

DOWN TO EARTH

No space to breathe in city

By A S M Nurunnabi

Dhaka city was once a city of verdant beauty and large open spaces, particularly in the Ramna area. The old part of the city was also not without its open spots, though few in number, which, considering the low density of population in that period, seemed to meet the needs for open air. All this recalls only nostalgic memories.

The city has since passed through momentous changes in the whole gamut of its life in course of about four decades, first as a provincial capital and then as a capital of an independent country. Inevitably the processes of growth and expansion concomitant to the burgeoning population took their toll on the available open spaces. It is generally felt that throughout its chequered existence, the city suffered, as in many other spheres of civic amenities, from lack of foresight and vision, on the part of the town planners in the matter of provision of open spaces which may serve as lungs for its citizenry.

Our nostalgia takes us to the olden times when, in the old part of Dhaka, the Armanitola maidan and the wide river fronts of Buriganga were the highlights of available open spaces. In the Ramna there was the popular Paltan Maidan. Besides this, there was the vast expanse of open spaces all around, untrammelled by the rising pressure of population and embellished with verdant beauty of tree-lined pathways. The nostalgia that has been mentioned only affects the old timers. The new generations are deprived of the ubiquitous blissful serenity that those open spaces presented during those days.

Now we are in the thick of a desperate quest for some open space where we can fill our lungs with fresh air. The whole Purana Paltan area has been eaten up by the stadium complex and its annexures for other games and sports. The Ramna Park and the Suhrawardy Uddan which were previously favourite haunts of fresh air seekers have lately lost much of their charm because of growing presence of anti-social elements. In old Dhaka also, the Armanitola maidan has lost its former charm. It has become a dumping ground for building materials and sundry other things with gradual encroachments being made by a large number of trucks and buses. The condition of Bahadur Shah Park is no better. The Buriganga river fronts are now a medley of rickshaws, hawkers and roadside shops with a heavy density of milling crowds.

The problem of scarcity of open spaces is compounded by the ever growing propensity of political parties and organizations to use the limited open spaces available for their meetings, gatherings and other action programmes like sit-ins. For such purposes, the most favoured spot, are the places in front of the Press Club, Baitul Mukarram Square, Shapla Chattar and the road-island in front of the Dhaka University Teachers Student Centre.

The huge number of rickshaws plying in the city streets have already been creating serious headache for road traffic controllers. The situation gets harrowing when the broad road areas are frequently used as venues for public meetings. Half the Topkhana Road remains closed almost daily when such meetings are held, creating problems for traffic of all descriptions and causing nasty jams for long hours.

What can be the way out of this impasse? Some people think that in the existing state of things there may be limited scope for improvement even if the town planners may try for it. What is more important, in their opinion, is to ensure adoption of appropriate measures to keep the existing open spaces free from encroachments and also to remain vigilant that the atmosphere in these areas is not vitiated through the presence of anti-social elements. This can be possible if the law-enforcing agencies, the City Corporation and Rajuk are serious in their endeavours in their respective spheres. In this context, they also feel that the concerned authorities should consider the question of provision of recreation facilities, particularly in the existing parks and open spaces. For example, short trips by motor boats in the Dhanmandi lake or the Ramna Park can be an attraction.

There is another dimension to the problems — the political parties and other organizations have the democratic right to hold meetings, rallies etc from this perspective, it seems that the appropriate authorities should seriously think of ways & means to provide open spaces for such purposes without creating jams for traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian.



Golapbala : A competitor with her roses at the Rose Festival-92 at Dhaka Club yesterday. —Photo: Enam

The Midnight File

EC union treaty signed

MAASTRICHT (Netherlands), Feb 7: The Maastricht treaty creating a European political, economic and monetary union was signed here today by foreign and finance ministers of the 12 European Community states. The treaty, which was negotiated in this town in December, must now be ratified by the parliaments of member states. The Maastricht Treaty commits the 12 EC members to a common currency before the year 2000 and to greater cooperation in the fields of foreign policy, defence and immigration, reports AFP.

