

GROUND REALITIES

Buet standoff

VC should resign immediately

THE situation in the premier institution of engineering studies, the Buet, it seems, has turned for the worse. The education minister had assured the agitating teachers that the matter would be taken up at the highest level and resolved by next Sunday. In view of that, we feel, the teachers could have waited till then before announcing their plan to resign. We agree with the minister's comments that his task has been made difficult because of this.

On the other hand the VC has added further fuel to the fire by his callous and intemperate comments that he would hire teachers from outside in the event of the agitating teachers carrying out their threat. This is not only provocative but also farcical. It may be recalled that he precipitated the situation by his sudden declaration of 44 days' vacation of the university ahead of the schedule, thus showing his mala fide intentions.

What is at issue is not merely the verity or otherwise of the allegations against the man at the top of Buet administration, but also the image, values, and sanctity of the exalted office of VC. That is more so when more than 50 per cent of the teachers of the university have expressed their no-confidence in him.

But the incumbent VC is hanging on to his post terming the demands of the protesting teachers, students and employees as unethical and improper as he claims the allegations brought against him are false. Instead, he has suggested holding a judicial enquiry into the allegations.

It is imperative that the government takes urgent steps to end the ongoing Buet standoff within the soonest possible time. Because, at stake is the future of thousands of students of the university.

The authorities should form a high-powered enquiry committee to probe the allegations against the VC, who should resign immediately if he has the moral courage. At least, he should step aside till the inquiry into the allegations against him is completed.

Private fund collection for Padma Bridge

Prohibit it through official notification

NO one is contending the fact that Bangladesh can build a bridge using its own resources. The questions are at what cost the proposed Padma Bridge will be built and what will the process of fund collection be.

In an earlier editorial, this paper had rung an alarm bell that unless clear cut mechanisms for fund collection were initiated by the government, there would be those who would cash in on the nationalistic jingoism.

The government has decided to open two bank accounts to collect voluntary public contributions for the project, which we feel is a step in the right direction. However, we are dismayed to witness the first signs of things going awry through factional fighting that erupted in Rajshai University over so called fund collection for Padma Bridge. And it has already cost the life of a Chattra League activist.

Although the opening of the bank accounts and declaration of such a move by the government is specifically aimed to avoid incidents like the one that took place at Rajshai University, the step does not go far enough. While we take some solace in the Finance Minister's statement that no one was assigned to collect money from the public for the construction of the Padma Bridge, it is crucial that the government makes it known through official notification that funds will be collected only through appropriate institutional mechanisms and proper channels.

It must be made clear that there is no room to ask for contributions through any other means. Should any quarter make attempts to coerce such contributions, legal steps will be taken by the State against such party or parties. Otherwise, chaos will reign supreme in the land and the image of the government is bound to take a nosedive, because, in the final analysis, party-based collection

The world's rainbow man



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

URBANITY drips from Nelson Mandela. The kind of decency you would expect from a great man but do not usually

come by is something which comes to him naturally. He rises from his chair every time a visitor, no matter how important or how insignificant he or she might be, walks into the room for an audience with him. It does not matter that his aides keep telling him he does not have to be on his feet all the time. Like all men of substance, Mandela knows that every individual deserves respect. And he respects everyone.

In a world where greatness is a fast dwindling quality, Nelson Mandela happens to be one individual who draws our respect, even our veneration, for the definitive manner in which he has made history. One other individual who is the repository of your respect at this point of time is Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi, for reasons we hardly need to recapitulate. Our sadness, though, is in knowing of the paucity of a bigger number of larger than life figures, of statesmen in our times. And you feel that sense of vacuum intensely when you recall the times once known for the galaxy of political stars they accommodated, to the intense delight of the world. Mandela's tragedy, and ours, is in inhabiting a world where not many are ready or experienced enough to measure up to his stature.

