

Press freedom and its abuses

Closing of Amardesh press and arresting its editor send frightening signals

HERE is no question in our mind that Amardesh newspaper and its editor abused press freedom by publishing unverified and sometimes malicious reports and writing provocative comments based on them. At times it deliberately tried to arouse religious fury through false or exaggerated reports with avowed purpose of inciting violence. Much of its reporting on bloggers was highly exaggerated and hateful, and the so-called "atheism" controversy was substantially its handy work. While professing love for religion it did not hesitate to falsifying several photos, especially one of a gathering of religious leaders changing the "Gilab" of the Holy Kaba and printing it as a demonstration against the trial of Maulana Sayeede.

Having said all the above we are extremely worried that editor of Amardesh has been arrested and the printing press of the paper put under police control. We recall that it is not the first time that this paper and its editor have been on the receiving end of government action.

Wherever there is freedom, there are those who abuse it. But the answer cannot be to curtail it. Abusing press freedom is not an uncommon thing in a democracy, and ways to handle them are also well known. We believe that the abuses of press freedom in which Amardesh indulged in should, first of all, have been handled through appropriate legal action, namely going to the Press Council, issuing legal notices, filing of cases for false reporting, etc.

Our worry is further founded on the specific charges that have been brought against the Amardesh editor. The publication of the text of the said "skype conversation" was already in the public domain. The Economist had already published it and it was widely available inside the country through the internet. We are of the opinion that reproduction of that text was in public interest and the cause of proper trial of the war criminals were better served by exposing the incident. This gave the Tribunal an opportunity to correct itself, which it did, before the trial went to the appeal process.

As for the other two charges about inciting violence during hartal and obstructing the police to carry out its duties -- in both instances his name was not on the original FIR -- patently lacks credibility. Hence we consider these charges to lack substance and meant only to harass him.

Given the above circumstances we are forced to stand in opposition of the government's move as one meant to stifle a critical voice, which cannot be a healthy practice for any country or people valuing freedom of press. Just as we take a firm position in support of freedom of the press we also would like to caution all against abuse of this freedom which we have gained through decades of struggle of the common people and of the journalist community. Much abuse of this precious "freedom" has already occurred.

Baira has its job cut out

It shouldn't feel left out at all

THE ongoing tiff between Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) and the Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry is uncalled for. That is because of the fact that both have a role to play in sending manpower to various destinations. They can only benefit from a good and mutually complementary relationship rather than being caught up in any adversarial relationship.

It appears that positive signals have been put across to Baira by the ministry concerned as well as the Parliamentary Standing Committee to come forward with a renewed vigour. For this to happen they need to delineate their respective roles so that there is no ground for conflict or confusion. Minister for Overseas Employment Khondker Mosharraf Hossain and the head of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the ministry Anisul Islam Mahmud have clearly identified where the recruiting agencies should come in.

First and foremost, they will have to cut down the costs of manpower export which are simply unaffordable for most jobseekers. Besides, there has been fraudulent activity on the part of some recruiting agencies with the result that the jobseekers fell prey to exploitation and contractual distortions. Resultantly, many of them have been pauperized and unable to pay up the debts forcing them to eke out a miserable existence.

Thus to cut costs and be genuine in their dealings, the recruiting agencies need to follow the government's lead. Anisul Islam Mahmud suggested that Baira should cooperate with the ministry since the government was working to ensure transparency in the sector. But the absence of a legal framework is denying fuller opportunity for the recruiting agencies to work.

Khondker Mosharraf for his part clarified that the government was only sending workers to Malaysia under government-to-government arrangement. That leaves out 156 countries for Baira to explore and utilise job demands from.

In this context, Baira should come forward ending their unilateral decision to stop sending manpower to

The Ulama and sub-continental politics in perspective



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE massive show of strength and organisational ability of the *Ulama* (religious preacher) under the banner of "Hefajat-e-Islam" on April 6 in the capital city may have been a surprise for many. The sponsor of the assembly claiming to be a non-political organisation has delved into matters that are clearly political and implementing their demands would mean basic constitutional change. While women's bodies and rights advocates have voiced their concern at the allegedly retrograde propositions, the government intends to engage the Hefajat-e-Islam in a dialogue.

