

What is a Barricade?

The best aspect about Tuesday's barricade programme of the opposition parties was that it passed off peacefully. It was, however, far from an uneventful day. The nation's movement activity was seriously curtailed during the day. All this goes to speak of the success of the programme. But at what cost? There have been too many heads of cost quite unintentionally exacted from the society by the parties.

This was no hartal, and traffic within the town should have been unaffected. On Tuesday cars and other four-wheeled motor vehicles tried to stay off the roads. Why? Some who got their vehicles on the road did that not without a hefty feeling of fear. For good reason — some *bang-churs* occurred even on the no-hartal barricade-only day. Rickshaws piled in numbers less than they do in a hartal day. Scooters and tempos were as scanty as to enable them extract double the usual fare from helpless people going to office and business and schools.

Some children's schools wisely closed shop for fear of throwing their kiddies into uncertain harassment. In fact nobody excepting the activists participating in the barricade programme was sure what would that action mean and what would it involve and affect. All Dhaka, the 8-million-plus megalopolis, on Tuesday looked a city in an eerie daytime slumber. Did the opposition parties expect this to happen?

What is a hartal and what is a barricade? Has the nation been clearly explained what the organisers feel to be the difference between the two? And hasn't 'abarodh' for which barricade is only a poor and misleading translation, undergone radical semantic change in the last few years. What the agitating parties had in mind when declaring a *Railpath Rajpath Abarodh* was inactivating movement between the towns and districts through closure of traffic on national highways, waterways and the railways. But when politicians speak of taking to the *rajpath* they mean mainly the city roads which were not meant to be affected by the *abarodh*. These confusions matter. If governance is the business of the government, fully, political movements are no less responsible and onerous charges to be carried out by those not in government.

The validity of such agitational programmes as the nation is passing through currently depends on the quanta in which people impose these on themselves — and with what spontaneity. This validity starts eroding fast when these tend to be foisted on the people rather than being courted by them. Mistakes such as attending this hartal-barricade confusion can push the present movement to the latter and an unfortunate position.

Dealing with Abductors

Chokhbandha Party, (gang that blindfolds people for abduction) is one of many such criminal groups now operating in large parts of the country. They often make news of the most chilling types, some of the gang members are even caught red-handed but yet the gangs go on committing more and more such crimes. Jalilur Rahman of Gulshan is one of the lucky few to have escaped the *Chokhbandha Party* that is most active in Dhamrai area but seems to have expanded its network upto the capital.

Abducted on November 18, Jalilur Rahman had to go through a terrible experience. A student of Abu Zhar Giffari College, who sat for this year's HSC examinations, before his release from captivity on November 28, was forced to write as many as seven letters to his parents asking for three lakh taka — the ransom money demanded for his release. Instead of paying ransom his guardians informed the Gulshan police of this abduction. Gulshan Thana maintained a liaison with Dhamrai Thana and even raided the area where Jalilur stayed captive. Although the raid was not unsuccessful, it led partly to his freedom.

However a stroke of luck was needed for Jalilur to get rid of his captors. At the time he was being taken to another place, the young man in a desperate did to save his life ran away from one of his captors then accompanying him. Local people and chairman of Sutipara Union under Dhamrai Thana gave him shelter and then the police rescued him.

The important question here is if the abductors are known, how come that they could escape arrest. Many times did the gang members try to take Jalilur away from the chairman. Local people and the chairman know them well. So here is an opportunity to trace their hide-outs and flush them out for good. We feel that police action in the aftermath of a captive's rescue falls far short of the standard follow-up. Had the gangs been pursued to the last and meted out the punishment they deserve for the crime, such criminal groups would not have proliferated like they have done today.

Inimitable Jagadish Chandra

What Rabindranath did for our literature and music, painting and drama was matched by almost even measure in the sciences by his one time closest friend Jagadish Chandra Bose.

This genius, born in Rahikhal, Bikrampur, however was groomed into the relentlessly groping and yet brooding type in Faridpur. Both his parents specially father Bahgaban Chandra Bose, helped shape the inner man in Jagadish by exemplifying a life of principles and sacrifice, lighted up by an unflinching sense of liberty and dignity. This early shaping saw the first Indian Fellow of the Royal Society, through the many challenging vicissitudes of life, not the least of which was being born a black and Indian.

Jagadish Chandra's works on the plant life are widely known and recognised all over the world and are staging a comeback in the contemporary observations in that area. His achievements in physics, specially that related to electro magnetic radiation induced action, antedating Guglielmo Marconi's similar work, still wait to be recognised.

