

The Vision Called Khulna

The city of Khulna was a few days back described in this journal as a city in limbo. Was The Daily Star overstating a genuine case? In our eagerness to do it a good turn, have we in fact weakened its true claim to be the third great city, if not the second, and the second greatest industrial complex, if not the first?

We are convinced that, on the contrary, we have not been able to give expression to Khulna's woes as it should have been done. And we must remember at all times that Khulna is comprehended — as it was indeed — as the kingpin to pull the western zone or northern district out of the morass it had been in ever since its rich primary products lost the market and Naogaon lost its world monopoly of hemp, with the partition of the Sub-continent in 1947. Even the colonialist Pakistan, patently in their own interest, tried to heal the gap that kept yawning between the opposing sides of the great Padma, Jamuna and Teesta. They started Mongla and laid the foundations of a great industrial megalopolis at Khulna, in order that the other part does not lag behind in development and does not need to be dependent on the eastern part's good grace to get to sea and stand on its own feet.

But Pakistan was wrong in its vital point. Only thermal power could not suffice to turn all wheels that need to assure the other part a truly fair industrial deal.

Lucky strikes after '72, however, offset these drawbacks in the vision. Natural gas was found in abundance in the eastern zone. And even petroleum. All that was needed to give life to Khulna as such the northern and western zones was to make general power and bulk gas available to Khulna. That didn't happen in spite of the much touted East-West Inter-connector. Natural gas was necessary also for a different and very important reason.

For want of fossil fuel almost all high-standing corpulent trees in the Khulna Division have gone into the oven — and in the Rajshahi Division the same conflagration has consumed green life there to feed the brickfield kilns. Khulna was the name of a vision to revive and rejuvenate, raise and enrich all of the other dying part — a far grander vision than a multipurpose multibillion Jamuna Bridge can conjure up.

For the realisation of that vision a third line of engagement was very necessary. And that was a straight land route to Khulna other than by way of the time-consuming circuitous path. A road was being built via Mawa which would connect Dhaka with Bhanga in Faridpur reducing the length to Jessore and Khulna and Sakhira etc. by at least 70 kilometres or save a two-hour journey. For mysterious reasons, buses and trucks cannot yet hit up Bhanga straight from Dhaka.

We do want to place a great emphasis on the need to materialise the dream called Khulna in the sincere belief that in it lies one key factor of rejuvenating the other part. Let gas go there, let the Mawa Road be smoothly serviceable and above all let Mongla be developed and put to such use as it can be capable of with imagination and application. And let all machinations of vested interests against these be defeated by the collective good sense of the government and all other forces of popular will.

Save Sunderbans to Save Future

Of late the Sunderbans has been making news for more than one reason. But the most awful prospect this unique mangrove forest, according to report, is facing is the threat to its very existence. First, it is the oil slick over a wide area advancing inexorably towards the forest with the dangerous prospect of wreaking havoc with flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. Second, the forest has been mauled by unthinking and excessively profit-mongering people. Third — and perhaps worse — is the rising salinity in the rivers around, thank to the withdrawal of the Ganges water at Farakka.

Already the impact is being largely felt in that the mangrove species are embracing a slow but premature death. If the process continues — there is no sign why it will be otherwise — there will be, scientists apprehend, no Sunderbans in the near future. The salinity level has long crossed the tolerable limit and peaked during the period 1989-92 when, significantly, there was no agreement between India and Bangladesh on the Farakka issue. As an attendant evil — and very much capable of influencing the overall ecosystem of the country — the increased salinity belt has spread about 100 miles upward posing further threat to industries and sources of drinking water.

Increasing salinity coupled with oil spill from ships and tankers, therefore, has the potential to spell an unmanageable disaster over the whole length and breadth of the country. As for the oil slick, our indigenous technology is too inadequate to cope with the growing problem. In that case, we surely have to look for international help. Sea pollution, after all, is not a localised issue. It is global in nature and therefore should be tackled through international cooperation. But the salinity problem is more bilateral than international. One way of fighting the current spate of salinity is to augment the flow of the river Gorai up to at least 10,000 cusecs. This is an expert opinion and maybe it is right. Unfortunately the flow through the Gorai, over the last 20 years, has gone down to almost zero level and redress to it has to be sought from the chronic problem of Farakka Barrage. The case for Bangladesh thus becomes strong enough to convince India, which also is having its own share of problem from Farakka, of the merit of a rational water-sharing between India and Bangladesh. The essential truth that ecological degradation is a threat to our common future should be recognised and it should be fought unilaterally too. And that is how we can save the future for our posterity.

