

## Inviolable Journalistic Right

We protest the latest police brutality on three press photographers in the strongest of terms. The Daily Star has ever made it a point to condemn any such police excesses and now one of our photographers lies critically ill. And all because he was performing his professional duties. He was neither committing a crime nor provoking the law enforcers to frenziedly swoop on him. There is no question of not identifying the press photographers who move mostly in a group at the time of covering violent street demonstrations. They are not only easily identifiable but also personally known to many of the metropolitan police-men. The police also know that the photographers are as much on their duty as they themselves are on theirs. It is their refusal to recognise and respect this professional inviolability at times that we find both painful and unlawful.

Clearly the police are yet to give up their unhealthy attitude — one that comes from an undemocratic mind-set. The law enforcing agency should have no reason to hold the print medium either in contempt or in antagonism. This is totally unacceptable that the police should behave in a democratic polity in the same way they did during the autocratic regime. Such an unhealthy antagonism between the law enforcers and the press will do no good to either. The chances are that democracy itself will fall foul on this. The police insanity in a democratic environment sends shockwaves across society. We feel all the more indignant because after each such law enforcers' aberration no action is taken against the perpetrators of the barbarity.

The trend therefore points to a worse scenario in that more and more demonstrations are expected to be held in the coming days. The journalists will feel increasingly insecure while covering those programmes. At this point we call for an immediate meeting between the home minister, the information minister and police officials on the one side and the leaders of journalists' organisations, including photojournalists', newspaper owners' organisation and editors on the other side. The meeting should come up with a set of well-defined code of conduct for the police in relation to their behaviour with the press. Some distinctive identification marks prominently displaying the journalists' identity — maybe a kind of badge — can be thought of. Along with eliminating the chances of police mistaking the journalist's identity there must be a provision for severely dealing with the more adventurous of the law enforcers. The point is to make the performance of journalistic duty, which is an essential part of democracy, inviolable.

## Water Scarcity

As the days get warmer, WASA finds it difficult to lift and pump its capacity supply of 780 million litres of water against a daily need of 1280 million. This year the difficulties have hit rather early — even as Falgun has not set in. To cope with this dire prospect WASA is commissioning new deep tubewells that together would lift another 100 million litres. Can one call it coping? By the end of 1998, on the expected completion of the first phase of the Syedabad water treatment plant, the supply would be augmented by another 225 million litres a day. A total of 450 million more than now pumped will be available in 2000 A.D when the second phase will be completed. But this city's population would by then race to a round 10 million requiring a supply of at least 1500 million litres a day leaving a shortfall of about 400 million litres.

Deep tubewells are no answer to Dhaka's gargantuan thirst. A falling ground water-level is likely to cause massive land subsidence destroying everything built up. Surface water seems to be the only answer exactly as it was when Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah built the filter water works at Chandnight about hundred years back. But no drinkable water now flows down the Buriganga and to withdraw as much even as 100 million litre a day from big rivers further away would not only need very big investment by way of pipelines and pumps but also be ill advised as this very adversely affect the hydrography of the rivers already in a very very bad shape, stricken mortally may be. That leaves us with recycling of used water — the job that the treatment plants do. And our experience of the government efficiency in building these lifelines of our nation is far from encouraging.

A city to be habitable needs enough centrally pumped potable water. We do not know how liveable is the city at present — for most of its residents. The prospect of its liveability would be bleaker if the water challenge is not met well and in an all-round manner. Which should mean reliving of the rivers and of our villages — a tall order by any standard.

## Felicitations to a Contemporary

Too much of everything is bad. Bangladesh has too many daily newspapers. For four million literate homes — by subcontinental standards — 10 would have sufficed. We perhaps have five times that. And when we confront the dismal overall circulation figure of all the dailies combined which would hardly cross half a million mark we shamefully remember Keralans buying at least five times more papers in a population one-eighth of Bangladesh's.

