

The traffic logjam in Dhaka

Some immediate relief needed

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's unhappiness at the prevailing chaos on the road traffic front is also ours. The way people's movements are increasingly getting difficult, indeed circumscribed because of the congestion on the roads all across the nation's capital is as irritating as it is mind-boggling. In the past one year, we have heard of a number of plans being put in place to bring order back in the traffic system. So far none of those plans have worked. And now we hear of new steps, especially related to business establishment closures on particular days of the week, being taken.

A harried citizenry expects that the new plan will ease its worries. But, in light of the clear disappointment the prime minister voiced at a meeting of the cabinet the other day, we feel that serious measures must now be taken to put an end to the traffic mess. The communication minister's argument of increasingly higher numbers of vehicles hitting the roads compounding the mess is no excuse. As the prime minister pointed out, how is it that old, dilapidated vehicles ordered out of the roads are back and doing business as usual? There are then the plans for new flyovers. One wonders if the plans are being moved into implementation mode or, as the head of government herself notes, have only been an exercise in rhetoric.

It is obvious that unless the road traffic issue is handled with the seriousness it deserves, Dhaka will soon be rendered immobile as a city. Educational institutions, business establishments, government offices, in fact everything pays a price in terms of loss of time, patience and energy. So the absolute necessity now is devising plans on a short term, medium term and long term basis to free citizens of the traffic logjam. In the prevailing circumstances, the authorities should begin working on the short term approach, for that can pave the path for a longer term handling of the problem. This can be done in quite a few ways. The first step should be a proper, meaningful removal of old vehicles from the streets. This can come about through making sure that no corruption is involved and that traffic personnel do not prove vulnerable to illegal gratification. The next step can easily be a freeing of the innumerable pavements in the city through a determined eviction of make-shift tea stalls, shop items put out on display and the like since these have badly impeded public movement. After that comes the question of compelling shopping malls, hospitals and similar business establishments to have their own parking spaces for vehicles. This should also apply to institutions which have no parking spaces at present. Finally, a determined and constant watch must be kept on buses and other public vehicles to ensure that they use proper stop-pages rather than stop anywhere at drivers' whims.

Let these primary steps come in first. Once they do, it will be easier to go for medium and long term plans of traffic control.

Expanding tax base

A good move getting underway

TWO major impediments to internal resource mobilisation in our context have been that there could be many having the potential to pay taxes remain outside the dragnet and those that are listed as tax-payers evade payment of taxes.

It simply defies comprehension that in a country as populous as 150 million we have eight hundred thousand tax-payers only. The fact that head-count of Tax Identification Number (TIN) holders is 2.2 million and that of tax-payers is even less than one million is itself a big discrepancy, let alone collusive big evasion scandals and a huge number suspected to have had taxable incomes that await assessment and filing of returns.

In other forms of tax collection like that of import, sale, gain, land, Vat etc, a good deal of effort is usually made but insofar as income tax goes no serious move has yet been taken to expand the base. Against such a backdrop, it is cheery news that the National Board of Revenue (NBR) is set to launch from February 8, a three-month long survey to identify new tax-payers in Dhaka and its adjoining areas with the help of university students. Nothing could be a better utilisation of educated youth power than harnessing it in the national service like finding new tax-payers thereby helping to expand the country's abysmally poor tax base. Let this flag off their involvement in leisure time in other important areas of national life.

We take note of the fact that the Department for International Development of United Kingdom which has a way of putting money where it is most needed is funding the project that will pay a monthly salary of Tk 10,000 to each student taking part in the survey. On the basis of how it goes, and what dividends it brings, the survey will be replicated country-wide, down to the upazila level. This sounds very exciting. For just like in the case of small farmers who have the best record of repayment of agricultural loans so also we believe there is sizeable number out there who with a little bit of sensitisation and persuasion would come out of the shell to pay taxes.

Bangla . . . the way it was, and is

Nearly four decades into freedom as an independent nation, we are not happy with what we have done to the Bangla language. Language loses its lustre when it dwindles into the plebeian. It cheers the soul when a patrician gleam comes to it.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

NOW that the ambience of *Ekushey* is here once again, it is time to reflect on the state of the Bangla we read, speak and write in our times. When we waged that epic struggle for the Bangla language to be accorded the respect and status it deserved in the state of Pakistan in the early 1950s, our goal was much more than making sure that it became the predominant language or one of the predominant languages of Pakistan. The struggle was, in so many ways, one of telling ourselves that the sophistication and modernity, indeed the dynamism that gives a language its energy and its verve, would all be there once the non-Bengali ruling classes had acknowledged the justness of our cause.

Nearly four decades into freedom as an independent nation, we are not happy with what we have done to the Bangla language. Take, first, those who have somehow come round to the conclusion that they can change the way we spell some of the words in the language. In our younger days, we went to school and grasped the fundamental ways in which Bangla words could be spelt and we did that with pleasure. We did not imagine then that in the name of evolution some individuals or some groups would arrogate to themselves the right to tell us that we need not spell words in the traditional way. But, you see, tradition is what really matters. Everything else is subservient to it.

Spelling apart, there is today a clear set of circumstances where few worry about speaking in chaste and pure Bangla. It is a malady you notice in almost everyone you see -- in politicians, academics, bureaucrats, journalists and the young. The heart breaks when a newscaster pronounces the name of Bangladesh's founder as Sheikh "Muzibur" Rahman. He is not the only one with bad pronunciation. In the political parties, men who feel little

embarrassment about the rustic way in which they speak Bangla are legion. That leads to a dampening of our sensibilities. If men holding public office or aspiring to do so, speak so badly, it has something of a ripple effect on the multitudes around them.