Sultan Ali Keshmand shot at

KABUL, Feb 7: Former Afghan premier Sultan Ali Keshmand was shot at and wounded today by a gunman outside a Suburban mosque here, but his condition was not clear, ruling Watan Party sources said. A lone gunman fired three shots at Keshmand at around 3:00 pm (0830 GMT), when he was reportedly leaving a mosque after Juma prayers, the sources and the official Bakhtar news agency said. The attacker escaped, reports AFP.

Ravi Shankar

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country including Comilla, Brahmanbaria and Chittagong. During his stay, Ravi Shankar presented two sitar sessions at the exclusive Osmani Memorial hall and at the Shilpakala Academy auditorium. On both the sessions, hundreds of people waited outside.

The Director General of the Shilpakala Academy Kamal Lohani told the function that the visit of the sitarist would inspire the younger artists of the country to devote themselves to the classical music.

He thanked Ravi Shankar and said that a total of 3,71,800 Taka collected from the Wednesday's recital organised to raise fund at the Academy auditorium would be spent for the distressed artists of the country.

The DG presented a portrait of the sitarist by painter Alakesh Ghosh. Khurshid Khan, the grand son of Ustad Ayet Ali Khan, the daughter of folk singer Mamta Ali Khan and members of the 'Projanma 71' also presented gifts to Panditji.

Ravi Shankar's wife Sukanya Ravi Shankar and other companions were present at the function.

However, the reception was marked by lack of grace and discipline. There was no garland or bouquet to greet the maestro, who visited the country under a bilateral cultural exchange programme between Bangladesh and India.

A motley crowd swarmed the sitarist and his companions on arrival at the venue of the reception.

The sitarist was ushered in on to the stage where he stood more than half an hour amid artists of a cultural function, which preceded the reception. Academy officials and other people to wait for his turn to speak to the audience. No sitting arrangements were there. Nobody bothered to respond to the requests.

Only last year, when the Caretaker Government of Shahabuddin Ahmed was in power, the Ekushey Book Fair was held in a totally free atmosphere. It was full of life, and free of any fear or pressure. And also free of presence of heavy boots and assault rifles.

Govt hopes

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ties in the maintenance of public order.

The press note said the government was considering to provide tax rebate for import of new trucks and buses. It was also thinking extending various facilities to transport owners like bank loan and interest rebate extended to industrialists.

The government was seriously considering to lower the price of diesel as far practicable from July under the net budget, the press note said.

It said the strike was called when the government had taken various steps to meet the cost due to the price hike of diesel resulting from the Gulf War.

The price of diesel had to be increased because of unusual price hike around the world following the Gulf crisis, the press release noted.

Besides granting tax rebates, relaxing interest and extending loans the government had extended the time limit of transport owners to pay their arrears income-taxes. While the duty on spare parts has been reduced by 25 per cent, the press note added.

The government was also working to amend the concerned law of decentralisation of route permits. Steps have also been taken to pay fares for requisitioned vehicles, the press note said.

In the backdrop of these steps the government very logically hopes that the transport owners would not take any step that would create hardships for the common passengers. Dwelling on the steps taken by the present government to meet the various demands of the transport workers, the press note said, the government had held at least 20 meetings in eight months with the transport owners to solve the problems through discussions. The government expresses its regret for this unwarranted situation which was going to take place and that the Owners' Association did not pay heed to keep away from politics.

France, Russia sign treaty

PARIS, Feb 7: France and Russia pledged in a landmark treaty today to hold their nuclear arsenals to a "minimum sufficiency," consult on crises and work for a European security treaty, reports Reuters.

Presidents Francois Mitterrand and Boris Yeltsin signed the accord.

Transport strike

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The 19-point charter of demands of the transport owners and workers include increase in the time frame for payment of arrear income tax, reduction of the duty on the spare parts, decentralisation of the route permit issuance system, and stoppage of toll collection.

