

### Nonchalance of the Drug Administration

We are shocked at the pace of investigation of the Bangladesh Drug Administration (BDA) in the case of the poisonous paracetamol syrup which, according to the Shishu Hospital sources, has caused the death of 233 children out of a total of 239 who reportedly were using this drug. According to a report carried in this paper yesterday, so far the only action the BDA thought fit to take was to issue a show cause notice against the offending company. Four other similar products now available in the market have also been sent for laboratory testing for possible presence of the poisonous ingredient, diethylene glycol. While we are not advocating any punitive action without the due process of law, we hold the BDA responsible for continuing to expose our children to the possibility of similar poisoning by not taking some basic protective measures to ensure public safety. First of all, the BDA should have made a serious attempt, through all forms of mass media, to inform the public as to what really happened, which drugs are safe and which ones we need to avoid, till investigation is completed. This would have gone a long way in calming the panicky nerve that gripped the public ever since the news first broke. The normal practice would have been to withdraw all paracetamol syrup till such time as proper investigation could have been carried out. At the end of which the safe drugs would have been allowed to re-enter the market. According to reports, public, in the absence of any clear guidance from the public health agencies, is now fearful of buying any paracetamol products, including the tablets, that are so far known to be safe. While the newspaper reading city dwellers may know the story of the syrup, the rural people and those living in small district towns continue to be exposed to this poisonous drug. It is true that the BDA has asked the manufacturer to withdraw the poisonous drug, but there exists no official mechanism to check whether this directive is being followed, especially in the rural areas.

This raises questions about the existing mechanism to safeguard public interest when a drug is suspected to be causing harmful effects. When the Shishu Hospital discontinued purchasing Famadol on suspicion of causing acute renal failure, did it inform the BDA? If it did not then the Shishu Hospital is guilty of not performing its obligation to the general public. If, on the other hand, the BDA was informed then what did it do, if anything? We would now like to know what steps BDA will take to identify whether or not there are other violators of the drug production code. The public is now suffering from a severe lack of confidence in the existing governmental apparatus put in place to protect the public against companies producing substandard drugs. We strongly urge the government to respond to the public concern and institute a thorough investigation of the BDA and its subsidiary bodies. The testing laboratories should be equipped to carry out authentic and timely investigation of suspected drugs. There is absolutely no excuse why these laboratories should not have the requisite equipment which do not cost all that much. The monitoring mechanism of the BDA needs also to be revamped and trained personnel hired to respond quickly and effectively so that cases like the one under discussion can never recur.

### Please Heed the Weavers

Everyone interested in the well-being of the society, which so much depends on an efficient and enlightened conduct of the state, must take news regarding the weavers with all seriousness. That this should serve as a dictum for socially committed minds was underlined for the umpteenth time by the weavers' rally in the city on Monday.

As an energetic young man with a cause and an old practised hand as a parliamentarian rolled into one, Suranjit Sengupta, as the chief guest, drove home his point — the main point of the rally it appeared to be — the total untenability of harassing weavers by issuing certificates on defaulting weaver-loanees. Pat he related this with the unrepaid people's money to the tune of 2200 crore taka, lying with the affluent ones. It is quite a question for us all whether the government has the moral right for pestering a poor weaver for the recovery of money in the area of thousands at best when there is visibly no urgency of going after the crore-taka defaulters. We know there are a thousand reasons why the government cannot make a go for the throats of the big borrowers. But so are there very many good reasons for the government's bearing with the miseries of the weavers, be a little more tolerant and encouraging and even indulgent in their dealings with the weavers.

There are a thousand holes in our textile situation. By all logic there should be an annual turnover of at least 20 billion taka in this sector. Bangladesh had the weavers and even the tools to manufacture all the material worth this huge money. Handloom, no Gandhism intended, could be a very dependable way to a national economic recovery and a follow-up boom. Because we have all the men who could do that with unmatched skill. Reports say that as many as two lakh looms, in a situation of despairing shrinkage of the handloom sector, are lying idle. If only a part of the price we pay for textiles, even as a poor nation, could travel to the root-level of the handloom sector — things would have been different both for the weaver as well as for the nation. All the money just melts through the thousand holes — very many mills marketing smuggled fabric with imprints of their own being a very standard one among them.

The question of an all-out support to the weavers is a nation-sized one. And the weaver knows best where the shoe pinches. The weavers have a list of 170 demands. Thank God, the number is not 1700. Please weigh them with all seriousness and please do look even beyond on your own, we say to the government.

