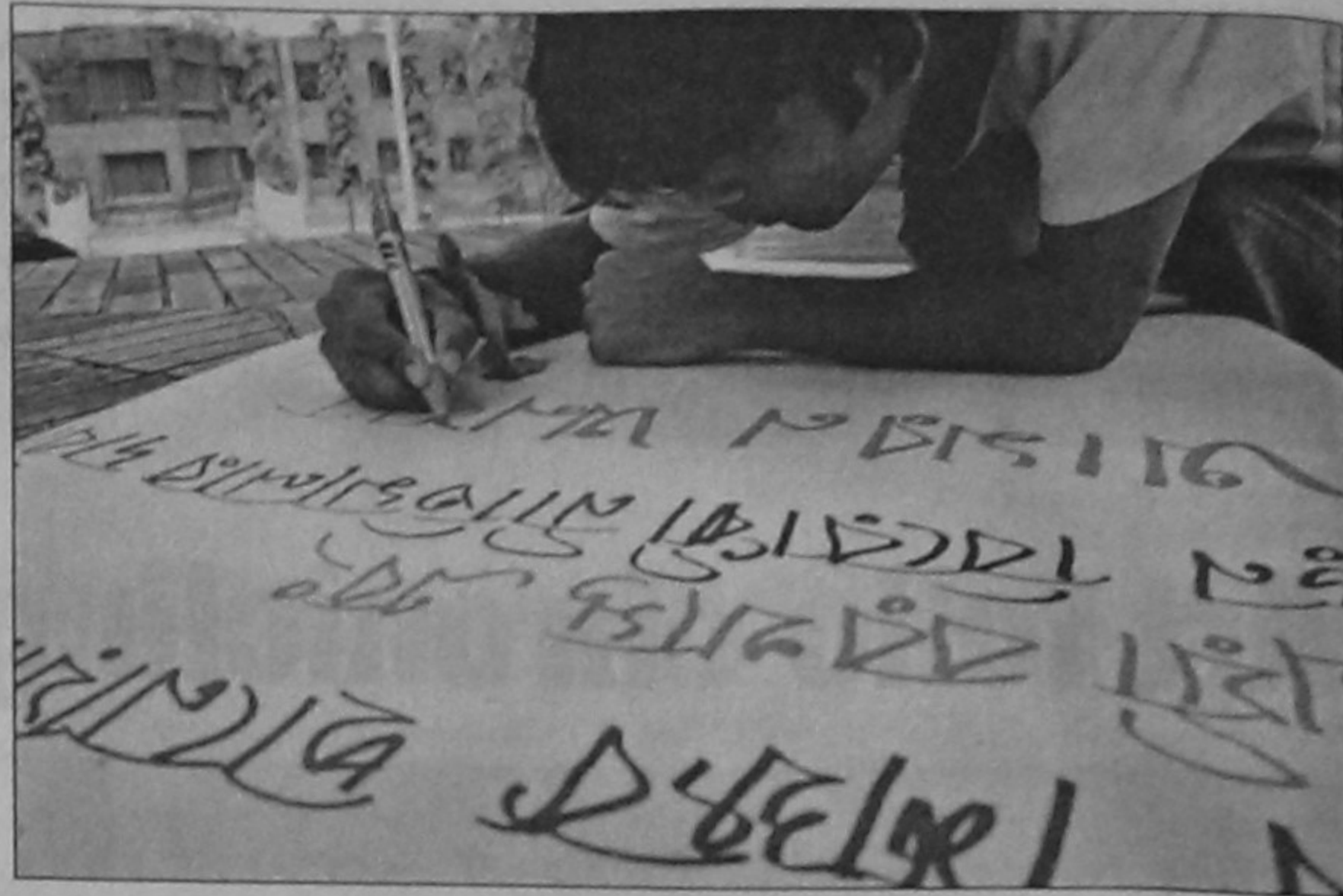
These crimes came to light for the first time in July 2008, when several public universities received a spate of complaints from their female students of sexual abuse and harassment by their teachers, prompting the education ministry to instruct the University Grants Commission for formulation of a policy to stop it.

The general students of Jahangirnagar University burst into protests after four female students of the drama and dramatics department had brought allegations of sexual harassment against the chairman of the department.

The JU authorities formed three separate probe bodies, which examined witnesses and issued reports with clear findings against the accused teacher. But one finds it quite painful as the JU authorities exonerated the accused teacher from the charge of sexual harassment and suspended six students on charge of assaulting him.

