

Louis Kahn's legacy under assault again

Let Jatiyo Sangsad keep its architectural grandeur

THE plans formulated about what was then given out as Pakistan's second capital in Dhaka (and that was in the early 1960s) were aimed at marking off and developing an area to be noted for its architectural as well as aesthetic beauty. In time, as a result of Bangladesh's War of Liberation, the second capital became Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, housing the Jatiyo Sangsad and the sprawling verdant area around it. Conceived and shaped into form and substance by the reputed Louis Kahn, the area was expected to maintain its pristine nature and serve as a proper and elegant symbol of Bangladesh's democratic politics. That, unfortunately, appears to have been an aim much to be trifled with. As a report and a photograph in yesterday's issue of this newspaper show, for yet one more time the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar complex is under grievous assault and this time in a way that can only leave the entire structural pattern of the area mutilated.

The tragedy is that it has always been the government, at a given point in time, which has systematically brought the Jatiyo Sangsad area to a bad pass. Now, it appears, the authorities are busy destroying the beauty of the area by leasing out land within the JS complex area. If such plans come through, much of the artistic quality which has always defined the area will have been spoilt, thus making the spot yet one more of the ubiquitous specimens of drab realities we have seen grow in this traditionally unplanned capital. Why the government should go for such a move is not only puzzling but bizarre as well. As it is, only a few years ago, a howl of protest was raised when reports emerged of part of the area being used to build residences for the speaker and deputy speaker of the JS. That was not the way things were supposed to be, for once the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar region was completed in the early 1970s, it was expected to stay that way for good without any additions or encroachments coming in.

In the circumstances, we urge the authorities to rethink any plan, now or in the future, to lease out land in the JS area. If lines are not drawn here, there will soon be time when other protected and structured areas will come under the axe as well.

Essential prices spiraling beyond control

The government must act decisively

THERE appears to be no let up in the rise of prices of vegetables and daily consumer items. We saw a comedy being played out in the month of Ramadan when the FBBCCI and the ministry of commerce through the so-called joint efforts of market surveillance were successful in doing nothing at all to check price hike. If anything, the empty rhetoric emanating from some government high-ups only helped to raise price level even further. And strangely, it is only in Bangladesh that price rise of essential commodities have a ratchet effect, once it goes up it never comes down. Statistics will bear out the assertion.

It appears too that well recognized economic laws do not apply in the case of Bangladesh. Were it the case than how does one account for a bumper crop and yet a rise in price of rice, although in percentage terms the increase of price of rice/paddy was the lowest. How does one explain the marked difference in the price of sugar between the mill gate and the retail shops, and that too when the retail price was fixed by the government? How does one explain the quantum price difference of common Ramadan items like lentils and all varieties of pulses and vegetables from what it was the day before the start of the month and the very first day of Ramadan?

We ask why the market forces are not being able to operate in Bangladesh. Even the government intervention, half-hearted, ill-planned and untimely though it was, couldn't stem the price escalation of essential commodities. Much as the business chambers would like to discount the accusation of hoarding and syndication, the fact is that we are in the grip of a very vicious group of manipulators whose sole aim is to make profit beyond the reasonable margin. The case of sugar price manipulation during the month of Ramadan through hoarding, which reportedly brought a windfall profit for some, should put to rest all the arguments against syndication.

It is time for the relevant ministries to act. The unholy nexus between the dealers at the wholesale level must be broken. The government cannot remain a hapless spectator when the market mechanisms are ruthlessly trampled by immoral, dishonest and depraved businessmen who exploit occasions like Ramadan and Puja festivals to pocket huge profit at the expense of the poor consumers. These traders must be made examples of.

We believe that market mechanisms must be allowed to operate freely. And should it be distorted, the government must act decisively and timely to offset it. It is time too to set up a monopolies and restrictive trade practice commission, with the task to act as a watchdog over monopolistic, unfair and restrictive trade practices and the power to take legal action against such practices, in the interest of the consumers.

Dipu Moni, foreign diplomats and self-esteem

The point here, for us in the media, is that some of us tend to think that our poverty has pushed our self-esteem into a corner. Or that the poor are not entitled to self-esteem.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

FOREIGN Minister Dipu Moni makes a point. It is one that all journalists, especially those with a fascination for foreign diplomats based in Bangladesh, ought to take note of. No, there is nothing wrong, at least not much, with the diplomats. But there appears, to be something grossly not right with a section of our journalists, who seem to have come upon the truth (and have held on to it firmly) that it is all right to seek foreigners' opinions on our domestic political circumstances.

Perhaps this conviction, if you can call it that, on the part of these media men, stems from a feeling that since it is governments abroad which sustain us through their aid and their advice, it is only natural that their representatives here will have a right to comment on Bangladesh's internal politics. Well, that feeling is wrong. It is not right that whenever a western diplomat emerges from a meeting with one of our political or administrative luminaries, he should be asked for his point of view on what we should be doing about changing our fate.

