

Putting the BDR mutineers on trial

Let justice be done, in expeditious and credible manner

THE government's decision on the modalities of the trial of those involved in the BDR mutiny last February finally sets the ball rolling. That is not to say that it has had an easy time of it. What with all the loopholes in the laws pertaining to discipline in the Bangladesh Rifles and the difficulties involved in invoking the Army Act in trying the mutineers, the government certainly had to operate within a number of ambiguities and constraints. At one point, it turned to the Supreme Court for its opinion, which in its turn sought the advice of eminent jurists before coming to the conclusion that the BDR mutiny could not be prosecuted under the Army Act.

One must now consider the merits in the government move. It has decided that offences like killing, attempt to murder, arson and looting will be tried under the penal code, with other offences such as violation of superiors' orders and breaking discipline coming under the relevant BDR laws. It thus appears to have made a clear distinction between those who actively participated in the tragedy and those who instigated their acts. There are the ones directly involved and those incidentally associated with the perpetration of the tragedy. Such a distinction will surely be in order. Even so, the fact cannot be ignored that those who played a behind the scenes role in the making of the tragedy cannot but be considered accessory to the murders committed on February 25 and 26 this year.

One understands, of course, that the methods of the trials determined by the government may leave the families of the dead unhappy and perhaps even resentful. The trauma they have gone through and are yet passing through is too fresh and raw to be forgotten or ignored. However, the bigger issue here is one of ensuring justice. Those guilty of the murders of February must be punished, but in a way that allows no scope for a miscarriage of justice. While we do not want that delayed justice should lead to a denial of justice, we are also conscious of the truth that hurried justice may quite possibly create a condition where justice gets to be buried through sheer mishandling of a case. The government has spoken of a speedy trial. The bigger thought is that it should be an expeditious trial that does not leave any questions unanswered.

A positive point that will surely emerge from a successful and credible prosecution of the accused in the BDR case is that it will assuage concerns about the trial outside Bangladesh and will indeed be a recognition of the country's justice system being based on fair play and transparency. Our state of rule of law will stand vindicated.

One last word. A good length of time has already elapsed vis-à-vis the trial of the BDR mutineers. Now that things are beginning to fall in place, let it be the priority for the country to see justice done and be seen to be done and then move on. Those who were murdered at Pikhana will never come back, but seeing their killers pay for their crimes will be one way of easing our collective sorrow.

Rajuk impinging on river bank

How could they get government's approval?

IT is quite surprising that at a time when heightened consciousness of environmental concerns is the order of the day, we have the predicament of hearing the news of a key development agency of the government flouting environmental laws. Rajuk has filled up 30-50 metres inside the river Shitalakhyia at the eastern side of the Kanchan bridge for the purpose of developing its Purbachal Town project. This is in clear violation of the existing laws on rivers and canals that up to 50 metres from the point where the river water reaches during the high tide should be regarded as river bank.

Little wonder, the river has been losing width and changing bank-line ever since Rajuk's earth filling activity in the area began in 2005. The satellite images are a proof of it.

What is particularly intriguing is that apparently Rajuk has a government approval, that too without any explanatory note that the citizens deserved. The river banks are the given jurisdiction of the Bangladesh Water Development Board and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority. The Bangladesh Water Development Board in particular took issue with the Rajuk to stop encroaching on the river banks that amounted to degrading the environment sustained by the waterways. But these objections fell on deaf ears on both Rajuk and the relevant authorities of the government. For even the government seems to have approved the project without any deference shown to the WDB's opinion and the environmentalists' legitimate concerns.

We know how these lifelines of river belts girdling Shitalakhyia, Buriganga and Balu have been almost irreversibly damaged by land grabbing and other commercial activities. And the Prime Minister herself has expressed her concern over the matter and issued directives to put a brake on river grabbing. There are powerful court rulings asking for restoration of river banks. But if the government or any of its agencies should behave like encroachers what is the difference with private party or individual grabbers?

In this context, we urge the government to revisit the issue and ensure that an effective balance be struck between environment and urbanisation.

Are we becoming what we eat?

