

Road crashes on holidays

Clamp discipline on drivers

NO fewer than thirty-eight people have died and eighty others have been injured in road accidents during the Eid holidays. The argument could be made that accidents do happen. But beating that argument is another, which is that it is unusual for accidents to occur at a time when roads are relatively free of the usual congestion and frenzy which might cause tragedy and lead to unexpected deaths. On holidays, therefore, it is not expected that buses will turn over and cars crash into all sorts of objects.

It appears, though, that it is just this fact of the roads being free and vehicles being unimpeded in movement which causes such tragedy in almost every holiday season. Drivers have a sudden, altogether bizarre compulsion to drive faster than they usually do and are cheered by the fact that where generally it takes them hours to reach their destination, on holidays they do the job in minutes. Speed is then something that goes beyond the normal and vehicles simply end up squashing people in their way or ramming into homes and other structures. Almost every person behind the wheel seems caught in a maddening desire to rush down the roads and highways. News reports testify to precisely these happenings in these Eid holidays.

It is here that strict measures of discipline are called for. With highway patrols at work, it should not be difficult to make sure that people driving buses, trucks and cars do not exceed speed limits but if they do will be swiftly penalised. At the same time, steps must be taken, through regular checks at different road and highway points, to prevent buses, trucks and cars being driven by helpers or young people with no driving licences or experience. Lax attitudes almost always lead to disaster.

Internet service at grassroots

The facility is not enough by itself

ON top of the extension of Internet facilities to 4,501 union parishads (UPs), optical fibre networks are being provided to 1,000 UPs in the first phase. Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Limited (BTCL) is installing the optical fibre connections. This is towards reaching efficient ICT access to the grassroots level. Broadband Internet service through the optical fibre is crucial to ensuring quality and speedy ICT service.

On the face of it, this is a laudable move overall; for an optimal utilisation of the service can ensure accelerated economic development in such vital areas as farming, trade, agro-based industries and self-employment projects in the rural areas.

The basic assumption is that an overwhelming majority of the rural people cannot afford Internet service and that's why it is being made available at the community level. Four outlets have been visualised: community centers, post offices, health centers and union parishads.

All this is very good. For all we know, computers at the union parishads are meant to be conduits for information gathering and dissemination. However, mere existence of facilities can end up being cosmetic unless we put trained personnel behind them. It's important to note that the disadvantage of widespread illiteracy can be obviated through access to information through the computer. But it is not enough to have the installations; the ancillary infrastructure should be there. For instance, computers at the UPs are being operated through relatively backward dialup system that takes longer time for Internet connectivity and that too at a higher cost.

Crucially, we need trained and committed people to operate computers and provide user-friendly broadband Internet services. There comes the question of competence on the part of the operators who are likely to be government employed persons. It has got to be ensured that those at the receiving end of the service get information of their choice and requirement. In other words, they should not be fed with information they might have little use for. Besides, repair and maintenance are an issue to

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 4

476

Romulus Augustulus, last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, is deposed when Odoacer proclaims himself King of Italy, thus ending the Western Roman Empire.

1870

Emperor Napoleon III of France is deposed and the Third Republic is declared.

1919

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Turkey, gathers a congress in Sivas to make decisions as to the future of Anatolia and Thrace.

1944

World War II: the British 11th Armoured Division liberates the Belgian city of Antwerp.

1967

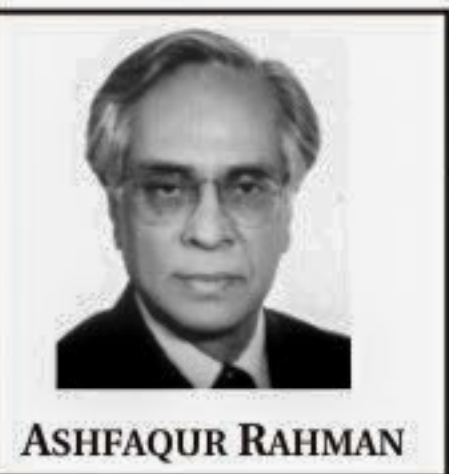
Vietnam War: Operation Swift begins: U.S. Marines engage the North Vietnamese in battle in the Que Son Valley.

1975

The Sinai Interim Agreement relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict is signed.

SUNDAY POUCH

Hazare's fast: Are there lessons?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

ANNA Hazare, a frail 74-year old man from a village called Ralegan Siddhi in Maharastra has recently rattled

India and democracies around the world.

Single handedly, he has raised the conscience of the middle class throughout the length and breadth of that country. He has challenged the government of India and its 545 members of the lower house of Parliament to reconsider an anti-corruption bill and to adhere to the idea of terminating corruption.

He has humbled an entire political class and brought corruption there under a dazzling spotlight. He has finally made the prime minister of India concede to his way of thinking.

But first of all, who is Anna Hazari? Baburao Hazare is an Indian social activist who is known for the Indian movement against corruption, using non-violent methods, in line with what Mahatma Gandhi pursued.

