

Repeated fires at BSEC Bhaban

Fire and safety measures must be put in place

WE are horrified that another fire incident has occurred at the BSEC building, making it the third such incident since 2007. It is a matter of great blessing that no lives were lost in the fire in a building that housed 30 organisations and lacked proper fire and safety measures. The fire-fighters and relevant authorities must be applauded for their prompt action in managing the fire and minimising loss.

However, it astounds us that even after a similar fire killed four people and injured more than 30 in 2007, the building still had only one fire exit and a staircase and no auto ventilation system, a central alarm system or sprinklers. Although there were fire extinguishers, they were unusable because of poor maintenance.

It is the responsibility of the owner as well as the employers of the organisations to ensure a safe working environment for the employees of the building. The recklessness is especially unforgivable since the owners clearly flouted the recommendations by experts that the building's fire and safety measures be strengthened after the prior casualties. BSEC is a government building and, as such, authorities should have followed proper safety protocols.

A probe committee has been formed to investigate the incident, which is laudable. However, similar committees were also formed after the last two incidents; no report, as yet, has been made public. The government should release the previous reports and ensure that the current probe takes place in an efficient manner, so we can put an end to the blame game.

Capital city in a dire strait

Unplanned urbanisation taking its toll

WITH some 4.5 million people living in urban centres around the country contributing anywhere up to 60 per cent of GDP, experts believe this contribution can go up to 75 per cent if policy measures are adopted for a planned growth of urban centres. Indeed, a national urban policy has been lying dormant since 2011, which if put into use could pave the way for a balanced development of Dhaka serving the needs of an ever-growing populace. With a demonstrative lack of local governance and numerous local municipal corporations and bodies implementing projects without proper coordination, the needs of the populace remain largely unaddressed.

Dhaka city being the premier urban centre in the country remains in the grip of unmitigated pollution of the rivers and other water bodies. With two city corporations operating more or less independent of one another, municipal services have been floundering. As pointed out by experts in a recent seminar, nearly 1.5 million cubic metres of sewage is being dumped into the water bodies through storm sewers daily without undergoing any sort of treatment. This is one major health problem for city residents.

What has come to light is that without proper administration of local bodies working in unison, balanced urban development taking into account economic development, employment generation, utilisation of land and taking care of the environment will remain a distant dream. The sustainability of the capital city may soon run into a critical state unless adequate policy measures are initiated today.

Journalists: An endangered species

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

IT was last December when the UN General Assembly proclaimed November 2 as the *International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists* while clearly condemning all attacks and violence against journalists and media workers.

Shooting, murdering, torturing, strangulating, to beating to death -- nothing could deter them from doing their job: journalism. The heart-rending reality is that, according to The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPI) report, in the past 10 years at least 370 journalists have been murdered in direct retaliation for their work globally. The majority among these were local journalists reporting on corruption, crime, human rights, politics or war. And even more heart-rending is that very few were convicted or arrested for the killing of these journalists. The death toll, according to the UN, has crossed 700. But the million dollar question is how and why are the killers of journalists getting away with impunity?

Sadly, lack of justice continues to beset press freedom across the globe. Not only that, the governments have repeatedly failed to take consequential action, and also failed to reduce the number of attacks targeted against journalists.

The CPI report titled, *"The road to justice: breaking the cycle of impunity in the killing of journalists"*, says that unsolved murder of journalists, who seek to inform their societies and the world, is one of the greatest threats to press freedom today. This inconceivable reminds us of the unsolved murder of Sagar and Runi.

But can only a proclamation made on a specific day, deter the killers?

Appropriately, the UN General Assembly had adopted a resolution to put an end to the impunity factor but then again it is up to the member states to implement it. And what if the legal process of a member state is incapable of protecting its journalists? What if law enforcement agencies are found incompetent, in terms of identifying and catching the culprit? Finally, what would be the fate of those unsolved cases?

Not that killing of journalists was not condemned before and is something new. But the commitment to protect their lives, rights and freedom to operate will have to be guaranteed by the UN member states individually. The state should be held accountable for each and every death that occurs within its territory. If that does not happen, then the resolution will be of little value.

