

Assault on New Age reporter

RAB should be held accountable for their conduct

THE Rapid Action Battalion authorities have formally expressed their regrets about the torture perpetrated on New Age reporter FM Masum last week. They have also let it be known that a committee has been formed to inquire into the incident and, based on the findings of the committee, appropriate punishment will be handed out to those responsible for the misdeed. We condemn the assault and want punishment meted out to the perpetrators.

Let there be no mistake though, that those who put the New Age reporter into that horrific situation were simply carrying things too far, clearly going beyond the law as they went about mistreating the reporter. If news reports that have appeared about the incident are any guide, a good deal of effort went on to implicate Masum heinously which only added to the repugnancy.

Which is why at this point we would like to make our perspectives clear. In the first place, any assault on a professional journalist is fundamentally an attack on the free press we have assiduously been trying to build and nurture in Bangladesh. In the second, the attack on Masum has only revealed the grim nature of a law enforcement system which eventually ends up being a violation of the law. The manner in which Masum was arrested and then humiliated at his home and later at the RAB office brings into question the entire matter of the security that citizens can expect from those whose job is to ensure that people can live in freedom and without fear.

Behaviour such as the one the New Age reporter was subjected to the other day must come to a stop. It does grave damage to the national image and to our endeavours to put in place a functioning and purposeful democracy for ourselves. So-called 'cross-fire deaths' have earned a bad name for RAB. We have editorially commented on this whenever the occasion arose.

All in all, therefore, we would like to say, let RAB go for the creation of an internal accountability mechanism that will closely and on a twenty-four hour basis monitor the activities of its personnel across the country.

Canal reclamation enters crucial phase

It's a test of political will now

UNDER a composite campaign for freeing rivers and water bodies from the clutches of grabbers and polluters, a serious effort has got underway to reclaim canals lost to illegal occupancy and construction of all kinds over time. The land survey authority has, at long last, determined location of 43 derelict water channels and, moreover, identified individuals and institutions holding these in illegal possession.

Now that the authority has demarcated the lost canals on the basis of records and made bold to name the encroachers to the parliamentary standing committee on land ministry, the public now look forward to see an effective eviction drive in progress. The parliamentary standing committee is understood to have decided to refer the matter to the prime minister for her directives considering that the encroachers are mostly powerful and influential people who had managed to remain untouched by law through successive governments. So, it requires intervention from no less a person than the head of government. Some of them may have fake documents to produce and with judiciary's cooperation which has been forthcoming as far as the overall campaign goes, the mess can certainly be cleared and the canals restored.

Multi-storied buildings housing markets and educational institutions and residences stand where once flowed the canals. This is utterly disdainful of the law of the land denying the city vital breathing spaces, sustainable environment and natural drainage channels without which the metropolis is fraught with severe water-logging in normal rains, let alone heavy downpour.

There is no question that the citizens are unified behind the cause of ridding the canals of the illegal occupants. The government is not only strongly mandated to bring change, it has also from time to time demonstrated its commitment to save the moribund water bodies. Ultimately it is a test of political will which we believe the government will demonstrate in good measure to reclaim the canals to the city. If necessary, the existing laws should be given more teeth.

In the face of evil syndicates ...

Once the consumers of different goods and services begin to build their own associations, that would act as the countervailing force against the power of the interest groups and the vested quarters tinkering with the genuine market forces.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE CNG-driven auto-rickshaws are perhaps becoming still costlier for the hapless passengers. Their owners are pressing the government to agree to another bout of increase in the auto-rickshaw fares. The CNG-owners and drivers have their reasons to charge higher fares. But the users of the service (!) provided by these motorised, freewheeling three-wheelers do not enjoy any such privilege to get a better deal. They are, as it were, destined forever to be at the receiving end. They may flail about in despair, they may protest, curse and cry! It would be a cry in the wilderness. And at long last they will have to take it all lying down -- and literally so!

But it is not only the fares charged by the CNG-driven auto-rickshaws that are driving them mad. The rickshaws, the taxicabs and even the bus transport operators are also no exception. One experiences the power of the bus transports, especially those plying between the capital city and the districts, during the two major Muslim religious festivals. Whatever they decide, the travellers have to accept. That is because they always have the arguments in their favour! The government, too, more often than not has to listen to them.

The common people have to put up with the tyranny of the wheels, be those operated manually or by engine. Their logic

passes for that of the market, which has deprived all categories of service users their rights. The power of the syndicate is everywhere -- on the road, in the kitchen market, in the lobbies of powers, you name it. Sad to say, such state of affairs is often termed the upshot of a free market economy. But is it really so?

Free of course the syndicates are to make free with their spoils. It is rather a kind of free syndicate-controlled market where the consumers have no choice. Here it is the not the buyers or consumers, who are spoilt for choice; quite to the contrary....

In the present case, too, the CNG-owners and drivers seeking to enhance their charge for service will have their way. For there is presumably no alternative in the government's hand. Moreover, the arsenal of arguments or excuses on the side of the purveyors (of the purported transport service) is too strong to be challenged! The public? Oh, those wretched ones, always in the habit of complaining and grumbling without having any inkling of the reality of the market!

