

STRAIGHT LINE

Transport sector under extortionists' grip

Break the unholy nexus

THE head of the three-member parliamentary sub-committee, tasked to find ways to check corruption in the transport sector, has opened up a can of worms. It should alarm anyone to read the way the sector has come under the vice of a disgusting practice that not only has deleterious impact on the sector itself, it has an equally negative impact on the country's economy.

The report that appeared in this newspaper recently, quoting the head of the subcommittee, is stunning though not new. The media in general in Bangladesh have been revealing from time to time the bizarre situation obtaining in this sector, without any consequence. And one wonders whether the government can really take any meaningful action given the odious linkage between the lawmakers, law keepers, the transport owners, and the workers' leaders some of whom are also lawmakers.

It is mind boggling to read the degree of the extortion regime, even more so when one finds that a minister has been named as one of those that are involved in it. Going by the same report, only three of the transport workers' federations, including the one led by the said minister, earn more than 130 crore a year ostensibly for welfare of the transport workers. And if this causes rise in fares from between 40 and 200 percent, one can well imagine the impact it will have on other areas. It is the people that have to bear the brunt of a practice that has assumed criminal proportions.

We hope, now that the degree and the extent of the problem, severely compounded by the political control that encumbers the sector, have been exposed once again, this time by the parliamentary standing committee, the government would be motivated enough to act to correct the situation.

We cannot condemn enough this practice, and cannot agree more with those that feel that this will not stop unless the police and political leaders are held in check. The task before the government is very clear. Is the government up to it?

Old trees, an asset

Witness to time put to axe

AMID growing concern over environmental degradation comes the news of continued tree felling in the tourist spot of Birishiri in Durgapur upazila under Netrakona, and that too, in defiance of a High Court directive. Netrokona Zila Parishad along with the forest department is chopping down as many as 1,600 trees including 200 century-old ones to widen a road. We express our grave concern about such an indiscreet decision that will surely skew the ecological balance of the area.

We also consider it as yet another blow to one of our heritage landscapes because the century-old trees are what constitute the speciality of Birishiri as a site at the foothills of the magnificent Garo hills. This move will expose the Garo community living there in perfect harmony with nature to a number of hazards. Furthermore, as many as 26 century-old trees belong to the Garo Baptists Convention, members of which were not even consulted before carrying out the decision.

For all we know, tenders for felling the trees were dealt with nonchalance and eventually awarded to many persons in a hasty manner clearly indicating an underhand dealing. More alarming is the allegation that widening of the road could have been and still can be done well without felling the trees.

There is no gainsaying that climate change will increase the frequency of cyclones and more erratic rainfall in Bangladesh in the near future. The country's shrinking forest areas will only exacerbate the hazards of climate change. In the face of such bleak warnings, Netrakona Zila Parishad and the forest department should immediately respond to the High Court directive and work accordingly not to wipe out the plantations, but to save them.



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

RECENTLY, in an article in *The Daily Star*, titled "The absurdity of the absurd poly-tricks," a teacher of English of Dhaka

University makes a passionate appeal to the politicians, for not telling us what is right and what is wrong. The concerned teacher implores the law enforcement body not to use sticks to teach us the difference between right and wrong because the public knows it all.

The disheartened educator bemoans the devaluation of words when he says that the plethora of words spoken by politicians make no sense because the speakers do not mean what they say and actually mean what they do not say, and to make matters worse they act contrary to their words. In an apparent state of utter confusion and bewilderment, the educator does not know how we can make sense of the political spectacle that is unfolding before our eyes.

Our educator friend cannot be faulted for doubting the intentions of the politicians because politics, unfortunately, for a good length of time in this part of the world, has not been a particularly edifying activity. Daniel Webster said that the unvarying tendency of the mad strife of politics "is to belittle greatness and corrupt goodness. It contracts the mind and hardens the heart." John Dewey observed that

"while saints are engaged in introspection, burly sinners run the world."

