

Public medicare cost enhanced

Who will take care of poor patients?

To a great majority of the people who avail medical service of public hospitals and health centres, the government decision to increase charges of certain services provided by them cannot come as welcome news. Public hospitals are supposed to provide free service or at best on cost basis in terms of certain facilities or at nominal costs. In reality, things are different.

The enhancement will no doubt put the very poor at a great disadvantage. The immediate impact has been discernible with some patients reportedly choosing to leave hospital, being no longer able to afford to pay the cost of hospital treatment. One would recall that such a plan was dropped in 2005, and rightly so.

We understand that not all charges have been increased but glancing through the list prices of a few specialist services like pathological and imaging tests, indispensable for specialist treatment, could well have been left untouched. In some cases charges have been enhanced by more than 50 percent, which appears to be unreasonable.

We find it hard to accept the health minister's rationale for imposition of 'user fee' recommended in the draft health policy that this would increase access to health service for people. On the contrary, we feel that this would deprive the poor of their right to health which is guaranteed by the constitution, and may also be looked upon as commercialising public healthcare system.

It is a weak argument too that increased revenue would enhance the quality of service. It is facile to talk about improving the quality of service that would leave out a large chunk of people from its ambit. It is the government's obligation to ensure that every citizen, especially the poor and the marginalised, has access to affordable health care system.

Our healthcare system, experts aver, on the whole has been a neglected sector and with the onset of many new diseases in the country health service needs to be geared up and made available without necessarily taxing the pocket of the poor. For a country like ours the health sector of necessity will have to be heavily subsidised, or else, as experts claim, it would be difficult to meet the millennium development goals.

It would be thus our hope that the government would reassess the issue while at the same time address the management of public hospitals and healthcare centres both in the cities as well as in the villages and outlying areas, which, needless to say, are in a poor state.

Errant Rab men

A concern that must be addressed squarely

THE standing of Rab, a special anti-crime crack force, must have been jolted, or lowered in the public eye, following the arrest of two Rab men reportedly involved in mugging and looting. The report is a really shocker, given the slide in law and order which leaves citizens in a state of quandary already.

Introduction of Rab was based on the idea of developing a crack force to deal with the ever-deteriorating law and order which posed a grave threat to people's security. But such reports of Rab personnel being themselves engaged in criminal activities seem to justify the criticism that grant of sweeping powers can neither bode well for any law enforcing agency, far less the public.

There has been a surge in criminal activities across the country with professional goons and extortionists taking charge of the situation. Here, Rab is expected to get down to business with renewed vigour and determination. It is not only a question of maintaining law and order, it is also a matter of keeping social peace and order intact as it shows signs of falling part.

It seems there is little or no oversight of the Rab activities. Now, the question of regulating and controlling Rab activities has assumed importance. There is no denying that criminal activities are hard to control with routine measures, particularly when the police have so many limitations, but the cure must not be worse than the malady. Rab has to prove its worth through its performance not smeared by allegations as repugnant as mugging and looting.

The Rab high-ups have to take note of the latest developments not forgetting that similar charges were brought against their men in the past also. So, alongside punishing the culprits they must also find out why and how some Rab men are committing culpable crimes. A thorough inquest into all such incidents will surely help them guide the force in the right direction.

EDITORIAL

Rape incidence: How high is high?

When vulgarity of such magnitude at one point is perceived as normal affair, a nation must pay a heavy price. The Biblical stories tell us that ancient towns were razed to the ground by God's wrath when the people indulged themselves in endless orgy of libidinal gratification that included rape.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

HAS our society started to rot from inside? If not, then why incidence of rape all across the country has risen so alarmingly? Young women and minor girls are not safe anywhere! Neither in towns, nor in villages. Why some men behave like animals? But wait, do animals rape? No, they don't. They follow a biological clock and respond accordingly.

The notions of values, morals and principles in people in society, in the rural areas in particular, seem to have disintegrated in the last twenty years. Sexual violence, especially rape, is being viewed almost as a mundane affair. But there was a time when rape of a village girl by local goons was something unheard of. Once in a while reports of dacoits picking up a young girl from a village household hit the headlines. That's all.

But today, we read harrowing tales of girls and women being raped by hooligans, and most unfortunately reportedly by men who belong to some of the major political

parties of the country. Most recently, reports of some student leaders of the ruling party unleashing an orgy of rape have only helped in taking the name of the political party to the dust. What becomes most shocking is when we hear that senior politicians and some partisan members of the law enforcing agencies try to influence the legal system to get those "boys" off the hook. So much for good governance.

When vulgarity of such magnitude at one point is perceived as normal affair, a nation must pay a heavy price. The Biblical stories tell us that ancient towns named Sodom and Gomorrah were razed to the ground by God's wrath when the people of those two towns indulged themselves in endless orgy of libidinal gratification that included drunkenness and rape besides other forms of carnal caprices.

