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Legislating against formalin menace

Strengthening enforcement mechanism imperative

THE cabinet in a welcome move on Monday finally Okayed the draft law on checking import of formalin and its widespread abuse in foodstuffs. Through preparation of this draft bill a pivotal requirement is being met towards facing this mounting threat to public health.

While appreciating the move, we would like to stress that once enacted in parliament, the law itself won't be enough to counter this national health hazard, unless the mechanisms to enforce it and monitor the same are also duly in place.

It is worthwhile to note that, mobile courts have been in action since long to address the malaise through destruction of fruits, vegetables or other perishables on sale found to have been contaminated by formalin as well as penalizing traders found guilty of its abuse. But despite the drive, its effect proved to be ephemeral and it could hardly allay the public fear about the safety of the commodities in the market place. This brings under spotlight the efficacy of the existing mechanisms to enforce any law against this evil practice.

The draft law sounds stringent as it provides up to life imprisonment and Tk. 20 lakh in fine for illegal import, stockpiling, or production of formalin. Evidently, this law will help circumscribe the availability of formalin in black markets. But what about keeping track of what happens to this dangerous chemical after it passes into the market from its licensed importers? Hence is the need for strengthening the monitoring and implementation mechanisms to stave off reckless use of this toxic chemical.

Solar shows the way

Fastest growth rate globally

WE are pleasantly surprised and heartened to learn that the annual growth rate of solar home systems in Bangladesh is higher than anywhere else in the world. It is little wonder that the World Bank has just extended additional funding to the tune of nearly US\$80million to Infrastructure Development Company (Idcol) which is implementing the programme. The solar programme has generated 70,000 new jobs and 140megawatts of electricity in rural areas that fall outside the main electricity grid. Today, 14million rural poor have access to electricity through solar power. The additional financing will help install another 480,000 units.

That a company like Idcol, operating on the public-private partnership model simply goes to show that it is possible to run programmes that positively affect poorer segments of the population. Electricity remains one of the major bottlenecks for growth in the country. It is good to see policymakers take cognizance of limitations of what the state can and cannot provide to its citizens. It is near impossible to bring the whole population under the national grid taking into consideration the massive amounts of finance required. It is here that innovative programmes like the one Idcol is implementing with great success, can serve as a role model for other infrastructure related projects that have not seen the light of day for lack of capacity to be implemented. Having access to electricity automatically translates into new income generating opportunities for the hundreds of thousands of new consumers helping them fend off poverty.

Online shopping of the young

RIDWAN QUAIUM

ONLINE shopping, especially buying and selling second hand items online is now the new trend in the country. To cater to the growing demand of online shopping, several websites and facebook groups have emerged to provide this service.

For example they are buying a motorcycle and then after riding it for a few weeks selling it off to buy a bicycle; after buying a bicycle they are riding it for a few weeks and then again selling it off to buy a DSLR camera, then after buying a DSLR camera they are selling it off to buy a mobile phone and then after a while they are selling the mobile phone to buy another item. It seems that many in the younger generation are constantly buying items not because they need it but rather out of a social complex that they need items to 'show-off' to make them 'look cool' in front of their peers. Since, financial resource is limited and they never needed the item they bought they are selling that item off very quickly too so that they can buy another item to impress their peers.

A common phrase that is being used by these sellers in their advertisement post to attract customers is 'Urgent Sell'. At first after reading the phrase 'Urgent Sell' I thought that these sellers need financial help due to some emergency to them or their family members which is why they want to sell off their item immediately. But after communicating with many of them I realized that many of them are using this phrase not because they or their family is facing some financial trouble but because they want to get rid of the item they have as they want to buy another item. I tried to explain to some of these sellers that they maybe mis-using and abusing the word 'urgent' who have replied to me by stating that getting rid of the item they have to buy another item is an urgent matter to them hence they find nothing wrong in using the word 'urgent' in their advertisement posts. This clearly shows that buying and selling has become a hobby and for some young people it is nothing short of a mental sickness.

