

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA FRIDAY JULY 20, 2018, SRABAN 5, 1425 BS

Plea of clerical error lacks credibility

Alleged adulteration of gold in BB vault

THE official refrain about the alleged adulteration of gold deposits in the vaults of the central bank that it is a mere clerical error lacks credibility. Are we to believe that one of the most secure areas in the country and the correctness of its contents are left at the mercy of clerks only? Is there no further verification and periodic stocktaking of the vault? Why is it that we are still dependent on archaic means to keep stock of inventory such as gold, especially in light of an investigation by customs intelligence and directorate of the NBR which revealed that there are serious discrepancies in gold management? Are we to believe that there are no more "clerical errors" in the bank? Given that the BB has fallen foul of a major scam not so long ago where USD 81 million had been siphoned off, can we rest assured that this was a mere clerical error?

The random sampling of gold discs and rings by these agencies two years ago had, reportedly, found that they were not gold at all, but metal alloys. The directorate of NBR carried out that inspection and submitted the report to BB in January 2018 stating that the bank take remedial measures. The fact that alleged adulteration was taking place means that gold artefacts deposited in the BB vault were being siphoned off. This is not merely a clerical error and points to the fact that the bank officials have not done their job in safeguarding public property.

There should be a high-level probe into the matter. It is up to the Bangladesh Bank to overhaul the stocktaking system in the vault and introduce oversight measures that would secure the precious metals in the bank's possession.

A model rural primary school

We must learn from its transformation

AT a time when our education system is rife with problems, from quality and commitment of teachers to the method of teaching-learning employed in schools, the story of Khagrabari Government Primary School in Pabna comes as a pleasant surprise. On Thursday we reported how the teachers and management of this rural school have managed through their dedication to create a learning environment that most urban schools, with more funds at their disposal, fail to give their students.

With donations from the local community and the teachers, the school has introduced technology for multimedia presentations, a computerised attendance system, and put up inspiring paintings and murals. The chairman of Faridpur upazila council donated closed-circuit cameras to ensure a safe environment on premises. But, beyond these, the crucial factor here is that the teachers and the management are going the extra mile to ensure that education is enjoyable to students. This realisation is the key element that is missing from our education system today, as increasing focus goes to achieving GPA-5s in the myriad of exams at any cost. Education must go beyond memorisation and exam-passing, and teachers of Khagrabari Government Primary School, through their focus on multimedia, facilitating access to books, toys for younger children, are doing exactly what is needed to promote a love for learning for its own sake.

Reportedly, their efforts have borne results. But, with limited funds, there is only so much they can do. There is still a dearth of classrooms and teachers in the school, and the multimedia room has to be used on a rotation basis to accommodate all the classes. The education department should invest in this school so that their good work can be built upon, and also see what can be learned from here so that this approach to education can be expanded to other government schools as well.

When populism reigns supreme



MANZOOR AHMED

RALEIGH, North Carolina. In the mixed neighbourhood of Oakwood in this capital city of the state of North Carolina, where this writer was on a visit recently, in a front-yard

among the myrtle grove, a handwritten poster hung with the words: "This 4th of July I don't feel very patriotic." Strewed around it were small stuffed dolls and animals, a reminder of small children who were forcibly separated from their parents crossing into the United States from Mexico seeking asylum from drug-gang violence and other mortal dangers. Beside the poster, the short foreleg of a dinosaur statue propped up an American flag.

The misery of the infants and children was the result of the "zero tolerance" policy imposed on illegal immigration by the Trump Administration. Answering reporters' questions on separating small children from parents, President Trump's response was, "Just ask them not to come."

A supreme example of the upsurge of populism in the world was Trump's victory in the Presidential election in 2016 against all predictions of political observers and the mainstream media. Donald Trump managed to create a support base among the electorate by invoking white male working class resentments and real or imagined fears about various things—non-whites over-running the country, global trade taking away American jobs, hordes of illegal immigrants depressing job markets and causing crime and violence, and Muslims waging a war on Western Christian civilisation.