Certain newly launched newspapers have however, saved us from a situation of unmitigated shame. If we only had some newspapers of the temper and enterprise of the Bhorer Kagoj, we certainly could sing in loud chorus the more the merrier. We felicitate our three-year old colt of a contemporary, the Bhorer Kagoj, on its foundation anniversary. In so doing we celebrate the fact that this leading newspaper is indeed thoroughly young in that all its constituents together wouldn't average an age past 30. How we wish our nation, Bangladesh, would put up a similar performance. Bhorer Kagoj as such has become an example setter for the whole nation.

In breaking ever new grounds in ideas and creativity and in keeping assiduously to the path of integrity and fairness, patriotism and loyalty to the interest of the broad masses the newspaper has set a standard all its own. We wish it god-speed on the way of unswerving service and unfailing prosperity.

# Political Impasse: Immediate Solution Still a Far Cry, but...

WITH the advent of spring, an election 'flavour' seems spreading in the political arena: When the polls for the sixth parliament would be held? Will it take place soon after the monsoon or at the onset of the next winter? This is the most talked-about issue during this holy month of Ramadan when the political activities and the agitation programmes as well of the opposition remain dormant.

The year-long crisis, created over the caretaker government issue, has now entered into the courtroom leaving behind a thick cloud of dust on the courtyard of politics. The learned counsels are now busy arguing on the constitutional points related to the opposition MPs' resignations which were tendered in support of their demand for holding free and fair elections to constitute country's future legislatures. All attentions are now focused on the august High Court with much eagerness for the verdict of judiciary that will have significant effect on country's future politics.

The fifth Jatiya Sangsad (parliament), elected on February 27, 1991, for a five-year tenure, is yet to complete its four years of existence. This parliament, a hard earned achievement of the democracy-loving people of Bangladesh, became virtually ineffective from March last year when the entire opposition, consisting over 150 MPs started boycotting the House demanding holding of future elections under caretaker government. The controversial Magura by-election, in which the ruling party was blamed for rigging, prompted the opposition to raise such a major demand.

Uncertainty in Bangladesh politics loomed large during

A high-level meeting held Saturday with Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman in the chair reviewed the progress made so far in the preparation of data-based voters' list and issuance of identity cards. The meeting took a number of decisions to expedite the whole process setting a tentative target to complete the task within six months. Political observers relate such decisions with the possibility of holding general elections in next autumn or in the early winter.

the last one year when the opposition abstained from all the parliament sessions and continued agitations in the streets which often took violent shape. Hartals, barricades, gheraos and sit-ins sponsored by the opposition dominated the year gone-by disrupting normal life to a large extent which also affected country's economic activities.

Initiatives for a peaceful settlement of the dispute were there, but in vain. Even a veteran trouble-shooter like Sir Ninian — the Commonwealth emissary — had to go back after several weeks' futile effort to bring about a rapprochement between the government and the opposition. Envoys of several western countries offered their good offices, and even intervened to solve the crisis, but failed to break the ice. Lot of formulas for ending the stalemate were suggested by different quarters, yet none could yield any positive result.

Finally, 147 opposition members of the parliament, belonging to the Awami League, the Jatiya Party, the Jamaat-e-Islami and NDP submitted resignation letters en masse through their respective party leaders to the Speaker on December 28 last. But the fate of those letters remained unsettled as the Speaker took his time for scrutiny before giving any decision.

Meanwhile, a writ petition, challenging validity of the en bloc resignation by opposition MPs, was filed before the High Court which was followed by another writ that questioned

Speaker's delay in giving decision about the resignation letters. Both the writs are now being heard analogously before a three-member special bench constituted by the Chief Justice.

The opposition maintains that the resignation of the 147 MPs should be considered effective from the very date of their submission which is December 28, 1994. According to them, the Speaker has nothing to do with those resignation letters except passing on to the

vision, by-election to any seat of parliament fell vacant due to death or resignation by any member should be completed within 90 days of the vacancy created. Now, if those resignation letters are accepted and given effect from December 28, it will be a difficult task for the Election Commission to arrange by-election in such a short period.

One cannot say that the resignation issue will be settled with verdict of the High Court, since the aggrieved parties will have the opportunity to go to

during mid-March.

