

Peelkhana massacre verdict

Justice done to the victims

PUNISHMENT has finally been handed down to the perpetrators of the February 2009 BDR massacre. We are happy that justice has finally been done.

Though the loss and trauma that the families of the victims have sustained cannot be entirely redressed through awarding of punishment to the offenders, the verdict will at least give some solace to their deeply aggrieved hearts.

While expressing our approbation for the court sentence awarded to the offenders during the mutiny, we would like to stress that retribution is not the sole purpose of justice. It is only meant to set an example so as to deter others from committing similar crimes in the future.

While we hope that with this verdict a dark episode in the nation's history will come to a close we must take lessons from the tragedy and learn from the mistakes. Particularly, we must be more careful in the future before employing paramilitary forces in such jobs that don't conform to the type of duties they are accustomed to doing.

A note of caution here. There is no room for complacency that the verdict has given decent burial to the Peelkhana incident once and for all. There is compelling reason to find out why the tragedy did at all take place. What motivated the mutineers to take up arms against their own officers? It is up to the government to go deeper into these issues, find out the causative factors of tragedy and take steps to avoid their repetition in the future.

Relocation of Hazaribagh tanneries

How long must we wait?

A recent study by US-based environmental watchdog, the Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross, Switzerland has merely given further credence to what had already been known. That, the continued presence of tanneries at Hazaribagh area of Dhaka city is a constant threat to residents of the city. The survey put Hazaribagh in the top 10 list of the "World's Worst Polluted Places". Apparently 22,000 cubic litres of toxic waste is being dumped into the lifeblood river of Dhaka city, the Buriganga that also serves as the principal water supply of the city.

With some 160,000 people suffering various forms of diseases, we are exasperated by the lack of decisive action of the regulatory authorities to stop tanneries from poisoning Dhaka residents and start relocating to Savar. This drama has been going on for a good many years now. The principal argument against relocation has been the establishment of a central effluent treatment plant (CETP) at the new location. The question that begs to be answered is precisely how many more studies it will take to convince the government that the continued presence of tanneries at Hazaribagh pose a real menace to public health. Perhaps when the European Union decides to ban leather goods from Bangladesh for foot dragging on the CETP issue, it will serve as a wakeup call for both government and industry. However, should that happen, we can safely say goodbye to this more than Tk 60billion per annum export market.

A plea to the leaders

MUJAZ JALIL

I sit and hear Professor Ha Joon Chang and Peter Nolan explaining the virtue of State led development. Cambridge development studies has always been known as the citadel of heterodox thinking challenging the mainstream neoliberal view that market can solve all our problems and that we don't need an intrusive state. I hear them talk about how Japan, Taiwan and South Korea became a first world country in less than half century due to strong political leadership and state interventionist industry, trade and technology policies.

This is the message that I get from my professors that not a single developed economy could have achieved what they are now without the help of a strong State. With strong leadership and shared long term vision, any nation can catch up and become a developed economy. The message is so simple, so persuasive that it brings joy to my heart only to be squashed and crushed by the rude reality I see in my country. Our leaders are too busy scoring points than thinking about their country.

The effect of hartal is so patently bad that one has to be literally senile to think the parties have "our" interest in their mind. The 160 million people of this country have been taken hostage by these two pseudo dynastic powers that have simply lost touch with the ground reality. This is not a medieval times when leaders can do whatever they feel like and people under their 'dominion' suffer with no recourse. We are falling behind, why should we have to suffer, why should our children have to give exams at midnight, why should our auto-rickshaws and cars get burned, why should we get burned and die when we get out for office?

With this mindset, how are we going to catch up with the developed world? We rejoice at our achievement in reducing poverty and reaching MDGs. Is this our target, to be barely above the poverty line and surviving? Can we not dream such dream, will we have to sacrifice our true potential because of our quibbling, incompetent leaders and politicians? We want a functioning democracy, we want a state that will guarantee stability, rule of law and protect our lives and property. Is this too much to ask? I implore our leaders for once for the sake of our country to leave aside their party politics and rise to the occasion and lead this country out of the mess.

The writer is currently pursuing MPhil in Development Studies in University of Cambridge (King's College).

February 25 revisited

STRATEGICALLY
SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

THERE are no instances in recent history where such a large number of officers were killed in the spate of 24 hours as that of the BDR massacre on February 25, 2009. During the entire period of the nine-month long Liberation War in 1971, Bangladesh forces lost 47 officers.

It is true also that in recent times, never were such a large number of soldiers tried in one single case and so many awarded the death penalty. The Court trying the case of BDR killings, which includes ten BDR soldiers and 7 civilians also, has awarded death penalty to 152 of the more than 800 accused.

The law of the land has taken its course. Not everyone will be pleased with the verdict, and while the family members of the victims of the massacre will feel that justice has been done, those that have been punished may feel aggrieved by the punishments awarded.