The roots of Mandela's greatness, of his place in history, lie in his childhood. The African tribal tradition being a healthy cultural landscape of ideas, Mandela was able, at an early age, to imbibe the degree of wisdom he saw his elders give voice to in his

youth. He listened to his tribal elders pronounce judgment on the issues of the day and quickly drew the conclusion that wisdom was a matter of ageing. It came with a graying of hair, with sharpness of vision in the eyes. The more one advanced in years, the more the possibility of one's bringing to bear on society one's increasingly profound percep-

catostrophe, though it did ignite a fire in his countrymen and around the world. At his trial in the early 1960s, his calm demeanour impressed the world, though it did not save him from the wrath of the racists then in control of his country. And yet, for twenty seven long years, Mandela refused to let himself be pushed into a hate mentality. As

reduced to impotence as a political figure. The mere fact that he survived the ordeal and eventually rose to being South Africa's first black, elected president is nothing short of a miracle. And miraculous too has been the manner in which he was able, through his wisdom and his power, to transform a racially divided country into an inclusive society. He called it a rainbow nation. The combination of colours is a rich statement for South Africa, a metaphor for the modern state. Alone among so many nationalist leaders taking charge of their nations, Mandela was careful not to let the new South Africa slide into chaos. An angry majority beside an arrogant minority is always a recipe for disaster. Mandela proved that his country was an exception to the rule, that anger and arrogance could be neutralised through visionary leadership. Mandela reached out to all South Africans. Then the world reached out to him.

Mandela was not allowed to be at his mother's burial in 1968. In 1969, his appeal for leave to have a last glimpse of his son, who had died in an accident, was ignored. It was not before 1980 that he would come by news of the 1964 Labour electoral victory in Britain.

And yet bitterness did not consume Mandela. Prejudice is a malady he has kept at arm's length. Which is why any celebration of Nelson Mandela is a paean to the power of the intellect, to the throbbing of the heart so necessary for life to be raised to the heights of sublimity. In his twilight, Mandela is the world's hold on the old-fashioned principles of noble humility and classic valour. After him, there will be loud silence.

(Nelson Rohlhlahla Mandela, born in 1918, is ninety-four today).

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk



PHOTO: AFP

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tions of a cracked, wounded world. Mandela learnt from those meetings of elders, from the flow of arbitration which went into a resolution of tribal crises. The non-violent streak that has consistently defined the Mandela character is essentially a truth shaped long, long years ago in the oral tradition of African narrative.

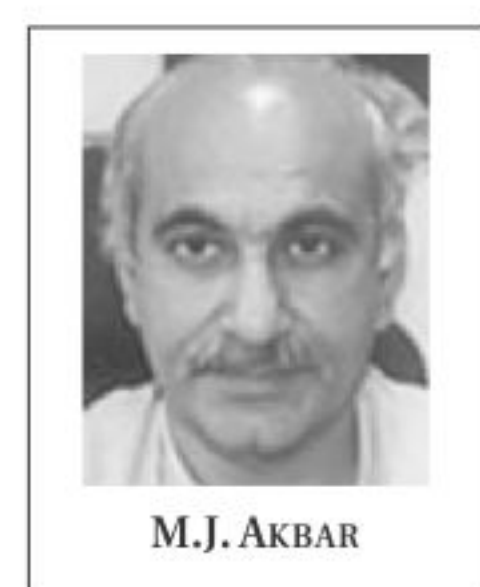
But the placidity of temperament for which Mandela remained famous in prison and outside may perhaps have been rooted in the traditions of old. Speak of the Rivonia trial, speak of his position vis-à-vis apartheid. The rebellious streak in him was of a kind which did not seek to incite

hard labour on Robben Island consumed his physical strength, it was the spiritual side of his nature that kept him and his fellow African National Union prisoners going. Verwoerd, Botha and the other white supremacists could not break his spirit.

What Mandela calls his long walk to freedom came to an end in 1990, on his terms. Now that you look back on the day he walked out of prison, his then wife Winnie by his side, it is easy to think of that release as being inevitable. The truth, though, is different: Mandela might never have emerged free, might have died in prison, might indeed have been

BYLINE

How foreign is foreign?



M.J. AKBAR

WHAT does "foreign" mean? What exactly is foreign about a foreign country? The instant answer is "distant," but distance is deceptive. The Indian middle-class is far closer to America than it is to Pakistan. It takes less

time to reach Tashkent from Delhi than it does to arrive in Trivandrum, but we know which one is the foreign city.

Till partition ravaged hearts and minds, Peshawar was part of the psychological home of the Punjabi living in Delhi and a Malayali so far away that he was called a Madrasi. Today Peshawar is part of either family romance or nightmare; and Kerala an Indian tourist destination.

