

Good-bye to a Week's Work

The opposition has called for dawn to dusk strike on 9th April, covering all Divisional headquarters, including Dhaka; and on 10th April, countrywide. Add to this, SKOP's postponed strike call for the 11th and the 12th. We are left with Saturday and Thursday of the week. The latter day is, normally, a half working day. Well, it can be managed(!). That leaves only Saturday to take care of. All we now have to do is to invite one of the left out political groups to call for another strike to fill the void and make the week complete. If we do not find any such obliging group, then some excuse will have to be found — perfect case for casual leave. After all, why spoil such a good thing by working for one day. Three cheers for all our politicians. Their concern for the poor and the disadvantaged is so intense that since they can't give them jobs, they are at least giving the poor and the hungry, some much needed rest. No other country in the world provides for such paid 'no-work' days. Only one of the poorest among them can afford such a luxury.

The question is, have we all lost our senses? Or is it that we have become so caught up in our party politics that we have forgotten both the country and the people, in whose name we are doing politics? Have we become so blinded by our hatred for the opponent that we have lost the ability to distinguish between the harmful, and the suicidal? For, what else can one term the idea of keeping the nation out of work for continuous four days? We have said this many times before. 'Hartals' harm neither the government nor the opposition political parties. It only harms the people. And because our people are not in the habit of protesting anything unless it is organised, this agony is being imposed frequently, carelessly and with 'care-a-damn' attitude.

The minimum respect the opposition can show for people's well-being is to coincide their programmes with that of the SKOP, or vice versa. This will make it a two-day, instead of a four-day strike. A directionless government and a desperate opposition are together taking the country towards total misgovernment. Our politicians are misreading the people, and are being oblivious of the tremendous sense of frustration which is building up inside them.

The Vile Bombay Eruption

Thanks must be due to Mr Bal Thackeray — no progeny of William Makepeace Thackeray, the writer — for not keeping the subcontinent guessing about his performance as the maker of the new Maharashtra government. He has fulfilled his lifelong promise of entering the delicate china-shop of taut communal relations and going on a rampage.

Maharashtra is a very important Indian state and not for its principal city Bombay alone or the Arab pleasure hunters it attracts or the smugglers that it is home to. In literary and other cultural achievements, specially music, this has, with Bengal, led the subcontinent towards a new awakening, well past communal and regional meannesses.

Nathuram Godse was a Maharashtra too. And the Hindu chauvinist BJP couldn't have dreamed of a better storm-trooper cadre to do all its dirty things than the Shiv Sena, the avowedly fascist phalanx raised by Mr Thackeray. And this man has come out in his true colours without wasting a minute. Making use of a threat by an imagined Bangladeshi—something he alone knows about—he has pledged to 'eliminate the whole community'. Everyone familiar with Mr Thackeray's warped thought process would know he is not pointing to hypothetical migrants from Bangladesh but to all Muslims particularly if they are non-Marathi speakers. And anytime the Marathi Muslims will also be pulled into this horrible pale.

The only good thing about Thackeray's diseased outburst is that he is speaking from a position of power and responsibility. One alienates him from the masses and the denting of the other leads him and his cohort to a fall that is certain. Both act to limit him in his nuisance.

It seems that we have not yet been through with all the Thackerayesque characters in the subcontinent. We are confident the great Maharashtra tradition of tolerance and humanism would be able to take care of such freaks and eruptions as Mr Thackeray. The disciplining influences and powers of the union government should come in handy in the matter.

Tourist Figures

According to Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC), the organisation earned Tk 80 crore from 1.4 lakh tourists who visited Bangladesh during '94. This makes for 4 per cent of 37 lakh global tourists who visited South Asia during the period. A total of 16 lakh European tourists came to South Asia. Of them 51 per cent went to India, 10 per cent to Pakistan, and 9 per cent to Nepal. According to World Tourism Organisation (WTO) there were a total of 52.80 crore tourists last year, registering a 3 per cent rise, and making for a total earning of 321 billion US dollars. According to WTO projections, tourists will total 66.10 crore by the year 2000, and 93.70 crore by 2010.