What a community! What a big community owning their means of production! What an all-production community with everyone in the family joining his or her hand in the making of a finished commodity ready for the market! If we fail to support them and ensure them a decent life of work and fulfilment, there will never be an end to our troubles as a nation.

# For Followers of Gandhiji, Different Battles to Fight

**T**HEIR number is small but their faith is unflinching. Some 40 men and women assemble every dawn and dusk to say prayers at Sewagram in the manner Mahatma Gandhi conducted for years before independence. It is the same enclosure, overlooked by the peepal tree he planted, where they squat in reverence. And it is the same order they follow in reciting from holy books: the Gita, the Quran, the Bible and the Sikhs' Guru Granth.

The core of congregation is still a band of Gandhi's aged followers. But there is daily a smattering of new faces, increasingly from the younger generation. They may not be Gandhians but they are soaked in his values. Every prayer ends with the chanting of *Ishwar, Allah tere naam*, Gandhi's favourite song to emphasis on the common theme running through different religious faiths, the fusion of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians that the Indian polity is.

Once upon a time the ashram looked far removed from the hustle and noise of 50-mile-away Nagpur. But now, ironically, factories and chimneys, which Gandhi disliked are rapidly devouring the countryside where he had preferred to live among villagers, India's 80 per cent people. Screaming signboards and glaring tubelights inside the ashram are as much out of place as are the outside honking buses, which are bringing more and more traders and fewer and fewer pilgrims.

Still the austerity at Sewagram Ashram tugs at your

**However loud the threats of the Bharatiya Janata Party to oust Narasimha Rao's government, the RSS chief, the party's mentor, Deoras struck a different note. He had a word of praise for the prime minister: "He is a good man who is trying to do his best, at one time attending to one problem and another some other."**

conscience as does the prayer. The first underlines the consumerism that is overtaking the country and the second the communal divide. Gandhi fought both, dressed in his homespun sacklike dhoti exhorting unity. His tatched hut at the ashram is a mute witness to his warnings to the high and the low against austeritouslyness and religious frenzy.

His youngest daughter-in-law, Nirmala, living in the ashram woeifully recalls Gandhi's dreams. "And now all has come to nought," she says. Indeed, the ashram is a monument to his blighted hopes, to what has gone dead in the nation.

How all this is different from another ashram at Nagpur, the headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). It did not chose the rural surroundings. Nor did the habitation come to it as has happened in Sewagram. Instead, it went to the habitation. Apty, the place where it is located is called *Saher* (city).

This ashram too has a tree planted by the RSS founder, K B Hdegewar. Here also the people assemble every done and dusk but they are only men and their number is many times more than 40. Their prayer is of sorts, not meant to seek uniformity among the religions but to awaken a sense of identity in the Hindus.

Gandhi's non-violence is not their creed either. They learn

how to wield a *lathi* (stick) which, they rationalise, is for physical fitness. But they believe in force, although Balasaheb Deoras, the RSS chief, is worried over the violence spreading in the country. He mentions particularly Kashmir, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Assam. It may be because of the growing violence that the ashram has armed policemen at its premises. This is unlike Sewagram ashram, where all gates are open without any security personnel inside.

for the construction of the temple, the ailing Deoras nodded in assent. He said his senior colleagues had kept him in the picture and he mentioned three names, Seshadri, Raju and Sunder Singh Bhandari, in that order.

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attending to one problem and another some other," said Deoras.

Both ashrams are influencing the nation in their own way. Sewagram ashram, lessening in importance, draws grassroots activists, working in the fields of education, health, environment, communal harmony and what Gandhi categorised as constructive work. The RSS ashram, increasing in importance, is not engaged in the constructive work. Its attention is focussed on one-point programme: how to marshal the Hindu majority behind it to capture power in Delhi. First it was only the Babri Masjid now the two

he can lose the chief minister-ship. "He has to face the fact: otherwise, the people will uproot his government," says Ramoji Rao, editor of *Eenadu*, a widely circulated Telugu daily in Andhra Pradesh.

Giving a helping hand to the movement are young men and women, who are grassroot, activists. They have been trained in Sewagram which conducts lessons in Gandhi's philosophy. Nearly 1,000 activists assembled in Sewagram the other day to voice their support to the agitation in Andhra Pradesh. Lately, they have been unhappy over the government's economic policies, which are poles apart from the spirit of self-sufficiency and self-reliance which Gandhi tried to inculcate. The rapid destruction of whatever has been built at the village level is seen by the activists as a sad commentary on the policy of liberalisation. But the anti-liquor movement has suddenly brightened their faces. They see the movement succeeding.

