

Adulteration of fertilisers

Take steps to protect our agriculture

ACCORDING to tests carried out by Soil Research Development Institute (SRDI), nearly 40 per cent of all fertilisers used by farmers are adulterated, as reported in a leading Bangla daily. Unscrupulous businessmen become overly active in adulterating various types of fertiliser during plantation seasons. Mixing of harmful chemical substances degrades fertility of the land and causes serious health issues for humans. Moreover, by applying such contaminated fertilisers, farmers are cheated and production suffers.

So why aren't the various agencies involved with the monitoring of agro-fertilisers being able to curb fertilizer adulteration? It is reported that more than one ruling party MPs are part of the association controlling fertiliser sales in the country; and the association includes many opposition politicians too. That being the case it is little wonder that the job of combating fertiliser adulteration has not been successful, if at all undertaken.

Though the department of agriculture extension along with other agencies regularly test fertilisers available in the market, the fact that SRDI's final report for the fiscal year 2012-13 is yet to be published speaks volumes of the power of vested interests. And why can't the authorities impound shops that sell banned fertilisers? And how do these find their way into the market?

We strongly urge the authorities to take necessary steps to stop this harmful practice by strengthening monitoring and meting out exemplary punishment to those involved – who-ever they may be. No syndicate, no matter how well connected, ought to be allowed to play around with our food security.

Light and sound at Lalbagh

Let sense of history be revived

THE inauguration of a light and sound show at Lalbagh fort in the nation's capital revives the old question of what degree of importance we give our symbols of history. Without question, the show at Lalbagh is a significant step in enlightening citizens on the past at a time when the study of history appears to have taken a back seat nearly everywhere, especially at our educational institutions. The government certainly deserves praise for initiating the move. Earlier, measures to build symbolic structures at such spots as Suhrawardy Udyan to commemorate Bangabandhu's historic March 7 call for freedom evoked the appreciation of historians and history buffs.

We are happy that the authorities plan to undertake programmes similar to the Lalbagh step at a number of the 448 archaeological sites in the country. While a preservation and popularization of sites dating back to ancient and later times is most to be desired, we feel that there are symbolic representations of our modern history which too must be taken into the ambit of wider popularization. For instance, the old Ganobhaban, where the crucial talks between the Bengali political leadership and the West Pakistani junta took place in March 1971 and which served as the prime minister's office immediately after liberation, should be maintained without the building having to house other government offices.

A sense of history keeps a nation alive. And historical sites are a boost to tourism. We expect that Lalbagh will be followed by other and similar efforts toward preserving history.

Shocking revelations

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

THE collective conscience of our sweatshop owners for combating anti-compliant practices has not awakened. For the first time on Thursday night, an undercover Independent Television (ITV, a British television network), investigation reportage revealed a number of our RMG factories where verbal and physical abuse takes place, as workers are reduced to tears, slapped and kicked for not working fast enough. Another factory was filmed with its fire exits locked up during operational hours. Officials of another factory regularly manipulated vital health and safety checks.

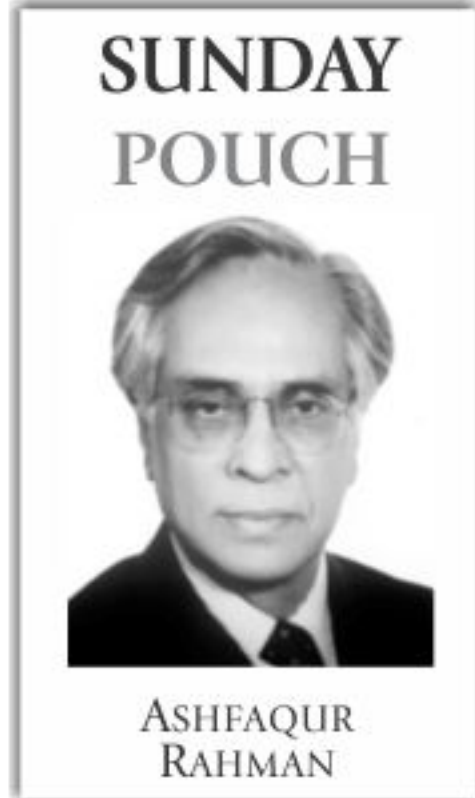
The video footages captured by two Bangladeshi journalists on behalf of the ITV reveal that not all owners of our RMG sector are willing to change. In order to reveal the many embarrassing truths among a group of Dhaka-based factories, the ITV producers fitted local garment workers with secret cameras to record the conditions inside. We ask: is there an effective body to monitor the compliance related issues of the five thousand plus operating RMG factories scattered all over the country? What more can be done to make our factory owners more responsible?