But Jagadish Chandra was more than his scientific achievements would make him appear. He had, on top of the scientist's analytic prowess, a comprehension of nature that comes to mystics and philosophers. And he penned his musings in inimitable Bengali prose for the benefit of us and our posterity.

Yesterday was Jagadish Chandra's 136th birth anniversary.

Dialogue: The Trinity's Aim is to Dislodge the Government

by Ziaur Rahman Khan

Several alternative options were advanced by the government only to be rejected by the opposition. The implications arising from this is manifestly clear. Nothing short of the opposition proposal will be acceptable to the opposition. This is an unjustified and unacceptable situation.

MR SAMS Kibria in his article on November 27 started off by stating that instead of re-examinations, we should have an objective assessment of the situation following the departure of the Commonwealth facilitator Sir Ninian Stephen. If this advice is directed to his own party than it is wise counsel. However, he promptly forgot about the dispassionate and objective analysis and heaped blame upon the government and the Commonwealth facilitator.

The non acceptance by the Opposition of the government's last proposal he attributes to its lack of merit, because he contends that an explosive situation would prevail within a cabinet made up of government and opposition members. He does not elaborate upon this unsubstantiated fear, and it is a reprehensible prejudice of a proposal and appears to be the result of a fevered imagination.

That the Commonwealth Secretary General Chief Emeka was, in Dhaka on an official visit is known to all. Why Mr Kibria felt the need to underline the "fact" that the government, and not the leader of the opposition, invited him is hard to understand. There was no invitation. He was here on an official visit as part of his job as Secretary General of the Commonwealth of which we are a part. From his long service in government Mr Kibria must be well aware of the fact that the Commonwealth Secretary General could hardly pay an official visit to any country

at the invitation of the leader of the opposition.

He then went on to assail the role of Sir Ninian and particularly the fact that he held a press conference with Mr Kibria thinks was in bad form and a departure from his role as a facilitator. What must be remembered is that Sir Ninian was in Dhaka for about five weeks trying to cobble together an agreement between the two sides on the question, form and modalities of a transitional government for the next elections.

During this period there was a dialogue between the two sides with 15 members on each side. This dialogue over a period of four days was torpedoed at the end by the Opposition Chief Whip who dashed out of the committee room in Parliament, all by himself, to announce to the waiting journalists that the dialogue had failed. All the government members and 14 members of the opposition including their leader Mr. Samad Azad were still inside the room. This was a deliberate, thoughtless and irresponsible act on at least three counts: (1) At that very moment it was being discussed how the dialogue could continue with smaller contingents and on definite points at issue, (2) If the opposition had decided that talks had failed, the leader of their team Mr. Azad

should have been the person to declare it and (3) There was an express understanding that all statements pertaining to the talks should be jointly given by the chief whips of both sides.

Mr Nasim's unilateral declaration of failure of the talks had all the appearances of being pre-arranged, the result of prior deliberation and designed to scuttle any attempts at a solution which may be at variance with their demand.

Almost the very next day the dialogue resumed with smaller teams and in the presence of the facilitator. Several alternative options were advanced by the government only to be rejected by the opposition. The implications arising from this is manifestly clear. Nothing short of the opposition proposal will be acceptable to the opposition. This is an unjustified and unacceptable situation.

The unbending rigidity of the Opposition stand does not make them amenable to reason or dialogue. If none of the four proposals put forward by the government are acceptable to them, then no future proposal has any chance of success. In defiance of reason, logic or even the Constitution, the Opposition demand for acceptance of their proposal in to amounts to dictating to the government. This is something

that no elected government can willingly permit.

The Government has, however, been free and willing to discuss the demand, examine its merits, explore other avenues for improving the election process, offer alternatives, and in a spirit of democratic openness arrive at a solution. Hence when the offer of the Commonwealth Secretariat to lend a hand was accepted with alacrity by the leader of the opposition, on 21.9.1994, the government agreed to the proposal on 25.9.94. The choice of a facilitator and his career details were also communicated to both sides. The parameters of the discussion/dialogue were also decided on by the Secretary General of the Commonwealth. Sir Ninian Stephen was sent out to Bangladesh as a facilitator, and he did that job to the best of his abilities in very trying circumstances.

It is unfair and uncharitable to assail his neutrality or belittle his efforts. But it is not altogether unexpected. In fact it is reminiscent of the attacks made by Opposition leaders on the visiting delegation of British Members of Parliament in the first week of September this year when they were branded as hired spokesmen for the government.