Under the circumstances, it would be worthwhile to look into the role of *Ulama* in politics in perspective, particularly insofar as it relates to sub-continental politics. One may recollect that in the second decade of 20th century, the sub-continent witnessed the Khilafat movement which used a pan-Islamic symbol to forge a pan-Indian Muslim unity. The point to note is that this movement itself contributed strongly to the strengthening of Muslim identity in Bengal. Frequent use of religious symbols by the *Ulama* who were pressed into service highlighted the Islamic self of the Indian Muslim.

The passage of the Shariat Application Act in 1937, with spirited advocacy by Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the central legislative Assembly, provided a symbolic ideological basis for Muslim solidarity on a national scale. At this point Mr. Jinnah launched a mass contact campaign and pressed the *Ulama* into service. For Muslim leaders, who in 1921 saw no conflict between their Indianness and Muslim identity, recognition of separate Muslim nationhood for them became a non-negotiable minimum political demand in the 1940s. The *Ulama* was a significant facilitator in the movement's crystallisation.

It is interesting to note that in early 20th century Hindu leaders like Balgangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghosh also believed that the use of Hindu mythology and history was the best means to reach the masses and mobilise them in support of their politics. Hindu religious revivalism was a main feature of their political strategy. Bhagavadgita became a source of spiritual inspiration for the Swadeshi Volunteers and Hindu religious symbols were frequently used to mobilise the masses. The *Ulama* at this point remained active

in alienating the Muslims from such political mobilisation.

As Hindu mobilisation made progress, it also simultaneously vilified the "other," the Muslims. This aggressive mobilisation contributed to the counter-mobilisation of the Muslims in Punjab and Bengal. In the countryside too, Islam penetrated rural politics in the nineteenth century through such intermediaries as the *sajjad nishins*, *pirs* and the *Ulama*. Bengal Muslims were united by a common allegiance to the essentials of the Islamic faith.

Under the leadership of a group of Bengali speaking Muslim literati and religious preachers (*pirs*), Islam in Bengal in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries acquired a syncretistic face by borrowing generously from local

The necessity of social mobilisation of the Muslims across cultural barriers and thus to forge horizontal solidarity could be done effectively by harping on the common faith, and the mullahs accomplished the task through the local *anjumans* by carrying the urban message to the countryside. A close collaboration between the educated Muslims and the mullahs was a distinctive feature of these *mofussil anjumans*. The rural *anjumans* that were started during the time of Islamic reform movements forged a link between the urban elites and the rural masses and thus brought the latter into the larger political conflict.

The Hindu *bhadralok* in Bengal often looked down upon the Muslims with contempt. The Hindu jattras

to take a clear and unequivocal stand on issues where they found themselves on the opposite side of what was understood to be the secular and pro-western elite. The parties, groups and institutions under the watch of *Ulama* started operating collectively as an Islamic establishment. They sought to define religion according to its own vision of the destiny of Pakistan and the Muslim world at large. On the other hand, religious groups sought to define the state through street agitation, lobbying, networking and vote politics.

The educational setting of political Islam in Pakistan in the form of *madrasas* as the perceived breeding house of militancy has attracted a lot of attention. During the last two decades, *madrasas* expanded their influence enormously in the society and at least indirectly in the political system of Pakistan. Successive governments in Pakistan have failed to register the *madrasas*, inspect their sources of funding and curriculum and stop training in the use of firearms.

In Pakistan Islamisation was primarily a political manoeuvre to win over the Islamic parties. One of the consequences of Islamisation was the explosion in the number of *madrasas* that catered to a student population of nearly six million. These students were drawn from the deprived and marginalised sectors of society and the lower middle class. They became a generation of men being inculcated with values that have reinforced negative perceptions of women.

In Bangladesh, the Hefajat-e-Islam's main support base comes from the *Qawmi madrasas* spread throughout the country, about whose authentic number there appears to be no authoritative data. They are mostly run by private donations and support from philanthropic organisations. These do not require government support and are also not subject to effective government scrutiny.

The Hefajat-e-Islam assembly and showdown have brought the primacy of Islam in the political discourse of Bangladesh. This is strongly likely to have a determining impact on the course of socio-political movement. We have seen the astounding organisational acumen and discipline of a section of society that had hitherto remained largely unknown. In a democracy the strength of organised manpower motivated by ideological orientation cannot be ignored. Negative apprehensions about such power need to be channelised into positive engagement by means of deft political stewardship.

The writer is a columnist for *The Daily Star*.