Rudolf claimed that man owed everything that liberates him internally to the substances derived from plants. What about the faculties that enable him to be actively engaged in earthly life? These qualities are largely derived from meat diet.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

"A man is what he eats," said German philosopher Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach. Feuerbach believed that what man produced was basically the result of food ingested by him. What does that tell about us? Contaminated food is contaminating us.

Where is the link? Of course, nobody will dispute that adulterated food is injurious to health. Formalin-laced fish, or chemical-sprayed fruits and vegetables are leading us to slow death. Crushed bricks are blended with chili powder. Then we have children's food coloured with industrial dye.

If it affects the body, then it also affects the mind. Could it be that we don't stick to our commitments because of chemical-induced disorientation? Could it be that cheating, frauds, bribery, shams and pretensions are outcomes of psychosomatic disruptions? Is that why we are quick-tempered, aggressive and intolerant?

On January 8, 1909, Rudolf Steiner gave a lecture in Munich on the problems of nutrition. He talked about the ascent from the

purely physical realm to the spiritual realm and divided it into four different layers -- the physical body, the etheric body, the astral body and the ego. While the etheric body is concerned with the preservation of the physical body, the astral body nurses the ego, which is responsible for constant build up and destruction of food consumed.

Rudolf claimed that man owed everything that liberates him internally to the substances derived from plants. What about the faculties that enable him to be actively engaged in earthly life? These qualities are largely derived from meat diet.

The proof, he said, was that the people from militant nations generally ate meat. On the other hand, a preference for a vegetarian diet prevailed among people who developed an introverted and contemplative existence. Another example he cited was coffee versus tea. Everything in the activity of our nerves that has to do with logical consistency and drawing of conclusions is strengthened by coffee. Tea, which tears thoughts asunder, is the opposite. This is why tea is not a popular drink amongst diplomats.

The bottom line is that food has connec-

tions with the soul by the way of the body. Somewhere in the digestion process, the contaminants are separated from other ingredients, and then absorbed into the blood and lymphatic systems. Somewhere these contaminants ride with digested fats when the lymphatic system carries fatty acid and glycerol onto blood vessels going into heart.

If not, they travel in the bloodstream and reach our livers. Perhaps here they hide amongst the excess glucose, which is stored as glycogen for emergency use. Maybe, some of these harmful particles end up in the cells, which take glucose from the blood for respiration.

It's not rocket science that adulterated food is nutrient deficient. On top of that, contamination has its ruinous effect. Failing health gradually catches up with mind. It diminishes the power of the brain. It destroys memory, weakens resolve and interferes with mood and temper.

Here is an example of how the mind can get diluted by disastrous diet. A former vice-president, who became the law minister of this country, spent 20 months in jail for possession of 14 bottles of liquor. But people who put poison in our food pay a few thousand taka in fine. If we are lucky, some of them might get three to six months in jail. Clear sign of inconsistency as a result of impaired judgment. No! Nah!

The problem of food adulteration is nothing new under the sun. It has been there since ancient times, the most common form

being mixing of water in alcoholic drinks. In 15th and 16th century Germany the adulteration of various foods and beverages was rampant, despite severe punishments. Literature of the 16th century mentions brick dust in ginger, and unhealthy stuff in pepper; dishonest weights and counts, artificial colouring, and storage of dried spices in damp cellars to increase weight.

The difference between now and then is the level of punishment. In ancient Babylonia, people who watered down the beer got death sentence. In 1444, any merchant caught selling adulterated saffron in Bavaria was burned alive. In 1456, at Nuremberg, two men guilty of adulterating wine were buried alive.

There is now a growing clamour for going back to the past. A Chinese court recently gave death sentence to six people for adulteration of milk products. There has been public outcry demanding strict punishment in the US for a peanut plant, which shipped salmonella contaminated products. In India, a former chief minister of UP has demanded that the food adulterers should be shot to death.

Why is there no such outrage in this country? Because, lacking in substance and corrupt in mind, Feuerbach's hypothesis has been tested in us. What flourishes a man depends on what nourishes him. In a nutshell, what we eat is eating us up.

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Axing our own legs?

Trees provide a wide range of products such as timber, fruit, medicine, beverages and fodder, and services like carbon sequestration, shade, beautification, erosion control, soil fertility. Without trees human life would be unsustainable.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

WHenever I see the 70-foot-tall digital billboard outside Penn Station in Manhattan, New York, displaying the running total of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, I feel scared because the changing climate is pushing many natural systems towards critical thresholds and will alter regional and global environmental balances.

