

Why This Delay in Rohingya Repatriation?

The Trade Minister of Myanmar Lt. General Tun Kyi who came to Dhaka to talk border trade as a mark of improvement in the working relationship between Yangon and Dhaka had to predictably respond to questions on Rohingya repatriation - an unfinished business between the two countries. We are pleasantly surprised to note from his clarifications that Myanmar government had cleared one lakh refugees for repatriation. Some 50,000 have already gone back home. We wonder what is holding up the return of the listed 100,000 refugees to Myanmar now?

The Myanmar Minister apparently has had his own snap-shot perception of where the hitch may be lying. He has surmised that the refugees are choosing to stay back because "honestly, they are currently having a better life in your country" - getting aid from the UNHCR and the NGOs - than they would have on return to Myanmar. But the refugees' natural inclination should be to return to their country at the earliest. That they are instead languishing in a foreign land by choice against the best dictate of their natural instinct to be home-going by the Minister's view-point - cannot reflect very well on their host. Although we are stopping short at suggesting that their patriotism may well have been questioned by the remark, we cannot help saying that it does not quite speak enough of the other side. The Myanmar Trade Minister has sought to remove the impression though that there had been any ill-treatment meted out to them or they had to face any religious discrimination. At any rate, his government's 'readiness' to rehabilitate the refugees in Myanmar goes down well now.

The statistical realities about the Rohingya repatriation are: out of 2,68,000 refugees, 50,000 have gone back to Myanmar, 1,00,000 await repatriation after obtaining clearance from the Myanmar government, and as many as 1,18,000 are yet to be cleared for their home-bound journey.

The tangible result in terms of repatriation being less than a quarter of the desired level, even after such long-drawn negotiations, it is the rolling of the ball into each other's court, every time there is an impasse, that diminishes our faith in the way the entire question is being handled. Mr Werner Blatter, the regional UNHCR functionary who had come here after the cyclone pointed out that the UNHCR has developed a good 'access' to Myanmar. As far as we know, a UNHCR office has also been opened on the other side.

So, what could be really holding up the repatriation process - we are quite frankly at a loss to understand. Has any lingering misunderstanding cast its shadow over the relationship between the UNHCR and the government of Bangladesh? It had been made to appear sometime ago that Bangladesh was rushing with the repatriation process. The occasional UNHCR remarks suggested something like that when they laid stress on their own verification harping on 'voluntariness' of the return. We appreciate the application of standard international norms but what is inexplicable is why those who have been cleared for repatriation have to still pass their days in the refugee camps? Where does the snag really lie? We would like to know from our Foreign Ministry and the UNHCR what really is going on with the repatriation process at this stage?

Death of a Single-man Institution

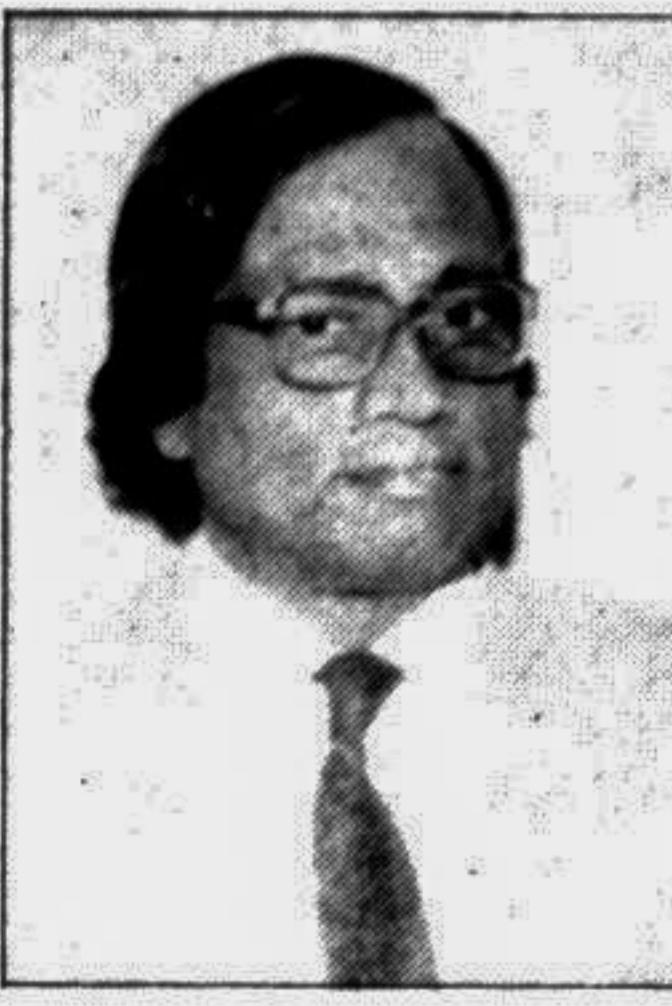
The top man of Bangladesh's music is dead. Abdul Ahad, or Ahad Bhai as he was lovingly called by musicians and indeed all contributing in the cultural field of the land, was an institution by himself. With Ahad closes a chapter of the Bengali people's cultural endeavour this side of the Radcliffe border. This is not only because in his passage we have lost one who did not merely breathe the same air and live in the same campus as did Rabindranath but sat at the great one's feet and excelled in absorbing music and culture from him. His was a unique pioneering and frontiersmanship that literally filled the vacuum created in the cultural arena of the post-partition Dhaka. He did that almost singlehandedly. He was a lone ranger, not only in music but in everything - dying a bachelor and always lonely in his achievements as perhaps in his sufferings of which he would not let anybody know - that being an expression of his sense of decency and culture.