Insiders of the ruling party indicate that the BNP is now preparing for a general election for the sixth parliament while party's policy makers prefer the election to be held in November. Under the constitutional provision, general election should be held within 90 days after dissolution of a parliament, which made the speculation rife that the present parliament might be dissolved in August after holding the budget session. The BNP has reportedly prepared a list of its tentative candidates for the next election while many of the prospective candidates are already in the field for electioneering.

Government's preparation for holding the general election has also been geared up. A high-level meeting held Saturday with Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman in the chair reviewed the progress made so far in the preparation of data-based voters' list and issuance of identity cards. The meeting took a number of decisions to expedite the whole process setting a tentative target to complete the task within six months. Political observers relate such decisions with the possibility of holding general elections in next autumn or in the early winter.

The opposition appears firm on its stance on the caretaker government issue. They are in favour of immediate election, but under a caretaker government to be constituted according to their formula. The parties belonging to the

opposition camp are also preparing to contest the coming elections. But, if the government concedes to the opposition's demand and agrees to form a caretaker government headed by a person who is not a member of the parliament, then the Constitution will require amendment. Even if the President heads such an interim government, there is no way to avoid amendment since he will need some special power and authority to run the administration. Therefore, support of the opposition MPs will be essential to amend the Constitution if it is done in the existing parliament.

But the opposition has already vowed not to return to this parliament or withdraw the resignation letters submitted by the MPs. Some opposition leaders, however, maintain that the holding of elections under caretaker government can be ratified later by the newly elected parliament since precedence of such act exists in country's Constitution.

Though election 'flavour' is felt, yet it is not clear under which government or administration the polls will be conducted. The tussle between the government and the opposition on the issue continues unabated. An immediate solution to the ongoing crisis is still a far cry.

Nevertheless, there is a question that an understanding between the ruling party and the opposition remains imperative for smooth holding of an election. Understanding with the opposition is a must, at least to ensure participation of major parties in the election to make it meaningful. And for such an understanding, scope still exists, since there is no last word in politics.

## Behind the Headlines

### Chapal Bashar



Election Commission

But, Speaker Shaikh Razzak Ali, who is contesting in the writ through his counsel, replied that neither the Constitution nor the Rules of Procedure has put any time limit in discharging his constitutional responsibility over the resignations of the MPs.

Thus, the arguments and counter-arguments over the MPs' resignation issue continue before the High Court bench for over two weeks. The court has already issued a rule on the Speaker under which the disposal of the resignation letters has been stayed.

Since the filing of the resignation letters by 147 MPs, about 50 days have elapsed. Under the constitutional pro-

Appellate Division. And this will mean spending more time, keeping the whole issue in a limbo for a longer period.

So, what next? What will be the strategy of the ruling party BNP and the opposition, especially the Awami League? Will they come forward with any positive move for ending the ongoing impasse?

The opposition sticks to its decision not to return to the parliament and reiterated its demand for holding elections immediately under a caretaker government headed by a non-partisan person. They have already announced future programmes of agitation to be initiated after Ramadan that includes 48-hour non-stop hartal

# The Poet Must Get His Vision Back

by Nilratan Halder

That he is looking for help in another country is because we have not been mindful in the least to the poet's need. The pattern set by the autocracy was not seriously challenged, let alone feeling for the need to reverse it.

HE is our unofficial poet laureate, our prime poet. He has indisputably earned that recognition despite his unassuming bearing and dislike for self-promotion. For once the Bangalees did not have to wait for foreigners to accord him the honour before themselves designating him to the elevated position. This was no mean job done by the Bangalees known for their miserliness in appreciating great minds among themselves. Or, the case may be a lack of mental broadness dwarfed by an inherent streak of jealousy. Even the great Rabindranath had reasons to feel genuinely hurt by this smallness of Bangalee mind. Shamsur Rahman can count himself lucky on that score. But only thus far and no further.

