

Bureaucracy needs a major overhaul

Key reforms being thwarted by bureaucrats’ resistance, political inertia

For the ordinary citizen, navigating Bangladesh’s famously inefficient, opaque, and outdated bureaucratic system can be supremely challenging. The many obstacles and complexities that lie in the way of getting services can leave one not just exhausted, but also bereft of hope. The lack of accountability has also meant that while service-seekers suffered, and redress was delayed or denied, corrupt and often inefficient officials were rewarded. Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising to know from a report by this daily that at least 16 commissions and committees have recommended reforms to create an efficient, merit-based civil administration since independence, but those have largely been ignored.

It is not difficult to understand the reluctance of the bureaucratic and political leaderships. For civil servants, especially those in high ranking positions, reforms that promote efficiency, meritocracy, and accountability represent a threat to their influence, benefits, and promotional prospects. Political leaders also do not want to embrace change as it is easier to maintain control over a pliable bureaucracy. The result is that Bangladesh’s civil service is still run under the structure recommended by the Enam Commission in 1982, which today is unsuitable to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape. Our report highlights several bids to bring changes which have been met with disappointment—except, of course, when it benefitted bureaucrats, such as salary increases or the option of “in situ” promotions, or posed no real threat to the status quo.

It goes without saying that this stagnation of key administrative reforms has had alarming consequences for the country. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), for example, identified “corruption and unskilled bureaucracy” as the two greatest challenges to national progress in four reports between 2013 and 2021. A recent report by the US administration has identified corruption in Bangladesh as a major deterrent for foreign investors. The banking sector has all but collapsed due to the lack of effective governance. We can cite many such instances where the lack of transparency, accountability, and inefficiency has had disastrous impacts on various sectors.

This has to change. We cannot continue to be held back by the preference for short-term personal and political interests. What we need is a bold commitment to administrative reforms that can transform the civil service into one that best serves today’s Bangladesh and its ambitions. The higher authorities must demonstrate the courage required to bring such reforms, and the formation of an independent reform commission—as proposed but rejected in recent years—can be a critical first step.

Mayor’s claim not backed by facts

DSCC must not fall short again in its dengue prevention efforts

We are surprised to see the mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) claim success in its fight against dengue last year, despite 2023 seeing record numbers of dengue-related cases and deaths. The number of dengue patients in Dhaka, he reportedly said, “halved” last year compared to 2019 because of “proper” mosquito control measures—even though data from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) suggests the opposite. According to the DGHS, 1,01,354 people were diagnosed with dengue in the country in 2019. Among them, 51,762 patients were from Dhaka. Four years later, in 2023, a record 3,21,179 patients were diagnosed with the disease in the country, while the number in Dhaka was 1,10,008.

That means, the number of dengue patients in 2023 were actually double that of 2019. Why then would the mayor make such a claim? In so doing, he has neither furnished any data collected by the DSCC nor referred to any other credible source of information. To his credit, however, he did mention that the task of controlling dengue becomes difficult if misleading information is given. But that is exactly what he himself seems to be doing, and the timing couldn’t be more unfortunate. Local experts as well as international bodies like the World Health Organization have warned that like 2023, this year too could see huge numbers of dengue patients unless the authorities take timely and appropriate measures. It is, therefore, essential that the relevant authorities take drastic measures to prevent a repeat of 2023.

The importance of such measures, with the monsoon season not far away, cannot be emphasised enough. Already, a number of people have died of dengue, including three in the 24 hours until Thursday morning, taking this year’s death toll to 32, according to the DGHS. Incidentally, all three were from the DSCC areas. Therefore, we urge our mayor to shun premature celebrations and start taking meaningful steps to make sure that his organisation does not fail in its dengue prevention efforts this year, like it did last year.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



SOURCE: ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA

School segregation outlawed by US Supreme Court

On this day in 1954, lawyer Thurgood Marshall scored a landmark victory as the US Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

What constitutes hurting religious sentiments?



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

A recent judgement involving Tithy Sarker, a public university student, on “hurting religious sentiments” has brought the subject back into public discourse. The purpose of this article is not to discuss the case but the issue and the laws that deal with it.

