

Stem the alarming trend

People are crying out for stricter penalties, harsher dispositions and harder ways to contain youthful terrorists and addicts. There have been many instances of young people being killed by their peers. These heinous incidents will continue to happen unless the family values are restored. It is not these youngsters who are at fault; it is their environment that needs corrective measures.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the menacing cloud of drug abuse and drug trafficking looming large, the nation seems incapable of stemming the tide of this scourge. Reports in newspapers about kidnapping, assault and murder by addicts have captured the attention of the citizenry. The various types of drugs available in the market spell disaster for the country. And to a nation that espouses adherence to religious principle, commitment to piety, morality and strict code of puritan life, drug addiction has emerged as the dark side of our character.

The country, it seems, is awash with this "giver of euphoria" and taker of life. On busy bus terminals, in little by-lanes, street corners and ferry ghats pushers peddle drugs under the nose of the law enforcers with impunity. In the old part of the Dhaka city slum areas reportedly turn into sprawling markets of all types of drugs after sunset. A handful of youth in these areas serve as lookouts, drug packagers, and even arms-bearing soldiers.

The number of addicts in the country, according to a survey by UNDP and some NGOs, has swelled to about 30 lakh from

10 lakh in 1996. The number of drug rehabilitation centres has increased manifold from just 50 in 1996, with almost all of them run by private initiatives.

Over the years hundreds of thousands of poor people have flocked to the capital city in search of work and a better life. Few found either and packed themselves into shanties. Many of the most desperate turned to crime, working under the protection of influential godfathers who operate this clandestine business but have always evaded arrest because of high connection and money dealings.

The vicious modus operandi of these drug thugs has evoked much fear in the public. Teenage addicts and drug peddlers armed with sophisticated weapons are now raiding homes and killing civilians, even in broad daylight, to get money.

Dhaka, once a decent city has now turned into a deadly abode of criminals. A report published in a daily paper on September 9 said that Rab arrested four persons including an S.I. of police for possessing Yaba tablets. Last August, Shahjalal International Airport police seized ingredients used for making Yaba tablets from the airport cargo village.

Addicts gather not only in the slums of

the city but also in posh areas and consume crack, heroin, phensidyl and yaba, a new kind of tablet drug that is consumed by upper class trend-conscious addicts. In some high level parties, ecstasy is the favourite choice. Most worrisome, women and even adolescent girls have become hooked to this vile addiction.

Bangladesh is also being used as a transit route for drug smuggling. A report published in The Daily Star in the recent past indicated that Customs intelligence arrested an Indian with 20 kg of heroin from Shahjalal International Airport as he was leaving Dhaka for Indonesia via Singapore.

Not surprisingly, the most devastating impact of drug addiction and drug dealings is a rise in violent crimes, not just a surge in extortion, muggings and armed robbery, but lethal violence. Dhaka city's homicide rates have gone up several times. Expert analysis says that almost 70% of the violence is credited to either getting or using drugs.

Addicts operate either by themselves or are engaged as goons by the drug lords or other agencies to serve their vile ends. So common-place is the violence of drug culture that it has almost become an "entertainment" to them. Ironically, drug dealing has peaked to new heights because of cellular phones and easy availability of sophisticated weapons.

Bangladesh border points with India and Myanmar have become so porous that weapons and drugs are getting into the country with least obstruction. Shockingly, in many cases law enforcement personnel are alleged to be in league with this criminal trade. An investigative report published in a Bangla daily pointed out in horrific details the modus operandi of the smugglers in bringing arms and drugs through Hili border in

Dinajpur.

Phensidyl syrup is being smuggled into the country through underground pipes from factories in India located near Hili border in Bangladesh. As it appears, the drug barons reign supreme in their dens and, even if people know about it, they can't be touched.

Drugs are as much an enemy as an "aggressing foreign power," as much a scourge as poverty, violence, street crime, lassitude of youth and unemployment. The war against drug calls for a civil war to be fought in the schoolyard, market place and park. Law enforcement agencies must take note that the drive against drug peddling will lose its momentum and intensity if they launch such drives by giving a prior announcement.

Drug dealers are bewitching susceptible kids and threatening society's sense of order and security. The public is outraged as all indications are there that drug abuse has surpassed economic woes. For a nation that has prided itself upon waging war against evils, the crackdown on drugs has become the latest imperative.