Bangladesh's foremost poet had known sunny days. His cup of joy however did not take long to turn sour once the autocracy took over the state power. Instead of seeing better days in the new-found democracy of the country a cup of poison is what he now finds he has been offered. Not exactly in the Socratic fashion but perhaps in a way of icy indifference. Shah A M S Kibria in his regular column for the Bhorer Kagoj, 'Mridu Bhashan' (soft speech) on February 6 last has written a moving piece. Under the headline, 'Kabike Diona Dukkh' (don't inflict sorrow on the poet) — a title of a poem penned down by none other than Shamsur Rahman — columnist Kibria has aptly made some caustic comments both on the government and the nation as a whole.

Kibria's personal account of the treatment the poet was receiving for his acute eye disease glaucoma not only makes a pathetic reading but also shames us as a nation. Many of us knew the poet had gone to

Delhi for the treatment of his fast deteriorating eyes. But what was beyond our imagination was the fact that the poet was forced to accept favour from the host country. All because we could do nothing to help our premier poet financially. Shamsur Rahman fell out of favour of the poet-autocrat on his refusal to court-write for and please the Bishwa Bahaya (world-beater in shamelessness). Had he compromised, he surely would have been an idol and did not have to worry about his bread and butter or for his eye treatment. Instead he gave up the editorship of the Dainik Bangla, a government-owned trust paper, and embraced financial hardship. So here is a poet who ranks first not only for his creative genius but also because of his calm resistance to evil and his ever readiness to side with all things good and that too prove to be a people's cause.

Yet, look how we have repaid the poet! That he is looking for help in another country is because we have not been mindful in the least to the poet's need. The pattern set by the autocracy was not seriously challenged, let alone feeling for the need to reverse it. Kibria has expressed his repugnance saying that it is not at all surprising to see the ministry of culture — one that is engaged in promoting curtailed or compromised culture — counting as liberal a poet as Shamsur Rahman out. He has then proceeded to make an impassioned case of the contributions the readers could

do Kibria rightly laments such an initiative.

I find no difficulty to appreciate the columnist's feeling. In a brief meeting — in fact I went to interview the poet for this newspaper — the poet revealed a flash of his nature that is beautiful for its child-like simplicity. That was when the poet literally ran upstairs to have a hurried shave before being photographed for the interview. It hurts all the more because such a simple mind is now going through both excruciating pains and agonising moments. His physical affliction could be lessened had he received the financial support in time. Such supports ought to come awash with the love of a willing mind. Unfortunately they have not come yet. How this can be organised has also been suggested by Kibria. I remember such a move was successfully carried out in helping poet Mahadev Saha's treatment, thanks to the organising ability of a few young followers of him.

Poet Shamsur Rahman's fast deteriorating eyes are a testimony to the fact that it is already late for such an initiative. The neglect shown is unpardonable. A master in his own field, S M Sultan did not have his wish for going abroad for treatment fulfilled. But lo, how profusely praises were showered on him after his death.

The great painter might have moved in his grave. Poet Shamsur Rahman went to Delhi — I believe after having exhausted all the means he could fall back upon — for

treatment at the last moment. It is for this utter neglect that we feel revulsion.

Here I beg to differ with Kibria on the role of the ministry of culture. After all, the money it is playing custodian to is public money. It cannot shirk its responsibility in this matter. The ministry has to be accountable for the money it spends. Compared to the money it has at its disposal, the expenses for the treatment of the poet's eyes would have been so small. But did anyone even make a strong case in the poet's favour? You cannot expect the ministry to be so open-eyed and alive to the need that ultimately proves to be in the nation's own interest. Every body is not expected to be a Bangabandhu who in his immense capacity to feel the nation's pulse always responded to any such need involving creative talents. So where the issue is to sustain creativity from premature but preventable decay, the ministry must be made accountable for its role.

As for the generosity of our nouveau riche the less said the better. There are perhaps more multimillionaires in the country than it ever boasted. But an amazing lack of interest in art, culture and poetry is only made up by their commercial concerns. In stark contrast with their predecessors of the past century or the early part of this century, they make money either to multiply or for getting the instant returns for its worth. These people are the last ones to emulate their predecessors in

establishing schools, colleges, hospitals and other institutes giving social benefits. So they are not the ones to extend their generosity to help save a poet's vision. After all in the culture of setting up of schools and hospitals lies the seed of giving light into the eyes and life into the bodies of others.