Populism has re-shaped the political scene in Europe. Brexit, or UK's referendum to pull out of the European Union, and recent victories or increased popularity of rightist politicians railing against immigrant workers and refugees in Europe are manifestations of a wave of populist politics.

Politicians everywhere appear to be taking the cue and are trying to apply the populist formula to gain political advantage. Playing on people's fear and prejudices is an old populist trick. A populist support base once created is not easily shaken by logic or evidence. Outrageous words, actions and policy or non-policy seem not to affect Trump's support base.

A test for democracy and democratic institutions in USA would be the mid-term Congressional and Governors' elections later this year. This could open

the door for President Trump's impeachment, which is a judgement about violation of law; but ultimately it is a political process dependent on Congressional action. Unless the current Republican Party majority in both the chambers of the Congress—the House of Representatives and the Senate—is changed in the November election, it is not likely that President Trump will be held to account.

In a generic sense, populism may be benign or even desirable in a democracy—if Merriam-Webster dictionary definition is taken, "the belief in the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people." It is often linked to anti-elitism or protest against the undue privilege and power of a dominant group in society or politics.

Populism may be linked to left or right causes in the political arena.

policies, government's regulatory functions and civil rights legislation that came about under President Franklin D Roosevelt and in the Kennedy and Johnson era had their beginning in the populist movement in the 1890s.

Judis contends that the right-wing populists are different in their approach which is to accuse the elite of coddling an ever-shifting third group—immigrants, blacks, terrorists, welfare recipients or all of them. This demagoguery of finding a scapegoat gives right-wing populism its current appeal and a steady support base.

Closer to home, economist Wahiduddin Mahmud, wrote about "How democracies die and economies grow" (*The Daily Star*, June 11). Hybrid regimes, those prioritising economic growth over democratic development, Professor Mahmud argues, attempt to

the high road, it did its populist calculation and cautiously brought back secularism into the constitution but kept Islam as the state religion. No matter that this co-existence made either of the notions oxymoron. By populist logic this makes sense to politicians.

The present debate about the quotas for civil service jobs is another instance of populism driving politics. A freedom fighters' quota in the 1970s, and perhaps for a generation afterwards, reserving jobs for the freedom fighters' themselves or for their children, made good sense.

Half-a-century later, is it logical to reserve this privilege for the grand-children and great-grand-children? The Prime Minister announced in the Parliament that elimination of all quotas might be considered. But populism kicked in and the government seems to be back-tracking.

Not only that; the student arm of the ruling party as well as the law-enforcers have set upon student leaders raising quota abolition/reform demands.

In our education system, a field of professional interest to this writer, populist approaches have resulted in policies and decisions causing long-term damage to the system.

Cases in point are many. The expansion of the madrasas, both under government patronage and in the *quomi* system, without a hard look at the consequences for the students themselves and society at large is one. Another is the liberal expansion of both public and private universities without essential quality control.

Spending a large share of public education budget on stipends is popular with politicians, even when it is clear that spending on quality improvement rather than incentives for attending school is the real need.

The larger national interest demands that educational institution management, personnel appointments and performance evaluation and student affairs are kept out-of-bounds for partisan politics. Populist political calculations prevent such a step.

The irony, at least in Bangladesh, is that it was not necessary for the ruling regime to engage in the fine populist calculations. Had it taken the high road in 2008 and used its electoral advantage to enhance democratic culture and values, bring about proper constitutional reforms through a participatory process, strengthen rule of law, promote decentralisation with stronger local government, and rein in corruption, the regime and the nation would be in a much better situation. It is not too late even now.

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Columbia University political scientist John Judis distinguishes the economic populism of Bernie Sanders and the cultural populism of Donald Trump, in his 2015 book, the *Populist Explosion*.

