

Let's Go for it

Some self-inspired software specialists have come out with a much-awaited statement that it is technically feasible to issue ID cards to all our voters in 9 months' time. It is so reassuring that we have the local expertise to do this job. If we seek the views of any foreign computer company it is most likely to sound even more convincing on the subject.

It is not any bombshell the local companies have cracked; they have merely stated what is scientifically within the realm of possibility. Therefore, it should mitigate the concern voiced by some sections that the ID cards may not be ready even in 1996.

Next to the question of technical feasibility, we have some political and administrative details to address before we can begin the exercise in earnest. Regardless of how and when the elections are held, what we indispensably need for free and fair polls is definitely the fool-proof ID card for each voter. We would even go as far as to suggest to the political parties that the date for the general election should be set after making sure the ID cards would be ready by then. However the database preparation cannot proceed along the right course without an adequate cooperation from the opposition political parties. Database, in this case, being a sophisticated version of the voters' list, in the preparation of which the opposition will no doubt extend all the necessary cooperation. In voter registration they have as much a stake as the ruling party.

Now the question is, in view of the highly specialised nature of the job, what role would the Election Commission be retaining so far as the voters' registration goes. We feel that the whole operation can be and must be under the direct supervision of the EC. The Election Commission shall be in full control, a writ to it will fulfil by providing the software specialists with specific guidelines and checking out on their professional commitment and end-product.

We suggest that pending resolution of the politico-constitutional tangle, both sides should unhesitatingly green signal an immediate preparation of the database. We must have the ID cards in good time for the elections otherwise the whole emphasis on free and fair polls will be a far cry.

Protecting Consumers

The news that the government is contemplating to put in place a law called the Consumer Protection Act is really heartening. The title of the act is self-explanatory. The reason behind such a move does not require much of an elaborate explanation either. The main concern ought to be if the act can be effectively operational. The demand-supply theory of economics surely cancels any such protective laws. But when the theory itself is put to manipulative uses, there is perhaps more than a need for the authorities to intervene in the market process.

In a sellers' market like ours the consumers perpetually find themselves at the receiving end of woes. Sometimes the prices they have to pay for certain items are highly incompatible with the market forces of the time. One such instance of consumers' travail is the unexplainably high prices of cereals and other foods this year. At a time when the inflation could be contained at a satisfyingly low level and new harvests have not registered an abnormal shortfall, the current exorbitant prices of cereals are simply confounding.

However, not quite for those who are familiar with the practices of our dishonest businessmen, hoarders and middlemen. They have simply taken advantage of the government's policy of doing away with the procurement drive. And quite successfully. It is not only in case of cereals that the businessmen take an undue advantage of their manipulative power but also in case of other essentials they can play unimaginably nasty games. They are filthily contemptuous of the people's health and hygiene. Otherwise how can they tinker with machine oil to pass it as edible mustard oil?

It is precisely on such points that the Consumer Protection Act should be made strong. But mere strength of this on paper will not solve the problem. The trading community itself has quite a clout — politically and otherwise. The implementation mechanism has to be smarter.

Poetry Festival

The 9th National Poetry Festival is being observed in an environment of political uncertainties. The present scenario hardly resembles that of the autocratic days when the festival was first launched; yet we are in a state of political confusion that threatens to dispossess us of the benefits we had derived from our anti-autocracy struggle.

Over the years the poetry festival has proved to be an effective means of protest against repressive forces at the helm of affairs. After the fall of autocracy therefore the yearly festival was supposed to lose its direction and the motivation that gave it the initial momentum. But not quite. Our society is far from perfect. It needs constant lashing like the one Qamrul Hasan, in whom we found a happy blend of an artist and a social worker, delivered throughout his life. This festival is an assembly of creative minds and they are the ones to provide us with the awakening touch we need to fulfil our obligations to the country.

Whether the festival is giving us any such guidance or not is however a different issue. It is this insight or ground-breaking move that we look for from such an august gathering. A creative genius of Qamrul Hasan's stature can easily enrich our socio-political experiences through art and poetry. If the festival lacks in such popular appeal and drive, it will one day discover its continuation to be rather meaningless. Before that happens, the organisers must think of adding new elements for its sustenance.

