

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The inflationary pressure

Expand distribution network

UNLIKE in the previous years, the just presented budget did not affect prices in the market except those of sugar and edible oil, which had been on an upward curve before the budget.

The opposition-enforced 36-hour hartal has left its adverse impact on food prices, especially vegetables and fish. Obviously, it was the dislocation in transport movement that caused this price hike. But what is of concern is that given the capricious price regime, price hike of any food item has the propensity to have a knock-on effect on other food items. Other contributing factors to price hike including rise in the fuel prices have pushed the fares of land and water transportation upwards. So, this is another depressing signal for the food price market.

Despite the budget's not raising the inflationary expectations, there are cogent reasons for worry for the general consumers on the longer term.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data as reflected in the budget show that the overall inflationary trend has risen from 10.49 per cent in March 2011 to 10.67 per cent in April, 2011.

Admittedly, food-related inflation had its contribution to the overall inflationary trend. And in the rural areas where the largest swathe of the population and the majority of the poor live, the food-induced inflation was at its highest at 15.38 per cent in April. This is around 3.34 per cent more than what was in the urban areas in the same period.

This calls for adopting concrete and failsafe measures from the government to protect the general consumers as well as the poor from the shock of unrelenting volatility in the food market. The consumers and growers of the food items are equally at the mercy of the middlemen or farias, the wholesalers and retailers alike.

So, the government should further expand and strengthen its distribution networks to supply food grains, build more storing facilities for food grains and continue with the operation of Open Market Sale (OMS) of food grains and other essentials. If the government is able to effectively countervail the tyranny of the market manipulators with these and other innovative measures, rather than interfering with the market forces then stability in the food price market will finally be restored.

Relics from ancient times

Take care of our treasure-trove

THE High Court has ordered status quo on construction of structures in and around Bhitorgarh Fort in Panchagarh. This was in response to a writ filed by Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh (HRPB) on the reported construction activity by two private companies in the perimeter of the archeological site.

The higher judiciary, true to its heritage-friendly activism has also issued a rule requiring the government to explain why the Bhitorgarh Fort site wouldn't be declared 'protected antiquity', accompanied by publication of a gazette notification in this behalf.

What we have gathered from the archeology directorate is that on this historical site a reputed archeologist has found traces of what might turn out to be one of the biggest fort cities dating back to sixth century AD. The ministry of culture and archeology department has taken note of the initial discovery. It might involve up to ten years of excavation to unearth the full extent of the fort city.

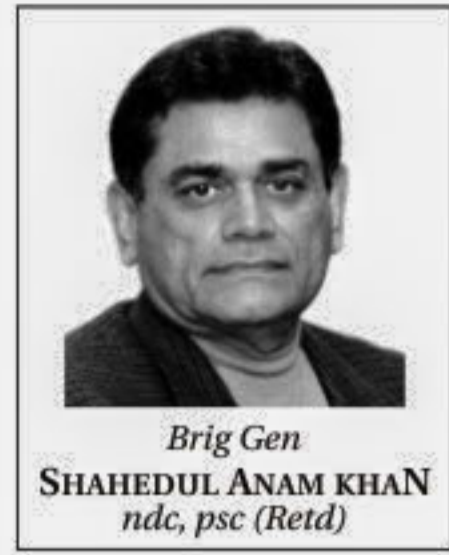
A gazette notification would mean recognising the site and government taking the responsibility of its protection. Basically, according to the pre-existing antiquity law of the land, once notified through the gazette no construction or human habitation would be permissible within certain earmarked perimeter of the site.

That is how it's protected as an antiquity. But, of course, there is much more to the undertaking. This relates to further probe, excavation, reworking, putting the pieces of puzzles together and, above all, maintenance under designated authorities.

Here we recall the shredding the bricks off the famous Mahastangarh site and using these for construction purposes. Even farming was reportedly going on in the vicinity. Such vandalism must be replaced by a culture of respect and responsibility for historical relics.

At the archeological level, there needs to be a campaign aided by government and private sectors to bring to the fore many unrecognised and yet valuable historical sites

Good and bad hartal



Brig Gen
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NOW, going by the AL joint secretary-general's remarks, we have "rational" hartal and "irrational" hartal. But this

is not the only statement in recent times that amuses us. Apart from the one on hartal we are seized with statements and comments on the caretaker system as well.

