

Is it Fear or Lack of Professional Commitment?

Union Parishad Election

The election to Union Parishad, spread over 14 days, starts today amidst expectations that this exercise will mark a step towards the setting up of a new mechanism that stimulates grassroots development in Bangladesh. So far there are a few good signs that we may be going about it the right way. Until yesterday, the number of deaths caused in pre-election violence throughout the country has been minimal, only a dozen as against some 500 during the last poll held in February 1988. While congratulating Justice Abdur Rouf, the Election Commissioner and his officials as well as the law-enforcing agencies for maintaining law and order, it is important for all concerned not to lose their alertness during the 14 days of the polls.

Another positive sign relates to the enthusiasm the election has generated among the people. Some 17,444 candidates are contesting 3,849 posts of chairman, while 1,06,968 are in the race for 34,801 member posts. Since, on average, 4.48 candidates are contesting for one post of chairman as against 4.30 in the 1988 polls, the increase in the number of candidates may not be all that significant. But the overall situation seems promising, with an impressive participation of women as candidates adding a new dimension.

Candidates have entered the race without any party nominations as such. However, we have no doubt that a majority of them have their own organisational affiliations. These affiliations should not prevent elected members or chairmen from working together on common issues, within the framework of a consensus. It is just possible that Union Parishads may well be able to demonstrate to the Jatiya Sangsad in Dhaka or, for that matter, to the country's major political parties that it is not all that difficult to arrive at a consensus, provided there is a genuine desire to work towards such an objective.

If newly-elected members become genuinely committed to grassroots economic resurgence in such fields as building of roads and primary schools, setting up medical clinics and mother care facilities, spreading the message of population control and child welfare — issues which really matter to our rural population — de-politicisation of development will not remain a far cry in rural Bangladesh. In this context, the authorities in Dhaka should avoid constant interference in the activities of the Parishads, but these bodies should receive adequate funds and necessary guidance. At some stage, it should be worthwhile to organise training programmes for newly-elected members and chairmen — perhaps we should say 'chairpersons' — on their duties and responsibilities. Here, even exchange of visits among members of similar bodies in SAARC would help in revitalising our unions with fresh ideas.

The authorities in Dhaka should help the Union Parishads in yet another area, in the field of mass communication. It is important to promote community weeklies through the Parishads, which should popularise the projects in the field of development. Again, here is a role that radio should play in establishing links between the people and their unions. The road that leads to de-politicisation of development, especially at the grassroots level, is long and hard. There is a good chance that a start can be made now, in real earnest.

The First Pile-up Accident

A particular kind of road accidents happen on a particular kind of roads. One such type can be called the 'pile-up accidents' which occur only on super-fast roads such as the British motorways and German autobahn and American interstate highway — all of which admit only motorised vehicles. The stream of traffic on these is not only fast but is also heavy and moves according to an automaton-like predetermined design. When something goes wrong on any one of the many lanes — cars pile upon cars.

Shall we congratulate Dhaka on its having the first ever pile-up accident last Sunday although Dhaka hasn't one inch of motorway, or for that matter the whole of Bangladesh hasn't that either. Why should a city have an autobahn within its limits? — no city in the world does. But it is very obvious that drivers of the vehicles that made up the first such accident — at least most of them — thought that the road belonged only to them and it was almost a motorway as there was no speed limit on that part of Mirpur Road. So, two buses, one private car, one jeep and a motorcycle joined in a rugby-like melee — killing one and injuring seven.

On the occasion our favourite villain of the piece proved true to its good name. Two of the five vehicles involved were minibuses and it is they who started the thing between them, one hitting the other from behind. This reminds us that the authorities haven't been taken to task over this mini thing for quite some time. It is imperative, it seems, that they should be kept standing on a hot-tin roof until they gather themselves up to finally rid the roads of this curse.

It is appreciated that there are no new minis on the city roads. But what about phasing these out gradually if you cannot at all remove them by one fell stroke? Practically all of them are more than a dozen years old. Three-fourths of them are completely unworthy of road. The fact that they still are very much at their killing game simply proves that there are among the police people a lot that is unworthy of their job. The staying power of the minis must be seen jointly with the powerlessness of the double-deckers to increase their number even by one beyond the original 20. In spite of the yeoman service they have been rendering to Dhaka traffic — in order to appreciate there are more things fishy in the traffic administration than one can suspect.