We are altering the environment far faster than the prediction of the consequences. Comparable climate shifts have happened before, but over tens of centuries, not tens of years. The unprecedented rapid change could accelerate the already high rate of species extinction as plants and animals fail to adapt quickly enough. For the first time in history, humans are affecting the ecological balance of not just a region but also of the entire world, all at once.

Almost every day we hear of yet another problem, like pollution, acid rain, global warming, the destruction of rainforests and other wild habitats, the decline and extinction of thousands of species of animals and plants...and so on. We have the economic, intellectual and technological know-how to head off this calamity and avoid the disruption and misery that inaction would entail. These range from energy saving measures and clean and renewable energy sources, to more efficient transport and better planning and management of our economies.

The solutions are probably numerous and, according to many economists, ecologists, and environmentalists, even affordable when compared with the cost of com-

placency. But forests and trees can play a central and pivotal role in slowing down and reversing some of the damage of climate change if we utilise and manage them properly. At the global level, trees and forests are closely linked with weather patterns and also the maintenance of a crucial balance in nature.

As trees offer numerous benefits for mankind, wildlife and the environment, the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep) has launched a major worldwide tree planting campaign. Under the "Plant for the Planet: Billion Tree Campaign," people, communities, business and industry, civil society organisations and governments are encouraged to make tree planting pledges with the objective of planting at least one billion trees worldwide each year. In a call to further individual and collective action, Unep has set a new goal of planting 7 billion trees by the end of 2009. The campaign strongly encourages the planting of trees that are indigenous and appropriate to the local environment.

While the movement towards a deeper commitment to environmental protection through planting new trees and taking care of the existing ones is rapidly increasing all over the world, a 10 km stretch of Teknaf beach in southeastern Bangladesh has turned barren after over 30,000 jhau (tamarisk) trees were felled by a section of local influential people during September 7-13. The forest department and other law enforcement agencies remained silent spectators of the mindless tree felling.

This report surely doesn't match with the government's earlier declaration that

says that the government is going to give over 700,000 acres of land for tree plantation through a national campaign this year as part of Bangladesh's Climate Change Strategy Action Plan, which was finalised by an inter-ministerial committee on August 26.

Although law enforcement agencies arrested over half a dozen people including a former forest guard on charges of felling the trees, and recovered about 7,500 felled trees, the damage done to the environment through denuding the land will bring irreparable natural calamity to the coastal life of Teknaf. As coastal forests act as bioshields, around half a million tamarisk trees were planted in 1995 on 700 acres of sandy beach on a stretch of about 10 km from Shahpari Dwp in Sabrang Union of the upazila to Baharchhara to protect the lives and properties of the people from erosion. But now this stretch will be at risk in any natural disaster like cyclone and tidal surge as it has become denuded land.

People who can no longer farm on eroding coastal land are moving inward to cities already crammed with jobless and desperate masses. Smaller than Illinois, US, Bangladesh has 152.6 million people, half the US population. Imagine what it will be like in 50 years, when the Bay of Bengal is predicted to cover 11 percent of Bangladesh's land. By some estimates, a one-meter sea level rise would submerge about one-third of Bangladesh's total area, uprooting 25-30 million people.

Bangladesh is set to disappear under the waves by the end of the century, says Nasa. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted that Bangladesh was on course to lose 17% of its land and 30% of its food production by 2050. Bangladesh has already begun to feel the effects of climate change as flood periods have become longer and cyclones cause greater devastation. As sea levels rise, the IPCC warned that 35 million refugees could flee Bangladesh's flooded delta by 2050.

"We have a short time to avert serious climate change. We need action and we need to plant trees. Countering climate change can take root via one billion small but significant acts in our gardens, parks, countryside and rural areas," said Achim Steiner, Executive Director of Unep, at the launching of the "Plant for the Planet: Billion Tree Campaign." The same call was made by President Bangladesh Zillur Rahman when he inaugurated the afforestation programme-2009 on June 25. "We have to plant trees to bring back the lost serene environment," he said. Globally, forest cover is at least one-third less of what it once was.

