

No ETP in two years?

Such slow progress is inexcusable

THE government has sought two more years from the High Court to set up an Effluents Treatment Plant (ETP) in Savar and relocate tanneries from the city's Hazaribagh area. The appeal is as inexplicable as it is worrying. It is inexplicable because two years have already elapsed since the High Court issued its directives on the ETP in June 2009 and in all this period the authorities have done nothing but seek an extension of time for the work to be completed. It is worrying because, as the authorities point out, there is no shortage of funds for the work and yet things have not been moving. One thus has a fine instance here of shoddy bureaucracy impeding a move aimed at ensuring public safety in the capital.

The fact that nothing has been done about the ETP in these past two years reflects the callousness and incompetence of the authorities. The project director entrusted with the task of overseeing the setting up of the ETP has informed us that the authorities are doing their 'level best' to implement the court's directives. Nothing could be more misleading. If this inaction is a hint of the 'level best' being done about putting an end to industrial pollution in the city, it is clear that those responsible for the job must be pulled up and made to explain why they have sat on the HC orders all these two years.

One can easily imagine the hazards to which public health has been further exposed during this time. Instances of various skin diseases, asthma, fever, diabetes and the like are all too frequent. Despite all the outcry against any further pollution of the river Buriganga, indeed insistent demands for a cleaning up process for the river to begin, the stagnation has continued. All that the government has done is come up with excuses of a repetitive and scandalous nature. It certainly feels no embarrassment at having failed to do its job and has asked for more time.

Such incompetence and inaction only damage the image of government. Citizens, convinced that the authorities are unable to fulfil the tasks, increasingly lose faith in their political and administrative leadership. The ETP issue demands stern, exemplary action against those who have failed to deliver.

Airline staff's errant behaviour

Passengers deserve more courtesy

IT seems that sometimes airline staff forget that they are paid to serve the passengers. And sometimes their imperious attitude makes them forget that it is their responsibility to ensure that all those that have preferred to fly their airline have a hassle free and safe journey from the time they check in. It doesn't happen all the time. Recently, the unfortunate victims of the fault of a staff of Eithad Airlines in Abu Dhabi airport were a mother and daughter.

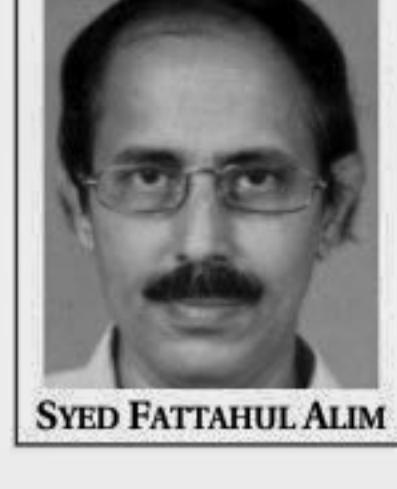
The account of the incident, as it has appeared in this newspaper, is that two women expatriate Bangladeshis, flying from Dhaka to Toronto, were prevented from their onward journey since the boarding pass of one of them was not stamped, and their mistake was to ask the person at the boarding counter to have it stamped since they had been already standing in the queue for an hour and would miss their turn if they were to go back to the check-in counter, which could be at a considerable distance in airports as humongous as Abu Dhabi. And in any case, as they reasoned, the fault was that of the staff who failed to ensure that the boarding passes were stamped.

Unfortunately, not only could these two passengers not make it to their final destination, they were forced to return to Bangladesh, but not before being subjected to undeserved and despicably high-handed treatment from the airline staff. Reportedly, they were not even allowed to call their embassy initially. This incident is fairly representative of the situation in many airports and of many airlines, but those don't get reported mostly.

It would do well for the said airline, and indeed all airlines, to remember that they are not doing the passengers any favour. They operate because of them and not in spite of them. And it is for some of the staff of the airlines to correct their attitude, not otherwise.