THE PEOPLE AND THE PARLIAMENT

Duty-free 'Despotic Car' for MPs

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

"..... If I mistake, counsel me. To tell truth to a person commissioned to rule is faithful allegiance; to conceal it is treason...." — Hazrat Abu Bakr (R)

It brings benefits to the members.

The country got rid of the autocratic rule nearly a year ago and most of the members of the present Sangsad fought alongside the people of this country for the purpose. This august sovereign body — the present Sangsad — bears the highest responsibility and the people, after so much of bloodshed and sacrifices, expect it to discharge its duties and responsibilities with all sincerity and devotion giving highest priority to the welfare of the people. It did give an extremely laudable performance when it rolled back presidential system and reintroduced the parliamentary form of democracy. But thereafter people's expectations on many issues and particularly on campus violence remained unfulfilled.

Against The Rules

Particularly on an issue of special duty-free car that created an unprecedented advantage for the parliament members, the present Sangsad's reaction on it has undoubtedly created some concern in the minds of the people. This is not so much for the special benefit that the members may get but for the reason that this was something unprecedented and against the standard fiscal laws and international rules.

Generally, the duties and taxes on imports which is international trade are governed

by international rules and particularly the rules set by the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT). The international rule is — when an item is imported everyone pays duties and taxes as per country's tariff schedule; only exceptions are the diplomats and some privileged persons of foreign origin. When an import item is exempted from duties and taxes the benefit goes to everyone importing that item; it can not be restricted to a particular person or persons as this will lead to discrimination and go against internationally accepted fiscal laws. One may argue that laws are framed by the parliament and it can frame the law to exclusively benefit its members. It may be then the law becomes discriminatory and the sovereign parliament is not expected to do so.

The past autocratic regime did it to benefit its supporters and it would be the right thing for the present sovereign parliament — elected through fair and impartial election — to overturn it. It is people's privilege and it is expected to give priority to framing laws to benefit those whom the mem-

People Not Aversed

However, the people are not averse to parliament members getting their due responsibilities in view the high responsibilities they are discharging. But it must be in conformity with the international rules and fiscal discipline. Instead of allowing duty-free import of cars for the members, which meant loss of government revenue, the government could have paid the duties on behalf of the members out of some special budgetary provisions — maybe as members' transport allowances — instead creating such fiscal anomalies. The amount could have been adjusted over a period of time through some agreed means. Alternatively, after the expiry of the term of the members the car could be returned to the government and the member could be reimbursed the cost paid by him after some deductions by way of depreciation. So far as the members are concerned it would have been a duty-free car but without violating the fiscal discipline. There could be no objection as the car was

going back to the government as an asset which could be sold and funds realised though in reduced amounts. This could allow some replenishment of the suggested special budgetary provisions for the parliament members. This could give the issue proper transparency. But as it seems, the past regime did this deliberately in order to give financial benefit to its members as reportedly some cars were sold immediately after import with big gains.

However, there is no doubt that parliament members need transports and they should be provided with full-time official transports, subject to availability, whenever the parliament was in session and whenever they were on official duties. The people may not even mind if the parliament members are provided with full-time government transports but they would obviously be against this type of discriminatory practices giving exclusive benefit to the parliament members only.

A Request

A request and not an advice as an issue of exclusive benefits are being discussed. The respected parliament members know at what cost the people got this sovereign parliament and therefore they have special responsibilities towards the people of this country. The country is facing serious economic crisis. While there is

virtual stagnation in the trade and industries sectors — rural economy already in coma, there have been fierce competitions from all sides — depending on who to where — for increases in pay, allowances, house rent even if the government accommodation is available, allowances for domestics etc. Some have already got them and others are preparing to put forward their demands.

The government officials aside, even the teachers of private colleges, seeing the trend of increases everywhere, have also gone on indefinite strike for realising their demands — they say their demands are just and reasonable. Agreed, but how the government becomes liable to meet their demands on higher pay and allowances when they work for the private institutions? There is, however, no denying the fact that there is need for the increases but is the country in a position to bear these increased expenditures? The answer is a big NO.

Let the wise parliament seriously consider the issue of present competitive pay hikes keeping in view the country's economic situation and put a stay order on all increases including their own — if they go for their own pay-hike others can not be stopped — until the economic recovery becomes certain. Otherwise, the country is likely to face not only economic collapse but also serious political crisis — that may even threaten the newly established democracy.