Those in the seat of power appear to be helpless before the organised power of the various clans and the syndicates. All the interests groups have their own pressure groups. The traders have their organised bodies. The professionals of umpteen brands have their societies. The labourers of the industries have their unions. Even the porters at the bus, train, steamer and

launch terminals have their powerful associations. It is by dint of this group power they dictate terms in the market and with the government. But the rest, the common people, on whose ability to pay hinges the existence of the various organised groups and quarters, have no body (for they are but nobody) to turn to.

What then about the power of the people that politicians and intellectuals alike are so fond of saying all the time? If the masses are the source of all power as they say, then why have they (the people) to suffer at the hands of the transport operators, market syndicates and even face the wrath of the armed goons of the powerful quarters?

Oddly though, the power and wisdom of the public become all too important at times when those in the seat of power want a change in the rule of the larger political game. In the election time only, the politicians recognise people's power. So they cajole, beseech the same, the almost forgotten amorphous mass of people for their support for another term in office. And once in office, the masses become a faceless nobody. Their existence, if at all, is to be found in the harangues of the demagogue, in the abstract prose of the academician, or in the sombre lectures of the intellectual. So the story of their day-to-day suffering on the roads, in the markets seems too abstract to be dealt with in a real life situation.

The general public, so long as they will remain a mere tool of the political game, their cries will remain unheard in the corridors of power. The power peddlers under various syndicates and groups hardly produce anything. They are but a bunch of middlemen, though they wield a lot of power, especially over the produces and services generated by others. And these others are but the real masses of the people.

Unlike the middlemen, the professionals and the various interest groups, they have no organised forums to fight for their rights as customers at the marketplaces run by the whims and caprices of wholesalers and retailers and at the bus counters or street corners as users of transport service.

Should then the general public stomach all this tyranny of the forces manipulating the market silently and take it as something fated?

Since the administration, especially its executive organs, is inextricably linked to various power lobbies and interest groups, the public as producers and consumers will have to exercise their right to a fair deal through their own forums. Some consumer rights groups are already working for the public's cause. They have meanwhile pushed through a number of legal measures to protect consumers' interest. But the problem is, those can be useful only when the implementing authorities, which are again the executive organs of the government, are serious. The truth is, in Bangladesh context, to solve this most intractable issue through government intervention is still a pipe dream.

However, that does not also mean that the work of these various rights and consumer groups are not necessary. They, of course, are. But they have to be buttressed with the strength of the organised power of the consumers and the producers. Once the consumers of different goods and services begin to build their own associations, that would act as the countervailing force against the power of the interest groups and the vested quarters tinkering with the genuine market forces.

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Secularism today

It would be wrong to assume that religion has declining influence in political and economic affairs, just because of modernisation taking place in the world.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IN reviewing Charles Taylor's monumental book *A Secular Age*, Professor Richard Madsen explored three meanings of secularism. The political arrangement that makes the state neutral with regard to religious belief and the government's legitimacy does not depend on religion or the blessings of any particular religious community. The second, according to Madsen, was sociological, reflected in the widespread decline in religious belief by common people in any country. The third was cultural, "a move from a society where belief in God was unchallenged and indeed was unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among other, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."

In this age of globalisation, competition for excellence is the key word for success, and the Aristotelian pursuit of excellence, calling for transcendence of the initial state of the self into a better one, may not necessarily mean an abandonment of religion. Then, there is no reason to believe that Asian societies can be accommodated into Charles Taylor's picturisation of a North Atlantic secular image. Even in Asian communist countries, suppression and/or co-optation strategies resorted to tame local religions had to be loosened to permit

economic reform and integration into the global market. Besides, says Madsen, Asian religious practices are less individualistic and more communal, socially embedded, and locally particularistic. NYU Professor Craig Calhoun saw in Charles Taylor's exploration a contrast between immanence and transcendence immanence, located in our senses of reality and good within the world around us, while transcendence gives us a sense of something beyond.

Apart from the Northern Ireland conflict, the West has more or less seen the end of religious war since 1948 when the Treaty of Westphalia was concluded. In the East, however, inter-faith and intra-faith conflicts are continuing and growing. This conflict is not Islamic in particular. The brutal Tamil-Sinhalese conflict, albeit shrouded in political terms, was due to the refusal by Hindu Tamils to acquiesce in the alleged discrimination by the Buddhist Sinhalese, as are the occasional riots between majority Hindus and minority Muslims in India.

