

BCL sinks in a deeper abyss

Rotten and yet pampered

THE explosive turf war within BCL beyond midnight hours into Wednesday centring around control of a Dhaka College dormitory temptingly close to extortion-prone markets was but a symptom of a festering malady afflicting ruling party student wing, root and branch.

Of course, it led to police raid and arrests and challan to court which may have given a publicity of the government's toughening up. But given past experiences, this is bound to peter out going down as an eye-wash. Why we say this is because the ring leaders alleged to be proteges of ruling party leaders may have escaped detention, leave alone some general students having been picked up in the sweeping raid.

Apparently ranging from expulsion from BCL committees, disbanding some councils through stern warnings of the Prime Minister to the wayward, directives to the police to act firmly to repeated reprimands of other senior party leaders everything in the book has been tried out. But it has only been a change for the worse. Actually, the tough words were somehow interspersed with a denial mode followed by allegations of intrusion by outsiders into BCL to discredit the government. So, whatever they said carried little conviction.

There was no public denunciation of the Eden College admission business brawl, firing and bombing at Jessore zila conference, row over formation and counter formation of committees at Hobiganj and, as if that was not enough, Dhaka College imbroglio. No action to fix responsibility, identify and expose the mentors and, above all, create conditions for reform of the BCL as self-contained dedicated student body drawing on the pristine traditions of student politics.

Nothing short of getting to the bottom of the degenerate brand of student politics can help. Unless we do that and take drastic corrective measures student politics of the rabid variety will continue to rule the roost. Internal conflicts over council disbanding and formation, indulgence in admission business, taking control of seats left by outgoing students, vast appetite for extortion and tender manipulation, interference in academic administration do not only interest the students but also some leaders in the ruling party.

As long as such linkages continue to exist, however much officially the ruling party leaders disavow any link to the student party in apparent compliance with certain RPO provisions, the malady can only grow to monstrosity.

A desperate yet diagnosable disease needs a desperate and suitably calibrated remedy.

Missing the ICAO deadline

Machine readable passports must be an urgent priority

BANGLADESH will not be able to make the April 1 deadline on machine readable passports. We have been informed that there will be a wait of at least till the end of April before the MRP project gets underway. That is certainly not cheering news, seeing that it threatens to put a very large number of Bangladeshis in a spot where applying for and getting passports is concerned. Effective next month, the passport and immigration department will not accept applications for any new handwritten passports. That is understandable. But what does place people in a difficult situation is that even if they begin applying for MRPs from April 1, there is little guarantee that they will be getting these passports in a reasonable frame of time. We note here, of course, the assurance by the authorities that they expect to begin the process of producing MRPs by the end of April.

The question which now arises has to do particularly with the matter of the L/Cs. The move by the International Civil Aviation Organisation to have its member states move into machine readable passports for their citizens was made quite some years ago, in 2005 to be precise. That in itself should have been a warning for the Bangladesh authorities to speed up the process of the work and by the end of this month everything should have been in place. To be sure, there are other countries as well which have fallen behind in keeping to the ICAO deadline. But that cannot serve as an excuse for our authorities. What must now be done is for the relevant government quarters to go for a swift removal of the all the constraints which have come in the way of a preparation of MRPs. The complications which have arisen over the L/Cs ought to have been removed a long time ago. That they were not is once again a sign of the bureaucratic delays which often hold up essential business relating to the public interest. Officials of the Malaysia-based IRIS Corporation Berhad have made it known that they have been trying to open an L/C here since the Bangladesh government initialled a deal with them on employing their expertise in the preparation of MRPs in mid February. In other words, more than a month has gone by without an L/C being opened.

The paramount requirement at this stage is for all the red tape to be cut out of the L/C process. The red tape factor, we note, involves several ministries. Why that should be so in a case of such vital significance as passports boggles the mind. Besides, once the L/C is opened, IRIS will need time to train the manpower that will be asked to do the job of going into the finer details of producing the MRPs. The sense of urgency is as such huge. And we expect the authorities to go full steam into making sure that our citizens do not run into travel-related difficulties after April 1.