As indicated by reports, drug addiction has become an epidemic and the fear that has gripped the nation is hardly unwarranted. The government must not only promise, but also implement, a massive drug education campaign and nationwide drive for drug-free parks, market places, restaurants, hotels and last of all schools. Private businesses and local philanthropic organisations might lead the way or at least foot the bill, but the real responsibility rests on the government.

Our experience over the years suggests that crime is fuelled by drug abuse. The link between drugs and street crimes has been established in a study conducted by a research group. Drug addiction in the country is a time bomb that is ticking and

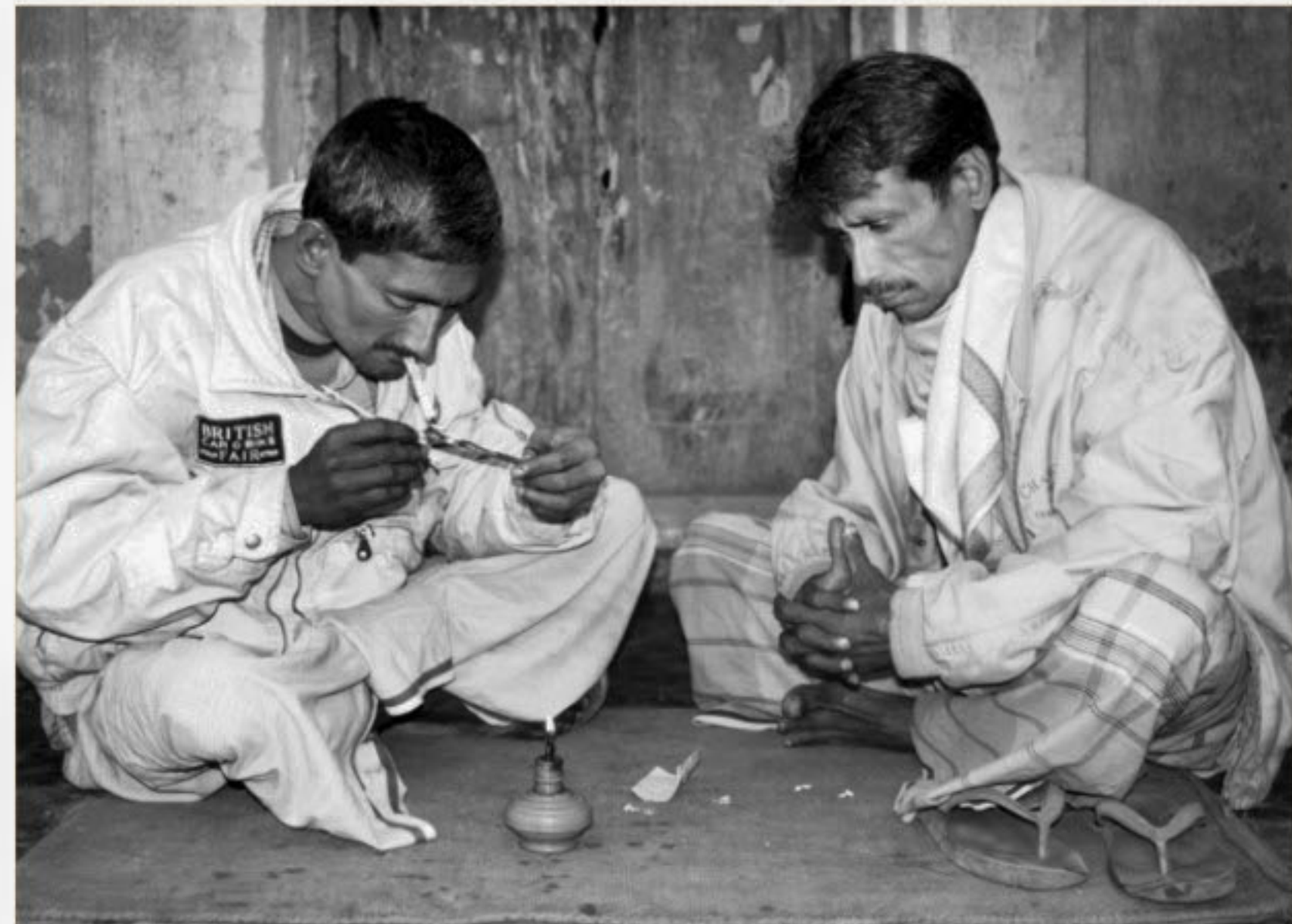
will explode in our face unless addressed right now. Researchers blame persistent economic hardship and the stress of living in a society, unemployment, and social inequity for driving increasing number of people to seek refuge in drugs.