One is at a loss as to how to respond to a common refrain from the media regarding how one feels about the judgment. As somebody who has been deeply scarred by the massacre, (and I am sure that there is hardly anyone who was not) not that there was any close kin among the dead but all of them were my kindred spirit, and many of them I had helped rear up as soldiers, my views may be influenced by sentiments. I ask—can one life recompense the loss of another? The death penalty may assuage the feeling of the victim's relatives but will it fill the void in their lives?

There is nothing to rejoice at the verdict either because the 152 who have been awarded the death penalty were also a part of the same outfit, and doing so would only show us as a bloodthirsty nation, which we are certainly not. It was so moving to see the very dignified demeanour of the wives of the some of the victims when asked to give their feeling about the judgment.

The question is, is the matter sealed and closed after the verdict of the court? I think not. This court has tried those accused in the killings. The matter of the mutiny has not been clarified even if some have been tried by BDR court for mutiny. There are many things that we are in dark about but which must be brought to light for the sake of the nation's security and to prevent such heinous acts being repeated.

While the court has pointed to some causative factors that led to the killings, to cite those as the main reason for




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There too has been a persistent controversy about the way the mutiny was handled. There is a view that it was dealt with a kid glove. There was too much delay in reacting to the situation which gave them the opportunity to kill so many officers. A shock action by a small force may have succeeded in pulverising the mutineers to submission. On the other hand, the government logic for not doing so is that that a direct assault would have led to more deaths given the built up area around Peelkhana.

It is easy to be wise in hindsight. It was a Catch-22 situation for the government. It was a matter of taking quick decision, and naturally any decision that had the prospect of fewer casualties was preferable. An attack may have led to more casualties but we have no way of knowing since that option was not tried out.

The writer is Editor, Oped and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

BETWEEN
THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

INDIA'S interests would have been served better if Sardar Patel, in place of Jawaharlal Nehru, had been the country's prime minister. This hypothetical possibility had been voiced by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as a poll campaign for the Bhartiya Janata Party's prime ministerial candidate in the 2014 parliamentary elections.

Of all the leaders, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Nehru's friend, guide and philosopher, came to the same conclusion after watching Nehru as an administrator. Azad was in Nehru's cabinet and saw him from close quarters. Azad told his secretary, Humayun Kabir, that they should have made Nehru the country's president and Patel its prime minister. Kabir and I were close friends. He recalled Azad's observation when Kabir was the education minister in the Nehru cabinet.

By no stretch of imagination can Azad be linked with Patel or his philosophy. During the national struggle, both ardent participants were poles apart and made no secret of their stance. Patel was a pro-Hindu but strictly adhered to pluralism. Azad was secular through and through and boldly faced the charge of "Hindu show boy" that the Muslim League made against him. He did not flinch even for a second to say publicly that the formation of Pakistan would be injurious to the health of Muslims.

He would say before partition that the Muslims could walk proudly in the country with their heads held high that they were equal partners, even though they were fewer in numbers. Once India was divided on the basis of religion, the Hindus would tell the Muslims that you had taken their share and should, therefore, go to Pakistan.

Patel may not have commented on pluralism in unequivocal term in which Azad did. But I recall that when after partition I sought shelter in Delhi, journeying from my hometown Sialkot, part of Pakistan, I heard Patel warning Pakistan against the exodus of Hindus. He said that India would send out the Muslims in proportion to the Hindus ousted from Pakistan.

It was a strange logic of pushing the innocent Muslims living in India for the sins of Muslims in Pakistan. Even after 67 years of division, this approach has not been disowned either in India or Pakistan. Pakistan has ousted practically all Hindus. But the Muslims are around 18 crores in India. When there is a tension between the two countries, many Hindus refer to Muslims as Pakistanis. Little purpose will be served in pursuing this point because the wounds of partition are far from healed and the people in both the communities continue to be exploited in the name of religion.

Left to Patel, he would have had an exchange of population before accepting partition. Nehru was different. He did not mix religion with politics or the state. The distance in separation in their approach made Mahatma Gandhi, who led the war of independence, to nominate Nehru as

his successor. The Hindu-Muslim unity was a matter of faith with Gandhiji, not part of the policy.

Gandhiji and Patel came from the same state, Gujarat, ate the same food and represented the traditions of the state in many ways. Yet Gandhiji preferred Nehru to Patel. Gandhiji knew that Nehru even dreamt in English and that he was too much engrossed in world affairs. But Gandhiji also knew that Nehru would interpret his philosophy of Hindu-Muslim unity more faithfully and employ such methods to implement it that respected scruples and were non-violent and fair.

Patel's biggest achievement is that he got 540 odd princely states integrated to the Indian Union. Hats off to him for what he did. But he believed in the ends, not the means. Some states volunteered to join the Indian Union. But some of them showed resistance. Patel's secretary, V.P. Menon, had no compunction in admitting in his memoirs that the show of force brought round even the most recalcitrant.

The typical example is that of Travancore. It announced its independence and initiated the process of seceding. VP had an extra man in khaki when he went to the Travancore maharaja. He signed the instrument of accession. He explained subsequently that he did not want his family to suffer and spend years in jail.