But, as mentioned earlier, Sir Ninian tried to effect a

compromise under great and monumental odds. He did try and encourage the two sides to reach an agreement, he offered his advice and ideas. And he did put forward a proposal. This is the cause of Mr Kibria's umbrage. But it must be appreciated that Sir Ninian must have felt at the end of his tether by the unreasonable obstinacy of the Opposition.

It was this perhaps that impelled him to design a proposal himself and offer it for the opposition's consideration. The proposal was Sir Ninian's and not the government's. This must be stated categorically. Whether this represents a departure from his brief is a matter of opinion. However, if a facilitator can be expected to encourage, advise and proffer ideas as suggested by Mr Kibria, I cannot understand why he cannot put forward a proposal after five weeks of daily deliberations with the two sides.

Mr Kibria jumped to his own confusion by asserting that Sir Ninian's eagerness to impose the proposal upon the Opposition led him to describe the proposal as his own. This is not only incorrect but imputes a lack of integrity on the part of Sir Ninian which is most regrettable. He also castigates him for his lack of neutrality by holding a press con-

ference. It should be evident to the meanest intelligence that a man who has been trying to broker a deal for five weeks has some right to state his position. Though it is untrue that there was any breach of his neutrality. To allege bias is to like saying that all those who agree with me are neutral: all those who disagree with me are partisan. This cannot be a sensible proposition.

The Opposition has boycotted the Parliament for eight months on the demand for a caretaker government. Though they concede that to meet that demand would require constitutional amendment. Their boycott then becomes illogical. Walkouts may be a legitimate exercise of democratic right to dissent. But boycott of parliament is a sinister attempt to undermine the democratic process to render the parliament meaningless. It is an act of contempt of parliament and an insult to the millions of people who voted these Honorable Members to sit in Parliament and not to take to the streets.

The Opposition's unholy trinity has one aim in mind. To dislodge this government by force and to disrupt the democratic process, because boycotts and hartals cannot co-exist in a democratic dispensation: nor do they advance the cause of democracy. This was the 'violence' alluded to by Sir Ninian and is objected to by Mr. Kibria.

The writer is an eminent Barrister and a MP from the BNP

Commentary

Competition of Irresponsible Statements

Continued from page 1

The PM's statement is so-called dangerous because she has given the students a larger-than-life role. How will she respond to critics that she is using the students as cannon fodder to realise her own political ends? When it comes to the crunch, she appears to depend on her student wing, and not on the main political party. Hasn't she diminished the prestige, power and position of her own political party? Now that she has directly called upon the students to resist the opposition, will not the students — and not the politicians of her party — be calling the shots of the future political course that BNP will take?

When it comes to street level fighting, it is obviously the toughies and the thugs masquerading as students, who will emerge as more important than ordinary students. An inevitable consequence will be that students politics will be totally captured by arms, brandishing thugs. Such may already be the case. But then will not the PM's statement sanctify this miserable condition, and make things worse? In terms of creating severe

unrest in the educational institutions, the Prime Minister's statement could not have been more ill conceived. Already student body leaders have been given much too much importance during Khaleda Zia's time. Principles and teachers of colleges see newspaper and TV coverage of their students being cordially received at Shugandha and personally addressed by the Prime Minister herself, when the closest they can ever think of getting to the decision-maker, is at best a deputy secretary. Ask any provost of University halls to recount the discipline problems they face because of the political connections of the students. Now, if these students' become Prime Minister's main weapon in her fight against the opposition then, it does not need too much imagination to realise what the educational institutions will be reduced to.

On the other side, take the utterances of our Shadow Pri-

me Minister, Sheikh Hasina. At a rally on Sunday she declared that she will create total deadlock in the country by enforcing a 48-hour strike, elaborating that the strike will be enforced continuously, and will not be lifted even during the night. Does the country belong to BNP that she is punishing it so? What crime have the millions of rickshaw-pullers have committed that their children, and their families will have to go hungry, or without any income during those 48 hours? Will her party compensate the day labourers, the small shopkeepers, the retailers, the bus and truck drivers. Millions of people are involved in millions of economic activities totally on their own. They have nothing to do with the government. Why should they be punished just because the opposition wants the government out. And what about foreign trade? Will the opposition compensate the

markets that our exporters will lose, or the credibility loss that they will suffer due to failed commitment?