In a bid to finding out the solutions of these problems, we must fulfill our commitment to our children. Only when we realise that we are hurting these dependent members of the society through excessive access to wealth will we begin to deal realistically with this menacing problem. More government programmes of employment opportunities along with loan giving programmes initiated by NGOs in Bangladesh could create employment opportunities and avenues for income for greater number of people.

People are crying out for stricter penalties, harsher dispositions and harder ways to contain youthful terrorists and addicts. There have been many instances of young people being killed by their peers. These heinous incidents will continue to happen unless the family values are restored.

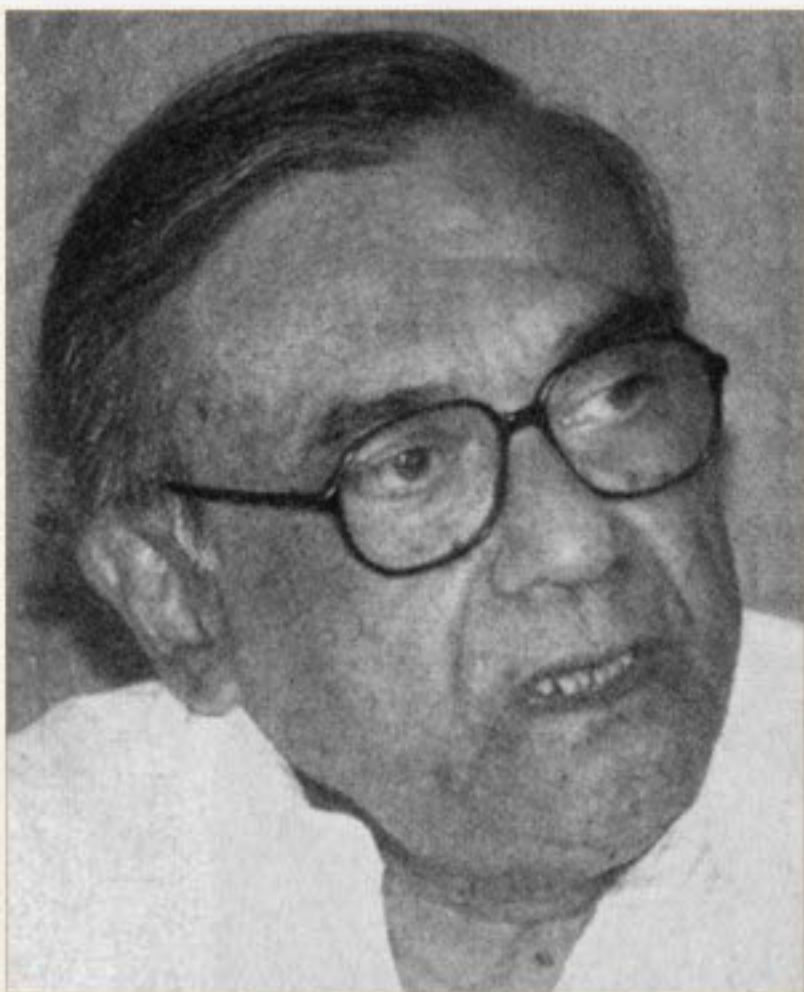
It is not these youngsters who are at fault; it is their environment that needs corrective measures. In the first place, if parents would have devoted the same time, energy, resources and money that they do to confront other crises arising out of their wards' wrongful conduct, things would not have been so bad.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. e-mail : aukhandk@gmail.com



It's positive approach that matters

There will always be issues between neighbours. This is true of neighbours in communities, between neighbouring districts and provinces of a state and between neighbouring states. In the case of sovereign states, sense of nationalism and public opinion come into play and resolution of issues becomes that much more difficult. What is required is a positive approach to their resolution, keeping mutual interests in mind.



DEB MUKHERJEE

I feel deeply privileged that Prothom Alo has asked me to write a few words on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of its publication. I would like to commend it for its fearless and constructive role in the life of the nation.

My links with Bangladesh go back to years before its emergence as a sovereign nation on the map of the world. I was in the Indian High Commission in Islamabad from 1968 to 1971 and saw from a distance the unfolding of events in

East Pakistan -- the Agartala Conspiracy Case, the Round Table Conference, the increasing demand from the people for the establishment of their rights.

