

A HOME THAT REHABILITATES THE PARALYSED

DANCING at a function in her school, Mohua Pal could hardly imagine that soon fate would put a permanent end to her performance as a promising dancer.

On the Decade of the Disabled Person, in Helsinki. Shyamal, aged 28, was a carpenter before he fell from the third floor of a building and broke his back.

At the age of nine, suddenly one day, Mohua developed an agonising pain from her waist downwards. She never experienced this sort of a continuous pain before.

Jobeda came to the Centre for Rehabilitation of the Paralysees after becoming paralysed from waist down after a mud wall was made to collapse on her by her husband and in-laws.

We find all of them in this home and many more Shyamals and Jobedas. The



Clockwise: Madhab, a disabled, painting from his bed; Physiotherapist Valerie Taylor with two of her wards; and Mohua Pal who first came as a patient, presently serving as Secretary of the Centre.

Later she returned to the Centre, this time to work to help in the rehabilitation of other people. Today, Mohua welcomes everyone at her Centre with a charming smile and lends the required assistance.

In a short talk at an Iftar reception here during Ramadan, I made the unso licited suggestion that for the development of free and independent media in the country, it might be a good thing for Bangladesh to do away with the Ministry of Information.

In support of my contention, I referred to the developed countries and a few developing ones, like Thailand and Singapore, which seem to manage very well without such ministries.

In my view, it is primarily an administration, anxious to keep a close watch on the media, when it should be the other way round, which needs an effective ever-vigilant Ministry of Information.

Then, I noticed a look of dismay and surprise on the face of Nurul Huda, the Minister of State for Information who had graced the occasion as the chief guest.

This time, Minister Huda put on his broad grin, while others, mostly journalists, gave me a sullen look.

Since then, Mr Huda and I have been on excellent terms. We even have an unspoken understanding which the Minister may not be quite aware of that while I will refrain from launching any campaign for the abolition of his Ministry, he, on his part, will ensure that the next time a government leader is allegedly defamed by a newspaper, the matter will be taken up by the Press Council, instead of by a criminal court.

When this unspoken understanding has worked to our mutual satisfaction, we will move into new areas of cooperation.

Here, one problem is, how do we establish that our unspoken understanding has really worked? A colleague suggests that one of these days, I should say something nasty about the Minister — rather difficult because Mr Huda is really a nice person — and see where I am taken to, before the Press Council or to a sub-jail set up in Gulshan for me, in recognition of my age, seniority in the profession and my erratic health, in that order.

SINCE Minister Huda is a nice young man, I should be as helpful as possible by inviting his attention to a few problems which have been screaming for the Ministry's attention for some time past.

In the first place, the Ministry must decide how the media, especially the Bangladesh Television (BTV) should project the activities of the Government, indeed those of the Prime Minister Begum Zia.

Here, an easy way out is simply this: Cut down on the TV coverage of cabinet meetings and of such other gatherings where officials sit with blank faces listening to ministers (as this writer had suggested some weeks ago) do not cover solemn religious functions, like the Umrah, performed by national leaders,

including Begum Zia, since they should not be meant for public consumption; reduce the time usually given to public meetings addressed by ministers; and so on and so forth.

However, this simple solution raises a number of problems which would undoubtedly worry our friend, Minister Huda.

The reduction and elimination of the coverage just mentioned would surely create a vacuum. How do you fill it?

Then, it is certainly true that the BTB coverage of Hussain Mohammad Ershad, based on an excessive exposure of the ousted president, became increasingly sickening to the majority viewers in Dhaka and other cities.



State Minister Nurul Huda: Unspoken Understanding

that the BTB coverage of Hussain Mohammad Ershad, based on an excessive exposure of the ousted president, became increasingly sickening to the majority viewers in Dhaka and other cities. But how did it go down with the common people in small towns and upazilas? Did it alienate the viewers or did it improve the standing of the dictator among the kind of people who elected him to the parliament from as many as five constituencies in Rangpur?

It is possible that looking at these two problems, many backroom advisers to the administration would assume that while it might annoy the educated class, the current TV coverage of the government activities would yield long-term political dividends for the BNP Government.

Minister Huda can either fall in line with this "keep-the-status-quo" group or develop his own approach to the situation.

If his choice falls on the latter course, he can request, say, Prof Rehman Sobhan to set up another Task Force, this one to look into the reorganisation of our media.

There is really no question of playing down the projection of the government activities, especially of the Prime Minister, through our electronic media.

It is all a question of deciding on the right focus, the right dimension, the right scope and the right style. When all this is done the right way, the administration should get much greater political dividend than the backroom advisers can visualise within their present narrow frame of references.

Memo to Minister Nurul Huda (continued)

What are the other problem areas facing the State Minister for Information?

The reorganisation of the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) presents by far the biggest challenge. The agency must move to decent premises; it must be computerised; and it must raise the level of its editorial and technical operation.

It must also improve on its revenue position and, among other things, set up bu-

therapist, Valerie Taylor, first came to Bangladesh in 1969 as a volunteer to work at a local hospital. She saw the problem of the disabled and within a few years, with the support and cooperation of her local colleagues, hit upon a solution.

The Centre's involvement with a patient does not end the moment the latter leaves. Instead, a social worker keeps in touch to ensure he/she is settling down at home.

Initially this Centre was located on Dhaka's Old Airport Road, from where it has moved to its own plot in Savar a few months back.

The Centre has built temporary accommodation for the patients



and the staff, until it can afford to build its own building. This Centre strives to rehabilitate a patient physically, mentally, socially and economically.

They will take with them teaching aids and in this way paralysed people would be able to move around the world.

The Centre at present caters for 55 men and women.

There are even four disabled members on the staff. It concentrates on those paralysed as a result of an accident. The most common causes of spinal injury are fall from trees and road accidents.

