

Show Cause Notices

With the two rulings by the High Court, our political crisis enters into an altogether new phase. Now the judiciary gets involved into our political quagmire. There are two ways of reacting to this development. One view is that what has happened is a bad thing, because it drags the judiciary into the complicated, and sometimes dirty world of politics. It is also argued that our courts should not give any judgment on the affairs of the parliament, and that any such act would amount to interference in the functioning of the parliament and infringement of its independence.

The other view is that a court is the ultimate interpreter of the Constitution and can, and must, pronounce itself on matters of law and the legal implication of Constitutional provision. Court is also a citizen's ultimate place to seek justice, or to seek the redress of violation of public good. Our view is on the side of the latter. We are fully respectful of the independence of the parliament, just as much as we want the full independence of the judiciary. Courts are the highest interpreters of the law of the land, and as such, questions pertaining to legal aspects of the functioning of the parliament, can and will come to the courts.

As to the implications of the two rulings of the High Court, they are the following. First, the speaker will now have to wait ten days before he can give his own ruling on the resignation. What he was doing on his own, giving time to the contending sides to reach a solution, he can now do, riding on the back of this ruling. So for the next ten days nothing happens on the resignation issue. After seven days, hearing on these two show cause notices will start. Both sides will now be busy preparing their replies to the show cause notices. In the meantime, as for the politics outside, it will be business-as-usual with our leaders making good use of their vocal cords uttering the usual invectives against their opponents. And, as is now clear from the declaration of hartals, that they will make us suffer the indignity of living on the dictates of the Opposition as to what we can and cannot do.

The political arguments and counter arguments that have gone on for the last one year, especially since the boycott of the parliament began, is now expected to acquire a more legalistic frame. That is perhaps what we need. May be the judges can give the interpretation that we have so far missed. But are we prepared to accept the judges' verdict? If we are not, then our last hope of building a society based on law will be dealt a severe blow. It will not be good for anybody, to say the least.

A Case against Hartal

There has been an unusual appeal. One that has been made by a very small group and to the leaders of the opposition political parties. They are the 'O' and 'A' level examinees, reportedly 51 altogether. They may be a puny group but that does in no way make their request less important. Their request is for the postponement of the opposition's gherao and hartal programmes tentatively scheduled for January 24 and 25. All because these examinees will have their examinations clashed with the programmes.

Conducted by the British Council these examinations are set for many other Commonwealth countries simultaneously. There is no way of shifting the exam date. So if the hartals are not postponed, the possibility of holding the examinations will get diminished. Or, if at all held, many of the candidates will fail to make it to the examination centre. The meaning is clear: those failing to appear at the exams will lose one academic year. Quite a good amount of money involved in such examinations will also go down the drain.

Here is a very special situation — one that is so desperate and unalterable that the opposition's political programmes need to be reviewed. Earlier the shopkeepers' and traders' bodies along with the Dhaka Chambers of Commerce raised their voice against the negative impacts on their business and the country's economy. Now for the first time a small group unorganised and without any political clout has made it known how badly they are going to be affected. We believe, there are others who are as severely — or even more — affected by the frequent hartal programmes. Soon they will come up with their appeals. In this case however the political parties must be morally obliged to create conditions for the examinees to sit for the exams.

Reason therefore dictates that some alternative — nonetheless effective — means of protest has to be planned. The less they affect the common people the better. The planning of such programmes should also take into consideration important events and meets like the Euro money-organised international investment conference. The holding of the hartal programmes after the January 26 will not make much of a difference.

Godspeed to Theatre

"Cross cultural contacts in theatre" is a theme that hardly requires any explaining. And quite aptly the three-day international seminar on theatre now in progress in the city has taken up the theme. The third of its kind, this seminar has drawn theatre personalities from a number of countries. This speaks of the seminar's importance and, to stretch the idea, accords a recognition to the country's achievement in the area.

Indeed, we have reasons to be proud of our progress in this performing art. Compared with our film industry which is financially and technologically on a far superior footing, the theatre here is doing amazingly better. The disease of overcommercialisation has not been able to make a dent in the theatre arena. Not all of the productions of different groups can be quality ones but some of the more renowned theatre bodies have come up with a number of quite outstanding works. What is even reassuring is the fact that the general standard of our drama has improved significantly.