It will be a victory for the Gandhian values after a long time. The other ashram in Nagpur has been advancing quite a bit, from less than 10 seats to 110 in the Lok Sabha. It is obvious that both have different battles to fight. If ever what Sewagram represents recedes into the background, it will not be a reverse for the Gandhian values but for those who only pay lip sympathy to them and lack faith and determination to pursue them. The RSS has achieved only pyrrhic victory; the Gandhians should have been of sterner stuff.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Perhaps it is not fair to compare the two ashrams, the two reflect different thinking and cultures. Gandhi strongly believed that "wrong means will not lead to right results." But only success matters to the RSS, not how. For the RSS, there are no shades, there is only black and white.

Gandhi gave his life for the Hindu-Muslim unity. The RSS represents an opinion which suspects the bonafides of Muslims. No leeway is given to them. That probably explains its non-compromising stand on the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. Asked if he had been consulted before fixing December 6 as the date

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State chief minister Vijay Bhaskar Reddy feels that it is all politics. But his opponent, N T Rama Rao, former chief minister, denies it, contending that he is not using even the flag of his party, Telugu Desam. "I have only the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi at my meetings," he says. Reddy is confident that he will take the wind out of the sails of his opponent by fixing the date of total prohibition in the state.

"I am a Gandhian and I want his dream to come true," says Reddy. In fact, his trying to be realistic because if he resists

## A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE — II

# Bangladesh Needs Better Coverage in the Indian Press

**C**ALCUTTA — In terms of media coverage, Bangladesh often looks like a distant neighbour from the capital of West Bengal.

The three English-language dailies — *The Statesman*, *The Telegraph* and *The Economic Times* — which I read every day have so far published little news from Dhaka — no major feature, no human interest story and of course no editorial comments.

It may be a little unfair to pass any judgement on the Calcutta press which, in many respects, is just as good as any found in a developing country, after only a short stay here. However, my local journalist friends confirm that major Calcutta dailies should certainly carry more news from or relating to Bangladesh, apart from few short items about clashes between student groups, the approaching typhoon or the visit of the World Bank President Lewis Preston.

There are quite a few good reasons why a reasonable coverage from Dhaka goes by default.

In the first place, the normal 12-page *Statesman* or the *Telegraph* is left with no more than a page and a half for foreign news, after it has covered the domestic scene more extensively than we do in our Dhaka newspapers. On such issues as the Babri Mosque dispute and the verdict of the Supreme Court on the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, no newspaper here — or in New Delhi — can afford to miss a single detail. A visiting journalist may argue that there is room for lighter reporting and editing. But, then, how would an outsider know what a local reader really wants, more coverage of the domestic scene at the cost of foreign news or the other way round?

Then, there are pages allotted to the ever-active business scene, the sports activities and cultural events. And, last but not the least, how we envy the Calcutta newspapers, especially the major ones, for the volume of advertisements, virtually all from the private sector, they carry every day.

These reasons partly explain why foreign news has turned out to be a major casualty of the expanded coverage of the domestic politics where, as the saying goes, there is never a dull moment.

This means that it is not just a Bangladeshi visitor, but also a Malaysian, Japanese or a Nepalese who may not find much news about his country in the Calcutta media.

Another major reason for this indifference

of the press here to Bangladesh lies somewhere else. It is in the news judgement of developments in West Bengal's "distant neighbour" which deserves the coverage.

This judgement, as with the western media, is often dictated by what makes an "exciting" story, or even a negative one. Hence, dramatic developments surrounding the abortive march of Benazir Bhutto to Islamabad get an extensive coverage in the English-language press here, while the evacuation of lakhs of people from the coastal areas, on the eve of the probable cyclone — a major success story — gets little attention from leading newspapers in the West Bengal capital.

This problem should be seen in the wider context as to how the press in one developing country covers events, especially the "positive" ones, in another "Third World" nation. The subject is expected to come up for a thorough

discussion in this field, I suggested that during this month. *The Daily Star* has published anything between 10 to 15 features on India, in such fields as environment, science and technology, health, population, literature and culture, and even travel. We also carry a regular weekly column by noted Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar and occasional pieces by other well-known writers.

