

Congress Splits

A split in the ruling Congress (I) Party of India was expected. With Arjun Singh parting ways with prime minister and party president Narasimha Rao...

Congress Party weathered similar divisions in the past. But the latest split has come at a very bad time for Congress. The party has been routed in constituency after constituency in the recent state elections...

Whether that calculation of the newly formed Congress faction will be materialised is still a matter of surmise. Regardless of how successful the dissidents are, the split itself will be enough to dash any hope of a Congress win in next year's election...

In the present crisis, it appears that the north-easters have come together to oust a man from the south. In fact Narasimha Rao is the only southerner to hold the key post of Indian premiership. That Arjun Singh has conceded the top party post to Tiwari, also from Uttar Pradesh...

Murders, One a Day!

According to report carried in this paper there have been 18 murders in the first 19 days of this month - almost one a day. It appears that we are qualifying rather fast for becoming one of the cities with the highest murder rates in the world...

It is the near total loss of faith in the law enforcement agencies which is contributing to the current rise in city murders. One a day murder may occur in a city of millions. But none of the perpetrators of the crime is being caught...

We think time has come to examine the performance of our police force. We often hear complaints about their efficiency and honesty, but seldom have we focused on their needs, capacities and the enormity of the task that they face...

The bottomline is that too many murders have made us all extremely fearful. Nothing the police is doing is calming our nerves. In fact the total loss of faith in the police, coupled with the dangerous rise in violent crimes, have created an all pervasive sense of helplessness...

A Model for Us All

Today is the first death anniversary of Mohammad Nasiruddin. The centenarian writer-editor was an institution all by himself. Have we amongst us any worthy successor to him - or successors? That the answer is rather in the negative should not be deemed a misfortune...

Mohammad Nasiruddin travelled to Calcutta, the cultural capital of the subcontinent, in his early youth. He carried to the big city an empty pocket and an inordinate ambition to serve literature. The resolute youth worked his way into founding a literary journal of undying significance...

Saogat generally offered ground for Bengali Muslim writers to come to light. But in truth Nasiruddin's journal was far more than that. Honouring the spirit of the Saogat's striving, we should place the journal among the best of such - Probashi, Bharatborsho and Manoshi o Mormobani, not making any allowance for its being a Muslim enterprise...

The great thing that Nasiruddin never parted with in his long life is complete lack of partisanship on the communal question. This was a very rare achievement in a time permeated with the poison of communal hate and mistrust and violence...

Mohammad Nasiruddin will continue to be a model for us what with his abiding love for literature and competence and fairness as an editor, what with his achievement as the great force of reconciliation across the literary chasms of independent Bangladesh.

Time to Seriously Talk about People's Rights

Misuse of official power and privilege is so commonplace in Bangladesh that it is not very fashionable to complain about it. We all know, for instance, that traffic jam in Dhaka is getting worse every day. Yet the prime minister's motorcade passes through deserted city streets because the police authorities routinely and rather ruthlessly block traffic on all sides.

As a columnist of The Daily Star I feel a sense of pride about the principled and consistent position taken by the paper about abuse of official powers and privileges. Only a few weeks ago, The Daily Star questioned both the legality and morality of the action of the prime minister in holding the divisional conference of her party in her official premises...

As expected, these remarks were ignored by the prime minister. Previous comments on the subject produced no visible response or reaction from her. Of course, she has the reputation of being a leader who does not compromise on anything. Presumably she would not like to change her practice because that would amount to yielding under pressure...

The issue has hit the newspaper pages again with a jolt. Some irate Biman passengers including Begum Motia Chowdhury are the cause of the furor. According to the press reports, these luckless passengers arrived at the Dhaka airport on May 18 to fly to Jessore on Biman's 7:30 am flight...

In order to avail of the early morning flight, they must have started from their respective homes at a very early hour because the airlines demand all passengers to present themselves at the counter quite some time before the plane actually takes off. I can well imagine the reaction of the poor passengers when they were told that a great fortune has befallen them; their flight has been converted to a VIP flight! The Biman management must have been baffled when the passengers, instead of getting thrilled by the turn of events, staged a sit-in at the lounge to protest the unannounced rescheduling of their flight...