Gandhiji was also confident that his secular ideals would be safer in the hands of Nehru. This was proved when Patel refused to release Rs.64 crore to Pakistan. This sum was part of assets which India had agreed to transfer while agreeing to the partition details. Patel argued that how could he release the money when India and Pakistan was engaged in a war over Kashmir. Gandhiji had to go on fast unto death to make Patel relent.

The extremist Hindus had vitiated the atmosphere of amity over the sum of Rs.64 crore. The society was sought to be polarised. They criticised Gandhiji again and again for being anti-national and anti-Hindu. The RSS, the fall-out of Hindu Mahasabha's philosophy of Hinduva, hatched a conspiracy and shot Gandhiji dead.

Patel was quite right in banning the RSS and blaming it for disturbing the atmosphere of secularism. Once again the slant of Patel towards the RSS made him withdraw the ban once the organisation changed its character to become a cultural organisation. This was only a smokescreen behind which the RSS used the BJP for its political activities. Modi is its candidate. In fact, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has openly said that the outfit would be participating in politics. Nehru had many a time exposed its duplicity.

When Azad thought Nehru's suitability for the office of president, he was confident that the communal forces had been crushed. He commended Patel's quality of being pragmatic and practical. Azad had come to have full faith in Patel's secular aptitude. That Modi is using Patel's image for polarising the society is unfortunate. Practical as Patel was, he would have understood that India's destiny lay in a democratic, secular polity. He, as prime minister, would have deepened its foundation more firmly than Nehru.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Fear of the third force

The fear of the third force is now being whispered by most of the affected parties as the political environment is taking a dangerous turn, especially after the clear failure of telephonic conversation between the PM and the leader of the opposition. The much awaited conversation has disappointed the whole nation and it has become a matter of shame that our national leaders can be so quarrelsome while discussing a critically important national issue.

Political violence in 2013 has, so far, claimed 259 lives. The BNP-led opposition has decided to go for several hartals. The agitation movement will be tougher if the demand for holding the next national election under a non-partisan interim government is not accepted by the ruling party. This means further loss of lives and properties that this nation can no longer support. Civil society, business community and all other social forces of consequence should work to find a way out of this dangerous situation. Considering the gravity of the matter, if necessary, the "doctrine of necessity" should be invoked to protect the nation and its people.

Engr. Md. Aminul Hoque
East Rampur, Dhaka

'The legend never dies'

This is in response to Pallab Bhattacharya's tribute to Manna Dey published on October 25. It is futile to discuss the greatness of Manna Dey because all are well-acquainted with the genius of the just departed legend. Though there is no dearth of great singers in Kolkata or India, it was Dey who used to appeal to my heart the most. Though this writer does not have a sister, Dey, through the soulful rendition of 'Shey aamar chhoto bon', has managed to enlighten me about the unbearable pain a memory-stricken brother suffers when his little sister is no more. Despite myself being a strict opponent of 'adda' culture, Dey's 'Coffee house er shei addata aaj aar nei' helps me to take a philosophical view of life where characters come and go but the show still goes on. Though the lyricists and music directors of these songs deserve their credit, still how could those songs manage to touch our heart without the passion of Manna Dey?

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata, India

They dashed people's hope

Neither BNP nor Awami League could win the election two terms in a row because they always disrespected the hope and aspiration of the people when they were in power. Their pride, arrogance and hostility totally isolate them from people. They start misusing power right after they are elected.

The two parties have placed two different formulas regarding the election-time government. We hope they will solve the problem through discussion.

Jabunnaheer
One-mail

Comments on commentary, "Save us from hartal, pre-hartal violence," published on November 5, 2013

Nds

Thanks, Mr. Anam, for a very timely and much needed appeal to the judiciary for positive intervention to stop the free play of this beastly brutality being patronised by whoever it might be.

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Wonderful article! While lax laws are everywhere, this ridiculous culture will continue. It is now up to the judiciary and the people to resist and stop this nonsense.

Hafeezul Alam

An excellent and timely write-up. Along with editor Mahfuz Anam, I appeal to the judiciary to take into cognizance the points raised in this commentary and save us from hartal and pre-hartal violence. It is indeed a shame that Jamaat easily apologise to the US embassy for attacking their car but never bothers to do the same to our own citizens for burning and vandalising their cars and for the killings.

Zaman Asif Ahmad

Does our judiciary have the strength to take such step?

Alekanda

Hope our judiciary will come forward to pass a new bill about hartal, so we common people will be free from our politicians' vicious and inhumane games.

"Hindus attacked in Pabna" (November 3, 2013)

Shafu

I hold the good and proper Muslims surrounding the area responsible for allowing this unjustified, primitive and brutal act to take place. The lady in the picture reminded me of my late beloved grandmother. I am a Muslim; incidents like this makes me ashamed and heartbroken.

Dev Saha

Going after innocent minorities would not solve Bangladeshi political problems. It just saddens me to see how low these party thugs can be.

MistiKotha

I hope the police will catch those who did these evil deeds. In addition, the government ought to force these culprits to repair all the damages caused by them and hand out heavy sentence as a warning to future misbehaviour against any citizen.