

Is Hartal Inevitable?

We are hoping against hope that a miracle could still happen to avert the 96-hour hartal due to begin on Monday.

It might come about in the following ways: an empathetic feeling with the people that they have had enough of it and why should they be made to suffer more through no fault of their own especially against the backdrop of the floods. The ball has always remained in the turf of the politicians and for quite some time now it has been in the centre-court of the two top-most political leaders of the country.

Either one or both of them will have to make the crucial move. Is two days' time too short for that? Given the stock of the basic result in hand — the Prime Minister's relinquishment prior to the polls — we do not think it is. A quick result-oriented initiative at the top duly facilitated by a catalytic role of some neutral trouble-shooters could make a difference in the situation.

Whether in association with the above development or unilaterally, there could be a simple announcement from the opposition saying that they are postponing the strike taking into account the flood-related hardship of the people. This would earn them the gratitude of the nation. Whenever they had lowered the intensity of strikes in the past their image bettered proportionate to the relaxation made. And, they lose nothing in terms of political momentum or manoeuvrability whatsoever by deferring the hartal.

While we are praying to be spared the absurdity of a complete black-out of individual or corporate activity for four days here are some practical suggestions we are offering to the opposition for a minimisation of the effects.

Let the opposition ensure emergency medical services to be freely sought by the citizens and delivered to them throughout the strike period. We suggest that they have special volunteer groups, both roving and stationary, to ensure this, if necessary with a fleet of ambulances kept in readiness to rush to the critically ill.

Another set of volunteers must take care of stranded passengers at the international airport in particular making sure that they reach home safely.

Why not have some centrally located telephone numbers to receive SOS calls and attend to these. Moreover, let directives go out to field-level monitors so that they can ensure completely incident-free movement of journalists and the whole bunch of medical and utility workers. Furthermore, in no way should relief-related transportation be impeded.

All these need to be interspersed with suitable area-wise exemptions in view of the flood. And duration-reducing relaxations, too.

A Noble Gift

President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran on Wednesday laid the foundation of the Pharsi Bhaban at the Dhaka University campus. The bhaban will be an institute for research into and cultivation of the great Persian language and its many-splendoured literature. There can be no better monument to the friendship between any two nations and President Rafsanjani's gift is sure to set a milestone in our relations with Iran. This is specially so because over many centuries Persian literature has been very close to the heart of the Bengali people. Muslims and Hindus alike cultivated with zeal the official language of the Mughals and lesser sovereigns and vassal chiefs and people here in general used bayets by Hafiz or Sadi as a regular prop of conversation.

Have we any other bhaban in our universities, set up by a head of a foreign state? Perhaps not. Indeed we have no bhabans at all in these our universities, anything to compare with the China Bhaban or Hindi Bhaban at the Visva-Bharati. Institutes are a rarity in our universities although these seem to be the linchpin of western higher education. There are, of course, the Institute of Modern Languages in DU and the Institute of Bangladesh Studies at RU, perhaps only to prove our point.

This situation increases the value of President Rafsanjani's gracious gift a thousand fold. The beauty of the enlightened act lies in the generative nature of the institute which will be built and run entirely by Iranian funds.

While registering our appreciation of the noble deed of our noble visitor can we not ask of our leaders of the state when are they going to found a Bangla Bhaban in some renowned universities of Germany or France or the US?

Guests from the Cold

Our beautiful seasonal guests have started arriving. According to Dhaka ornithologists 25 species of Siberian birds have already come here. Ducks are the most numerous of these tourist birds counting as many as 22 subspecies among them.

Here in Bangladesh it is yet only Aswin, with two more months to go before winter will officially commence. And our winter is but a pleasant summer for these far-flying world citizens.

For the past few years this country is also becoming rather cold to the wintry visitors. Bird poaching is increasing at a geometric rate. An elephant's memory is proverbial. But migratory birds too show a pronounced streak of remembering the incongenial station and avoiding it. And the bad news spreads among the travelling birds fast, how one doesn't know.

There is law against catching and selling the guest birds. It has failed, miserably, to arrest the criminal practice. The selling is made in the open, very visibly on the prominent and crowded thoroughfares of Dhaka city. No one seems to know, even the police, that law is broken in such a showy manner and at the top of one's voice. The government should either stop such flagrant slighting of the law or withdraw the law altogether.