These features, provided to us at considerable price by such development-oriented services as the Gemini, Depthnews and Panos, generally offer a positive picture of progress in our neighbouring country. From time to time, even the features put out by the Press Trust of India (PTI) get used by the *Star*.

By and large, this is an unbalanced situation. To put it plainly, Bangladesh is far from getting even a small share of the coverage it deserves in the Indian press or, for that matter, in

merely look for news of disasters, angry exchanges between political leaders, signs of the rise in fundamentalism and killings in universities? Or should they also find out what is going on inside the Gramscian Bank and the BRAC, about the strides made by the country's book publishing industry, on heroic efforts made by Bangladeshi NGOs to change lives of millions, about new trends in art and literature and, last but not the least, about policy changes in the administration which offer some hopes for the future of this country?

While discussing this subject with a couple of receptive local newsmen, we agreed that at a certain point, this indifference of the Calcutta dailies to positive developments in Bangladesh has something to do with their perception of West Bengal's "distant neighbour".

Is it possible that a section of the Calcutta press tends to write off Bangladesh as an impoverished over-populated crisis-ridden country which can never make it in its endless struggle for survival? If this is so, this may not be a country worth bothering about.

I challenged this contention. I did so with full conviction and in all sincerity.

Even experts working for several donor agencies agree that there are a number of areas where Bangladesh has made significant progress in the past two decades and that by pursuing correct policies, in economic and political fields, and by bringing down the rate of population growth, this impoverished nation can find a place in the sun.

If the Indian press has to change its perception of Bangladesh, we, in Dhaka, must also play a role in what is certain to be a difficult but, in the end, a rewarding exercise.

If *The Daily Star* publishes PTI features on a fairly regular basis, why shouldn't *The Statesman* or the *Telegraph* use development-oriented materials produced by our news agencies, BSS or the UNI? Of course, this depends on whether either of our news agencies can launch the kind of service that the PTI can be justly proud of.

One major factor that ensures success to such an exercise is a keen desire among the educated elite here to know more about Bangladesh, about its success and failures, about what makes it such a resilient country fighting against all kinds of odds, without ever giving up. Behind this keen interest lies a lot of goodwill for Bangladesh, which I take back with me to Dhaka.

## AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

discussion, not for the first time or for the last time, at a conference of journalists in New Delhi early next month. Whether this meeting, sponsored by the Non-Aligned Movement, will make any change in the situation remains to be seen.

When it comes to the coverage of developments in Bangladesh in the Calcutta press there is not only need for a change. There are even some scopes to be explored if distant neighbours should become close friends.

Like *The Daily Star* and a few other Dhaka newspapers, the English-language dailies in Calcutta set aside at least two pages, including the editorial one, for interpretative features and columns by noted Indian, western and at least one Pakistani journalists. These features cover wide-ranging subjects, including India's "push-out" drive. This is where one would like to see some analytical pieces, even critical ones, on Bangladesh.

As I explained to a local journalist, in sharp contrast to the conspicuous absence of features on Bangladesh in the Calcutta dailies, newspapers in Dhaka pay considerable attention to what is happening in different Indian states, sometimes by freely lifting materials from publications of New Delhi and Calcutta.

Without appearing to brag about our

newspapers in Calcutta.

One problem, we assume, lies with the lack of briefing by newspapers and agencies in India to their correspondents based in Bangladesh as to what they should look for in their coverage of developments in Bangladesh. Should they merely look for news of disasters, angry on India, in such fields as environment, science and technology, health, population, literature and culture, and even travel. We also carry a regular weekly column by noted Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar and occasional pieces by other well-known writers.

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## 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.

### Nonpayment of scholarship money

Sir, I would like to bring the following facts to the attention of the concerned authorities of the government through your widely circulated newspaper.

To encourage students in primary and high schools in their studies, government introduced the Primary and the Junior Scholarship examinations at the end of Grade Five and Eight respectively. These are competitive public examinations and thousands of students are benefitted by this programme from both financial and competitive points of view.