Already they have introduced — for the first time though — a national poetry council citation and a national poetry award. The attendance of poets from abroad will further enhance the attraction of the festival. Further innovative additions will be welcome.

HAPPLY the Ekushey Book Fair at Bangla Academy premises is not going to shrink in size, thanks to various student and cultural organisations' timely moves. The spirit of Ekushey has been so deeply embedded in our national ethos that we cannot help reacting strongly to any attempt that may undermine it. In a way we consider any infringement with or curb on things associated with the occasion sacrilegious. But this is how most Bangladeshis will make their protestation. In the heart of their hearts they may indeed harbour a feeling so unalloyed for the prime agent of their national awakening. Yet the expansion of any event of Ekushey's scale — and that in terms of megal map — may end up producing alongside some aberrations on the celebration side.

They may go unnoticed — most likely to be ignored — for a long time until the accumulated garbage has threatened to overwhelm the occasion itself. I am happy our happy-go-lucky attitude has been given a rude shock by the Bangla Academy authority's initial refusal to hold the book fair on an expanded scale. Only when did it announce its inability to manage the unmanageable, there was a flurry of actions all around to keep the image of the Ekushey intact. It could not have been possible but it not dawned on those who matter that the Language Martyrs Day's sanctity has been compromised far too long by allowing things improper and in-

Remodelling on Ekushey Spirit

by Nilratan Halder

We surely will be blamable for hypocrisy and self-deception if we do not admit our lack of preparation and failure in the past. We no longer can afford smugness after what happened a few years back on the eve of Ekushey. Only 10 to 15 minutes' power failure brought out the demon in the so-called culture-craving or cultured young men visiting the fair.

compatible with the occasion. I feel grateful to them who have delivered such a crucial touch of an eye-opener.

No doubt, the Academy authority is delighted to get the instant results its strategy has produced. It knew how to elicit the most desirable reactions. This however does in no way lessen the credit of those who have moved fast and responded so positively to restore the dignity and calm aura of the book fair. Today we are pleased to know that a set of obligatory code of conducts have been framed by the organising committee for the participants of the fair. Among others no unapproved stalls will be allowed to set up on the road in between the TSC and Doyel Chattar, any behaviour incompatible with the spirit of Ekushey will be prohibited, posters of prurient taste will not be allowed to sell, high-volume music will be banned, customers cannot be forced to get in the restaurants etc.

All this looks to be quite a healthy move. But there certainly will be detractors who may raise controversy over the definitions and interpretations of some of the points involved

regarding implementation. It is very difficult to draw the border line between refined taste and bad taste. Even more challenging will be the task of enforcing discipline at the book fair after years of distortions and distractions. Our volatile politics may act as an incendiary too. Careful handling of any possible untoward incident will be most desirable. Both toughness and persuasion will have to be in ample display if the intriguing situations and crises are to be brought under control. Any let-up in vigilance may cause incalculable damage to the whole process of restoration of our Ekushey culture.

We surely will be blamable for hypocrisy and self-deception if we do not admit our lack of preparation and failure in the past. We no longer can afford smugness after what happened a few years back on the eve of Ekushey. Only 10 to 15 minutes' power failure brought out the demon in the so-called culture-craving or cultured young men visiting the fair. It was the ugliest incident ever to take place at that hallowed premise. The unsuspecting girls and women who were entering the mela

premise had had their lives' worst experience on that black night as the prying hands of the perverted gangs swooped on the formers' persons. Last year on Pahela Baisakh we were witness to the restaging of the same demonic act.

Personally I am very apprehensive of the groups who surge into the thick crowd in a body without minding the children and women's security in the rush situation. The organisers will have tough time dissuading these youths from getting on with their way of enjoying themselves. So the authority should keep in readiness measures to tackle them whenever they pose to be a threat to the peaceful atmosphere of the fair. Their physical threat apart, however, there are a whole lot of things that do not go entirely with the sombre occasion. Still I do not object to turning the occasion into a festive celebration. The point is to maintain propriety. Some alien influences might have been responsible for caricaturing everything we hold dear to our heart. Even I am for healthy caricature with the sense of humour remaining intact. Yes, sometimes this means can be highly effective in conveying the message better than plain portrayal of things.