Trees provide not only environmental protection but also significant income and livelihood options for more than one billion forest-dependent people in the world. Trees provide a wide range of products such as timber, fruit, medicine, beverages and fodder, and services like carbon sequestration, shade, beautification, erosion control, soil fertility. Without trees human life would be unsustainable. Their beauty adds diversity to the world's natural landscape. Trees also play an important cultural, spiritual and recreational role in many societies. In some cases, they are integral to the very definition and survival of indigenous and traditional cultures.

While we need to plant and preserve existing trees and forests to restore the earth's forests cover and the expanding carbon sinks, and to lessen the impact of global warming, some influential people in Bangladesh don't hesitate to destroy the valuable trees and forests for their ulterior motives. And their illegal attempts repeatedly prove beyond any doubt the government's concern about the environment and greenery at the field level.

The longer the risk is ignored, the more drastic the consequences will be.

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Being good neighbours

We will always welcome close relationship with India based on mutual respect, dignity and honour. Let us hope for a new era in Bangladesh-India relations.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

AS a small country, with low level of development and high level of poverty and illiteracy, Bangladesh needs to be careful about its relations with neighbours, particularly India and China, the two emerging giants of Asia. It is certainly not proper for Bangladesh to take a partisan view about either India or China. We should be close to both.

With a long border with India, along both land and river, it is pretty difficult to develop a good relationship if both the countries are determined to see only their own respective interests. It needs a spirit of sacrifice to build the edifice of mutual trust and confidence for the benefit of their people, particularly the people at the borders.

Closer links with India depends mainly on the Indian attitude. What appears to be necessary for India is proper appreciation of the difficulties for Bangladesh due to lack of

initiative from India in resolving bilateral issues. What is required is an integrated approach to all bilateral issues.

The governments of India and Bangladesh appear to be keen on developing a cooperative relationship in various sectors. With strong, stable, democratic and friendly governments, this is an appropriate opportunity for India to create the right atmosphere for resolving ticklish bilateral issues. Our foreign minister's recent visit to India (7-10 September) to discuss various issues appears to be the right step for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh issues are demarcation of sea and land boundaries, sharing of waters of trans-boundary rivers, construction of Tipaimukh dam, transit to Nepal and Bhutan and balancing India-Bangladesh trade. India is interested in transit or trans-shipment by road, railway or waterway through Bangladesh, and cooperation in terrorism and extradition with Bangladesh.

The four days long bilateral discussions appear to have been mainly on the following issues: (a) allowing India to use Chittagong port, (b) designating Ashuganj as a new port of call, and (c) need for water-sharing agreement for the Teesta river.

India has agreed to the following: (i) facilitating Bangladesh transit to Nepal and Bhutan, (ii) providing at least 100 mw power to Bangladesh (on priority basis), (iii) increasing trade and communication facility, (iv) finalising agreement on criminal matters and combating international terrorism, illegal drug trafficking and organised crime, (v) assisting Bangladesh in dredging its rivers, and (vi) opening markets on the Bangladesh-Meghalaya border.

In principle, India agreed on: (a) Providing Bangladesh with a line of credit for railway projects, and supplying locomotives, coaches and buses, (b) railway link under Indian assistance.

Apart from the above the following issues were also raised: (i) duty free access, removal of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers and improvement of infrastructure on the Indian side, and (ii) removal of barriers to Indian investments and port restrictions for specific commodities.

Our past agreements with India could not

bring us the desired results. The repeated assurances by the Indian prime minister of not hurting the interest of Bangladesh in constructing Tipaimukh dam cannot assure us. We need written agreement in the matter. The details of construction of Teesta dam have not yet been fully reported to Bangladesh. Broadly speaking, the agreed issues need further careful study by our experts before papers are ready for our prime minister's meeting with the Indian prime minister.

In the past, Indian credit (at low rate interest) could not be ultimately utilised fully by Bangladesh due to some flaws in the agreement. We should be more careful in handling such issues. We are not fully aware of the need for a rail link between Akhaura and Agartala. However, we must ensure our safety and security in undertaking such a project.

The success of our foreign minister in handling India depends on finalisation of the treaty at prime ministerial level. We will always welcome close relationship with India based on mutual respect, dignity and honour. Let us hope for a new era in Bangladesh-India relations.

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