The realpolitik of fools

This kind of thinking, which governments in the past have dabbled in with notable lack of success, is the worst kind of amateurish realpolitik that would only antagonise both neighbours. Trying to play China and India off against one another -- what could possibly go wrong?

ZAFAR SOBHAN

COMING hard on the heels of her recent historic opening to India which has fundamentally transformed the frosty relationship between the two countries, the alacrity with which the prime minister has immediately afterwards followed up with a trip to China makes a lot of sense.

Hasina seems to understand that for too long Bangladesh has been stuck in a self-defeating and counter-productive insular mind-set, and that located as we are at the cross-roads of south and south-east Asia, we are uniquely positioned to benefit from the dynamic economic growth all around us, if only we were to open ourselves up to the world.

Just as we need a close relationship with India, we also need a close relationship with China. The two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, how we manage these two relationships will be the key to our economic growth and development.

For the first time since independence, we finally have a government that is putting foreign policy and our external relations and place in the world front and centre.

In the past, we have never seen any great strategic thinking in terms of a comprehensive foreign policy that was based on an in-depth assessment of the world and Bangladesh's place in it. Foreign policy in the past has been an ad hoc affair and the absence of a cohesive and coherent foreign policy vision has long been a failure of Bangladeshi statecraft.

More to the point than the government's focus on foreign policy is that their understanding of Bangladesh's interests and resultant approach to foreign relations has been spot on.

The key to Bangladesh's global vision is connectivity. This means opening up Bangladesh to India and China, and frankly anyone else who wants.

This means wooing foreign investment and encouraging technical and managerial expertise and infrastructure development assistance from outside. It means fully



India-China border: No need to take sides.

integrated and accessible road, rail and water transportation networks. It means allowing neighbouring countries access to our port facilities and soliciting their help in building a deep-sea port. In the future it should mean energy exports from and through Bangladesh.

In short, it means fundamentally altering our relations with the rest of the world. It means the dismantling of the Fortress Bangladesh bunker mentality that has held us back for so long.

It is a bold and dynamic vision, and China is no less crucial to this vision than India is. Just as a good relationship with India is not a choice, but an imperative, so a good relationship with China is also an imperative.

To conceive of anything other than good relations with the global superpower on our doorstep would be unthinkable. The advantages that accrue to Bangladesh from a close relationship with the anchor econ-

omy of the 21st century are surely self-evident.

China's rise requires Bangladesh to reassess how best to leverage China's gains to our advantage, and the government should be thinking along the lines of a broad and comprehensive framework of cooperation.

For instance, as China prices itself out of low-end manufacturing such as garments,

notable lack of success, is the worst kind of amateurish realpolitik that would only antagonise both neighbours. Trying to play China and India off against one another -- what could possibly go wrong?

China, to its credit, remains resolutely uninterested in being dragged into the nationalist-Islamist axis's beef with India. In fact, China is very keen to use Bangladesh to transport its goods to India

and access the Indian market, and thus our long-standing petulant refusal to opening up the country is of no benefit to them at all.

Nor, crucially, is it just China that will benefit from Bangladesh opening up and integrating its transportation networks with those of the region. It would also be advantageous for Thailand, Bhutan, and Nepal, among others in the region.

Bangladesh should be able to leverage its unique geographic advantage, being positioned at the cross-roads of south and south-east Asia, to emerge as a crucial transportation hub and conduit for the entire region. But to do so requires maintaining good relations with all of our neighbours, not trying to play them off against one another.

There is a profoundly foolish school of thought extant among certain circles in Bangladesh that suggests that Bangladesh should seek to play China off against India and looks to China to provide a counterweight to what they see as the regional hegemon.