Respect for others’ religious beliefs is one of the fundamental pillars of our present day civilisation. Learning from history, from the incessant religious wars in many parts of the world, especially in Europe, people realised and internalised in their collective consciousness that unless mutual tolerance became the norm, violence and war would never cease and human prosperity could never be achieved. This practice of tolerance began with accepting the norms and practices of the religions of others.

This writer and this newspaper are firmly opposed to anyone hurting religious sentiments. We are, in principle and in practice, totally against anyone, however remotely or indirectly, denigrating the religious feelings of others.

In history, one of the most brutal and protracted religious wars was the First Crusade, initiated by Pope Urban II in 1095 when he called upon the Christians to unite and recapture the city of Jerusalem from the Muslims. The reason I mention this is because it is important to know that the first victims of the First Crusade were not Muslims but the European Jews at the hands of the Roman Catholic Christian army. Thus, from the very beginning, it showed that wars in the name of religion often victimise those who are not the original target. Many vested interest groups enter into play and use the heightened emotion and blind devotion—characteristics of faith-based wars—to achieve their own narrow ends. A lesson that has been proven over and over again throughout history.

The question of “hurting religious sentiments” is hardly comparable to wars. However, one has to be fully aware of where these things can lead to, the examples of which we saw in Bosnia Herzegovina and in many riots that took place, and still does, in South Asia, each of which contains the seed of greater conflagration.

There are two ways of achieving the goal of inculcating religious tolerance: social and legal.

The social measures come through the family, social values and education. Family is where learning of all sorts begins. This is where values about not hurting others’ religious sentiments must be taught. The parents and the larger family have a sacred obligation to create an environment that will instil in every child the obligation to respect their own religion and that of others. In Bangladesh, where the vast majority are Muslims and we are proud of our faith, we need to ensure



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

that the followers of other religions are allowed to feel the same. Every Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, members of ethnic groups and followers of other religions are proud of their own faiths and, as the majority community, it is our responsibility to ensure an atmosphere of tolerance that allows the followers of all faiths to practise their religions in total freedom and ease. That is the premise on which the whole notion of religious tolerance is based, and one that everyone in society must respect. That is a fundamental principle of our Liberation War, our constitution, and of course democracy. This must start at the family level.

Then comes society, where the above values of religious tolerance must be made the norm. We must be fully aware of the fact that religious

respect and to build a harmonious society where everyone can live in peace. The education policy further states that true knowledge about one’s own religion is vitally important so that no one can misguide them with inappropriate or false interpretation.

The issue of tolerance in general and religious tolerance in particular have become a matter of great concern as we see a global rise in narrow-mindedness, prejudice and hatred based on race, colour, ethnicity, and religion. Ultranationalism is, on occasion, blended with religious beliefs that essentially incorporate hatred for other religions, causing a great disruption to social harmony and creating conditions for future tension, if not outright conflict.

Our final point is the legal construct

to prevent “hurting” the religious sentiments of others. Whenever we try to make a law to prevent such occurrences, we must ensure that the law is clear and unambiguous. This brings us to the discussion of the old Digital Security Act (DSA), about which we have had so many reservations. Yes, journalists have been given some respite in its new incarnation—Cyber Security Act (CSA)—but the vague formulation dealing with hurting religious sentiments still haunts us as it affects journalism directly. It is very broad, too encompassing, and without clear definition as to what constitutes “hurting religious sentiments.”

For a law to be meaningful, it has to be clear and its violations must be specific. A citizen must know where the line is drawn beyond which he/she stands in breach of the law. A vague law can be misused and even weaponised. The CSA says, “If any individual or group, for the purpose of deliberately or knowingly hurting religious values or feelings, or for the purpose of instigating, propagates or broadcasts something through a website or any other electronic device, which hurts religious beliefs or values, then that act will be considered a crime” (translation ours). How does one determine “hurt”? It is so personal and subjective. What may be a legitimate and innocent question may end up hurting another. Will criticising a “Pir” or an imam or a religious scholar or a religious teacher constitute “hurting” religious sentiments? Their ardent followers may feel “hurt” and thus lodge a case. There are many instances of corrupt practices within religious institutions. Will revealing those constitute hurting religious sentiments? If a newspaper exposes the wrong doings in the management of a mosque, madrasa or any religious body, will the paper face a case under CSA? The law is so vague that it can be used for the purpose that it is not meant for.

