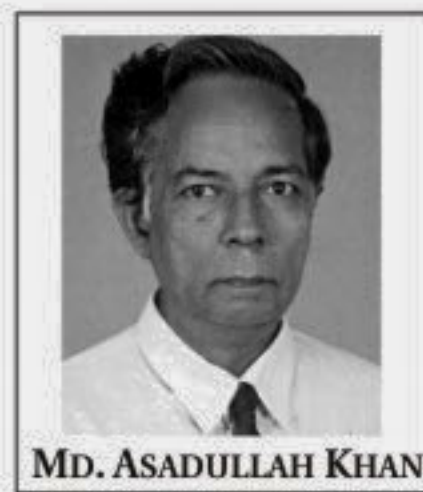


BITTER TRUTH

Corruption eating into the vitals



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

DESPITE pledges by the present government to rid the country of the scourge of corruption, it continues to corrode the soul of the country's political structure, bringing in its wake an apparent collapse of the country's governmental and political institutions.

During the days of the 4-party alliance government, business activities and development efforts came to a grinding halt because every sector of the government was redolent with the stench of corruption.

The prime minister, who is so passionate in her crusade against corruption, cannot achieve the desired objectives because people around her seem to have pursued their own narrow causes, often in disregard of national interest. Ill-served by corrupt politicians and officials whose concern rarely extends beyond their own interests and purses, many people have become adept in shrieking about their rights but shirking their civic responsibilities.

But gloomy though the situation is the country's unexplored resources and abundant human capital are readily available for a revival, if only there is enlightened and determined leadership. Even when many people are languishing in abysmal poverty and deprivation, they are still hoping that they will

see better days.

People tend to invest goodwill in their leaders, and even overlook transgressions, but only up to a point. That point surely has been reached. The country's politicians of all hues should understand that. The moot point is that young Bangladeshis want their leaders to be more accountable.

The stock market scam is the latest incident, resulting from lack of proper vigilance and failure of the government in booking the guilty persons in a similar incident in 1996. These politician-cum-businessmen groups must realise why these 30 lakh small investors, mostly in their 30s, flocked to the share market with everything they had, but in just a year they lost all their assets because of someone else's greed and machinations.

These youths had no job, or access to business opportunities, and many dependants, but all their hopes were dashed because of flawed government policies, total callousness and indifference from the responsible quarters in the government. The consequences will be grim if these disgruntled youth turn up on the streets in another colour.

Financial experts say that erosion of their assets happened due to corruption by some high-ups in the business and political circles, but they offer no prescriptions as to how these losers will be compensated to ward-off the distress they underwent.

Businessmen, who understand the nuances of corruption better than most people, are forced into a

conspiracy of silence that makes it impossible for them to admit publicly how much they pay to build a power plant, to get an environmental clearance for setting up a factory, to build a bridge, or even to get a loan from a bank.

Everyone knows that nothing moves in government offices and utility organisations without the greasing of the right palms. In the job market the situation is horrendous.

Corruption is the rule, and honesty is naivety. The most corrupt are likely to walk away with their amassed wealth. The lesser ones run the risk of being caught, suspended or arrested.

dous. Allegations abound that for a teaching job in a non-government primary school, one has to pay a hefty sum of money to the management board.

As the world has become frenetically competitive, nations realise the value of good education. Most people who had schooling in the earlier days are not happy about the level of attainment of the students. Most high-profile schools and col-

leges are losing their image as producers of national talents in different services.

Reports about school authorities indulging in corruption in admitting students in primary schools are very alarming. A news item published in a Bangla daily on February 11 sent a chill down the nation's spine. It is hard to comprehend, harder still to believe, but it is true.

The report indicated that an



A.M.AHAD/DRINKNEWS

unprecedented and insidious nature of corruption was resorted to in admitting students in the Day Section of Motijheel Girls' Primary school. The school authorities drew up a merit list of 121 students prepared on the basis of competitive tests held for admission in class three, but admitted 118 students from the waiting list. The merit list of 121 students was not even hung

up in the notice board.

Guardians complained to the headmistress, but she paid no heed to their complaints. The authorities in the secondary and higher education directorate took no cognisance of their complaints although, as the controlling authority of the school administration, it was their primary responsibility to investigate the matter and take proper action. Undaunted, the guardians filed a case with the Anti-Corruption Commission, which investigated and found the allegation to be true.

What is more ominous is that the perpetrators seem to be supported by influential quarters. People believe that this crime must have been engineered in exchange of high kickbacks. This shows the breakdown of moral fabric and social values. Not reining in such scams is a political blunder and will only lead to further scams of greater magnitude.