The author, a former Secretary and Ambassador, is a columnist of The Daily Star.

WITH the diminished threat of superpower nuclear war, the United Nations is urging the world's rich and poor nations to "beat their swords into ploughshares and convert their missiles into meat-grinders."

A three-day conference scheduled to be held Feb 24-27 in Dortmund, Germany, will explore how and why the world's military industries should abandon their fighter planes and battle tanks in favour of computers, cookers and refrigerators.

The United Nations argues that a central issue in the process of disarmament is the re-orientation and re-allocation of resources.

Led by its Centre for Science and Technology and its Department for Disarmament Affairs, the world body plans to spread the gospel of conversion to the "merchants of death."

Yashushi Akashi, undersecretary-general for disarmament affairs, told a UN gather-

Disarmament

From Missiles To Freezers

ing last year that "as conversion has become an urgent and practical necessity, the question was not whether such adjustments would take place, but rather the degree to which they would be easy or painful, long-lasting or transient, and what their effects would be."

Writing in the New York Times recently, Nobel laureate Lawrence Klein makes a strong case for "turning swords into toasters", arguing that civilian goods create income after their creation, but military hardware does not.

"It just sits there," says Klein who is currently emeritus professor of economics at the University of Pennsylvania. At the conference in Germany, about 150 decision-makers

The United Nations is urging the world's arms manufacturers to convert their fighter planes and battle tanks into cookers and refrigerators. Thalif Deen of IPS reports from New York.

from governments, defence industries and the scientific community are to discuss the technical feasibility of conversion, including institutional barriers to the restructuring of priorities.

A primary focus will be "dual-use" technology in sectors such as the world's aerospace industry which has both civilian and military applications.

The UN Centre for Science and Technology points out that

their military industries were producing civilian goods.

However, the United Nations says that the first and only country to actually develop a well thought-out plan for the conversion of its military industry is Sweden, which is not only going ahead with plans to drastically reduce its armed forces through the year 2015 but also to increase the output of civilian goods at the expense of military hardware.

The move to encourage conversion also comes at a time when both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are threatening to reassess all financial assistance to developing countries that are spending "excessively" on their military.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP), in the meantime, continues to urge these countries to reduce military spending and divert re-

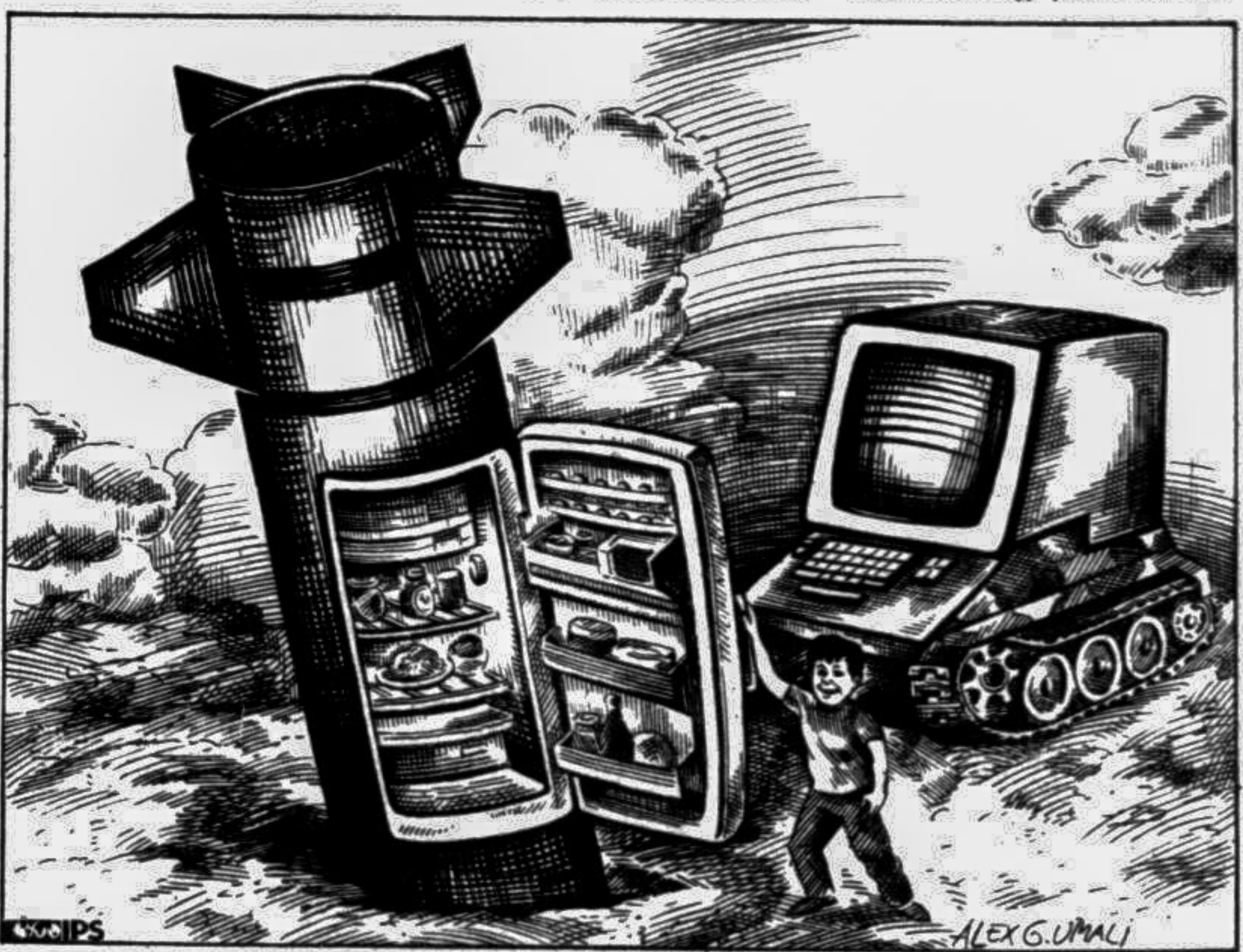
sources into education, health, child care and social welfare.

