

Pressure Mounts

We have a sigh of relief that nobody died in the clashes yesterday. But our relief ends there, and a serious concern for our political future takes its place. Yesterday's political action by the combined opposition marks a serious escalation of their pressure against the government to accede to the demand for a caretaker government to supervise the next elections. For the moment Sir Ninian facilitated dialogue takes a back seat, and street agitation becomes the focal point of political action. That fact notwithstanding, we underscore the importance of the dialogue, and stress that the talks must be brought back on tracks and an amicable solution found.

In the streets of Dhaka yesterday, the political course that the two opposing groups will follow in the immediate future, became amply clear. The opposition will go for more and more street action, — note the calls for two days strike on Saturday and Sunday next — and the ruling party and its government will mobilize more and more the state apparatus to counter it. Are we then back to November-December days of 1990? We hope that all are aware of the qualitative difference between then and now.

In terms of democratic governance we would like to raise a fundamental issue. We think that in a democratic system, the opposition has a right to demonstrate in front of the Prime Minister's office. We constantly see pictures on CNN and BBC of numerous demonstrations being held every month in front of the White House, 10 Downing Street, Elysee Palace, etc. We seriously question the logic of the BNP government's action to cordon off large parts of the city area whenever the opposition announces a programme of demonstration in front of important government offices. We all remember the scene in front of the secretariat that led to violent and repressive action by the police. What would have happened if the opposition was allowed to sit-in in front of the PM's office? This occurs in other democracies all the time.

We are afraid that both sides are hardening their attitudes, and are digging in, in their respective positions, precisely when they need to move from their current positions. This they must do for the sake of the country and for that of democracy. Will our leaders stop for a moment to ask themselves, how is all this benefitting the hungry and the poverty stricken multitude?

Prowling Death Machines

This is what we have been long suspecting. More than half of all motor vehicles in operation in the land do not have fitness certificates. Without these certificates, these are not entitled to be on the roads. But tens of thousands of such unauthorised vehicles are plying the roads of the country to the great peril of the nation. We have for long been cautioning the government against this — but we had no proof. The government was never keen to tally the three kinds of figures and act on the finding. One: the total number of vehicles imported; two: the number of vehicles registered and paying regular taxes; and three: the number of vehicles having valid up-to-date road-worthiness certificate. No official figures ever came out giving the differences between the three. It is through direct experience that we maintained that most of the vehicles specially on the Dhaka roads were not roadworthy — it is so easy to see that. Now the head of the organisation of importers of reconditioned vehicles has said on Tuesday that his set-up has gone into the question with a survey which has given a 60 per cent figure for the recalcitrant vehicles.

As every motor vehicle is a very potential killer and also as everyone of these cost the nation a pot of money in foreign exchange, there has to be a tab on every piece of these contraptions. Very evidently government has failed very badly in this respect — and a very patent failure of governance it is. Imagine tens of thousands of moving death machines let loose on the prowl for unsuspecting victims — and all the while emitting noxious fumes and denting seriously the sustainability of our society and its physical support system!

On the point of pollution two very important points have been made by Mr Abdul Haq, the leader of the importers of reconditioned vehicles. The 1990 law providing for a fine of Tk 200 for emitting black smoke must needs be updated to make the fine effectively inhibitive or even to provide for jail terms. The second point is equally good. Bangladesh should ban import of vehicles having no anti-pollution device. To this we add that the government also disallow the import of leaded petroleum. The vehicles are indeed a test of governance. Our society wants very badly that government believe this.

What's Happening to Them?

Can a grisly murder be beaten in cruelty by a grislier one? How can two infinitely cruel events be compared — after all two infinities cannot be unequal. The second point of puzzlement over the Pinku murder case relates to the nature of anger. Recently a jilted lover's anger caused him to torch the dormitory where his beloved stayed, in a Chinese township, — and 12 resident girls died in the fire. The man was a doctor and had to wait and look for ways to avenge his rejection. Can anger last that long? The Pinku case, enacted recently in Mirpur and a Manikganj village, poses the question for the umpteenth time.

