

## Why Ignore the Teachers' Strike?

Some two hundred thousand teachers of non-government schools and colleges of the nation struck work yesterday as a part of continuing with an indefinite strike to realise their four-point demand. The strike decision was declared in a massive public rally of the teachers on April 12. The Education Ministry asked the leaders of the teachers to sit in a meeting with the Education Minister in the morning of April 17, a day before the strike was to commence. The leaders did not turn up for the meeting. The government then offered another meeting with the Minister-of-State for Education in the afternoon of the same day, which was a non-starter even before the invitations went out. The leaders of the liaison committee, representing six professional associations of the non-government school and college teachers, were not interested in talking to ministers who they thought had proved incapable enough to materialise agreed recommendations of a high-powered government committee set up at the behest of the Prime Minister.

The teachers' disquiet and impatience over the government's failure to take full charge of their salaries together with allowances, as decided by the government itself, have been brewing for some time. It cannot be that government was quite in the dark about that and that the April 12 demonstration before the National Press Club was a bolt from the blue. The government's keenness to avoid a crisis situation of the nature of the present one is nowhere on record. And its response to the April 12 declaration of strike action has failed to show any eagerness to defuse the mounting crisis. It reacted rather like any government of the colonial or autocratic times — steady itself to ignore the whole thing and resorting to stratagems that would develop breaches in the strike line-up. The government has already been able to get a group of teachers who the minister will happily like as representing the community of teachers. The whole game is totally unbecoming of a government that has been playing its part in building democracy in the country.

While we concede that the teachers are fully within their rights to protest and agitate to realise reasonable demands, we can hardly be persuaded to accept that short of crippling the whole of 12,000 non-government schools and colleges there weren't other courses open to them.

The government must have its side of the picture, hopefully as convincing as the teachers' if not more. But what prevents the government from laying its cards on the table, taking the people into confidence and telling the story of its exertions to be helpful? Transparency of government is one very necessary way of governance that the present dispensation is not proving particularly keen as buying.

Meanwhile we are at a loss to guess who shall the nation ask one very important and relevant question. What is it this interminable squabble over salaries and allowances, running into hundreds of crores of Taka, for? Education? Hardly. The steadily improving lot of the teachers hasn't resulted in any improvement of the quality of education. We are all for the striking teachers getting the whole of their dues directly from government coffers. Would that do the trick? After all it is not the books but the teacher who educates. Who is there to ensure that the teacher will be worth his or her emoluments, nay worth his or her calling? Perhaps the teachers needed competition, perhaps they had better be held accountable. How one doesn't know specially in a trade-union induced no-competition, no-accountability situation guaranteeing a pay packet at month's end irrespective of the service turned in.

How about the teachers mellowing down a bit and allowing a token respite by way of agreeing to conduct the May SSC exams? That shouldn't damage their cause.

## Get to the Bottom of this Incident

The whole city was dumb-founded at the sight of the reclining building at Shantinagar that was flashed in the front page of almost all national dailies yesterday. A perfectly stable building, being used as a hotel, suddenly began to tilt toward a side, when most of the hotel guests were sleeping. As reported in the newspapers, the building began to collapse because of the weakened foundation. This was caused by digging a seven feet deep ditch for the foundation of another building, hardly a couple of feet away.

Several questions arise as to the irresponsibility of the civil engineers involved in the construction of the second building whose foundation digging started the dangerous tilt. It is reported that a well known housing construction company was responsible for the new building. How could it permit the digging of seven feet deep ditch within a few feet of five-storey Meghna Hotel? A far greater responsibility falls on the shoulder of RAJUK, without whose permission the foundation digging could not have started. If the process was unauthorized then the total fault lies on the shoulder of the contractor(s). But if RAJUK had actually given permission for it, then of course the responsibility of this must rest on them.

This incident has sent a wave of alarm into the heart and mind of every occupant of highrise buildings in Dhaka. How safe are they? If RAJUK is found to be responsible for giving out all sorts of permissions for construction of technically flawed highrises, then a case could be made for a thorough investigation of all other similar constructions in the city.

