

JnU students' grievances

High-handed approach condemned

REPORTEDLY, more than 50 students and teachers of Jagannath University were injured in police firing of rubber bullets while they were agitating to recover halls belonging to the university from the clutches of illegal occupants. The treatment of the students by the police was deplorable. The students for their part, however, shouldn't have occupied the street causing considerable public inconvenience. That too is unacceptable.

We wonder whether the students were armed with lethal weapons and whether they had posed serious danger to the police or to the public and property in that area so as to necessitate such an onslaught on them. We understand from the report that it was the police who had resorted to firing teargas and rubber bullets to disperse the agitating students. The police must come round to realising that bullet is the last resort only to be employed in the most exceptional situation. It seems the police have forgotten other ways of crowd dispersal that are less harmful to the public.

As for the demands of the students, they had been demanding the release of the many students' hostels that are under illegal occupation mostly by the ruling party cadres, and a few of them were also under the occupation of government agencies. Given the dire strait of accommodation facilities of the JnU students it is the government which should have been proactive and recovered these hostels without the students having to agitate for it. And the students should well remember that violence does not beget the expected result.

Mockery with hospitals

The attitude is outrageous

TWO hospitals have made news lately for utterly wrong reasons. Usually a hospital would come under criticism for deficient services. Not so with Mugda General Hospital and Al-Helal specialized hospital ltd in Mirpur, the former a government healthcare facility and the latter a private one. In the government hospital at Mugda, some ruling party activists literally took over the hospital to receive the health minister with fanfare. For two days the minister was scheduled and rescheduled to visit the hospital, but did not turn up. But the patients were hindered from entering and exiting the hospital. The patients even had to take permission from the activists converging on the place. When hospital authorities were the right persons to receive him, why was it attempted to be made a public show of loyalty? When there are other venues to do so!

As for the patients of the private hospital at Mirpur, they had to suffer the ordeal of film shooting. Allegedly the cabin patients on the 8th floor of the hospital were literally stranded as film crews occupied the corridor while patients of other floors could not sleep due to loud noise till late night. Ward boys of the hospital had a field day witnessing film shooting. We would like to see the authorities more accountable and transparent in their undertakings when it comes to serving patients. Hospitals cannot be places for antics.

Wall around the Parliament!

THE unplanned construction of the metal bar wall around the Parliament Building complex will effectively restrict access of the people to the green fields surrounding the Parliament. These construction works are wrong -- legally, aesthetically, as well as morally.

Legally, the construction works are contrary to a number of laws. First and foremost, the disfigurement and deviation from the original plan of the Parliament Building, as finalised by Louis Kahn, would be contrary to the fundamental principles of state policy laid out in Article 24 of the Constitution. Article 24 bestows upon the State to protect our national monuments and states "The State shall adopt measures for the protection against disfigurement, damage, or removal of all monuments, objects, or places of special artistic or historic importance or interest."

In Bangladesh, the Parliament Secretariat has been bestowed with the functions of overseeing all matters relating to the Parliament.

In addition, the open spaces around the Parliament Building are designated for protection under the Protection of Open Spaces and Wetlands Act, 2000. The enclosing of the green fields and changing their nature and character as open spaces is in violation of the 2000 Act. It is a well recognised legal principle that the State cannot arbitrarily and unreasonably cause detriment to the quality of life that citizens already have.

Aesthetically, the construction of the fence wall would obstruct the view of the majestic building which is recognised as one of the greatest architectural monuments of the 20th century. It will also be in violation of the Master Plan left by Louis Kahn, one of the greatest architects of the last century. It is arguable that the caging of this architectural treasure would be as ridiculous as caging of the Taj Mahal.