The fact that some dedicated and talented people are making up for the resource constraints should not escape anybody's notice. They have also largely been successful to nurture a theatre taste among a sizable theatre-goers. On the whole, it is a movement that gives our culture some sense of direction and purpose. Theatre after all is not dissociated from our cultural mooring like the way the films here are. To celebrate our theatre is in the fitness of things.

This seminar will give people involved with theatre here the perfect opportunity to extend the horizon further through an exchange of experiences among them. We wish all success for the seminar.

I had to rub my eyes several times before accepting that it was after all not a betrayal of my vision. Never before did my eyes meet anything so remotely comparable with sartorial change. It was a thorough transformation — as if from rags to regal robes — that makes anyone like me so naive mistrust both his eyesight and central faculty. By any standard it was a grand sight — two men elegantly dressed in their tailor-fresh suits — was it boots too — shaking hands. "No, it can't be them," I reasoned. But after the initial sensory shock I had no doubt, I knew them so well. One of them was my fixed grocer whom I trust both for the qualities of goods he supplies me and for his sincerity. Of the other I am not a permanent customer but I often buy vegetables from him.

So, what really has prompted them to go for this sartorial transformation did not take long to cross my mind. There were posters, leaflets and banners all around. And my grocer and vegetable vendor were just candidates in the election for the bazaar committee. I have all through known them to be ordinary folks with little education and hardly any inclination for big spending. Much less for suit and tie that cost between Tk 2,500 to Tk 3,000. But these two men along with their peers are impeccably dressed today — perhaps in the only new suits they have indulged themselves the luxury to have prepared at the tailor's.

That they were at their sartorial best should be considered a reverse sweep (pardon the cricketing jargon), so far as electioneering is concerned.

The Sartorial Saga

by Nibratan Halder

Apart from political implications of clothing, apparels have an enduring appeal for most people... Special robes are used for creating an aura for certain purposes and professions.

For don't politicians try to be what they actually are not? And what a better thing than dress to choose for presenting them agreeably? Once the politicians known for donning themselves immaculately in suits and boots have received party nomination for national or other important elections, their sudden change over to traditional khaddar and pajama has only to be witnessed. The pro-people, endearing and modest image they desire to project among the people is as much put on as the dress they contrive themselves in. If the relatively better educated, influential and moneyed men have chosen to be less elegant in their look, our grocer man and vegetable vendor have every reason to look for special elegance in their outfit on a day they are seeking their fellow shopkeepers' verdict. Unlike their more illustrious counterparts these humble men trying to look impressive however stop short of being political turncoats.

Apart from such political implications of clothing, apparels have an enduring appeal for most people. When naked, a head of state or government and the most ordinary of his or her subjects do not look much different. But then special robes are used for creating an aura for certain purposes and professions.

The flowing robes of the church priests or Popes and nuns, the wigs of the judges and the black coats of the legal practitioners serve the special purpose. Princess Diana's hugely long wedding gown she wore at the time of her marriage with Prince Charles is considered a sheer waste of fine clothes by people who cover their bodily shame by a piece of loin cloth. On the other extreme, Florence Griffith Jones popularly known as Flo-Jo exploded on the world track scene with her colourful contour-fitting sensational running suit. To the uninitiated too, the bikini-clad beach-goers may give the impression that the men and women might have run short of clothes after a ship-wreck.

Be that what it may. The fact that is now widely accepted is that weather, taste and simple necessity go into the making of people's wear. What is however not so readily admitted is the sexual signalling or the subtle display of special status through the wrapping up of the human body. For some African, Indian and American-Indian tribes the message is only too obvious. The Nuer females and the Dinka males of Sudan have a definition — completely their own — of physical modesty. Both these males and females have their cultural approval to display their genitals. But the number of bands of beads the Nuer girls wear is an indication of their fathers' wealth. An indication of the fortune they would bring as wives.

To most outsiders this may seem to be a blatant display of physical charm and economic status. But tribal societies, unlike the modern hypocrites, call a spade a spade. The Tasaday people of the Philippines before coming in contact with the world outside in 1971 had only loin clothes to wear. Equally scantily clad are a large number of people from India to Africa to Canada and America. Mahatma Gandhi, a barrister trained in the etiquette-conscious English way, ultimately made a choice for knee-length loin cloth for the rest of his life because most of his countrymen could not afford anything better.