If environment is one of Bangladesh's first concerns, migratory birds should get a better deal here. Their maltreatment is symptomatic of both government's having very little grip over society and downright hypocrisy on the environment question.

Good News Amidst Bad News

The government has always been aware of the "murmuring" pertaining to loan defaults but because of the weak legal system and also, possibly, because of the political link of loan defaulters, very little could be done so far to recoup the money

FEW days back it was reported in the newspapers that the political parties are, in principle, against the participation of the disdained bank loan defaulters in the upcoming general elections. To this effect, they are reported to have requested the Election Commission to take necessary steps to disembark these loan defaulters during the whole electioneering process. It could be learnt, further, that the Election Commission would proceed along the lines suggested by the political parties. At heel, another news item relating to loan defaulters rekindled some rejoice. The news is that the Central Bank of the country (Bangladesh Bank) refused to reschedule the defaulted loanees and thus temporarily blocked the holes for a escape by the said defaulters.

It may be reiterated here that bank loan defaulters have been accused of creating a disarray in the financial sector. There was a time, especially during the 1980s, when provisions of bank loans to the private sector was construed as the Moses and Prophet of a robust private sector development in Bangladesh. The surge in the interest in promoting private sector development — and

the bulge in credit pumped — resulted in few thousand crore taka lying with the borrowers but, allegedly, never returned to the lenders. The donors expressed their annoyance over the whole episode and the banks, especially the NCBs, were heading towards a point of bankruptcy. This phenomena gave rise to a kind of "default culture" in Bangladesh where the perception that one can run away safely with bank money getting implanted. Erpassant, it should be mentioned here that the government has always been aware of the "murmuring" pertaining to loan defaults but because of the weak legal system and also, possibly, because of the political link of loan defaulters, very little could be done so far to recoup the money. The government had issued bonds to save the NCBs — a situation of a kind where the taxpayers had to come to the rescue of those who failed to protect taxpayers' hard earned deposits. Recently, of course, Bangladesh Bank embarked on a "save the banks" programme and forced some of

the directors of private banks to vacate their seats in the board of directors and also, reportedly, declined to reschedule loan money.

We, therefore, would like to appreciate the concerns expressed by the political parties. It would be very

law and rules making on the country. Again, once permitted to participate in the election, majority of them would drive the opponents out first because of money they own but belonging to others. However, in the whole process of eliminating bank loan defaulters, few

tie necks, demand constraints etc. For these factors to have happened, the society has to bear at least some of the burdens. The home-baked factors one, for example, using bank money for buying, say, real estate, cosy cars, sending children abroad, lavish lifestyle etc. as a result of which the industry of the healthy and wealthy owner fell sick. Bank officials, therefore, have to be cautious in their process of identification.

The second problem relates as to who would pick up the losers? It is apprehended that in this process, political victimisation might result in. Since most of the loan defaulters owe to NCBs, which are under the direct control of the Finance Ministry, political interference might dispel good intentions. We can only hope that such apprehensions turn into mere gossips.

Third, when does the

process start? Unless it is started very soon, relevant authorities may not get enough time to come up with a list. Their failure at the end, it is being apprehended, might cause for a reversal of the decision. The general election drawing close, the Election Commission should, therefore, ask the banks to supply them with the list so that legal complications can be removed in time.

It is true that we are passing through a critical time in our politics which is locked into a stalemate. Bad news are now abound in socio-economic and political arena. People seem to be losing faith in politics and politicians alleging them of rocking the boat of infant democracy in Bangladesh. A glimmer of hope is rayed by the news that, seemingly, the "scarce" consensus was built up around the issue of loan defaulters. Why not then, the politicians, build up some kind of consensus around the current political crisis so that they themselves do not turn into defaulters — not of loan but of duty to the nation — by their own people?

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



much unfair and, perhaps, disastrous for the nation if those who failed to repay bank money, built fortunes by not doing that, infected the society through such a culture, and above all, contributed most to the fragility of the financial sector are allowed to show up in a place like the Parliament. The Parliament is an important place where laws are enacted and rules are formed. It would be unfair to see those law and rule breakers participating in

problems could creep up which might need due attention.