He did not cut many discs of his own performance as a singer, one does not know why. It can be that he enjoyed composing, arranging and producing music - making his mark in all three - more than singing. But he was a singer all right of great feeling and culture, knowledge and skill, which owed in a great measure to his serious *sadhana* in his late teens which earned him top position in all Bengal Music Conference in Thumri. His stint at Santiniketan as a peer of Suchitra Mitra and Kanika Bandyopadhyay and a pupil of the legendary Sailaja Ranjan Majumdar and Santidev Ghose must have been similarly responsible for making him an authority of Tagore song and a composer of unforgettable excellent melodies.

The authority in the young master was recognised by stalwarts like Pankaj Mullik and Hemanta Mukherjee who recorded Tagore songs under his training and direction. One of the best performance of Suchitra Mitra on gramophone disc is the delightful "Tomay Amay Khonike Dekha" - a modern song tuned by Abdul Ahad - and this marked the flowering of a near-genius composer who benefited the early years of East Pakistan musically. But far more important than that as foremost exponent of Bengali music, and untiring and ever creative, his was a most effective contribution in the transformation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh.

His resistance to the pervasive anti-Tagore campaign in the government establishments, specially radio where he worked till retirement, in the mid-sixties was quite in keeping with his character and convictions. By declining to sign the notorious 'statement of Forty Thieves' advocating a ban on Tagore - he acted courageously. But at the same time he was a father to all singers and musicians, this side or that of Tagore. There will not ever be anyone quite like him again. Our sympathies to his near ones.

The Proposition is: Should the Next General Elections be Held under a Caretaker Government?



Today Barrister Rafiqul Islam Mia, Member, Standing Committee, Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Minister for Housing and Works, argues against the proposition

Interviewed by Chapal Bashar

we believe that the improvement of the election process and non-interference in the EC's function are the guarantee for fair elections, and that is how all other countries including England achieved the process of conducting the elections in a free and fair atmosphere.

In every democracy, there

ministries, and committee system of parliament must be nourished and developed further for stabilising the democracy.

I think, the present stagnant position centres on how we can ensure fair, impartial, meaningful and credible election in the country. During the 9 years' movement against au-

episode should be to ensure fair and impartial elections. Election Commission is the only body which is concerned with conducting the elections. Therefore, all efforts should be made to strengthen the hands of the Election Commission. The EC shall have to find out the mechanism so that the candidates do not spend more

Accountability is the main feature of the democratic government. Without accountability, democratic institutions cannot be built up, and since the caretaker government has no accountability, it cannot be developed as an institution. It is the development of the institution which can guarantee fair election, not the stop-gap arrangement such as caretaker government.

In my view, the concept of caretaker government is against the principle of democracy which provides right to rule after getting a mandate from the people. Moreover, it is an attempt to avoid the responsibility of building proper institutions like Election Commission to conduct fair elections.

To develop the democratic culture, politicians shall have to accept the responsibility for any manipulation taking place. Future of democracy in Bangladesh solely depends on the ability of politicians and political institutions.

Africa. All patriotic citizens of Bangladesh, except those who opposed liberation war, could have been incorporated in that national government. If that type of government could have been made a reality, I am sure the question of forming BAKSAL would not have arisen. That national government could have laid the foundation for resolving all the crises faced by the new-born country, including political and economic problems. I have no hesitation in saying that the unity through a national government, could have helped to rebuild the country as an exploitation-free Bangladesh and this could avert the tragedy in August of 1975.