Obviously, of course, the unique nature of

our politics does give foreign governments a handle to deal with us, sometimes even to browbeat us into submission. And you can be sure that behind all those closed-door meetings between an ambassador and some of our ministers, not much of cheering note is there. That happens to be because of the dynamics of global realities. Remember globalisation? Since that term came in (and some of us have accepted it rather happily), the world's poorer nations have not had a happy time. But let us not dwell on that now. There will be time later.

The point here, for us in the media, is that some of us tend to think that our poverty has pushed our self-esteem into a corner. Or that the poor are not entitled to self-esteem. That is plain wrong, but who will explain to these journalists (and they are all young people out to make an impression by any means) that there are certain norms you need to observe when peppering an individual, any individual, with questions? Where it is a matter of eliciting diplomats' opinions on our politics, there are and there have been many who have lost little opportunity to offer us their advice, often in a patent spirit of condescension. That is depressing, but

then you remember that there are certain other diplomats (include here the present British high commissioner to Dhaka) who have properly and diligently stayed clear of making any comment on our political situation beyond what is acceptable in diplomatese. And you feel a trifle happy.

So, as we have said already, Dipu Moni has a point, a pretty good one. But what do we do when often it is our own politicians who give themselves and the country a bad name when they seem to be falling over one another in their bid to be seen in the company of a foreign diplomat? There have been western ambassadors here who have on various occasions invited some of our leading political figures to breakfast. And the result? All those politicians, early in the morning, have trooped down to those diplomatic residences to partake of the food there, indeed to be able to have an opportunity to proffer those diplomats their points of political views.

Now, the question here is simple: these political figures who seem to find nothing wrong in accepting the invitation to that breakfast have been ministers or are ministerial material. Why is it that they do not realise the blow they are giving their self-esteem through accepting that invitation? Besides, if a foreign ambassador wishes to share breakfast with local politicians, it ought to be for the latter to ask the former to come over to their homes for tea and biscuits and not the other way round. Ah, but who

will make this point to these good men eager to have their views, or so they think, reach some important ears in distant spots like Washington or Ottawa?

Of course Dipu Moni is right. And, equally, there are others who are right as well about the way our ministers and other public figures should be dealing with not just foreign diplomats but with visiting foreign dignitaries. An entire question of protocol comes into the equation in such circumstances. A Bangladesh head of government visiting a western capital should make it a point not to feel thrilled meeting a deputy secretary of defence.

At the other end of the picture, an assistant secretary of state flying down from Washington to Dhaka should not expect to be granted an audience with Bangladesh's prime minister. There is the foreign secretary and there is the minister of state for foreign affairs (someone should take the spot left vacant at the Foreign Office when Hasan Mahmud was shifted to environment recently) to talk to him, protocol-wise.

We could go on with this discussion for hours. But we will not. Let us just say that we are deeply worried about our collective self-esteem. May we have it restored in our lives? Please?

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Why did Obama receive the Nobel Peace Prize?

The Norwegian Nobel Committee praised Obama for "his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples," citing his push for nuclear disarmament and his outreach to the Muslim world.

HARUN UR RASHID

PRESIDENT Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize in a stunning decision that honoured the first-year of his tenure as US president.

The bestowal of one of the world's top accolades on Obama was greeted with gasps from the audience at the announcement ceremony in Oslo.

The president, who will travel to Oslo to receive the award on December 10, plans to donate the prize money of 10 million Swedish kronas -- roughly \$1.4 million -- to charity, the White House said.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee praised Obama for "his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples," citing his push for nuclear disarmament and his outreach to the Muslim world.

"Very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future," the Nobel committee said in its citation.

Describing himself as surprised and deeply humbled, Obama said he would accept the award as a "call to action" to confront the global challenges of the 21st century.

The awarding of the prize to Obama won praise from statesmen such as Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev and Jimmy Carter, and all Nobel laureates including Prof Yunus. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said: "His commitment to work through the United Nations gives the world's people fresh hope and fresh prospects."

President Obama brought fresh air into American foreign policy on the basis of 3 Ds -- defence, dialogue and development.

He offered the olive branch to the Muslims and, in his Cairo speech on June 4, said: "America is not and never will be at war with Islam."

