

Dhaka, Sunday, June 28, 1992

Transport to Nowhere

The country-wide strike by transport workers, which was of dubious validity to begin with, went completely off the rails within days. The split among the various transport unions, apparent from the very outset, robbed the action of any real effectiveness, in so far as putting pressure on the government was concerned. Instead, it piled on misery on the low-income groups of the country. Amid all the violence from both the pro and anti-strike factions, the purpose behind the action seemed to have been forgotten. So much so, that public confidence in the ability of the labour unions to conduct themselves responsibly appears to have been severely shaken.

Not only that, the government's handling of the dispute has also left a lot to be desired. This wasn't the first such confrontation with transport unions that the present government has had to face, nor did the dispute appear from out of the blue. For some inexplicable reasons, the government failed to pursue the issue at an early stage, and later on, allowed the line of communication to disappear. The result was violent picketing and equally violent attempts to break the strike.

The Minister for Communication Col. (retd) Oli Ahmed felt he had made enough concessions not to warrant a confrontation. But somehow, one cannot shake off the feeling that the government was relying more on the disunity among union ranks to render the strike ineffective than on meaningful negotiations to resolve issues at dispute. Whatever the case might have been, the result has not been to the good of any party, least of all the citizenry which always become the first victim of any dispute involving a public utility, whether privately-owned or state-controlled.

The dispute has clearly shown the dangers inherent in a policy of taking actions late in the day. There was plenty of time to have a drawn-out series of negotiations, as the unions had given ample advance warning as to their eventual intention in case of failure of talks. The time in hand should also have been used by the government to build an effective mechanism for continuous parley, so that even in the event of a strike action, negotiations could continue with a unified body representing the workers. On the one hand, the government should realise that it is not in the public interest to split labour unions, since that can only lead to inter-union violence which can create serious industrial instability and economic dislocation.

On the other hand, the unions too should realise that they are part and parcel of this country, and their demands cannot in any way be divorced from the socio-economic realities of Bangladesh. It is well understood that the unions have a duty to get the best deal possible for their members, but it must also be recognised that the deal cannot be sought by pointing a loaded gun at the head of the public. Furthermore, it is imperative that the unions themselves try to retain unity among their constituent members, because it is neither possible for a fractured union to negotiate effectively, nor is it possible for a government to hold meaningful talks with such a union.

For the public interest, negotiations between the two sides in a dispute must be serious and with a clear, credible goal in mind. This strike should stand as a good lesson for both the government and unions in how not to approach a dispute.

Punishment for a Student

The student of the Physics Department, Dhaka University, who assaulted his teacher has been meted out, in absentia, the punishment he deserves. Not only has he been expelled from the university but also his B Sc honours degree has been cancelled. More, Sheikh Ansar Ali, the student, has been declared persona non grata on the university campus. The unfortunate incident prompted the teachers of the university to go on an indefinite strike. Their demand for the offending student's arrest and punishment is yet to be fulfilled. After the Syndicate's decision to punish the student has come, the teachers have also joined their duties.

It was an issue with grave imports. If the matter was allowed to pass without such a strong protest, it would be a blunder no doubt. Question however remains if there were any alternative to the strike the teachers could think of with equal impact. Usually the University of Dhaka or for that matter any other university of the country remains open only for a paltry few days and when the teachers refuse to take classes — in fact they had been on strike since June 6 — for a long period, the loss cannot be measured in terms of any single academic criterion alone.

The aggrieved teachers, nevertheless, are not to blame for this lingering strike. The issue could very well be taken care of promptly had the DU authority been keen on doing so. We understand some procedures have to be followed before taking a stringent measure such as this (taken against the student at fault). But we are also equally unsure if such a long time is required to act on a matter of such importance. The Syndicate has given its verdict on the recommendation of the Academic Council and the Disciplinary Board of the university. One wonders if the procedures could be less time-consuming and thus help avoid such a long session of classless days.

Still then the decision is most welcome, for a university already encumbered with endless problems has lost much of its past glory. If an offender of Ansar Ali's order goes unpunished, the university's image would have been further tarnished. There is no doubt that the student has paid dearly for the wrong he has committed. And it is his own doing — mostly. A few questions however do not rest there. The most troubling question, to our minds, is: will this incident put an end to similar unfortunate turn of events in future as well? We are not sure. The fact that relations between teachers and students have come to face a set of new realities should not go unnoticed. There is certainly a need for reevaluating the relations between them.

