

A rent seeking policeman!

This is not an isolated case

THE horrific experience of an assistant director of the central bank, picked up by a sub-inspector and his cohorts and tortured inside a police vehicle, is a chilling example of what can happen when upholders of the law become lawbreakers. The victim was beaten up and threatened with a false drug case and death by 'crossfire'.

What is more frightening is that this incident is only the tip of the iceberg – we suspect there may be many such stories of errant policemen extorting money from ordinary citizens. Allegations of false cases being imposed on ordinary citizens and threats of dire consequences by lawless law enforcers have been frequent in recent times with only a few of them being punished for their crimes. The banker's ordeal became a news story possibly because he was a high ranking public official and the publicity of the incident in social media. We shudder to think what the fate of those who do not have the same status could be. According to a news report, an eyewitness has related how a young man had recently been picked up by police in their van from the same area and later released after paying a TK 1,500 bribe.

We urge the police authorities to carry out a quick, thorough investigation into this incident and make sure that the policeman, who has disgraced his uniform and organisation he works for, is punished according to the law of the land. It is graver when the keepers of the law break the law than when criminals do so.

Massive gridlock in city

Can't something be done to lessen the pain?

A few days ago we had commented on the unmitigated pain inflicted on the commuters of Dhaka city when the Chhatra League organised a rally to commemorate its founding. Similar pain was wreaked on them on January 11.

The homecoming of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is a memorable day in the history of independent Bangladesh. The significance of the day is immense and there is need to commemorate it in a befitting manner, but we fail to see why steps were not taken to ensure that the city was not brought to its knees with unbearable tailbacks. Thousands of commuters were forced to sit in their vehicles for hours on end since ruling party activists brought out massive rallies from their respective localities to march to the meeting venue. Sadly, patients had to suffer the most. Not only that, we found VIP movement using the wrong side of the road while Dhaka residents were forced to suffer massive gridlocks in many parts of the city.

This phenomenon is not new. Every time an important event is commemorated, we find the police failing to check the unauthorised movement of rallies on busy roads of Dhaka. The January 5 rallies were held with many conditions, we wonder where were these conditions on January 11? Do people have to go to the rally in processions occupying all busy roads leading up to the meeting venue?

There will be other major events unfolding on a regular basis in the capital and we call upon the authorities to take concrete measures like earmarking a portion of the road for processions, if at all.

Cow is a four-legged animal



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

LONG ago, an essay on cow was the easiest challenge of a primary examination. We were always given hints on what to write in case we chose to attempt such a "common" essay. The most obvious first line defined a cow: "A cow is a four-legged animal." Many of us, who were a little ambitious with exam scores, would always shy away from such easy baits. Somehow, we were taught not to be regular or predictable. We were taught to score more with writing essays on topics that were a little more challenging. Young children, by habit, get tired of prompted repetitions. Young children, by habit want to soar to the skies. Adults, unfortunately, choose the easiest option and indulge in cycles of bad practices that ultimately harm both the public and the private.

In a television channel day before yesterday, when the anchor and the guest kept on asking a politician why the whole city had to come to a halt because of a grand rally, the gentleman perhaps remembered his childhood mantra of the cow being a four-legged animal while answering, "You can define suffering in many ways. Think about 1971. Think about how the people suffered when the Pakistanis tortured us." At one point, both the anchor and the guest were infuriated. Right then the gentleman started defending the traffic chaos saying, "But you are trying to undermine the spirit of January 10." The anchor then reminded the politician that January 10 was certainly not to be forgotten. January 10 is a day covered in the media with highest honour. The congestion that happened because of VIPs going to the rally has nothing to do with putting January 10 down. Finally, much to our satisfaction, good sense prevailed and the politician ended up apologising to the audience for having suffered the whole day.

On the ground, while the honourable Prime Minister was being taken to the venue from the wrong side, the other side too, was at a standstill. And I was "only" two and half-hours late for a meeting. Instead of reaching at 2:30, I reached at 5:00 pm. Luckily I was pardoned. On a separate occasion, just the other day I heard a very senior person associated with the law saying that he always chose the wrong side to go to court. My jaws dropped in surprise a little more when he proudly justified his action by saying that his time mattered and that he could not

afford "not to be on schedule". I shuddered at his audacity. Why would he, for even one second, think that his time was precious than the rest of ours? Very unfortunately, this is how atrocious egos surface with power while the wrath of the real people go unnoticed. While VIPs clear roads and blow their sirens, and go from the other side, does it ever occur to the authorities that the challenges of the next elections are just around the corner? Does this ever occur to the authorities that the VIPs need to remember that one cannot ride the opposite stream for long?