The horrible deaths caused by the Rana Plaza collapse last year should have forced us to make an effort right across our garment trade to improve labour conditions and remove the dangers in working places. Sadly that's not happening. On top of that, exploitation of child labour has not stopped as we saw from the ITV video footage how girls as young as 13 were forced to work 11 hour-shifts. As we focus on the horrific revelations of the ITV's video footage another media report by the Human Rights Watch worries us. HRW interviewed some 47 workers in 21 factories in and around Dhaka. The workers claimed that some of the managers not only intimidated and mistreated employees involved in setting up unions, but also threatened to kill them. This followed as some union organisers were beaten up while others said they had lost their jobs or had been forced to resign. Factory owners sometimes used local gangsters to threaten or attack workers outside the workplace, including at their homes.

The government and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) are yet to ensure compliance with the labour law, and sanction companies which abuse worker rights. In July 2013 Bangladesh ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 87 and 98 on freedom of association and collective bargaining, and is required to protect the rights contained in them. In light of such happenings, establishment of independent trade unions to monitor and protect workers' rights will be not possible. We are upset.

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Understanding the issues in Indian election



INDIA goes to the polls to elect a new Lok Shabha (Lower House) in a few weeks. The voting will take place in at least five phases. Like all the previous elections, this election to the Lower House will be critical. It will change the balance of power in the central government of India. A new party or a coalition is more likely to take over power. The historical dominance of the Congress party may not be there after the elections. The party that is challenging Congress is the Bharitya Janata Party (BJP). However, many smaller parties and regional parties that have strong sway in many of the populous provinces and states could be playing a bigger role this time. Such parties, by winning many seats in their regions, could act as power brokers. It is with support from them that either of the major two -- Congress and BJP -- may be able to form a government by claiming majority in the House. So a coalition government would perhaps be the norm than the exception.

What really are the issues that are agitating the mind of the huge electorate this time round? Do not forget that India is a country with vast diversity and ethnicity. Emotional and regional issues, which by nature are narrow, are also popular. So the foremost thing to consider is the mindset of the Indian voters. Issues relating to caste, religion and reservation work to 'divide and rule' the people. It is these issues that are on the front burner and the power brokers exploit them in order to get power. Cross-border terrorism or issues that concern religious liberties also tend to dominate the election debates. The Indian polity is normally not concerned about prevention of economic recession, or about reforms in administrative and financial matters.

The challenge in any election in India is to make the voice of the common man heard. This is usually drowned in the cacophony of the rich, the very rich, the communalists and the corporate media. The Indian national press is often ready to declare that there are no national issues. But they are eager to point out local issues that grab their attention, such as hunger and unemployment. Many consider these as real national issues.

Since the last general elections (in 2009) an anti-corruption movement was started by one Anna Hazare. Similar moves by Baba Ramdev have helped to galvanise the young into political participation. The ruling Congress has itself faced much political flak for not containing corruption scandals in which some of its senior members were involved. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is personally a clean person. Even the chairperson of the party Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul, who is aspiring to be the next prime minister, have been facing corruption allega-

tions. In the meantime, a maverick political party called Aam Aadmi Party (common man's party), led by Kejriwal, espoused the anti-corruption cause and swept through the Delhi state elections. This has electrified the cause of anti-corruption and brought this issue to the national limelight. The only reason it may not get easy traction is that the other major party, BJP, is also facing allegations of corruption.

Let us look at what the big pundits are saying about the prospects of the various political parties, especially the big two. Three opinion polls taken in January this year came up with the following results:

1. India Today-c voter : 21,772 respondents: UPA (Congress+) 103 seats, NDA (BJP+) 212 seats.
2. CNN-IBN Lokniti : 18,591 respondents: UPA 107 seats, NDA 211 seats.
3. ABP News-Nielsen : 64,006 respondents: UPA 101 seats, NDA 226 seats.

So far, the opinion polls seem to give BJP a lead over Congress. Yet the possible formation of a government is a different matter.