This kind of thinking, which governments in the past have dabbled in with

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

Evil society, civil society

Our intellectual minds think for the ruling class, however this class may be split between political parties. They blindly support one political party or another. They madly adore one political leader or another. They doggedly follow one political ideology or another.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF you haven't thought of it before, not to worry why you didn't. But have you ever noticed that the severity of the itch is inversely proportionate to the difficulty of the reach? In lay terms it means your hand almost never finds the spot where it should happen to scratch the most. That in a way is also true for the intellectual quest of this nation. It has more thinkers than it has thoughts, but their thinking hardly touches the real spots. The reason is straight and simple. Intellectual curiosity doesn't drive that train. It's driven by foregone conclusions.

That means everybody comes to the table with preconceived notions. Hence, the obvious that has to happen, happens. We have a surfeit of thinking but surcease of thoughts. It works like that famous law of inflation in economics; too many dollars chasing too few goods. Number of speakers grows, but nature of speaking remains the same. In this country, we are suffering from the inflation of the intellect. Too many thinkers are chasing too few thoughts.

Perhaps this country holds more seminars and workshops in a month, that many countries don't hold in a year. Perhaps this country has more talk shows on television in a week, that many countries don't have in a month. Perhaps this country creates more controversies in a day, that many countries don't create in a week.

The Persian Sufi poet Rumi says that the intellectual quest isn't the same thing as the spiritual quest. Intellect investigates cause and effect, whereas spirit surrenders to the wonders of God. How does it compare to our situation? The intellectuals have given up on investigation. They have surrendered to the wonders of instant gratification.

As a matter of fact, they don't even think anymore. What they are doing in the name of thinking is reacting to reactions producing more reactions. They flex the muscle of their ideas. They offer protection to special interests, enlightenment being subservient to parochial gains. They are more inter-

ested to defend the status quo than fight for change.

Antonio Gramsci was a leading Italian Marxist, who writes in his notebooks "all men are intellectuals but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals." Then he further elaborates his point. "Everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs, or sews up a tear in a jacket, but that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is a cook or a tailor," he argues.