These figures only confirm what we all knew, that tourism is a mega-buck industry, and that many developing countries, like India, Pakistan and Nepal in our own region, are taking a piece of that lucrative cake. Question therefore is, how much of that global industry can be diverted to Bangladesh?

Not much, if BPC goes the way it has been going ever since it has been set up to direct the growth of our tourism sector. The first thing that needs to be clarified is the BPC figures. We think they are misleading at best. The total tourist figure that BPC gives includes all those who came to Bangladesh on conferences, work, government delegation, even all those who transit through here while going elsewhere. Then there are those who are forced to take lay-over in Dhaka while travelling to Bangkok or Kathmandu, availing Biman's cheap fare for foreigners.

To take all such visitors just to inflate the total number of tourists serves to give a completely distorted figure about our tourist industry. This gives a false sense of achievement of BPC. We would like to know the figure of 'real' tourists. How many came here solely to visit our country? Only then can we know how much we have earned from tourism. Comparing that figure with how much we spend on the whole infrastructure of the sector will help us make a real assessment of the current status, and of the potential of this industry. Till then, let us take the latest BPC claims with a grain of salt.

At the moment, Bangladesh is undergoing a series of crisis, perhaps of an order which was never witnessed before. It is said that bad days never visit alone and so is the case with the present situation when Bangladesh is grappling with a number of problems. First comes the political impasse arising out of the en masse resignation from the parliament of the Opposition MPs. The resignation seemingly turned the existing parliament into a non-functioning entity. The political crisis so started, as we know, from the allegation of election rigging by the ruling party, later foamed into a demand for election under caretaker government. When the demand was turned down, the major Opposition chose to be on the street rather than in the parliament.

The greatest virtue of parliamentary democracy is said to be the face-to-face seating across the table by the government and the opposition parties to address and deliberate on national issues. However, the gravest pitfall of such a system derives from a failure to put them together. Bangladesh now experiences the pitfalls at the cost of the virtue. What is more disconcerting is the fact that in this hot summer politics, the government is apparently turning a deaf ear to the crisis and their solace from a 5-year verdict seems to have exacerbated the situation. Notwithstanding the arguments for and against a caretaker government, such a political stalemate, quite obviously, threw a ring of dissonance on those who really care for a parliamentary democracy.

Then came the crisis relating to rice. The price of rice seems to have shot up to Tk 15-17 per kg and stayed at that level for quite some time.

Crisis versus No Crisis

Given the ominous signs, it is not clear how the government is going to clear its dues to the nation. The fact remains that the government needs to throw its sincere efforts at resolving the crisis.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



The benefit of the poor families that was derived from a fall in rice prices over the years was soon pickpocketed by a sudden surge in its price during the last couple of months. A number of reasons are being attributed to this price hike but two of them deserve special mention. First, the 'dip' in rice prices of 1992 is alleged to have originated from government's failure to procure rice at a reasonable scale. The then dip turned out to be so deep that even a slight rise in prices from that point could appear a big jump. Second, it is alleged that rice was sold from stock, due to quality deterioration. The stock thus depleted is alleged to have furthered the crisis and also seems to have enriched some at the cost of many. But unfortunately, our learned policy makers tend to deem it as a "no-crisis" where an abundance of supply of rice persists. It remains to be asked as to how the prices of rice could rise so steeply given an adequate supply. The government, as usual, seems to blame the hoarders. But over the years, the growing integration of rice markets across the country and the amount of competitiveness injected seem to belie the premise so espoused. Third, the recent drought in northern districts is alleged to have positively contributed to the exacerbation of the crisis. The Aman production, the major rice variety, is reported to have suffered heavily in the absence of proper rainfall.