For a large part of South Asia this affordability has not recorded a dramatic improvement. Yet time has changed and Indian women and their neighbouring sisters now regularly participate in the catwalk parades of the glittering fashion world. The crowning of the two Indian girls as the Miss Universe 1994 and Miss World 1994 is a well-earned reward for the untraditional venture. The women in the West have long passed this stage of freedom from restrictiveness.

Indeed, clothing restrictiveness has a lot to do with the female fashion shows and beauty contests. Argues Grace Vicary, an American academic, restrictiveness is the most important feature that makes "female clothing feminine". Men's fashion show can at best be considered a late addition. Even the so-called "unisex" clothes too are explicitly meant for special feminine attraction.

The human kind, unlike those in the animal kingdom, is born-paked without the natural bounties of scales, fur, fleece or colourful plumage. Today, we tend to consider nakedness, except of course in our private moments, so unnatural that it can evoke some strong emotions and reactions. Stripping someone in public is the ultimate humiliation. It is also used as a "classic technique for interrogation or instilling terror", say Terrence Dixon and Martin Lucas in their book, "The Human Race". But, some do deliberately remove their body coverings for a living. The naked sandhis in our streets and the belly dancer in one of the hotels may find them poles apart, but both of them actually exploit the shock we are subject to.

In the long and diverse history of clothing such revealing of the human body is however, a minor thing. The

movement to stay nude and form nude clubs in the West was nothing but a passing fad. The earliest known evidence of clothing is a figurine called Venus of Lespugue (discovered in France). And surprisingly, the skirt or apron hangs below the buttocks and on the rear. The wall-carved figures of different famous temples in India too are revealingly clad or not at all covered. The clothing fashion is therefore nothing new. Human species have long been fascinated with their forms and as well have experimented with them.

The revealing garment with protruding busts, hips etc and the casual dress with a subtle but significant signal to override the casualness have their special messages for the beholder. While one indicates physical charm, the other an unreachable status for the ordinary mortals. The show-biz and entertainment world has both extremes of the gaudy and the ordinary. But in no case they fail to be strongly suggestive. Yet both human sexes look for more than bodily attraction in case of choosing a long-term mate. The consideration or concern is about their supportive role both for each other and their children.

Yet fashions survive. Some of the styles may be scandalous and perversely bizarre but there is a relentless attempt to look special through their highly specialised clothing signals. The uniforms might have come into existence to send the message that at the time of dealing with one of them you are confronting the entire organisation, one represents! Quite subtle but not to be mistaken.

Which Way Ahead for Congress?

by AN Dar

Most people feel that the new government will be a coalition of some kind. For the present Congress to be fighting two elections in February and 1996 it will have a mighty dissident in Arjun Singh.

was to blame. He left the issue hanging which dismayed the public. His critics found in it a good stick to beat him with. The result was that on one day he defended them and within twentyfour hours he accepted their resignations.

The situation about the Union Cabinet was not handled well too. The Prime Minister kept too many portfolios with himself. Defence as well as Company Affairs remained with him. When two ministers, S. B. Chavan and Rajesh Pilot, were fighting each other for over a year Narasimha Rao did nothing to discipline them. It became a public joke, even as they traded charges against each other inside the country and outside. Ultimately, what did he do? He took away the vital subject of Kashmir from them and relegated it to the Prime Minister's Office, hardly a solution to bring sense to two of his ministers or to bring about peace in Kashmir. The public had a big laugh.

Already the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been languishing for support with the unfortunate illness of the Minister for External Affairs, Mr Dinesh Singh. The Prime Minister was also now playing his own Foreign Minister.

This was not the way to run a Cabinet. Some ministers had left the Cabinet on one pretext or the other. There were cases like those of Madharao Scindia and Chittabaram who had left because they felt morally responsible for something they thought should not have happened. A Prime Minister who wanted to keep his flock together should have seen to it that they could come back if there was nothing wrong with how they had acted as ministers.

The way he made M L Fotedar quit the Cabinet was

only to show that Rao could deal with him because he had the power enjoyed by being the Prime Minister. The Cabinet Ministers were invited to a dinner and asked to submit their resignations. Out of all those Fotedar was the only one whose resignation was accepted. If he wanted to take action against the so-called dissidents, he should have asked Arjun Singh to go. But he left Arjun Singh in to give him a place when he could strike back when he liked. Arjun Singh did that now, when the Congress party was weak and looking for support. Arjun Singh had the upper hand because the party was in a poor state.