As long as the transactions are done legally, there may be nothing wrong about how many times someone buys and sells product but parents and even the society may need to intervene to ensure that the younger generation are not suffering from social complex which is forcing them to buy and sell items so frequently that it is turning out to be some kind of a mental sickness. If such behavior is not controlled then when they grow older their situation may become catastrophic.

The writer is a Transportation Engineer working in Thailand.

When protocol is cast aside . . .

GROUND REALITIES



Syed Badrul Ahsan

AT the end of his talks with visiting Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj a few days ago, Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali went before the media to brief them on the deliberations and their outcome. He did not have to do that. It should have been a Foreign Office spokesman or the Director General External Publicity who should have gone before the press to inform journalists of the nature of the negotiations. For their part, the Indians did the proper thing of having their spokesperson Syed Akbar Uddin appear before the media with their version of events. Sushma Swaraj was not there. It was not her place to be there.

Protocol in high places is important. For certain mysterious reasons, though, the rule has been quite different in Bangladesh. We have repeatedly been embarrassed when individuals have taken upon themselves roles they ought not to have. It is not merely in government that protocol has been turned on its head. Here in the media, there are instances aplenty of newspaper editors who have been on jankets abroad when it should properly have been their reporters to undertake that journey. We have had editors who have cheerfully boarded, free of course, inaugural flights of foreign airlines when they ought to have sent a senior reporter on that trip. In the late 1990s, an important newspaper in this country had no journalistic representation at the Cricket World Cup because its editor had insisted that he, not his sports reporter, be invited to the games. The exasperated organizers decided to withdraw the invitation to his newspaper.

There are all the times when Bengalis go red in the face when they see their important, highly placed fellow citizens doing things they ought not to. A few years ago, at the United Nations General Assembly, Bangladesh's permanent representative to the global body had members of the prime minister's family occupy seats meant for the official government team to the UNGA. You could observe the permanent representative and the foreign minister (it was Dipu Moni at the time) just managing to find some space for themselves in that crowd. Protocol had simply been flung away somewhere.

In the early 1980s, barely two years after he had seized power in a coup d'etat, General Hussein Muhammad Ershad decided to address the UNGA in New York. That was fine. The only problem was that in the course of his address, his son, a little boy, reportedly sauntered all over the place. If that puts you to shame, how do you react to the image of Tareque Rahman, a rising politician in his parents' political organization, seated as chief guest at an official ceremony involving the Bangladesh Air Force? He held no position in government and yet the chief of air staff saw little reason not to have this callow young man

occupy space in the manner of a significant figure in government. A state institution was being made subservient to a political party.

There are other instances of such unacceptable behaviour on the part of important citizens. Years ago, at an international conference that called for the presence of senior government officials from different nations, it was a Bangladesh minister who turned up to speak for his country. Pretty soon he realized that it was not his place, that a minister was not needed there. He spent a few days in that foreign city before coming back home. There is a moral here: you do not belong everywhere. But does that really matter? We yet have our ministers jetting off to conferences abroad, meetings where our ambassadors can easily speak for the country, where no ministerial presence is called for. Dipu Moni's travels abroad are a case in point.

Some years ago, the chairperson of the Dhaka education board had a team accompany her to a Middle Eastern country where their job was seeing if preparations for HSC examinations by a few expatriate Bengali students were in order. That was a colossal waste of money. It was a job which clearly could have been handled by a mid-level official of the Bangladesh embassy in that Middle Eastern country. So why were this lady and her team there? The answer is not hard to come by. They simply camouflaged a holiday by billing it as a necessary government trip.

A few years ago, as a senior police officer presented a keynote paper that listed certain shortcomings in the police force, one of his subordinates in the audience loudly protested his findings. The junior officer's outburst left everyone stunned. And yet nothing was done to discipline him. Insubordination in service is a grave offence. In this case, the protocol-violating police officer remained untouched. The senior officer he so rudely interrupted has lapsed into silence. We have little idea of where he is today.