While we don’t want to see anybody’s religious sentiment hurt, we also don’t want to see this becoming a way of stifling research, legitimate criticism, critical thinking and definitely not a cap on the exposure of wrong doings.

I want to end with one thought of caution in the whole exercise of preventing hurting of religious sentiments. It is usually the sentiments of the majority that gets priority. Hurting the religious sentiments of the minority is not dealt with as much seriousness, urgency or severity as that of the majority. For us to understand it clearly, let us look at present day India. How seriously is hurting Muslim religious sentiments or values likely to see justice vis-a-vis hurting Hindu religious sentiments? This should help us see the play of state power in the reverse and prevent its occurrence here.

Rediscovering self: A note to me



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RAFFAT BINTE RASHID

I just finished reading a short story called “Nearly Departed” by Twinkle Khanna. The deep underlying message of the story resonated with my recent state of mind and I garnered the courage to write this note to myself.

Although her protagonist, an 86-year-old who suffered from a stroke, was seeking euthanasia, a hospital-assisted suicide was not exactly something I support. Still, her story of accepting the responsibilities of others in her life and how one courageous act of staying with her ill father had slowly eroded her made sense to me.

I decided that I needed a bit of madness and foolhardiness in my life. I am tired of being the sensible one. In fact, all of us should be a little footloose in life. We are so bogged down by the pressure of responsibilities and obligations of life that we totally miss being us and suffer silently. Adulthood can be taxing especially if you are the one fending for all your familial dependency. We need to rise for ourselves.

So, if I say, I matter the most to myself, am I being selfish? I want to take care of my wounded wings that were clipped even before I could

take flight. I want to replenish my parched soul that has been battered and bruised with the load of others. If I say I am emotionally exhausted from being selfless and lending all my strength to others, will I be judged?

How do I assess my success and my worth as a being? In fact, who is keeping the tab on my failures and those rare few accomplishments? I realised after passing almost two-thirds of my life that ultimately no one is truly yours. You cannot claim anyone as your own—parents, spouse, children, or friends. None!

It does not matter how cordial your connection is with them; you are always alone in that crowd of dear faces.

My life just zoomed past me fending for others, taking care of everyone’s wishes, whims, and wants. Then one fine morning I realised I had done a rotten job acting all selfless and self-sacrificing. And nobody cares what I did or not did for them. They never asked me to be noble and self-effacing or to be accommodating. So, why am I fretting for their sake?

I learnt in life that to give your 100 percent to any one of your relationships you have to lose more than what you gave to that person, in

regards to any other responsibility.

If you want to be a picture-perfect daughter to your ageing parents you lose almost 50 percent of being a hands on mother. To give full attention to your child, you lose out on being a happy spouse. To be a caring partner, you need to drop more than half of your self-dignity to be

Yes, I am ranting and being sappy because I want to. I want to read aloud this note to myself that it’s ok to be sad; who cares if I am not appreciated or acknowledged for the sacrifices I made! I am true to myself; I did the best I could for my loved ones, and if my best is not good enough then I cannot be blamed. I only had this meagre 100 percent to give.

that “understanding and sacrificing” person in the relationship.

For any kind of misgiving in any one of these relationships, you are blamed black and blue, at least emotionally if not physically. The brunt of the emotional storm you face is a deadly killer, it eats away the small nuances of your good life, your identity, your self-worth and your sanity.

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Thus, now I want to live for myself, I want to spoil myself with that forbidden icecream, be that unsocial grouchy old hag, or that madly happy 50-something. I want to drown myself in giddy pleasures society says no to me. Most importantly, I do not want to care.

I want to attain nirvana where nothing matters except for my Zen state of mind. It’s not an easy hike to be able to reach that raised ground of grace and spirituality but once there, I will be sorted. My forever fidgety yin and yang will be synchronised.

The negative, dark, and feminine in me will complement the positive, bright, and masculine also in myself. And I, after crossing the many ditches in my relationships, the deep abyss of grief and sorrow of motherhood and loads of bumps along the way as a woman, realised I have little to no time for myself to be carefree and happy before I die or become someone else’s liability. I do not want that, actually I don’t deserve any more guilt.

Having gone through so much angst and unfortunate faults in my destiny I never want to rely on others for my contentment. I will give myself the love and care I always craved for. I am my own woman; I will still rise as Maya Angelou said.