Alaudin Khan alias Dipu is in custody on charge of murdering his young first cousin Pinku. Dipu who has just passed SSC very creditably has confessed to the crime which can shame both the Isha murder and the Chinese dormitory fire deaths in perversity and criminality. In the results published of Dipu's SSC performance, his name came out wrong. He requested Pinku's father who was his own uncle and worked for the education board, to get the name corrected. The uncle demanded Tk 600 for the job. Angered, Dipu looked for a way, any way to teach his uncle a lesson. Accordingly, days later he took his nine-year old cousin from the latter's playfield to Manikganj. The little Pinku had nothing to suspect, for he was being taken to his aunt's house near that town. Dipu bought a *gamchha* and borrowed *chadar* from a friend. With these he strangled Pinku and threw the body into the Kaliganga.

One can understand a farmer butchering his wife for offering him cold rice at the end of a hard day's toil. Anger, as temporary insanity, can be understood to be in operation there. But what mental shape was Dipu in when planning how to hurt back his uncle and executing it with so much cool and thoroughness? What is happening to our young people?

TRADITIONALLY, jute has been grown for its fibre and the stem. Jute stick, as the by-product, is an important source of fuel for cooking in the low-lying floodplains of Bengal. While using the entire green jute plant for manufacture of pulp, the jute growing areas, lacking in an alternative source of fuel, may face a severe crisis. However, large-scale use of green jute plant has not yet started, but given the vigorous encouragement by the government, the fuel crisis might be imminent.

I do not wish to raise an undue alarm, but no one seems to have taken into account the important role of jute for cooking, on a daily basis, by poor villagers. The total bio-mass and its various uses should be the concern of a thorough-going analysis based on field investigation before deciding on the large-scale, alternative use of jute. If the entire jute plant is consumed by the paper industry then where and how the poor rural households would get their cooking fuel for their daily rice? It is incredible, but true that no one has officially thought about it. We must not forget that less than 5 per cent of the households of the country enjoy the constant access to a vital national resource — gas. In fact, scarcity of wood and farm by-products used as fuel for cooking has already reached crisis proportions in certain parts of the low-lying floodplains. As a result, cow-dung is largely diverted from its more important use as manure — affecting soil fertility. Thana level case studies indicate that women and children from poor rural households spend an increasing proportion of their time scavenging for fuel wood; and children are forced to abstain themselves from schools. Shortage of jute sticks would considerably heighten the existing scarcity of fuel for cooking.

As a result, will there be a

come-back for jute? Is jute pulp the golden means of revival? The interested reader may please note that there has not been much enthusiasm from the agriculture lobby in this respect. Why not?

Should jute plant become an important source of pulp material and the basis for a significant expansion of the pulp and paper industry, then its price must also remain competitive. Will it be possible to ensure a fair return to the growers of jute and yet manufacture pulp and sell it at the international market price? I doubt it — since bamboo or wood, the alternative raw materials, are obtained from forests and their prices have

no immediate welfare implications: while, price of jute would affect millions of growers.

The traditional jute fibre, when sold, includes a great deal of added value through the process of extracting the fibre from the plant and its subsequent cleaning and drying etc., involving use of a lot of labour — abundantly available in the jute growing areas.

Prices received by farmers when green jute plants are sold would be much less compared to jute fibre in addition to considerable loss of employment in the immediate post harvest period.

Therefore, why farmers should grow jute to supply to pulp factories? Instead, why shouldn't we concentrate on producing bamboo and wood in forests? After all, these are the traditional ingredients for manufacturing pulp. One may, however, argue that forest resources should be preserved for other users and sustainable yield, while, the objective of the recent jute-pulp venture has been to identify an alternative use of jute on a fairly large scale, so that our jute economy can stage a recovery and comeback.

Pulp manufacturing is, however, an expensive business in

to consider both sides together. First, jute varieties in our country have been selected on the basis of quantity and quality of fibres. As a pulp material, fibre is of no concern and it is the total pulvable material including jute sticks which would be consumed by the pulp digester. Hence perhaps *mesta* which produce the most inferior variety of fibre would be the best to cultivate in order to produce the maximum quantity of pulp ingredient per unit of land. A fair return to farmers can perhaps be maintained, while competitive manufacturing of pulp might also be feasible.