We on the other hand are making a caricature of our

elves in a way that is simply in bad taste. Had we allowed the trend to drag on further, chances are that we might even have failed to identify our defects. But we are famously known for choosing the wrong targets. Last year a writer was a victim of such an ill-directed wrath for her extreme views on certain matters. Here the issue is the individual right to expression. However outlandish the opinion can sound to others, there cannot or should not be any legal sanction for taking law in their own hands and punishing the person for his or her radical views. The only way to counter the view is through putting forward rationally drawn arguments. The organisers ought to have exercised their authority in the defence of such views and opinions.

The objection to salacious printed materials can be well understood but obscenity itself can be a very controversial subject at the highest level. Think of Lady Chatterley's Lover and Samareesh Basu's Propajoti. The epochal judgements on both these novels show that things may at times be far ahead of their times. For the common people it may pose some difficulties to catch up with the creative minds. So the question of branding books as obscene may not be that easy for the organisers of the

restriction on the foreign music might put everyone in some dilemma. Will Bangla songs from across the border be subjected to the disciplinary measure? Let the wording be more precise to avoid the last minute hassle.

The impression so far is that this year's book fair is going to be a trimmer one if not reduced in the real form involving just books. The fact that the entire mela period will be during the holy month of Ramadan will call for further self control and regulation. As things stand, often self-righteousness on both sides of fasting and non-fasting is a villain to make a mount of the mole-hill. This is an attitude that has permeated through our society to mar its sanity. There is no point to behave differently for a certain period of time. Both Ekushey and Ramadan can be elevating experiences if we are sanctified by the occasions' spirit. The important thing is to remodel ourselves on the teachings of both for the benefit of our individual and collective behaviour throughout the year or even our lives.

The book fair will truly serve the purpose when we will not only be able to respect the occasion in its intrinsic quality but also make it a point to place our language in its right places through spreading education. As long as the overwhelming majority languish in ignorance and the educated class continue to blindly imitate the ways of alien everything, the observance of this most proud historical achievement will fall short of the ideal. Let us strive to reach the ideal by giving the best account of ourselves.

Lankan Leader Shuns Dictatorial Powers

Dalton De Silva writes from Colombo

SRI Lankan women, moving up the political ladder since the country gained independence from Britain in 1948, reached dizzy heights when Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected Executive President and her mother, Srimavo Bandaranaike, was appointed Prime Minister recently.

As Executive President, 49-year-old Chandrika has reached the most powerful position any man or woman could aspire to in the Indian Ocean island of 18 million people.

The President is head of state and of government, and is commander-in-chief of the security forces. She can declare war, appoint a prime minister and a Cabinet of ministers, and assign to herself any Cabinet portfolio.

She is also immune from any legal action regardless of whether she had acted in an official or a private capacity.

In addition to being President, Chandrika has kept for herself the key portfolios of defence, finance, policy planning and national ethnic integration. The post dealing with national integration is particularly important because she has launched peace talks with the Tamil Tigers guerrilla group which has been waging a civil war in the northern Jaffna Peninsula to demand a separate state for the Tamil minority. More than 30,000 people have been killed in the war during the past 12 years.

There may not, however, be a presidency much longer, at least not as defined by the Constitution enacted in 1978 by the previous government.

During the campaign for the general election last August, the then opposition People's Alliance of eight political parties led by Chandrika pledged to abolish the executive presidency which had enjoyed dictatorial powers. For this the PA received overwhelming support.

When she was elected President at the Nov. 19 presidential poll with an unprecedented majority — receiving 62.28 per cent of the 7.713 million votes cast — Chandrika

again said she will abolish the post of Executive President by mid-July, 1995.

She wants to amend the Constitution and return to the Westminster style of government where the Prime Minister will be the head of government and the President a ceremonial head. Chandrika is expected to revert to the post of Prime Minister and to appoint her mother as President.

The daughter of two prime ministers, Chandrika has had a meteoric rise in the political field.

Her father, Solomon Bandaranaike who founded the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), was assassinated in 1959 when he was Prime Minister of the country. Her mother has led the SLFP since her husband's death, creating history in 1960 when she became the world's first woman Prime Minister. Srimavo held the post for two separate terms spanning 12 years. Now 78 and ailing, Srimavo has once more been appointed Prime Minister by her daughter, the new President, to hold the post until the Constitution is amended.