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When modern slavery persists

SUNDAY
POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

THERE was a disturbing op-ed article in the *New York Times* last week written by one Lipika Pelham. She speaks about modern slavery in Bangladesh. Referring to more than 170 men, who were mostly Bangladeshi, recently rescued from human traffickers in the jungles of Thailand, she describes their ordeal. They were offered jobs and when they turned up "they were drugged, tied up and dragged onto boats, beaten and starved." Their tale was horrendous and outrageous. How could citizens of a free and democratic country, which is galloping ahead consistently at 6% economic growth for a decade, be forcibly taken as bonded labour to a foreign country? It seemed quite implausible but it was true.

Such fate does await many of our countrymen who venture for employment abroad. Reports have it that many of our women who went to work as domestic help in



several Middle Eastern countries had also suffered and were enslaved. However, this is not the case only for those who went abroad seeking menial jobs. In the country, many unfortunate women and children who sought similar employment were also treated most inhumanly by some of our own citizens and lived in slave-like conditions.

Several non-government organisations have collected information that such slaves are paid a pittance for their long hours of work, often in unhygienic conditions, as house servants. They do the bidding of their masters and mistresses in spite of being physically and mentally abused. They have no one to complain to and lead miserable lives till they are able to escape. It is a shocking indictment when their state is described by a Save the Children functionary as "inside the room, outside the law." Newspapers and the electronic media often report when, out of desperation, such victims of slavery commit suicide.

There are several circumstances that lead women and children to opt for employment in households where they are meted out degrading treatment. It could be that the families from which the victims come are heavily indebted to the receiving family, or due to extreme poverty the children are often given to such families for mere sustenance in lieu of domestic work. They, therefore, become

bonded workers. This is quite common in the shrimp and tea growing areas of Bangladesh. In other cases, poor guardians of children give them in marriage to those who are well off. Child marriages often result in slave-like treatment of the victims.

Before we dwell further on what is happening inside our country, it may be relevant to know what is taking place in other parts of the world, especially in other Asian countries. It is common knowledge that slavery did not end with its abolition in the last century. It exists for millions of people throughout the world. A global slavery index has, therefore, been compiled by an Australia-based rights organisation called 'Walk free Foundation.' It lists 162 countries where 30 million people are in bondage. Modern slavery is defined by it as debt bondage, forced marriages and human trafficking. 21 million of such people are victims of forced labour. Bangladesh, according to this index, has the 10th largest number of slaves (3 lakhs). However, in South Asia, India, Pakistan and Nepal have large number of slaves too. India has the largest number in the world (14 million) followed by China (3 million) and Pakistan (2.1 million). Other countries which have large numbers are Nigeria, Russia, Thailand, Congo and Myanmar. In Bangladesh, women, children, the poor, the illiterate and internally displaced persons due to climate change and river erosion constitute the largest segment of such modern slaves.

The big question is, has our government taken any step to check the spread of modern slavery? There are reports that the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006, Women Development Policy of 2011, Child Labor Elimination Policy of 2012 have been significant steps to contain the practice of modern slavery. The government has also ratified all important international treaties related to slavery except the Palermo Protocols. It is now crucial that we ratify the Palermo Protocols and the Rules for 2012 Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act. The government also needs to sign bilateral agreements with governments of destination countries to safeguard Bangladeshi migrant workers.

It must be remembered that modern slavery in any country is also related to corruption and human development in those countries. Poverty is also responsible for increasing the risk of enslavement of the vulnerable population. Access to financial services also determines the spread of modern slavery. When it is difficult to get access to legal sources of credit, the poor will mortgage their own lives, leading to slavery. The government must look into all these factors and craft a comprehensive plan to address the scourge of slavery. Such a plan should be part of every political party's election manifesto too. The people of Bangladesh, in the struggle for emancipation in 1971, did not want to remain in bondage to anyone both within and outside the country.

No political programme of any political party is worth the paper it is written on unless it ensures the end of modern slavery. We cannot suffer from such ignominy in the future.