BSS adds: Bangladesh Bus-Track Owners Association Friday expressed itself in favour of solving the road transport problems through discussions instead of resorting to strike.

Referring to the efforts of the Home Minister for solving the problems vis-a-vis the strike call given by the Bangladesh Road Transport Association from today, Bangladesh Bus-Track Owners Association felt these could be solved through discussion. In this connection, the association pointed out that its general secretary had apprised the Prime Minister of the problems of transport business in December last.

The association urged the road transport leaders to seek solution to the problems of this sector in a realistic manner. Otherwise, it said, the strike would only accentuate the sufferings of owners, workers and passengers. Conclusion of any agreement under duress was no answer to the root problems of this sector, the association stressed.

Trawler workers begin strike

Some 2,000 workers of deepsea fishing trawlers in the country began an indefinite strike Friday demanding increased wages and benefits, reports UNB.

The strike has been called by the Deepsea Fishing Trawler Workers Union to press for its 10-point demand which includes 50 per cent rise in wages and increase of on-board allowance to Tk 1,500 from Tk 800.

Meanwhile, a joint statement of trade union leaders Friday expressed complete solidarity with the strike action of the trawler workers union.

JKLF march

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forcibly stop the JKLF marchers if Islamabad failed to control the Kashmiris in Pakistan from crossing the line of control dividing the two.

If anybody is trying to cross the Line of Control (Kashmir Frontier), it is the duty of Pakistan to stop it, we will do it, the Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted Pawar as telling reporters.

We are fully prepared to deal with anyone who in violation of international law would make an attempt to enter into Indian territory from across the border, a military official said.

"Our defence and security forces are fully prepared to meet the challenge", the official added.

The Director general of Jammu and Kashmir police, BS Bedi today warned that the JKLF activists participating in the march would be shot if they tried to cross over into India.

"We will shoot those who violate the border by crossing it," Bedi told newsmen in Jammu.

India was determined to "resist with appropriate firmness any efforts to infringe the country's sovereignty or to violate the country's borders," Foreign Ministry spokesman Aftab Seth said. He said the army commanders at the border will determine the use of "proportionate force" to repel the marchers.

"This is a dangerous situation. It could lead to dangerous consequences that India does not want," Seth told reporters.

He said the ambassadors of the so-called Economic Community troika — Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain — Friday expressed concern over the proposed march and also urged India to ensure that "no disproportionate force is used against the (Pakistani) demonstrators."

On Thursday, India urged UN Security Council members to use their clout to ease tensions in Kashmir.

Also Thursday, Islamabad said it would not allow the Ceasefire Line which divides — India and Pakistan — held Kashmir to be violated by the militants, which would create a dangerous situation along the tense border.

But Amanullah Khan said, "we will across the Ceasefire Line even if it costs a thousand lives."

The JKLF's protest coincides with the eighth anniversary of the hanging in a New Delhi prison of the group's founder-leader Maqbool Bhat.

Jammu-Kashmir is India's only Muslim majority state with 65 per cent of its 6 million people following Islam. Nationwide, Muslims comprise 12 per cent of India's 844 million people. Hindus account for 82 per cent.

Shaheed Day

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port and proposals to the Assembly on September 28, 1950, and with that, the true picture of what sort of a country Pakistan's rulers wanted to create, began to emerge.

According to the FPFC's proposals, the legislature was to be divided into two Houses with equal powers. The catch was that the Upper House would be composed of two members from each of the five provinces. The Lower House, where East Bengal would have a natural majority, would be helpless as the Upper House was given powers to delay or reject legislation enacted by the former.

In other words, although East Bengal, had a larger population than West Pakistan, it would be outnumbered eight to two in the Upper House and end up being totally dominated by Karachi and Rawalpindi.

That wasn't all. Provincial assemblies were to be turned into rubber stamp ones, with no power to amend or annul any decision taken or law enacted by the centre.