Just when it was time for everyone to talk about how ineffective Arvind Kejriwal was, he started the odd-even experiment for Delhi for 15 days; the drive to alternate between the odd and even numbers was supposed to be effective in controlling air pollution. Ten days into the 15-day experiment, the air quality monitors have indicated that not much has improved. But though nothing may have changed, the simple visibility has gotten better and at the same time, the Delhi courts are themselves banning diesel engines outright. This experiment was only possible because of Delhi authorities launching 6000 new buses.

Delhi has done this to clean their air, while we must do this to clean our streets. There cannot be 200 new cars registering every day; there cannot be party supporters riding on horse carts, elephants and various other transportation to attend rallies; there

cannot be a full city coming to a halt just because of a lack of planning or public transport.

Therefore, in public interest, your columnist humbly suggests that there must only be a designated space to be demarcated by a rope or light fence, so that the procession or the rally cannot occupy the entire street and completely halt transport; the VIPs must not be allowed to use streets from the wrong side, ever; the sirens, whistle et al. must be banned; the VIPs must kindly make sure that they plan way ahead of their time and start off early, so that they can reach their destination on time and don't demean the public, who also have appointments to keep and places to go to. And last but not the least, apart from the honourable prime minister and the honourable president, no exceptions should kindly be made for anyone to bypass the laws of the streets.

At a time when stats, facts and figures are all on the government's favour, at a time when the city is also starting to look better with a bit of a cleansing drive, perhaps it's the right time to brand the ruling party better with the right initiatives and the right actions on the streets. While the honourable PM may not have known that the traffic gridlock was created only because of the prioritised transport of the VIPs, and had probably thought that the traffic was a sign of affluence of the people of Dhaka having more cars, it's essential for people close to the centre of governance

to convey the right message.

With so many achievements, the government cannot afford to lose popular support just because the number of VIPs in town has increased and just because many of them feel entitled to cross lines that are majorly defined by the public and are indicative of public displeasure. Let us all remember that with every validation comes the risk of a subsequent controversy and with every achievement runs the threat of critique. A traffic gridlock for a public gathering that belongs to the "public" cannot run contrary to public interest. A rally cannot only belong to the political people. Since Bangabandhu belongs to the nation, a procession on behalf of him have been more appropriate. And in all honesty, had it been over a weekend and had the public given an advance call, just to honour this great man, just for him, many of us would have happily walked miles.

But resorting to the cow essay format is not the answer; referencing to 1971 for a traffic gridlock is not fair. There's only a limit to being defensive. After a point, the line of acceptance begins to fade and the bold stature marked in red with pride begins to wane. With so many trophies to flaunt, the current government cannot afford to lose any ground because of the greed and the callousness of a few.

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A fifteen-year-old wait



THE SOUND & THE FURY

SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

FIFTEEN years is a long time to wait for justice, to hope for it. Fifteen years is a long time for a country to deny its people reparation, peace of mind, a feeling of belonging. It is a long time for one political party to get away with orchestrated violence, and for another, to reap the spoils of it, using it as "bait" to win elections.

Fifteen years is a long time to cling on to the aspiration of a pluralist Bangladesh.

Fifteen years and we seem to have all but forgotten that, in 2001, right after the BNP-Jamaat alliance came to power, there was a systematic backlash against the Hindu community, who are generally thought to be the "vote bank" of the Awami League. In the worst incidents of communal violence in independent Bangladesh, tens of thousands of Hindu households were rampaged and their property looted, temples were desecrated and set on fire, Hindus were mentally and physically assaulted, even murdered, and Hindu women were raped all around the country. The worst affected areas were in Barisal, Bhola, parts of Pirojpur, Khulna, Satkhira, Gopalganj, Bagerhat, Jessore, Comilla and Narsingdi. Hundreds of Hindu families, fearing further attacks, fled across the border into India. Not surprisingly, many of them have not returned, too afraid to come back to the country that never quite thought of them as its own.

According to eye-witness accounts, media reports at the time and field investigations of different rights-groups and concerned individuals, the attackers were mostly supporters of the BNP-Jamaat alliance. The complicity of the law enforcement agencies and local administration were, in many cases, explicit, and in others, implicit.

Predictably enough, the then government not only denied its own involvement in the violence, but also that such incidents had taken place. The Home Minister at the time, Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, even claimed that the attacks were "baseless, exaggerated and politically motivated". In the face of widespread national and international outcry, the government was forced to admit that

some incidents of violence had taken place, but made no comments about its scale or name the perpetrators.

On November 8, Khaleda Zia formed a secretarial committee to investigate the attacks on members of the minority community across the country and report within a week. It was, however, not an independent committee, for it was headed by Kamaluddin Siddiqui, the principal secretary to the Prime Minister, and supervised by the Home Minister himself – a man who, interestingly enough, was named as a perpetrator of violence in the judicial commission probe in 2011.