Many believe that Narasimha Rao did not work the party to good effect. There has been a demand that no leader should occupy two offices. Being both the Prime Minister and the Congress President is convenient for whoever holds the offices. But Narasimha Rao would have been a more comfortable Prime Minister if he had someone who would take care of the party machine. True, the party president and the prime minister should not be clawing at each other, just as Chavan and Rajesh Pilot were doing. But with mutual respect and confidence in each other, they could work as a team. This was more important because Narasimha Rao, despite the excellent work he did in a first half of the term of the cabinet in foreign affairs, liberalisation and Punjab, is not a great crowd-puller and a charismatic leader. Could there be the fear that the Congress President would outgrow him and put him in the shade? This is an empty fear because the good work that he did would have shone by itself.

After the death of Rajiv Gandhi who had a charisma of his own, Narasimha Rao had the opportunity to build a collective leadership at the top. It is sad that he did not do that. To help the Congress Narasimha Rao could do that even now. He could throw open the race for leadership, while still remaining in the run, and whoever the party wants should assume the top position, bring in new policies and give up the old stances which the people have rejected in the elections. Is this what Digvijay Singh, the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, wants? He has said that acrimony among senior leaders of the Congress party should end soon. "A divided house always works to the party's disadvantage," he said recently. If he is as close to Arjun Singh as he is thought to be, he should have given the same advice to the former minister for human resource, particularly before he submitted his resignation.

The political mood was grasped by N T Rama Rao to good effect. His offer of cheap rice held the hearts of the people. The Congress thought of it in a belated and indirect manner. Narasimha Rao should fear that the other parties too may do the same in the February elections. What is going to be his answer to that? Very soon the manifestoes will be out but the people don't read these sheets of paper and it is the confidence he has in a party that is most important for an elector to vote his preference. The Janata Dal did it to good effect by promising a clean government in Karnataka. The Congress had lost that image in the various governments it had created in the two states.

The Congress mistake was also to send out no word of cheer to the minorities and the backward classes. The other parties have been wooing them. How will the Congress face this challenge? Some Muslim leaders have already said that they are sympathetic to the moves of Arjun Singh. An important question is what will Narasimha Rao do with Arjun Singh. Many see the latter having thrown his hat in the ring for the prime ministerial position, that is if the Congress comes to possess a position where it can form a government. Most people feel that the new government will be a coalition of some kind. For the present Congress to be fighting two elections in February and 1996 it will have a mighty dissident in Arjun Singh. How will the party deal with him? Will he canvass for the party as he says that he will? And if he does, with the seven-page resignation letter forming the backdrop, will the people take him at his word? Will he have a group of his own

within the party? By all means have that, but what will it do to the party at the hustings? Understandably, he has been left out of the party's campaign committee.

If Arjun Singh is not expelled, the Congress will be fighting like two parties inside one. That will be its death knell. If he is expelled as many Rao supporters want, how many of his men will be taken with him and will the Government survive? Narasimha Rao and Arjun Singh and Pawar should consider still working together. Is this what the other "hot" personality of the present-day Congress, ND Tiwari, meant when he said that he is in favour of "bridging the gap" between the Central party and Arjun Singh? An unlikely statement to have come from one who has given a major headache to Narasimha Rao in UP but he has made no bones about it. The Congress leaders have the example of the Janata Dal leaders of Karnataka and the NTR family of Andhra Pradesh to work together and save themselves. Otherwise the Congress is doomed. But who of the party leaders sees it like that?

A N Dar is a former Resident Editor, Indian Express.

OPINION Food for Education and Poverty Alleviation

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Though it is still too early to make a firm assessment regarding the Food for Education (FFE) pilot project which commenced from July 1994, a World Bank funded report (DS dated August 16, '94) was indicative of certain trends in its overall impact on the country. The attendance in schools of children coming from the poorest of families has increased very significantly, and specially so in the case of girls. In the cases of children coming from poor households, not entitled to receive the food/income support, the attendance rate has not improved. The cost of reaching the wheat to the entitled families is also low, and leakage is insignificant. For the past two decades, there have been interventions to raise the number of primary school going children, and also their retention from the second year onwards. But these efforts have not been very successful.