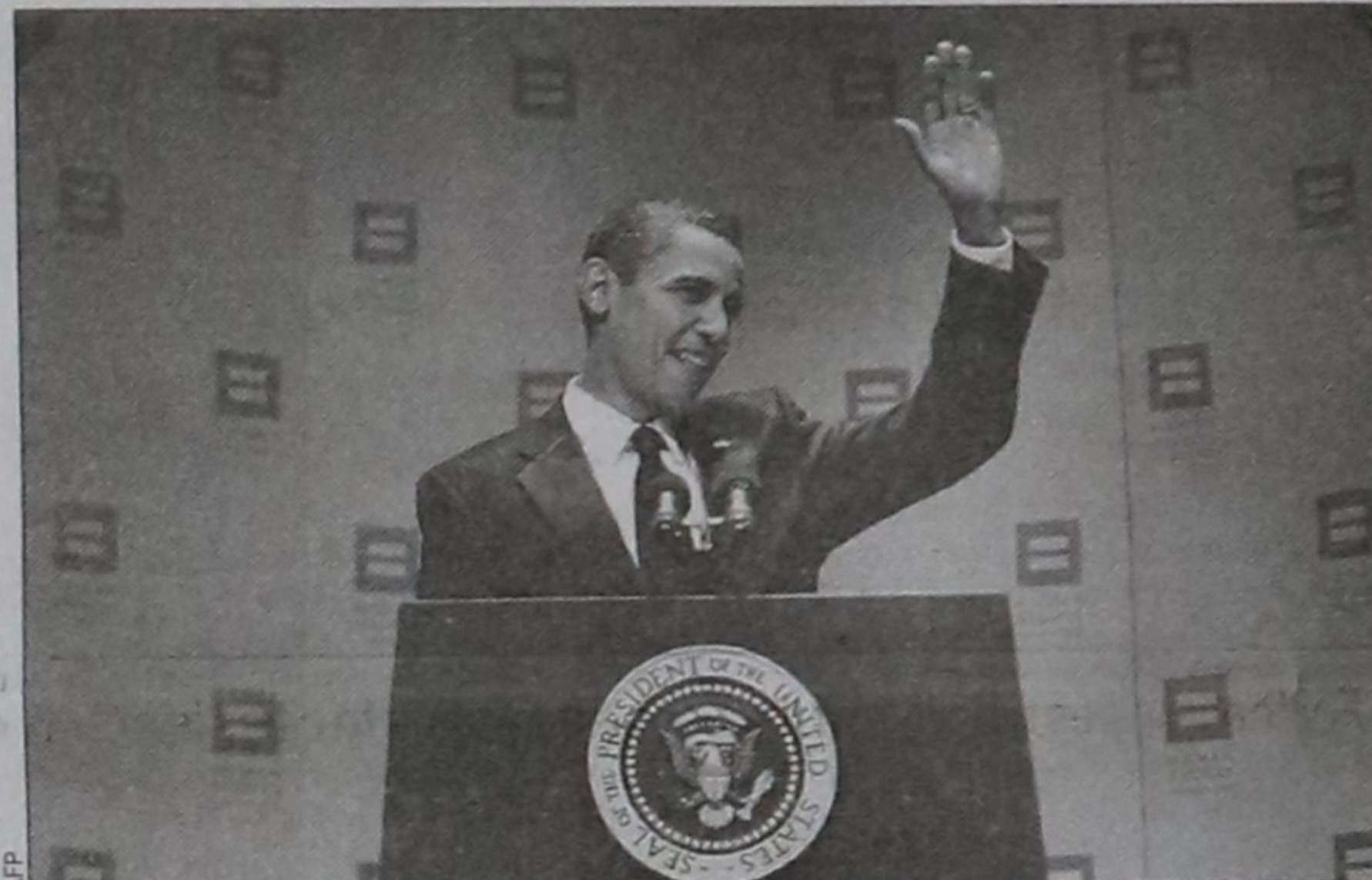
On January 27, the president, in his first interview with Dubai-based Arab TV Al Arabiya, said to the Muslim world: "The Americans are not your enemy." He offered a dialogue with Iran and what he depicted as a new readiness to listen rather than dictate. Under his direction, US started face-to-face dialogue on nuclear proliferation with Iran in Geneva on October 1 after a lapse of 40 years.

Matching words with deeds, the president, within days, outlined the new US priorities by naming three envoys -- former senator George Mitchell for the Middle East; senior diplomat Richard Holbrooke for Afghanistan and Pakistan and Todd Stern, a former adviser of President Clinton to deal with climate change.

He repaired US-Russia relations by scrapping the plan to install a missile shield in the Czech Republic and Poland, which was vehemently opposed by Russia.

The president initiated direct engagement with Myanmar, reversing the long-standing policy of isolating Myanmar. In New York, the representatives of both countries met to discuss how to resolve the stand-off between the two countries. The opposition Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi welcomed the policy shift.

Obama has advocated the elimination of nuclear weapons across the world and



Spurred on to greater heights.

chaired a UN Security Council meeting on September 24, which adopted a unanimous resolution to this effect. The resolution also called for the creation of a treaty that would ban the production of fissile material made specifically for nuclear weapons, and urged "all states to refrain from conducting a nuclear test explosion and to join the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), thereby bringing the treaty into force."