What is most important is clearing the air about RAJUK's role in this affair. If RAJUK stands cleared, then severe action should be taken against those responsible for digging seven feet deep ditch for foundation of the proposed new building. They should also be made to pay compensation for the Meghna Hotel, that will now have to be demolished anyway.

We urge the Works Minister to get to the bottom of this affair.

THE way the first of Baishakhi was celebrated this time all over the country will certainly remain a treasured memory for many of us. Even for those of us who have reached a less impressionable age, it has been a memorable experience. Speaking for myself, I will frankly confess that, for some years now, my practice has been one of defensive exposure. I believe the term needs some explaining. By defensive exposure, I mean a strategy of avoiding direct experience and substituting by collecting the impression of others, expressed orally or through written words. From what I have heard and read about the celebrations just concluded, I am emboldened to say that our people rose to the occasion, this very rare occasion, of celebrating a New Year's day which was also the first day of a new century. We have done it in our own way: plenty of sentiment, a good deal of genuine emotion, a nostalgic return to folk ways and country manners, all this going to show that the Bengali psyche remains firmly linked with rural Bangladesh.

Naturally enough, the celebrations took the form of fairs. A fair is essentially a country concept which sometimes, and only sometimes, invades the town. But a perceptible change has taken place in this respect. Our town-based celebrations have come to the fore front, and in many of these cultural events, a fair is seen to be an adjunct. A good example is the celebrated Book Fair which forms part of the Ekushey celebrations held on the Bangla Academy grounds in February

each year. Now a book fair is not the traditional fair, with its fun, its merry-go-round, its great variety of fares bought and sold. Originally, if I remember correctly, the Book Fair was exclusively so, as the name indicates. Then, at one stage, a corner of the site was kept apart for a few stalls, serving tea and snacks. Gradually, the corner claimed more and more space, till a stage was reached when the authorities were driven to finding a separate site altogether for the ever-increasing number of such stalls. This liberal policy has now proved fatal to the idea of a book fair since the adjunct is now seen to threaten the main body.

Experience shows that it is wellnigh impossible to contain a fair. Where you have a fair pure and simple, this is no serious problem. But when you have a fair which is but an adjunct to something else, it can be a problem.

The comments that I am going to make now refers to the New Year celebrations traditionally held in the shade of the banian tree, the famous *Batamool*, organised by the well-known *Chhayanat* group. Whether *Chhayanat* can be called an ensemble, I am not competent to say. What is important is that the group has

been offering songs in the dawn of the Bengali New Year for the last thirty years. For thousands of city-dwellers, this session of music beginning with sunrise and going on for over two hours without break, has been the richest fare of all the offerings of all the groups of the day. And now it looks as if what was so long a mere adjunct, a few vendors selling traditional food items, has assumed proportions threatening the very function to which it owes its existence.

### PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

While I say this I do so on the basis of a direct exposure, and not on hearsay, or my readings of what has appeared in the press. This time, recognising that it was a very special New Year, I ventured to visit the place. We two of us just arrived in the city at the end of a train journey from Chittagong had decided to drive straight from Kamalapur station to the Ramma gardens, keeping the *Batamool* as the ultimate destination. By the time we had reached the row of stalls set up to sell country food, we found it impossible to proceed further. The entire passage was choked by the stalls, and even our retreat was

made difficult by aggressive salesmanship of some of the *pantabhat-wallahs*. Apart from this totally offensive presence of people setting up stalls at a place which should have been kept clear for visitors and their free movement, we found the loud presence of other music groups little less than an annoyance. The other groups could have chosen sites at a reasonable distance from each other which they didn't. The competitive presence of several groups, thanks to the same quality. But the best of them show a sincere attempt to conceptualise the main trends of our history and culture. Out of these separate visions, perceptions and interpretations should arise, in due time, a clearer picture of the century that is gone. We have every reason to look forward to a new history to be written by our historians, with many obscurities and past prejudices removed. For a nation still inchoate in many ways, still fumbling on its way to a democratic future, a clearer sense of history is essential. That a thinking process has been set in motion, spurred on by the advent of a new century, is quite evident. The retrospective and the prospective have met on this particular hour, two visions interpenetrating, and fused into one.