The question is, have the foundations of our constitution been shaken by the folly of the people, the corruption of the politicians and the negligence of the elite? In just forty years have we reduced the noble provisions of our constitution

process. Similarly, the unbridled arrogance of the law-enforcers would be rare when responsible folks would educate public opinion by joining public representative positions.

Whether one agrees or not every democracy must have an aristocracy of talents, of knowledge and of character. It is this aristocracy which has

decide to abide by the rules.

The unlimited powers to arrest and search need to be controlled through institutional initiatives. For that to happen, police reform must be a real manifest priority. The important segments of our society must act positively, with a view to pressuring the ruling elite to accept and support progressive changes. Once the process starts, it would not be easy to reverse it.

Republics are created by the virtue, public spirit, and intelligence of the citizens. The question is, have we banished the wise from public affairs because they dared to be honest and have we rewarded the profligate who flattered in order to betray the people?

The speakers of our political world need to remind themselves that liberty is not an "optional extra" in a democracy, that human rights are not a luxury intended merely for the elite and the affluent, and that our people, poor and downtrodden, are as intensely committed to the free way of life as the richest and the mighty under the sun.

In the end, this scribe piously hopes that in the interests of democracy our fourth estate, including the electronic media, would seriously consider the radical proposal of our educator friend to impose a temporary ban on political circus for two weeks, and prays that politicians would pay heed to his exhortations to go to parliament to let words fight against words.

The writer is a Columnist for The Daily Star.

Words and sticks

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to the level of a carnival of claptrap, cowardice and chicanery?

The above queries assume significance because it is not the members of parliament dressed in brief authority who are supreme. It is the constitution which is supreme. It is the eternal human freedoms which are supreme. It is the people who are supreme and it is they who have given the constitution unto themselves.

In Bangladesh, one may reasonably expect that foul words will not flow from the guardians when honest and knowledgeable members of our society would reverse their decision of opting out of the democratic

to take to public life, however distasteful it may be, if democracy is to survive in Bangladesh. It is time to accord higher recognition to ability, knowledge, and integrity.

On the issue of democratising and humanising the stick-wielders, a reasoned view is that we have to allow them to perform their duties in a truly professional manner without political interference. The police force, in many ways, one may have to admit, is a victim of circumstances. We, as a nation, especially the ruling elite, are responsible for the arrogance and incompetence of the police. They can no doubt perform better if citizens and politi-

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDEEP NAYYAR

POLITICAL parties in a democratic system are seldom on the same page. They have their own agenda and their

own way of thinking. And, above all, they are competing for the same elusive goal, a majority in parliament. They are bound to jostle one another for that spot. But should they be hurting the system by doing so is the question. Should the race to beat the opponents be with no holds barred? I trust that the question has now become more relevant than before because the people have little faith in what the political parties say or do. They have lost respect and their leaders evoke disappointment and cynicism. In fact, the word, politician, has become a term of contempt.

It is generally conceded that there is no alternative to parliament but, at the same time, it is argued that nothing gets done there. It is only a talking shop. On the other hand, parties have no policy or programme to pursue. Their only ambition is to grab power or be part of the government. It is a strange paradox the more the parties try to come nearer to the people, the farther they go because of people's disenchantment with them.

The frustrated L.K. Advani is leading a *rath yatra*, unfortunately from the birthplace of Gandhian Jayaprakash Narain who was known for his secular credentials. Advani's purpose this time is to bring back the money Indians have stashed away abroad. But he is covering the same ground which Anna Hazare has done by asking the government to pass in this winter session of parliament a Lokpal (ombudsman) bill to eliminate corruption and seize the black money kept abroad. Advani's *yatra* is a futile exercise. I suspect it is only a façade for his politics of communalism. The nation has had a bitter experience

when in the wake of his *yatra* in 1990, hundreds of Muslims were killed. This *yatra* too has the making of polarisation and it may strengthen fanaticism among Muslims.

In fact, after the Sachar Commission report, there is a churning in the community. The question before Muslims is: what should they do? They want to have an effective say in politics of secular India. Advani's *yatra* may drive them to refurbish their identity. Must Advani or, for that matter, the

examined to find out whether they too had a role when hundreds of Muslims were killed in the Gujarat riots in 2002.