When perspectives go wrong in the corridors of power, you know there is something terribly wrong with the system. For years on end, we have had our prime ministers inaugurating almost everything that is built anywhere in the country. Be it flyovers or highways or

culverts, it is Bangladesh's prime minister who must open them to the public. Think of the many foundation stones or structures that bear the names of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Protocol, had it been maintained, would call for lesser mortals to do all that simple work.

On the day Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrived back home from Pakistani incarceration in January 1972, the Mujibnagar leadership and the administrative machinery of the new state of Bangladesh stood at Tejgaon airport, waiting to welcome him back to his now free country. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a burly freedom fighter pushed through the dignitaries, went right inside the aircraft and emerged minutes later with Bangabandhu.

That was indecency at work. Protocol had been thrown to the winds.

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Think of the many foundation stones or structures that bear the names of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Protocol, had it been maintained, would call for lesser mortals to do all that simple work.

Will India's social development stagnate under Modi?

M NIAZ ASADULLAH

INDIA under Modi faces a difficult development agenda. Despite significant economic growth from 1990 to 2010, progress on key Millennium Development Goals (MDG), particularly those in the areas of education and health, has been lacking. The country lacks social infrastructure such as toilets and schools. In Modi, Indians have chosen a leader who may be able to improve the country's poor infrastructure, arrest the slide in governance, and give a much needed boost to economic growth. But will everyone share in the economic prosperity Modi is hoping to stoke? A comprehensive vision for India's development must ensure that the basic needs of all of its population are addressed.

There is much to do to ensure India meets its human development needs. The under-provision of sanitation facilities is widely believed to be a key driver of under-nutrition in the country. A shortage of toilets means that nearly half of India's population is forced to defecate in the open. In this respect, Modi's state of Gujarat scores ahead of the national average. Gujarat increased the proportion of households with access to some form of latrine by nearly 13 percentage points between 2001 and 2011, which, while certainly an improvement, was less than the gains seen in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, among other states. The proportion of households in Gujarat with toilets is higher than the national figure — 57 per cent of Gujarati households with toilets against the national total of 47 per cent. It is less impressive when compared to Bangladesh, which managed to dramatically cut the number of households without toilets in just 10 years, despite being poorer than India. According to World Bank statistics, only 4 per cent of the population in Bangladesh today practice open defecation, down sharply from 42 per cent in 2003. No wonder infant mortality in Gujarat is higher than that in Bangladesh.

While India has also made considerable progress achieving near universal enrolment in primary education, 19 per cent of Muslim boys and 23 per cent of Muslim girls are still not in school. Gujarat does stand out in

some respects, with near universal (that is, 95 per cent) enrolment of rural children between the ages of 6 and 14. However, drop-out rates remain high and hardly anything is learnt in school, while the educational attainment of Muslim children is lower than that of Hindu children. In Gujarat, one report found that 55 per cent of children in fifth grade cannot read a second grade text and 65 per cent of children in fifth grade cannot do simple subtraction.

In addition, large gaps remain in education statistics between Hindu and Muslim children. Of all the Indian states, Uttar Pradesh is one of the worst in terms of Hindu-Muslim gaps in social and educational statistics. Yet Modi's election campaign saw him shore up support in the state by

followers. After all, Gujarat's economy grew significantly over the past decade, compared to the economic stagnation during the period of Congress party rule in the 1990s. This has arguably benefited Hindus and Muslims alike in terms of income and employment. But evidence for the success of Modinomics is unconvincing. Over the past three decades, the state of Kerala has seen much better progress in human development than Gujarat. Much of Gujarat's growth was a legacy of history: the state was already growing when Modi assumed power. Most disturbingly, an invisible fence divides the city's Hindu and Muslim population — an infrastructure boom in Ahmedabad has bypassed the city's largest Muslim ghetto with a popula-



whipping up Hindu anger against already disadvantaged Muslims.

