

Another minor gang-raped

Address the causes, punish the rapists

A GAIN a teenaged girl has been gang-raped, this time in Dakshin Khan area of Dhaka. It is reassuring that the police have arrested five youths who are suspects in the gang-rape of the 16-year-old school girl. But the rising incidence of rape and gang-rape of young girls and women leaves us with a feeling of helplessness and unease. Last year, according to Ain O Shalish Kendra, 846 rapes were reported with 60 of the victims dying as a result of the rape. Of the victims, 163 were between 7 and 12-years-old.

These chilling statistics plus the latest incident indicate a frightening rise of sexual violence against women and girls. In many of the cases, the rapists are known faces. In the Dakshin Khan case, at least one of the rapists was a friend of the girl who lured her into a flat and then raped her along with his friends.

But all this points to a society where basic moral values are corroding and where the legal system is not particularly conducive to getting prompt redress. More importantly the way victims of rape are treated while filing cases, especially during medical examinations, adds to their trauma.

It goes without saying that we must address many of the factors leading to such sexual violence. Law enforcers must be trained to deal with such cases with utmost sensitivity and the system must ensure that rapists do not go scot free with money and influence. It is equally important to inculcate respect for girls and women among our youth along with stringent enforcement of the law.

Overloaded vehicles on bridges

Disasters waiting to happen

THE collapse of the Bailey bridge, under the weight of an overloaded truck, over the Kansama Canal in Bandarban speaks volumes about the sorry state of the bridge management system of the country. What can we expect a temporary bridge with a load capacity of only five tonnes to do except collapse when vehicles with heavier loads drive on it?

Lately, we have seen a plethora of reports of small bridges failing due to various reasons in different parts of the country. In this particular case, however, the primary cause seems not to be sloppy maintenance or deviation from design standards but exceptional stress or overload, something that can be avoided with enforcement of laws.

Each bridge presents complicated factors that must be taken into consideration, such as the geology of the surrounding area, the amount of traffic, weather and construction materials. When any of these factors are miscalculated, the result can be tragic, as in the case in Bandarban.

Building bridges are among the most massive and expensive engineering projects and not arresting conditions that lead to their premature destruction is an unacceptable waste of taxpayers' money. A survey of all the bridges of the country should be conducted and provisions made for their repair and maintenance. Monitoring devices should be installed to record stresses on bridges.

But first and foremost, signs clearly stating the maximum weight a vehicle can carry should be posted near every bridge and owners and drivers of vehicles violating the instructions must face the full force of relevant laws.

A bizarre saga

AKHTAR SHAH

LITTLE did I expect to come across such furore over a news item in Dhaka on a short trip on my way to China. It felt surreal, a reflection by an editor expressing his regret of publishing some "suspect information" that took place some nine years ago had resulted in an avalanche of litigations of sedition/defamation with damages sought in telephone number proportions.

I wonder if the editor himself reckoned on a "Hadron Collider" of a reaction to be the fall out! I started to dig and what did I find? No one, including the editor of The Daily Star, had any means of corroborating the "missives" handed out to them. This practice of "disinformation" is culturally hardwired into the psyche and is used frequently (past and present).

He quite possibly had an opportunity of not joining the herd at the time. Mr. Anam candidly explained that one or two papers had not published such items of let's say, 'mischievous' bulletins. Times were difficult and movers and shakers at the time had their own agenda which they kept close to their chests.

Questions have arisen about the timing of this "admission". Putting aside my crystal ball gazing findings, it's quite plausible that the editor had been in a reflective mood due to the 25th anniversary of the paper and thought of unburdening himself of this conscience-pricking act of the past. He appears to have had nothing to gain from a specific timing of such an admission. It is clearly a 'non argument' when questions were raised by certain quarters about the elapsed period of silence; these are attempts to simply vilify the person by people sans logical objectivity.

It's abundantly clear that the TDS editor certainly didn't expect such a reaction of seeking an "impeachment" of the editor by some ruling party activists acting in the manner of the judge, jury and executioner.

The significant achievements of the government and its leadership are unnecessarily put in a questionable place. Holding a national daily and its editor in such hatred and animosity can hardly be seen as civil.

One can only hope that good sense will prevail and the powers that be would put an end to this extremely sad saga of retaliation, disunity and bad blood.

The writer is a British entrepreneur of Bangladesh origin.

Why raise fares?



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

BANGLADESH Railway has hiked its fares by a little over seven percent. The regular hikes in fares have been justified since 2012 on the promise to improve the quality of service, which sadly has not been forthcoming. Then again, we are told that the railway needs to cut down on annual losses of about Tk. 1000 crores per annum and fares need to be adjusted upwards to cover operational costs. But if we delve deeper into the issue, we find that losses suffered by railway have little to do with subsidised fares railway suffer from.