Apart from the crudity, the vulgarity of such incidents and developments marring the

morning of the day, it was a shock to see the totally irrelevant BBC and CNN stuff being served, absolutely out of tune with the meaning of the day. I had a feeling of repulsion, a fresh realisation of how stupid a decision it has been to give so much time to something which offers so little of real worth to our viewers. Even as an escape from BTV stuff, stupid and puerile and often vulgar, the Western type of irrelevance, once the novelty wears off, is an insult to our national sensibility. When will the government realise that it is time it must revise the ill-conceived idea of forcing totally alien stuff down the nation's gullet.

BTV's own offering was a programme of about a couple of hours. During this span of time, BTV quite foolishly attempted to present an account of our literature, music, art and what not in a capsulated form. It was a most tantalising show: a line of a Tagore song, followed by a line of Nazrul, as if such samplings, offered in such an amateurish way, was enough to celebrate the passing of a century. The least the BTV should have done was to devote a hundred evenings of special programmes, each of a hundred minute's duration, of thoughtful presentations prepared with due care — something unknown in BTV practice — and all these things gathered in a volume of permanent value, something of a collector's item. But this is something beyond the BTV's reach. The people did rise to the occasion and the print media did not fail us. Let that be the consolation.

they will renew flights as soon as it's overcome. That was two months ago and I'm still waiting for a call from them."

The airport's future is uncertain. Both the Israelis, and Palestinians want it badly, and no-one can be sure who will eventually operate it.

Koussevitzky realises his job

is in jeopardy but is not overly worried. "I hope we run the airport together," he says. "But if we get peace in return for it, I don't mind giving it up."

BARRY CHAMISH is editor of 'Inside Israel,' a monthly intelligence newsletter.

## The International Airport that Only Film-makers Use

Barry Chamish writes from Bat Shemesh

Jerusalem Airport is sited on contested land and is the subject of an Arab boycott. It is wanted by both Israel and the PLO and its future is being decided by secret negotiations. Gemini News Service looks at a terminal that a million people a year would like to pass through but which is used only by Hollywood film-makers.



Jerusalem existed in a political limbo, controlled by Jordan but belonging to no-one.

The United Nations ordered sanctions against the use of the airport in case Jordanian hegemony over the land on which it was sited became sanctified. The sanctions were widely ignored and Jordan operated an international airport in Jerusalem until the Six Day War of 1967, when it was won by Israel.

The airport's traffic consisted of internal flights punctuated by occasional business and diplomatic traffic. But in

1990 more than 200,000 immigrants arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union.

An Israeli company, the Clal Corporation, cut a charter agreement with Air Ukraine to fly thousands of the immigrants directly to Jerusalem. Thus, the airport received its first international flights in 23 years.

Clal's reasoning for using the airport was purely economic. The government offers companies using the airport a 40 per cent reduction on landing fees and gives a similar break on passengers' airport

tax.

Furthermore, the airport's compactness means fewer handlers and much faster service than is available at Ben Gurion.

Last November, Aeroflot signed an agreement to land at Jerusalem Airport three times a week. In December, an Aeroflot Airbus 310 landed with 367 Russian Orthodox pilgrims and Jewish immigrants. Aeroflot told me there was a technical problem and that

lations: 'The Ukrainians suffered a financial upheaval when they became independent of Aeroflot. They are still in contact with me and assure me when they sort matters out we'll do business again.'

The government's Ministry of Tourism attached great significance to the event and its Minister, Israel Kesser, greeted the flight with a ceremony at which he declared the inauguration of Jerusalem International Airport.

Koussevitzky is sorry Kesser showed up. There was no need for pageant, he says. The airport was already international without any government declarations."

The Aeroflot landing was internationally publicised and inquiries about landing at Jerusalem came pouring in from charter companies in the Far East and Europe. As Koussevitzky notes, "We were on the verge of transforming the airport into a bustling centre."