We have not shown any attitude of opportunism (*subidhabadi manushikota*) by not accepting the concept of caretaker government. We don't believe that the caretaker government is a guarantee for a fair election. Rather,

is a shadow cabinet - it gives parallel view on every matter including foreign policy, financial management, unemployment problem and what not. People can judge what policy they have while the opposition can say that the government has failed in development activities and can show alternatives how they will solve the problem.

The opposition is criticising the 'Golden Hand-shake' policy of the government which has been adopted due to loss of hundreds of crores of taka in nationalised sector.

Mere criticism of the government does not bring an end to the responsibility of the opposition - they have to convince the people about how they will solve the problem when they will be in power.

The developments in our policies such as sovereign parliament, Election Commission, accountability of the government, transparency of the

democratic government and even in the joint declaration of the three alliances, there was no formula of any caretaker government. Under special circumstances, deposed president Ershad removed his vice-president in the face of the people's movement and appointed Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the new vice-president - then Ershad resigned and the Chief Justice became Acting President. And all these were done under the provision of the Constitution. That was possible under the presidential system. But under the present parliamentary system, this is practically impossible.

It may be remembered that after the election under Shahabuddin's government, Sheikh Hasina alleged subtle rigging in the polls. Who will give the guarantee that this type of allegation will not be raised again?

The whole purpose of this

than the money prescribed by the EC. If any candidate fails to satisfy the EC that his expenditure was not beyond the limit, his election should be declared null and void by the EC.

For ensuring fair elections, public awareness should be created and identity cards can be introduced in this regard. During the elections nobody will be allowed to use government machinery and facilities.

Building democratic institutions is a process and there is ample scope to develop it. It took hundreds of years to develop British democracy. Money does not play an important role any more in British elections. In the last two elections in Britain, election expenditures were found to be decreasing.

Since the caretaker government is not an elected one, it does not acquire any constitutional democratic legitimacy to govern while it does not

enjoy the mandate from the public to rule. And, so, it has no accountability to the people. Since there is no accountability of the caretaker government, it will not be responsible to anybody.

The caretaker government will not resolve all the problems. For example, 16 by-elections have so far been held while another one in Bogra will be held soon. These by-elections were not held under any caretaker government. Now, suppose, any political party manipulates the result or takes advantage of rigging and gets their candidates elected in the by-polls, the party might get majority in parliament and oust the government. So, we shall have to find ways and means to bring an end to all these riggings. Only a caretaker government cannot bring solution to the problem.

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To develop the democratic culture, politicians shall have to accept the responsibility for any manipulation taking place. Future of democracy in Bangladesh solely depends on the ability of politicians and political institutions.

Tomorrow Suranjan Sengupta MP of the Ganotantri Party argues in favour of the proposition.

Riddle of Population, Poverty and Plenty

with a per capita GNP of \$ 220, we remain one of the poorest nations not only in the world but also in the region.

It should also be pointed out here that the increased crowding of the country over the years past does not necessarily signify that the population growth rate has accelerated. In fact, data published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics about intercensal growth rates of population show a marginally declining trend. The population growth rate was 2.48 per cent in 1974, 2.35 per cent in 1981 and 2.17 per cent in 1991. In short, population continues to grow but at a slower pace. Land area, on the other hand, remains fixed. Each birth thus serves to precipitate population density.

The US Census Bureau takes our population at 125 million, living in an area of 144,000 sq km. The 1991 Census gave us a living area of 147,570 sq km for 111 million people. To go by the mighty BTV spot on population growth, we are now 118 million people living in this country. At an annual growth rate of 2 per cent, we might end up this year adding another million mouths - may be a hundred thousand or so more. That still leaves us short of 125 million. However, we rest assured that these small differences cannot dislodge us from the top position on the global chart. Our nearest rival Japan has a population density of 317 persons per sq km and the next country on the list, India, 309. Despite the differences of a few million people and some hundreds of square kilometres of land area on the computation sheets, ours still remain the most populous country on the face of the earth.

In the matter of quality of life, our place is nearer the bottom of the global chart. The UNDP Human Development Index gave us a ranking of 147 in 1993 among 173 countries

of the programme. They prefer to call it a health and family planning programme. Human resource development sounds even better.