Politics in India is often tougher than in the democracies in the USA and other Asian countries. There have been instances of political assassinations in India's democratic history. Issues of caste, communalism and regional tensions have dominated Indian politics.

In recent times, however, India has seen the rise of right to information (RTI) activists. They are tens of thousands of ordinary Indians, more often poor, sometimes totally illiterate, but highly motivated. They use what is called the Right to Information legislation (of 2005) to seek transparency and fight corruption in public institutions. For example, in the first five years of this legislation over a million RTI requests were filed. They challenged the abuse of power by the authorities. Some powerful institutions and persons retaliated and persecuted the complainants, or even assassinated some of them. This election will see some of these excesses being questioned and fought against.

Of late, a movement around the demand for an anti-corruption agency called Lokpal has reenergised certain segments of the Indian society. It has attracted the support of the burgeoning middle class. This group has money but has no influence because of its alienation from politics. It is prepared to use this anti-corruption platform to acquire strength.

In the next few days, Rahul Gandhi and Modi, especially, will counter many of these issues and through last minute agitations convert them into votes. Their hope of climbing to the top depends on whether they champion the cause that has mass appeal.

Bangladesh waits with bated breath to see how this fascinating democracy next door continues on its journey.

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Bangladesh at a crossroads



States to send observers, following the decision by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the country's main opposition party, not to participate.

Unrest in South Asia's dynastic democracies is nothing new. But the international community thought that Bangladesh -- though still desperately poor, prone to frequent flooding, and having experienced a recent series of tragedies, including fires and a major building collapse in its garments factory -- had matured sufficiently for a peaceful transition of power. Under the Awami League government, which was peacefully elected with a huge majority in December 2008, and whose secular/socialist traditions are rooted in the Bengali national movement (which led to independence from Pakistan in 1971), Bangladesh had enjoyed a period of relative stability and rapid economic growth.

But painful divisions persisted beneath the surface. In particular, the split between democratic secularism and sharia-based Islamist governance has defined Bangladesh's identity since independence, when the rift between competing political models took its most extreme form in horrendous massacres of Bengali nationalists. That legacy remains a flashpoint for violence today.

One controversial issue stoking tensions has been the workings of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) established by the current government after receiving a clear mandate to try those accused of mass killings and other atrocities 43 years ago. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina defended the decision by insisting that there can be no impunity for war crimes on the scale perpetrated in 1971, when an estimated two million people died, with many civilians executed in cold blood.

This quest for justice is no different from efforts to hold war criminals accountable elsewhere, such as in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. There is clearly a need for emotional closure to allow the country to move on from its bloody birth. But Hasina's opponents rejected the ICT as a political act aimed at silencing another opposition party, Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's most prominent Islamist organisation, whose leaders sided with Pakistani forces during the civil war.

But Hasina's desire for justice and closure is understandable, given that her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (the country's founding father), and most of her family were brutally murdered in 1975. There were also sound political motivations for establishing the court: a portion of the Awami League's support comes from the Bengali intelligentsia, in particular the Hindu minority, which suffered terribly in the 1971 war.

Jamaat-e-Islami and its ally, the BNP, responded to the war-crimes trials with violent disruption and obstruction aimed at paralysing the economy. Roughly 300 people -- many of them members of religious minorities, who are often scapegoated for supporting the Awami League and the ICT -- died last year as a result of the protests. Hindus comprised most of the prosecution's witnesses for the ICT.

Jamaat-e-Islami and its even more radical ally, Hefajat-e-Islam, a fundamentalist madrasa-based group that has campaigned to ban women's right to work, attempted to block the ICT's work physically -- and even to destroy its international credibility on the grounds that the court reserved the right to impose the death penalty. Hefajat-e-Islam, which supports execution for so-called "atheist bloggers," apparently thinks that blogging causes greater harm than mass murder.

Hasina's government rightly pointed out that all criminal courts in Bangladesh can impose the death penalty, so it would be odd that a murderer could be executed but a mass murderer could not. On December 12, Abdul Quader Molla, a prominent member of Jamaat-e-Islam, was the first to be hanged for war crimes, with six more sentenced to death.

In fairness, international jurists have criticised the ICT on procedural grounds, while the EU opposes capital punishment in all circumstances. But no one outside the country contests the legitimacy of the ICT per se.