We feel that the matter should be thoroughly investigated and the said passengers duly compensated for the agony they were made to undergo.

Student politics: Then and now



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE politics in Bangladesh is again at a cross-roads. Has the student community any role to play at this yet another crisis

created by the major political parties themselves. In fact, during the last two decades that the nation is professedly practicing democracy, a new form of crisis syndrome has become endemic in Bangladesh politics. It is characterised by an irreconcilable deadlock between the major parties--Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP)--over the question of who would run the interim government that would hold parliamentary elections. And unlike the historic roles they played in the pro-democracy movements against military regimes of the past, the student bodies of today look rather docile and are, as it were, tied to the apron strings of their mother parties.

In the past, especially, during the anti-autocracy movements of the 1980s and early 1990s, the student community would always lend a hand to protect people's right and democracy from the clutches of autocracy or extra-constitutional forces. But in a sharp departure from the political crises of pre-1990 or pre-1972 eras, there are no military dictators to fight against at the moment. On the contrary, the present problem concerns more with enjoying the privileges of state power by either of the two major parties. The overarching grand narratives of ideology or the popular causes to uphold they would beget in the yesteryears are conspicuously absent in the present case. Obviously, the common cause that bound students from different political camps together to fight shoulder to shoulder against extra-constitutional forces in state power is absent in the present scenario. Understandably, the student groups in the fold of different political parties are blindly toeing their respective party lines. And the country's two biggest political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), just by virtue of their being the biggest ones, do also have the largest following within the student community. So, one is hardly surprised when like these two parties are engaged in a mortal power rivalry, their student wings too are acting out the same on the university and college campuses, on the streets and at every other conceivable places where they have an axe to grind. Now the question that vexes the minds of the common people, the helpless victims of the circumstances, when will these



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students wake up and come face to face with the reality? Why can't they see what the populist leadership they have been hobnobbing with doing to democracy and everything that their previous generations held so dear and even laid down their lives for?

Where has gone the moral high ground they stood on to protect their mother language in 1952, or establish people's democratic rights in 1969, or wrest the freedom of the people and the nation from the yoke of the Pakistani military junta in 1971?

Or is it that the restoration of elected democracy in the wake of the military dictator Ershad's ouster from power, the student community of the country has resigned themselves to a state of inaction other than murderous rivalry among themselves as well as with their adversaries in the opposition political camp. Apparently, it is now faced with a vacuum of ideological kind. Had it not been so, how could the student bodies with such a glorious past could remain silent onlookers when the populist leaders have dragged the country into a political blind alley?

Those in their late 50s or early 60s among us and who used to be university or college students in the late 1960s or early 1970s cannot recognize today's student activists, who are stomping around the campuses and corridors of the educational institutions of higher learning.

Contrasted with this picture, university students in those days were

highly regarded by the people if only for their patriotism, unflinching commitment to the causes they were fighting for and the great sacrifices they were making for the nation.

The old-timers have valid reasons to be nostalgic about the prestige they drew from the mass people at large. However, the act of mere luxuriating themselves into mere nostalgia about the past, too, is not going to serve the nation. In fact, the new generation of students who are growing in the midst of such wanton display of opportunism and greed by their fellow students involved in politics are either following in the footsteps of the latter or getting totally cynical about politics. This is a very dangerous trend. The elder generation of student leaders, who could not reduce themselves to such an ignominious state of existence cannot and should not also afford to simply look on and allow things to slip away. For in the heart of their hearts they, too, know that they have a role to play to stem this tide of socio-moral erosion.

An erstwhile student leader of the 1970s, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, who, despite being a member of the ruling Awami League, is yet to jump on the bandwagon of wanton opportunism. Evidently, he appeared quite unhappy with the way the student politics is headed today. Neither does he finds any common ground with many of his former fellow travelers in politics of the 1970s. The way the student political activists have

become a mere stooge of their mother parties puts him to shame. The students who fought to establish the people's right to vote and elect their government of choice have not exercised the same right for themselves. Election for student unions, especially, for the Dhaka University Students Union (DUCSU), or similar unions at other universities have not been held for the last two decades, he pointed out. They have not even held councils in their respective organisations since long. In other words, they do not exercise democracy within their own organisations, he further noted.