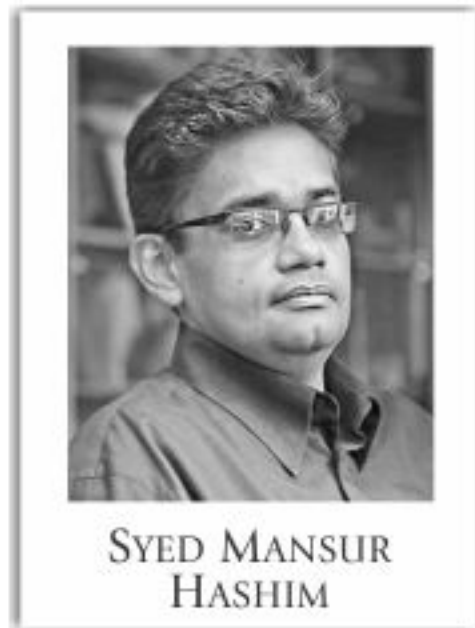
The philosophical significance of Louis Kahn's design was to reflect the notion that, in a democratic society, the people are a part of the process of governance. The assembly of citizens on the outside lawns was meant to mirror the assembly lawmakers inside the Parliament. The institution of democracy was meant to emerge from the light, columns, and open spaces of the entire Parliament Building complex, which includes the green fields. This aesthetic aspect of the design would be destroyed by the construction of the wall.

Morally, the project will deprive the citizens of open spaces which they have enjoyed for decades.

If the issue is one of security the State needs to explore other alternatives which would not change the character of the open spaces, not destroy or damage our cultural heritage, and not be detrimental to the quality of life of life that the citizens already enjoy.

The writer is a Barrister-at-Law and an Advocate of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

Safety vs. cents and dollars



THE debate over 'Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh' is an understandable one. Inspection standards specified by Accord, which is a platform of some 150 European clothing retailers and brands, are being termed as too stringent by the garments manufacturers' representative body BGMEA. One of the sticking points is the hiring of foreign experts and engineers for inspection. This of course has got not only BGMEA but also legal experts up in arms with regards to how foreign experts can be brought in to inspect a sector without prior government approval. Legalities aside, precisely why foreign experts are needed as opposed to hiring local engineers from the very outset is also somewhat baffling.

There exists serious debate on the timeline for safety inspection and remediation process. While the panel hopes to inspect 200 factories initially totaling some 1,500 factories by September, 2014, it is still unclear as to who will foot the bill for amendments being proposed.

Both the government and industry need to go back to the basics -- land use plans should be followed. One should not raise a huge building in the middle of a residential/mixed area for use as a garment factory.

There is no question as to what needs to be done to make the factory workplaces safe for workers. A repetition on the scale of Rana Plaza is unthinkable both for the sector and the foreign brands that source garments from Bangladesh. Yes, there is need for changes to be made. Sadly, changes will come at a cost, both in time and money. Though the Accord has stressed on credible inspections by "a qualified safety inspector, with fire and building safety expertise and impeccable credentials, and who is independent of and not concurrently employed by companies, trade unions or factories," the question really is whether a pool of inspectors is readily available in Bangladesh. And if not, why haven't stakeholders (like the government) been taken into confidence when floating an international tender to hire foreign inspectors?

Then there is the question of structural flaws in the design of buildings that the majority of factories suffer from. It is here that the crunch will be felt most of all. According to Alliance for Bangladesh Workers Safety, a platform of 26 North American clothing retailers, 74% of the garment factories were established before the enforcement of the Bangladesh National Building Code (2006). Indeed, the problems do not end there. Apparently "most factories do not have any drawing design, soil test reports, electrical line outlines." Hence, the whole question of satisfactorily carrying out inspections is

thrown in disarray.

A host of recommendations, including the installation of sprinklers, adequate fire doors and exits, re-wiring of electrical circuitry, smoke control, etc., have been made which factories must redress in the immediate future. All very nice on paper, but two questions arise out of these requirements. One, precisely who is going to pay workers' wages while the factory is shut for retrofitting and two, who pays for retrofitting? That is a question that keeps coming back to haunt us. The reality on the ground is that the industry will not foot the bill alone. This is especially true as the new wage board is in various stages of implementation. With the sector still coming to terms with the losses counted during the 3-month long political gridlock running up to the elections, and foreign buyers yet to make financial commitments to that effect, this is a plan of action that is not truly feasible. Expecting changes in infrastructure overnight is unrealistic. For all practical purposes, buyers need to set staggered targets over the next five years for the sector to recover. Retrofitting is expensive and technically cumbersome, especially when we talk about a large number of factory buildings currently being rented as garment factories.