But the PLO had different ideas. By late December, the organisation spread the word worldwide that it would look unkindly on any airline that landed at Jerusalem.

The Syrians pitched in and invoked the threat of the Arab boycott of Israel to the Russians who responded by cancelling their flights to Jerusalem. The Ukrainians quickly followed suit.

Koussevitzky seems strangely unaware of the political background to the cancel-

Recent, a number of write-ups appeared in The Daily Star (March 1, March 11, March 29) on the above subject. Among the writers is no less an important person than Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui who himself was Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University for full two terms under the existing Act of 1973. Prof. Siddiqui is not only a distinguished educationist of the country but also a noted columnist and a well-known critic/analyst of contemporary affairs. Personally we have been long-time colleagues in the Rajshahi University and also we had ample opportunity to work together when he was a Vice-Chancellor and I was a full-time Member of the University Grants Commission.

I have tried to follow closely most of his writings and it has been my impression that Prof Siddiqui is opposed to the idea of a change in the Act unless socio-political situation of the country changes, and the government and the political parties stop interfering into the affairs of the University and using the students for political purpose. In my view, the pre-conditions are such as will possibly never materialise in its entirety. However, in one of his recent writings (Daily Star, 29 March), Prof Siddiqui seems to have slightly shifted from his earlier position when he concedes that "there is a case for amendment if the object is to have a Syndicate less partisan, less obliged to a constituency with its ever-present pressure, and therefore able to function as a judicial body. The difficulty with our democratic Syndicate is that it is both bar and bench merged into one."

On the question of choosing a Vice-Chancellor Prof. Siddiqui hinted about the 'Search Principle' that is followed in the centrally administered universities of India, and his comments are, "It is reported that the system is working well. It cuts at the root of teacher politics. It also ensures that there is no politics at the higher level outside the university." However, Prof. Siddiqui expressed doubt if the 'Search Principle' will find ready acceptance with our political guardians here.

I had written a few articles about the 'University administration' a few years back and those were published in the Daily Sangbad between 10.12.86 and 14.12.86. I tried to put forward an analysis of the different laws (Act, Statute, Ordinance Regulation etc) under which a University administration functions and I

tried to make a comparison between the provisions of 1973 Act with those of 1961 Act leaving the matter to the readers for making their own judgement. Only in a few cases I put forward my own comments or views. Now that many such issues are being discussed rather loudly, I am stating below what I suggested in 1986 regarding the system of appointing a Vice-Chancellor.

According to the 1973 Act, the Chancellor appoints a Vice-Chancellor from a panel of three persons nominated by the Senate. The Senate is a forum of about 100 persons or so nominated/elected from persons of various categories, such as the teachers, students, parliament members, members of various research organisations, college teachers, government officials etc. As such, the system is definitely democratic in comparison with that of 1961 Act according to which the Chancellor used to apply his discretion and appoint anyone he like. However, the existing practice has been presenting certain problems. On the issue of nominating a panel, teachers get sharply divided, and this division unfortunately gets reflected almost in every sphere of campus life. Some consider the Vice-Chancellor their 'nominee' and try to put pressure on him to realise undue benefits. It becomes difficult for the Vice-Chancellor to act with a neutral attitude. On the other hand, if the Chancellor is given a 'free-hand' in choosing a Vice-Chancellor, the latter may not be acceptable to all. It is, therefore, necessary to work out a compromise between the two systems. In my view, there may be a 'Search Committee' consisting of a Supreme Court judge (to be nominated by the Chief Justice) as its chairman, and four other members who may be the Chairman, University Grants Commission, a representative of the Senate of the university concerned, a former Vice-Chancellor of any university (to be nominated by the Chancellor), and a Secretary to the government (may be the Education Secretary). The function of this committee will be to suggest a panel of three persons who are considered highly respectable because of their scholastic and administrative ability, and are likely to derive respect from teachers, students and other employees alike. The Chancellor shall appoint anyone out of the panel.

The writer is a retired Professor of Chemistry, Rajshahi University, and former member of University Grants Commission.

## Festivals, Fairs and Failures

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