No surprising that such people no longer consider it a privilege to be in any way associated with the self-less effort of making society a better place. With all its blemishes the feudal system once was highly patronising towards our art and culture, including edu-

cation and health. The maestros in various fields of our cultural arena found in the zamindars great enthusiasts and patrons of such disciplines. In democracy it is the state that ought to take the responsibility. But murky politics gets into everything — from poetry to art and culture. We are indeed diseased by adulterated politics to the extent it serves our purpose. In the process the country itself becomes the greatest casualty. It continues, do to injustice to its great sons and daughters. One has to prove one's worth by getting dead.

For a poet like Shamsur Rahman it is essential to see the sights and hear the sounds all around. For he has unasked taken the responsibility to show us what lies beyond the apparent. If we fail to save his eye-sight through sheer negligence, time will not forgive us.

## OPINION

### Cars vs Rickshaws

Andrew Robison

For the second time in a month I must correct an assumption a writer for your paper makes regarding the role rickshaws play in Dhaka's traffic problems. In his article, 'Unforgivable Neglect of City Traffic' which appeared on the front page of your February 12th issue, Mahfuz Anam writes: "... there is no denying the fact that [the rickshaw's] unbridled growth in numbers has been the single most important factor in bringing the city traffic to the present state of stultification."

While I commend Mr. Anam for pointing out the rapidly declining state of Dhaka's traffic, I remain absolutely baffled by how many critics of Dhaka's traffic situation fail to notice the number one cause of traffic jams — private cars! Why is that? Do private cars somehow, by virtue of their cost, perhaps, or their status-symbol image, represent, de facto, modernization and development? In the over one thousand words in Mr. Anam's article extolling Dhaka's traffic nightmares, the words 'cars' or 'private vehicles' do not appear once.

What critics like Mr. Anam fail to understand is the important difference between private and public transportation. Rickshaws are a form of public transportation, so their growth in numbers arises from a public need. If the public has access to alternative forms of transportation (i.e. buses, trams, subways, etc.), the demand for rickshaws will decline naturally.

Cars, on the other hand, are a private form of transportation. Their growth arises from private needs, regardless of public transport demands. So, for example, when ministers who are supposed to be serving the public cry out for special car import privileges even after they have resigned, they are expressing a private need (nothing, in my opinion, could be more disgraceful). And anyone — urban planners, the transportation minister, journalists (?) — who condemn rickshaws for causing traffic problems while sitting behind the windows of a private car, is also expressing a private need. The growth rate of private

cars in Dhaka far exceeds the growth rate of rickshaws, and yet Mr. Anam recommends a "ceiling" on the total number of rickshaws, without once suggesting a ceiling on the total number of car imports. I have yet to encounter a traffic jam on an *abhorrid* day, when motor vehicles are virtually locked outside the city, and rickshaws flood the streets. Yet were you to banish rickshaws for a day and try to transport the same number of passengers via private cars, you would have gridlock. As in Bangkok, Or Los Angeles, Or Singapore. Or so many other cities that have valued cars more than public transportation.

While car owners complain that rickshaws add time to their commute, or to their shopping excursions, their vehicles are causing much greater misery for rickshaw drivers. The exhaust is polluting rickshaw drivers' lungs and making them sick; the traffic snarls (especially in the back lanes where cars often block the entire road) reduce the amount of money they can earn; and the sheer size and speed of cars can literally kill them in a collision. In all the traffic deaths I read about each day in The Daily Star, I've not once read of a rickshaw running over a private car owner. The reverse, unfortunately, is much too common.