The pile-up accident before the Karotoa state guest house on Sunday should be the last of its kind in the city. Elimination of the so-called minibus will contribute mightily towards that end.

LIKE politics, India's press has fallen on bad days. There is lessening of credibility, lessening of ethics and lessening of values. The worst part is the lack of accountability. Most journalists, who have retired or those who occupy key positions today, have had no compunction in taking one side one day and the opposite on another. Consistency is not their virtue.

One gets the impression as if they change when the climate changes. They tend to become part and parcel of the establishment and even go to the extent of planting news stories or suppressing them to suit its purpose. They talk big but they will under pressure or when a prize is dangled before them.

L.K. Advani, the Bharatiya Janata Party leader, was quite justified in observing that, during the Emergency, journalists were asked only to bend but they began to crawl. It was pathetic to see at that time how the desire for self-preservation became the sole motivation for their behaviour. The Pakistani journalists fared far better even in martial law conditions.

Why most journalists in India are timid? Why are they reluctant to pinpoint lapses, deficiencies or mistakes of the government? Is it fear or lack of professional commitment?

Shadow on Objectivity
In a democracy where faith stirs the people's response, the press cannot afford to have even a iota of doubt raised about what it says. But they way

most journalists have ingratiated themselves with the power that, maybe, casts a shadow on their objectivity. The press in fact looks too nice, too ready to leave out. Perhaps editors in the past lived in an ivory tower and had no contact with the people. But many editors of today are seen at most odd places in the company of most odd people. They have come to be a compromising lot. Without the awareness of what is right and a desire to act according to what is right, a majority of journalists have no realisation of what is wrong.

Biju Patnaik, the Orissa chief minister, has a point when he advises editors of the national newspapers in Delhi "to grow up". Who said what and about whom is important as long as it is news. But if the purpose is to project or run down someone, as is happening increasingly, it is anything but journalism. Patnaik is right when he says, "the mind stops functioning when you become personal." Why issues are pushed into the background is the question that journalists should ask themselves.

Walter Lippmann, a famous US journalist, said: "The press is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision". But what most newspapers bring to light are episodes, eruptions and eavesdroppings. In the name of interpretative reporting, even mutilated facts are hidden in the verbose, over-written stories. The readers find it hard

to separate rice from the chaff. In fact, news is so editorialised that one has to read editorials to find news. Newspapers, according to my old-fashioned thinking, belong to the readers and the news columns are sacred. We may criticise a particular party for its acts of omission or commission in our editorials and columns but we cannot arrogate to ourselves the authority to withhold news from the public.

Language Newspapers
Against this background, the argument that Hindi newspapers or, for that matter, language newspapers,

can express themselves in English are generally better placed in life than those who are proficient in Hindi or any other Indian language.

Since English enjoys pre-eminence in the country, newspapers appearing in it have more importance. The policy and decision makers read them. That English language press has a far bigger clout is apparent for one incident I recall when I was working in an English daily. A minister in Delhi approached me to publish a photo of his wife distributing prizes at a function. I pointed out to him that

move in certain quarters, is not fair. It will not draw the best out of them, to say the least.

Hindi Journalists
In the midst of discussion on the status of Hindi language journalists, a Home Ministry report on Right to Information has remained secret. The report, prepared by a team of ten senior officers, some of whom visited the US, the UK, Sweden and Canada, has recommended not to make the right to information a fundamental right, a proposal which the Cabinet Secretariat had formulated some time ago. Even the constitutional amendment, which the report has suggested on access to information, will be "to the extent and subject to the conditions limited by a law of Parliament."

We are back to square one. The report negates all that the VP Singh government promised when the team was appointed. The undertaking was to make the functioning of the government "more transparent". President R Venkatarao underlined this in his joint address to Parliament: "An open government functioning in full public view will minimise the wrong doing." But those who have prepared the report think otherwise. They have argued that if the right to information is made a fundamental right, it would open "the flood gates of litigation and the consequent wastage of time and energy of the entire administration in the government at the central and the state levels."

Freedom of Information

The new statute, The Freedom of Information Act, which the report has proposed, will ensure that the existing procedures for access to government are "not replaced or limited." But they are to be tardy and encompass only superficial activities of the government. The report has specifically kept beyond the purview of the act, what it has called "Cabinet confidences", including "(a) agendas, minutes or other records of the deliberations or decisions of Cabinet or its committees; and (b) records containing proposals or recommendations submitted, or prepared for submission, by a Cabinet Minister to Cabinet."

