

## Protecting and preserving Lalbagh Fort

*Heritage must not be trifled with*

THE preservation of heritage is an important sign of how a nation takes pride in its history. That being the underlying truth, it is easy to understand the nature of the demand made the other day by the Paribesh Bachao Andolon and Bangladesh Scouts Dhaka District Rover regarding measures toward protecting Lalbagh Fort. It is quite surprising that where the High Court directive asking the authorities to ensure a preservation of the Fort should have led to speedy and effective action, the demand by the two bodies only shows up once more the laid-back attitude so often adopted by the authorities over issues of public interest. There is no denying that over a long period of time, unauthorized constructions have appeared not only outside the Fort, in its immediate vicinity, but inside the Fort compound as well. How that has happened is a question which, we suspect, the authorities cannot answer to our satisfaction. All we know is that had the authorities been alert and carrying out their responsibilities, Lalbagh Fort would not be in the position it finds itself in today.

Back in October this year, the High Court had directed the government to demarcate the area of the Fort through a proper survey. It also opined that all unauthorized and therefore illegal structures within the area should be removed within a period of three months. Of course the three-month period is yet to be over, but what ought to have been done since the HC issued its directive was for the authorities to go into quick action against those who have been encroaching on the premises of Lalbagh Fort. The human chain formed on Saturday was a clear sign that not much progress had been made over the issue. Land grabbers, as we understand, have already built 30 structures at the northwestern wall of the Fort. Besides, quite a good number of residential quarters have also come up well within the Fort area proper. Such images are only reflective of an administration that is either callous about performing its duties or could care less about the cultural heritage the country is heir to and must preserve strenuously. Now, the plight of Lalbagh Fort raises a further question: in what states of neglect do other places of historical interest happen to be at present? A large number of old buildings and other structures of great archaeological interest as well as old cemeteries dating from early times to the War of Liberation dot the entire landscape of Bangladesh. There are often reports of how many of these structures lie in neglected and dilapidated conditions. It is such circumstances which must be looked into by the government, particularly the ministry of culture.

On a final note, we observe with concern that some organizations often arrange cultural programmes on historical sites. We believe that such tendencies should be dispensed with, for the particular reason that celebrations of any kind inside the fort will only worsen the precarious state of the fort. If the aim of the organizers is to draw attention to our heritage, they can surely do it through other means.

Let Lalbagh fort and all other sites of historical interest be preserved as proud symbols of our past. No excuses must be there for the authorities to treat the matter in indifferent fashion.

## A tale-tell bridge

*Those responsible must be held to account*

IN a country where multi-storied buildings collapse without warning with alarming regularity, that a bridge would be short-lived may not come as a surprise. Yet, the sense of outrage is quite palpable when one learns of a bridge completed only six months back in Mohanganj union in the district of Kurigram came crumbling down.

Needless to say, it has put thousands of habitants of the union under great deal of distress. The bridge did not serve the purpose for which it was meant and yet public fund has been spent, or rather misused in this instance. It needs to be mentioned that the bridge had partly collapsed only a month's of its completion, ostensibly due to the flooding of the dying river on which the bridge was built. And apparently the second phase of flood was the cause of its complete collapse.

While one must appreciate the fact that the bridge was built within the specified time, since nothing gets done on time in our country, but the contractor is blameworthy for coming out with the most ludicrous of pretexts for the collapse -- washing away of the soil from underneath the bridge. But is not that the character of rivers, where the soil is constantly in a state of flux and the design feature is supposed to factor in these fundamentals?

It goes without saying that the manner in which the bridge under discussion was built is fairly representative of the way many such bridges are constructed in our country with the hope that nature would come in as handy excuse for the deliberate lacunae in the work. The approach section of the bridge was left unfilled. And as per the contractor, that could not be done due to early floods and heavy rains. That being the case, how can anyone, least of all the project implementation officer, claim that the construction of the bridge was done as per schedule, and that too when the connecting approaches were also left incomplete? And it seems quite incomprehensible that a bridge would be built without soil test as was done in this case and the UNO was quite ignorant about it. And how could the payment be made for work that was only half done?

The only impression we get from this episode is that the procedure for rural construction is rather lax and there is little administrative oversight over these projects. It is a case of misuse of public fund, and no matter the amount, all those responsible for it must be held to account for loss of scarce public resource.



STAR

## The hartal paradox

So, a *hartal* the opposition will try to enforce and the party in power will try to foil with all the powers it has under its disposal. And that is seemingly the unwritten rule of the game between the opposition and the party or parties in office, even when they are at each other's throat.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

TOMORROW'S nationwide *hartal* called by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has created a confrontational situation across the country. The police have resorted to arrest of hundreds of activists of BNP and Jatiya Chhatra Dal (JCD), the party's student front. They are also using force to disperse gatherings and procession marches organised by the main opposition and its front bodies.

