

High Court directives on Shaheed Minar welcome

But it must continue to be the focal point of our democratic expression

THE High Court has issued a set of eight directives as a measure toward upholding the dignity and sanctity of the Central Shaheed Minar. We believe that these directives will prove instrumental in reasserting the homage the memorial has always had from the nation. More importantly, the HC move will further strengthen the resolve of the nation in upholding the legacy of the martyrs of the language movement of 1952. Theirs is a legacy which was to lead, in time, to the growth of our nationalism and eventually to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state.

It is to be particularly noted that our nationalism, our yearning for democracy, indeed the essential secularism of our statehood are all a direct offshoot of the language-based struggle we launched and carried through to fulfilment between 1952 and 1971.

It is against such a background that the Central Shaheed Minar has carved a special niche in our collective consciousness. In recent years, its importance has been getting even more pronounced through individuals and organisations making it a point to express their democratic right of speech and action before the altar of the Shaheed Minar. In a very large sense, it was only proper and fitting that they do it, for the Shaheed Minar has always been an embodiment of our collective national aspirations. One may recall the fury with which the occupation Pakistan army destroyed the monument in the first few minutes of the genocide on 25 March 1971.

One will also recall the sheer speed, powered by patriotism, with which the people of Bangladesh rebuilt the Shaheed Minar immediately after Bangladesh stood liberated in December 1971. It is in such sublimity that we have consistently held the Shaheed Minar.

The reason behind the High Court directives on the Shaheed Minar is understandable. The propensity of some people to misuse or abuse the premises, the inclination of some to take advantage of its sanctity and indulge in questionable behaviour are acts that must be prevented. The High Court has now seen to it that the Shaheed Minar is maintained in a state of full and regular security and that no one is permitted to make use of the main altar.

We appreciate the move. At the same time, we would also like to point out here that no unnecessary steps, beyond what the HC has noted, should be taken to prevent people from paying their homage to the language martyrs or reasserting their dedication to democratic causes at the Shaheed Minar. The spirit of the judgment must be fully understood by the authorities who must guard against the possibility of misinterpretation of the judgement, so that the people's place, which the Shaheed Minar is, does not exist only in a state of dignified seclusion.

All our democratic aspirations are rooted in 1952 and in the Central Shaheed Minar. Let the monument be kept secure from unnecessary and unwelcome intrusions. But let there be the reassurance as well that citizens will not be kept in isolation from it.

The poor getting excluded from medicare

Govt. should step in to rationalise hospital charges in private sector

EXORBITANTLY high service charges in the private hospitals, especially at their intensive care units (ICU), have become a virtually insurmountable hurdle for patients from low and middle-income groups to get treatment there. The public hospitals, on the other hand, are almost inaccessible for such patients because too many patients are waiting in queues for too few ICUs. The result is that less privileged people have to either go without treatment or sell all their properties if they are to have treatment from a private hospital.

An exclusive report on this subject in Thursday's issue of this paper says how a transport worker had to finally embrace death in the corridor of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) while waiting for his turn at its ICU for treatment. In another case, a rickshaw-puller was charged nearly Tk.3 lakh for his son's treatment at a private hospital in the city.

There are also allegations of underhand dealings between some private hospitals and a handful of doctors of questionable integrity. The long and the short of such developments in the area of medical service is that gradually the medical service in the private sector has been going into the hands of people whose ultimate motive is to make a lucrative business out of the hapless patients' woes.

In the circumstances, it is only the rich who can afford the services of the private hospitals while the large majority of the population, for all practical purposes, has to wait at the queue at public clinics or go to the quacks.

Though the right to medical service is one of the basic human rights the poor and middle-income people are being deprived of the service in greater numbers every passing day.

The government, its health ministry in particular, therefore, owes an explanation to the public as to why the lower-income brackets of the people are gradually getting excluded from medical treatment.

The private hospitals, on their part, have no standard rules to fix fees and other charges for treatment. The situation calls for the government's strong monitoring in the hospital service sector, especially in fixing the rates of service charges at the private hospitals. The alleged nexus to fleece the patients in the private health service sector should also be brought government monitoring.

At the same time, the government should set some rules to standardise the different fees and charges for treatment at the private hospitals. For the poor patients the government will have to turn its attention to the public hospitals first since these hospitals can no more cope with the ever increasing number of patients. Their capacities are in need of drastic improvement. They need more equipment, wards, ICUs, doctors and nurses.

Along with addressing these shortcomings, the government should also prevail upon the private hospitals to earmark some of their wards and ICUs for treating the poor patients.