Recently, a 12-seater 'baby taxi' has been converted so that it can be driven by a disabled person. It will be used to take a team of people from CRP out to the villages of former patients.

The wide range of activities a patient can undertake include daily exercises, reading and writing, looking after orchids, goats and ducks, tailoring, sewing, painting, metal work, weaving, shop-keeping, making fishing nets and paper bags and helping in the Centre's kitchen.

All wheelchairs used by the patients are made in the Centre's own workshop. A special low-level wheelchair or 'trolley' has been developed for those who cook and eat in the village at ground level because they have no chairs.

Over twenty different handicraft items, made by the patients, are sold to the public. These are not only supplied in the local market, but are exported to the United States, Australia, Canada and Japan.

Sports play a vital role in the rehabilitation programme of the disabled. Basketball is a hot favourite along with swimming, table tennis, badminton and volleyball, which they play with great enthusiasm.

In September, 1986, Saleh Ahmed represented Bangladesh at the first world games for disabled youth held in Nottingham, England. He won two silver medals for javelin and shotput. He had come to the Centre after being paralysed because of a fall from a tree. He can now walk with the aid of crutches.

by Madhab, who is another disabled member of the staff. Madhab, the Centre's tetraplegic counsellor, discovered his talent as an artist after an accident left him paralysed at the age of 14.

CRP's first priority is to raise the necessary money to construct a building of its own, with the provision for more than 200 patients. It aims to deal with the patients suffering from spinal injuries, stroke, and children suffering from cerebral palsy.

The Centre receives no money from the government and the continuation of its pioneering work depends on the generosity of individuals and institutions. A separate fund has been set up to build the long-cherished new Centre.

As Jean-Paul Sartre, a famous French philosopher, once said: "Anybody, at any time, may equally find himself victim or executioner."

"Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on earth."

But cooperation from fellow brothers is a necessity. In all societies around the world paralysed people are considered to be objects of pity. They are not treated as normal human beings, which results in paralysing them mentally, too. We cease to think that they are like the rest of us, except that they are victims of disabling accident.

A Memo for Minister Nurul Huda; Spotlight on The London Times; and Attack on Another Central Bank

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

Times of London. The exercise produced some unexpected rewards and helped in raising my spirits.

In the issue of the paper of Thursday, May 23, the paper's correspondent in New Delhi, Christopher Thomas reported the offer made to Sonia Gandhi to take over the presidency of the Congress (I) in a front page report under a six-column headline, "Party Picks Gandhi's Widow."

It is all straightforward, a

correspondent finds support for his unique conclusion from another source: "In a possible sign that she might not be more than a figurehead, Pranab Mukherjee, a party spokesman, said, 'The question of acceptance does not arise.' (Does it mean the 'acceptance' is taken for granted or there is no question of Sonia accepting it?)"

On Friday, Correspondent Thomas dutifully reported the rejection of the offer by Sonia Gandhi!



It is the Bank of England which is under fire: "Total nonsense surrounds the issue of the Bank's independence."

little too definite that leaves no room for any doubts! (Whatever happened to the 'doubting Thomas'?)

In the third paragraph, Correspondent Thomas provides a new angle that we had all missed: "The decision was, however, binding (on Sonia Gandhi)". Since this line appears without any quotation marks and is put in without any source, one assumes that it is the correspondent's own inference, perhaps based on what Congress leader, Jonathan Reddy, said earlier about any lack of communication of the offer to Sonia Gandhi "because she is in grief." (Well, that's news I isn't it?)

In search of this morbid pleasure, I spent several hours last week in glancing through some recent copies of The Times

"Her rejection came as a humiliating blow to the party", said the report.

One would not be surprised if The Times Editor sent a note to his man in New Delhi, "Her rejection is also a humiliating blow to your reporting."

Whether Messrs Thomas and Mukherjee still often get together to exchange notes is worth finding out for the Times Editor!

What a pity that it is all in The Times which this writer has patronised for decades. Back in the mid-fifties, then a student in London, he often went without his afternoon snack to keep up with his subscription to this great newspaper.

DURING the week when the Bangladesh Bank caused a uproar here with the publication of its list of "defaulters", I saw this title over an editorial in The Times: "THE BANK MAKES MISCHIEF."

I was furious. This London newspaper had no business to comment on our internal situation in such an objectionable manner. I decided to send in a protest direct to the British High Commissioner or refuse to attend the Queen's Birthday reception.

I was all wrong. The "mischief maker" in the editorial was not the Bangladesh Bank, but one which should be as much above reproach as, say, the Privy Council. The target of the Times' attack is the Bank of England!

The editorial relates to the Bank's opposition to the government's move to cut the interest rates. The Times is pretty angry with the Bank and makes a number of observations which our local experts may find interesting. The editorial, inter alia, says, "Total nonsense surrounds the issue of the central bank independence. . . . It is not a magical nostrum to cure a nation's inflationary habits overnight. There is no evidence that the Federal Reserve or even the Bundesbank do better jobs at running their economies. . . . than the politically subservient Bank of Japan and Bank of France."

Strong as it is, but perhaps not so relevant to our situation. No, wait for what the Times says in the next paragraph: "When a government disagrees with a central bank it wins, as it dictates it should. . . . Central banks are only independent when it suits democracies to treat them as such. Central banks do not meet electorates. . . . (Italics mine)!"

If official is of the Ministry of Finance or the Minister Saifur Rahman himself are reading these extracts and rubbing their hands in glee, let me hasten to add that the case for upholding the independence of the Bangladesh Bank is much, much stronger than the one for placing this institution under the dictates of a Ministry. The situations in Bangladesh and Britain are quite different. A London-trained technocrat, Minister Rahman probably knows this better than this writer. That's a comforting thought.