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Romila Thapar speaks out

PRAFUL BIDWAI
COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

WHEN BJP leader L.K. Advani said of the Indian media during the Emergency that "when asked to bend, they crawled," he rightly received widespread praise from the secular intelligentsia.

Today, not just the media, but leaders in education, culture, healthcare and law, are crawling before the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh without even being asked to bend. They include the University Grants Commission chairman, Delhi University vice-chancellor, and many serving and former bureaucrats.

These were among the 60 luminaries who met RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat over lunch on October 12. Reports say some tried to ingratiate themselves to the head of an organisation which spawned the BJP -- an act unworthy of their positions.

Sangh Parivar functionaries are trying to radically reorganise government programmes and have held two long, structured meetings with ministers. They want to purge textbooks of secularist "misrepresentations." Delhi University's Sanskrit department, which lacks expertise in history, is demanding that history textbooks show that the Aryans were indigenous to India, and not migrants, as most historians believe.

Media articles are appearing glorifying a fiction called "Vedic mathematics," based on a 1965 book by Bharati Krishna Tirtha, which provides no evidence that his *sutras* (formulas) exist in the Vedas.

Meanwhile, there are strident calls for banning/burning books that advance non-Hindutva views. Fanatics are rampaging through colleges, bookshops, theatres, art-galleries and cinema-halls. Everything from political belief, cultural identity to personal morality is being targeted in hysterical campaigns; dissenters are branded "un-Indian."

Intolerance for the right to dissent, palpable in all regions, is now backed by the BJP. Other parties, including the Congress, regional outfits, or even the Left, also don't fully respect the right.

However, they aren't as viscerally and viciously anti-dissent as the BJP/Sangh Parivar. This is in keeping with the profoundly undemocratic culture of the RSS, which long ago discarded the "cumbersome clap-trap of internal democracy" and embraced *Ek-Chalok-Anuvartitva* (unquestioningly following a single leader).

Yet, the right to dissent and express dissenting views is at the core not just of democracy -- without which it would become a despotic majoritarian system -- but of knowledge production itself. Without dissent, there can be no progress in the natural or social sciences, and no dissemination of knowledge through education, dialogue and public debate.

Professor Romila Thapar, one of India's greatest historians and internationally respected scholars, emphasised this theme in her third Nikhil Chakravarty Memorial Lecture on October 26 in Delhi. The other two lectures were delivered by economist-philosopher Amartya Sen and eminent British historian E.J. Hobsbawm.

Chakravarty was a doyen among India's post-Independence journalists, who edited the weekly *Mainstream*. He was long a Communist Party of India member. Yet, he sharply criticised the Emergency -- which

the CPI then backed -- and had to shut down *Mainstream* temporarily.

Thapar's lecture was a tour de force covering many epochs and continents. It was at once a rigorous, scholarly analysis of the evolution of critical intellectual traditions over 2,000-plus years, and a passionate appeal to reason and the spirit of questioning authority.

Thapar traced the relationship between dissidence and science from Socrates and Galileo in the West to the Buddha and Charvaka schools in India, and showed that scientific principles and methods were common to all civilisations, from Athens and Arabia, to India and China.

In South Asia, we had the Buddha espousing agnosticism, and many materialist schools which questioned *karma* and the immortality of the *atman* (soul), and spurned Vedic rituals.

If Aryabhata hadn't opposed contemporary royal astrologers, he wouldn't have been able to show -- a thousand years before Galileo -- that the earth goes around the sun. The key to this lay in the primacy he gave to logic and rationality, not faith or religious dogma.

The method was to postulate a hypothesis linking observed phenomena to their causes, and test it through experiments; the results would be tested against future observations and refined to establish scientific laws.

Thapar showed that rational thinking and logical explanation were always opposed by religious bigots. Buddhist ideas were described in Brahminical orthodoxy as "delusional," and different schools like Charvakas, Ajivikas, atheists, materialists and rationalists, were all lumped into "one category -- *nastikas*."