The burden of money

May be, the billionaires want to unburden themselves. May be, being filthy rich amidst the squalors of poverty has its anxieties. May be, the rich are daunted that a camel will go through the eye of a needle before they can enter the Kingdom of God. May be, this side of the Heaven conquered, the billionaires are now after the next.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE sun still rises in the east. The earth still goes around the sun. The continents haven't drifted, mountains haven't shifted and churning oceans haven't inundated plains. The world must be very much the same, except for thirty billionaires who have pledged to give away at least 50% of their wealth. Did I wake up in the right world? Pinch me.

Billionaires Warren Buffet and Bill Gates are spearheading this campaign to give. They are asking hundreds of U.S. billionaires to donate most of their money to charity either during their lifetime or after their death. Buffet pledged back in 2006 that he was going to donate 99% of his wealth to charity. Bill Gates is worth \$53 billion and he and his wife Melinda have donated more than \$28 billion to their foundation already.

The Forbes list of billionaires as of February 12, 2010 shows there are 1,011 billionaires in the world, out of which 403 live in the United States. If they all agree to give up half of their wealth to charity, it shows that at least this much money they didn't need. Last April Chinese billionaire Yu Pengnian completed donation of his entire fortune until he was left with nothing more to give. He showed that one could live without even more.

Only last week we learned about Mark Boyle, the Moneyless Man, who gave up using cash. He uses a mixture of cuttlefish bone and fennel seeds instead of toothpaste. The birds in the trees around his kitchen work as his iPod. Mark is waiting for one woman in the whole of England who wants to adopt a life without cash. Good luck to him!

The billionaires would never go to that level. Even after Yu Pengnian gave away everything, he would still like to have tooth-

paste in the morning. Don't know about iPod. At 88 years of age it is hard to find anything that is music to the ears, and that includes music itself.

Throughout history, stinky rich people have given their money to charity. Rockefellers and Fords in the United States set up foundations. In India, Birlas have built a planetarium and a slew of hospitals. Tatas have done no less. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Newton's third law of motion works in human sensibilities. The propensity to take at some point produces its own propensity to give.

Hence comes the old adage; excess of anything is bad. Perhaps too much money has its excesses. Perhaps it creates the vapours of guilt that pushes the walls of conscience. Perhaps too much money is hard to spend. The super-rich build their dream houses, buy a few islands, own private jets, fleet of cars and then eat, drink and enjoy life at an exponential rate.

But at some point fatigue strikes them. We wouldn't know that because our fatigue comes from not making enough money. Still there must be some kind of an ennui associated with the knowledge of having nothing beyond one's means. Why else should the high priests of a cult that worships money suddenly talk about giving up so much of it?

It is said in the villages of this country that a man can do three things when he has money. He can buy more land, take more wives and make lives of others a living hell. In between, some people fight elections and build orphanages, schools and mosques.

The upshot is that even the rich folks can do limited things with unlimited money. They can sleep in one bed only, wear one pair of shoes or eat one meal at a time. Money cannot raise them above their human conditions. The body imposes its own restrictions. Five senses are all it offers,



How much weight can a person bear?

besides one tongue, one stomach, and one pair each of eyes and ears, rest of the organs also in limited supply.

Perhaps the billionaires of the world are having a new awakening. It could be outright fear or downright guilt or simply the discomfort of having too much money in the way overeating makes one sick. People throw up after cramming themselves with food. People weep to unload their burden of grief. Ships jettison cargo to save lives.

May be, the billionaires want to unburden themselves. May be, being filthy rich amidst the squalors of poverty has its anxieties. May

be, the rich are daunted that a camel will go through the eye of a needle before they can enter the Kingdom of God. May be, this side of the Heaven conquered, the billionaires are now after the next.

All advanced ideas come late to us. High or low stakes, what does it matter if the game is fixed? Our billionaires please consider if you need too much money before you start refunding it.

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The great mosque divide



In the long term, if the US wants to protect freedom of worship while combating the real threat of radical Islam, both conservatives and liberals will need to alter the nature of their discourse.

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AFTER hovering over Danish cartoons, Swiss minarets and French burqas, the epicentre of the ongoing culture clash between Islam and the West has crossed the Atlantic. Now the United States finds itself in the midst of a gut-wrenching debate about Islam. The impetus; a controversial proposal to build a 13-story mosque and Islamic community centre two blocks from Ground Zero, the site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York.

For critics, the proposed centre -- initially called Cordoba House in a nod to Muslim Spain, but since renamed Park51 -- represents a slap on America's face. Last month, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin famously called on "peaceful Muslims" to "repudiate" the project because it stabs Americans "in the heart." Newt Gingrich, former Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, likened the proposal to displaying a Nazi sign beside Washington's Holocaust Museum.

Indeed, for many conservatives the proximity to Ground Zero of the Park51 site -- parts of one of the aircraft that slammed into the World Trade Centre landed there -- marks it as hallowed ground. To them, celebrating Islam so close to where radical Muslims carried out an infamous terrorist attack in the name of their faith appears both insensitive and provocative.