The stance on hartal is something which keeps us quite confounded because of the changing stance of the two major parties on the issue. Every now and then we are dispensed homilies on hartal. And depending on which quarter the sermon is coming from we are supposed to be enlightened on its characteristics and its bad and good sides, on its indispensability or the utter insensibility of those that are calling hartal and shutting off the country for 12 - 24 - 36 and even 96 hours. The question is do the people take them seriously anymore?

The home minister's comments, that her party would not resort to hartal even when the AL would be in the opposition, has been rejected by the party joint general-secretary as not reflective of the party's policy on the issue. Not only that the Awami League has been quick to distance itself with the home minister, we have now been made aware of the fact that there is a "good" hartal and a "bad" hartal.

If we go by the joint secretary-general's statement to the media, we are expected to believe that what the home minister was trying to convey was that the AL will not call "irrational" hartal, which in other words suggests that some hartals are "rational" and the AL would not be averse to resorting to it should they be constrained to do so in

future. We are no less amused by the BNP's stand on hartal, given its expressed position on the issue when they were in power.

Human memory is short, but one should credit the Bengalis with some degree of intelligence and a modicum of power of recollection, which the politicians are unwilling to do, perhaps on the misplaced conviction that intelligence and wisdom are their exclusive preserve.



Hartal is patently a bad thing, therefore, we find it hard to believe that there can be "irrational" or "rational" hartal depending on who is calling it.

Promise to abjure hartal had been made in the past by both the parties. That it has not been kept is either because the politicians do not mean what they say or because hartal still remains a potent weapon to realise a party's demand. And this has been amply illustrated by the recent comments of the senior AL office bearer, but which may not have any correlation with the views on the issue of the greater

majority of the people.

Bad things rub off very easily, and the BNP is returning the favour to the AL for what it did 15 years ago when the AL was going the whole hog to force the BNP to accede to its demand for a neutral caretaker government to conduct the parliamentary election. While there is a role reversal on the issue now, it is the people that have been the sufferers.

Hartal is patently a bad thing,

and the objective conditions that made us resort to it in the past against the Pakistan regime or against undemocratic regimes in Bangladesh are no longer present. Therefore, we find it hard to believe that there can be "irrational" or "rational" hartal depending on who is calling it.

The other issue occupying everyone's time is that of the caretaker government. Were it not for the fact

that the comments on the matter stemmed from very senior leaders of the AL, it would be comical.

The prime minister and some of her senior colleagues in the party are sparing no efforts now to denigrate the idea of a caretaker system in the same intensity and conviction with which they were extolling its virtue in 1995 and 1996, and had employed the same mechanisms that the BNP is employing now, to attain their objective.

When the PM says that unelected people were given state powers through caretaker dispensation, does she realise that it is only denigrating the AL and exposing the party's lack of statesmanship, because 13th Amendment was the result of its agitation.

When the PM says that only the people's elected representatives will decide under what mechanism and whose authority the next parliamentary polls will be held, isn't she forgetting that it were the people's representatives that had enacted the 13th Amendment. And when she says that the caretaker government had perpetrated sufferings on the politicians, and that we would be only "inviting crocodiles by digging canals" (a very bad translation of a Bangla idiom), was it not her party that had prepared the grounds for digging the canal in the first place?

We have in the past commented on the need to guard against venturing such comments that might cause embarrassment to the person making them. And if the remark happens to come from persons holding high office, it demeans the position as well as the person. And if the statement happens to be related to politics and political issues, it only exposes the party's and the person's inconsistencies on serious national issues.

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The poison of male violence

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

SHE had many former students in Dhaka University IR department, and they were the first to make the brutal attack on "Rumana Madam" national news, through social media and blogs. Some connected this case across class-strata with the beating death of Amena Begum (Bihari Colony) and Halima Begum (Kadomtoli). Others commented on the link between women's emancipation ("it was all for scholarship") and heightened male rage.

Predictably there were also elements of "blaming the victim."