Rarely has a person guilty of such misconduct been meted out proper punishment. People also feel that the near fruitless endeavour to curb terrorism and looting of state properties has mostly resulted from the interference of godfathers in the administration, who receive their strength from political bosses.

There is no point in taking refuge in the old truism that corruption is a way of life in an underdeveloped country like Bangladesh, or that bureaucratic corruption is not as massive as political corruption. There are no institutional checks and balances to contain bureaucratic corruption and no democratic government can offer immu-

nity to a particular class even when the official faces charges after impartial investigation.

In a fledgling democracy like Bangladesh, instituting a genuinely honest government is tough unless the politicians change their mindset. The top tier of bureaucracy constructed by the colonial rulers and often referred to as the "steel frame" has now turned into "rubber frame." Politicians often use the threat of transfers and punitive postings to bend the officers and make them comply with unethical and illegal orders. These invisible corrupt practices hinder distribution of the fruits of economic progress widely and with social justice.

In a country that is governed by rule of law and can give severe punishment to those found guilty, corruption will automatically take a backseat. Corruption is the rule, and honesty is naivety. The most corrupt are likely to walk away with their amassed wealth. The lesser ones run the risk of being caught, suspended or arrested. Bigger corruption is a sure route to increased pelf and even a position in governance.

Tackling corruption is like fighting another liberation war today. What it needs most is a band of selfless leaders supported by an army of passionate crusaders. At the same time, the country needs a total overhaul of its vigilance system. It needs a statutory independent investigating and prosecuting agency like the ACC we have now, but not with its wings clipped.

The writer is former teacher of Physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.
E-mail : aukhandk@gmail.com

Nation lacks direction

KULDIP NAYAR

BEING an open and free society with independent media, scam-ridden India can absorb shocks and scandals. Yet this does not lessen the people's anger against the rulers, civil servants and some from corporate sectors for swindling amounts running into lakhs of crores of rupees which could have made a further dent in poverty and unemployment.

The reported offer by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to appoint the much evaded Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) and his neither-here-nor-there press conference have somewhat eased the atmosphere, whatever the rhetoric of the opposition and the critics.

Yet the government should not take people for granted. If there is one thing which the Egyptian revolution has underlined, it is that a determined nation does not rest until it has ousted the rulers who have misgoverned.

What comes out clearly after months of tension and the stalled parliament for the Winter Session is that the government has to face the demands squarely and announce the decision quickly. In his press conference, the prime minister has promised this. But he was still talking about procedures and rules which he alone can overcome because they are too cumbersome and unnecessarily delay things.

The appointment of JPC was justified from day one. It is a process which brings out in the open what the government and its limbs may be trying to hide. The good news is that the prime minister has announced his willingness to appear before the JPC or any other committee appointed to hold an inquiry.

The 2G Spectrum became like the Bofors guns which Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had brought after the reported kickbacks of Rs.64 crore he had received. Then the JPC failed because no government department cooperated with it. This may not happen this time because

both left and the right are united to get at the truth. The public is also vigilant and watching every step.

In the series of scams, another relating to the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) has come to light, thanks again to the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). The government says that there was no deal. Then what has it scrapped after running the contract for two years? The affected firm has threatened to sue the ISRO. The prime minister has unnecessarily exonerated its office. But the fact remains that even after scrapping

The real point that blew up Egypt was the rulers' insensitivity. They considered one eruption here and another there as isolated examples. But it indicated the lava beneath the surface. President Hosni Mubarak had not anticipated it.

the deal, the firm and the PMO were discussing it.

The government took more or less on the same line as it did in the 2G spectrum case, causing a loss of Rs.1.75 lakh crore. Telecommunication Minister Kapil Sibal has claimed that there was no loss of revenue. The prime minister has also supported him by arguing that the loss was estimated from the point you began. But how do the two explain when even the government-controlled Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has said that the government has lost revenue.

The real point that blew up Egypt was the rulers' insensitivity. They considered one eruption here and another there as isolated examples. But it indicated the lava beneath the surface. President Hosni Mubarak had not anticipated it.

The problems in any country, if allowed to fester for decades, assume such a proportion if a solution was not sought early. This is what is happening in India. Agitations and protests do not make much difference to

New Delhi until people take to the streets.

Take the case of Kashmir. It could have been sorted out when the then Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah asked New Delhi to make good the letter and spirit behind Article 370 that gave Jammu and Kashmir a special status. Even if the Article were to be implemented fully today, it would fall short of the Valley's demand.

The insurgency in the state has cost the lives of some 40,000 Kashmiris. Merely Article 370, they argue, does not give them even a

face-saving formula. Still the BJP on the one hand and Mufti's People's Democratic Party (PDP) on the other go on aggravating the problem for electoral purposes. This should not deter New Delhi from finding a settlement, with Pakistan if necessary and without it if possible.