In this case the student is undoubtedly the offender — no matter how engrossing his grievances were. He has simply underestimated the sanctity not only of the relations between teachers and students but also of the institution the teacher represents. But not all the students are so nasty and when they are subjected to partial and unjust treatment — so far as the evaluation of their merits is concerned — there should be a provision for a fair hearing of their cases and also redressing their grievances without delay. The university authority should give serious thought to the matter.

Politics in Thailand — Beginning of a New Phase

POLITICS in Thailand has taken a fascinating turn. The bloody attempt by the military to impose its will on the people has failed. Quite clearly, the first round has been won by the people.

The last minute decision made by the King, reportedly on the advice of the Speaker of the Parliament, prevented the appointment of Mr Samboon Rahong, the leader of the coalition backed by the military. Instead, much to the surprise and perhaps relief of the people, Mr Anand Panyarachun has been appointed by the king as the interim Prime Minister. Mr Anand has declared that he will dissolve the Parliament in two or three weeks and hold general elections in four months time. This decisive action by the king seems to have diffused tension and ended the political uncertainty in the country. In fact, this also marks the beginning of a new phase in the Thai people's long struggle to establish democracy in the country.

It is perhaps too early to predict the future of Thai politics. Has the military decided to call it quits and return to the barracks? I doubt it. Thai armed forces still believe that they are the custodian of the country's interests. This belief is so firmly embedded in the psyche of the officer corps that it is considered to be almost a divine right to intervene in

politics when they deem it right. A belief held for more than half a century cannot be shaken so easily. But the learning process has begun. The bloody riots of 1973 and 1992 have no doubt taught a lesson to those in the military who are willing to learn. The trouble is that some of the officers may not be keen to learn. Personal ambition as well as greed for money and power may stand in the way for them to see the writing in the wall.

The military seems to have failed to notice the fundamental change that has occurred in the last three decades in the structure of the Thai society. The phenomenal economic progress achieved by the country in the last three decades has created a large and affluent middle class. Industrial workers without much link with land are concentrated in urban centres. The tempo of economic growth has quickened in the last ten years creating a new yearning for a life style similar to that in the developed countries. Even the rural population is not immune to the influence of the western values though the military still seems to have some hold on them.

The urban population, growing rapidly in number and wealth, are assuming the characteristics of an industrial culture, similar to that in Korea and Taiwan. Higher education is having its impact on the ur-

ban elite. The businessmen, conscious of their power and strength and supported by the educated urban youth, are unwilling to accept the domination of the military. Thus, one can see the current power struggle as a fight between the entrenched power of the Thai military and the rising industrialists, bankers and business magnets. Since Thai politics is not ideologically oriented it was very easy for the busi-

nessmen to gain control of the political parties and establish their hold on political power. Despite wide-spread corruption among the politicians — primarily drawn from business circles (and some retired military officers) they succeeded in getting the support of the educated youth as the lesser of the two evils. This ambivalence on the part of the academics and students was evident in their attitude towards the

Chatchai Govt ousted by Gen Suchinda. Gen Chatchai was the first elected Prime Minister in many years but his administration was generally believed to be thoroughly corrupt. Yet the academics and students were calm. The country was economically making rapid strides and the rapidly rising level of income and employment ensured a degree of stability though the Chatchai Govt did not enjoy much public respect. Perhaps this is why there was no public outcry when Gen Suchinda staged his coup to set the stage for his eventual take over. He did not take into account the combined strength and power of the urban middle class and the business community. Of course, the agitation gained strength and momentum because of the leadership provided by charismatic persons like Gen Chamlong — the popular governor of Bangkok. A devout Buddhist and an ascetic, Chamlong's leadership was crucial for the success of the mass uprising against the military's grab for power.

The king and the royal family has traditionally provided stability to Thai society and this is especially evident in turbulent periods such as one witnessed in the last few weeks. The king is not only revered because of his position as the monarch but also as an individual who has served his subjects with dedication ever

since he ascended the throne. He is very careful in adhering strictly to the principles of constitutional monarchy but on this occasion the nation looked up to him for guidance and he responded. The appointment of Anand Panyarachun is seen as a wise and shrewd move which will stabilize the country and put the economy back on the rails.

The fight between the military and the civilian democratic forces in the country is far from over. The politicians will have to earn the respect of the common men and women before they are seen as the genuine champions of democracy and people's rights. The armed forces will have to readjust to the changed circumstances. Thailand is no longer and agricultural country. The rapid growth of industry and urban population has created a society vastly different from the largely rural one over which the military dominated.