To communicate is the highest form of democracy and it requires the right to know. Without this, a person cannot discharge his responsibilities as an individual in the society. An American opinion-maker has said, "People who mean to be the governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." But, the report is the opposite both in content and spirit.

It is sad that when the matter was discussed in parliament last September, M.J. Jacob, Minister of State for Home Affairs, praised the team "for doing a very good job". Yes, the job of not letting the people know. The press would serve the profession better if it were to agitate that a free society was founded on free information. Who said what an about whom would then be less relevant.



should translate the news copy of their counterparts in English carries little weight. There is already so much dearth of good, hard news that all journalists, whether writing in English or language papers, should spread their net separately so that their catch is from wider areas. By tapping different sources, the press will be richer, not poorer.

However, the controversy raises a bigger question, that of the stature of language journalists. They are inferior to none, but since their field is limited to a particular language, they do not earn the kind of reputation which English language journalists do. Here the general atmosphere in the country is more to blame than an individual management. Those who

the picture had already been used by a local language newspaper. His contention was that until it appeared in an English newspaper, "nobody notices it." The attitude may have changed since the importance of English newspapers has not.

Understandably, language newspapers are more sensitive to this bias now than before, largely because language papers have many times more readership than the English Press. For example, the Hindi press in terms of new newspapers and journals has increased by 147 per cent in 1990 as compared to practically zero growth in the English press. To suggest that language journalists should be mere translators, as is the

Eastern Germany

Reconstruction of the Judiciary and Administration

A lot is happening in eastern Germany. Firms are establishing new plants. Companies are being launched, new roads built or old ones modernized, and shut-down railway tracks restored. The telephone network is quickly being expanded. In some places outdoor cafes, flea markets and boutiques already live up the scene. Video libraries are spreading. In Erfurt, a travel agency near the railway station is using glossy posters showing palm trees to advertise holidays in countries that the people in the eastern part of Germany were unable to visit for many decades.

Leipzig, too, is hopeful. Although the city is in dire financial straits and the plaster is flaking off many houses, Christian Albert Jacke, councillor for economic affairs, has detected "light at the end of the tunnel". The Quelle mail order firm has laid the foundation stone for a major branch in Leipzig, where 4,000 people will soon find work. The Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk broadcasting corporation is to be based in the city, and the Brockhaus publishers envisage a large multi-media centre with 2,500 employees. The tourist centre will, like other centres in Magdeburg, Rostock and Jena, receive at last with government aid the modern medical equipment so urgently needed. The development of

Leipzig's traditional trade fairs also gives cause for hope.

Economy
The situation in Leipzig and Erfurt is similar elsewhere in the new Lander. But a fresh coat of paint is not enough. The eastern German economy is being fundamentally restructured from a communist command system into a social market economy. The publicly subsidized combines and collectives have had their day. They are being replaced by independent enterprises, which admittedly need temporary public support.

However, the new or reorganized enterprises can flourish only if the infrastructure is right. Much ground has to be made up. From Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania to Thuringia there is a shortage of modern flats, telephone links, motor-ways, railways and information technology. In the national budget DM 40 billion are earmarked for road and rail traffic alone, mainly in the new Lander. The environment, which has been polluted especially by large chemical factories, also urgently needs cleaning up. The unique project of wholly reshaping an entire economy and the judiciary and administration within a few years necessitates unparalleled efforts and expenses. According to the Institute of the German Economy, western German financial aid for the east will this year alone total

Major tasks to cope with in the new Lander, reports IN Press from Leipzig

about DM 153 billion, without counting private investments. The German Unity Fund and the programme "Economic upswing in eastern Germany" are involved in the transfers. Their aim is to help quickly and unambiguously in many fields ranging from housing to job creation. The western aid amounts to roughly DM 9,600 per person of the eastern German population. And the transfers are continuing. A quarter of the 1992 national budget is envisaged for economic and social reconstruction in the new Lander. Budget spending will thus reach a record DM 422.6 billion, almost twice that of 1982.

Tax Increases
In view of these burdens, tax increases and further borrowing, higher petrol taxes and subsidy cuts were unavoidable. Politicians speak of adjustment processes. This also means that people in the new Lander have to gain the painful experience of unemployment. The latter is new in eastern Germany, but was inevitable. Under the socialists, unemployment was avoided simply by imposing a ban. As a result, over-stuffed enterprises catered for a non-existent market. Although some 1.7

million people started new jobs in the east by mid-1991, the effects of the previously concealed unemployment are evident. Many jobs in no longer viable or in over-sized administrations had to be shed or adapted.

