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Of tall tales, current social ills and the role of a newspaper

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AS a cardinal rule, newspapers must not ignore what they do not like or find distasteful. This was once the advice given to journalists with the added reminder that it would not do to write belated reports on the subsequent reaction, confirmation or denial.

The rule still applies. Thus it was that there were no news reports about a series of lectures by a young imam claiming to have witnessed the burial of a man turned into a pig after becoming apostate. Cassettes of his lectures were later sold here and there.

The matter came to light only after thorough investigations by the Department of Islamic Development (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia or Jakim), the Selangor Islamic Religious Department and the police after numerous enquiries from members of the public. The claim was totally false and no such thing happened, Jakim said in a statement thereafter.

The imam, an assistant at the State Mosque in Shah Alam, has since been dismissed and is now banned from giving religious talks in Selangor. The announcement was made by Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Abu Hassan Omar.

It remains to be seen whether other States too will impose the ban. As a writer was to comment later, the "the Malay community has to accept the fact that some of its members are so gullible and naive as to believe such a tall story".

Still remembered is the story which spread after last year's haj pilgrimage about a shopkeeper from Kelantan said to have changed into an animal because he had cheated his customers. This too was denied by religious authorities.

Posed is the question why such preposterous stories circulate among Malays only and not in other Muslim communities.

Also mentioned by Datuk Abu Hassan is that religious authorities are investigating 58 deviationist groups in the State. Co-operation was, therefore, sought from mosques, suraus, district and security committees and members of the public.

As has also been said a newspaper reflects the society that it serves, its mores and norms, all showing common images of themselves. Clearly noted then in Malay newspapers these days is the wide coverage on social problems among youths.

Revealing is the call that has been made by an Umno Youth division in Penang to government departments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector to organise "penance rallies" (majlis bertaubat) at State, district and kampung levels.

Reported earlier was a story on Kelantan recording the second highest number of new dadah addicts in the country, after Selangor, last year. Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat said this was due to its location near the Thai border and influence of addict friends.

Nik Aziz, Kelantan Pemadam patron, said although border checks were stringent the menace could still not be checked particularly among fishermen. "The fishermen leave and enter freely and it is difficult for the authorities to frisk all the fishermen when they return from their fishing trips." He was speaking after attending the National Pemadam conference in Shah Alam.

From Alor Star comes the disclosure that in the first six months of this year, the number of addicts arrested has increased by 50 per cent. Some 3,000 addicts have been detained from January till June compared to 1,994

for the same period last year. Most of them were aged between 17 and 30.

Related to this was the earlier coverage in almost all newspapers about young boys and girls being detained in Alor Star after indulging in sex orgies and dadah-related activities. A massive campaign to check social problems has been launched by the Kedah State Government.

Published in Utusan Malaysia earlier this week was a long article by an official from the Muslim Lawyers Association on the ramifications of such a campaign. It noted that the Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid, had asked the police to conduct raids on shopping malls to curb loafing. Firm action would also be taken against owners of premises used for such activities.

Posed by the association were questions relating to the legality and legitimacy of actions to be taken, and about civil rights. Some examples:

* Two male youths are in a fast-food outlet and there is no sign to indicate they are dadah addicts. Could both be detained and brought to the police station for questioning?

* Three girls are in a cybercafe surfing the Internet and there is nothing to show that they are involved in untoward activities. Would they be brought also to the station for questioning?

* Two young couples are in a shopping complex, chatting and gossiping. There is nothing to indicate they are bohsia or bohjan. Have the police the power to bring them to the station for interrogation?

* A group of youths are in a shopping centre after lunch, eating and drinking, window-shopping or just gossiping along the corridors. Could the police order all to enter a police truck and be brought to the station for questioning?

At heart is the issue of civil rights as guaranteed by the Constitution and whether in the circumstances described there is "probable cause" for certain action. Otherwise, there is the possibility of charges of "false imprisonment" being brought against the authorities.

Last, and certainly not least, is a news item in Berita Harian from Klang. The Selangor Islamic Religious Department is planning to use an alcohol detection device named Alcometer SD-400 P. It would be used to ascertain whether a Muslim has taken liquor. This is in accordance with an enactment passed by the Selangor State Assembly.

A department spokesman explained that procedures on its use would be presented to the Islamic Council for approval and enforced beginning next year.

Among questions posed is whether there are that many Muslims in Selangor drinking liquor to the extent that such a device is to be used. And whether other States will do likewise later.

Surely asked is the order of priority set by those in charge of religious matters. Does the list of don'ts supersede that of things which should be done - the do's. In this context, the role of religious teachers and preachers is important.

Consistent and persistent has been the call from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Muslims to take greater interest in science and technology in order to be as advanced as people in developed nations. As he said it, science is not secular.

Published recently was Islamic Teaching: An Overview by Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammad Husayn Tabatabai'e, a noted scholar. Mentioned was that after studying Arabic and Islamic jurisprudence for some 10 years, followed by six years study in philosophy he was advised to study mathematics, analytical reasoning and geometry.

Not from such a scholar imbibing matters also scientific would there be a story about a dead body turning into an animal.

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