Out of the three reasons shown above, two reasons are obviously policy induced and the last one, nature induced. The government, democratic and transparent as it claims to be, needs to clarify to the nation as to how the policy induced errors could lead to the worsening of the situation. It may be mentioned here that although visibly no sign of famine appears to persist, such price hike robs the poor families of balanced diet to whom rice is still a relatively price inelastic commodity.

The last assault came from the recent conundrums relating to the fertilizer market. Never in Bangladesh's history a "horror" of this kind did crop up. The price of urea fertilizer increased from Tk 230 per bag (Tk 4.60 per kg) to Tk 400-500 per bag (Tk 8 to 10 per kg) within a very short span of time. More disturbing is the news that a sign of peasant upsurge took shape with farmers blocking roads, looting fertilizers and in consequence giving life to police firing. While the catastrophe is going on everywhere, the feeling of a "no-crisis" by the government seems to pain the nation as a whole. It is not clear as to how the most important input, urea, of agricultural production could be exported at a time when all indications of a possible surge

in demand could be in forecast. The export drive in respect of urea fertilizer is alleged to have fanned the crisis. Added to this is the alleged political interference in relation to dealership distributions. It is being complained that the newcomers in this business, mostly at the grace of the party in power, destabilised the distributional channel and thus contributed to aggravation of the crisis. If, within a few days, the fertilizer distribution cannot be properly channelled, the fear is that there might be a reduction in the rate of yield. This means Boro crops now in sight might face serious shortfall of about 40 per cent.

The fertilizer crisis appears totally policy induced. It is doubtful whether the way the government is moving, is at all in consonance with the gravity of the crisis. The main actors behind the creation of fertilizer crisis are still to be taken to task although the government tends to admit that much of the crisis owes to mismanagement.

The three crisis mentioned above might erode the popularity of the present regime, especially in rural areas. The rice crisis, although gradually moving to an ease, would cost

the government heavily in terms of political supports. And the political crisis would cost the government in terms

of the total economics. Given these ominous signs, it is not clear how the government is going to clear its dues to the nation. The fact remains that the government needs to throw its sincere efforts at resolving the crisis. A pretension of a no-crisis situation would simply deepen the crisis while a feeling of crisis would augment a no-crisis situation.

Lest We Forget

A K Khan: A Visionary Entrepreneur

Yesterday, 31 March, was the fourth death anniversary of the man who was one of our visionary entrepreneurs and a leading actor in our industrialization process. Below we publish a small text from one of his unpublished manuscripts, which shows his deep concern for his country and his people:

Our two greatest untapped and undeveloped assets are our terribly human resources and fertile soil. If we develop these two potential resources Bangladesh would not remain a basket case for long. This is no wishful thinking. With discipline hard work we could be very productive in developing many types of service industries with our basically intelligent and teachable man power which is now a drag on our economy being very largely unproductive.

The future is now supposed to be with the service industries rather than the manufacturing as has been the case hitherto.

Our greatest misfortune is that we are one of the most illiterate populous nations. It must be admitted to our utter shame that since our real independence in 1972 and even before that most of the administrations have misused our young students for furthering their political purpose. They have corrupted the youngsters by bribing them in various ways. Most of the University campuses instead of being seats of learning have been turned into battle grounds of warring political parties faction fighting each other under opposing banners. Hooliganism and vandalism prevails in these sacred seats of learning instead of peace and calm which

alone is congenial in such places. The result has been irreparable loss of potentially productive human resources, which properly used could contribute to the growth of our economy and gradually usher in a new chapter of development in many a sector vital to the eradication of our abysmal poverty.

I am not going to point my accusing finger to any particular party, group or individual in allocating the blame for this colossal loss which is now admitted by every patriotic person of our country and which trend if continued longer will surely spell disaster for us.

We have lost much valuable time and resources and it is high time that we must cry 'halt' and put a stop to these suicidal activities now prevailing in our educational institutions. It is a truism to say that all human developments have been achieved through knowledge systematically acquired with devotion and hardwork in educational institutions.

