

Rivers unprotected as ever

Enforcement of law pressing urgency

TO all appearances, the rivers and other water bodies surrounding the capital city see doomed, as the law prohibiting their illegal occupation has never been respected. Even a government agency like the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) itself has been found to violate court order by erecting business establishments in the filled parts of Buriganga river at Sadarghat in the city. It has even built a jetty by filling up Shitalakhy River at Kanchpur in violation of High Court Order of June 25, 2009 to demolish all such structures. Do these instances not open the door for the vested quarters to go ahead with illegal grabbing with impunity? And what worries us further is that even if in certain cases where the Wetland and Open Spaces Conservation Act, 2000, has been enforced to bring the violators to justice, they evaded punishment through legal loopholes. That leaves one wondering, if the violators of the river protection law are more powerful than the government and the court?

There is no instance so far of any one breaking the provisions of the Wetland and Open Space Conservation Act 2000, which saw an amendment in 2009, getting duly punished. In one recent case, a river grabber at Kamrangirchar of the city was detained. But that could hardly discourage others committing the same offence. Ironically, recently the DoE stopped a member of the River Saving Task Force, also a lawmaker, from filling up a canal without due permission. Stranger still, the lawmaker later again sought DoE's permission to continue the illegal work.

Against this disappointing background, the rivers and other water bodies, wetlands and open spaces will continue to be an easy prey to the illegal occupiers. The government, if it is serious about protecting those should put its foot down on the errant. In a similar vein, the media, the pro-environment groups, the civil society and all others concerned must carry out a stronger and more forceful campaign to save our rivers, various water bodies and wetlands from the unrelenting violators of the law.

Destroying a teenager's future

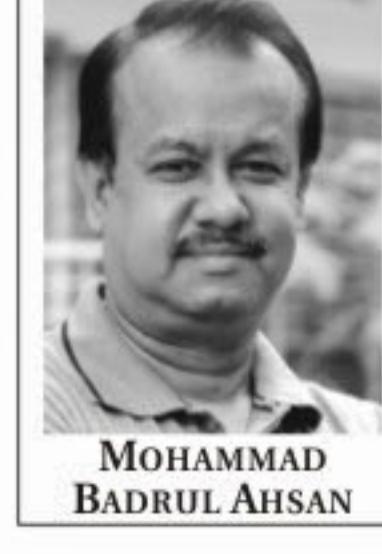
Time for firm action against perpetrators

WHAT the Rapid Action Battalion has done to the young Limon Hossain of Jhalakati district is a clear outrage. The young man, aged sixteen, has had one of his legs amputated because some trigger-happy member of the force shot him at close range on the unsubstantiated charge that he is a member of a terrorist gang. The truth, as has since become known, is that the RAB personnel accosted Limon as he stepped out of his home to collect his family cattle, asked him about an individual they were looking for and then shot him the moment he answered in the negative. The young man, who was looking forward to taking part at the HSC examinations the next day, then bled for three hours before being taken all the way to Dhaka. By then, his leg had become useless.

This atrocity raises once more the question of the impunity with which RAB has been operating for years. Its allegation that Limon is a terrorist is rendered meaningless considering all the positive reports which have come from Limon's teachers, family and neighbours about his background. Like millions of others in rural Bangladesh, he struggles with poverty, works in a brick kiln for paltry wages and even borrows clothes from others in order to make a decent appearance in class. When RAB now charges him with criminality (it has filed two cases against him), one is impelled to ask if such insensitivity and impunity on its part can any more be ignored.

It is clear that the future of the young man has been damaged beyond repair. We demand swift action against those who shot Limon. It is indeed shocking that, even as we write this editorial, no one in the government has promised action against the RAB men behind this outrage. Are the authorities yet in denial mode about RAB excesses? It is the collective conscience of a nation that has now been aroused. It becomes everyone's duty to demand justice. It is for the government to go after the perpetrators of this

The politics of history



MUHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

IT came as no surprise when Home Minister Sahara Khatun said it last Friday. She said Ziaur Rahman never claimed that he had declared independence. If she has told the truth, she has only told half of it. The other half is that neither did Sheikh Mujibur Rahman make that claim. Not as we know it.