As for the ruling Congress, it has dropped abruptly both in popularity and in credibility. It looks as if it is not capable of doing anything worthwhile. Congress President Sonia Gandhi, who has been doing the backseat driving all these years, is out of gear. Health may be one factor. But my hunch is that her biggest worry is that her son, Rahul Gandhi, whom she wanted to

of omission and commission of Kamal Nath may become public because he has left behind a trail of corruption in the ministries he has headed. He has reportedly acquired property abroad that is worth billions. The glimmer of hope is still Anna Hazare. But his team has already begun to play at the political crease. His movement represents the resentment of people not only against corruption but also against mis-governance. Nothing else should come in the way of its real goal. It looks as if some members of his team are too anxious to be in the corridors of power.

One of them has placed Hazare above parliament. This statement, however general, does not fit into the democratic system that we pursue. The people are supreme, not one person however popular he is. JP, who led the movement to oust the Congress in 1977, was solicitous towards parliament. We have to ensure that only clean people go there, but the importance of the institution should never be minimised. It is ridiculous for the RSS to claim its hand in the thousands of people who demonstrated their support to Hazare. And it is equally ridiculous for the Congress to make him a front man of the RSS. The Congress called even JP a CIA man. By making allegations, the party does not wash off corruption which is strewn all over in the government and in the Congress. When Hazare has snubbed the RSS, the matter should have been left at that.

Still the basic question has to be answered: how to retrieve the system. True, it is seething with corruption but which other models do we have in view? Collective thinking is necessary. And that brings in the political parties. Can their agendas be deferred till a consensus is reached on the alternative? This is not possible until morality returns to politics.

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India's jagged politics

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BJP muddy the water at a time when a relatively calm period of accommodation and tolerance has come to prevail?

What Advani may be doing is part of BJP's internal politics to be at the top in the party. But the nation is not bothered about his ambition to occupy the centre stage or the projection by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi to be the prime ministerial candidate. People are worried over the harm the two may do to the polity. Muslims are particularly concerned because both of them have a reputation of being a divisive factor in the country.

Party President Nitin Gadkari has, for reasons best known to the BJP, introduced in the *yatra* drama the demand for building a temple at the site where the Babri masjid once stood. On the other hand, the captains of industry have got involved in Modi's politics. They have hailed him as the country's best CEO. I think these industrialists need to be

anoint, has failed to create few ripples in the country. He does not look like a person who can succeed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. After investing so much on Rahul Gandhi, the Congress does not have anyone except him to project.

Yet, the party is comparatively better when it comes to assessing secular credentials. The middle class may argue that it is a lesser evil but this very plea is an advantage for the Congress at the state or parliament elections. An array of schemes for alleviation of poverty and for improving the rural scene would also garner some votes for the party. Realising this, the Congress may introduce some more welfare schemes. Also, it may introduce some measures to curb corruption.

The party should have put the CBI under the supervision of the Supreme Court till the institution of Lokpal was in place. But then too many at the top are involved in one scam or the other. Some day the acts

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 15

1529

The Siege of Vienna ends as the Austrians rout the invading Turks, turning the tide against almost a century of unchecked conquest throughout eastern and central Europe by the Ottoman Empire.

1793

Queen Marie-Antoinette of France is tried and convicted in a swift, pre-determined trial in the Palais de Justice, Paris, and condemned to death the following day.

1815

Napoleon I of France begins his exile on Saint Helena in the Atlantic Ocean.

1934

The Soviet Republic of China collapses when Chiang Kai-shek's National Revolutionary Army successfully encircles Ruijij, forcing the fleeing Communists to begin the Long March.

1969

Vietnam War: The Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam is held in Washington DC and across the US. Over 2 million demonstrate nationally, about 250,000 in the nation's capitol.

1971

The start of the 2500-year celebration of Iran, celebrating the birth of Persia.

1990

Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to lessen Cold War tensions and open up his nation.