Sanders, calling himself a democratic socialist, contested for presidential nomination of the Democratic Party in 2016. He harkened back to a tradition of populism in USA since at least the 1890s. Farmers and industrial workers formed the Peoples Party, also known as the Populists, in 1891 and exerted considerable influence in national policy making in relation to workers' and trade union rights, a progressive tax structure, regulations of banks and the financial sector, and generally protecting people's welfare and political rights.

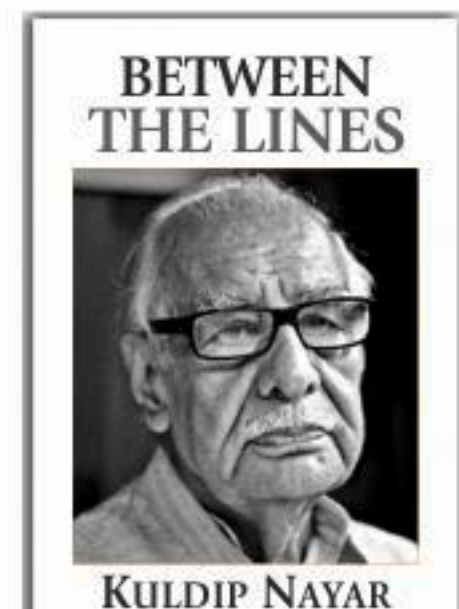
Progressive and people-oriented

gain legitimacy by compensating for democracy deficits with a dose of economic progress. In the regime's populist calculation, the majority of people would then overlook trampling democratic principles.

Populism, as a strategy, is a staple in politics, and, as noted, can serve either general welfare or partisan purposes. In Bangladesh, the military regimes of both Ziaur Rahman and Hussein M Ershad played the populist game to buy legitimacy by revoking secularism from the national constitution and bringing religion squarely into statecraft.

The 2008 parliamentary election, recognised generally as fair, gave the Awami League led coalition an overwhelming majority and the power to bring about necessary constitutional reform. Not taking

Dangers to secularism



KULDIP NAYAR

I recall after the Independence, politician and diplomat Syed Shahabuddin articulated the Muslim point of view. He did not ask for separation but suggested a self-rule for Muslims within the country. Nobody took him seriously, not even the Muslims because the partition had brought misery to both the communities.

Now Assaouddin Owaisi, the president of All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, has demanded that there should be reservation for Muslims in the armed forces. Owaisi is quite right that the Muslims have come down in numbers in the Indian army. But that was inevitable because the division was on the basis of religion and the Muslim armed forces went to the Pakistani side.

The thinking is faulty. I recollect that the Constituent Assembly was discussing the subject of reservation—the then Home Minister Sardar Patel had proposed 10 percent of reservations for Muslims—the Muslim leaders in the Constituent Assembly stood up and said that they did not want any reservation because it had led to the formation of Pakistan.

Owaisi's grievance is that despite the prime minister's 15-Point Programme expressly stating that all efforts would be made to increase the share of the minorities in Central Government jobs, little was done about it. Owaisi pointed out the same thing at a public meeting recently and was rightly questioned by some groups on his linking of recruitment into paramilitary forces with religion.

However, Owaisi defended his statement, saying that "those people are totally ignorant, arrogant, and they do not read. I want to ask them: isn't this issue related to the prime minister's 15-Point Programme? Point number 10 of the 15-point programme clearly states about the recruitment to state and Central services for Muslim communities." Owaisi said as per the rules even if 10 people were to be recruited, the selection committee must necessarily have members from the dalit, ST and minority communities. This was as per the memorandum issued by the Department of Personnel, he added.

Owaisi also pointed out that the Minister for Minority Affairs, Muqtar Abbas Naqvi, had wrongly claimed that the percentage of minorities in government jobs had increased. "I had exposed the wrong claims of the government," he said. According to the leader, "Muslim recruits in the CISF are mere 3.7 per cent. In CRPF, they are just 5.5 per cent and in Rapid Action Force are just 6.9 per cent." He even challenged the Narendra Modi government to release the data of recruitment in all central government organisations.