The matter had come to such a pass that a third-year female student of the same department tried to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills due to the deep shock she received at the syndicate's decision.

The HC on May 17, has declared illegal



Justice at last?

JU authorities' decision to exonerate the JU drama and dramatics department chairman from sexual harassment charges and to suspend six students on charge of assaulting him. The HC has also directed the JU authorities to hold a fresh enquiry into the incident and take action.

The decision of JU syndicate to exonerate an accused teacher from sexual harassment charges, disregarding the findings of three separate enquiry committees, has put the academy to great shame.

There is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that several premier seats of learning in the country have acquired a dubious distinction in terms of sexual harassment, where the female students instead of feeling secure under the wings of their revered teachers, find themselves vulnerable. Certainly, it is quite disgraceful for the teaching community as a whole.

In its landmark judgment, the HC has introduced first-ever sexual harassment ban, pending enactment of a law to resist sexual harassment of women. But the set of

guidelines laid down in the HC's verdict has no real direction in terms of punishment to the accused persons if they are found guilty. There is no guideline for forming harassment complaint committee in the educational institutions, where sexual harassment is endemic.

Now the paramount task before the members of our parliament is to pay heed to this crucial need and instruct the relevant agencies to formulate a full-fledged law to be enacted as soon as possible for resisting sexual harassment of women.

We must also remember that enactment of law is not enough to resist sexual harassment of women. The government and the women's right activists also need to organise vigorous campaigns to change the mindset of people in general and the males in particular, creating a familial atmosphere among all men and women in their workplaces to wipe out the ailing culture of sexual harassment.

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The cost of smuggling

Assuming an average customs duty rate of 25 percent, the lost revenue stands at Tk. 200 crore annually. Taking bootleg smuggling and other small check posts into account, the total revenue loss might hover around Tk. 300 crore!

ABDUL BAYES

RECENTLY, I was invited by the National Defense College (NDC) to speak on smuggling. I was happy to accept the invitation because, when NDC started its journey, I was one of the members of the board of governors (as VC of JU) and also attended the inaugural function.

Our expectations at that time were that NDC would grow to be an internationally reputed institution of excellence. To be honest, I found our expectations coming true with more than half of about fifty participants (high level military and civil officials) coming from abroad and gradual improvements in the infrastructure.

Talking about smuggling is just like talking about the lost revenues of the government. The determinants of smuggling are many but few should be cited: price differentials, misaligned exchange rate, high transaction and logistic costs of trade, underdeveloped check posts and corrupt, and weak law enforcing agencies.

Most of our illegal trade is with India through the porous border. In fact, roughly 70 percent of the total imports from India

come through land ports in western and eastern zones to convey the message that most of the smuggling between Bangladesh and India is through land ports.

"Bootleg smuggling" generally dominates the discourse on smuggling. Small quantities of commodities are carried across the border through head loads, bicycles, small boats, etc. Not only Bangladesh, but other countries are also scared of bootleg smuggling of alcohols, tobacco, drugs etc. If one could carry some cartons of cigarettes from US to Canada, the costs of travel could easily be recouped. Or a few bottles of wine from France to England might allow a comfortable stay in London. This is "bootleg smuggling" -- small in quantities per head but large number of heads. To contain such illegal trade, the best way is to lower import duties and domestic taxes so that the traders find no incentive to engage in such kind of trade.

Historically, Bangladesh's illegal imports from India have hovered around 30 times more than its illegal exports to India. The trend in legal trade is no different. Theoretically speaking, a liberalisation of trade through rationalisation of tariff struc-

ture and lowering of customs duties should reduce smuggling. In fact, it has done so over the years.

Now, illegal trade is reported to constitute roughly 60-70 percent of the legal trade of more than \$2 billion compared to 1.5 to 2 times in the 1980s or earlier times. But the most important thing to note is that trade liberalisation has prompted illegal trade through legal routes. That is, trade is now taking place through customs posts but by illegal means. The major means are: recording lower values of imports than actual, mis-classification and mis-declaration of commodities, under and over-invoicing etc. These are mostly done in connivance with customs officials in either side of the fence. My research a couple of years back on smuggling showed that, of the total illegal imports from India, 70 per cent is "technical smuggling" and only 30 per cent is "bootleg smuggling."

How much revenue is lost by the government on account of "technical smuggling"? If illegal imports from India are 70 percent of legal trade, then total illegal trade can be approximated at \$1.4 billion per year. Seventy percent of that comes to about one billion dollars of illegal imports taking place through regular check posts (technical smuggling).