According to current UN estimates, global military spending is in excess of one trillion dollars, of which US\$900 billion are spent by industrialised nations, and the remaining US\$200 billion by the Third World.

The United States, one of the world's biggest arms exporters, has perhaps made the least progress in conversion. Defence analysts argue that the conversion of the vast military-industrial complex into civilian production lines is not an easy process for both technical and marketing reasons.

Major arms manufacturers, including Grumman, Raytheon, General Dynamics and Boeing, say their operations are not suited for civilian production. Boeing, which once tried to produce electric trolleys, trams and subway cars at its helicopter manufacturing plant, abandoned plans mainly because of problems related to marketing and quality control.

As one defence analyst pointed out: "The problem with US companies is that once they are hooked on weapons, they do not easily kick the habit."



To the Editor...

Heroin at Mohammadpur

Sir, Perhaps the term "Heroin" is no more unknown to any one. Just a few years ago it was difficult to find a heroin addict anywhere in Bangladesh. But now-a-days we are rather tired of seeing these addicts generally identified by their abnormal gestures almost everywhere.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries of the world and it needs contribution from the youths to come out of the "vicious circle of poverty." Because, youths are the driving force of a nation and no nation can expect a flourishing economy without proper involvement of this force. But, sadly, a recent survey indicates that among the drug addicts 75% are youths. And it is more of concern to note that not only the young boys but girls are also in the race!

In Mohammadpur, one of the most talked of residential areas of the city, this "business" of addiction has become an open secret. Heroin is being sold in the Town Hall camp and some other places by some outsiders and well-known "mastans" about whom, many allege, police is well informed but little active against.

Sometimes residents of the areas have to keep awake whole night in fear of attack by the "mastans" under the impulse of drug. Would the higher authorities of the police department look into the allegation, to the redress of some Mohammadpur residents, and in the interest of the country's youths at large.

Md Reazuddin, Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Heinous crime

Sir, What a heinous crime was committed at Rangunia! Two brothers were brutally assaulted while their father was savagely murdered. We're deeply shocked and anguished to witness the heart-breaking video report in the "Drishtikon" magazine programme of BTV telecast on 14 February night.

It was stated that the enemy originated with a criminal group as the victims refused to pay illegal tools to them. It is most unfortunate that the role of the police was insignificant. I think, in such alarming cases, special police squad should be sent from the capital to deal with the situation. Help from the army

personnel may also be taken to contain the criminal activities of the notorious gangs.

It is strongly hoped that the government will take stern measures to curb the criminals and to protect the lives and properties of the law abiding citizens. Let the case of the poor victims of Rangunia be dispensed with proper justice. These people didn't go for taking the law in their hands. Rather they went from door to door for legal protection. The poor father had to sacrifice his own life for demanding justice for his sons who became victims of the unlawful activities committed by some notorious criminals.