Who cares for the poor members of the public stuck on one side or the other of the blocked street! Cars, trucks, baby taxis, rickshaws, push carts and bicycles as well as pedestrians - all have to wait, often indefinitely, for a glimpse of the speeding vehicles of the nation's elected prime minister!

The Thai nation hold their King in "worshipful reverence" and yet when the King goes by car, the traffic is not blocked. This is done under his personal orders. In England I saw the British authorities had provided, while going to the airport, two motor cycle outriders ahead of the presidential car. Traffic was neither stopped nor even slowed down...

But what happens if the government itself violates the law? Who will then enforce the law? The prime minister not only violated the normal ethical standards but also the law of the land in using the official premises for holding a party conference. Though there were some feeble comments and murmuring here and there, she seemed to treat such protests with contempt.

In the United States the political party pays the bill when the president travels in government aircraft for party programmes. I am told the same practice is followed in India. In all the democratic countries a distinction is made between the party and the government. Even in areas which are somewhat grey, a line is carefully drawn to ensure that the resources of the government are not used to promote, directly or indirectly, the interests of the party in power...

When the prime minister is using the helicopter, at great cost to the tax payer, for electioneering purposes or even to attend public meetings organized by the ruling party, she is surely indulging in abuse of official powers and privileges. I think the nation has a right to get an explanation about these travels.

Her political opponents do not get the same facility. In the United States, the state provides funding support for presidential candidates irrespective of party affiliation. This is done to prevent the use of private money from unduly influencing the election. If the incumbent president is a candidate he will not get a penny more than his entitlement under the law and the opposition candidate will not get a penny less than what he is entitled to.

In Bangladesh, regrettably, such a situation is not only unthinkable but perhaps even beyond the comprehension of those who are currently in office. They seem to believe that once voted to power the government machinery and its resources are their personal property to be used for their enjoyment and benefit until they are kicked out of office.

This is perhaps the main reason for the desperate desire to cling to office by hook or crook.

The contrast between the situation in Bangladesh and what the British are aiming at is so sharp that it may appear somewhat academic to our people. For example, the British prime minister John Major has launched what is known as the Citizen's Charter in 1991. The aim is to raise the standard of public services and to make them more responsive to the needs and wishes of the citizens who use them. The Citizen's Charter introduces six simple principles: standard of service, consultation, information and openness, access and user-friendliness, redress and value for money. Does it sound too good to be true? Well, this is what the British people think they should get even if it looks a far cry to us who have to live with gross abuse of official power and privileges at the cost of the ordinary citizens. I hope to write more about the Citizen's Charter in a subsequent column. Meanwhile we all can reflect on the reason why Begum Motia Chowdhury did not appreciate the favour done by the Biman in upgrading her flight to a VIP flight!

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



suffer like this just because a prime minister wants to move from her one office to the next quickly? Is it likely to speed up the disposal of files? What about the loss of time and inconvenience of the people? The underlying issue is not the traffic jam but the rights of the people vis-a-vis the power and privileges of the head of the government. When these rights are trampled under foot with impunity, what can they do? What is the possible remedy? One must not expect any help from the security forces. They are very conscious about their duties to those who are elected by the people to offices...

On Entering the Secretariat

Unfortunately, these writings have had no impact, and it seems no one is even interested in finding a solution which will eliminate hassle and corruption, and at the same time ensure that members of the public can meet officials in the Secretariat.

Wish to name names in this regard because it is an open secret that has been high-lighted time and again in the popular press. Unfortunately, these writings have had no impact, and it seems no one is even interested in finding a solution which will eliminate hassle and corruption, and at the same time ensure that members of the public can meet officials in the Secretariat. Well, I would like to suggest a way out. This may be tried out on an experimental basis for a month or two, and then evaluated, before deciding whether to discard or retain or modify it. In my scheme, the last two hours of one day in a week, perhaps, Thursday, should be kept reserved for meeting members of the public. During those two hours, the Secretariat gates will be kept open to all, and officers will be in their respective offices to attend to this duty exclusively. People will be met on a "first come, first serve" basis, and efforts will be made to meet as many people as possible during those two hours. They may be met individually or collectively, i.e. along with other officers. The visitors may also be referred to the relevant officer if they knock at the solution lies in the strengthening security and vigilance measures and not in preventing people from entering the Secretariat. Hopefully, the proposed arrangement will reduce the existing public pressure on officers and allow them to work in relative peace for at least five days in a week.