First defining a defaulter. What should be the length of the loan repayment period for which the connotation should apply. Second, defaults might have sprang from different sources, some of which are marked-made and some are home-baked. The former could relate addu to, inter alia, a gestation gap, policy distortions and policy reversals, infrastructural bot

Heir to Irreconcilable Contradictions

by Nilratan Halder

Does the present civilisation give the impression that it has nearly completed its cycle? Never before did human spirit soar so high and also perhaps so low

ON Saturday the BBC telecast a programme after the 2:00 pm (Bangladesh time) news. The programme's main theme, I believe, was the dominant civilisations — particularly the enduring influence of Western civilisation. Since I switched on the TV late and the BTB snapped the programme off before it ended, I missed both the beginning and the last portion. Yet what I have seen has made me think a few questions raised there over and over again. For example, why Britain, a small and undeveloped society and economy, instead of the larger and more advanced Indian and Chinese societies, came to dominate the world? The Babylonian astronomy, Indian mathematics and Chinese science had seen wonderful development earlier than the Industrial Revolution that took place in Britain. Still the material prosperity, individual liberalism, democracy, market economy etc., have all become a great gift of the West to human civilisation. Why?

These and other unsettling questions need a thorough analysis before we venture to reach some sort of a conclusion. But the scope being limited here, we concentrated on a few striking features. The programme traces back trends of civilisations and how the Barbarians of the Northumberland take lead over others. According to it, 'the seed of the Industrial Revolution was sown in the 12th to 14th centuries when the Western societies found virtues in small families, late marriage and material acquisition. These are apparently less recognised qualities but

their impact on moulding the shape of human society is immense. What the West opted for voluntarily to raise the quality of life seven or eight centuries ago is yet to sufficiently impress the peoples in large swathes of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Does it not explain, to a large measure, the underdevelopment with its attendant ills in the less developed countries? People started marrying late and having small-unit families in the West at a time when contraceptives were unheard-of things. Today we spend billions of taka on manufacturing and promotion of various contraceptive materials with less spectacular results. The West had gone whole hog for material prosperity at a time when denial of material comforts and abstinence were prescribed as means to acquiring mokshya, the ultimate truth. That kind of preaching is good enough for stifling the spirit of enterprise in man. But that was not all, while the no-wealth prescription was meant for the masses, the privileged and the elite of society always wallowed in idle comfort and luxury.

Societies in the East, particularly in and around the Indus valley saw great prosperity between 3000 and 5000 BC. But all through — except for a brief period — social hierarchy and religious divisions undermined a cohesive and collective well-being. It was in the ancient small jana samaj where people — irrespective of their sexes — got equal treatment. The French Revolution liberated the spirit of man and ushered in the age of modern democracy. But the West's rise is

not without blemishes. The discovery of steam engine and weapons of greater fire power and long range whetted the West's hunger for new colonies where from the conquerors shipped wealth — often unearned and by foul means — to their countries. Britain took away so much wealth from India that it could not absorb in its economy. The BBC programme did not mention this infusion of over-size capital. This should be considered one of the deciding factors, for the accumulation of resources from foreign land provided Western countries with the launching pad for the industrial take-off. In doing so the West had but few cruelties to resort to in the colonies. While the democratic ideals and principles got full fruition in the lands of the colonial powers, the colonies were served with a disproportionately raw deal.

It is this swooning blow from which the colonies are yet to recover. The modern civilisation is built in the image of the West. Many times did the centre of gravity of human civilisation have shifted. The Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Indus on the one side and the Inka on the other have all seen their glorious unfolding and pathetic decline. With the addition of newer knowledge, art and craft the centre of gravity has changed. In the modern time two countries on the banks of the Thames initiated the process but later the initiative has been seized by America. The communist movement that began with a bang has ended in a whimper. As things now stand, what the West has stood for

since the Industrial Revolution seems to have clinched the day. But like every other civilisation, this American-led one too has its Achilles' heel. It is the self-destructive power within.

