

Flooding in the north

Gear up relief efforts

INCESSANT rainfall has raised water levels of rivers across many districts in the northern parts of Bangladesh resulting in flooding. Hundreds of thousands of people are now flood-stricken. Yet, reportedly, there is a general lack of coordinated relief operations for the affected communities. Items like drinking water, food and essential medication form part of any flood relief operation. This time round, people apparently have been left to fend for themselves. We are informed that due to erratic weather patterns, the country may be experiencing further heavy downpour in the coming weeks. Given the forecast, emergency relief operations need to get off the ground immediately.

The Brahmaputra River in Kurigram district has recorded water levels 13 centimetres above safety level and has adversely affected some 150,000 people in 40 unions. A similar scenario exists with all major rivers that has caused flooding and played havoc not just with people's lives but seriously damaged agricultural production. While some food aid has been despatched to the affected districts, the supplies are not enough to meet the demand. With so many people waterlogged who have neither the means nor the capacity to move to safer areas, it is high time that authorities responded to the woes of the flood affected people.

And with early warning of further adverse weather headed our way, we expect the authorities to speed up relief operations. And side by side, a post flood relief and rehabilitation programme should be worked out to help the affected to overcome the losses.

Moghbazar robbery

Police can ill-afford to be off guard

THE robbery in broad daylight at Moghbazar in which Tk. 31 lakh was snatched from an employee of a private company causing him grievous gunshot injury on Tuesday speaks volumes of the state of law and order in the country. The timing and style of the robbery, as reported, make it amply evident that the felons were well-informed and well prepared. It was because of absence of any law-enforcers around the scene of the incident that the robbers could make off with the looted money unchallenged.

This is not the first case of such audacious robbery taking place in and around the city as elsewhere in the country. Incidents like employees of money transfer agency bKash being stabbed or shot before getting mugged at Bashabo and Turag, or businessmen being shot at in Motijhhel and Topkhana Road area, have often been the stuff of the news in the not-too-distant past. In many cases the victims of such snatching or mugging were murdered by criminals. What worries us most is that in absence of effective deterrent measures, the incidence of such crimes is on a rising curve.

Evidently, criminals are getting further emboldened by lack of matching police actions against such crimes. The home ministry can ill-afford to allow such crimes to continue unabated. It should ensure that the citizens feel secure to carry out their day-to-day transactions. In particular, the criminals behind the Moghbazar robbery must be arrested and brought to book within the soonest possible time.

Quo vadis our education system?

ABDUL MATIN

WHEN the successful students of the recent HSC examinations were jubilating on August 14, a report in The Daily Star revealed that the management committee of a high school in Rajshahi had taken Tk. 20 lakh and a plot of land as bribe for recruiting three teachers and a librarian for the school. It is alleged that the president and three members of the management committee, all activists of a political party, were involved in the deal. Moreover, the plot was registered in the name of their party leader, perhaps without her knowledge, for construction of a party office.

The three teachers got their jobs in 2011 on forged certificates of Non-Government Teachers' Registration and Certification Authority, according to an official of Rajshahi. The most interesting part of the story is that, when contacted by the reporter, one of the members of the management committee said: "Taking donations for recruiting teachers is common nowadays. There is nothing unlawful in it."

The process of recruitment of teachers by taking bribe now appears to be a regular practice and is considered to be 'legal.' Bribe and quality are incompatible. It is obvious that such teachers lack the required qualifications to teach. This explains why the standard of education has been going down in Bangladesh. According to a recent report by the Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh features in the bottom five positions among 28 Asia and Pacific countries in four categories including education.

It has also become a common practice at schools to coerce students to take coaching lessons if they want to pass or get good grades. Students are thus forced to attend coaching classes catered to pass examinations only. They hardly learn the subjects properly. In addition, there are serious allegations of frequent leaking of question papers and widespread circulation of fake educational certificates.

It has also been reported that several private universities award fake degrees, complete with transcripts, against payments without offering courses or taking examinations. As long as "chakuri banijoyo" (offer of jobs on payment) continues unabated in offices, jobs will be easily available to the fake degree holders at the cost of the deserving ones.

Corruption in education is like cancer. Slowly and steadily it destroys the backbone of a country. Sooner or later, we may not be able to stand straight. No matter how much we pride ourselves on the results of the school final examinations, corruption is badly tarnishing our image. Knowingly or unknowingly, we are even devaluing the genuine school final certificates and the university degrees with all the glittery GPAs.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

What's the recourse for demeaning the people?