Unfortunately, since last year payment of the scholarship money for both the programmes have been discontinued because of reported lack of funds in the relevant sector. This is unbelievable. I hope people in authority will look into the matter and arrange for timely payment of the scholarship money to the hard work-

ing bright young boys and girls all over the country. Dr Nooruddin Ahmed Professor and Head Chemical Engg Dept. BUET, Dhaka

### Bus terminal needed

Sir, The Zia International Airport (ZIA) bus stand, north of ZIA Police Box, is in a jeopardy. A number of mini-buses, especially of Route No 9, are constantly standing on the eastern side of the Airport Road, back of Airport Railway Station, causing immense sufferings to the pedestrians. The Airport-Ashkona Road running from the Police Box remains jammed almost all the time posing serious problems for the passers-by and the pedestrians.

The ZIA bus stand is a busy junction point for a large number of residents of Dakshin Khan and Uttar Khan Unions and far off Tajkura, Barua, Hollar and other villages in addition to the residents of Uttara Model Town.

The long distance minibuses and buses plying on this road also suffer greatly when tucked in traffic jam. Due to lack of a Bus Terminal at ZIA, the people in general have become the worst sufferers.

Over the past months and years serious accidents have occurred at this bus stoppage area due to haphazard bus parking on the road sides blocking passage for other vehicular traffic.

On the other hand, there is a derelict pond just south of the Airport Railway Station. It needs to be filled up and the space made available to construct the ZIA bus terminal.

Currently, the government is renovating and beautifying some spots, roads and road corners in the wake of SAARC summit to be held in Dhaka next month.

We urge upon the city Mayor to rise to the occasion and construct a modern bus terminal to the south of New Airport Railway Station by earth filling and widening the area and scope for parking buses and minibuses without obstructing the main road. The problem has been accentuated greatly these days as minibuses of Airport route are not allowed to stand inside the Airport area.

Will the authorities concerned do the needful before the beginning of SAARC sum-

mit to benefit the public and beautify the localities with its adjacent bus stand?

M A Rub, Naddapara, Dakshin Khan, Dhaka

### STOL air service at Lalmonirhat

Sir, Lalmonirhat airstrip is one of the oldest airstrips in Bangladesh. It was built during the period of Second World War to facilitate airlifting of cargo and carrying of soldiers.

During Pakistan time too the airstrip was in use. There was weekly air service between Dhaka and Lalmonirhat.

Lalmonirhat is not only a Railway Divisional headquarter but also a big railway junction. Lalmonirhat is now a district headquarter too. Bhutan is nearer to Lalmonirhat. Teesta Barrage project, one of the biggest irrigation projects, is being constructed at Doali which is very near to Lalmonirhat. There is a border check post at Burimari which is one of the official entry points for visitors of India and Bangladesh. Considering all these points, introduction of STOL air service at Lalmonirhat is very much needed.

At present the vast air field is lying idle. A portion of it is being used for agricultural

purpose. If STOL service is introduced, tourists both from Bhutan and India will feel encouraged to visit Bangladesh through this part of the country. Besides, the people of Lalmonirhat, Kurigram and Rangpur will also be benefited. And I think the service itself will be commercially viable.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury DGM, Sonali Bank HO, Dhaka

### Save migratory birds

Sir, Many thanks to your reporter Mr Shariar Khan for his nice report "Winter birds start arriving to Bangladesh". Mirpur Zoo is making special arrangements for migratory birds. The number of migratory birds to arrive here depends on the intensity of cold in the northern parts of Asia, specially Siberia. After all these birds are our guests.

But, are we treating them well? Of course not. Here are some crazy meat lovers who are shooting them, trapping them or killing them, only to add a delicacy to their menu of so-called lunch or dinner. We do not understand why we are so cruel to our guests of winter. Regulations to prevent cruelty to the birds and animals but these are not strictly implemented. The reasons are best known to the law enforcing authorities. It is our humble request to

all, be kind to the migratory birds who are our guests, not enemy. Let us not sell them in the markets for onward transmission to dining tables.

Meh M Khalilullah A bird lover, Dhaka

### Horn abuse

Sir, Abuse of horns by the car, bus, truck and other motor-vehicle drivers has reached an alarming proportion. Irritating noise from incessant blowing of horns causes serious harm to human health. High pitch noise of vehicle horns can impair hearing, increase blood pressure and may contribute to the development of various psycho-physical diseases.

Considering the harmful effects of horn noise, the Bangladesh Society for Conservation of Environment (BSCE) has undertaken some motivational programme to create public awareness on the matter. As a part of its programme, the BSCE, through the courtesy of your column, would request all section of people to become alert about the hazardous effects of motor-vehicle horn noise and to create public resistance against horn abuse.

M Zahidul Haque Publicity and Press Secretary, BSCE