The use of force, sometimes in amounts disproportionate to the situations at hand, has been the usual practice of governments in office ahead of any *hartal* called by opposition party or parties. This practice has been in force since long, regardless of whether the government in power has been an elected or an unelected one. And the methods used in such actions are also more or less the same -- be those under a democratic or a non-democratic government.

The opposition BNP has meanwhile warned the government with more *hartal*s for the use of such arrests and highhanded

treatment of its activists by the government before the *hartal*, while the business and industry leaders and the apex trade bodies have unanimously opposed the *hartal* with appeals to the opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia to call it off considering the harm such a countrywide shutdown might inflict on the economy.

The government leaders, including the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself, has also come down heavily on the opposition for the *hartal* as they think it has been called in protest against the eviction of the main opposition leader from her cantonment house. However, the opposition BNP has not mentioned anything about the "eviction" issue in connection with its November 30 *hartal*. On the contrary, what they alleged was the government's "failure to bring down the rising prices of essentials, supply necessary quantity of gas and power, maintain law and order and so on" as reasons behind calling the *hartal*.

The government, the business community and different other cross sections of society have expressed their strong disapproval of the *hartal*, while the highest

body of the business and industry asked the government to put a ban on *hartal* through legislation. However, the government has negated such a suggestion from the business community saying that calling of a *hartal* was a democratic right of the opposition.

Thus far, the utterances of the government leaders as well as of those in opposition were quite comprehensible to the man in the street. And he was also quite capable of making sense of every action taken so far by the government and the opposition centring on tomorrow's *hartal*.

But after the government leaders have termed it a democratic tool of protest, the question that naturally arises in his mind is: Why then is the government using the repressive measures like the arrests on the gatherings and processions organised by the opposition activists? Is then organising processions, rallies and so on also not a democratic right? Why should a democratic government then come down on the opposition when the latter is using that democratic right? Is it not paradoxical that the same government, which is so critical of the opposition's *hartal*, is not willing to go for any legislation to put an end to that practice once and for all through legislation?

Here, it is the apparent self-contradictoriness in the government's attitude towards the *hartal* that is being questioned and not the feasibility of adopting any legal measure to put a stop to such a weapon of movement. Clearly, the government is unwilling to go that far

about *hartal*s. The business community might have become wiser by now as to why the political parties of the country, even when in power, become so enigmatic when it comes to the issue of banning *hartal*.

So, a *hartal* the opposition will try to enforce and the party in power will try to foil with all the powers it has under its disposal. And that is seemingly the unwritten rule of the game between the opposition and the party or parties in office, even when they are at each other's throat. And it is immaterial, in such a case, what that might cost the people in terms of the lost man-hours, business and the suffering the common people would have to go through.

The political parties, if they are so at one about the "use value" of *hartal* as a weapon of political agitation, but so consensual about the harm that it inflicts on the economy and the people's life, why can't those in power avoid creating the very condition that supply the reason for any political party or group whatsoever to call a *hartal*? And is it not the confrontational nature of the dominant political culture that provides the fertile ground for using *hartal* and other destructive political weapons by political forces out of power?

Unfortunately, the political parties of the country have so far failed to resolve this dichotomy in politics. And this failure is causing the economy to bleed and the people to suffer with no hope in sight.

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## Deep rot in the system

It would be worse, and ethically more repugnant, if journalists become political fixers or take instructions from corporate lobbyists. The Radia tapes suggest that's precisely what happened. Journalism has reached a new moral-professional low in India. That's tragic for democracy.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

AS the telecom scam over the 2G spectrum reverberates, two magazines (Outlook and Open) have reproduced partial transcripts of certain telephone conversations between Ms. Niira Radia, a corporate lobbyist for the Tata and Mukesh Ambani groups, and several top journalists and politicians. These show journalists illegitimately acting as political lobbyists.

The conversations, wire-tapped officially by the Income Tax department, are part of the record in the 2G case before the Supreme Court. They appear prima facie authentic; and their genuineness isn't denied by most of those implicated.

They show that Ms. Radia tried to recruit Hindustan Times' Vir Sanghvi and NDTV's Barkha Dutt, among others, as mediators who would influence portfolio distribution during the mid-2009 formation of the second Manmohan Singh government. One objective was to give the now-disgraced telecommunications minister A Raja that portfolio.