Assuming an average customs duty rate of 25 percent, the lost revenue stands at Tk. 200 crore annually. Taking bootleg smuggling and other small check posts into account, the total revenue loss might hover around Tk. 300 crore!

The car that drove me to and from NDC is run by gas. My own car (until sold recently) also used to run on gas. The price difference between gas and other fuels (e.g. diesel, octane, petrol) is very wide to distort the use pattern. I reckon that I spent Tk. 100 or so on gas for my visit to NDC and back. But alternative fuels would have cost at least 5-6 times more.

Why should our gas be under-priced? Why should we subsidise imported fuels for the transport of the rich? Price adjustments in this respect could yield substantial amount of revenue each year. To raise revenue, you need not have to increase taxes always. A rationalisation of tariff and tax structure along with a wider coverage of the net would be helping generate revenue for the government and reduce smuggling across the border.

By consuming smuggled goods of bootleg type, we are in fact paying taxes to the Indian government. Such smuggled goods carry central and state taxes of India at retail level. Had these been formalised through legal imports, there would be no such taxes from Indian side and Bangladesh government would get taxes through tariffs.

Reduce customs duties and domestic taxes, you end up with increased revenues for the government. Like poverty, smuggling cannot possibly be eliminated -- only reduced.

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Declining status of RU teachers

What struck me was that only a few teachers were seated and most of the teachers were standing. However, I found a good number of fourth class and third class employees who were seated. What was most pathetic was that at least half a dozen teachers were standing in the doorways.

PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

WHILE it is true that university teaching as a profession has lost its excellence, it was still well regarded in the society even in the recent past. When I was a student during the mid 1990s, I found a special distinction for this profession.

Rajshahi University, the second largest university of Bangladesh, had a good reputation in the past. Even when I was a student I had a dream to be a teacher of RU. However, in due course of time, my hopes and aspirations faded away. The experience of ten years of teaching has offered me several bitter experiences, which has created a sense of dissatisfaction.

The main intention of this write up is not to highlight those issues. Rather, an attempt is made to shed light on one example which would offer the readers an understanding about the status of RU

teachers: the transport facilities for the RU teachers.

RU authorities provide transport facilities to the teachers to go to different places within Rajshahi city. There are a few buses which are reserved for teachers and officers (although, I am still not convinced about the definition of the officers since the passengers travelling those buses range from fourth class employees to class one officers along with teachers).

Teachers are required to pay a certain amount of money as bus-fare, which is curtailed from their salary every month. It is important to mention that I seldom travel on these buses since they look overcrowded all the time.

Now, we are passing through very hot weather in Rajshahi since April. Thus, travelling on a rickshaw at midday is quite difficult. Recently, having found no other alternative, I boarded one of the buses to go to Rajshahi city.

The bus was scheduled at 12:10 pm. I boarded the bus at about 12 pm. The bus was full. I noticed different categories of passengers, ranging from fourth class employees to first class officers, teachers, family members of the teachers, officers, employees, and a good number of kids who were returning back to their home after completing school.

What struck me was that only a few teachers were seated and most of the teachers were standing. However, I found a good number of fourth class and third class employees who were seated. What was most pathetic was that at least half a dozen teachers were standing in the doorways.

This was not the case for that day only. It was happening for a long time. However, no initiative was taken from any administration to oversee the issue. As far as my knowledge goes, a group of young teachers took an initiative and collected signature of teachers and demanded for separation of buses for the teachers during 2000-2001. However, finally decision was not taken at that time.

I am not sure whether there had been any initiative in this regard since after 2001. Travelling with others in the same bus is not a matter of indulgence for the teachers. However, given the societal setting of Bangladesh, a teacher may expect to be in an advantageous position. It looks very odd when we notice a senior professor is stand-

ing in the bus while a fourth class employee is seated.

When I joined the university, I had lots of dream. Of course, I fulfilled some of those. But, some bitter experiences like travelling on buses have created a sense of inferiority within me. Now, it is up to the readers to judge the status of RU teachers. The case of bus is only one. We have lots of problems which need the immediate attention of the authority.

We know that our resources are limited. Thus, the government as well as the university authority could not afford to offer us with lots of facilities. Even though, this is the time to think on such issues. The university authority should have taken some decision in this regard.

I know that if the university authority wants to separate buses for the teachers they will have to buy new buses which will require extra allocation of funds. In order to implement such initiatives, the authority should negotiate with the government and the government should respond positively in order to uphold the dignity of the teaching profession. Otherwise, in the near future, candidates with better calibre would lose interest in building their career in the field of university teaching.

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