Does the present civilisation give the impression that it has nearly completed its cycle? Never before did human spirit soar so high and also perhaps so low. The achievement, on the one hand, is unparalleled; then it becomes so hollow when we know that the majority of people of this planet are deprived of fulfilling their basic needs and their requirements are outstripped by spending on means of destruction of man. The beast in man is more powerful than the superior being. Even leaving aside this egalitarian consideration, we can clearly see that civilisation has reached a point where the planet cannot sustain the level of human activity in its breadth and scope. To sustain life's need and comfort, man creates pollution beyond any acceptable level, exacts a demand on resources that are limited and unreplenishable. Will then this civilisation come to an end soon? Much before the aspiring areas of the world catch up with the West? Here is an intriguing situation as we can roughly work out to see that the average duration of a civilisation is 2000 years. Sounds cynical or overbearingly pessimistic. But the greatest contradictions within this civilisation — sky-high scientific advancement on the one hand, and almost complete lack of human values on the other — can hardly indicate anything better.

PERISCOPE by Voyager

Bollywood Barrage

TECHNOLOGY has transformed international Television from a stranger encountered only on journeys abroad to a permanent house guest in most middle class homes in the country. The barrage of air waves, carrying not only in-depth news coverage and excellent documentaries but also the soft porn which is the music and dance of the Hindi Cinema, has been settling like a miasma over our land since satellite TV became accessible and cheap.

The problem, of course, is the ubiquity of Television and its easy availability to persons who may not have the ability to separate the grains of information and knowledge from the chaff of pop culture. To those of us who believe in democratic principles any form of restriction or censorship of information is abhorrent therefore we need to develop alternative strategies to deal with the problem that is causing social changes in this country which will, perhaps, have long term consequences that should be carefully considered.

The case for and against unrestricted access to the air waves is quite simple. On the one hand having access to global news and information, the vivid images which bring people and nations closer, the clarity with which causes and issues are shared — all these are undeniably important advantages. On the other hand the exposure to alien cultures can distort societies which are not strong enough or ready enough to hold their own against foreign influences that differ from their own norms, standards of behaviour and cultural observances. It is significant to note that commercial television exists to create consumer demand therefore considerations of good taste, realism and accuracy only

arise if they affect sales. Soap operas, both western and Indian are good examples of unrealistic portrayals, extraordinary story lines and sensational incidents which provide escapism to the bored, the lonely or the feeble minded. Will the exposure to permissiveness and licentiousness, which is so alien to our culture and to which we have never been exposed in such a manner, lead to profound social changes?

Already the effects can be seen — take young people, for instance, small children mouthing the lyrics to Hindi songs without obviously knowing what the words mean or youngsters wanting to emulate their pop icons resorting to crime to satisfy their desires. How many younger people actually tune into the excellent BBC documentaries or travelogues or something like "Breakfast with Frost" it is usually "Mangta Hai" or "Tara" or "Santa Barbara" that captures their interest.

The result is that it becomes commonplace for a ten or eleven year old to know the complete lyrics of "Humma, Humma" or to sing, "Teri nani mari to main keya karoon?" or for youngsters to dress like tawdry Ruby wannabees? Is it sensible to have access to the freedom and promiscuity of some societies when we do not yet have access to their technology or experience? And if we do have that access should we not then try to somehow counteract these undesirable influences. A debate is certainly necessary on these issues of cultural and national development because it has not been very long ago that we defended our language, our culture and ultimately our nation against alien domination.

To the Editor...

Clean Dhaka

Sir, The Daily Star's initiative to clean up Dhaka was admirable and deserves full points. It was a timely step in the correct direction. To mobilize so many people and resources in a planned and coordinated way took thoughtful planning.

Going through the various articles and photographs one thing, however, struck to me a little odd. Almost none of the volunteers had any kind of protective clothing like gloves or handkerchiefs around their faces. When attempting to clean garbage one can be exposed to a lot of germs and infectious elements. Not only can the person be affected but he/she can also become a carrier of a disease and affect others. I do not claim to be an expert on disease-control but it seems to me a simple task of wearing a mask while handling the garbage can reduce the risk factor considerably. I am sure if we look into it we can come up with a lot of other ideas that could steer the 'clean up' programme around this tricky problem.

For instance, experienced people (may be volunteers from BRAC) could give elementary training on hygiene and sanitation so that this programme also becomes a learning experience for the participants. This could

achieve both the short term objectives of cleaning up the waste, safeguarding the health of the volunteers and also the long term objective of teaching the people the basic elements of hygiene and disease prevention.