All these steps by Obama changed the global environment for reconciliation and peace and were unthinkable during the Bush administration.

The award was attacked in some quarters as hasty and undeserved. Chairman Thorbjørn Jagland rejected suggestions from journalists that Obama was getting the prize too early. "We hope this can contribute a little bit to enhance what he is trying to do," he told a news conference.

Critics miss the point that long-standing disputes do not admit early resolution. The most significant fact is the beginning of pro-

cess towards resolution, and the president has created the right environment for settlement of inter-states disputes.

It is noted that Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, but the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved even today. They were awarded for the commencement of a peace process of a very intractable dispute.

President Obama has shifted America's foreign policy from hard power (military power) to soft power (diplomacy, aid in social work, health and education), winning hearts and minds of people across the world.

President Obama is perceived as an inspirational figure across the world. He deserves the Nobel Peace Prize because he changed the direction of US foreign policy towards cooperation and inclusiveness in place of confrontation with adversaries.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Thorn in Hasina's crown

Their unlawful activities became so unbearable that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina chose to resign from the post of BCL's organisational chief in order to isolate herself from them. These unruly elements are, in fact, thorns in Hasina's crown.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has been gaining laurels for upholding crucial global issues in the world's forum with creative suggestions while addressing core issues. She is now in the global limelight for playing a big part in the 64th UN General Assembly (UNGA), putting an end to the country's negative impression.

While addressing the UNGA, Sheikh Hasina touched all the keynotes of the crucial global issues, including the impact of economic meltdown and global warming, food security and world peace. She also raised issues related to Bangladesh very strongly and effectively through her statements at a series of discussions with other world leaders on the sidelines of the UNGA session.

Sheikh Hasina's address at UNGA bears special significance as it outlined the woes and problems of the developing countries, including Bangladesh and called for joint global efforts to address the grave crisis faced by the poor nations.

Both US President Barack Obama and UN

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appreciated her for strongly presenting the global warming and UN peacekeeping issues.

The *Far Eastern Economic Review* in its current issue also lauded Sheikh Hasina's attitude, as she stated that experience had made her more desperate and determined to work for the people. She said this to an interviewer of the international fortnightly on the sidelines of the session.

While Hasina was engaged in enhancing the country's image abroad, playing a pivotal role on the world's stage, the student wing of the Awami League (AL), that has been involved in all sorts of crimes from tender manipulation to raping girls, has tarnished the image of the ruling party.

The martial mastery of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activists, in order to establish their control over the campuses, forcefully closed over a dozen educational institutions including four public universities where they manifested their ugliest muscle flexing, deeply annoying a lot of people.

* The BCL leaders have also started taking control of tender related activities in various

government offices ever since the AL-led grand alliance was elected to power, creating a reign of terror across the country.

A band of 10 BCL activists, who kidnapped and raped a teenage girl at Kalapara upazila in Patuakhali, were given only token punishment at the village arbitration that was arranged by the local AL leaders to ensure their escape. The victim's family, and not the rapists, is on the run because of the fear of reprisal from the perpetrators since the police remained inactive against the rapists.

Only a few days back, another BCL leader at Pirojpur lured a class 10 student to a love trap, raped her and recorded it in a cell phone. The video footage reached local youth through cell phones, flash drives and CDs, which were on sale in video stores. The involvement of BCL activists in such heinous crimes put not only the AL but also the whole nation to shame.

Sheikh Hasina, however, expressed her determination to deal strictly with the rampaging youth front of her party, and instructed the organising secretaries of the party to strictly monitor the activities of the youth fronts and recommend actions to the party hierarchy.

The people of Bangladesh feel really proud when the TV footage shows their prime minister addressing the UN session or sitting beside the US president. Yet, they feel quite disheartened when they see the young activists of the ruling party getting involved in all sorts of criminal activities.

The BCL activists, at least a huge number of them, have already done enough to tarnish the image of the government. Their unlawful activities became so unbearable that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina chose to resign from the post of BCL's organisational chief in order to isolate herself from them. These unruly elements are, in fact, thorns in Hasina's crown.

Sadly, the BCL today is poles apart from its idealistic pursuits, which once had played a key role in the country's liberation movement. Not only that, its hardcore members, motivated by greed for wealth, are now involved in all sorts of crimes.

Therefore, there is a need for the prime minister to give a serious thought about student politics, which has not only become devoid of idealism but has also become rotten to the core.

Students on rampage is a sign of old-fashioned politics, and not in keeping up with the promise of change that had propelled the AL-led alliance to power.

The time is ripe for taking some effective measures to rein in the unruly elements of BCL before they do irreparable harm to the government's image. The government should also strive to determine the forces that are driving them to violence and criminality. At the same time, it should lead the campaign to free student politics from the clutches of the gangsters who go by the name of students.

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