The parliamentarian from Hyderabad also said the government should release data of recruitment to banks, the railways and other PSUs to reveal how many

minorities have been recruited. "The BJP is not doing justice to minorities. I have all the right to question the government," Owaisi said.

Congress is the only party which is supporting the Muslim point of view. Prime Minister Modi recently accused publicly that the Congress was a party for Muslims over the alleged remarks by Congress president Rahul Gandhi who supported the continuance of practices like triple *talaq* during his speech in Azamgarh.

"For the last two days, I am hearing that a *naamdar* leader—a sarcastic reference to Rahul Gandhi—recently said that the Congress is a party of Muslims. I'm not surprised. Even former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once said that Muslims have the first right over nation's natural resources," Modi recalled.

Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the

parochial point of view he espouses.

I have seen that most Muslim leaders are talking in terms of co-existence as if they were two nations. They should realise that there is only one nation, India, and religions come second. Not long ago, I went to address the Aligarh Muslims University and I was surprised to find the students talking in terms of *ummat*, their community. The then Vice-Chancellor calmed the students down with the explanation that there was no contradiction in being a staunch Indian and a staunch Muslim.

My feeling is that we are all Indians first and Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians later. Even the constitution's preamble has the word "secular" to describe the nation's ethos. Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister, is the one who included the word during the emergency. The Janata Party changed all other additions that Mrs Gandhi had made, but left the



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

SOURCE: PIB

meeting of the National Development Council in 2006 had said: "We will have to devise innovative plans to ensure that minorities, particularly the Muslims, are empowered to share equitably in the fruits of development. They must have the first claim on resources."

Modi, during his speech, also wondered whether the Congress was interested only in the welfare of Muslim men and not women. "I want to ask the *naamdar* of Congress, please tell that is the party only for Muslim men? Because they don't stand with Muslim women on issues of triple *talaq* and *nikah halala*," he added.

Whatever the case, Muslims do not feel involved in the affairs of government. Owaisi has rightly said that if the Muslims were to participate in the country's development, India's example would be followed in the rest of the world. He did not himself jettison the

preamble as it is, without any amendment.

It is unfortunate that political parties are furrowing their lonely plough while keeping the shield of secularism. I have heard some voices demanding separate country. Parliament should *suo moto* take notice of such demands and warn the nation that the people with such thinking are misusing the constitution which gives one person, one vote even though Hindus are 80 percent in the country.

Owaisi may be doing all these to garner vote in the forthcoming elections. But he is sowing the seeds of hatred which should be nipped in the bud. I also find the RSS active when the government is conniving at their activities to support Hindutva. Leaders who would take a stand on secularism are silent. Silence and the voice of Owaisi seems very loud.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Attack on DU teachers shameful

Traditionally, the DU campus has been a common platform for protesters—a bastion for freedom of speech.

Yet, this very campus was exactly where a number of university teachers, students and guardians, were harassed and assaulted by BCL cadres.

Such shameful act tainted the glorious image of the university. What's more, while they were being assaulted, the law enforcement agencies were totally inactive, and the university administration was silent if not hostile. This will go down in history as a new low for the deeply partisan university administration.

Tanaka Rahaman, Gendaria, Dhaka

New round of bank scandals

A report in the *Prothom Alo* highlighted how a business group withdrew massive amounts of money—totalling Tk 5,000 crore—from Janata Bank. Another in *Banik Barta* focused on a Chittagong-based influential businessman who took Tk 3,000 crore and now wants his enterprises to be declared bankrupt.

It's really disappointing that despite numerous scandals, the government has done little to discipline the financial sector. Rogue businessmen continue to rob banks with impunity, while bank executives sanction money without proper assessments. This does not bode well for our financial sector and the economy.

Abhish Chakma, By e-mail