Chandrika entered the political arena in 1984 when she was appointed vice chairman of the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party founded by her husband Vijaya Kumaratunga. She later became its chair after her husband was gunned down by political rivals. However, she had to flee to London with her two children following threats to their lives from the group that killed Vijaya.

She returned to Sri Lanka two years ago and joined the SLFP, becoming its deputy leader. In 1993, Chandrika was elected chief minister of the Western Provincial Council; from then it was just a matter of months before she entered the national legislature. She took over the reins of the SLFP from her ailing mother and led the People's Alliance to a thumping victory at the general election in August, ousting the United National Party (UNP) government which had been in power continuously for

17 years.

Just 10 weeks after she was appointed Prime Minister, Chandrika scored a resounding victory at the presidential election dubbed by the media as the "Battle of the Widows", since her closest rival in a field of six was UNP's Shrimathi Dissanayake. Shrimathi was thrust into the fray just 16 days before the election after her husband Gemini Dissanayake, leader of the Opposition and the UNP's presidential candidate, was killed by a woman suicide bomber at an election rally in Colombo.

Unlike Chandrika who holds a political science degree from the University of Paris, Shrimathi, a lawyer by profession, was a novice in politics. The UNP had hoped she would win "sympathy votes" but this did not work. "We have had too many assassinations of political leaders to be moved by emotion," a journalist said. Shrimathi, 51 and mother of three, is expected to go back to her law firm.

Sri Lankan women have been taking an intense interest in politics since they got the right to vote in 1931. Widespread education facilities, resulting in a literacy rate of more than 85 per cent at present (women students outnumber the men in universities), have equipped more and more women for political participation. At every election since independence, several women have been voted into Parliament. The current Parliament elected in August has 11 women members including Chandrika and Srimavo.

The first Sri Lankan woman to attain cabinet status was Wimala Wijewardene as Solomon Bandaranaike's health minister in 1956.

The present Cabinet reconstituted by Chandrika after she became President has one other woman minister aside from Chandrika and her mother. She is Srimani Athulathududal, minister of transport, environment and women's affairs — also a widow whose husband Lalith, a former minister, was assassinated last year. —Depthnews Asia

OPINION

In Memory of Col. K. N. Huda

Niloufer Huda

I read with great interest your coverage on the celebration of Liberation Day of Jessore held on 8th December 1994 at Chowgacha published by your correspondent on 22nd December in your paper. The name Chowgacha to me since 1971 has been "a spring of hope" but since reading the article it has become "a winter of despair".

My late husband Colonel K N Huda BB was a Sub-sector Commander in Sector 8, and it was under his direct command, all operations in Kashipur, Chowgacha, Mastia, Dekhipota, Borini, Kotchandpur Road, Chrimunkati, Nabarun, Jhikargacha etc. was launched. The Border Outpost of the then EPR at Kashipur was captured by him and remained liberated throughout the nine months struggle, and it was here that Huda's Shaheed Subedar Major Muniruzzaman BU sleeps eternally on the side of a pond in Kashipur village. It was here that Barrister Moudud Ahmed, Aminul Haque Badsha among many others had taken foreign journalists from The Guardian, Times, Washington Post, The Economist, etc. to show them that part of Bangladesh which was a reality and in existence all through. It was here that Senator Edward Kennedy visited and was shown around by Huda the glaring reality of liberated Bangladesh. The JFK Library at Boston has classified documents, tapes, and pictures of Ted Kennedy visiting liberated areas with Huda.

Huda was one of those Commanders who always personally led his men to battle right in the forefront and this boosted the morale of his ex-EPR troops. Halidar Arab Ali BB in a hand to hand combat led by Huda despite being badly wounded fought single-handed with a Pakistani soldier and killed him with his bayonet though twice his size and height. Huda was the first Commander of the Bangladesh Armed Forces to enter Jessore Town which was liberated weeks before any other towns had fallen.

The Indian Army had advanced towards Jessore Cantonment from the Chowgacha area which was already softened by the onslaught of Huda's troops for nine months. The Indian Army spearheaded their advance with their APC — Armoured Personnel Carriers — which the Pak Army was misinformed as advance of Indian tank column for which they were literally on the run, abandoning Jessore. Thus the Indian Army with virtually nil resistance entered the deserted Jessore Cantonment from Chowgacha.