Recently Japan in the East and Switzerland in the West have proved beyond doubt that countries lacking many natural resources can achieve a high standard of living in a very competitive world provided their human resources are developed in a way to meet the demands of their countries.

Reappraising Democracy for the Twenty-first Century

by Rashida Ahmad

It's time we realised that two opposing political dogmas fighting it out between themselves is not a democratic process. Two conflicting ideologies do not ensure the freedom of choice necessary to claim the label of democracy

It seems that all too often 'democracy' in so-called democratic nations, means simply a two-party system. 'Multi-party democracy' is the pronunciation, two-party rule is the reality.

In most cases, politics is more or less divided down the centre — Left and Right — with minority parties hardly participating in national affairs. Far from maintaining any sort of equilibrium or stability, such two-party states create a wildly swinging pendulum oscillating from one extreme to the other at every change of government.

The problem in such situations tends to be that both party-lines become entrenched in beliefs whose only validity emerges out of being diametrically opposed to the other. Thus, their mind-sets or political ideologies are irrevocably dependent on and restricted by each other. A form of symbiosis occurs, and this mutual feeding off each other destroys the political environment for any challenging or innovative ideology to establish itself. Imaginative or neutral solutions (with respect to existing party dogmas) to political, social and economic problems are discouraged.

In the States, for example, the issues to be dealt with in the political arena, and their parameters, are preset. If certain issues are not discussed, and discussed within the politically acceptable boundaries set by the Democrats on the one hand and the Republicans on the other, then the discussion is considered as meaningless and irrelevant in the context of US politics.

With no scope for the resolution of certain issues except on a linear plane between two opposing points, politics becomes one-dimensional and stagnant — whether on the national or international level.

In Bangladesh, on a national level, our once sought-after democratic state has settled into a rut where the boundaries of disagreement have become limited to personality clashes between two opposing leaders. Anyone refusing to take sides is essentially disregarded from the political scene. Meanwhile the interests

of 120 million people are considered to be adequately represented by 330 Members of Parliament.

On an international level, until recently, global politics was narrowly defined within the strictures of communism to the left and capitalism to the right. For too long there was a void outside this linearly expressed divide — nothing outside was deemed relevant to world affairs. If any global policy failed to discuss free-market versus closed-market economics, it was viewed as not worth serious consideration. It took decades for vital and urgent environmental issues in a global context to get a foothold in the door of international politics.

It's time we realised that two opposing political dogmas fighting it out between themselves is not a democratic process. Two conflicting ideologies do not ensure the freedom of choice necessary to claim the label of democracy. Compared to a one-party state, there appears to be little more democratic choice available in such a condition, and choice above all is what freedom and politics for the people is about.

It may be necessary to attempt to reach some sort of global consensus and to admit that in many allegedly democratic nations, democracy has failed to be actualised. We must ask ourselves why, and in some way reappraise the ideals of democracy in a manner which is truly suited to the masses, who must by all present accounts be its real beneficiaries.

Being presented with two opposing dogmas can never provide the people with any real or valid choice. Even the middle ground is defined by the two extremes. Such lack of true choice breeds political apathy and complacency, as can be seen in the younger generations of many Western nations where 'democracy' has

been established over the last century or so.

Such indifference can even be detected here — after more than two decades of post-independence 'democratic' rule, we are asking ourselves, is there any real political choice available to us? Many of us may well be firmly entrenched in party politics — but does this in any way ensure democracy for the rest?

The danger is that the two extremes end up being, to all intents and purposes, a means to a common political end — dogma and oppression. In 1949, when George Orwell's 1984 was first published, both sides of the then political divide claimed it portrayed their counterpart — communism on the one hand and fascism on the other. The irony is that with the passing away of both regimes, 1984 is no less applicable to the present global divide — between the liberal left and conservative right. Both attempt to control and oppress with their particular dogmas of political correctness, on the left, and survival of the strong, on the right.