Thapar says this reminds her of "the Hindutvavadis of today for whom anyone and everyone who does not support them are Marxists!"

Numerous streams of thought coexisted in ancient and medieval India, which "questioned beliefs and practices upheld by religious authorities." They included women like "Andal, Akka Mahadevi and Mira, flouting caste norms ..." Amir Khusrau is best known as a poet-composer, but he also studied astronomy; his sun-centric universe "distanced him from orthodox Islam."

Later came social reformers with modern-liberal progressive values, like Ram Mohun Roy, Phule, Periyar, Syed Ahmed Khan and Ambedkar. Indian society has since been undergoing major changes, which need "insightful ways of understanding" social and economic conditions and relate them to culture and politics.

Public intellectuals are needed to explore these connections and "to articulate the traditions of rational thought in our intellectual heritage." Thapar said there are "many specialists in various professions, but many... are unconcerned with the world beyond their own specialisation." These professionals are not identical with public intellectuals -- because "most prefer not to confront authority even if it debars the path of free thought."

Public intellectuals must take positions fiercely independent of power, and question received wisdom. In addition to possessing a professional status, they must have a concern for citizens' rights, particularly "issues of social justice," and be ready "to raise these matters as public policy."

Thapar ended with an analysis of why India's public intellectuals are in decline and what they can do to become more effective. She didn't speak a day too soon.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Modi's clean India drive:

Lesson for us

We have come to know from the media reports that Indian PM Narendra Modi has started a mission named 'Clean India'. We have also seen pictures in which he has taken a broom in his own hand to sweep up rubbish in a Delhi neighbourhood. It's everyone's duty to keep his/her country clean. But it is unfortunate that we, the Bangladeshis, are quite indifferent towards cleaning our surroundings. We throw wastes everywhere: on roads, inside public vehicles, you name it. Even the Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban premises are not always kept clean. As I walked past the area the other day, I noticed that the walkway was littered with garbage (polythene, packets of chips and biscuits, tissues, etc). Our parliament building is a masterpiece of modern architecture. We should at least keep its premises neat and clean.

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Health benefits of curd and yoghurt

Both curd and yoghurt are good for health. Both are milk products created by fermenting milk -- yoghurt by fermenting milk using bacteria while curd by curdling milk with an edible acidic



substance such as lemon juice or vinegar. Curd and yoghurt contain vitamins and minerals including calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium etc. They are high in probiotics. Probiotics are bacteria that help keep the natural balance of organisms (micro flora) in the intestines.

Those who cannot tolerate normal milk can take curd or yoghurt. These dairy products can be prepared at home. Nowadays a lot of probiotics preparation is available in the market but curd or yoghurt is much better than those.

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US's double standard on human rights

The UN resolution 64/292 openly acknowledged the human right to water and sanitation. The so-called human rights champion and the world super power US is violating the human rights of its citizens in Michigan, shutting off the water lines for those who are unable to pay their water bills on time. This is a preposterous act of Detroit Water and Sewerage Authority. "It is contrary to human rights to disconnect water from people who simply do not have the means to pay their bills," according to Ms. De Albuquerque, UN special rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. You can learn more about the issue on the following links: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-29697767> and <http://voiceofdetroit.net/2014/10/26/we-charge-genocide-detroit-water-shutoffs-foreclosures-focus-of-un-visit>.

The super power has been spending billions of dollars on indefinite wars, which only benefit the corporate interest of the US arms manufacturers, while it is ignoring the suffering of its own people who have been living in an impoverished condition after the 2008 financial meltdown.

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Comments on news report, "Death for death designer," published on October 30, 2014

Earth Light

This death row convict deserves death with maximum pain and suffering which he and his men inflicted upon millions of four innocent people.

"Death of war crimes mastermind" (Oct. 28, 2014)

A freedom fighter

A very realistic piece. You may criticise AL for its many lapses in governance, but only the AL will continue the trials of war criminals.

"Operated like Gestapo" (Oct. 30, 2014)

Earth Light

The verdict should be carried out as early as possible. Hanging does not seem enough for the Rajakar ringleader.