Huda on the other hand made a dash through Jessore Road in his captured Pak Army jeep followed by his officers, regular troops and FFs in trucks defying the dangers of mines which could be laid by the retreating Pakistani Army who were well dug-in in almost a mile long trench near Benapole which still existed few years back. Huda made his Head Quarters in the Circuit House in Jessore where proudly flew the flag of Bangladesh, being the first liberated town, it is therefore a fact of history that town of Jessore was first reached by the troops of Colonel Huda and not the Indian Army which was his intention and purpose. His actions continued even after en-

tering Jessore all the way upto Bhatipara where a Microwave Station was being held by enemy troops who refused to give up and after several days of fighting surrendered to Huda and not to the Indian Army. It was here that Hony Capt. Kómol Siddique (Executive Engineer NAWPA) lost one of his eyes in enemy LMG fire.

What I have stated above is a part of history which people I have mentioned will bear out as will people like Hony Capt. Taufiq Elahi Chowdhury, Major Mahboob (ex SP Dhaka), Mr Wajid Islam (now Secretary Shipping and the first DC Jessore), Major General Mustafiz (now GOC Jessore Div), Brig Halim (now with DGF), Hony Lt. Ishiaque Hossain Hiddi BP (now a Director in Everest Bangladesh Ltd.) who were all either Huda's comrade-in-arms or have witnessed the foregoing. I still have a part of the F-86 Sabre's wing which was shot down by Huda's troops by LMG fire before the Indian Army went into action. I would in normal course been too happy to give to this museum.

History cannot be changed nor can it be tailor made to suit anybody. Lt. Colonel (ret'd) Abu Osman Chowdhury was the Sector Commander as rightly stated in your paper. In fact he was one of the first Bengali officer who had foreseen the designs of the Pak Army and independently revolted. But what I found rather strange is that there was no mention about Major General Manzur BU who replaced Lt. Col Chowdhury around July/August 1971 as Sector Commander. This is a fact of history and I still have preserved the sad letter from Lt. Col Chowdhury to my late husband regarding his removal.

It is also a fact of history that Huda a Sub-Sector Commander in 1971 in course of time did supersede his Sector Commander Lt. Col Chowdhury both in rank and command. Again it is a fact of history that with the advent of General Manzur the whole Sector 8 underwent a total transformation from July '71 onwards — into an highly professional and efficient fighting force. General Manzur proved himself to be one of the finest Commanders and a superb Infantry Tactician. The Daily Sitreps (Situation Reports) of 1971 by Huda clearly reflects this point and I am sure Sitreps of all other Sub-Sector Commanders preserved somewhere in the military archives will speak of the same. Yet there is no mention of General Manzur. This is rather unfortunate as you cannot draw a curtain to that part of the contribution a Freedom Fighter has made for his Motherland or to a part of our national history. I do not see any reason to be afraid or cause for any embarrassment to uphold the contribution in 1971 of any Freedom Fighter.

It is 20 years Huda has been killed and has gone from this world for good. I will leave it to the posterity, his fellow officers and the people of this country to judge whether he deserved to be killed and after that denied from even getting a place in the Army Burial Ground. As far as I am concerned, Colonel K N Huda BB left Flag Staff House, in uniform, on duty as a Formation Commander to report to the AHQ in Dhaka, where he was officially summoned. What I got

back was his bullet ridden and bayoneted body with his tattered shirt soaked red with blood. I still have preserved this shirt.

It is unlike me, as his wife to write about my own husband's role in the War of Liberation. However two things, which has appalled and shocked me, has made me write this letter:

Firstly: the coverage made by your media, the deliberations made by the speakers in the function as reported by you did not have the courtesy or perhaps the courage to express the name of Huda even once — though it was his very sector and the core of his military operations. The regular artillery bombardment of the very school in Chowgacha where the Pak Army was camped was directed and corrected from an OP (Observation Post) manned by ex-EPR personnels under Huda's direct command.