In 1962, despite not meeting the physical requirements, he was selected as a vehicle driver in the Indian army. During the 1965 war with Pakistan he was assigned to the Indo-Pak border. In November of that year, he was the only survivor of a convoy when Pakistan launched air attacks on Indian bases.

Since then he engaged himself to study the purpose and meaning of life and death. He read books written by Swami Vivekenanda, Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave and began dedicating himself to the service of suffering humanity.

In 1978, when he left the army, he returned to his village which was plagued with poverty, a fragile ecosystem and hopelessness. He identified the key problem there as alcoholism and organised the youth in the village temple, which he had earlier built himself, to close down the liquor shops

and ban alcohol.

Hazare then used Gram Sabha (village meeting) for a collective decision making process to discuss welfare of villagers. The decisions were taken in a simple majority consensus and accepted as final.

He then introduced Grain Bank for food security. Rich farmers were allowed to donate surplus "quintal" to the bank. Subsequently, he solved several other problems in the village, like meeting irrigation needs, replen-

Hazare has introduced a fresh approach to initiate change in a society, and that also in India which boasts the largest democracy in the world. Could there be more lessons? Maybe.

ishing ground water, improvement of education, removal of the curse of untouchability, etc.

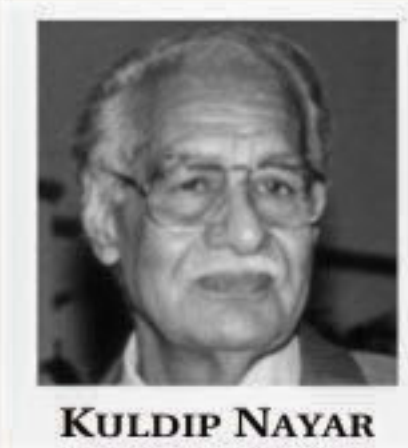
In 1991, Hazare started a People's Movement against corruption by forest officers and timber merchants. He went on to strike against the governor of Maharastra for alleged malpractices in the purchase of power looms. In 2003, he raised his voice against four ministers of the government. In August 2003, he started his fast unto death. This made the government appoint a one man commission, which forced the ministers to resign.

But in 2011, Hazare began Satyagraha (fasting for a noble cause) for passing a tougher anti-corruption Ombudsman bill, in line with the Jan Lokpal Bill which his team had earlier drafted. This attracted millions. People showed their support through Twitter and Facebook and on line signature campaigns. Thus, he could gather 10,00,000 signatures in 36 hours. He was taken to Tihar Jail but released after a few hours. He refused to come out until he was permitted to fast without any conditions attached.

He went on a fast unto death based on his ideology of non-violence till the government capitulated to his three demands. The Parliament debated them and announced that

BETWEEN THE LINES

India remains a soft state



KULDIP NAYAR

IN the fifties and the sixties, India was known to be a soft state. The allegation was that it could not take hard decisions because of

"unfavourable environment in attitudes, cultures and institutions." The entire Anna Hazare phenomenon shows that we continue to be a soft state.

On the 12th day of the fast, both the government and Anna Hazare, along with his team, were bending backwards to have parliament pass a resolution so that the fast would end by that afternoon. The government's stand only 24 hours earlier was that no resolution was possible but a discussion could be accommodated "under some rule." Anna Hazare's side was adamant that the anti-corruption ombudsman (Lokpal) bill must be passed before he could break the fast. He himself did not insist on having his version of the bill passed, but surprisingly wanted only a resolution enunciating his demands. Some say it happened that way because Union Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, who knew Hazare personally, went straight to him with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's assurance on the resolution. This was how the "stumbling block" that Hazare's team had become was bypassed. Many insiders maintain what weighed with Hazare was the unanimous appeal by Parliament to break the fast. Yet it turns out that Hazare wanted only to see that Parliament would take up the Lokpal bill, even if it was not his version.

The fact is that the members of civil society had lost stamina. I heard in many drawing rooms that they had enough of Hazare and wanted to "hear something else." That was expected

from a soft state. Over the years, I have felt that the society was willing to strike but afraid to wound. By temperament, we do not join issue. If ever it comes to that, we try to find a compromise which would be nearer to our demand or gives us an illusion of winning. The truth is that we do not allow things to reach a boiling point because we are not prepared to face the consequences.

True, we are not radicals. Nor do we favour changing the status quo. Yet this time the movement had stirrings of a revolution. It could have achieved something in the shape of parivartan

(change). Whether the system delivered or not was not an issue for the fast. The issue was that people were expecting something that would change their life. It meant different things to different people. But the common factor was the change.

Still, there is no running away from the fact that the Hazare movement against corruption had galvanised the middle class youth for the first time after Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan's call for a change in 1974. Yet both the movements did not allow the people's anger and anguish to concretise and saw to it that they did not go beyond "control." Had the JP movement lasted longer, the nation would have steeled itself to fight against the undesirable elements parading themselves as votaries of change but perpetuating the status quo. They were the beneficiaries and falsified JP's dreams.

In Hazare's case, the disconcerting part was the fast. Otherwise, his movement would have ushered in a revolutionary era, the dawning of the second independence. I wish Hazare had separated the movement from the fast. I am

the "sense in the Parliament" is to accept these demands.