The visual is part of the rationale for travel, but internet has turned information into a horizontal flat line; is there anything really foreign in the age of internet? The honest answer might still be yes, but remain on the lookout for shifting responses.

Is nature the great variant? I am writing this early on a summer morning, in Vancouver. The sun has just begun to climb sagely over mountains dressed in forest and fading snow, an undulating panorama that stretches across a sparkling horizon. Below, seaplanes rise noisily from a pond-surface Pacific, ferrying passengers to a splurge of miniature islands in the bay, past large cargo ships that look as lazy as seagulls until they disappear. But nature is majestic and startling everywhere. The Himalaya is in one world; the Rajasthan desert in another; and the Kerala rainforest in a third, but they are not foreign to one another. They belong to a natural geography that lives beyond the insularity of manmade divisions.

It is human nature that separates the earth into compartments, ever fighting to cut them

into smaller pieces, never finding the rationale or spirit to expand them. Travel is a temporary door through such compartments; but what is the difference that you discover? The human being is the same in essentials. The eyes may slant differently in Alaska or Mongolia, and the skin acquires a different hue in Africa, but everyone has the same organs, and uses them for the same reasons.

What is different, and therefore worth travelling for, is culture. Heaven knows who put this word on a pedestal, and turned into a synonym for rarefied activity. The most exciting exposition of culture is at the mass level, visible in laughter and temptation on the street or in the home. Television has married the two, and then spun it

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off into a mass market, by making the common emotions of a community into a profitable commodity for home consumption. It requires great insight to spot the genius of a successful soap opera or reality show.

Obviously a TV reality show is as fake as any formula. When an American icon like Jerry Springer sets up his daily dose of visual marijuana, he never changes the component parts: sex, rejection, sex, competition, sex, violence between rivals, sex and youth. The audience is as pre-programmed as the players, and I do not mean merely the studio audience. Everyone

watching this morning show has been programmed into suspending disbelief. But this works only in the culture of its breeding ground. From the keyhole of another society, this is utter stupidity gone rampant. On the stage of its intended viewers it is as entertaining as a wrestling match packed with simulated body hits that are as untrue as the grunts. It works. It makes money.

The fundamentals of capitalism are not terribly sophisticated. The capitalist sells fat for one half of your life so that he can sell obesity cures for the other half. But the enormous strength of the market lies in the ability of the manufacturer to persuade you, through advertising, that he is doing you a favour. A successful business understands parts of the buyer's psyche that the latter barely knows existed.

It is not logic that keeps this balance sheet healthy. American billboards in Pittsburgh are selling clothes by keeping pretty models as bereft of them as possible. Logic suggests otherwise: if I want to buy clothes, I expect to see their presence, not their absence. But less is more when it is fed into your imagination. Imagination leads you to the prison cell known as the shop. Once inside that cell, you have to pay for the key that will return you to reality. The problem with socialism, and perhaps an important reason why it failed, was not the lack of clothes, but the lack of imagination. Man does not live by bread alone. And neither does the woman.

There is sufficient motivation for travel: the human being might be the same set of bones everywhere, but life is also different everywhere. But don't make travel didactic. The search for morality, or the lack of it, is merely the pompous face of an inferiority complex. Bring the foreign back home as a pleasant memory, not as a lesson. We all laugh in our different ways, and thank God for this big mercy.

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

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 18

362 Roman-Persian Wars: Emperor Julian arrives at Antioch with a Roman expeditionary force (60,000 men) and stays there for nine months to launch a campaign against the Persian Empire.

1290 King Edward I of England issues the Edict of Expulsion, banishing all Jews (numbering about 16,000) from England; this was Tisha B'Av on the Hebrew calendar, a day that commemorates many Jewish calamities.

1389 Kingdom of France and Kingdom of England agree to the Truce of Leulinghem, in inaugurating a 13-year peace; the longest period of sustained peace during the Hundred Years War.

1391 Tokhtamysh-Timur War: Battle of the Kondurcha River Timur defeats Tokhtamysh of the Golden Horde in present day southeast Russia.

1812 The Treaties of Orebro end both the Anglo-Russian and Anglo-Swedish Wars.

1925 Adolf Hitler publishes his personal manifesto Mein Kampf.

1996 Battle of Mullaitivu. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam capture the Sri Lanka Army's base, killing over 1200 Army soldiers.