Secondly: is the irony in your coverage — name of Major Asaduzzaman — the very killer of my husband as stated in the book "The Legacy of Blood". He has been allowed to preside in the rally — in the very place where the person he reported to have killed — had played the key role and was the architect of what was achieved. Major Asaduzzaman has been allowed to bask and shine in the glory and deeds of the very man he had reportedly killed. Perhaps this could have given the Author enough substance to write another book titled — "A Legacy of Jokes". In any civilized society, would such a man, who reportedly killed his senior officer in cold blood, be ever allowed to go scot-free, far from being allowed to head an organization or preside in a function of national importance?

When the gates in Mainamati Cantonment bearing Huda's name in a marble plaque (Huda commanded this Formation concurrently as the first Commandant of the Bangladesh Military Academy) was pulled down in the recent past, I could still accept it. But not this — as, to put it in the words of Shakespeare "was the most unkindest cut of all".

After reading your article I am beginning to wonder perhaps after Agartala Conspiracy Case when Huda had to leave the Army, it would have been wiser for him not to join the Liberation War — at least it would have saved his family from so much of humiliation. The very Colonel Huda, who to join the Liberation War, had abandoned me and my children (including six months old daughter) in a remote village of Bangladesh to fend for ourselves — is indeed being paid back well by the country he loved and fought.

I still have the tape of 1971, which before engaging himself in the war, he had left me. It begins "Nilu, I am leaving you and the children like this to serve in a greater cause as the country needs me... so many Bengalis are dying and if I stay in a safe place, it will be a betrayal to the cause and to my conscience..." and ending "Victory shall be ours". As the stream of time flows I keep listening to it, and when I do, sometimes I laugh, sometimes I cry — asking him why? what for? what has Victory brought us — for you, me and our children?

The writer is the wife of late Col K N Huda

To the Editor...

Bangladeshi world record

Sir, Except for small island nations or city-states inhabited by more people per square kilometer, Bangladesh was the most crowded country in 1994, declared by US Census Bureau, that must not stop making sense beyond demographic characteristics in the global habitat.

Having been a deltaic plain, criss-crossed by hundreds of rivers and their tributaries and distributaries and scores of canals, such an (almost) uncontrollable population growth can contribute to unbearable pressure on her essential resources with probable barbaric consequences before long.

This alarming increase necessitating additional supports for subsistence she will find hard to cope with sooner than projected because of reduced basic needs — land per head, per capita income, foods, etc — has rightly been identified as this state's first problem.

Meanwhile, the gratification of the fortunate ones, the average living level of the rich citizens in this poor state has risen remarkably over the last decade and a half by virtue of alien amenities among the most favourable wealths. But, a few millionaires against millions of destitutes,

poors, handicaps, and malnutrition patients cannot upgrade the nation high enough until the mechanism of reaching the aspired level is accelerated.

Nevertheless, with a view to achieving the ultimate target — Zero Population Growth — of this 9th largest population, which had better be the reality for this LDC in a decade or two, mandatory family planning coupled with non-issue and single lifestyles as the bond of human relations within Human Rights enlightening the International Day of Families is the first means.

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Attracting foreign tourists

Sir, A foreigner arrives at the Zila International Airport. He drives straight to 5-star Sonargaon or Sheraton Hotel in a luxurious car, dines and sleeps in the cosy atmosphere, calls on some of our ministers, secretaries and top business executives at the Bangladesh Secretariat Building or at Moti-heel Commercial Area and flies back home after 2-3 days.

Another foreigner enters into Bangladesh via Benapole check post. He travels all the way to Dhaka by bus, stays in

an ordinary hotel at Nawabpur Road, visits some places of interest in old and new Dhaka then goes either to Chittagong/Cox's Bazar by train or bus or makes a river journey to Khulna by steamer.

Ask both of them about their impressions on their visit to our country. The former usually says "Bangladesh is a beautiful country, the people are hospitable, your country has made a great progress under your leader... the visit has been a pleasant one, I would never forget it."

The latter, however, complains "Wherever I go I am being followed by a big crowd of people, they ask for bakshish, journey by train or bus is horrible, hotel rooms are dirty, I do not get any correct information, help and cooperation from any quarter."

It we really want to promote and develop tourism and attract foreign tourists into our country we are required to extend necessary information and help to the tourists, attend to their complaints and grievances, provide them with accommodation and transportation at reasonable rates and earn their goodwill and friendship.

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