What the Gorkhas in the north of West Bengal are demanding is a state within India. They have tried the experiment of special powers within the state. But Kolkata has failed the Gorkhas. Today, they are observing only hartal. Tomorrow things can go out of hand. New Delhi has to play a part to help the two sides arrive at a workable arrangement.

The Nagaland problem could have been sorted out when Phizo, the Nagas' icon, was living in London. He had realised in the later half of the eighties that his demand for independence was not tenable. He was willing to accept a state within India. New Delhi did not rise

to the occasion as it did in the case of Lal Denga, giving him the state of Mizoram, with concession within the constitution. Today, the government once again finds the Naga leaders asking for independence.

What India does not realise is that the problems, apart from gathering moss, are sucking the life out of the system. However strong the country's economy, the governance has lost the élan it had enjoyed earlier. The credibility of even Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has gone down and the reshuffle of the cabinet which he has reiterated will not do.

No doubt, the falling standards of governance in the states have impaired the image of New Delhi. With no law and order in UP, no honesty in Tamil Nadu, no morality in Haryana and no shame in Chattisgarh, where the police and terrorists come from the same basket, India can never shine or become incredible.

The exposure of industrialists and even that of the media houses through the Nira Radio tapes shows how our system can be manipulated through bribes and contacts. Values are trampled upon too often and too intentionally. Mafias have been allowed to take over.

Egypt's upheaval should awaken all the countries that the long neglect of people's basic demands can take an unexpected turn. All political parties have to correct their ways. The Maoists are not a one-day phenomenon. When lands of the tribals, who are happy in their own environment, are appropriated for industry they are bound to become desperate.

I do see hope in the money-dazzled civil society. The manner in which it has expressed support to Dr. Vinayak Sen, sentenced for life for "sedition," indicates that the embers of idealism are not yet cold. The functioning of the stalled Parliament is also a proof of MPs' faith in the consensus and democratic values. The budget session promises to be interesting.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.
www.kuldipnayar.com

Epidemic of tautology spreads



MY child told me she was drawing "a round circle."

I said: "Aren't all circles round?"

She looked up. "Not the square ones," she said.

I backed off. You can't win an argument with anyone born after 1980, the date at which humans evolved beyond logic.

One of the results of the new irrationality is the massive epidemic of tautology (saying the same thing twice) sweeping the world.

A new product appeared on the shelf at my supermarket: Chai Tea. Since "Chai" is the Asian word for tea ("chai" in Hindi, "cha" in Chinese, "tsaa" in Tagalog etc), people in this region cannot help but read the name as Tea Tea.

Ten metres away was a jar of red stuff labelled Salsa Sauce. Even I know that Salsa is Spanish for sauce, so the product was Sauce Sauce. And in the frozen section was Shrimp Scampi, which means shrimp shrimp to anyone who knows any Italian.

On menus in cafes in Vietnam you are offered a choice of drinks: "Coca Cola Coke" or "Pepsi Cola Coke."

Tautology is all over Asia's maps, too.

In China, there's the Gobi Desert ("Desert Desert"), and Mount Lushan ("Mountain Lu Mountain").

In the Philippines, you'll find Laguna Lake, and in Kashmir, Dal Lake -- both of these mean Lake Lake.

I once met someone from East Timor, and pointed out that since Timor is Malay for East, his country's name meant "East East." He shook his head, replying: "Not so. People who actually live there call

it Timor-Leste, which is actually the same thing backwards." He folded his arms to signify that he had won that argument. I was about to point out that "East East" backwards was "East East" but then I realised that he was under 30, so I shut up.

Europe has many examples of tautology, too.

In the UK is a town called Torpenhow Hill, a name which comes from the word for "hill" from four languages, so the actual name is Hill Hill Hill Hill. And since Hill is a common English family name, there are likely to be individuals who call themselves Hill of Hill Hill Hill Hill.

Spain has a river called the Rio Guadix, which means River River River, and Estonia has Saaremaa Island, which means Island Land Island.

But the most tautologous place on Earth is France.

I once tried to learn French. Lesson one was the word "today." This is aujourd'hui, which means "on the day of this day".

Lesson two was the question: "What's that?"

In French, one says: Qu'est-ce que c'est? This means: "What is it that it is?"

My brain about to implode, I fled before Lesson Three.

Grandpa Fardel can probably add to this list.

I asked my child whether she could actually draw a square circle for me. "Of course not. It's Tuesday and I only have blue pens," she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I'm sure this makes perfect sense. Just not in my universe.

One of these days I will find the time to fly to the town of Wagga Wagga in Australia, where I tell residents that their town has a silly name, and recommend they change it.

Proposed new name: Wagga Wagga Wagga.

For more "new innovation" to languages, visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com