CROSS TALK

HENRY David Thoreau writes that disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. Cutting through the cacophony, it skims the gravamen of the controversy brewing in this country over the National Broadcast Policy. The government is pushing the policy because it's worried about the danger of disobedience. The media are resisting because they're afraid of losing their foundation of liberty.

Anybody who wishes to understand this controversy needs to know the difference between obedience and compliance. Obedience is when one does what one is told, failing which could lead one to negative consequences. Compliance is when one agrees with the rules and follows them because it's the ethical thing to do.

Now we're ready to play on both sides of the chessboard. Why on earth is the government painstakingly reinventing the wheel? The answer is that it definitely feels the need to impose certain restrictions on the freedom of the media. It could be for a number of reasons either rooted in the past, or rutted in the present or routed in the future. But one thing is sure that the government feels it should demand obedience from the media. It wants to preempt criticism of what it has done already or is doing right now or is going to do anytime soon.

On the other side of the board, the media are thinking their own thoughts from the compliance angle. It's not sure if it's ethical that the government should interfere with their freedom of expression. Their concern is that the government's justification for the proposed policy could be as mischievous as cuddling the baby to fondle the mother. However much the information minister tries to allay their fear, the media suspect sinister conspiracies behind this initiative to muzzle their voice.

One of the questions making the rounds in public imagination is that, given many more pressing needs, what's the urgency of this particular one. Apparently, the aim of the new policy prescription is to tie up the loose ends. The information minister insists with a straight face that nothing much is going to change. He vouches the media will remain free without so much as a scratch.

The media minds aren't convinced for their own good reasons. They smell rats and, reading between the lines, find minefields of manipulations buried in the policy under its palliative pretext. They fear, given an inch, the government will take a whole yard. They're also tense lest the perfidy of the policy will give a trigger-happy government a gun in its hand so that it can interpret things to its liking and shoot down dissent.

Sigmund Freud lamented in 1933 over the progress of mankind. He said that in the Middle Ages they would have burned him and now they were content with burning his books. In the same tone of voice one can despair

over the progress we have made as an independent nation. The British subjugated us, passing their mantle to the Pakistanis. Forty-three years later our own government is grappling with the idea of rationing freedom to us.

Needless to say, censorship of any kind must be a hare-brained scheme in this day and age. Given the Internet, cable television and mobile phone penetration, nothing can be more powerful than an idea whose time will come. Surveys show that a recipient of bad news tells it to 11 other people. A dissent suppressed has every chance of spreading on the multiplier effect of words of mouth.

Censorship also has its own characteristic failure for the same inscrutable reason why telling a kid not to watch pornography further stokes his interest. Mark Twain argues that Adam didn't want the apple for the apple's sake, but wanted it because it was forbidden. He also said in good jest that if the serpent were forbidden instead, then Adam would have eaten the serpent.

The proposed National Broadcast Policy has it that anything demeaning the armed forces, law enforcement agencies and government officials, who can punish people for criminal offences, cannot be broadcast. Be that as it may, what about anything that demeans the people and their country? What's the recourse if leaders embarrass them before the rest of the world?

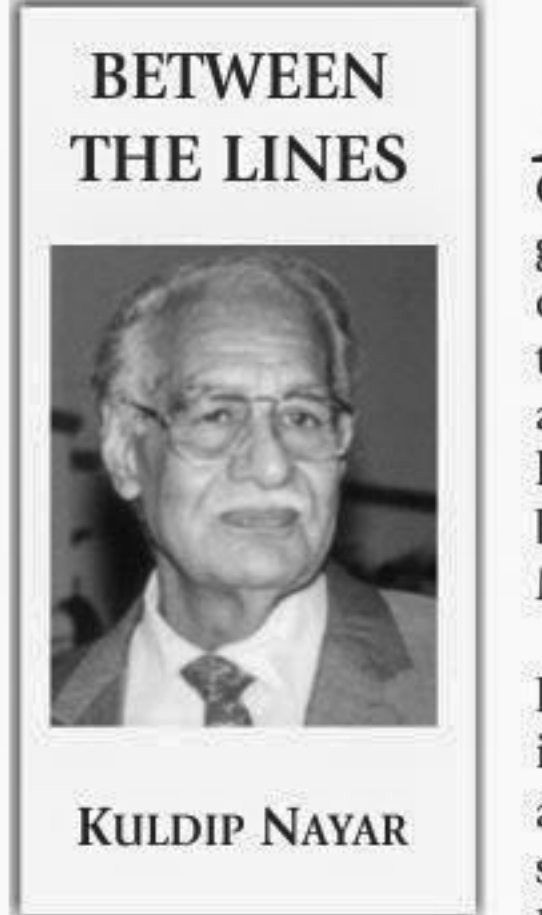
If the government goes ahead with the refurbished broadcast policy, that will be its own nemesis. It will only draw heightened criticism at home and abroad for being a repressive regime that has resorted to consolidate its illegitimate power by questionable means. In the eyes of the world, this government will make its position more untenable.