Prophets were sent to the people of the two towns to spread the words of caution and encourage them to come to the path of redemption. But the wicked men and women were not interested. Gluttony, fighting and sexual orgies continued

unashamedly. When nothing worked the prophets gave up and left the towns. Soon after, God acted quickly and decisively. Today, there is no trace of the two towns.

Well, those are not mere stories, but are mentioned abundantly in the holy scriptures. We are supposed to learn lessons from them. Nations that did so have been able to create better societies for the citizens. Yes, rape and other forms of sexual violence are present even in the highly developed societies, but the laws are equally severe and active in giving the culprits stern punishment, often death sentence when rape is followed by homicide.

Well, the less we talk about our legal system the better when it comes to rape. When such a despicable crime is being committed every other day, we hardly hear the top leaders giving strict instructions to the law enforcers to apprehend the culprits. They never say... "anyone... party men or not... student leaders or not... we want to see them brought to the court in shackles and treated like loathsome criminals."

It is equally condemnable that when any criminal is branded as a student leader, we see a change in the attitude of the police officials. They start to call different people and talk in a hush, hush voice. Soon instructions come via cell phones and the police officers get busy. The so-called students and student leaders look happy as they get the green signal to walk out of the police station. So, despite the promises of

the central leaders, law enforcers treat ordinary people and those who do politics differently.

We keep hearing that police officials show reluctance in arresting local level political workers and student leaders in fear of getting a transfer order to Khagrachari. Please tell us that we have heard the wrong thing. When political workers and student leaders get protection from local politicians and the police for committing a serious crime like rape, they get emboldened and commit more such crimes. Therefore, if those young criminals are not caught and given severe punishment today, this society of ours will be overrun by hardened criminals tomorrow, and a time will come when they would dare to enter our houses in broad daylight to pick up our daughters.

The onus of creating a crime-free, just and friendly society rests with the political party in power as well the major opposition parties. They should equally exert pressure on the law enforcing agencies to curb crime. But, in this country, opposition political parties rejoice when crime level begins to go up. They keep quiet and never offer any help to save the people from the criminals. They do so to use the crime statistics to woo voters during the next election. So, you see, politics is all about getting elected to power.

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A paean to India's melody queen

Which song is the best of her six-decade oeuvre? We are spoilt for choice, of course: she has 30,000 on offer, which makes it about four a day, not counting holidays. Phenomena do not get more phenomenal than that.

M.J. AKBAR

THE 80th birthday of Lata Mangeshkar, surely the greatest popular singer of our lifetime and beyond, invites an irresistible question: which song is the best of her six-decade oeuvre? We are spoilt for choice, of course: she has 30,000 on offer, which makes it about four a day, not counting holidays. Phenomena do not get more phenomenal than that.

Her usual is so much better than the best around her. She lifted ordinary into memorable, and was superb when the musical score was minimalist. She excelled with Naushad, who distilled the purity of a raga with an aesthete's light touch, never better than "Khuda meherbaan ho tumhara, dharake dil ka payaam le lo/ Tumhari duniya se jaa rahan hain, utho hamara salaam le lo." The second line is not there to remind you of lyrics but to recall the music.

Compare Shankar-Jaikishan when Lata sang for them, and when they were with anyone else. They made fools of themselves when they fought with Lata and switched to Sharda, and were soon piling violins into the background to ameliorate the foreground. Suman Kalyanpur, the would-be alter ego, could hold a note, but was simply not in the same class.

My great regret is that Lata and Rafi did not sing together for three years because of royalty disputes. Individually they were masters; together they were magical. Witness the eternal song from Kaali Topi Laal Roomal: "Laagi chute na ab to sanam, chahe jaaye jiya teri kasam." Rafi deserved a

Bharat Ratna too, even if he died at 55 and denied us decades of thrall. Hemant Kumar, or Hemantada to Kolkatwallahs, was absolutely right to refuse a Padma Shri. That genius could never be an also-ran. The silken bonds of the Lata-Hemant number from House No. 44, "Neend na mujhko aaye, dil mera ghabraaye" could capture you forever.

As for the big question: preference cannot be locked into the straitjacket of mathematical formula. Since the personal is creeping into public space through this column, there will be those who sniff and others who snigger. But, as any politician says on the eve of an election: "Please saar listen please, with folded hands."

The finest Lata solo, on my admittedly prejudiced list, is that sublime harmony of voice, word and music so delicate that you can hear it only through Lata's vocals, "Ja ja baalamu, Sautan ke sangh raat bitaayi kahe karat ab jhotti batiyaan." See what heights Shankar-Jaikishan ascended when they got themselves out of the way. The verse, lifted by near-absence of instruments, is an exquisite blend of mischief hovering above pain and captures, with love, the ethos of an age. Sentiment steps outside boring adoration, and smiles at its own excess. A lover's complaint that never descends into the self-abasement of a moan.