Conservatives such as Gingrich point to a pattern of marking Muslim military victories

by building a mosque on ground sacred to non-Muslims. Among the most famous examples; the Dome of the Rock, built on the Jewish Temple Mount in Jerusalem; the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, built atop the church of St. John the Baptist; and Istanbul's Ayasofya mosque, currently a museum, which, until the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, was Hagia Sofia, one of the most revered churches in Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

For conservatives, the initial decision to name the building after Cordoba, the first major Spanish city to fall to Muslim armies during their eighth-century conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, was no coincidence. Nor do they regard the man behind the project, Kuwait-born Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, as a moderate.

In a television interview shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Rauf suggested that "US policies were an accessory to the crime that happened." Rauf has also demurred from labelling the Palestinian group Hamas a terrorist outfit, which puts him at odds with views of the US government.

By contrast, many liberals see attempts to deny Muslims the right to build wherever they please as a violation of one of America's most cherished principles. In a landmark speech in early August, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg evoked the Statue of Liberty and called freedom of worship the most important of the city's "precious freedoms."

Rather than dwell upon history, liberals tend to see the project as part of the fabric of

contemporary American life, a community centre that will help heal the wound of 9/11 by extending a Muslim hand of friendship to members of all faiths. To the extent that they consider the past at all, they see Cordoba, where Jews, Christians and Muslims once lived in harmony, as a symbol of coexistence and creative flowering.

Raising questions about Park51, supporters insist, besmirches a great religion and confuses Islam with the handful of terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks. As for Rauf, the liberal narrative emphasises his belief in a gentle Sufi form of Islam rather than the austere Wahhabism of the 9/11 hijackers. In short, he's exactly the kind of Muslim the US needs on its side as it battles his radical co-religionists around the world.

In this view, Rauf's criticism of US foreign policy -- common enough on the left -- can hardly be seen as exceptional. Moreover, even the Bush administration, hardly known for its warmth toward radical Islam, used Rauf for outreach to Muslim countries.

Both sides have strong arguments. The liberal appeal to America's founding principles carries both historical and moral weight. As Mayor Bloomberg put it, New York's diversity is what makes it "special and different and strong." Muslims too died on 9/11, liberals correctly point out, and the moderate majority has the right not to be stigmatised for the actions of a handful of their co-religionists.

In the absence of clear evidence that Imam Rauf has radical sympathies, his stated desire to build bridges must be taken at face value. Whether his views on the Middle East are out of sync with most Americans is beside the point. Other clergy face no such litmus test.

For their part, conservatives distinguish between opposition to a mosque at a particular location and opposition to all mosques, much less to Islam itself. Indeed, in general, conservatives question the wisdom of

Park51's location rather than the legal right to build it.

They also have a more accurate reading of the importance of triumphalist symbols to radical Islamists, those Muslims who seek to order 21st century society by the medieval norms enshrined in Sharia law, and of the impact of such symbols on the proverbial Muslim street.

Conservatives also point out that, more often than not, the interfaith understanding preached by the likes of Rauf cuts only one way. Where are the Muslim proposals to foster dialogue in Riyadh, Karachi or Tehran?

For now, the conservative argument appears ascendant in the court of public opinion. Despite their city's famed liberalism, more than six in ten New Yorkers oppose the Park51 project, as do seven in ten Americans nationwide. With Congressional elections approaching in November, leading Democrats, fearful of a backlash from voters, have begun to backtrack.

After offering a ringing endorsement of freedom of religion at a Ramadan dinner for Muslims, President Barack Obama clarified his stand the next day by emphasising that he backed only the Muslim right to build the mosque at the proposed site, and had no comment on the wisdom of doing so. Senate majority leader Harry Reid and former Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean have come out in opposition to the project at its current location.

In the long term, if the US wants to protect freedom of worship while combating the real threat of radical Islam, both conservatives and liberals will need to alter the nature of their discourse.

Conservatives must cease to see religious pluralism as a weakness rather than a strength. The US won't defeat radical Islam by becoming more like Saudi Arabia or Iran. Conservatives also need to distinguish between the Islamist minority and the majority of ordinary Muslims, and give the latter the benefit of doubt until proven otherwise.

For their part, liberals need to recognise that debate about Islam is now global. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and a plethora of interconnected blogs, blur national boundaries and fuel a global consciousness about the issue.

Unless they take a leaf out of the conservative book and begin to actively question Muslim-majority countries for their generally tawdry treatment of religious minorities -- legal discrimination, apostasy laws, and restrictions on freedom of worship remain all too common -- they will be accused of double-standards.

In short, Western conservatives and liberals need to find common ground on one of the most pressing issues of our time. The failure to do so weakens both the West's culture of individual rights and the struggle against radical Islam.

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