The socialist legacy also causes large problems for the Trust Agency in Berlin, a public corporation, which is the world's largest undertaking with a historically unique task: that of "quickly privatizing, resolutely reorganizing or cautiously shutting down" 10,334 enterprises. Yet most of these enterprises produced articles that were antiquated, excessively polluted the environment in many cases and did not stand a chance on world markets.

Unknown Before Unification

Completely unknown in eastern Germany before unification was the control of administration by an independent judiciary. The latter has to be set up from scratch, but many judges and public prosecutors have a trained political past and are thus scarcely able to cope with, for example, the most explosive problem left behind by the collapsed communist regime: the results of

the work of the Ministry of State Security, known as "Stasi", which spied on people in all walks of life and infiltrated every organization. According to Joachim Gauck, once a vicar in Rostock and now the Special Government commissioner for Personal Records, the rows of Stasi files stored in Berlin alone are probably over a hundred kilometres long, not to mention the millions of index cards, photos and films. The card catalogue of victims includes millions of names, and that of the agents several hundreds of thousands.

The administration of justice must also be developed in the new Lander. Initial success is being achieved. Efforts are being made to provide suitable training, which western judges, public prosecutors and professors assisting Administrative officials from the west — roughly ten thousand at present — are also active in towns between Schwerin and Chemnitz, between Eisenach and Gortitz, because only a functioning administration will make it possible to carry out the essential reforms of the infrastructure, extending from housing and new roads to the renovation of hospitals.

Complete Reorganization

The judiciary and administration have to be completely reorganized. In other areas, however, there is a basis on which to build. This applies

particularly to the field of research. It is increasingly being acknowledged that some institutes of the former Academy of Sciences offer great prospects for research in the whole of Germany. "The universities in the new Lander have good and in some cases excellent young or old researchers and teams in almost all disciplines," said Professor Hubert Markl, president of the German Research Foundation. At over forty research institutes it is possible to continue work which supplements areas of research in the western Lander or opens up new domains hitherto unexplored in the west.

The beginning of the upswing in eastern Germany is also indicated by consumption patterns. In the first few months after the collapse of the regime the people in the former GDR sought only western products: chocolate, citrus fruits, household appliances, consumer electronics and especially cars. Easter products were scorned in east and west alike. Although the interest in western cars remains, a new trend is emerging in respect of many other consumer goods. According to an opinion poll, 90% of people in eastern Germany consider local products to be on a par with western German articles.

Conversely, customers in the western part of the country have nothing against eastern German products.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Expatriates, repatriates and a book

Sir, A programme on manpower export and earning of foreign exchange was conducted by BTV on 12th January after 10 pm news in which three resource persons participated. It would have been enriched if participated also by a representative of the "Probashi-o" Protyagato Kollyan Sangho (expatriate and repatriate welfare association), who could put their first-hand experience and practical knowledge.

On conclusion of the programme the name of the book "Probashi-o Protyagato Jonoshokti Ebong Artho-Samajik Unnayan" (expatriated and repatriated manpower and socio-economic development), written by Mr S A Hossain, a veteran resource person, flashed to my mind. Most of the points discussed in the said programme is covered by that book, in addition to various other points. It means the writer has put in the things thought and required by the people and the government for general advancement.

He maintained regular touch with the Bangladeshi expatriates during his tours over several countries for more

than 20 years. He passed a few years as an expatriate himself and is now maintaining close contact with his permanent return. Accumulating these experiences he is well aware of the woes and aspirations, faults and benefits of these people.

The writer's main objective is gradual elimination of poverty and unemployment, utilising foreign earned money and experience appropriately in the fields of industry, agriculture, co-operatives and trade.

In general we are shy or even miser in reading books. At the same time it is not convenient to collect the newspaper cuttings and store for a long time. Keeping that point in view, S A Hossain contained his book to only 70 pages, where he very appropriately and effectively highlighted the essential points like — treachery with foreign job seekers; obstacle created by redtapism; want of training; manpower traders; permanently settled Bangladeshi manpower in the UK; problem of shelter and children's education of expatriates and repatriates; the absence of sense of direction; "Hundi"; joint venture with the government and this group of people for putting the financial

condition on an even keel, etc. The present government, however, lent its ears to the research writing. Going through the synopsis of the manuscript of the book the Foreign Minister and the Finance Minister have given their valuable comments in the book. Had there been a proper atmosphere for this writer to carry on further research, he could have contributed more to the society.

