

# Freedom: The unfulfilled dream

G. M. QUADER

THE people of Bangladesh have been struggling for long to free themselves from the clutches of poverty, exploitation, discrimination and insecurity. That freedom is possible in a society where social justice prevails. Social justice is ensured by practicing good governance in an environment of rule of law. The ultimate goal for the people of our country has always been to achieve a better life based on social justice. People participated in different movements and even fought an armed struggle for a separate state and independence, once against the British Empire and then against Pakistani military rulers. But what they actually looked forward to was freedom from the social evils as mentioned.

During the initial years of independence, people waited eagerly to reap the benefits of independence. But freedom did not materialise. Corruption and mismanagement engulfed the country after each episode of success.

At one stage, the people rose to wage a movement to establish a democratic government. The idea was accepted as it was believed that democracy would deliver good governance and ensure rule of law which would remove social injustice. The people's struggles resulted in establishment of a multi-party parliamentary system to govern in a democratic way in the early '90s. The two political parties, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP), that gave leadership to this movement, alternated in power from then onwards till date.

After restoration of parliamentary democracy, people began to feel that the main objective of both the dominant political parties has been to stick to power or come to power by hook or by crook. The sole objective was seen to be fulfilling personal and partisan interest while in power. It seems that both the parties made full use of their control over state machinery and rendered the institutions for ensuring democratic norms and good governance ineffective to suit their purposes.

Efforts were made to fill up the posts of election commissioners, other important positions of Election Commission (EC) and the personnel engaged in election process with people loyal to the ruling party. Moreover, in addition to the tampering with neutrality of the EC, it was gradually made weaker and ineffective, violating provisions of the constitution at times. Due to this, the EC was not in a position to enforce most of the election rules under the existing law even if it wanted to. Money and muscle dominated election process due to EC's failure to control them. Success in election started to tilt in favour of moneyed and violent candidates. Bangladeshi voters have a very interesting character. Most of them tend to vote for the winning candidate as per their assessment. This encourages candidates to organise big showdowns of money and muscle. Election, along with politics as a whole, started having higher concentration of corrupt and violent elements of the society.

For those elements, the two political parties that were in the forefront in the anti-government movement of that time became most favoured choices. While in power they ensure snatching of power by manipulating the institutions and by distributing favours from public resources. These two parties provide a good platform for grabbing power and misusing it for personal gain. It is felt that all the money and muscle power have been accumulated and distributed among these two parties. Also, the institutions which can influence the election have been manipulated in favour of both, one after another. These two parties are thus unchallenged. Neutrality of election nowadays means option to choose between either of these two. In that case also there is better chance that the choice will tilt against the incumbent government. This is so because the party in power misused it and the people wanted to register their disapproval by discarding the government in the election.

Basic institutions for democratic governance under parliamentary system are legislative (parliament), executive (government and bureaucracy), and judiciary (courts). Each of these institutions is to function independently but with close coordination with each other.

Parliament is supposed to be the place for ensuring accountability of the government to the people along with providing suitable guidelines of governance reflecting hopes and aspirations of the people. When politics is dominated by money and muscle power and the people who patronise those, the objective focuses towards earning more through



AMDADUL HUQ/ DRINK NEWS

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corrupt practices by misusing the position. People's views are naturally not considered relevant. To ensure the said objective, there are efforts to avoid checks and balance to flout monitoring and accountability.

In a functioning democracy decisions made in the parliament and all pro-people programmes are to be implemented through the government with the help of the officials of the bureaucracy. But, it is opined by many that most activities of government are directed to benefit self and party interest only. Most appointments, postings and promotions of government officials are done on partisan consideration. All important positions of government are filled up with party loyalist and officers with pro-party reputation as much possible. Sincerity, honesty and capabilities are ignored. Efficient officials are made officer on special duty (OSD) or retired prematurely in case they are not known to have pro-party (government) leaning or are not willing to toe the government party line blindly.

Public Service Commission (PSC), the constitutional body responsible for recruitment of government officials, is manned by party loyalists. Their intention and goal, as perceived by many, is to make recruitments on partisan consideration as much possible and not by judging merit on the basis of capabilities and suitability. Recruitments of other officials, which are done directly by respective departments, are also made in a similar fashion. But, here the influence of party leaders plays a vital role. This has opened up an avenue for corruption during selection as they take bribe to do that. A new term, "Appointment Business," has been widely used by general people these days. An almost institutional arrangement is in place where the bribe money is shared amongst party people, appointing officials and important people of government party, and incompetent people are recruited.