Plato's Republic, the original blueprint for democracy, now appears to us to be anything but democracy. By the Greek's definition at that time, political rule by the people extended only so far as the educated elite in society. Over the centuries we have redefined and changed such a reading of 'democracy' to attempt to include a larger measure of society. Perhaps, with the approach of a new millennium, it is time to pause and think again about the meaning of democracy.

How is it possible under democracy for governments to be ruling nations with only a minority vote in their favour? How in the name of democracy can laws be passed by these governments which the majority of people are opposed to?

The face of national and international politics must change if it is to reflect the increasingly complex societies we live in. There was a time when almost universal rejection of autocratic states and sovereign leaders took place. It was realised that such means of governing societies could no longer succeed. As nations and civilisations grew and evolved, the interests of a people as a whole could no longer be ascertained or assumed by some dictator, benign or otherwise.

The 'common good of the people' no longer existed as it may have done for smaller communities in the past. Within nations composed of numerous self-contained communities, governance was forced to change as each community clamoured in favour of its own particular concerns. Thus the spirit of democracy was born.

But the spirit was weak. Democracy, as it has been implemented, has failed us. With the further evolution of societies, democracy, as we know it, has ceased to reflect the needs and wants of today's citizens.

Whether we view democracy internationally or intranationally, it appears to be degenerating. Global democracy, in action, can be exemplified by the unflinching ineptitude of the UN as they attempt to impose a narrowly defined set of imperatives on nations which are not only diverse in beliefs and culture but each at a separate stage of development — from the newly emerging and idealistic nation-states, to the ageing and decadent. This, in the name of democracy itself, Democratic rule within nations, with few exceptions, is as flawed and distorted.

The time is right, with the close of the old millennium, to challenge our established beliefs. The time, in fact, is always right to question and challenge established beliefs — this is the true essence of democracy. If such a necessary condition is not fulfilled with respect to democracy itself, then we can but have failed in our pursuit of freedom and the escape from tyranny.

An annoyed citizen Dhaka

To the Editor...

"Penny wise, pound foolish"

Sir, Some time during my school life, a teacher would often make use of the proverb "penny wise, pound foolish". Now after so many years, the proverb is suddenly playing in my mind, as the message is felt so realistic in my present occupation. I come across many businessmen, who are really tight on spending money for good and for that matter a bit expensive industrial machinery. They believe that second hand or less expensive (so lesser quality) machinery can serve their purchase. Generally, such a lesser quality machine, for example a boiler, can for a certain period serve the purpose, but later on maintenance becomes more and more expensive like increased consumption of gas and oil and

a headache as such. And most are without the protective devices.

It costs a lot of money to setup an industry, and it is a matter of life-long duration. Therefore should an inferior/used machinery be worth it or should it really be a criterion? If it is, it is "penny wise, pound foolish".

I wish these businessmen be more wise and understand what good quality means. Apparently if may cost you a pound but ultimately you would lose not even a penny.

Khawja Viqar Motruddin Dhaka

Alternative to hartal

Sir, This refers to the letter "Alternative to hartal", by OH Kabir in The Daily Star's March 25 issue. Mr Kabir deserves a

pat on his shoulders for his noble suggestion to our leaders and politicians — hunger strikes instead of hartal and other destructive activities. Now the question is will our rather power-hungry and self-motivated politicians ever bother to go hungry? Hunger strike demands a certain level of honesty and willingness, not to mention moral strength.

One can lump these adjectives together under the names of great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose and many others. Unfortunately, our leaders and politicians have something else on their minds. Otherwise, things would have functioned within the normal procedures. I suppose, the best way to fight them back is to straightaway oppose all their apparently destructive designs and motives, especially hartal calls. If this be

a bit risky, the other logical alternative is, let us all accept or take hartal hours as mere hour of rest and start work after the end of hartal to 12 mid-night.

This will compensate the normal 8 hours of work loss. We have got to cope up with the hartal ways, as it has taken a firm root in our way of life.