With the government itself disavowing the extent of the violence, it is hardly a surprise that not much progress was made in ensuring justice for the victims during the BNP regime. In many cases, the perpetrators were protected by their privilege, access to and power over local administration, which meant that even if and when cases were filed, investigations took place in a thoroughly biased manner (if they took place at all, that is). Many rights organisations, too, backed off from filing cases on behalf of the victims for fear of backlash against them; they were also afraid that if they filed cases under the ruling government, the verdicts would go against the victims.

What is surprising, however, is the lack of any real attention the issue has garnered since the BNP regime. Sure, the AL has been all too apt to point fingers at the BNP-Jamaat for perpetrating the post-election violence when it suits their agenda – and to highlight themselves as a pro-minority party to garner votes – but seven years on, how close are we to bringing the criminals to justice in a systematic manner?

In 2009, the High Court ordered the government to form a commission and launch an inquiry into the violence after the 2001 general elections. The victims of the crimes, their family members and witnesses gave depositions to the commission, which found the involvement of 26,352 people, including 25 ministers and lawmakers of the previous BNP-Jamaat alliance government, in the 2001 post-polls violence. The report, however, was never made public, despite repeated appeals from vested quarters.

According to media reports, the commission recommended bringing the people involved in post-polls violence in 2001 under trial, filing cases against the accused and restoring the cases

withdrawn in political consideration. The judicial commission also recommended the formation of short-term investigation committees or investigation commissions at district level involving additional district magistrate, additional police and an executive magistrate to investigate the incidents of political violence and attacks on minority communities, and setting up a monitoring cell at the Home Ministry to coordinate the tasks of the probe bodies. Unfortunately, none of these recommendations have thus far been implemented.

Seven months after the commission filed its report in April 2011, the then Home Minister Sahara Khatun briefed reporters about the findings. She stated

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that the government would help victims file lawsuits against people alleged to have been involved in the crimes. If the victims were afraid to file the cases, the government would do so on their behalf. She also promised to help the victims financially according to government capacity, as the report had stated that many victims had sought financial help from it.

These were laudable promises, no doubt, and if fulfilled, could go a long way towards ensuring some form of reparation to the aggrieved community. Better late than never, after all. Unfortunately, however, these promises got buried under that never-ending list of pledges made by the government to its people... buried deep and deeper still

under lofty promises of bringing peace and order, restoring democracy, ensuring social justice, protecting human rights...

Then came another [threat of an] election, and with it, another series of attacks on the Hindu community. The AL lost no time in capitalising on the violence against minorities; it helped sell their image as the secular party, after all. Even if we hold BNP-Jamaat to blame (for there were allegations to the contrary), why, we wonder, did the government fail to give due protection to the minority communities this time, given that they had ample notice that Hindus might come under attack, and when the Chief Election Commissioner himself had assured, shortly after the election schedule was published in November 2013, that there would be no repetition of the 2001 atrocities? And beyond the inevitable political blame-game, how many cases were filed and investigations conducted in a free and fair manner? What efforts were given to rebuild the confidence of the affected communities?

With the AL in power, it was hoped that violence against minority communities would go down significantly. It is distressing to see perpetrators of communal violence being given free reign during its regime, and land grabbing of Hindus and associated violence going on unabated in many parts of the country, allegedly under the patronage of AL-backed cadres and local elites. It is easy enough to blame the BNP-Jamaat for all atrocities against the Hindus, and easier still, for "secular" and "pro-minority" party men to hide under the AL's cloak of so-called pluralism.

Fifteen years of disavowal and delayed promises later, we must confront the uncomfortable truth that beyond paying lip-service to the "ideals of secularism and tolerance" (if that!), we have done precious little to show we care about the Hindu population of this country, be it through our everyday practices or institutional structures. The statistics speak for themselves: from 25 percent of the total population in 1971, Hindus are now down to just 9.2 percent. If we cannot end the culture of guaranteed impunity to land grabbers, rapists and instigators of violence, and challenge the normalisation of violence and discrimination against Hindus, we may as well admit that the idea of a pluralist Bangladesh is a fantasy at best and a farce at worst.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Sexism or racism?

Chris Gayle, the batting sensation in the T20 arena, has been accused of harassing a TV reporter, that too on a live interview session during the ongoing match between Melbourne Renegades and Hobart Hurricanes. At one stage during the interview, Chris Gayle asked the Channel Ten presenter out for a drink. After the incident the 36-year-old cricketer has been receiving worldwide criticism for his inappropriate comments. Many former Australian cricketers are terming it as "sheer misconduct" and "workplace harassment." However, Chris Gayle did apologise to the TV sports journalist Mel



McLaughlin and she subsequently accepted the apology.

What started out as a simple joke suddenly created a massive stir on social media. Cricket Australia, all in all, is exaggerating the entire matter and making it look more complicated every day despite the fact that Chris Gayle did offer a formal apology and Mel later accepted the apology. It would be fair to say that the issue has reached an amicable settlement. Prolonging this topic unnecessarily and creating trouble for the Jamaican all-rounder stems from Australia's long history of being racist.

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