The educated urban youth and the industrial workers are imbued with western ideas and values. Quite clearly they will not rest until the political system in the country is modified to reflect their aspirations for freedom and democracy. However while the military has been restrained for the present they are not yet defeated.

We have to wait for the next phase to see the final outcome.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria



Democracy demonstrators caught and tortured by soldiers in Bangkok.

In Uttar Pradesh, Crime Pays but Politics Pay Tore

by Special Correspondent

LUCKNOW, India — Law breakers have emerged as lawmakers and Ministers in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh.

Observers note that when India became free in 1947 criminal elements, who backed the freedom movement against the British Raj, swung into positions of political importance. They realised that crime pays, but politics pay more.

Today, they are power brokers engaged in a most lucrative trade. It is reckoned that each parliamentary seat costs around Rs 1 million to win, and the price may go up to Rs 10 million, depending on where you are and the kind of opponents you face.

What is remarkable is that each criminal who has a police record of murders, kidnapping, extortions, blackmail and robbery, has a tremendous influence in almost every street corner. The educated may

shun him. But the lower classes such as workers, the petty businessmen and shopowners regard him with awe.

As a political analyst says, "As the power of money grows, crime becomes an integral part of Indian politics."

A newspaper survey in Uttar Pradesh shows that 30 per cent of lawmakers face serious criminal charges. Cutting across party lines and ideological beliefs, these men are fast emerging as a distinct group. A typical comment on criminal politicians from a police diary in the state's Deoria district goes: "The incidence of cattle-lifting has declined as the outlaw is living in Lucknow as a Minister." This was in 1977, but now the police believe that the situation has got worse.

A senior police official notes that it was in the 1980s that men with criminal records swamped the legislature in Uttar Pradesh. The number of

Men with criminal records appear to have penetrated all major political parties. And there are all kinds of criminals

seats occupied by professional criminals, was jumping up in each successive Assembly. It was 7 per cent in the 1984 Assembly. It jumped to 20 per cent in the 1989 legislature and an alarming 30 per cent in the present one.

Men with criminal records appear to have penetrated all major political parties. And there are all kinds of criminals. They have been accused of kidnapping, cattle-lifting, housebreaking and contract grabbing. Then there are killers and murderers.

The left-wing Samajwadi Janata Party has the highest concentration of men with criminal records. But sheer number the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

happens to be at the top. As many 58 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) belong to the BJP figure in the police files.

There was consternation among the legislators of almost all parties when the BJP leader Mulayam Singh Yadav released a list of 23 BJP leaders, including Ministers, MPs and MLAs, against whom criminal cases were pending in different courts. Not be outdone, BJP State President Kalraj Mishra released a list to counter it.

Mr Yadav was piqued by the arrest of his associates like former Minister DP Yadav and the issue of warrants against

his brothers and nephews. The orders were part of Chief Minister Kalyan Singh's drive to "decriminalise politics."

Legislators, regardless of party affiliations, are unanimous that this type of mudslinging would only degrade the prestige of the legislature. Members vociferously argued that merely because a person was facing trial, he should not be branded a criminal.

Understandably, those accused deny the accusations. Others claim cases had been registered against them for their participation in public demonstrations. "If we are criminals, so were Gandhi and Nehru," a legislator remarked.

No doubt, a large part of the 120 odd MLAs whose names figure in the police files may not be criminals in the real sense. But the number of those involved in serious offences

startling.

As a senior politician tells *Depthnews*, "It is all part of the money power game. It is happening everywhere — in Thailand, Japan, the Philippines and in some parts of Malaysia. Once criminals gather enough money, they develop political ambitions and there is nothing to stop them."

Take the gangway in Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh. The man who sought to eliminate his political rivals, now Congress legislator, has two dozen criminal cases registered against him.

The police regarded him as an obscure police informer in the early Congress government. But now he has grown into a powerful overlord of East Uttar Pradesh and North Bihar by the adept use of his political muscle money power. — *Depthnews Asia*

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.

Conversation with Saifur

Sir, It was indeed remarkable that you arranged such a free and frank conversation with hon'ble Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman which was published in your esteemed daily on 05.06.92. Like many others, I was thrilled to read the questions, and the answers by the Finance Minister. My personal view is that the Finance Minister was very free and openly expressed himself, as honestly felt on various national issues, without caring public criticism. He was bold and straightforward and we are thankful to you for arranging such a nice interview with an important minister like the Finance Minister. Hopefully, you will be able to arrange such interviews with other high-ranking ministers as well for the benefit of readers who are interested in the welfare of the nation.