At the end of the day, safety does come first. Therefore, the most vulnerable factories should be shifted, if need be, retrofitted. However, given that many of the buildings were not designed or built to any industrial specifications, many of them may not really be worth retrofitting. Rather, constructing them anew is a better option.

Again, both the government and industry need to go back to the basics -- land use plans should be followed. One should not raise a huge building in the middle of a residential/mixed area for use as a garment factory. A factory building is not a residential or commercial building. It requires careful designing supported with all necessary facilities that include access roads, safety arrangements, and power, water and sewage systems. Unfortunately, our building owners build buildings for multifarious uses, which include renting out to garment factories. So the problems are inseparable parts of the practices.

In the final analysis, the solution lies with special industrial facilities buildings in designated areas. Desirably, they will be located away from the middle of cities. In the interim, industries should, in coordination with the government, do the needful to secure safety of the buildings and overall occupational safety for workers.

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Some old wounds never truly heal.....

SYEDA NAZNEEN FERDOUSI

SINCE 2009, the month of February seems to launch a ruthless attack on our basic worth of ourselves as human beings and pours salt on our already painful wounds. I don't think a single person related to those 74 people who lost their valuable lives during the Peelkhana massacre on February 25-26 2009, would disagree with me. I am Shaheed Col. Mojibul Hoq's sister-in-law. He was more a friend to me than my relative so whatever I am writing is from my experience and emotions, which are as real as the sun and the moon.

Yes, life moves on and so did we. By 'we' I mean the parents, widows, children, siblings, kith and kin and friends of all those departed souls. But, does our strong appearance mean we have left the ghastly memories behind us? No, we haven't, they are now part of our lives. Neither have we forgotten nor have we forgiven those involved in the senseless killings. We are all human beings, not angels, and expecting divinity from us 'to forget and forgive' is pure naivety.

My concern is for those who have not been able to get beyond the negativity -- anger, bitterness, resentment, self-pity, a sense of injustice (why me?), hatred of whoever or whatever caused the pain, desire for revenge.

I just cannot let this go unsaid -- how grateful and indebted I am to all those who stood by us at the darkest moment of our lives and lent their unconditional support. They continue to be our well-wishers by patronising 'Col Mojib Trust' -- an endeavour created by family members to keep Col Mojib's memory alive, and to uphold his values and principles, his noble views, his love and dedication for the country, and his commitment.

However, our grievances are pointed towards those who were supposed to act with responsibility but failed to do so. They totally ignored the necessity of counseling the immediate members of the deceased -- their wives, children and siblings. They never understood that the wounds of those who were incapable of letting go could still have an effect even after 20 years.

I suppose the theory that given enough time everything will be re-cycled in the chaos of eternal and infinite activity may sound good, but it is only a verbal try-on for the scarred and emotionally crushed ones who must live with their wounds somehow. It is an easy thing to say, but when you are the wounded one you probably don't feel the same way.

Five years after the incident, I am now venting out my anger as I had to face questions like "how are you still alive when so many people were killed inside Peelkhana?" "Oh my God, so many people were killed inside, so how did your sister and nephew survive?" "I am sure your brother-in-law got the hints of rebellion brewing among the staff...why didn't he do anything?" "Well, the incident was a concern for the army, why should the civilians suffer?"

Or comments like, "the families of the slain army officers are doing fine...they have received huge amount of money, flats, land...they are all happy," "their children are studying abroad, some of the widows are getting married...so they are moving on..." "oh, I thought they will never be able to get out of the grief...but they seem

to have forgotten everything."

I really feel sorry for these people who act as if they know exactly what has been happening inside the minds of the grief-stricken. As if the widows and the orphans or the siblings of the deceased would have shared in public how they were passing their days and nights. Young widows who were just married before their husbands were killed, what were they supposed to do? Kill themselves/bury themselves with their husbands' corpses ...or waste the rest of their lives in isolation, just to get some sympathy or pity ... that too, from people who were devoid of any common 'human' sense?