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religious and cultural traditions. This reconstructed Islamic great tradition was more acceptable to the masses, as it resolved the problem of dualism between the Persianised and Arabic Islamic high culture of the *ashraf* and the Bengali culture of the *atrap* peasants. The *Ulama* was the facilitating factor in this process.

Most Bengali Muslims were poor cultivators and thus preferred the indigenous and less expensive traditional institutions, like the *maktabs* and *madrasas*. The *ulema* exercised considerable influence over the peasantry. The traditional theocratic order was in conflict with the British rule which had threatened the traditional system and their own predominance.

Among the Bengal Muslims a distinct Muslim identity had been developing at a mass level from the early nineteenth century through various Islamic reform movements. These movements rejected the earlier syncretism and sought to Islamise and Arabicise the culture, language and daily habits of the Muslim peasants by purging whatever they thought to be of un-Islamic origin. This gave the *atrap* (lower orders) a sense of social mobility. This was developed through various agencies, such as the itinerant mullahs, the *bahas* (or religious) meeting and the *anjumans* or local associations. The process certainly helped the Muslim masses in political mobilisation and in strengthening their argument about separate Muslim interests.

(rural open air theatrical performances) often indulged in vilification of Muslim historical persona, which was not very lightly taken by the *anjumans* or the mullahs.

In northern India the *Ulama* challenged Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan's leadership and quite clearly they did not like his thrust towards westernisation, which seemed to threaten their pre-eminence in Muslim society. As opposed to his modernism and rationality, they invoked Islamic universalism and exclusivism.

After Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan's death younger leaders like Muhammad Ali and Shaikat Ali were profoundly influenced by the *ulema*, like Maulana Abdul Bari, and through their influence they rediscovered the inspiration of Islam as a mobilising force. This resulted in what may be called a gradual Islamisation of Muslim politics, finally culminating in the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

In Pakistan, Islamic elements from political parties on the right of the political spectrum and the conservative section of the media and the *madrasas*, together assumed the character of pressure groups. The more the ruling establishment provided space for politics of Islam due to its own strategic compulsions in both foreign policy and domestic context the more the disparate elements sought to shape the country's ideological discourse according to its own priorities and preferences.

Various Islamic sectarian groups influenced by the *Ulama* continued

'Iron Lady' admired, reviled

EDITORIAL DESK: *The Statesman*

NOT since Winston Churchill has a British prime minister strutted the world stage as did Margaret Thatcher: maybe because both flaunted that "bulldog streak." They had their ups and downs, were possibly admired more abroad than at home, but the first -- and thus far only -- woman to occupy 10 Downing Street also had the questionable distinction of being pressured from within to quit. That, despite being the longest serving prime ministers of the 20th century. The reasons for her fall from grace were firmly rooted in the determination that enabled her to rise from humble origins to leading her nation, uncharacteristically when heading the traditionally "upper crust" Conservatives. Thatcher was, to use the current buzzword, a game-changer.

She inherited a moribund economy that impacted the national mindset, and dared do the unthinkable:

battled the powerful trade unions, opted for massive privatisation, shut down inefficient collieries. In short, she gutted the welfare state of its "socialist" impediments. The period of dislocation was difficult, and it remains an open

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question if her right-wing policies have succeeded. Some contend "de-regulated" policies are at the core of the European financial crisis, yet Thatcher was ever a "reluctant European": in fact her negativity on the EU triggered the in-house revolt that caused her exit.

Philosophic affinity with Ronald

Reagan saw Anglo-American cooperation regain its World War II level, and they joined forces to dismantle the "evil empire," end the Cold War. That a uni-polar world has its downside cannot be denied, but during that process Thatcher proved an

ability to engage with those with whom she had serious differences. In his tribute, Mikhail Gorbachov recalled the effect of her stating he was someone with whom she could "do business."

It was a different kind of business she did in the South Atlantic when she re-wrote military doctrine by

dispatching a task force to reclaim the distant Falklands. Reacting to her passing the islanders have hoped they will, if necessary, be provided similar "protection" since Argentina is reviving its claim over the Malvinas.

Thatcher was generally projected as arrogant and cold, but those who worked with her insist she was personally warm and considerate. Tributes to her leadership have been flowing from all over the world, but large sections of British society have not been hamstrung by the convention not to speak ill of the dead. The scars of the wounds she inflicted on communities, coal miners in particular, have yet to heal, and the victims have been articulating that. Maybe "Maggie" would have understood such forthrightness -- she never was a "softie."

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