Momtaz Uddin Ahmed, Indra Road, Dhaka.

H H Chowdhury: A tribute

Sir, We are greatly shocked at the death of Mr. Hamdul Huq Chowdhury, Chairman of the Observer Group of Publications. We deeply condole his death and pray to the Almighty Allah for the salvation of his departed soul. We also extend our profound sympathy and condolences to the members of his bereaved family and to the members of the Observer family. May Allah bless them the fortitude to bear the loss.

Late Hamdul Huq Chowdhury was one of the pioneers in the organization of newspaper industry in this part of the Sub-continent. His newspapers including "The Bangladesh Observer" had contributed significantly in the socio-economic uplift of this country. He was one who never used his newspaper for either political or self-aggrandizement which is to an extent a common practice now-a-days.

Late Chowdhury was an outstanding lawyer. His book "Memoirs" is excellent. I express my deep respect and admiration for late Hamdul Huq Chowdhury. I hope that people in the helm of the Observer management will adopt all possible measures to retain smooth publication of the Bangladesh Observer and Chitralekha which are great contributions of Late Hamdul Huq Chowdhury and in my opinion, his memories will well be preserved through these.

M Zahidul Haque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

Toll collection

Sir, The government has taken a few steps to clear out "toll collectors" from the society. BTV, even dared to show some faces on the screen. But still groups or gangs and that riding motorbikes are "efficiently" active at Mirpur in Dhaka. What we don't understand if these sorts of hooligans are continuing this disorder hiding from the eyes of law or the law is simply overlooking them.

A resident Mirpur, Dhaka.

Inter-city train stoppage

Sir, Manikkhal railway station under Katiadi upazila in Kishoreganj district is an important station on the Dhaka-

Bhairab Bazar-Mymensingh line. People from different walks of life travel from the capital city Dhaka to Katiadi upazila and vice versa through this station. Unfortunately, the inter-city train "Egarasindur" does not stop at Manikkhal. As a result, people's sufferings have increased to a great extent. The volumes of services and income of this station deserve the stoppage of 'Egarasindur'.

The Railway division of Communication Ministry is earnestly requested to take immediate measures for the stoppage of inter-city train 'Egarasindur' at Manikkhal station.

M. Moniruzzaman, Chamelbag, Dhaka.

Bihari Camps

Sir, At least 320 NGOs have been working in Bangladesh to help ameliorate the sufferings of the destitute, the hapless and the marooned. Some of them are engaged in providing facilities for education, socio-economic and cultural uplift. Some are also creating job opportunity for the jobless. Their humanitarian services are guided by the noblest spirit so that each and everyone may enjoy human rights in its broadest term, as envisaged in the latest Human Rights Declaration. Humanitarian services do not believe in caste, creed, linguistic or nationality barrier. Ironically enough, the non-locals, called "Biharis" have been passing a squalid life — a parody of life in 66 camps all over Bangladesh, none of the

NGOs could look at them. These camps are full of poverty, disease, illiteracy and insanitation. Physical environment of these camps are very appalling. The killer cyclone of 1991 further multiplied their sufferings. These camps are but a sad commentary on humanity in silence sending SOS to human conscience all over the world.

Thank goodness that the heart of Mr. P N Austin of CAFOD was moved with pity when he visited these camps in Chittagong. Under his own initiative CAFOD had done appreciable services in Halishahar and other camps in Chittagong. Unfortunately the cyclone of 1991 brutally reversed the services so far rendered by the CAFOD in the non-locals camps here. The CAFOD is likely to embark upon a very ambitious programme, "Bihari Refugee Projects". Very recently, this NGO built low-cost huts in Halishahar non-locals camp and has now started in other camps.

Much more is still left to be done by the CAFOD such as the supply of fresh drinking water, sanitation, mother-child care and motivation. The most attractive aspect of the CAFOD project is community-based. It is hoped the CAFOD will not let these ill-fated and uncared human beings down in their trying times. Let us also hope other NGOs will follow suit.

Z H Ansari, Secretary Relief Committee, Halishahar Non-Locals Camp Chittagong.