Why it didn't come as a surprise is because like music, our history is going through its remix phase. The politicians are using audio mixing to compose an alternate master recording of historical facts. They are simply changing the equalisation, dynamics, pitch, tempo and playing time. Everybody is busy creating an altered version of history. Everybody has his or her target audience.

That's why we have been hearing many versions of history, varying recollections and various interpretations. It now appears that suddenly everybody has started to remember everything, and history in this country has turned into a cottage industry. It's unfortunate that two of our greatest leaders are the targets of our scorns and derisions. They fought for our freedom. Why are we fighting over them?

The unpleasant truth is that we don't know how to appreciate what either man has done for this country. Our independence is akin to a family fortune. One generation has worked hard to earn it. Being their unworthy descendants, we are having the lux-

ury to squander it in squabbles. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman never claimed credit for anything. They didn't have to. Perhaps they never wished to. Heroes don't claim achievements. Achievements claim heroes.

But let us talk about history. Veteran freedom fighter Kader Siddiqui has claimed that prime minister's advisor H.T. Imam should be tried for conducting oath to Khondoker Mushtaque Ahmed. Everybody knows Mushtaque was a prime suspect in the conspiracy

that nucleus existed since he was then the main man of student politics.

The icing on the cake came from Awami League joint secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif. He said that BNP should observe the Independence Day on March 27, if they believed Zia declared independence. He essentially fell short of asking BNP to go get its own country.

So much for the torrents of history, that also in last one month only! This nation is dazed like someone who is blindfolded and spun around before

Germany had different ways of remembering the Third Reich. They took vastly dissimilar directions to come to terms with their common past.

We are also facing a similar challenge in this country: divided memory of collective history. How one political party wants to remember the Liberation War is not the same way other party remembers it. Even worse, our politicians are resorting to innuendos and inferences to make up for their inconsistencies. They are turning history into stand-up comedy.

Perhaps what is most fortunate for us is also most unfortunate. We have still got a large number of politicians who can remember the history of our freedom struggle. But too many cooks are spoiling the broth. In their parochial memories of history, they have been creating many paradoxes.

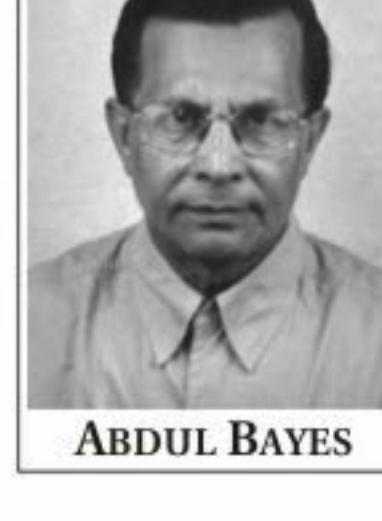
Future generations will be left with no choice but to take our history with a pinch of salt. If anything, they are being cooped up in a house of horror where the walls are lined with distorted mirrors. It will be creepy and kooky for them because whichever way they turn, they will be terrified by disfigured facts.

We must put an end to political rants that treat history with the vigour of a hawker, who believes that if he shouts louder he can sell more products. We all know why our politicians distort history. They are more committed to the present than they are to the past and the future. It's politics for them, tragedy for us.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

Treatment of land tenants



ABDUL BAYES

THE tenancy market in rural Bangladesh is passing through an interesting phase. Not only have the arrangements of operation in the market undergone rapid changes -- say, from crop-sharing to fixed-rent system -- the amount of land transacted in this market has also picked up.

According to one study, 48% of farms are engaged in renting-in land, claiming about 37% of total cultivated land. Again, of those engaged in tenancy, one-fourth are pure-tenants (cultivating only other people's land), about 15% are tenant-owners (more rented land than owned) and roughly 8% are owner-tenants (more owned land than rented).

By and large, the tenancy market in rural Bangladesh had been surging over time. This can be construed as positive development since the poor segment of farm households appears to operate most of those lands. In other words, landless households have become *de facto* land owners on the heels of the massive expansion of non-farm activities luring land owners. Tightening of the labour market is another factor.

Sadly though, the tenants rarely received agricultural credit, which is crucial to carry out crop related activities. In the wake of NGOs meeting credit needs mostly for non-agricultural purposes and agricultural banks counting collateral against loans, these tenants have so far been denied access to funds to finance their working capital.