Another issue was a High Court judgment on the Ambani brothers' dispute over the pricing of natural gas from the Krishna-Godavari Basin. Ms. Radia coaxed or subtly pressured journalists to support Mr. Mukesh Ambani's view. Sanghvi's column in The Hindustan Times relied heavily on her feed.

Both the 2G and the Radia tapes scandals show that India's precious public resources are being undersold or plundered by venal businessmen and corrupt

politicians with journalists' help. The two scandals haven't fused in public discourse.

But that's because most newspapers and TV channels have backed out the story despite the media's claim that it's a watchdog of truth and democracy.

The underselling of 2G licences has caused the public exchequer a loss of between Rs.66,000 crores and Rs.1.77 lakh crores, according to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Rs.1.77-lakh-crore loss to the public exceeds four times the budget of the UPA's flagship National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Mr. Raja used four devices or methods.

First, he priced the spectrum licences ridiculously low, less than a third of their reselling price. Second, the application deadlines were whimsically changed to favour certain business houses.

Third, some industrialists were allowed to conceal their holdings in different telecom companies, thus violating the maximum-10-percent-stake rule for two telecom service-providers in the same circle. Among the culprits was Mr. Anil Ambani's Reliance which held a big chunk in Swan Telecom.

Fourth, the licensees were to roll out 10 percent of their networks within a year and all of it within three years. This wasn't done. The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) should have levied weekly penalties of up to Rs.20 lakhs for long delays, or cancelled the licences. This wasn't done.

Finally, DoT gave away spectrum worth Rs.37,000 crores free to several companies.

The 2G scandal is rooted not just in corruption, procedural violations and regulatory failures, but in the deeply flawed 1999 Telecom Policy, since continued. This policy allowed blatantly partisan decisions, including, crucially, allotting spectrum on a first-come-first-served basis.

This makes no sense in a precious scarce resource like the electromagnetic spectrum. Its price was arbitrarily fixed in 2001, when mobile telephony was at a nascent stage. Auctioning spectrum would have been far better, if accompanied by conditions containing larger social objectives -- access for the underprivileged, affordability and prevention of cartels.

The Telecom Policy has encouraged cartelisation against the consumer interest and balanced telecom development.

This makes it imperative that the Parliamentary investigation of the 2G scam cover the Telecom Policy too. This is essential if past malpractices are to be probed, including permission to Reliance to migrate from a wireless-in-local-loop licence to mobile telephony, and the extension of CDMA licences for the Tatas and Reliance to GSM services.

However, what issues do the Radia tapes raise regarding the media's role in the 2G and gas allocation episodes?

Several, including the legitimate limits of the journalist's relationship with his/her source; industrial lobbyists' gatekeeping role and trading of access to magnates with favours; the integrity of anchors and print-journalists; and the state's violation of privacy without a proper legal rationale, which must be strongly resisted.

It's clear from the Radia tapes that Sanghvi and Dutt offered to lobby senior Congress leaders at Ms. Radia's behest so that DMK politicians hostile to Mr. Raja wouldn't influence the choice of portfolios.

They, and other journalists, also discussed DMK and Congress leaders' predilections, various individuals' moves, and key players' strengths and weaknesses.

That's legitimate. Journalists often have to engage, pump and cajole their sources, including lobbyists, on issues beyond their primary interest. They also exchange and cross-check information, analysis and interpretation.

Sometimes, journalists use information from one source to extract more dope from, say, their competitors, or get help from other sources to analyse it. But there they must draw the line.

What is illegitimate and unethical is using access to and influence with powerful politicians to fix ministerial berths and key appointments in order to do favours for the lobbyist and his/her company. It's certainly illegitimate to agree to write articles on lobbyists' dictates and offer to get them vetted by them.

The self-justification offered by Sanghvi and Dutt is unconvincing. The claim that NDTV has carried some anti-Raja stories doesn't validate Dutt's offer to lobby Congress leaders on Ms. Radia's behalf. Nor will Sanghvi's excuse wash, that he was only "stringing" Ms. Radia along.

Nothing in either conversation suggests anything but a subordinate, if not supplicant, relationship in a context defined by stakes running into thousands, even lakhs, of crores.

The crossing of professional-ethical lines has dangerous implications for the media's credibility -- its greatest asset. Already, many Indian journalists have become advisers, strategists and publicists for corporations, and serve as "food consultants" to five-star hotels. Some enjoy free perks from airlines, hotels and spas.

That's bad enough. It would be even worse, and ethically more repugnant, if journalists become political fixers or take instructions from corporate lobbyists. The Radia tapes suggest that's precisely what happened. Journalism has reached a new moral-professional low in India. That's tragic for democracy.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian Journalist