As pointed out in an article in the *Financial Express* on January 25, 2016, there is much to be done in providing enough rail carriages to meet current and growing demand. "A glaring example of the demand-supply mismatch is the mad rush for rail tickets during Eid time. Even after spending the whole night in the station, many passengers fail to avail their tickets due to the shortage of supply. The poor capacity of the railway to meet the passengers' demand also reflects the urgent need of modernisation and upgradation of rail operation." The poor quality of services on board trains are nothing new and appear to have been going downhill over time. A recent overnight trip to Chittagong by this writer on the AC Coach Service revealed some very interesting facts. First, the train made several stops between stations to pick up unauthorised passengers who would be making the journey either standing up or sitting on the non-1st class coaches and corridors. The situation made walking quite impossible from our coach to the diner and vice versa. It is best not to talk about the toilets, while rodents and roaches travel with people all the time, or so we hear. This of course is one firsthand account of a journey taken of late.

Recent surveys by various organisations like the Passenger Welfare Association of Bangladesh (PWAB) have revealed various anomalies. For instance, the ticketing system is rigged in such a manner that one cannot get tickets during peak times which allows for a section of staff to make tickets available by paying a little "extra". The seats of

coaches, other than the AC ones, are rundown to the point of either being broken or have seat cushioning that is damaged. Toilets are often without lights, and carriages are poorly lit. There is often no running water in the toilets and the latrines are so ill-maintained that using them in the first place requires nerves of steel.

One of the basic realities of state-owned enterprises is the rampant graft that is allowed to flourish due to poor state of governance. Railway has suffered from such systemic problems for years.

that the service had lost more than Tk. 700 million due to irregularities. Despite such damning evidence unearthed by the government's own watchdog bodies, there have been no disciplinary actions against officials, which in essence merely help perpetuate the system of graft.

If railway is truly to become a mainstay in our transportation system, we need to do something about ensuring its good governance. Mere hiking of fares will do little to allay the problems faced by railway. Authorities need to go after recovery of occupied lands and other

point whereby the service has become inoperable in about 100 stations; railway tracks are worn out causing derailment and there accidents are increasing because the service suffers from inadequate staffing.

Instead of raising fares, authorities should focus on increasing revenue by other means. Why not introduce more freight trains from the port city of Chittagong to Dhaka and vice versa? Why not work out the bugs with the ticketing system and make a serious attempt at improving passengers' comfort on the



PHOTO: STAR

Indeed they come to surface from the various audit reports conducted by the government itself. For instance an audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Audit General on land management and recovery of license fees covering three financial years (FY08-FY10) found non-recovery of compensation from the various government organisations, non-realisation of license fees for using land belonging to railway and the illegal occupancy of railway land. Other irregularities have been found in procurement of development works. This report covered a six year period, 2001-2007, found

assets which on paper, is owned by railway, but to which it no longer has access. There is serious need to be more prudent in quality implementation of the budget allocated to the service in the national budget. At the end of the day, one simply cannot discount the importance of railway as an essential mode of mass transportation dedicated to the movement of bulk goods and people. No other mode of transportation is as safe or as economical as railway. Yet, our railway continues to sputter along on an infrastructure that is dilapidated to the

journey so that more people can avail the service. Why not introduce more shuttle services to adjoining districts so that people can come to Dhaka to work and go back in the evenings which would also help reduce over-congestion of people and traffic in the city? Such measures would go a long way to help recuperate the annual losses faced by railway. They would also help transform an essential service into a meaningful service that bears dividends to commuters.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Will we one day reunite as 'Akhand Bharat'?

Muhammad Azizul Haque

INDIA'S ruling BJP's General Secretary, Mr. Ram Madhav, recently said in an interview to Al Jazeera that the RSS, his core organisation, still believes that one day Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, "which have for historical reasons separated only 60 years ago, will again, through popular goodwill, come together and 'Akhand Bharat' will be created". The idea of Akhand Bharat is a dream of the RSS, and of the BJP, which is a right-wing party with close ideological and organisational links to the former, and of other Hindutvadi organisations and their adherents. I am not going to speak for Pakistan. But, whether future generations of Bangladeshis will reunite their country with India will depend fully on those generations that are probably yet to be born.

If we recall history, we see that despite innumerable attempts by the Muslims of the unpartitioned India, they failed to ensure and protect their politico-economic, socio-religious, cultural and other rights in the midst of the overwhelming Hindu majority population, and under the 27-month-long Congress rule following the general election of 1937. In every Hindu majority province, the Muslims were victims of serious riots and oppression.

