

Drug court's verdict welcome

All other drug adulterators must face justice

In a welcome judgment a Dhaka drug court on Tuesday awarded the highest punishment under the law to a pharmaceutical company owner and her two staff members for manufacturing an adulterated drug for children. Being the first case of such conviction, the court has thus set the stage for holding to account other spurious drug makers, the deadly impact of whose products is yet to be unraveled.

The convicted drug manufacturer, as the case statement goes, was responsible for the deaths of some 76 children due to renal failure following application of their brand of paracetamol syrup that contained a highly toxic ingredient. Though the tragic incident took place between 1982 and 1992, a nexus between the accused and the powers that be caused delay in the process of justice. Mercifully, it was an investigative report run by this paper in 2009 that the case, which remained in hibernation for some 16 years, reopened leading to Tuesday's verdict.

The individuals punished were not the only ones dealing in deaths in the name of producing drugs. In fact, some five drug companies involved in producing such kind of spurious medicines were responsible for allegedly killing some 2,700 children under similar circumstances.

The government must now step in to expedite the process of justice for three other cases, too and sue the fifth such company still enjoying immunity from law.

Continued EU market access

RMG sector reforms key

GOING by what the outgoing head of the EU delegation William Hanna has stated, the duty free access Bangladesh gets to the EU market has proved to be a tremendous opportunity for exports. Indeed, EU remains the country's single largest export market, with exports going up by a significant 57 per cent over the last three and a half years. It speaks volumes for the quality of our products and the RMG sector as a whole. That said, for the EU, the compliance factors linked to assuring international labour standards in the garments sector remain a crucial area that requires attention.

The Sustainability Compact signed in July last year by all major stakeholders set forth certain conditions to be met. And to that effect Bangladesh has made serious progress. One should not forget that making all factories safe is a long term affair, but there remains contention on how far workers' rights to associate freely and bargain collectively has made progress on RMG factory floors. The government has been recruiting factory inspectors and work in making buildings safer is progressing. The sedate pace at which the new labour law is being implemented needs to be expedited. This and other issues need to be fast tracked if Bangladesh is to meet the conditions set forth in the Compact that is coming up for review this year. As this paper has reiterated a number of times, we need to do these things for our sake and not due to external pressure to avert any misconceptions about Bangladesh being an unsafe place to do business in.

Clothes to die for

EDITORIAL, *The Statesman*

THE celluloid rendering of South Asia's worst disaster since Bhopal is arguably more hideous than what was portrayed to the world in April 2013. The cakewalk electoral victory of Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League doesn't lessen the enormity of the tragedy -- the 1,200 deaths in the collapse of the high-rise Rana Plaza, the centre of an intensely exploitative garment industry for Western clientele. The details, as exposed 15 months later, are no less graphic and gut-churning than what was known in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

The report of the BBC documentary, *Clothes to Die For*, as reproduced in this newspaper from the account in *The Independent*, ought to bag honours in the non-fiction category of any film festival. India has much to learn and little to lose -- not even in terms of bilateral relations -- from its screening, hopefully in Kolkata this November. A critical point of detail must be that the building's owner, Sohel Rana, is yet to be brought to trial. It was only last Wednesday that Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission filed charges against 18 people accused of having "grossly breached the building code" while adding additional floors without sanction. Not that the victims are merely waiting for justice in the courts; the compensation fund backed by the International Labour Organisation is yet to attain even half the targeted amount. Admittedly, the Bangladesh government has doubled the minimum wage, but it still remains one of the lowest in the world. As yet, the trial has been a non-starter, and much too palpable has been the slow-footed approach of the born-again Awami League government in a year that also witnessed the parliamentary elections.

Fifteen months later, the administrative aberrations and the less than robust response of the developed nations can be contextualised with the struggle for survival beneath the debris. As a survivor, Rezina Begum personifies the horrific underbelly of a thriving industry. Equally does she represent the extent to which the truth of the matter has been sought to be airbrushed by the establishment. Her story, as recounted to the film crew, beggars belief -- "I never thought that I'd have to amputate my own arm. But I was forced to by the situation. The doctor tried to amputate it but couldn't find me beneath the rubble. He said: 'I'm giving you a saw and you can do it yourself.' I said: 'OK, give it to me,' and I cut it. I had only one thing on my mind, to look for my sister. That's why I could do it." Rezina was remarkably forthright in her interaction with a foreign film crew. It is hard not to wonder whether her voice was muffled in the summer of 2013. As the words "The End" flit across the screen, it shall not be curtains on the tragedy and shame of Bangladesh and its merchandise of designer garments for the West.