You are no doubt one of the few objective-minded journalists of the country and I wish you many more years of happy and objective career in journalism. I also want to convey through you my personal appreciation of the assistance given to you by Mahfuz Anam and Sabbir Mustafa in arranging the above mentioned interview. I wish them continued success in their chosen profession of journalism.

K K Das
GPO Box 123, Dhaka.

Father Timm and CHT

Sir, My attention is being drawn to the letters and news items so far published in the newspapers demanding deportation of Father Timm for his alleged involvement with the CHT affairs.

Well, so far I know Fr. Timm as a dedicated teacher and social worker. He has been working as a reputed NGO expert for the improvement of the lot of the rural poor. His concern for bringing change in our rural power structure is indeed praiseworthy. For his outstanding human qualities,

with many others I respect and admire Father Timm. It is very much difficult on our part to believe that Fr. Timm is involved in any negative activities. His association with the Commission for Justice and Peace might have created some misunderstanding because as a member of the Commission Fr. Timm had tried to reveal facts for the cause of establishing peace and justice in the CHT. We don't trust that his activities in any way served the interests of the anti-state elements. I still firmly maintain that Fr. Timm under no circumstance could involve himself in any activity contrary to our state or Govt. policy. Moreover, most of the time of the year, Fr. Timm remains busy with international social welfare matters staying out of Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, I have received a letter from Rosaline Costa of the Commission for Justice and Peace which I would like to reproduce here and which I hope will help in removing confusions generated in the public mind regarding Fr. Timm's activities.

Dear Sir,
I was glad to follow your letters regarding Fr. Timm and I greatly appreciate your estimation on him....

I have been working with him since the last six years very closely. He is never involved with any of these allegations. Hope you will not be misled with all these false allegations.

If any query, you may contact me.
Yours sincerely,
Rosaline Costa
Commission for Justice and Peace

About the problems of CHT, I would once again like to recall the announcement recently made by our esteemed Prime Minister that she and her government is interested in drawing a political solution to the existing CHT problems.

One more point I would like to make clear to all international concerns that none of

the governments after the independence of Bangladesh had undertaken any measure which might be classified as gross violation of human rights. On the other hand, the so-called Shanti Bahini men have been killing the innocent peace-loving people of the CHT. Is this not a gross violation of human rights? Had our army made a single operation like one of those performed by the Sri Lankan army against LTTE people, there wouldn't have existed any Shanti Bahini men around the CHT area.

We are ready to go for political settlement with the devoted people of the CHT but we can not tolerate their terrorist activities and harmful actions against the solidarity and integrity of Bangladesh.

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

Campus violence

Sir, We were horrified at the incident on the Dhaka University campus on 7th June in which three school children were injured. Every citizen with conscience cannot but be shocked at the sight of the innocent faces of the kids who fell victim to the senseless violence on the campus. How long will the government and the opposition suffer indecision regarding taking unified action against the terrorists irrespective of their party affiliation? We do not understand why the members of the parliament are not giving priority to the issue of the campus violence while environment for education is sharply deteriorating in most of the institutions.

Recently there has been an assault on a teacher by a student in Dhaka University. This type of incidents must be dealt with sternly — the cause must be nipped in the bud. If we condone such an incident today, it will recur tomorrow with uglier ferocity. The teachers justifiably went on strike demanding exemplary punishment to the student who assaulted the teacher. But why cannot the teachers take such unified action against gun-shots on the campus? I wonder what the teachers will do if a teacher dies or a child of a teacher dies from a gun-shot on the campus?

Dr M Amrul Islam
Department of Physics
Rajshahi University

OPINION

Courtesy, Cordiality and Cooperation

Of late in an evening, I happened to be in a friendly family gathering. Some young ladies and gentlemen were also present. As usual the issues ranged from individual/family problems to international policies, primely and grimly pointing to deteriorating present affairs vis-a-vis the value system of the by-gone days.

The discourses became all the more interesting at the presence of the youngsters. They were heads over heels to defend themselves. Both the parties (oldies and young) were often venomously vocal and trying to impress upon one another.