Judiciary is supposed to be the organ for delivering justice. Laws are created in the parliament. Any grievance is redressed and any violation is punished, even against the government, by trial in court as per law. Courts must be independent of any influence as they are expected to act free from fear and favour, affection and ill-will, to exercise their judgment.

The Constitution of Bangladesh has provision for separation of judiciary from the executive to ensure non-interference from government in matters of the judiciary. A process of separation has been initiated only recently. The government of the AL-led great alliance is progressing with the separation. But, so far, independence of judiciary is considered to be on paper only.

Court judges are appointed by the government and there are allegations of incompetence and partisan bias in that respect. It has become a tradition that lawyers from the party and from among party supporters and loyalists are selected for the posts of law officers (public prosecutor, general prosecutor, attorney general, deputy attorney general, assistant attorney general) of the government. When judges and government law officers belong to and are loyal to the government party (sometimes party activists) it is almost impossible to ensure unbiased judg-

ment. The situation provides an enormous opportunity to the government and/or party to use judiciary to harass and punish opponents.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is the institution to fight corruption. But it is widely believed to be a toothless tiger. It is considered by most as being almost ineffective, except to harass low level citizens and punish people opposed to the government.

Human Rights Commission and Information Commission are institutions for ensuring actions against oppression and for empowering people by providing information. But, they are almost at their nascent stage and are not effective enough so far.

The wrongdoings as stated are practiced by both parties. Continuous growth of irregularities, corruption and absence of good governance is the logical consequence. The overall situation has deteriorated so much that it is widely believed now that giving power to either of the two parties in fact means giving them the license to impose autocratic oppression on the people and plunder public fund.

Democracy is practiced for enhancing social justice through good governance, which can be obtained by establishing rule of law. Curbing of corruption is a natural consequence of the presence of rule of law. But interestingly, illegal and irregular activities or corruption, like unauthorised toll or bribe collection from businesses, forcible tender manipulation, use of violence for intimidation by the political personnel -- specially the party in power -- are carried out in the name of democracy. It is claimed that political parties are necessary for practice of democracy. It is said that dispensation of money and irregular facilities to party activists are needed for survival and strengthening of a political party. So these irregularities need to be allowed for sustainability of democracy.

It is believed by many that majority of political leaders and government high-ups from politics are involved in corruption and irregularity with the said pretext. Under the circumstances, it is irrational to expect that subordinate government machinery and different institutions of the state will be able to uphold rule of law and practice good governance. So, in the name of democracy, the desired good governance with the cherished objective of freedom from social evils, for which we need democracy, is being sacrificed.

People of Bangladesh dreamed of freedom from all social injustices. They participated in movement to oust British Empire; waged agitation and fought a war of liberation against Pakistani regime; struggled with the semi-military rulers and came out successful in all the cases; but the desired freedom is yet to be achieved. People, especially the younger generation, are seeing no way of attaining a positive change in the near future. Under the circumstances, extremist politics becomes a choice. Both the two major political parties, whether they claim to work against or not to work in favour of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, are in fact inviting the same by not allowing good governance and thus refusing to establish social justice.

The writer is a Member of Parliament and Minister of Commerce.

# Hazards of pepper spray

SAYEED ANAM

Pepper spray, or Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) spray, is a lachrymatory agent -- a compound that makes the eyes tearful. The active ingredient in pepper spray is also an inflammatory agent that swells up the eyes and mucous membranes of the upper respiratory tract. It often causes pain and temporary blindness, while tear gas may cause permanent blindness.

It is used as self-defence against human and wild animal attack, as well as during riots and as a crowd-control device. Since 1973, pepper spray has been used by law enforcement as a way to subdue violent, aggressive or uncooperative subjects; it was used initially by the FBI and US police to incapacitate humans and animals temporarily.

The active ingredient in pepper spray is capsaicin, which is a chemical derived from the fruit of plants in the Capsicum genus, including chillies. Extraction of oleoresin capsicum from peppers requires capsaicin to be finely grounded, from which capsaicin is then extracted using an organic solvent such as ethanol.

