

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 — steadily 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 Baishakh 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 it 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 banyan tree, the famous Batamool, organised by the well-known Chhayarat group. Whether Chhayarat 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 more and more space, has assumed proportions threatening the very function to which it owes its existence.

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might of microphones, took the form of an onslaught on an innocent public, and finally succeeded in chasing them away from the place.

I am not surprised that Chhayarat, which has reportedly objected to the setting up of stalls so close to its traditional venue — the spot under the banyan tree — has notified it would stop performing if the vulgar commercialism is allowed to ruin its festival of songs. If things come to such a pass it will be a sad day for many of us.

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

beauty of New Year celebrations, the day was still a glorious day, to judge by the spontaneity and the richness of the popular festivities as reported in the press, and more particularly by the supplements brought out by our dailies on the occasion. The essays and articles published in these supplements may not all be of 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.

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Festivals, Fairs and Failures

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