In the long last, the debate began to revolve around the behavioural patterns. The older ones were pointing their accusative fingers to the younger ones for their careless, indisclined, arrogant and beligerent way of antics. To counter it, the younger ones were striving to convince the old ones to learn to accept the changes. I would frankly confess that I was on the side of the older generation. You may, therefore find some of my remarks biased but hopefully not untrue. Today, when I write this, I should appreciate that everybody took the arguments and counter-arguments in good spirit and heart.

It is frequently observed that the young boys and girls ignore their parents, guardians, teachers and elders as out-dated, unproductive and uncreative. Even yesterday, it was simply the problem of the western world alone. But today it has pervaded our society too. Some recollected, in old days the children were obedient, loyal and respectful to parents, teachers, and the elderly people. These days, a well-behaved, gentle and loyal boy or girl is considered a fool by his/her peers even.

In course of discussions, some persons of good offices narrated some events to substantiate their points which I intend to share with others.

One gentleman told this real-life story. One day, as he was leaving his office, one young man dropped in and proudly declared that he had been to Delhi on excursion, thus he could not get the admit card for the ensuing recruitment examination of that office. He asked the officer to issue an admit card immediately for him. The officer (I would say anybody would) disliked the commanding tone. That was the day before the

examination date and office hours were already over an hour ago. So, he was bluntly told that it was next to impossible to issue an admit card for him because the office was already closed. The young man retorted that it was one way of answering him. This was too much for the official. He told him clearly that it was one way of answering no doubt, and it was the formal and final answer for him.

Following the above, another gentleman was inspired to tell us another such incident. A young person one day showed up in his office and very perkily asked if the office would recruit any technocrat. The gentlemen wanted to know which sort of technocrat the young man was. The entrant had completed his master's degree with first divisions/classes all through with major in a particular subject from a university. The official very rudely told him that he had very brilliant academic credits but their requirements did not match with his achievements. Thus, he was turned down.

In the presence of a lady, one day in the personnel department of one office, a young man rushed in. He was in a colourful T-shirt, Jean's pant, high quality keds and holding a pair of goggles in hand. He asked, "Who is Mr X?" The gentleman thus addressed responded to his query with a scowling face. He didn't like the way the young man enquired about him. The young man was one of the candidates for coming recruitment test of that office and he would like to know about the likely pattern of questions. As his behaviour had already embarrassed the gentleman, he outrightly told him that the questions would be simply within the subjects so far studied by him. That was all to him.

Now let's turn to the other side of the coin. The complaints of the young ones cannot be ignored. It is observed that some elderly Executives are perpetually late whereas if once by any chance they find any of their sub-ordinates tardy, they either issue warning letter or transfer him/her to a remote area thus punishing for violating punctuality.

Again, some seniors often while leaving office at the closing hours, give urgent tasks to the juniors to be completed that evening forgetting that their juniors too have a family/social life. The work could

be handed over to the junior earlier or the seniors could at least spend sometime in the office as a solace to the junior.

Over and above, juniors need appreciation. A little sympathetic gesture is often enough. Many a time it is observed that some seniors neither they greet nor they bother to respond to greetings from the juniors. We must remember that juniors as well seniors equally deserve respect. It is a two-way traffic. Real respect comes from the heart in the form of peace which is enjoyed by the both, the giver and the receiver. And peace helps achieve good results.

The seniors like the ruler of a state, head of an institution/organisation, teachers, superiors and so on, should practise what they preach. We should remember that the old saying "honesty is the best policy" holds perfectly good today too. The principles of equality, justice, fairness etc. Should be applicable to all. Only the practice of them can bring happiness for us.

In the light of the above incidences, everybody came to a consensus that lack of cordiality and courtesy can bring nothing but negative results. The courtesy and cordiality go hand in hand with cooperation. A little politeness and gentle tone can play magic for one. Our youths need to be trained to behave and thus reap a rich harvest. One's nice words can do wonders. It is practically proven (many books have been written on this). They should know it better than others that love begets love. In the above cases, the lack of courtesy and display of arrogance simply deprived them of cooperation which they needed badly.

The time is come to realise that specialisation in certain subject is not enough. Our curriculum should be thus shaped that our young specialists learn and practise human qualities too. Lack of human qualities will bring disaster for the society.

Let's not complain and counter-complain but compromise to reach a point where we can share courtesy, cordiality and resultant cooperation — to narrow down the present gap for the healthy growth, development, peace and prosperity of all.

Jerome Sarkar
Singtola, Dhaka