We have written on numerous occasions that there are three parties to a strike. The strike-caller (opposition), the strike target (government) and the general public who are supposed to observe it. The point is that both the first and the second parties do not suffer from the strike. One calls it, and the other lets it happen. But it is the third party — the poor and struggling people of Bangladesh — who bear the brunt of it all. It is they who go hungry, lose work, lose income, lose profit, lose contracts and lose customers — and in some instances, lose everything.

Where we find Sheikh Hasina's position unacceptable is that she does not seem to make any distinction between the government and the society as a whole. She does not seem to realise that there is a whole world of people, organisations and economic activities that fall outside the

orbit of the government. All of which gets hurt in her attempt to hurt the government. What the Leader of the Opposition is not realising sufficiently is that, in her attempt to hurt the government she is hurting the people whose support she needs. She is hurting the business community whose growth can only ensure the success of her regime if she comes to power. Sheikh Hasina is also hurting the prospect of foreign investment that can bring about export-led growth which can help ensure a better future for our people.

We are not commenting on the merit or demerit of her political movement. We are questioning the right of anybody, especially of a political party that believes in democracy, to impose its will on another. Especially when that imposition entails economic sacrifice of the most basic kind.

So we urge our leaders to desist from this shameful and dangerous competition of irresponsible statements.

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.

Medical facility in launches

Sir, We, the inhabitants of Barisal division, now living in Dhaka, are very much acquainted with launch journey. In Dhaka-Barisal route people mostly prefer launch transport because it is very much safer and more comfortable than any other means of transport which are available in this route. It can be mentioned here that Barisal is yet to be introduced with air or rail transport. So, the launches on this route are always in great demand.

In keeping with this, the launch owners are offering more and more facilities to the passengers with a view to gear-up their business. The modern launches are equipped with color TV, VCR, aircooler etc. But unfortunately, no launch is providing the least medical facility which often causes great suffering to the passengers. Sometimes the seriously ill patients are to be carried by launch. But if their condition becomes critical in this nightlong journey, no doctors can be found to treat them, which may lead to the tragic end of the patients life. So, the concerned authority should look into the matter and necessary steps should be taken immediately to provide basic health facilities to the launch-travellers.

Meena Mahbub
AB Bank Ltd, Dhaka

Be magnanimous

Sir, the lingering political crisis is eating into our vital, national life to be precise, like gangrene and pushing the country perhaps towards a economic disaster. The people from all walks of life are absolutely fed up and have lost their sense of judgement as to who is right and who is wrong. They just want to see the end

of it. It is time to show magnanimity. And whichever party will show it to end the crisis, will earn people's gratitude. Trust people and they will not forget as to who started this crisis and who ended it by placing the country above petty party interest.

Being it the party in power, our claim on BNP is more for it to be magnanimous for which the party shall not suffer. Even if they did lose, which is unlikely, the completion of 5-year term with many achievements will usher in a bright future for them. One must also learn to be a good loser.

We appeal to them to show magnanimous statesmanship and agree to a caretaker government under a non-party man and face the next elections. BNP has more to gain by it.

Iskander Meah
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Political arena

Sir, It appears from the present scenario that the ruling party and the opposition are proceeding towards a face to face confrontation after the Commonwealth-mediated Government-Opposition dialogue has collapsed. It is a matter of great regret and concern that with even the good services of the Commonwealth emissary Sir Ninian Stephen, the "dialogues" could not be reached to a favourable consensus. It is obvious that the "dialogues" failed on because of the Opposition's stance anything but her vis-a-vis the ruling party's stance — the same 'everything but her'. This is a mere issue but is still deepening the present political impasse which is tarnishing our country's image as an emerging democratic society. Does it not prick the conscience of our politicians? Does it not make them feel ashamed? It

appears that it does not.

The Opposition has said that it will realise its demand through mass agitation against the BNP administration. This will certainly lead the country towards confrontation and create severe social and political unrest. And this will absolutely jeopardize our economic activities and seriously discourage foreign investment. Now what will the politicians choose: confrontation or peace?

I earnestly urge the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and the Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina to come only one step forward to put an end to the present political deadlock, to rid the nation of possible violence and anarchy.

Shah Abdul Saadi
1-D/3-25, Mirpur, Dhaka

UN and morality

Sir, Referred to some controversial agenda of the recent UN conference at Cairo and alarmed by the world-wide moral degradation, our attention has been attracted to a recent talk about "... proposal to the United Nations on moral development approach: a new world order for peace" advocated by an eminent educationist Dr Abu Obaidul Huque, Professor and Director of Bangladesh Institute for Advancement of Science and Technology Teaching (IASTT).