A separate State was not in the minds of the Muslims at the beginning. But the Congress' intransigent opposition to any measure by the British Government aimed at benefiting the minority Muslim population – like the 1905 partition of Bengal, grant of separate electorate for the Muslims, giving power to the Muslims in those provinces where they were in majority – compelled them to

demand a separate homeland. The Congress repudiated all British government plans that stipulated power-sharing with the Muslim League – the party that at those times epitomised the aspirations of almost all Muslims of India.

Have the basics of the Hindu-Muslim relations changed in India over the last 68 years? One proof that they have not changed much is the fact that right-wing Hindutvadi cultural and political organisations such as the Hindu Mahasabha, RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, BJP, etc., that envision India as a Hindu country, still wield enormous popular support and influence. In effect, they regard Muslims as outsiders. Even after about 70 years of existence of the democratic and constitutionally secular India, Muslims are killed there for eating beef. The Muslims in India could still be coerced into converting back to Hinduism under the Ghar Wapsi programme. Celebrity actors like Aamir Khan and Shah Rukh Khan felt insecure and alienated in an atmosphere of growing religious intolerance in India in recent months; and they faced severe backlashes for voicing their sense of insecurity.

At the behest of the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a High Level Committee, chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar, prepared and submitted a report on the socio-economic and educational status of the Muslims in India in November 2006. It's not possible to mention all of the findings of that committee in the extremely limited space of this article. But some key ones were: the unemployment rate among Muslim graduates was the highest among all the socio-religious catego-

ries and participation of Muslims in jobs in both the public and private sectors was quite low. The number of Muslims in Central Government departments and agencies was "abysmally" low at all levels. "There was not even one state in which the representation of Muslims in the government departments matched their population share (around 14 percent)", states the report.

Behind the impressive façade of some VVIPs and key positions held by Muslims, there existed a pitiable scenario of near total absence of Muslims in superior cadre jobs (IAS 3 percent, IFS 1.8 percent, IPS/Security Agencies 4 percent).

Behind the impressive façade of some VVIPs and key positions held by Muslims, there existed a pitiable scenario of near total absence of Muslims in superior cadre jobs (IAS 3 percent, IFS 1.8 percent, IPS/Security Agencies 4 percent). Employment of Muslims was also very low in the universities, banks and central public sector undertakings. The access of Muslims to bank credit was

low and inadequate.

About one third of small villages with high concentration of Muslims did not have any educational institutions. About 40 percent of big villages with a substantial Muslim concentration did not have any medical facilities.

There has been no perceptible improvement in the conditions of the Muslims since the Sachar Committee Report.

Do the communal policies of the RSS and other Hindutvadi organisations help make an impression in favour of envisaging reunification of Bangladesh with India at some point of time in the future? With these organisations' declared Hindu-centric policies and their recent activities against Muslims, and other religious minorities, Mr. Ram Madhav is not in a position to speak of reunification of the three countries. Their communal, divisive, non-inclusive policies do not advance Mr. Madhav's great expectations or dream of an Akhand Bharat.

Until Indian politics truly rises above communal parochialism, until there occurs a paradigm shift in India's politics to ensure politico-economic, socio-religious, cultural and other equity and equality for all religious and ethnic communities regardless of their size, unless India's constitutional secularism truly finds its roots in the society, and until the minority Muslim communities across India are seen to be happily living in honour, prestige and security in India, I do not visualise any reason why the future generations of Bangladeshis should decide to reunite their country with India.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

COMMENTS

"Want to be remembered as the man who saved Syria"

(February 22, 2016)

Ab Alam

He has killed thousands of children, created conflict between Shia and Sunnis and destroyed Syria.

Len McAlpine

He is obviously the one to destroy Syria. Russia, for now, is holding off his ultimate destruction.

"Irregular workers pass tense time"

February 22, 2016

Ab Alim

The Malaysian police are arresting not only illegal workers but also legal workers. We urge the government to do something for the workers living in fear and insecurity in Malaysia as soon as possible.

Rajibul Haque Khan

Our government should stand beside them. If they come back home, their families will be in great financial trouble.

"Priest killed, devotee shot"

February 22, 2016

Pamelia Khaled:

If we do not speak out against all these brutal killings that are happening in Bangladesh, our democracy will be destroyed forever. We must condemn those cowards -- who have no other passion besides killing innocents -- for their filthy actions.

Rakibull Hossain

Extremism spreads in the absence of democracy