The solvent is then evaporated, and the remaining wax-like resin is the oleoresin capsicum. An emulsifier such as propylene glycol is used to suspend the OC in water, and pressurised to make it aerosol in pepper spray. The high performance of the liquid chromatography (HPLC) method is used to measure the amount of capsaicin and major capsaicinoids in pepper sprays.

The police use pepper spray so that they can restrain violent protesters, who become temporarily blinded, and so can be more easily removed from the scene.

### Effects on the body

**Skin:** Skin exposure to pepper spray can cause intense pain, burning and even blistering of the skin. It worsens skin conditions like allergic dermatitis, and in severe cases, it can cause hypothermia.

**Eyes:** OC causes a burning pain in the eyes, inflammation and involuntary closing of the eyelids. In extreme cases it can cause temporary blindness. It can also cause longer-term eye damage because of sustained loss of blink reflex and/or anesthesia, which can cause corneal abrasions from contact lenses or other foreign material.

**Respiratory System:** Pepper spray often causes a burning throat, wheezing, gagging, and difficulty in breathing. In extreme cases, it can cause laryngospasm, which leads to an inability to speak or breathe. For those with asthma, exposure to OC can even cause death.

Some people can subsequently experience intense headaches for several hours.

Depending on the brand, pepper spray can contain water, alcohols, or organic solvents as a carrier for OC. They can also contain nitrogen, carbon dioxide, or halogenated hydrocarbons as propellants. Some of these chemicals can have serious cardiac, respiratory and neurologic, and teratogenic effects when inhaled in high doses.

### Is mace better than pepper spray?

No. Mace is a tear gas, an irritant, while pepper spray is an inflammatory agent. Mace causes the eyes to tear up (permanent blindness) and stings the skin. Pepper spray causes temporary blindness and temporary breathing difficulties.

### Legality

Pepper spray is banned for use in war by Article I.5 of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which bans the use of all riot control agents in warfare, whether lethal or less-than-lethal.

### What to do if sprayed with pepper spray?

Remove as much spray as possible. Peel off your shirt or other clothing if it is contaminated with pepper spray. The idea is to eliminate as much contact as possible with your skin, and spray will seep through clothing.

Once your breathing is under control, use a washcloth dipped in cold, soapy water to wash yourself. Use soap liberally and rinse frequently by dousing the area with clean water. Don't wash with warm water as it may worsen the pain.

Stay away from hand lotions and any oil-based product that could seal over your skin and trap the pepper oils that are burning your body.

### Don't rub or scratch

Pepper spray is made of oleoresin capsicum, an oil from chilli peppers that will smear all over your skin when rubbed, worsening your situation.

Though you may itch terribly, resist the temptation to scratch. Vigorous scratching can break the skin surface, allowing the pepper oils to seep under your skin. If you think it burns on the outside, you don't want to find out what it's like to have pepper spray in a cut or scratch.

Try some activity that distracts your mind from the pain as much as possible. Swimming in cold water may ease the irritation, but if that is not possible, try soaking in a tub while listening to quiet music. In about an hour, the worst of your symptoms should have subsided.

Persistent irritation, prolonged difficulty breathing, vision problems and any other medical concerns should be brought to the attention of a doctor.

The writer is in the Department of Psychiatry, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College and Hospital.

# Wrong man locked into asylum



After the incident in Western Australia was revealed last week, a top health official described it as a "mistake." I would have loved to have overheard the conversation between the guards and the victim.

"I'm not an escaped mental patient."

"Yeah, right."

"No, really, you have the wrong man."

"Yeah, right."

Etc.

It can only have been one of those conversations where whatever you say gets you in deeper trouble, like when the prosecution lawyer asks you: "Give me a straight answer: have you stopped robbing old ladies, yes or no?"

"Er..."

"Yes or no?"

Anyway, the mental hospital staff gave the victim a cocktail of drugs which was so strong they then had to send him to a medical hospital to be resuracted. (Doctors can do that now, which is why they buried Osama Bed Linen at sea.)

In the meantime, the REAL mental patient returned to the home, called Graylands, by himself. I would have loved to have overheard THAT conversation too.

"Can you let me in? I'm the escaped loony."

"Yeah, right."

"No, really, I am."

"Yeah, right."

Somewhere in the heart of this story, when staff realised what they'd done, there must have been one of the greatest face-palm moments in history.