Subject to further investigation, the best way to manufacture jute pulp would be to encourage cultivation of *mesta*, whose yield is much higher than jute, in the marginal lands where nothing else can be grown during the rainy season. In *char* lands adjoining big rivers where the soil is very sandy and floods come early, *mesta* or *kenaf* of high variety tolerate flooding

people and the country. I am very proud of the Soviet Union and I feel I still belong to it. It's all the same to me whether it is a democratic or a communist regime. What's important is that people should be happy.

Today, Tajikistan is Moscow's chief commitment in Central Asia. Russia's presence has served to contain the political troubles, but the military presence is drawing Russia deeper into economic and political commitments as well.

Russian soldiers in Tajikistan say otherwise. Major Vasili Likholyot works for the Tajik Minister of Defence, despite the fact that his pay is one-seventh that of his colleagues working for the Russian armed forces.

"We are military people and we should stay here to keep the fundamentalist forces under control," he says.

The task of the former Soviet military in Tajikistan, which lasted nine years, beginning with the Soviet invasion in December 1979. But already many Russians are calling Tajikistan the Second Afghanistan.

OPINION

Bad Law Casualty

Mufazzel Hossain

A few weeks back, I was coming from Topkhana Road area towards Ramna Park. It was around 12 noon, the usual rush hour during week days. The usual traffic, cars, buses, auto-rickshaws and rickshaws were moving at their maximum possible speed, which again is the usual norm in Dhaka, blaring horns and competing with each other like suicidal maniacs to overtake the other without slightest safety concern. Just in front of the Supreme Court/Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a car coming from the Ramna Park direction took a U turn from the right lane towards the Supreme Court entrance gate. As I said, it was rush hour and there was an unending stream of traffic coming from the opposite direction as well, the car driver did not give a damn about the vehicles coming from the other direction. One auto-rickshaw plying at full speed could not control itself and crashed into the U-turning car. Again there was the usual scene, broken glasses, upturned vehicles, blood on the road etc etc. So help up, God!

Talking about traffic and driving hazard in this lawless city, it is amazing to see them driving at break-neck speed, overtaking at road curves and bends, speeding through the right lane, and the police observing all this without batting an eye lid! I doubt whether most of our traffic cops know the traffic regulations themselves! Buses, particularly mini-buses, stopping at traffic island turnings and in the middle of the roads to pick up passengers (also leave: imagine, in the middle of the road!) is a routine scene and is accepted as a rule. (Any wrong thing practiced over and over again becomes the rule). And that's what has happened here. So help up, God!

I would briefly mention another aspect of Dhaka traffic. Given the road condition, intermittent traffic signals, abundance of slow moving traffic like rickshaws and push carts, no automobile starting from one end of the city to towards the other end can gain more than 3 minutes by driving at top speed. That calculation is for one end to the other end of the city. In and around mid city and downtown, one can expect to save a minute or two by driving at top speed. So what is the point driving at top speed, risking life to gain a mere minute? This is ridiculous, madness and genuine lunaticism. By nature we are intolerant people. We have no care for others. We are impatient and even callous. It is time that we should try to be a little decent, a little humane.

Will there be a Come-back for Jute?

Is jute pulp the golden means of revival? The interested reader may please note that there has not been much enthusiasm from the agriculture lobby in this respect. Why not?

Therefore, there is no comeback for the traditional jute as we understand. Jute pulp cannot cause a return of the glories to the Narayanganj jute market. For this purpose, the glories of golden fibre has to be restored. Given the enhanced environmental awareness all over the world, particularly after the UN conference on environment and development in 1992, it appears that use of jute bags as an environment friendly biodegradable product can be promoted. Unfortunately, recycling of plastic bags and use of bio-degradable plastic have again shunted jute bags into the background. However, I still think fancy, colourful and reusable shopping bags — for example, for supermarket use — might have a bright future provided the right product is manufactured and the right marketing genius comes forward to do the needful. But where is that genius? Nobody is aware of the timeframe for the purpose.

Let us therefore be realistic and consider traditional jute weaving to be a sunset industry. Perhaps the existing capacity might be fully utilized through an increase in domestic demand — taking up the slack in exports. If only jute bags are allowed to be utilized, then the combined domestic production of 50 million tons of grains, cement, fertilizer and animal feed would require half a million tons of jute goods which is the present capacity of our jute manufacturing industry.