The question is not: Why did Rumana stay silent? The question is why did we? What is this monstrous society we created where a husband can beat his wife for 10 years, and she cannot find the social support to leave and file an assault case against him?

Among many factors is a murderous idea of izzat. Izzat of family, of marriage, of women; forcing thousands of women to silently endure continuous domestic violence. And when society sees those bruises at a wedding dawat, they always politely avert their eyes.

There is a breathless, voyeuristic glaze in some media reports. The extreme violence in this case grabbed headlines. The vision of gouging eyes, the cannibal attack on cartilage. Sumon is an extreme manifestation, but there is pervasive male violence in many marriages. The 5th Bangladesh Demographic

and Health Survey, (BDHS) 2007, revealed stunning statistics on this. In Chapter 14 ("Domestic Violence", P 197-214), the results showed 53% of women experienced sexual or physical violence from husbands. The most common act was slapping (46%), followed by pushing, shaking and having something thrown at them (30%), punching with fists or something that can hurt (17%), kicking, dragging or beating (15%), and choking or burning (5%).

Actually, the numbers may be higher, as at least some respondents would psychologically block out the details, and this would be even more true with sexual violence. Still, 18% reported some form of forced sexual intercourse (or "domestic rape").

Tenure does not correlate to any improvement. 54% of those married more than 10 years reported violence, compared to 30% of those married less than 5 years. A 2001 survey also showed very little difference between urban (59%) and rural (60%).

The results of extreme violence sprawl out in many directions. A

2008 study showed desire for suicide (or "suicide ideation") stood at 14% among married women in Bangladesh, which is high compared with other countries. The suicide of the wife, the domestic maid, the cousin, the schoolgirl has become a convenient endstate for the assailant.

Thinking of elements that normalise gender violence (beyond television, cinema, video games and all the other obvious factors), my friend reminded me about a popular "bazaar" song which ended up on many ring tones. As "Tabiz Faruk" mixes declarations of love with violent threats, the nasty message comes out clearly: Hey girl who do you think you are? Think you are Queen Victoria? You don't like these Rajanigandha flower sticks When you get beating by hockey stick You'll learn How to take love by force Boss, should we give her a good lesson? No, wait.

There is a lot of anger after the Rumana case, but I worry when I see the lynch mob, blogging about wanting to "chop off the nose and blind" the assailant.

Hysterical to enact an eye-for-an-eye tab-leau, while the cancer remains untouched.

Ghee does not come up on straight finger

Neither will ring fit on a bent finger

[Excerpt from "Tabiz Faruk"]

In the last decade, every time a friend has left an abusive marriage, there have been social whispers of "she must have done something," "affair chilo bodhoy," "she must have provoked him," etc. I wrote in 2009: "So many people hear of a case of wife beating, hostile factory floor, office sexual innuendo, invasive photography, phone stalking, and then casually make excuses. O to sherokom chelei na. Bhodro ghor theke."

In this unforgiving, hostile environment, women are forced into silence, or convinced this is the way husbands are supposed to be.

The new normal.

There is a lot of anger after the Rumana case, but I worry when I see the lynch mob, blogging about wanting to "chop off the nose and blind" the assailant. Hysterical to enact an eye-for-an-eye tableau, while the cancer remains untouched.

We need to channel grief and outrage into a push for social support, laws and infrastructure. Demolish this society where izzat, economics, and social prisons force women to stay trapped in abusive marriages.

[Police arrested Syeed Hasan Sumon, husband of Rumana Manjur, in the capital Wednesday afternoon.]

The writer is a Contributor to The Daily Star.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 16

1779 Spain declares war on the Kingdom of Great Britain, and the siege of Gibraltar begins.

1922 General election in the Irish Free State: a large majority goes to the pro-Treaty Sinn Féin.

1940 World War II: Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain becomes Premier of Vichy France.

1976 Soweto uprising: a non-violent march by 15,000 students in Soweto, South Africa turns into days of rioting when police open fire on the crowd.

1997 The Dairat Labguer massacre in Algeria; 50 people are killed.

2000 Israel complies with UN Security Council Resolution 425 after 22 years of its issuance, which calls on Israel to completely withdraw from Lebanon.