In the proposal Dr Huque rightly mentioned that the morality is the root key to curb today's widely talked about problems like AIDS, human rights violation, environment pollution, population control, oppression on women, terrorism, drug abuses, etc.

Thus, implementation of this moral development proposal by the UN with universal approach will definitely help in developing moral values, humanity and social responsibility in the world population which will ultimately bring about durable peace, discipline and justice for mankind.

So, we appeal to the UN and its member states to come forward to consider and implement this proposal for the greater welfare of mankind.

Prof Abu Sayeed
Head of Geography Department, Nasirabad College, Mymensingh

OPINION

Third World Afflictions

We never stop hearing that our people are not only poor but also ignorant and illiterate. Democracy in the 1960s was discouraged throughout the third world on the plea that people are uneducated. Democracy demands that an individual has a say or makes a choice in policies and elects who should make those policies. And it is certain that, had sound thoughts prevailed within the elite intelligentsia, the people would have responded to and strengthened the national efforts to remove Bangladesh's political and economic woes.

Just as the peasants had obeyed the Mughal Kings because their lives were threatened, today we accept hartal calls lest we be injured or victimised if calls are disobeyed. I hear of no country where politicians calmly threaten the masses and get away. Leaders committed to democracy cannot harm or dictate the people.

The question is, how else do the feuding politicians talk or mould a public opinion? Legitimate demand to free the media of government control is one answer. Political censorship must be done away with. Debates and discussions must be held indoor, on the TV screen, and in the print media. Differences can be settled across the table and not by pitched stone-throwing battles on busy streets, crowded *muhallahs*, campuses and fields. And a large section of the middle class are not illiterate. They can participate in the debates and can be the biggest contributors of ideas.

We have TV, press, journalists, an educated audience and everything else other democracies have and, possibly several hartal calls to free the media could have had the spontaneous mass support till true westernised democratic information network developed in Bangladesh. Political and intellectual issues could then be decently debated upon

Nizam Ahmad
in the pursuit of winning the electorate and shaping the public mind.

Freeing the media is very much possible but, many of us have long observed that hardly anything positive ever comes across in Bangladesh and as a result, we will probably have to face harder and bitter realities than we have experienced so far.

Much of the problem lies with the intellectual elite of the country. Many of the writers, politicians, teachers, doctors, bureaucrats, exporters and importers, foreign currency savers and earners under protectionist economic laws etc are alleged to 'fiddle' while their country 'burns'.

Constantly our elites receive honours, medals, and awards for their 'extraordinary' achievements and contributions to the society. VIP signboards such as, VIP exit at airports, VIP cabins at hospitals, VIP suite in circuit houses, VIP roads where rickshaws must not ply, are prominently demarcated for every non-VIP to notice. We are flooded with VIPs and celebrated personalities while, the country is under deep afflictions like floods, power shortage, irregular airline schedules, irresponsible doctors, spurious drugs, open latrines, diarrhoea deaths, etc.

In contrast to this scenario, I noticed, for example, no VIP sign boards at the Heathrow airport or inside the British Parliament. Health care is available to each and every citizen and, employment or unemployment doles are visibly in existence. Indeed Thatcher's over-bearing health reforms have hard-hit the health standards and management quality but, they do have the 'out of power' Labour Party roaring to correct public health and education services.

Third world governments have too much control over the

people. Governments no longer or, perhaps, never did act as a simple social organisation like any other organisation designed to protect and promote people's welfare. Governments have become colossal and out of the reach of the common people. It is because we have to go to them for nearly everything concerning our lives and livelihood. The men who sit in the government have transformed themselves into shielded VIPs. Excepting the President and the Prime Minister no VIP facility should be extended to anybody and that too, only for high security reasons. However, if the facility has to be extended at all, let it be done quietly and discreetly.

Nevertheless, other than many minor and major wrong doings, some good things are certainly happening in this country. We have, amongst others, achieved universal adult franchise, we have much freer newspapers now than in the 1980s and, we have democratic aspirations getting rooted in our people. Overall goodness will come when we will be at par with the rest of the prospering world.

No doubt we have a long path to tread and the smoothest route is to build democratic institutions, to decentralise and fragment State power. Only one branch of the State such as, the executive, should not be vested with all powers. This is monopolisation of power.

In a democracy it is also possible to rule for many terms. Japan's LDP Margaret Thatcher and the Republican Reagan administration have done it so. The contending parties in Bangladesh can rule for many terms only when proper democratic conditions are laid down by the ruling and or opposing politicians for every citizen to cherish and enjoy.

The writer is Chairman, MOER