If financial resources prove to be an obstacle Daily Star could look for sponsorship from the big spending firms who pour so much cash on advertising. Any forward looking firm would jump at the opportunity to have its name associated with such a socially conscious initiative. This programme could have the potential to benefit all and have far-reaching positive effects.

After all if so much effort could be given towards this project surely we could put in a little more to make sure that Dhaka becomes clean, relatively disease free and remain so in the future.

Aziz Mallick Gulshan, Dhaka

Poor political culture

Sir, Let us hope Hossain Zillur Rahman's excellent commentary (Star, Oct 3) on the poor standard of the current political culture in the country will not deliberately go above the head of most of our political "leaders" (what is the definition of a leader?)

As a non-active non-politician I would gently suggest to those who try to sit over our destiny to return to sanity and not to experiment with their own theories and hypotheses on the fine tuning of western democracy and making it unworkable by the have-nots in the developing countries, because that is what we are, at least till this generation. Such a society has two drawbacks: weak in resisting temptation; and strong in intolerance. These two negative qualities we see in abundance in Dhaka (and its satellites). The leaders of such a society must have extra-reinforced qualities of the head and the heart to drag the country out of the vicious circle. The pity is that the leaders themselves cannot generate enough centrifugal force to get out the system (as space crafts do to get away from the earth's gravitational field).

The cult of violence and indiscipline is already taking its toll — the factional killing is mounting through trigger-happy opportunists and day-dreamers. Evil destroys evil, as the cure of evil lies within evil. These words of wisdom are centuries old.

Now we are following a policy of market economy. The price of leadership has to be paid, tomorrow, or the day after. The moral default-

ers and debators are not exempt from the law of compensation. We have seen enough experiments during the last four decades. It is time to settle down to some steady and positive work. Why the politicians have become so utterly insensitive to non-political opinion and feedback? Nothing is good enough for them except their own narcissist ideas?

The politicians must solve their problems themselves, without dragging in third parties (the non-politicians or the defence forces); otherwise leave the playing ground as unfit. "Bangladeshi people could yet surprise their politicians". History repeats itself?

A Husnain Dhaka

Trading of fertiliser

Sir, On September 14, your daily carried a small news item, inconspicuously tucked away on the back page, which I found both intriguing and ominous. Police in Barisal had arrested a urea dealer for trying to "sell the fertiliser on the blackmarket", and seized his stock — 47 bags of urea.

I was fairly certain that the government had with-

drawn from the fertiliser market and restored freedom of private trade, so that there can be no such thing as a black-market. Just to make doubly sure, I called up a highly placed official at the Ministry of Agriculture. He confirmed that there is a clear cabinet decision restoring free private trade (with no minimum retail price) in fertiliser, expressed concern, and even promised to take appropriate action to prevent such harassment of legitimate private trade.

I wish him luck. With the peak season for urea use coming up, we can do without arbitrary action calculated to scare off private traders. This could well precipitate another urea crisis, which we can ill afford.

Abu Abdullah BIDS, Dhaka

A scared citizen

Sir, A scared citizen is an independent individual, frightened with the prevailing situation looming around him. When he says he is scared, it is not the outcome of out-burst of his emotions. It is the natural reflex of his mind. On the other hand, zealots and goons are often found charged with emotions. Mostly, they get carried away

by this and commit many unexpected and unbecoming misdeeds. So a citizen is afraid, for his life, dignity or his property. While the emotionally charged zealots (can be called goons) are the ones, those threaten other citizens.

It is unfortunate that the nation is yet to produce a balanced educated leader to lead it. Most probably for this, the goons have come up and out numbered the conscientious ones, under many savoury banner. Thus, the latter is scared and cocooned in non-chalance. Those of us, who are literate and also educated must not forget, any heinous crime done anywhere, by any one, is always worth condemning. But can a filial piety be compromised! The educated children of the country should have the savoir-fair and know the better language, to express indignation to any unfair done to them. In any case, is it too genteel to assure a fellow scared citizen a helping hand, or further scare him to death?

We may have many reasons to be scared, but that does not allow us to scare others.

A R Choudhury Uttara, Dhaka