In this connection, I would like to suggest that the authorities should impose restrictions on the import, marketing and screening of violent Hindi movie videos. I would also request the Bombay film-makers to produce films depicting the ugly appearances of the criminals and the dire consequences of committing crimes. The strong sides of law and order should be visualized in the movies.

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OPINION

Education and the English Language

Nahid Rahman

With its many euphemism, puns, adages, similes and spelling rules the English language is very humorous at times, but funnier are the parents who are under the impression that by sending their offspring to one of the numerous English Medium schools, their beloved progeny will acquire a minimum level of intelligence and learn enough English to become an average medium English speaking "conversationalist."

Parents should not think that English medium schools are Professor Henry Higgins who can mould students into Eliza Doolittle over night. The foundation of all education is made during the early school years where a child learns its mother tongue (Bangla in our case), English and mathematics. Mastering these basic skills will ensure his or her future. By making a child slave over the additional subjects during its early childhood is unnecessary.

However, when a demand of this kind is created one can be assured that there are enough intelligent people to exploit it for economic gains. Thus even if one is in search of a school with a name of X, Y or Z they will inevitably stumble upon an English medium school in Dhanmondi. Schools such as these are commonly known as Tutorials. Though I have yet to conduct a survey in other areas, I am certain that the situation in the more affluent areas of Dhaka are parallel and students who attend these schools may have a lot to lose than gain from it in the long run.

Commuting through the inner Dhanmondi area, I see a lot of children on their way to school with their bags and water carriers dangling from the sides, invariably accompanied by their mothers (the father is probably at work). It is upto the mother to be aware of the Trauma her child regularly faces from the classrooms and playing fields to the homework tables. She should know who her child's teachers and friends are, what is

taught at school and if her child is actually learning anything. But unfortunately the trends are quite different in our education system whether it's Bangla or English medium. To send a child to a particular school has become an overrated issue with society conscious parents.

In most Banglali families, I know the mother helps her child with the homework. This task is most probably universal in character. But beyond a certain level, professional help becomes essential. So having a teacher for each subject on the syllabus becomes necessary for the Bangladeshi student. Recently I had the opportunity of seeing my sixth standard cousin's science question paper where I came across the word Interferon. My first encounter with this word was in my Immunology class at the advanced level of a university Biochemistry MSC course! I am still wondering as to why it was there.

My amazement was even greater when a boy of the seventh standard asked me whether I studied Animal Farm as a fairy tale or a political allegory. A little later he informed that his teacher mentioned the latter term in her summary of the text. He seemed perplexed that I did not know what a "political allegory" was until my last year at high school. If Animal Farm or Gulliver's Travels are to be included as part of the English Literature course, my request is that they introduce it as a fairy tale if not for helping to inculcate a reading habit into them so that he or she may grow up wanting to read it as a political commentary, than for allowing Orwell's and Swift's soul to rest in peace at least.

There are plenty of such schools; names have been carefully avoided because even amidst such organized chaos there are lessons to be learnt. In spite of all its shortcomings schools are a wonderful place where we learn to live and

share and respect teachers and elders. It is not only a place to grind over the pages. Education should transcend beyond the realms of text books only and raise enough curiosity to find out more about the subject. It should teach each individual the process of learning to interpret and apply that knowledge in all practical aspects of life. Like the set of Tangal sari shops, video clubs, Kabab houses and coaching centers (I will not mention clinic because that will from the basis of yet another debatable issue), schools should not become a subset of this matrix.

The creed amongst the middle class families of Bangladesh as well as in other cultures is that education is the only means for a better life. Naturally parents wish the best for their child which includes a better life than the one they have lived, at least in terms of material comforts. Good paying jobs abroad can therefore serve as yardstick of success.

In the developing countries, English has become the only language of communication. The reasons for such a development is self explanatory. With the current trends in the educational institutions in the country, parents and students are looking for alternatives abroad. Those who can afford the exorbitant price tags of foreign education have opted for Europe and America and others with a little less money but still unwilling to make any compromise with the quality of education have turned to India. So it logically follows that, if one is adequately equipped with English the transition from one level of education to another becomes relatively easy.

Knowing English and Bangla well are equally important and it is immaterial whether one has a degree in medicine, engineering or is an MBA. But whatever the chosen field, one must pursue it with fervour and dedication and aim at being the best in this area since mediocrity simply isn't enough.