Today, Hazare is an acclaimed activist and the most powerful influencer of political issues in India. As a result, a large number of Indians now seem to hate politicians even though they love democracy.

So can we list the lessons which Hazare has taught democrats in India? Hazare is an honest and humble man. He is unmarried and lives in a single room in a temple. So the people

around him believe in him and trust him. Millions in India are attracted to him because of his honesty and humility. He is a natural leader of people.

Hazare is also a keen observer of any situation. He has the habit of thinking deeply both in and outside the box. He identifies the root problem and sets out to solve it. He tends to choose the right policy and gets the right people involved to set the thing right. But then he does not hesitate to adjust his policies if required.

The man is a great communicator. He shares precise information consistently. He is aware which information motivates his followers and guides them with clear direction towards his political goal.

Hazare's anti-corruption campaign has spawned many more lessons for his adherents.

Take the matter of his uncanny sense of what and when a change is needed in society. He knows that when people are sick and tired of matters like corruption or poverty then it is the time to jump in and champion the cause. He then triggers action that brings change.

To Hazare there are two ways to face an issue. Either you alter the issue or you alter yourself and embrace the solution. He usually urges people to

told this was initially stressed upon by some older NGOs. But the people surrounding him wanted a dramatic step to attract attention and made the fast an integral part of the movement. The result has been a mishmash, neither fist nor foul. It promises a lot but doesn't look like delivering much. And there should be no surprise that it is business as usual. Had the movement by itself reached the proportion which the fast did, the government would have feared people's threatening mood.

True, Hazare is honest when he says that he will resume his fast if and when he finds his expectations have not been met. But I am not sure whether the popular response some months later would be of the same scale. I was in Mumbai when more than one lakh people marched in rains as a victory procession. I could see that Hazare had come to symbolise the aspira-

tions of hundreds of thousands of people who came on the streets to support him throughout the country. Yet it is difficult to see whether the same number of protesters will respond if and when the government does not meet his demands.

That parliament is supreme does not need to be repeated because it is an apex body in the parliamentary democracy. People elect its members. Yet, what should not be forgotten is that the people continue to be supreme even when they demand circumventing of an institution like the Standing Committee of Parliament discussing the Lokpal bill. The constitution says: "We, the people." Therefore, their assertion should not be an affront to parliament or state

change themselves. In his campaign he looks to include all sections of society, from the prime minister to the ordinary bureaucrat, to stop corruption.

An important lesson learned from his campaigns is that democracy is no something you believe in only. Democracy is something you do. You participate. If you stop doing it, democracy crumbles. Hence, if parliament members who have been elected to solve people's problem do not have the gumption to do it, the people have the right to jump in to either make them perform or let the people do it in a non-violent way.

Hazare has also shown that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change a country. Indeed, it is the only way that Hazare and others think changes take place.

The most striking lesson learned is that a gentle hand may lead even an elephant by a single hair. Hazare, with no arsenal at his disposal and with only his wit and courage, led the Indian government including the Prime Minister ever so gently to reconsider the Lokpal Bill and agree to discuss his Jan Lokpal Bill. His most potent weapon was his fast unto death, which produced its own timeline for an elephantine government to act.

Finally, Hazare has shown to everyone that a lie has speed but truth has endurance. When rumours were spread that Hazare was himself steeped in corruption, the truth that he is honest endured.

Hazare's campaign was magnified by the media well before it was seen as a mass movement. His dramatic fast shot up the TV channels rating. The government became queasy about Anna Hazare. But it was damn scared about the media.

Thus, Hazare has introduced a fresh approach to initiate change in a society, and that also in India which boasts the largest democracy in the world.

Could there be more lessons? Maybe.

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legislatures. This is only a reminder to the elected representatives that sovereignty lies with the people. The Lokpal bill or other steps have to ensure that. The right to recall may not be an ideal way but it at least keeps the sword of public sanction hanging over the head of the elected.

I was amused by actor Om Puri's argument that a parliament member must be literate. India had been served well by the earlier Lok Sabhas, of which at least one-fourth of 545-members were illiterate. Dr Rajendra Prasad, Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, wanted to have a provision to lay down the minimum educational qualification for

legislators. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, opposed the proposal. His argument was that when they were engaged in a freedom struggle, the illiterate and the backward were the ones who followed them while the literate were toadies, on the side of the British rulers. Should he deny the illiterate their right after winning freedom? The proposal was dropped.

Hazare's movement has been supported as much by the illiterate as by the literate. The effort should be to make everyone literate, not to punish the illiterate who have had no opportunity to go to school. The Lokayukta (state ombudsman) should see to it that everyone went to school and ensure at the same that that there were teachers in the schools. Their quality is another story by itself. What does not come in the ambit of Lokpal is poverty. Electoral reforms are essential so that the right type of people reach the Lok Sabha and the state legislatures. Yet more important are the measures to enable the have-nots to become the haves. Like corruption, poverty in India is indelible. There are no soft options.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.
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