The presidency was invested with Draconian powers; he — the question of a 'she' simply did not arise at the time — would have powers to declare emergency, suspend the constitution, dissolve provincial assemblies, enact laws regarding provincial matters etc. A little Hitler in the making, in fact.

The FP was full of such brazenly undemocratic proposals. But the icing on the Hitlerian cake was the proposal to make Urdu the only state language of Pakistan.

The ideas of autonomy and democracy were thrown right out of the window and the Bengalees faced the prospect of being turned into a colonised and culturally retarded people once again.

The Pakistan Observer, along with the progressive intelligentsia of East Bengal, student groups, opposition parties, even some factions within the Muslim League, became stridently vocal against this blueprint for fascism.

The Observer was not the only paper to speak out against the government. But perhaps because it had already become one of the most influential papers in the country, the government in Karachi and its lackeys in Dhaka led by Nurul Amin waited more eagerly for an opportunity to silence Abdus Salam's mighty pen than anybody else's.

The real surprise was that the astute Salam had so carelessly provided such an opportunity. In any other country, Salam's editorial 'Crypto Fascism' would probably have been regarded as a masterpiece.

But in the quasi-fundamentalist, inherently intolerant Pakistan of 1952, the writ from Salam's pen became a red rag to the bull.

Perhaps Salam wanted to show that fascism was no longer in the crypt in Pakistan; that it was already out and asserting itself.

Or perhaps he simply miscalculated. Whatever it might have been, the Observer, faced with legal strangulation, was forced to apologise and withdraw all references to Caliph Osman bin al-Affan.

BDR, BSF hold flag meeting

From Our Correspondent

SATKHIRA, Feb 7: A flag-meeting of the BDR and the BSF was held at Katutola under 24-Pargana district of West Bengal this morning.

In the meeting, BDR raised the issue of releasing 31 Bangladeshi fishermen who were arrested by Indian authorities. They also drew attention of the Indian side about illegal fishing by the Indians in the Bangladesh waters.

In reply the Indian side said that they would soon release the Bangladeshi fishermen.

Major Liakot led the Bangladesh team in the flag meeting while the Indian side was led by Baljit Singh.

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PM: Culture

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Ekushey Book Fair of Bangla Academy in the academy premises in the city.

Begum Zia said, "because of the colonial rule and oppression we are economically poor but in the fields of literature and culture we are not poor. Bangla is one of the developed languages in the world which has attained a prestigious position long before among world community," she said.

The Prime Minister said no nation had sacrificed lives like ours for the sake of the language adding that efforts must have to be continued for the development of Bangla language and literature despite resource constraints.

The Prime Minister said the advices from litterateurs and intellectuals would be welcomed in the efforts for enriching our language and literature.

The Prime Minister said the poets and litterateurs were the conscience of the nation. They had always remained in the side of justice and democracy and protested against wrong and injustice, she added.

Begum Zia said the artists and litterateurs played a great role during the War of Independence and remained active in the nine years of anti-autocracy movement.

The Prime Minister urged the litterateurs to continue to write for the happy and prosperous future.

Referring to the important contributions of the Ekushey Book Fair of Bangla Academy to the flourishing of the national culture, the Prime Minister said that efforts would have to be continued to make the publications of the country more attractive to the buyers and readers.

The Prime Minister suggested that an international book fair could be held every three years in the capital to make a positive contribution to the flourishing of the nation's art, literature and culture.

Begum Zia said the people had great expectations from the Bangla Academy regarding enrichment of their mother tongue.

Begum Khaleda Zia said the language movement was really a movement of education and culture in the final analysis. She regretted that majority people of the nation, which had sacrificed lives for the language, did not have the knowledge to read or write their own language.

The Prime Minister said "we can show proper respect to the martyrs of the language movement only when we will be able to give the light of education to all the people."

Begum Zia paid her deep respect to shaheeds of the language movement.

UNB adds: The Prime Minister recalled the contribution of the late linguist and educationist Dr Mohammed Shahidullah in establishing a national research organisation like the Bangla Academy.