Think of some of the bureaucrats, and pretty senior ones too, who simply cannot speak a sentence in pure or *shuddho* Bangla. Does it need that much effort to have your speech come soothingly to the ear? In the old days, it was unthinkable for a young man with aspirations for the civil service to speak his language or any other language for that matter in a bad way. And where Bangla was concerned, it was everywhere expected to be spoken in the correct way. In the movies, on the radio, on television and at social gatherings, you were expected not to go down to a bad presentation of Bangla through having it mangled or come out in the particularities of your dialect. Nobody could dream in his wildest imagination that terms such as *ganjam* and *khobor aase* and *dui nombori* would come into polite conversation.

In these past many years, there has been a clear and dangerous decline in the way we speak our own language. Not that we speak other languages any better. Take English for instance. These days, for reasons you are not likely to comprehend, nearly everyone you know wants to speak it. That ambition is to be praised. A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for? With due apologies to Robert Browning, we will note that there is today a pretty wide gap between an aspiration for English and an actual use of it. The problem is somewhere else, though. There are far too many people who resort to a medley of languages when they deliberately have pointless English terms infiltrate their Bangla. If a television presenter on a Bangla programme cannot get her Bangla straight, but must impress the



Shuddho Bangla is in need of rebirth.

audience with a smattering of English, you might as well not have that presenter there at all. The bad spectacle of artistes using English phrases to thank their listeners does not sit well with us. What is wrong with *dhonnobad* and why must "thank you so much" come to a singer who has just rendered a beautiful song in Bangla?

Our television plays are no better. Throwing up plays in local dialects is all right, only up to a point. But if you turn it into a trend, into a norm, you are simply making us forget that there is a formal structure of Bangla we would rather see come back to the small screen and even in the movies.

It is time for all of us, wherever we are and whatever our class identities, to go back to the pure Bangla we grew up speaking and hearing and writing. The old art of letter writing is gone in all this avalanche of e-mails, sms and now twitter. But recall those letter-writing days. How many of us used bad Bangla when we wrote to our grandparents, to our parents and to our friends?

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No, the stigma is still there

Can we hold our heads high as a nation when we have tried and punished the killers, but let go off those who masterminded and helped enact this horrendous tragedy and remained unrepentant for their crime?

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

WITH the execution of the five convicts of the Bangabandhu murder in the early hours of January 28, there was jubilation across the country. Yes, we have reasons to be happy, because justice has been vindicated in this case -- although the nation had to wait for a long 34 years to see it happen.

One prominent AL leader said that with the hangings of the five convicts, the nation is now free of the stigma of justice that had been denied all these years, following the tragic assassination of Bangabandhu together with his family members on August 15, 1975.

No, the stigma will not go away just because some of the self-confessed killers have been hanged. It will be there even if all the absconding six convicts are brought back to the country and executed. The stigma and the stain the nation has suffered are far too large and deep to be wiped out so easily.

Is it only the few misguided young army officers involved in the killing of Bangabandhu whose trial and punishment will erase the stain from the face of this nation? No. A man of the stature of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who stood taller than the tallest amongst us, could not have been killed the way he was murdered if power-hungry politicians had not used these

army officers as pawns in their political chessboard to grab state power; with a view to taking this country back to the Pakistani format of politics.

We now know who were calling the shots from behind the scene when the August 15 tragedy had unfolded. We know who, close on the heels of the August 15 tragedy, appeared on centre stage of our mainstream politics and ruled this country for 26 long years. We know who lionised these killers, arranged their safe passage abroad, rewarded them by promotion in rank and absorption in government service, and indemnified them from trial by enacting law. We also know who allowed them to float a political party and romp about at home and abroad in wealth and glory for 21 years before they were brought to justice during the AL government in 1996.

Do we now not know about those who are shedding tears at the turn of events, culminating in the just and fair trial and conviction of these killers? These people

need to be brought to justice not only for the innocent blood spilled, but also for misguiding and using young army officers in order to commit such a horrendous crime that has tarnished the image of our army.

Until this is done, their guilt will continue to haunt the nation. And so will the shame and the stigma on the face of this country.

When a politician-cum-cleric says that there would not have been any August 15 tragedy if there had been no fourth amendment to the constitution, does he not clearly mean what he and people of his fraternity stand for? Does he not convey the implied opinion that in politics it is fair to kill even the innocent in the pursuit of political ideology? Is it not a disgrace for this nation that we have to bear with these people in and out of power all these years, knowing very well that most of their hands are stained with the blood of the August 15 tragedy? Can we hold our heads high as a nation when we have tried and punished the killers, but let go of those who masterminded and helped enact this horrendous tragedy and remained unrepentant for their crime?

There can be no crime more heinous than murder in cold blood. But it is a pity that in this country power-hungry people don't hesitate in killing others for the sake of power, and show no qualms to protect the killers. Is it not a matter of shame that the nation had to wait for 34 years to track down and punish the killers of Bangabandhu because no government other than the AL, headed by Sheikh Hasina, would be interested in bringing the killers to justice? Had there been a rule of law and democracy in this country, the killers would have walked the gallows a long time ago.

Let this government take it as a challenge and focus with a clear commitment to establish a rule of law and democracy to ensure that all killers and their godfathers are punished equally. Otherwise there will be a repeat of the Bangabandhu murder case, and the spectre of political murders will continue to haunt the nation.



The killers have been brought to justice, but what about the conspirators?

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