Anything that undermines democracy also undermines people, and vice versa. The world takes pity on those who aren't respected by their rulers. That brings us to what should be the most burning issue in our hearts: the dignity of our people.

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Politics of Kashmir



BETWEEN THE LINES

ARTICLE 370 is not meant to reflect the liberal tilt in the Indian Constitution. It is specific. It gives a special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir -- a status which the people of Jammu and Kashmir won after waging a long, tough fight for freedom both from the British and the Maharaja ruling the state.

Sheikh Abdullah was in the lead and achieved what looked impossible at one time, an autonomous status within the sovereign, secular Republic of India. Except three subjects -- Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications -- the Indian parliament had no power to legislate without the consent of the state legislature. The state could have merged with Pakistan, but preferred to integrate with secular India because the entire struggle by the Kashmiris was secular.

The undertakings given at that time are sacred and cannot be written off by the people who are of different thinking. The state had even adopted a separate constitution, passed to make it clear the state would not compromise on its autonomy.

Watering it down now will amount to betrayal of the confidence which the people of Jammu and Kashmir had reposed in New Delhi. If any change had to be made, it has to be done by them. The Indian Union which the state had joined cannot amend its powers without the consent of the state people.

To give more subjects to Delhi is the prerogative of Srinagar. Sheikh Abdullah joined the Union on that understanding. Some elements trying to undo the understanding accorded to the state people are neither serving the cause of India, nor that of the state. In fact, most of what is happening in Kashmir is irrelevant and confusing.

Take the meeting of some Hurriyat leaders with the Pakistan High Commissioner Basit Ali in Delhi. Such meetings had taken place in the past too. The Indian government did not raise any objection to them then because they were taken as exercises to exchange views from the sidelines.

Shabbir Shah was only following a practice of several other Kashmiri leaders. To be charitable to him, one can say that he met the Pakistan High Commissioner as he or some other leaders would have done in the past, without any furore.

The Pakistan High Commissioner, however, is to be blamed because he knew that the Narendra Modi government had discontinued such practices. In his case, New Delhi made a request not to meet the Hurriyat leaders. Despite the majority in India being opposed to the "cozy relationship," the Pakistan High Commissioner went ahead with the meeting. He should have anticipated the anger sweeping through India.

Apart from some sort of bravado, there was nothing positive about the meeting. New Delhi's policy on Kashmir is to monopolise power and dilute the special status of Kashmir. Sheikh Abdullah had kept the issue alive with some authoritarian thinking. When he challenged New Delhi, he was detained in a special jail at a

faraway Tamil Nadu for 12 years.

No doubt, Jawaharlal Nehru tried to rub off the stigma of being power crazy and put up the Sheikh at his house after the detention. But history judged Nehru as a ruthless ruler who did not spare even his intimate friends. The same thinking prevails when those who want independence are called separatists. They are wrong in projecting a demand which has acquired a fundamentalist edge. In the bargain, the secular Sheikh's contribution has been forgotten.

No doubt, the Hurriyat is a divided house. Some, led by Syed Shah Gillani, want the state to 'join' Pakistan. And the others, led by Yasin Malik, demand *azaadi*. Then there are those who are confused. Not long ago, when most Kashmiris, alienated from India as they are, favoured the integration with Pakistan, the Kashmiris would have voted for Pakistan if there had been a plebiscite. Today, a preponderant majority of Kashmiris, want *azaadi*. Yasin Malik has been able to veer them round from being pro-Pakistan elements to making them accept the demand for an independent, sovereign state.

Yet what the Hurriyat does not realize is that *azaadi* is an ideal, not a feasible proposition. When the British left India in August 1947, they gave the princely states an option to stay independently and they did not want to join either India or Pakistan. Maharaja Hari Singh, the then Jammu and Kashmir ruler, declared that he would stay independent. The land-locked state had to have the support of both India and Pakistan for access to the outside world. He did not want to depend on one.