However, the recent initiative of the Bangladesh Bank to exclusively target tenants with agricultural credit is a landmark in the history of tenancy in Bangladesh, and possibly elsewhere. Meantime, a few research questions have cropped but it would

be pertinent to look at a case study that approximates the impacts of such facility.

Rafiqul Islam (33) of Shambaria village, 3 km south of Bogra Sadar, is the focus in our write-up today. He heads a relatively small household of four, and owns 66 decimals of cultivated land and 6 decimals of homestead land. To be on an even keel in terms of food availability, the household has also rented-in 70 decimals from others. By and large, about one and a half acres of land is the source of food for the household concerned.

In the Bangladesh context, Islam is a marginal tenant. The arrangement of tenancy in the village under study is that the tenant has to sur-

render half of the output to the land owner; the owner bears no cost of inputs. As we are told, on few occasions and to meet operating costs, he had to borrow money from *mohajons* or *chataldars* at an exorbitant rate of 10

maunds of paddy (roughly

Tk.8,000) for a loan of Tk.10,000!

Fortunately, Rafiqul Islam had qualified for the agricultural "soft" loans targeted for the tenants under the new window. The loan, ranging from Tk. 10,000 to Tk.20,000 is offered by Bangladesh Bank (BB) through Brac. Some of the pre-conditions for accessing credit are that the loan seekers (a) do not have access to NGO credit; (b) failed to cross SSC level; (c) have more rented-in land than owned ones and (d) are engaged in full-time agricultural pursuits for last three consecutive years. The process of screening and group formation took several months before credit line was

opened for them.

The tenant under review availed the first loan of Tk.10,000 to be paid under 10 installments. With that money, he produced jute in 38 decimals of land and, within four months, could reap home a net return of Tk.14,000. It is obvious that the borrower could painlessly repay the loan and the interest. Then he asked for a second loan to produce HIV in 130 decimals. The "fortune" is still in the field but he expects, other things remaining same, about 100 maunds of paddy.

Meeting owner's share would leave him with 70 maunds -- worth Tk.53,000. After deducting costs of all

inputs, the net

return would be

around Tk.

33,000. Besides

that, Rafiqul

informed us that

he also gets 50-

60 maunds of

paddy worth

Tk.41,000 by

renting-out his

shallow tube-

well that he

bought two

years back at a

cost of

Tk.13,000.

This shows

that marginal

farmers could become owners of STWs on the heels of falling prices of the equipments and thanks to import liberalisation of agricultural inputs.

However, Rafiqul's pass book shows that he has already saved about Tk.2,000 during the last 18 months -- a situation of forced saving enshrined in the contracts between him and Brac.

By and large, from the two loans

that Rafiqul accessed, he could generate some surplus which has already been put to productive uses. For example, we are told that he has already transferred his son from a "low-quality" to cadet madrasa that

would cost Tk.3,000 per month. The other son has two tutors. He has built two tin houses. Thus, there seems to be little doubt that the availability of cheap credit at the right moment, to a large extent, helped him fulfill his hopes.

According to Rafiqul, the loans for farmers like them "have fallen from heaven." First, the interest rate is very low compared to that charged by *chataldars*, village *mahajons* and NGOs. Second, distress sales of paddy have decreased in the absence of pressure from private lenders. Finally, the contract postulates an additional advantage of low interest rate if the money is repaid before due time.

Thus, for example, if the loan is repaid in the 7th installment instead of say the 11th, a rebate of 4 percentage points is available for each of the remaining installments. One of our questions was: how much are you willing to pay as interest rate in case you find the loan is stopped on account of paucity of funds? "I am ready to pay 13%; if that does not work, I am ready to pay 15%," answered Rafiqul.

Let us now turn to some research questions that need to be addressed by taking a large sample across the country. First, given that resources are limited for continued subsidy, what would constitute an "effective" rate of interest for sharecroppers? Second, It needs to be enquired whether the subsidised credit has been diverting demands from other sources of credit. Third, to what extent is the surplus generated by sharecroppers used for investment purposes? Finally, besides credit, what are other scopes for reforms in the tenancy market? Such research questions need to be addressed to make the credit operation under present scenario sustainable for the sharecroppers.

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