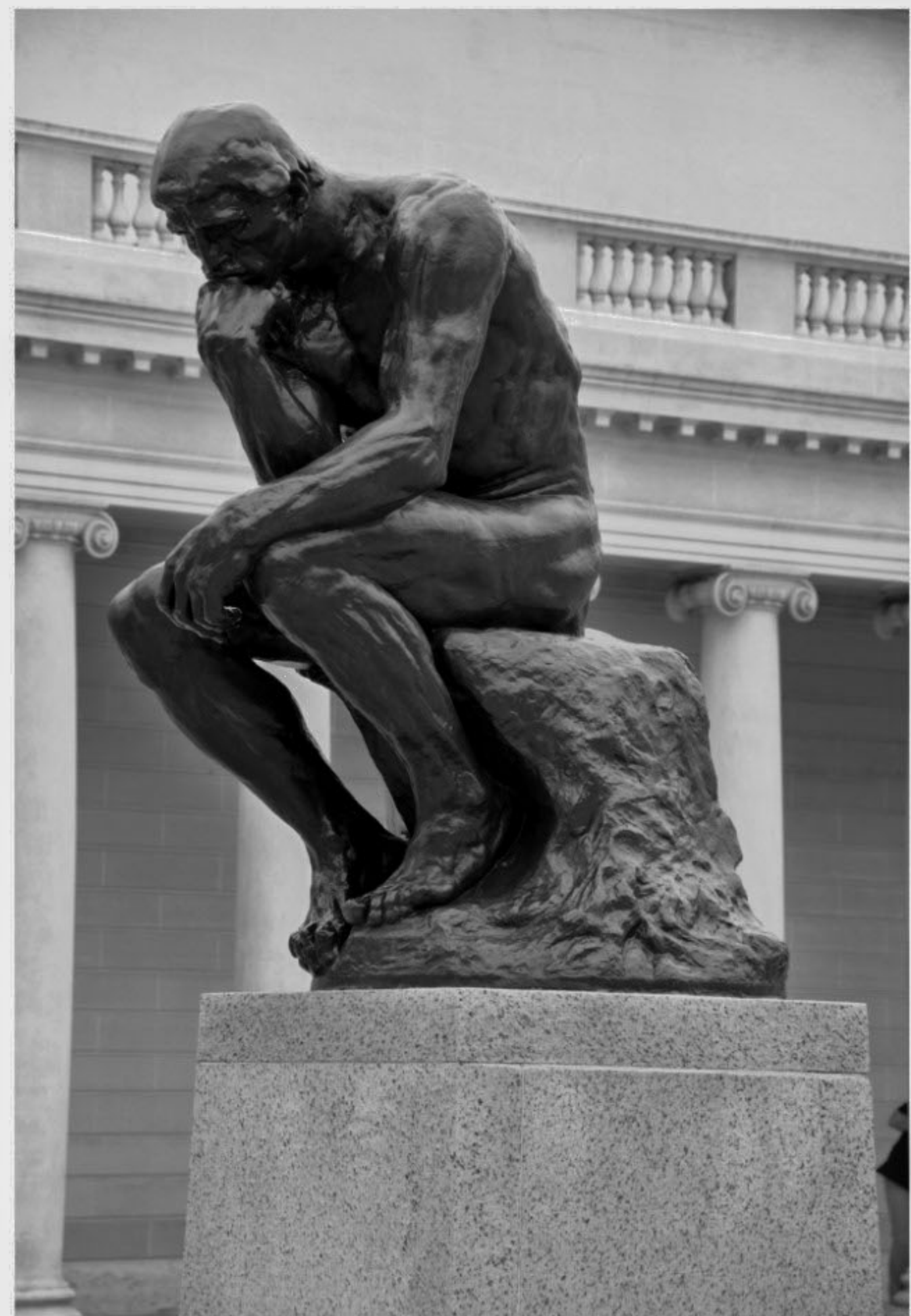
He identifies two types of intellectuals: traditional and organic. The traditional intellectuals are perceived as being autonomous and independent of the dominant group in a society, giving the aura of historical continuity despite the social upheavals. The organic intellectuals grow organically with the dominant social group, which uses them to maintain its hegemony over the rest of society.

In his conclusion, Gramsci despairs that both groups of intellectuals assist the ruling class, difference being that the former does it more conservatively than the latter. So he offers his solution. Not only should a significant number of traditional intellectuals come over to what he calls "the revolutionary cause," but also the working class movement should produce its own organic intellectuals.

That, in a nutshell, explains why our intellectual quest has become stagnant. Our intellectual minds think for the ruling class, however this class may be split between political parties. They blindly support one political party or another. They madly adore one political leader or another. They doggedly follow one political ideology or another.

In an ideal situation, the intellectuals should build an ideological bond between the ruling class and the people. According to Plato, a man is irresponsible not to aid society if he has the intelligence to do so. But our intellectuals are in the maintenance business. They upkeep what already exists. They don't generate fresh ideas.

Historian Richard Hofstadter describes the intellectual as a man who lives for ideas, while professional man lives off ideas. Does



Whither intellect?

anybody need to tell anymore? All signs lead to one conclusion. Intellect is no longer power of the mind, but it has become profession of a kind. Our intellectuals think for living. They don't live for thinking.

The reason is lack of effective engagement. Poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti believes that "the foremost contribution of intellectuals is dissent." Our intellectuals serve the ruling class, their fertile faculties fully dedicated to servile concurrence. They are removed from people by an equal measure. Like Gramsci's working class, our people

don't have the intellectuals on their side.

We have a glut of intellect in this country. Combined with scarcity of integrity, it makes for a cursed mix. The intellectual soul creates the moral authority. The moral authority creates the political wisdom. Rulers are flawed, and people can't change them. When thinking minds sit on the fence, an evil, uh civil, society wobbles the foundation.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com.