It would be wrong to assume that religion has declining influence in political and economic affairs, just because of modernisation taking place in the world. Yale Professor Paul Bloom ("Is God an accident," *The Atlantic*, December 2005) wrote that the US was a poster child for

supernatural belief, as just about everyone -- 90 percent in one poll -- believes in God. He quotes sociologist Steven Waldman that 51 percent of the Democrats -- the Republicans are no exception -- believe that God gave Israel to the Jews and that its existence fulfills the prophecy about the second coming of Jesus. Bloom suggests that religion is bred in the bone. This thesis is just as debatable as how far Thomas Friedman's flat earth has been achieved just because of lowering trade and political barriers and exponential advances of the digital revolution that have been torn down between the first and the third worlds. Then, however, Friedman admits that much of terrorism is driven by the humiliation that societies, from which the terrorists come, have suffered. He suggests that one of the ways to fight terrorism is to ensure that those areas of the world not flat enough should be made flatter to defuse the anger that causes deprivation in their societies.

A case in point would be the outburst of the Brazilian President Louis de Silva that the global economic meltdown "was caused by the irrational behavior of white people with blue eyes, who before the crisis appeared to know everything and now demonstrate that they know nothing." Despite IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn's projection that the worst of the recession is over and the possibility of "double dip" recession has receded, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan has predicted that another global financial crisis is inevitable due to "unquenchable capability of human beings when con-

fronted with long period of prosperity to presume that it will continue." Nobel Laureate Edmund Phelps feels that the massive debt incurred by the US to exit recession will thwart growth for decades and will also fuel inflation. On top of that, the Pittsburgh G-20 summit, despite the disappointment of non-G-20 nations, had the positive aspect in the formalisation of G-20.

In this evolution of a new global architecture, it has become difficult to discern the religious factor in al-Qaeda-sponsored and Taliban-sponsored terrorism. Pakistan is now virtually fighting for its life. Nicholas Schmidle, a fellow at the New America Foundation and the author of *To Live or to Perish Forever: Two Tumultuous Years in Pakistan*, traced the growth of Talibanisation from a loose knit group of pious, well meaning Muslims wanting nothing more than to live according to Sharia law to the brutalisation of Swat and Malakand areas. The terrorism at Bali testifies that the Taliban did not spare the largest Muslim country in the world. The argument proffered that Taliban terrorism in Muslim countries is to establish the pristine spirit, and practice of Islam does not hold water as the victims of terrorism are often innocent and pious men, women and children who by no stretch of imagination can be termed as "degenerates." It would have served the world better if the end game of the Taliban were clearly understood and forced to desist from the madness rocking the peaceful global order.

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Caught on the wrong foot

British diplomats are proverbially known to be cold, reticent and remote. It is time they, obsessed with the paean of British virtues, eschewed atavistic colonial predilections and abandoned their self-serving elite mentality to better serve the interest of their country.

ABDUL HANNAN

THAILAND has no literature, no painting and has an odd kind of music. Its architecture is monotonous and its interior decorations are hideous. Nobody can deny that gambling and golf are its chief pleasures. Thais are lewd and licentious."

"Africans as a whole are not only averse to cutting their nose to spite their face. They regard such an operation as a triumph of cosmetic surgery."

"Rio de Janeiro is damn badly run with corruption so rampant that you can buy anything from a driving license to a High Court judge."

"Nicaraguans are the most dishonest, unreliable, violent and alcoholic people. Brazilians are still second-rate."

"The values of Egyptian middle class could best be understood through enduring popularity of ITV's Edwardian drama 'Upstairs, Downstairs' representing a nostalgic evocation of a society that still flourished in their lifetime."

"Canadians are deeply unimpressive and have no talent."

Please don't panic. These atrocious and amusing comments are not mine. These are observations made by former distinguished British envoys about their host countries in Bangkok, Nigeria, Cairo, Rio, Nicaragua and Ottawa, con-

tained in their valedictory letters to Whitehall, the British foreign office at the end of their overseas postings. The British envoy based in New Delhi, however, expressed frustrations of dull monotony of attending 'exasperating receptions and cocktail parties in pin stripe suits.' The tradition of writing such letters, which began five decades, ago has been suspended since 2006 when a leak of such a letter caused embarrassment to the foreign office. The letters were recently released to BBC under the Freedom of Information laws of Britain. The disclosure of these letters have since been circulated by the Associated Press and carried by some British and American newspapers.

Beneath the dignified surface of international relations, the dark humour of these observations about national characteristics of various countries, if anything, is not diplomatic but rude, unfair and in bad taste. These are sweeping generalisations betraying a typical highbrow superiority complex, and a contemptuous and condescending attitude of British diplomats. The function of a diplomat is to send

objective and accurate reports about the political, economic, social and cultural condition of a host country, and it is not the business of a well-meaning diplomat to portray arbitrary and disparaging labels of a nation in one broad sweep. Apparently, the British diplomats, short of prescience, have been caught on the wrong foot. The disclosure will certainly cause deep resentment and rage in the concerned countries and thus, it may take a little while to repair the damage and restore normal relations.

British diplomats are proverbially known to be cold, reticent and remote. It is time they, obsessed with the paean of British virtues, eschewed atavistic colonial predilections and abandoned their self-serving elite mentality to better serve the interest of their country. The English Writer E.M. Forster famously said, 'British diplomats educated in Eton, Harrow and Oxbridge come out with well-developed bodies, fairly developed minds but undeveloped hearts.' He could not be any truer.

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