We watched with wonder as the people of East Pakistan expressed their views unambiguously in the 1970 elections as they voted overwhelmingly for the Awami League and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. There followed those days of excitement of early March when it was a people's government in East Pakistan and Radio Pakistan became Bangladesh Betar as nationalist songs were broadcast.

Then came the dark days of the Pakistan army's genocide. In autumn, after I had left Islamabad, I saw at the West Bengal border the pitiable plight of streams of refugees coming into camps and was reassured by the strong and defiant songs of "rupantar gaan," (retained for posterity by Catherine and Tareque Masud) as the artistes performed by the light of hurricane lanterns to give a beacon of hope for their people who had had to flee their motherland.

I came to Dhaka on a posting in 1977 and stayed three years. As the political officer of the high commission I could observe closely the changes in the polity and the constitution brought about by the martial law regime of the time. For some of this period, there were sharp edges to

Indo-Bangladesh relations. But this did not prevent us from making friendships, many of which have lasted over the years.

My wife and I consider our two stays in Dhaka as the most enjoyable in my foreign service career of 38 years, both personally and professionally. The rivers of Bangladesh also gave substance to the imagery of Tagore and Jibanananda. It is not possible to appreciate "abar ashibo phirey" unless one has floated down the Meghna and its many channels.

I returned to Dhaka in 1995 for a stay of over five years as India's High Commissioner. These were eventful years in the politics of Bangladesh with the Awami League returning to power after a long gap. The problems relating to the Chittagong Hill Tracts were addressed by the government, making it possible for Chakma refugees to return home. The issue of sharing the Ganga waters was resolved by a 30-year agreement. It was a privilege for me to have been associated with the agreement.

Old friendships were renewed and new friends were made. I traveled from Teknaf to Tetulia and made several visits to the Sunderbans, drove down the beach at Cox's Bazar and saw many wonders of architecture and antiquity, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of Bangladesh.

The editor of Prothom Alo, my friend Mr Matiur Rahman, has asked me to say a few words about Indo-Bangladesh relations. Much has been discussed about all aspects of this and besides my years in government, I was also associated with some of these discussions in the Track II Dialogue with the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

To put it briefly, there will always be issues between neighbours. This is true of neighbours in communities, between neighbouring districts and provinces of a state and between neighbouring states. In

the case of sovereign states, sense of nationalism and public opinion come into play and resolution of issues becomes that much more difficult. The presence of issues is not surprising. What is required is a positive approach to their resolution, keeping mutual interests in mind.

There are, I believe, some fundamental facts in the relations between India and Bangladesh. Each benefits from the welfare of the other and damage to one cannot be to the benefit of the other. If Bangladesh feels constrained by being geographically surrounded by India, from India's perspective, Bangladesh lies at the heart of a sensitive part of India. Developments in Bangladesh or relations with it thus remain of the greatest importance for India. Each is dependent on the other for its welfare.

There are, of course, many issues that remain to be fully resolved or addressed -- relating to trade, economic co-operation, border management, maritime boundary, land boundary, connectivity, migration, security etc. I firmly believe that all these can be resolved by the display of adequate political will and direction by both governments. The way forward in each of these areas has been discussed in detail over the years, both by governments and the civil societies of the two countries, and the possible courses of action are known.

The area of vital importance to Bangladesh, namely water resources, can be addressed only in a limited manner bilaterally. Rivers do not know political boundaries and the optimum development of this critical resource must eventually involve all the co-riparian states. Meanwhile, I expect that the interests of Bangladesh would be kept in mind by India in the development of its water resources. An important element here is

the exchange of information so that there is no avoidable misunderstanding or misapprehension.

My introduction to Bangladesh was as a foreign diplomat. My own linguistic and cultural roots and the warm friendship of many have ensured an abiding interest in the welfare of the land and its people. I have seen the trauma of the birth of Bangladesh and the suffering of its people.

There were two parallel motivations that enthused the people leading to the war for independence. One was the desire for cultural and linguistic autonomy and the other the economic emancipation of the people. The former has been achieved and there has been the significant recognition of "ekushey" as the International Mother Languages Day by the United Nations. There is continuing efflorescence of many facets of culture rooted in the people.

Despite the negative prognostications by many at the time of its birth, the economy of Bangladesh has done and continues to do well. What has, however, hindered a more rapid march forward has been political uncertainty and the culture of impunity which started with the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and national leaders in 1975.