If above views are shared and accepted by all peace-loving people of the country, its time now for a non-political people's movement to develop the country and re-set those opposed to it. I might sound rude and against the grain of a civilised procedure. But then, we have no choice. Do we?

OPINION

"Efficient Administration and Political Patronage"

T Hussain

This refers to the article captioned "Efficient Administration and Political Patronage" by Shah A M S Kibria, published on March 2, under his column "On the Record" in The Daily Star.

It is obvious that the columnist, who is the political adviser of Awami League, had palpably intended to malign a particular political party and then mustered so-called arguments necessary to prove his point in the way he wanted. In the first place, he brought in Magura by-election as handy for the purpose, even though this case was never taken up before the election tribunal. At the same time, it was most convenient to forget the results of many other bye-elections and city corporation elections, which were fresh in everybody's mind.

As regards alleged "abuse of official power to promote party interests", the writer has named one Bengali daily to substantiate his thesis. He has also referred to his personal talks with "various people including retired senior officials" who, according to him, seem to believe in the substance of the newspaper reports. The allegation is that government is placing those officials who are known to be supporters of the BNP in key positions in the districts and thanas. I have been occasionally visiting interior areas in districts for the last several years in connection with my humble social service pursuits. Except during the post-independence period of 1972-75 and during 1982-90 Ershad regime, I have hardly come across any flagrant case of abuse of political power in party interests in course of my mufassil visits. Truly speaking, the administration's image of integrity and neutrality had completely broken down in Ershad regime. It was an uphill task for the democratic government which followed in 1991 to restore this image to its true position. By and large, public servants are now following the path of objectivity and neutrality, leaving democratic practices and institutions to work properly. On the other hand, it would be very unfair now to say that the "magistrates or police officers or other government officials are considered to be agents of the ruling party". I had never any occasion to notice "ministers, MPs and even local BNP leaders" having started to "requisition" officers of their choice for appointment or transfer to the particular post in which they are interested. I have never heard of such terms as "requisition" and "indent" — at least in this perception. To quote Mr Kibria, "Anybody suspected of not being a BNP loyalist is sent away on transfer to a post where he

can do no harm to the ruling party." This is nothing but a blatantly sweeping remark and can hardly be accepted unless substantiated.

Mr Kibria seems to have a lack of faith in institutions like Election Commission and normal phenomenon of having foreign observers at national polls. He thinks that these instruments designed to ensure free and fair polls are destined to be inoperative and useless, if the officers utilised for election processes are partisan. But he forgets that a powerful Election Commission will have full control on officials engaged in the electoral processes, leaving no scope for them to be partisan. And neutral "foreign observers" will have full facilities to observe the election processes in the way they want to, and no partisan activity will escape their watchful eyes.

As regards appointment and posting of Deputy Commissioners, the columnist assumes that after assumption of power in 1991, BNP government has cast aside all previous procedures of selection of these officers by a high-powered committee. But in actual fact, these assumptions are purely imaginary and such appointments are never made, as we see, in the light of party interests. Nor are Thana Nirbahi Officers appointed on any such extraneous considerations. These are all wild speculations.

Mr Kibria has again made a categorical statement that "the government of Begum Khaleda Zia is leading us along a most dangerous path." It is very difficult to find out what is the basis of making such a damaging remark and coming to the conclusion that "the time has come to take a hard look at the performance of the BNP government." A statement of this nature is outrageous and one who makes such a statement must be accountable for this.

I do not belong to any political party. I have no axe to grind. But as a conscious citizen, I have every right to question any one making wild statements and accusations against a freely elected democratic government. This is not the way to foster democracy and democratic practices. If anything, this serves the party interest only and not the national or country's interest. The country is now faced with a serious constitutional crisis and the only way to resolve it is to help develop a national consensus. Time is running out and we must desist from making allegations and counter-allegations which will be obviously unproductive. Let democracy survive and let us all contribute to the process of survival.