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Growth and governance: Making the transition

WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

ONE striking feature of the results of the last Secondary School Certificate examinations may have escaped our attention. Nearly 10% of more than a million successful candidates secured the highest grades, leaving no way of identifying the top 1% or even the top 5%. Evidently, a deliberate policy of grade inflation in public examinations is undermining the merit system. This phenomenon is perhaps symptomatic of a decline in meritocracy, with a concomitant rise of mediocrity, in all aspects of our institution-building efforts.

This article is not meant to be a commentary on the governance of our education system, but on the country's governance system as a whole. Nevertheless, it could be a good starting point. Research findings show that the quality of human and intellectual capital of a country, as determined by its education system, is the most basic determinant of long run economic growth, affecting all other growth-inducing factors like how effectively we use physical capital, or how efficiently we can adopt productivity enhancing technologies or even how well we can govern ourselves.

Bangladesh is by now well-known as a case study of a governance-growth conundrum: our performance in economic and social development has far exceeded what can be expected at the existing level of governance quality. Although the governance environment may have been barely adequate thus far to cope with an economy breaking out of stagnation and extreme poverty, it may increasingly prove a barrier to putting the economy firmly on a path of modernisation, global integration, and poverty reduction. There are indications that institutional weaknesses may be reaching the tipping point beyond which they become binding growth constraints. Notice, for example, that Bangladesh has had a unique record of experiencing accelerated average annual growth of GDP per capita in every five-year period since the last half of the 1980s; but the on-going growth stagnation may jeopardise the continuation of that record beyond 2010.

There are alternative ways of conceptualising how the required transition in the governance system may come about to make it possible for economic growth to move into a higher trajectory. A few broad aspects of this possible transition may be pointed out.

First, in a low-income but modernising country like Bangladesh, governance effectiveness in terms of rules and standards varies widely across different segments of society and economy. There are obvious cases where being a poor country is no excuse for lacking in international standards, such as, for example, the management of air traffic control system. On the other hand, there are grey areas like "rule of law" or "human rights" in which we are aspiring to achieve the First World standards in the Third World socio-economic realities. Overall, the challenge is to gradually expand governance effectiveness and good practices beyond some existing enclaves. Unfortunately, the reverse seems to have been happening in Bangladesh.

The government agencies or institutions like the Local Government Engineering Department, or the Rural Electrification Board or the Basic Bank were once cited as pristine islands of excellence in an otherwise governance-challenged environment; but each of these institutions subsequently became victim of malevolent politicisation. The integrity of Nobel Prize winning Grameen Bank is now under threat. Even the enclave-type arrangements that helped the export-oriented garment industry to bypass the governance problems are now proving inadequate because of questions being raised about the factory and labour standards. True, Bangladesh does not have the worst forms of employment conditions like bonded child labour as are still prevalent in many parts of the developing world; but the lapses in labour standards in the garment industry in Bangladesh are relatively more visible because the industry caters to the global market. Similarly, the credibility of our financial sector or the quality of our economic diplomacy will increasingly become major determinants of how far we can benefit by leveraging the emerging global economic order.

The second aspect of transition is to move from a centralised and relation-based system of governance dispensation to one that is impersonal and rule-based. While we have moved

from state controls to market orientation of the economy, we need to create a system of governance that can successfully manage the intricate interactions between the state and a well-functioning globally integrated economy. Managing such an economy requires many inputs that markets do not provide: rules, standards, training, certifications, infrastructure, security and a host of other services that can be provided only by professionally competent and well-resourced government agencies. This also needs a governance system that decentralises power to identify problem, work out solutions, and monitor performance such that decisions are made promptly and with much more information.

There is a need to shift from reactive ad hoc decision-making to a more proactive, informed and analytical approach. Unfortunately, there is little indication that we are moving in that direction either. For example, the remedial measures for recovering the global image of our garment industry tarnished by the Tazreen and Rana Plaza disasters are proving to be much costlier compared to preventive actions that might have been taken beforehand. Again, some of the currently proposed large infrastructure projects seem to be driven either by their prestige value, or by interest-groups' lobbying, or even by geo-political considerations; but there seems to have been little analysis for setting priorities based on any proper evaluation of their financing and implementation modalities and their social costs and benefits.