Nothing is more irritating than a large private vehicle honking its way through a traffic jam while only carrying a single passenger. To me it represents all the ills of Dhaka city — the power of the rich and their incurable myopia regarding the world around them. Private cars carrying less than three passengers and honking their horns as if everyone should move out of their way because they have money, because they have a car, and because they have a very loud horn, is, in my opinion, what should really be banned. Then, with the addition of well planned public transportation we might see an improvement in Dhaka's traffic conditions that is truly substantial, lasting and beneficial for everyone.

## To the Editor...

### One Taka coin or note?

Sir, The new one Taka coin issued recently by the Bangladesh Bank is hardly available for transaction.

Some people, especially the shop-keepers claim that the metal value of the coin is worth more than one Taka and, as such, all the one Taka coins are being smuggled out to India for manufacture of various metal products, such as, spoon, imitation jewellery, replicas and medals etc.

We do not know the actual fact. Have our concerned government authorities noticed the matter? If so they may kindly issue a Press Release on that account.

Some people complain that carrying one Taka coin is troublesome because of its weight. They opine that one Taka paper note is easy to handle but the note gets dirty, soiled and damaged and becomes worn out within a short period of its circulation.

We wonder, in this age of advancement of science and technology, can't we use a better and durable quality of paper or find out ways and means to print one Taka currency note on thin plastic sheet?

Don't we remember Sultan Ghasuddin Tughlaq of Delhi

issued leather currency in 1330 A.D?

O H Kabir Dhaka

### To get out of the loan grip

Sir, As nationals of a predominantly Muslim country we must observe strict austerity in our day-to-day life if we sincerely want to get rid of shameful national poverty and pull out our Govt from the soup. In our day-to-day conduct and behaviour, we must pick up the habit of being frugal.

No more foreign loan from international bodies/donor countries just to inflate the already accumulated heavy and unbearable load and liability of several thousand crore Taka heaped on the frail shoulder of this utterly poor nation. Now who will clear this mammoth backlog? How and when this country will prosper and arrive at the front line?

No doubt we are no more a "bottomless basket" a petty adage given to us by the then too powerful US Secretary of State, indomitable Henry Kissinger. But fact remains that we are yet to come out of the grip of being branded one of the poorest nations of the world, whatever glorious history and tradition we might have.

Will our learned and wise

analyst, and your esteemed reader Mr O H Kabir throw more light on this?

Flu Li (Retd) Mohiuddin Dhaka

### The traffic scene

Sir, Thank you for the fine piece you carried recently about the total breakdown of traffic control procedures — and especially so for following up with a leader on 13 February. I do so hope that you will adopt the issue as something of a crusade and refuse to let up until the authorities actually do something; having said which, I really do wonder if they ever will.

The fact is that the overall scene is terribly depressing and I honestly marvel at the spirit of the occasional Bangladeshi who expresses pride and satisfaction at the way we all participate in running the country.

Just one recent instance to explain my total disenchantment. Frighteningly, the incident has occurred many times in the past and will be replicated many times in the future — vehicle fitness test procedures. As everyone who has a vehicle knows, there is absolutely no way one can avoid payment of a substantial gratuity if one wants a vehicle fitness certificate. This is extremely irritating for every one and a tangible imposition for most. But that is not the point.

As a bureaucrat friend of mine once said — surely no more than half in jest — the government pays him to attend office and we must pay him to work. We must grasp the devastating realisation of allegations that while bribes must inevitably top up official fees, no one at the Test Centre actually even looks at the vehicle except to spot deficiencies (including dents and faulty paintwork) with which to hang the owner.

I other words, so long as I pay the "convenience money" I can get a certificate — regardless of whether a lethal machine in a lethal condition is being let loose on the highways. Do the senior people who run the Centre ever realise that the parlous state of affairs they preside over could make them accessories to murder? Do the other involved officials there ever think through the consequences of, say, their mindless greed? Laws, new laws and more laws; our parliamentarians enact statute after statute. If only they would concentrate on ensuring that the bureaucrats charged with upholding the laws did just that. There was a law or ordinance recently about levying fines on owners driving vehicles with unacceptable levels of foul emissions. No prizes for guessing who benefits from that.

Mizanur Rahman Banani, Dhaka