To supplement the World Bank funded study report, there has to be close monitoring at the grassroots level. At the present moment the Thana Education Officers and the Assistant Thana Education Officers are not giving adequate support to the educational administration. They are to be activated. At present, we are trying to administer the primary education programme from Dhaka. The line supervisors are required to be made responsible and accountable. Unless the present state is changed, raising the literacy level would be a distant dream. Primary schools in not too distant past were being run with the support of the local community, and the situation was not unsatisfactory. With the nationalization, the communities have washed off their hands as their expectation is that, Dhaka will now do everything. The Union Councils may be given the necessary powers and responsibility to manage

and supervise the primary schools. If they fail in their duty, there's little feasibility of any one else doing it for them. Decentralisation, delegation and devolution of power etc at present are almost meaningless words and empty rhetoric. Democratic norm and ideas demand that there should be different layers of responsibility at the appropriate levels.

The Ministry of Health has forged a task force, for surprise visits to its field offices. Such visits may have a high visibility value, but in the long run these can have only low utility value. And if such step is taken in case of education, the result may also be the same.

The present government's declared policy is poverty alleviation and provision of Dal Bhat for its teeming millions. It is now for the government to fulfil its commitment, through appropriate policies, programmes and projects. For the last two decades our poverty situation has both expanded and deepened. The FFE programme can be a potent force for reaching the poorest of the poor.

The extension of FFE programme to all the primary education activities in the country will need an enormous amount of our national resources from year to year. So this may be an integral part of the oncoming five-year plan. The economists agree that economic and social progress will not take place unless a substantial part of the total population are literate. As compared to other South Asian countries, both our literacy and per capita income are the lowest.

The Food for Education project offers to us a hope for the future, for empowering the poor. The best of programmes and policy objectives fail because of insincere applications. The twin Cs, corruption and control, are also required to be tackled.

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.

No politics of confrontation

Sir, 147 opposition MPs claim that they have submitted their resignation letters lawfully and legally as per Article 67(2) of the Constitution.

It appears that on the one hand the opposition MPs show their respect, honour and loyalty to the sacred Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh by defending its Article 67(2) but, on the other hand, they flout and disparage the Constitution by resigning from the Jatya Sangsad demanding caretaker government, provision of which does not exist in our Constitution.

We are surprised and puzzled at the topsy-turvy politics of AL-JI-JP. Would they kindly explain their aim, objective and strategy to the people as to how they are going to save our hard earned democracy and hard hit economy? We feel that with the change or time and situation

all over the world democracy and economics have become interdependent and inter-linked. So is the case with Bangladesh. We can neither afford the consequence of disruption of democracy nor we can bear the loss caused by frequent hartal, strike and siege.

We want politics of reasons and arguments and rule of law in the country and not the politics of confrontation and lawlessness at the cost of untold suffering of the people.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203

Political 'holy-men'

Sir, When political parties confront one another with 'holier-than-thou' attitudes, what is the way out? This is what is happening in Bangladesh today. How to tackle these political 'holy-men' without the referee being beaten up? Bangladesh has many weaknesses, but egotism is not

one of them. Self-effacement does not mean effacement of the country.

Where is the dirt, and what is to be cleaned? The dustbins, of course. There are problems in identifying the dustbins. Dhaka is suffering from political pollution. Let us import more ozone for oxidation of the impurities.

A Husain Dhaka

"Moral Responsibility"

Sir, Your editorial — What About Moral Responsibility? published on Jan 16, 1995 is a nice reminder at the right time when after a long struggle, democracy is being introduced as a political system, though, through a bitter struggle. You rightly observed that 100 or more lives lost in the accident were not perhaps enough to move the Prime Minister to act for drastic administrative changes or the Railway Minister to resign to demonstrate his moral responsibility. You have cited good examples of shouldering moral responsibility.

It is indeed unfortunate that power in this society, still rules everything, and people in power think the power once captured, should not be given

Congratulations!

Sir, The other morning (Jan 15) when I took the Daily Star from the hawk and was having a glance on the third page, one spectacular item struck my eyes. It was the news of the marriage of Sharief Khan and Rafiat Binte Rashid, two of your talented contributors. It is a happy surprise for me indeed. I am really happy to see them together. I do like both of them, specially Sharief Khan whose cartoons give me a lot of pleasure. On the other hand Rafiat Binte Rashid is excellent in writing articles. I do hardly miss them.

I congratulate this newly married couple and wish them a happy and prosperous life.

Jamil Rasid Second Year (Old), B. Pharm (Hons) Department of Pharmacy, DU