With the Muslims in a majority in J and K, Pakistan expected its accession. When it did not take place, Pakistan sent its irregulars, backed by the regular troops. The Maharaja sought the help of India which insisted on the accession before sending its troops. He had to sign the Instrument of Accession Act.

The task of the Hurriyat is more difficult than that of the Maharaja. The two parts of the states are against *azaadi*. Jammu, the Hindu majority part, would like to join India. The Buddhist majority Ladakh, the other part, want to be a union territory of India. Therefore the demand for *azaadi* is essentially that of the valley which has nearly 98% of Muslims.

When India is in the midst of endeavour for polarisation and when a political party is playing a Hindu card, it is difficult to imagine that the Congress or any other political party, including the Communists, would support the Hurriyat. Even otherwise, all political parties are opposed to the demand for independence, although some may go to the farthest in giving powers to the state.

After 67 years of partition, the wounds inflicted because of the division have not healed yet. How does the Hurriyat expect the people in India to reconcile to another partition, however genuine and strong are the sentiments of the Kashmiris? If partition is again on the basis of religion, the secular state may not survive as it is. True, the 15 crore Muslims in India are equal citizens and they cannot be treated as hostages. But the valley's secession may have such repercussions which are dreadful to imagine. The Hurriyat has to introspect and change its tactics. It has to prove that it counts.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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It's beyond medical ethics

The public recently witnessed an inhuman drama on television. It was enacted in real life at the United Hospital in Dhaka. The hospital authorities refused to hand over the body of a person, who had died while undergoing treatment, to his relatives as they could not clear hospital dues amounting to Taka 20 lakh. Not releasing a dead body for non-payment of dues is indeed inhuman and beyond the code of medical ethics. The United Hospital could realize the dues after handing over the dead body to the relatives for his peaceful burial.

The health minister has, however, taken the issue seriously and made moves to formulate a policy to control the affairs of private hospitals.

I strongly feel that the government should take pragmatic measures to improve the quality of medical services in the government hospitals. Such measures may include raise in pays and allowances for doctors as well as the general staff. The prime minister recently talked about the introduction of health insurance in the country. I think this should be implemented as soon as possible for ensuring proper treatment of patients.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Palestinians can't coexist with Israel

"Israel doing much worse than apartheid," wrote Ted Rudow III MA, from CA, USA. (DS. Aug.18,'14) I want to say Israel has been very cleverly sponsored and protected by the United States! Why not the saner world leaders condemn the role of US when they nakedly patronize such 'apartheid'? Please find out if there is any superlative form of this word as it is not enough to describe the massacre of the innocent Palestinians.

In my view, these people don't have any justifiable reason to coexist with the Palestinians and, if the Israelis don't behave, no sane people should anymore campaign for their coexistence. It's also high time that unity among the Arab nations is encouraged and fractious Palestinian factions mended their differences.

A F Rahman
On e-mail

Meghna up for grabs?

A part of Meghna river on the left of the Daudkandi bridge on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway is being filled up with sand. The grabbing is taking place some two to three hundred meters into the river from its bank at the bridge's Daudkandi end. It seems these two to three hundred meters of the river will gradually be filled up. I would like to draw the attention of the Ministry of Environment to this act of river grabbing. Nowhere are our rivers safe in Bangladesh.

In Dhaka near the Rampura TV Station, there is a bridge on a canal. It is a wide canal, perhaps it was once a river. A large section of this canal to the west of this bridge is being filled up with sand. The city corporation may look into the matter.

Faruque Hasan
Dhaka

Comments on report, "Who said what after August 15," published on August 17, 2014

Dev Saha

It shows how shortsighted our leaders have been in the past except for Selim. Had Mujib been alive, the tune of those leaders would have been totally different. Nothing justifies murder of a first family. Bloodshed should not be a solution for political change.

Shohag Ahsan

Thanks for the report which will help to know about people around Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Zinat

Thanks for the great effort!

Saleh Md. Shahriar

These comments are the reflections of the then socioeconomic, cultural and political situations.

Rony Shawkat

Yupp...We have a complicated history. But a man is not an angel who will not make any mistake. And a man will also have friends and foes.

"Another rice variety ready for release" (August 18, 2014)

Saleh Md. Shahriar

In the context of our growing population, this is good news indeed. Food security is a global concern now.