Third, strengthening the credibility and integrity of state institutions is integral to a process of governance transition. Even in the mature rich democratic countries, the motives of elected public representatives are held in the public eye with a degree of suspicion. It is the non-elected state institutions that most enjoy the confidence of the public -- be it the higher judiciary or the higher echelons of civil bureaucracy or the authorities responsible for holding elections or the anti-corruption and other watch-dog bodies. This is where we have done poorly. The successive governments have transformed some of these watch-dogs into lap-dogs. Without restoring the credibility of these institutions, any attempt to put together the Humpty Dumpty of our democracy is bound to fail.

Last but not least, we need to inculcate some degree of cooperation and accommodation in our otherwise individualistic approach to political and economic entrepreneurship. In politics, we have feudalistic hierarchical relationships based on patronage politics instead of collective action among equals. Thus far, individualistic entrepreneurial drive has been the main contributing factor behind our economic growth. It is no accident that we are the world leader in promoting micro entrepreneurship through microcredit, but have failed miserably in sustaining any successful model of co-operatives, including the once famous Comilla model of co-operatives. Even the impressive gains in Bangladesh in many social development indicators were achieved through policy interventions at the household level rather than through community based actions to demand and sanction public service delivery.

The individualistic approach to entrepreneurship may be historically rooted in our rice-based economy, where easy rain-fed cultivation used to require little mutual help among farmers, in contrast to most other regions where cultivation was more labour-intensive or dependent on maintaining an irrigation system. Recent studies have found links between historical agricultural practices in various regions with attitudes towards cooperation. Whatever be the reason for our cultural trait in this regard, we may now increasingly need more cooperative arrangements in many areas ranging from optimal use of scarce land to sustainable urbanisation to protection of environment. Similarly, a more cooperative and accommodative approach among political parties will also be needed to sustain any workable form of democracy. The narratives on Bangladesh have for sure changed over the years: it is no more considered a "test case of development." But the country still remains a test case of whether economic development and democracy promotion can proceed hand in hand in such a low-income yet resilient and dynamic society.

The writer is an eminent economist. This write-up is based on the presentation made at the first workshop of the Bangladesh Economists' Forum, Dhaka, June 21-22, 2014.

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

IMAGINE renowned poet Rabindra Nath Tagore seeking admission to the Calcutta Club, a preserve of the British, and getting rejected. Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the legendary Urdu poet, receiving a similar treatment at Lahore's Punjab Club in Pakistan and Nazarul Islam at the Dhaka Club. In all these cases, the public outrage would have been difficult to assuage.

The white rulers saw to it that the leading clubs in a country where they had ruled remained an exclusive place for them and their elitist friends. Refusal to the non-whites' clubs was part of apartheid. Posh clubs would have a billboard at the entrance saying: Dogs and Indians are not allowed. Shocking it may sound, but the white rulers enjoyed humiliating dark Indians, apart from heaping on them other indignities.

The upper stratum of society which rubbed shoulders with the white and lived more or less in the western style was given entry straightway. Therefore, it was not surprising to find the same members of the society replacing the white and making clubs exclusively for their use. The club management prescribed dress code, the western style, essential and banned local dress within the premises.

A club in Chennai went to extent of banning dhoti consequently. A Madras High Court judge wearing dhoti was refused entry. There was an outcry when this happened. Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa called the act an "insult" to Tamil culture. The AIADMK chief promised a quick law passed to put an end to such a practice. The CM has also promised prompt action against the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) in Chepauk, which had denied admission to Justice D. Hariparathaman and two other guests, ostensibly for violating the dress code of the club.

Members and their guests are expected to be well-dressed, which for men is usually interpreted as Western attire. "The way of tying the dhoti in Tamil Nadu style may leave it to a number of aspects of exposure. Many clubs cite this as a reason for not allowing guests in dhotis," a member of the Madras Club said. However, in a state where most politicians prefer a dhoti and a white shirt over the Western attire, charges of indecent exposure have backfired. R. Gandhi, 77, a senior advocate who was turned away along with Justice Hariparathaman, said it was an "arbitrary reaction" by the club's staff against respectable men "in their natural dress."

People in South East Asia, however democratic in their temperament, are enamoured of authority. Clubs may be the relics of the British rule but they represent power. That is the reason why clubs of the past are kept as they were, although they do not fit into India's reality of austere living.

Authoritarian police is another relic which has been retained, with more powers to silence the opponents. It was an investiture ceremony where top police officials were being honoured for the outstanding service they had rendered to trace and punish those who had committed excesses during

the emergency. In the midst of the ceremony, then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi got up and ended the ceremony.