English cannot hope to convey the meaning of "sautan," so we shall merely describe her as a woman's competitor for her lover's affections. He has just returned after spending nights with the other, and Lata's hurt voice keeps pushing him away, but never pushing him too far, for he belongs to her.



Lata Mangeshkar

"Aaaa jaane jaan". The Lata who could mesmerise you in Vyjanthimala's *Madhumati* ("Main to kab se khadi is paar..."), hypnotise you in Sadhana's *Woh Kaur Thi* ("Naina barsey rim jhim rim jhim") and perhaps tranquillise you in Bina Rai's *Anarkali* ("Yeh zindagi uski hai, jo kisi ka ha gaya") could also energise you with Gen Next Mumtaz in *Bindiya chamkegi, churi chamkegi...* This, too, is the song of a new epoch, as much of a breakthrough as "Aayega aayega, aayega aane wala" in *Madhubala's Mahal*.

In the 1970s, Lata skins the soppiness out of sentiment and tells her lover that she may or may not be around when he arrives with his *baaraat*, and if he loses any sleep over this, tough luck.

Love is so much sweeter when sprinkled with sauce.

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Government-opposition relations

We must broaden our outlook to encourage interactions between followers of different political parties to develop better understanding among political parties to lead the country to the road to democracy.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE post-independence politico-administrative history of Bangladesh may be divided broadly into four parts. They are,

- Period of rehabilitation and reconstruction (1972-75),
- Period of military dictatorship (1976-90),
- Period of regained democracy (1991-2006), and
- Period of civil-military interim government (2007-08).

In our struggle for independence we sacrificed a lot for economic and political freedom. Unfortunately, we could achieve little due to political instability.

We may not have been able to achieve our goals. We need not be frustrated. Whatever may be the extent of our success it cannot be ignored. With our weak economy we have been able to survive so many natural disasters during the last 38 years. We are facing the world's worst economic crisis better than many countries economi-

cally and politically stronger than us.

We have been able to successfully overthrow military dictatorships and semi-military governments due to the strength of the people's opinion mobilised by our political parties, particularly the major ones.

Our people prefer democracy to dictatorial type of government despite inherent incompetence of democracy. The government, which made many commitments at the polls, has not yet been able to show clearly and confidently that it is capable of achieving its goals. This appears to be due to its defective assessment of the capability of the administration and overestimation of the capacity of young politicians chosen for ministerial positions by ignoring some mature and vastly experienced politicians.

The government's reliance on some retired bureaucrats has not been able to raise the level of administrative efficiency. Rather it has not been taken well by the seasoned politicians.

The recent promotions will not help the government in its drive for quickening the

pace of work. Bureaucrats are, in the true sense, hired servants of the people and work for the benefit of the people. In reality, government servants hardly think about the people. They are always eager to protect their own interest.

Negative politics is a big hindrance to growth. By attempting to frustrate the beneficial activities of the government the opposition may gain for a short time; but it harms the interest of the people. Why should we not take a lesson from our big neighbour India, where democracy has progressed so much despite the fact that they face more difficulties than us. Why cannot we face our national crises unitarily? Why should the opposition be concerned at the success of the government?

It is easy to find faults with the government. We understand that the government has made some blunders during the last 9 months because of

- Inexperience of some ministers,
- Global economic crisis,
- Highly politicised bureaucracy,
- Inheritance of misdeeds of the 4-party alliance government,
- Lack of adequate cooperation from some disgruntled, seasoned and experienced leaders of the party.

The omissions and blunders can be rectified if proper action is taken in time. It would be wrong for us to pass any firm judgment on the performance of the gov-

ernment on the basis of its activities during its 9-month rule.

Overcoming the present difficulties needs the concerted effort of a united nation. The government must work hard to ensure participation of the opposition, who may show a spirit of cooperation and ignore the smaller mistakes of the government at this critical juncture. They may compete with the party/parties in power and avoid unjustified criticism.

They may sort out small issues like allotment of seats on the front row in the parliament or legality of allotment of government residential house to their chief in the cantonment. What is important at this stage is creation of a congenial atmosphere for parliamentary debates and discussions to make the parliament effective.

Creation of a positive political atmosphere will improve the administrative capability of the government, improve law and order situation and reduce student unrest. With smooth running democracy Bangladesh may attain the level of a middle-income country within, perhaps, a decade. We must broaden our outlook to encourage interactions between followers of different political parties to develop better understanding among political parties to lead the country to the road to democracy.

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