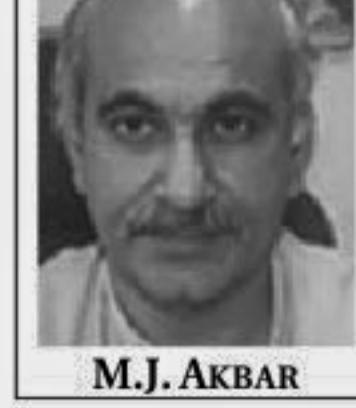
What is the way out then? Is frustration the last word?

We think the old generation of student leaders, who are still unspoiled, should come out of their long hibernation and re-educate the new generation. We must remember that student leaders of the yesteryears were also good at their studies. They read avidly. It is their knowledge about society and history that made them leaders. And that is also true of today's students.

We believe the enormous advantage of access to information and knowledge the younger generation of today enjoys over their forbears, they can put to better use. On this score, the older generation has a role to play to show them the correct way.

The writer is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star.

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR
IBN Khaldun, the classical Arab historian, ascribed the great revival of the Arab spirit to "asabiya," a term that can be loosely equated to

"group solidarity," a consciousness that rose above traditional loyalties like tribal identity and released the inspirational energy that made oasis dwellers and nomads into world conquerors.

Nothing can be compared with that seminal 7th century resurrection, but there is a touch of "asabiya" in the transnational Arab Spring that has turned a dormant Arab street into a revolutionary force that is clearing the septic cobwebs which have turned a great people into victims of local despotism and tyranny.

The pace and trajectory of a revolution can never be predicted, nor can its re-formation into a stable order be guaranteed. But the Gaddafis and the Assads are clinging desperately to a world that is dead, along with their bankrupt ideas and alibis, all of which have been a thin cover for devastating

regimes which turned national wealth (including oil) into personal property and castrated the people's right to freedom and democracy.

These army-police states tried to garner international respectability through a thin middle class which shared some prosperity as reward for loyalty to the new hereditary, civilian sultans. Could there be a worse instance of medieval despotism than

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the Gaddafi family, whose anarchic flamboyance was tolerated for so long by the rest of the world?

Western powers were indifferent to values they professed at home as long as despots honored their regional security concerns: an Egyptian somehow did not need democracy as much as an American if Hosni Mubarak was obedient. Now that Tahrir Square has decided otherwise, traditional relationships are in disarray.

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They are asking a loaded question: if Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, could drive a camel at the head of her army, if women could go to mosques and take part in consultations, then why cannot women drive cars in a country ruled by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques?

The question juxtaposes current reality with a pre-monarchical republican ideal in which there was far greater gender equality than in most modern Arab nations. The debate is opening minds. Open minds demand open societies. If Arab monarchs do not turn their abodes into a Buckingham Palace, and substitute total authority with a ceremonial role, the spirit of "asabiya" will rattle their gates.

Hafez Assad had a slogan on every city gate and public building: "Our Leader forever is President Hafez Assad." His son Bashar shares this pompous conviction. Time, and the tide of "asabiya," wait for no man.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, and *India on Sunday*, published from London.

A spring in Arab history

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 4

1187

The Crusades: Battle of Hattin Saladin defeats Guy of Lusignan, King of Jerusalem.

1827

Slavery abolished in New York State.

1865

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland published.

1886

The people of France offer the Statue of Liberty to the people of the United States.

1887

The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, joins Sindh Madrasa-tul-Islam, Karachi.

1918

Bolsheviks kill Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and his family.

1947

The "Indian Independence Bill" is presented before British House of Commons, suggesting bifurcation of British India into two sovereign countries India and Pakistan.