Another example is the disdain with which the Police Reforms Commission report was treated by her. It confirms fears that the Shah Commission proceedings may have been destroyed. In fact, even a copy of the report is not available either in the market or in government offices. Does the Congress believe that the emergency would disappear from the history itself? At least, the Police Reforms Commission report exists, although its recommendations have not been implemented because most state chief ministers are not less authoritative than Mrs. Gandhi was.

The BJP feels that it can afford to give the impression of being liberal at a time when soft Hindutva has ennobled even the leftist parties. The Congress is seen steadily losing its secular credentials in the past few years despite the fact that Muslims, by and large, voted in favour of Congress. But the biggest dilemma facing the Muslim community today is who among all parties is liberal. The radicalisation of the community is not the answer, as it is happening. This would be used as an evidence to stigmatise the community. Muslim terrorism has no chance against Hindu terrorism simply because of the numbers.

I realise that some Muslims, out of desperation, have taken to violence. But this is the path Hindu militant organisations like the Bajrag Dal, Ram Sena and Vishwa Hindu Parishad want the community to take. The guilt of these organisations has been proved from the bomb blasts at Malegaon, Ajmer and Hyderabad. Initially, the suspicion was on Muslims -- as is the police practice -- and the Muslim youth was picked up.

At Hyderabad, they were beaten by the police. But a detailed investigation revealed a Hindu hand. Had there been accountability, such chauvinist deeds by the police would not have taken place. Young men have been arrested when law courts have found that there is no evidence against them. Who made the mistake? Who is responsible for illegal arrests? He should be punished if the impression that the Muslim youth was picked up without any rhyme or reason is to be removed.

A commission has also been appointed under the chairmanship of former Chief Justice of India J. C. Verma to suggest changes in rape laws and the quantum of punishment. The students have asked for death penalty or chemical castration. Yet it is strange that the government acted only under pressure. The authorities pressed the panic button because for many days all roads leading to India Gate were closed and even water cannons were used to push back the agitating students behind the barricades the police had erected. The lathi-charge was uncalled for and widely condemned.

The biggest support to the politicians are the police who are supposed to maintain law and order. The force has to be purged of sycophants and sluggish elements. But for that to happen, the police have to be made independent so that they are free of pressure from politicians. The worst example is in Punjab and Haryana where the police force has become a private army of chief ministers.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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US's role in Palestine crisis

The greatest hoax of the millennium is Nobel Peace Prize laureate Barak Obama's role in and his recent comments on Gaza issue. The whole world knows Anglo-US axis is the creator of the Israeli state. His offer of mediation is also a great mockery. In the previous millennium, US mediation has made the Palestinians captive in their homes as they lost their leaders; and US roadmap led them to a bleak future.

Let us condemn all those barbarians and their promoters.

Abdul Halim

Savar, Dhaka

Potholed roads and highways

The roads and highways of our country are full of potholes and patches which can be rightly compared with a ragged quilt. Why did the authorities let the roads reach such a pitiful condition?

The homebound passengers will certainly face ordeal as they will travel to their destinations. Moreover, they are being charged extra money for tickets.

We hope the authorities will do something promptly to mitigate the woes of the passengers.

Zabed Wali

Chittagong

Anti-chemical drive must continue

We appreciate the recent drive of DMP against chemical-tainted fruits. People are now more aware about what harm chemicals in fruits can cause to our health. The drive should continue. DMP should also run anti-chemical drives in the kitchen markets.

Shafkat Rahman

BIAM Laboratory School

Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Sundarbans tolls taken by robbers," published on July 20, 2014

Reza Noor Muin

Deploy army against these forest criminals.

"Trip to serve 3 purposes" (July 20, 2014)

SM

How could both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia go for Umrah/Hajj every year and who knows how their tickets and other costs are paid? Well, they have to have honest earnings but when they lead a corrupt regime, their earnings can't be legit.

Deep Purple Blue

Tarique is making strategic decisions for BNP! Allah save BNP!

"Can prisoners of parties do that?" (July 20, 2014)

Abul Kashem

Many thanks to The Daily Star for writing on such an important issue. Anything is possible under a 'one-person-oriented' administration where nobody other than 'one person' decides what to do or not to do.

Molla A. Latif

MPs are the prisoners of the party but the parliament is independent and also supreme! Prisoners of the supreme parliament make laws.

Should the judiciary be brought under parliament or should the MPs be freed from imprisonment through annulment of the article 70 of the constitution?

Hafeejul Alam

In a democratic country, parliament should be regarded as a sovereign authority. In countries like India, Canada, Australia and many other democratic countries, such practice is in