In the name of human resource development, you could even promote population growth, albeit on a selective basis. Singapore provides incentives to educated women to have more children. Conceivably, such a policy could bring about a qualitative improvement in the future stock of human resources. To us, how-

ever, such thoughts would seem just too outlandish. We give education to our women so that they may grow wiser and have fewer children.

As the population grows so does food needs. In the area of foodgrain production, we seem to have achieved a notable success. The country is now nearly self-sufficient in food. The output of foodgrain is rising annually at a rate faster than the population growth. There should be plenty of food for the teeming millions, then. Well, the availability of food per capita has increased. However, this does not mean that every family has ready access to as much food it requires to meet its consumption needs. It's just that many of them are too poor to lay

hands on money to buy food. So they still remain undernourished although food is more plentiful in supply and cheaper even better.

Poverty indicators quoted in the latest UNDP report on human development show that nearly 50 per cent of the rural households in the country cannot meet different proportions of calorie and protein requirements in full. Another recent study, also funded by the UNDP, reveals that in the urban areas too, 44 per cent

of the households suffer from malnutrition. Despite near-availability in food, half the population still remain undernourished.

How about shelter? As reported in the press, a recent official survey found that the country is running short of three million housing units. Nearly 15 million people have no shelter. The survey forecast that by the year 2000, the number of people without homes could rise to 25 million.

All the same, we also have to take note of the improvement in some of the quality of life indicators at the beginning of the decade of the nineties as compared to the eighties. The number of hospitals has increased by about 32 per

cent, hospital beds by nearly 45 per cent. Number of doctors has more than doubled while the number of nurses and midwives has trebled. About 85 per cent of the rural population get safe water to drink. Infant mortality rate has come down to 88 per thousand from around 111. People live longer. Life expectancy at birth has improved by nearly 3 per cent and now exceeds 56 years. All these are indeed welcome developments but also imply that the country would grow even more crowded unless birth rates come down significantly.

As noted earlier, our per capita income stands at \$ 220. This shows an increase of just about ten dollars over a period of three years. We may not be growing poorer but neither are we on the way to getting out of the poverty trap set. Besides, 45 per cent of income accrue to 20 per cent people who belong to the top and upper middle brackets. It thus seems more likely that increments in income would accrue mainly to the affluent segment of the population. If at all, the poor benefits only marginally. The overall poverty situation remains dismal.

Our honoured new citizen Ms Leung Lai Ching also comes from Hong Kong. Population density in both Hong Kong and Singapore is five-times or more than ours. In the case of Hong Kong, there are about 5,500 persons per sq. km. and in Singapore, nearly 4,500. Yet, they are terribly rich by our standard. Their per capita income stands at around \$ 13,000 compared to our \$ 220. They are decidedly more populous than we are. However, our lot is poverty and theirs affluence. Any correlation between population and poverty is not easy to discern here. Meanwhile, we carry on our fight both against population growth and poverty. Some day, maybe, we will come across an answer to the riddle.

Before I forget, Hong Kong and Singapore are more like city-states. Their population density should not be seen as thwarting our standing as the most crowded country in the world. Our record remains unbroken, you might say.

ALONG MY WAY
S B Chaudhuri

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Tagore and BTV news

Sir, I didn't want to miss the 8 o'clock BTV news on 8 May as the day was 133rd birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. The script on Tagore item and the supporting visual was seen to be the worst perhaps I've ever watched on BTV news commemorating any anniversary of Tagore.

The newsman who drafted the story seemed to have been reproducing what he wrote in his earliest essay on Tagore. His paragraphs repeatedly began with 'Bishwakabi' Rabindranath. He could simply write 'Kabiguru' Rabindranath.

Then again while Papaya Sarwar along with other singers were seen rendering Tagore songs newscaster was heard continue reading what the speakers (including the Speaker of JS) said on that occasion! No precision, no

editing to synchronize the visual! Even there ran no visual of Bangla Academy story on that occasion. The visual part of Shishu Academy story was also poorly done.

The story of Tagore series anti-climax when the Agricultural Minister was quoted to have said at another function at Shilaidaha - "... Tagore enjoyed boating on the river Padma ... He glorified the mighty river Padma. But the Padma has all dried up due to Farakka barrage. Our neighbouring India should let the Padma flow again ..." It reminds us of the anecdote where the student memorized essay on 'the river' but was asked to write on the cow ... he began on cow and ended into river!

The Tagore Story '94 perhaps tells well the ignorance or negligence and crisis that BTV news is passing through.

Mukul, Rampura, Dhaka