An expanding jute industry is out of question. On the other hand, jute or *mesta* pulp has a future and for the benefit of those who are the poorest of the poor in Bangladesh. Perhaps there is no comeback for jute. Yet there is a bright ray of hope from a different direction.

WINDOW ON ASIA

Shahid Latif

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The Bear's Soft Underbelly

Russia makes a stand in Tajikistan, the most troubled among the five ex-Soviet Central Asian republics. Ian McWilliam reports for Inter Press Service from Khorog, Tajikistan.

commander of the Pamir region's self-declared Self-Defence Forces, based in Khorog. Though not opposed to the Russians' presence in Tajikistan, he says they make the situation worse by assisting the government. But Dushanbe is the real enemy.

"We don't want to control Dushanbe," says Ayubov. "We only want to remove the government of murderers and criminals."

The Muslim Pamiris mostly belong to the liberal *Islamist* sect and they strongly object to being labeled "fundamentalists" by Dushanbe and the Russian media. Valentina Tkachova, who is Russian, came to Khorog and married a Pamiri.

"My husband is a Muslim and I'm a Christian," she says emphatically, showing the little silver cross she wears around her neck. "In 40 years we never argued about this. There is one God."

Almost no food reaches Khorog from western Tajikistan because of the political rupture between Khorog and Dushanbe and the insecurity of the single road between the two. Food shops in the Pamir region are bare.

Since December 1992, massive quantities of food aid

sent to the region by the Aga Khan Foundation have averted mass starvation, particularly during the long, cold winters.

More than 200,000 people live in the Pamir region, including thousands of refugees who fled their homes in the west of the republic during the civil war.

During 1993, the Aga Khan Foundation distributed free to all those people more than 10,000 tonnes of wheat flour, 2,500 tonnes of wheat, 500 tonnes of butter and large quantities of milk powder, rice, soap and other essentials.

Those actually involved in fighting are usually Tajiks of the Sunni sect from central or western Tajikistan; rather than the Islamic Pamiris.

A small minority of fighters say they are fighting for Islam, but most are fighting simply because they were driven from their homes during the civil war. Many have come to the Pamirs from refugee camps in Afghanistan.

A group of six bearded young men waiting to see

Majnun, chief commander of the Self-Defence Forces, apparently belonged to the minority of fighters inspired by religion.

"We have just come from a

camp in Pakistan near the

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.

NGOs and local culture

Sir, It may appear odd to quote Newton's third law of motion to Ms Ayesha Khanam, the general secretary of Mahila Parishad. "The *shash* is directed towards suppressing the progressive, march of women in our country," she was quoted as saying in the October 22nd issue of the *Economist* magazine.

Three cases of *shash* punishment fatally administered to women aged between 14 and 21 were reported in the magazine. The cause of these incidents has been attributed to the success of the NGOs in empowering women: "These programmes, as intended, are helping women acquire economic power; and that may be exactly what worries the men on the *shash*."

The reaction to foreign people in Germany, and to foreign ideas (empowerment of women) in Bangladesh have both faced resistance by local people. Will our government follow the Teutonic example and do something to free the poor inhabitants of the area from these binding nuisances?

An Inhabitant, Babar Road, Dhaka

purposes. They are using this road as their latrine, shops, football field, workshops, parking place and what not. Even a conscious citizen, a medical practitioner, is doing private practice. The whole road is used for parking vehicles of the crowding patients in the evening, thus invariably creating a traffic jam at the entrance of the main road.

Mr Haque is very right in his complaint that there is none to remove the nuisance created to the inconvenience of the public and nobody dares to take any legal actions against those responsible for creating such nuisance. Even the distinguished DC (Traffic) of the Metropolitan Police lives on the same road perhaps without bothering to look outside of his protected house. Will the authority concerned do something to free the poor inhabitants of the area from these binding nuisances?

In comparison, the Dhaka University VC's hand in hand procession with those students who themselves create carnage at the university may appear contrary to good sense and discipline to many.

I am not involved in politics, neither are the VCs known to me but as an independent and clear thinking citizen it appears to me that politically motivated educationists are out to destroy whatever little system has been left behind by the politicians after they have made political slandering of the education system.