In fact, the war-crimes trials were only one of several irritants to the opposition, which was also determined to reinstate the model of a technocratic civil-service-led caretaker government in the run-up to the election. This model, unique to Bangladesh and Pakistan in South Asia, was introduced to eliminate abuse of administrative resources by the incumbent government during election campaigns but was abolished by a constitutional change that the Supreme Court upheld in 2011. Indeed, the Awami League rightly pointed out that the caretaker government that took power in 2006, backed by the military, clung to power for two years, instead of the constitutionally mandated maximum of 90 days, and even tried to prevent Hasina from returning to the country from abroad.

The BNP claimed that there could be no fair elections without a caretaker government, even though they had recently won local municipal elections. This stance led to a boycott, despite Hasina's offer to create an all-party government with three cabinet portfolios for the BNP, including the interior ministry, which has substantial oversight over both the police and the conduct of elections. The government had no choice but to hold the election, as mandated by the constitution.

So, what can be done now that the election is over and a new Awami League government has been sworn in?

Above all, the Awami League must make a greater effort to build bridges -- for example, by either charging BNP leaders accused of committing crimes, or releasing them from prison. It must also deliver on its promise to hold a fresh election, provided the BNP ceases its deliberate use of violence, and it should seek an agreement with the EU to send a strong election-observer mission.

The BNP should also distance itself from Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamist fundamentalists, and commit itself to secular governance. Indeed, the BNP has not always been close to those who want a sharia-based state. On the contrary, the BNP has traditionally been pro-business, and Bangladesh badly needs foreign direct investment, which has dried up with the unrest. The BNP also needs to make peace with India, the regional economic giant.

Bangladesh is at a crossroads. Neither the West, nor South Asia, can afford to see the country take a wrong turn.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Making Dhaka liveable

Recently The Daily Star published a survey report prepared by Economist Intelligence Unit, a London-based organisation. According to the report, Dhaka is considered unfit for living. The survey was done based on political and social stability, crime rates, quality of healthcare, education, transportation and natural environment. This is an embarrassment for the whole nation.

The density of population is one of the major factors that contributed to this situation in Dhaka. People are coming to Dhaka to make a fortune as most of our economic activities are Dhaka-centric. In order to improve the situation, local governments should be made more effective. More job opportunities should be made available outside Dhaka to lessen the pressure on the capital city. It just needs sincere attempts to solve the problem.

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It was not like Obaidul Quader

I have a special respect for Communications Minister Obaidul Quader, a soft-spoken person. He speaks logically on different issues, which is praiseworthy.

But recently I have become disappointed at his comments on a few subjects. His remark about the opposition political party's not participating in the general election is not acceptable. He said that, "the opposition has missed the train." But ignoring the demand of 90% people for a CTG, the government went ahead with its agenda, so we think the train was derailed and there was no scope for the opposition to board it.

Then his comments on the violence at Rajshahi University, where 100 students were injured and 20 of them were hit by bullets as the police and the activists of BCL swooped on the students, were also unacceptable. Obaidul Quader has blamed the violence on criminals who infiltrated into the ranks of BCL. We did not expect this sort of unreasonable comments from him.
Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Comments on news report, "Boost for army," published on February 04, 2014

Ibrahim Zaman

This is a very pragmatic decision of the government. Bangladesh needs to maintain the current standard of its army while improve the navy significantly for preparing itself to tackle any untoward situation that may arise in the near or far future.

Mofi

First, the mass promotion of civil servants, now a new cantonment for army -- trying hard to make the power houses happy. This will help the government to stay in power but won't bring comprehensive development. I hope this is the end of the appeasement culture; now think about comprehensive and coherent development, please.

Nazmul Haq

Good. This might be the 26/27th cantonment for the army. How many high schools have been established by the successive governments since the Liberation of Bangladesh? Probably none.

Saint

It should be implemented on an emergency basis.

SM

Did India approve of this move?

"Powerful ex-GM finally indicted" (February 06, 2014)

Aasfisarwar

He was certainly a powerful GM, but is he now more powerful than the then railway minister?

Saint

Where is the black cat?

"For a fresh new beginning . . ." (February 05, 2014)

Khan

We live in a different world. If we beat our children or wives, it is no more our internal matter. We must prevent Taliban from coming to power and it is not considered an "internal matter" of Afghanistan. If you do not follow the internationally agreed norms there will be questions.

The other issue is secularism. You should go for a referendum to ask people which way they want to go. These issues are vital and should be solved urgently.