Begum Zia announced a two crore Taka assistance to the academy for research and development of Bangla language.

New organization

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political leaders of the country always talk democracy, they in practice, have developed a tendency of ignoring democratic values and norms at all levels.

The draft, however, was optimistic about overcoming all problems through 'utilisation of local resources, talents and labour power of the country'. All we need is a political leadership equipped with firm determination, patriotism, psychological make-up free from parochialism to direct a united nation towards the goal, the draft added.

The persons involved in floating the forum have meanwhile, proposed a 14-point socio-economic and political programme with a view to establishing democratic values, building up democratic institutions throughout the country and strengthening the country's economy.

The 14-point programme includes, among other issues, ensuring the control of the elected representatives of the people over administration at all spheres, separation of the judiciary from the executive, development of local resources and their optimum utilisation, increase in scopes for private initiatives in the economy, ensuring freedom of the print media and autonomy of the state-run electronic ones.

Rain ruins book fair

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quickly. The more intrepid ones, however, decided to remove the books at the front of their stalls and stay open for a while longer. By 6.15 pm the rain had turned into a heavy downpour and even the rickshaws had vanished.

The street outside looked as if somebody had waved a magic wand and cleared it of all reminders of state power and pomp which adorned it only a while ago.

While the Prime Minister spoke, nearly 40 vehicles were parked along the pavement or in the middle of the road, including 12 police jeeps and two trucks of the Guards. The rest were civilian cars of various shapes, sizes and price tags.

It is inconceivable that they all belonged to the Prime Minister's entourage, but then, who would bet against it?

The Bangla Academy has certainly done a brilliant job of organising the street outside its premises this year. At least, that's how it appeared on the first day's evidence, and hopefully, that glorious observation went have to be amended (with or without referendums).

In the past, the street used to be occupied by unauthorised vendors selling everything from poorly-made handicrafts to Bangali translations of Lenin's works. This year, the Academy has set up stalls, about 80 of them, on the pavements on either side of a 75-yard stretch of the road.

Most of them are strictly non-book, selling foodstuff, handicrafts, cassettes, posters etc.

It will be interesting to see whether the unauthorised vendors, who usually spread their wares right on the middle of the road and make life hell for the visiting public, are able to make a comeback or not. Such a heavy police presence might have deterred them yesterday, but tomorrow is another, and there never is a last word when it comes to Bangladeshi entrepreneurship.

One particular trend set by last year's fair is being maintained, though not with the same gusto as 1991. Cultural stalls with a heavy political message, like those of the Zia Parishad, Jot Bangla Sangskritik Jote, Siraj Sikdar Smriti Sangsad, Amra Mujib Sena etc are here again. But the battle of the cassettes speeches is yet to begin.

The battle for the best stall prize will not be an easy one to settle this year, as so many of them are so magnificently decorated. Bangla Academy's own stall, although the largest, should not be in the contest at all, as it is by far the drabest things going.

The smaller stalls, by contrast, are far from drab. Some of them are positively overflowing with artistic touches, and totally devoid of influences of 'alien cultures.'

For the sharks of the trade like Bangla Academy, University Press Limited, Muktohdara etc, what matters is the selling of books. But for the minnows like Roktetter, Prezona etc, just to be there is good enough.

Koreas to set up joint bodies

SEOUL, Feb 7: South and North Korean officials initialled an agreement today on setting up three joint committees — political, military and exchange-cooperation — as stipulated in the inter-Korean reconciliation accord concluded in December, reports AFP.

Avalanches kill 57 more in Turkey

DIYARBAKIR (Turkey), Feb 7: Avalanches tore into 12 villages in blizzard-swept south-eastern Turkey today, killing 57 people, including eight children, officials said, reports Reuters.

The latest victims brought to 201 the overall death toll in the week since snowslides began striking terror across the region, scene of a revolt by separatist Kurdish guerrillas.