Making Government Work

By Analyst. I have suggested this arrangement to senior bureaucrats a number of times, but the standard reply has been, "It won't work", and without any explanation. This response, I hold, is in line with Newton's second law on inertia of rest and motion. I will freely admit that my proposal is not a permanent

BIHAR ELECTIONS

The Abominable Showman

by Dr Ashok Mitra. matter of life and death for the citizenry, but a prank for the CEC to indulge in. The reason proffered for the postponement of the schedule was always the same: the CEC was not satisfied with either the total strength or the deployment of Central forces. It is an imperfect polity. While the CEC is within his rights to improve the probity of the polls, to keep postponing on the ground that the voting arrangements are not foolproof is a bit of an outrage. First, such postponements meant that the campaign season stretched almost to three months, seriously affected the normalcy of life and living in the state. The CEC also tied himself up in knots, when, while postponing elections in Bihar, he allowed counting of votes in the other States. He thereby discriminated against Bihar, confirming the suspicion that he did not care if Bihar's poll was affected by the results elsewhere. He rescheduled elections in the final round in such a manner that there was no possibility of presenting a vote of account to the newly constituted Assembly before the end of the fiscal year. This created an invidious situation in the State, apart from necessitating the imposition of President's Rule. The Chief Election Commissioner is to be held solely responsible for the emergence of this situation. Quite obviously, as far as Bihar is concerned, he failed abjectly to fulfil the obligations the Constitution has imposed on him. Besides, in recent weeks he has dropped many overt hints that he is keen to join active politics. On this latter ground alone, he ought to resign immediately from the position. In case he does not, it would be quite legitimate to seek his impeachment, although, given the present composition of Parliament, the move is likely to fail. But at least the annals of history would show that the way the CEC had gone about did invite social approbrium.

To the Editor...

Election prospect. Sir, Unless something unpredictable happens national elections are going to be held within a few months. Awami League backed candidate has swept the poura polls. In the past four city corporation polls BNP faced debacle in Dhaka and Chittagong. In these two cities AL backed candidates have won. Victory of Awami League in Tongi poura poll and Dhaka and Chittagong city corporation polls is not, however, so much an indication of popularity of Awami League rather it is a reflection of the frustration of people with BNP. It's did not live up to the expectation of the people. Although in macro-economic management BNP's performance is praiseworthy, no tangible benefit could reach micro level. So far law and order is concerned BNP's performance is dismal, to say the least. Continued sense of frustration is leading people to desperation. In 1992, the so-called promotion scandal had tarnished the image of the government and antagonized a large number of bureaucrats. This may prove fatal for the ruling party in the next general election. An impartial analysis shows that over the last twelve-year period annual average economic growth rate has been roughly four per cent. So no tangible improvement has been made during the BNP rule. Unemployment situation is also worse. Disenchantment of people with BNP is increasing day by day. Recent drought, food and fertilizer crisis has compounded the situation. People in modern times are no longer prepared to wait indefinitely to see the results of development. An eminent economist rightly said "If development is a long run affair, it is well to remember that in the long run we are all dead". The recent Tongi poura polls and the past city corporation polls are rather a clear warning to BNP to get Bangladesh going up, visibly. Mrs Montaz Jahan Fulbari, Sylhet.

Activities of NGOs. Sir, Thanks are due to your paper for publishing "A clarifications about NGOs" written by the DG of NGO Affairs (letter 28/04/95) and "More focus on the NGOs" by A Husnain (opinion 30/04/95). I have also seen an article written by Walter Truett Anderson titled "NGOs and their growing influence in the Dhaka Courier issue of 21st April, 1995. So, I like to point out the following which may be clarified by the DG of NGO affairs: (1) What are the grey areas to be evaluated? (2) Why development activities of NGOs are often treated as troublesome? (3) The role of NGOs in political, social and economic development etc (evaluation) in Bangla desh. M Ali Kalerganj, Rajshahi.