As highlighted by the 2006 Sachar Commission Report on the socio-economic and educational status of Indian Muslims, key government facilities remain systematically under-provided in Muslim communities. Making progress on social welfare would require addressing these critical gaps in supply of public services.

For India's consumer class who rely on the private school sector instead of the failing government schools, and who live in exclusive residential neighbourhoods, Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat riot does not carry much significance. Modi's narrow development vision, which has largely ignored the limited human development progress in Muslim communities, has caused little concern among his Hindu nationalist

tion of about 400,000 people.

The 2015 deadline for reaching the MDGs is around the corner. As Modi leads India into the post-MDG era, he must go beyond divisive politics and pursue a development agenda that equalises social opportunities for all, including the country's 150 million Muslims. He must prove critics wrong by delivering roads, schools and hospitals to under-served neighbourhoods and villages irrespective of their religious composition.

Such an inclusive approach at this critical juncture would have long-lasting positive effects on India's progress in social development.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Hazards of formalin use

One of the recent burning issues for the last few days is the excessive amount of formalin being used in our food. Formalin is a colourless, strong chemical which is normally used to preserve corpses, and now being used to give fruits, fishes etc. a fresher look and attractiveness.

Formalin creates a wide range of health problems. It irritates the respiratory tract, causing sneezing, sore throat, larynx constriction, bronchitis and pneumonia. It can affect the skin, causing dermatitis. If taken in large amounts, it is extremely harmful to almost every internal organ. This can be revealed through symptoms of nausea, vomiting blood, acidosis, etc. It also causes cancer.

A study conducted by a green organization revealed that this year, a lot of seasonal fruits like mangoes, litchis and blackberries have been soaked in dangerous amounts of formalin before reaching the market. Fish and fruits are supposed to be a part of our diet but now due to these illegal chemicals being used and little action being taken against it, they are causing the serious diseases that are badly affecting the nation's health.

Samaha Raida

The Aga Khan School
Dhaka

End torture on draught animals

I wholeheartedly support the views of Professor Dorie LaRue regarding the abuse and torture of horses in old Dhaka in a letter published in The Daily Star on 27 June 2014. The description of the tortured cart drawing horses of old Dhaka is realistic and very painful. The way these helpless and speechless animals are treated and abused is not acceptable to anyone who has a slight kindness in his or her heart.

Therefore, I would like to request the government to ban the use of horses or any kind of animals for drawing carts or doing any other torturous jobs.

Nuha Jajibah

SFX Greenherald International School
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Money flies away from Bangladesh," published on June 25, 2014

Hafeejul Alam

The export of illicit money as outlined by UNDP is really alarming. The nation expects that the government, particularly the Finance Ministry, Bangladesh Bank and the NBR would explain the matter before the media. The government agencies concerned should also let people know as to what action they have taken so far to stop this huge drain on the country's resources.

Hardreality

When we desperately need capital investment for the development of the country, we became the top exporter of illicit capital among the LDCs. Another feat by us! Now BB, NBR and ACC are working to stop it. The question is what were they doing all these years? Were they sleeping, or just thinking like our finance minister who once said (about Hall Mark scam involving Sonali Bank) that US\$ 460 million was not a big deal?

Akhtar Shah

This is old news! It's been going on for ages! BB and the finance ministry have suddenly decided to wake up from their slumber! First thing to do is to plug the hole! That is to stop it happening now!

"No democracy in Bangladesh" (June 28, 2014)

Sukhamaya Bain

Since the BNP leaders are talking about "no democracy in Bangladesh", shouldn't they bring democracy within their own party? In fact, there is hardly any intra-party democracy in Bangladesh. Most of the top leaders of the parties are dictators of their parties. That is why in some constituencies we see criminals getting party nominations over other better candidates within the party.

Hafeejul Alam

Could the BNP chairperson spell out as to when there was democracy in Bangladesh since its inception?

"Fake votes cast at 30pc centres" (June 29, 2014)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

The EC could not reflect the people's expectation. It is a spineless organ.

SM

Fake democracy by fake leaders need fake voters, no surprise.