People and public officers sought my view on the verdict of the trial (delivered on November 5, 2013). My reaction was straightforward (and in this regard, I didn't speak on behalf of all). I said: "I still have so many questions that remain unanswered. Who were behind the planning of the killing? Exactly what had happened on those two days? Certainly discontentment among staff for salary, benefits/perks cannot justify such brutality. It



is still unclear to me why and how 68 soldiers in custody died of 'heart attack' within a short span of time, at the very initial stage of interrogation. Were their statements recorded at the time of interrogation and used during the trial?"

I was categorical about my view and said: "I am not the vindictive type...so even if 2,000 people are hanged as a result of the verdict, it will not make me any happier....because I will never get my dear one back. But if I get answers to the questions, then at least I can console myself in knowing WHY those precious lives were snatched away within less than 48 hrs."

I am well aware that healing begins with the process of forgiving and forgetting....but how can this be an option for me...when I don't even know who to forgive and who to forget?

Time does not heal some wounds and the BDR massacre left wounds as deep as the Pacific. Life, for all the families of the deceased will never be the same again. Yet, for the sake of living in sanity, I do not want any of us to give up. So, on behalf of the family members of all 74 irreplaceable lives that we had lost, let me keep the light of hope kindled and pray for 'the gift of MORE time'....to help the wounds heal. We know those wounds will ultimately leave an abysmal scar, but we will live with it.

The writer works for a foreign international development agency.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Bangladeshi cricket lovers shocked



The series against Sri Lanka was heartbreaking for Bangladeshi cricket fans. The Tigers have forgotten how to bat or catch a ball. Our team captain has forgotten how to lead a team. They batted carelessly. Maybe because no matter whether they score a century or get out without scoring a single run, they still get paid. What's next for the Bangladesh cricket team? Are they going to be able to regain their strength? They now look like the same team they were ten years ago.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali, Dhaka

Why this rush to cultivate Bt brinjal?

Our government has quite hurriedly released some varieties of genetically modified Bt brinjal even before neighbouring India did it for production. Our government has, however, gave directives for controlled cultivation of Bt brinjal.

Some scientific research reports hold that genetically modified crops have some adverse effects on human and animal health and environment. The question is how far the directive of controlled cultivation of Bt brinjal would be followed. Still the production of local varieties of brinjal in our country is satisfactory. So, commercial cultivation should only be allowed after due revision of the existing and future scientific findings on the effects of transgenic crops including the Bt brinjal.

Another thing is, proper labelling on Bt brinjal packs/trays should be made to help the consumers decide what they will buy.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
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Illegal gas connections

We have learnt from news reports that some corrupt government officials are behind the practice of extending illegal gas connections from the main lines. With the small amount of gas that Bangladesh extracts every year, people can't even meet their daily needs. The situation is getting worse day by day because of these illegal connections. On the other hand, Bangladesh depends on foreign countries' help for exploring new gas fields and extracting gas. The government should take effective steps to stop illegal gas connections.

A.B.M. Atiqur Rahman
Dept. of Business Administration
SUST

Comments on news report, "The murder of Major General Abul Manzur," published on February 22, 2013

Mofi

General Manzur, a veteran sector commander of our Liberation War, has not been portrayed fairly in our history. I don't understand why BNP didn't put much effort in unearthing the truth despite the existence of all the information.

Abbasuddin

There was strong rumour that Ershad assigned Manzur to kill Zia and after Manzur completed his assignment, Ershad just killed him to remove the witness of his involvement in Zia murder. Courts could have verified the rumour to know the facts. But unfortunately, Ershad is now a special envoy of Hasina.

Dev Saha

With the new revelation, our civil society has an obligation to dig out the truth. Manzur was not the man who killed Zia and that needs to be made clear now. An innocent freedom fighter was killed. What a shame!

MH Khan

I hope Ershad will not commit suicide.

OpeeMonir

The man is in serious misery. This is the time when he should be in CMH.

"Migrants' death rises sharply" (February 20, 2014)

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

The same old tested method of going into denial mode when you fail miserably.

A reader

We expect responsible comments from a minister. Rather than denying the truth, he could have said what his ministry could do in this regard.

Sumon

It's because of the hard work of these migrant workers that Bangladesh is progressing. We should never ignore them and also make sure that they are not deprived of their basic rights.