A miasma of military or quasi-military rule prevailed for fifteen years until a people's revolt overthrew a dictator. But even the restoration of parliamentary democracy has been tarnished by the absence of mutual understanding and dialogue between the major political parties. All friends of Bangladesh would wish to see the recognition that all political parties, in their own way, whether in government or in opposition, represent the people and have distinct duties to perform.

When I was in Dhaka, my Sri Lankan colleague once told me that Bangladesh was uniquely fortunate in the homogeneity of its people, its culture and its language and compared it with the internal difficulties his country was facing at the time. He was surprised at the sharpness of the political divide in Bangladesh.

I do believe that Bangladesh has the inherent strengths and possibilities to become a significant member of the international community. Its people have shown their resolve in the Liberation War and in standing up to autocratic regimes. They have demonstrated that their commitment to their faith does not make them support extremist ideologies in the name of religion. In this they hold out a beacon to other parts of the world, including in the neighbourhood.

The achievements of Bangladesh in women's rights and micro-credit are internationally acknowledged. Its natural resources, particularly gas, and its unique location which provides it with the opportunity of becoming the transport hub of the entire region, are significant assets which can assist economic development. Above all, Bangladesh has the advantage of its people who can fight any adversity and utilise all opportunities that may come.

As a friend, I would hope to see Bangladesh build its future on its syncretic culture and the unity of its people, building on its strengths. There is a great deal that unites all the people and these aspirations, rather than divisions, need to be emphasised. The promise of the Liberation War where the youth fearlessly laid down their lives, still remains to be wholly fulfilled. I remain confident that this shall be so.

By courtesy of Prothom Alo.

Deb Mukherjee is a former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh.

A guide to modern music



EVER been to a junior school disco? It's basically World War III with Barbie accessories.

I was doing my deejay thing the other day. I put on High School Musical: hundreds of girls squealed, running to the dance floor.

I put on Taylor Swift: they shrieked and jumped up and down.

I put on Justin Bieber: they screamed, became hysterical and fell over, frothing at the mouth.

Man, this was so easy, I said to myself, lining up more guaranteed crowd-pleasers like Katy Perry and Lady Gaga.

faces had appeared at the side of the deejay booth.

"This is all girl music," said the spokesman for the gang of boys, his tone of voice making it clear that "girl" was synonymous with sick, evil and disgusting. (I thought guys had to be married before getting to that stage.) The other young men nodded gravely.

I spun my screen around to show them the names of the current chart-toppers. "Sorry guys, but all the most popular music recently has been either by girls or for girls," I explained, pointing to Ke\$ha, Rihanna and the rest.

To mollify the boys, I found a track in which the "melody" was some guy shouting all on one note: Low by Flo Rida.

They approved and were soon jumping up and down and punching the air.

Then teenagers from the nearby high school crashed the party and demanded music for their generation.

So I segued to a song that both sexes of all ages loved: I've Got a Feeling by the Black-Eyed Peas. This alternates a tune-

ful melody with out-of-tune shouting about smashing things up. Yeah--perfect for girls and guys. I played it six times.

On the way home that night, with 120 beats-per-minute music ringing in my ears, I pondered on the Rise of The Female Rocker.

Guys have dominated pop music for its entire 48-year history (the Beatles entered the charts on October 11, 1962). Remember that tingly, summery, great-to-be-alive feeling you got when you first heard Penny Lane by the Beatles? You get the same feeling today from Who'd Have Known by Lily Allen.

The next morning, I phoned a musician to talk about this change. He disagreed, and said it was a total myth: "Nothing's changed. Ninety per cent of people in the music business are guys."

Behind every great girl singer is a guy who produces the music, and sometimes even writes the songs, he explained. "Amy Winehouse has Mark Ronson and Duffy has Steve Booker," he said.

Lily Allen's song Who'd Have Known,

he continued, was partly written by her producer Greg Kurstin, and partly stolen from the all-male band Take That.

She'd first posted the song on her Myspace web page (mis-spelt as Who'd Of Known), with a note saying: "I ripped off the chorus from Take That."

(Here's the link to the Take That song, if you feel like comparing the two choruses.)

He was pretty convincing. It is still a guy's game, although women may be dominating the top of the charts. But why are males so dominant in rock music?

The heart of the business is touring, my musician friend explained.

"A small amplifier can weigh 50 kilos. The main skills you need are weightlifting, obsessiveness, the capacity to drink huge amounts of beer, the ability to wear the same clothes for weeks, and most of all, extreme arrogance. These are all male specialities."

At last: something we guys can be proud of.

For more visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com

