

We Condemn

We find no word adequate enough to express our indignation and outrage over some Shantibahini elements' gruesome murder of 28 woodcutters in Rangamati out of the 33 they had abducted in an insurgency-style swoop on Wednesday. Our condemnation is so much the stronger for the fact that the mayhem has been perpetrated at a time when the peace process in the hill districts looked well-poised for a successful completion.

The whole atmosphere has been rendered highly conducive to a speedy resolution of the tribal question by the installation of a government in Dhaka which is expressly committed to a political solution of it. The MPs from the CHT have all belonged to the Awami League party since the days of the 1991 elections. On the other side, the new Deve Gowda government at the centre in India and the Tripura state government across the border are keen to see the tribal repatriation issue resolved at the earliest.

So, the massacre, to all intents and purposes, looks like an attempted act of sabotage to the peace process. When an insurgency problem approaches resolution, the die-hard elements, in their desperate bid to keep that possibility at bay form into retaliatory groups and apply shockers to disrupt the process. That psychology could have worked here, although purportedly incidents relating to collection of toll from the woodcutters or theft of a water pump owned by a tribal member led to the dastardly act of violence.

In the changed objective situation, it must have been the work of fringe elements within the Shantibahini. So, the onus lies on the mainstream Shantibahini to ferret out the culprits in their ranks and punish them. It would be highly useful for the probe the PM has ordered into the incident if the Shantibahini leadership gave their inputs to it.

Such a terrible eruption of violence is fraught with the danger of creating a backlash that might in turn jeopardise the otherwise much-advanced peace process. Hence we call for restraint from all sides especially the settlers or workers from the plainlands.

Let the incident be not utilised by any party whatsoever to extract any political mileage out of it.

Aid Utilisation

The commitment of \$1.9 billion in aid to Bangladesh by the donors at the Paris meeting has been heartening piece of news. Thanks are due to the new government, specially its finance minister, for presenting the case of Bangladesh so convincingly at the moot, even though it had a very short time at its disposal for the ground-work. We are also happy that the aid community has shown its undiminished confidence in a country whose aid utilisation record is not enviable, particularly at a time of adverse aid climate.

The challenge for aid utilisation during the current fiscal will be even greater because of the time lost — a delay of about five months to hold the Paris Aid Club's meeting and get a pledge out of it. The government's commitments to the donors, we believe, should be a test of its efficiency to utilise the amount committed by the donors. Most governments in the past got stuck with reform programmes because quite a few of them were in conflict with the populist demands. This government needs to go some extra miles if it is serious about pushing forward with its reform policies and programmes.

Of particular interest will be the creation of representative local government institutions. In fact, we consider that this should be the centre-piece of governance. Without making local government effective, the reform programmes relating to poverty alleviation, development of private entrepreneurship, economic growth at a desirable level, education, health and hygiene, etc. cannot be adequately implemented.

If the government goes by its commitments, the chances of aid utilisation at an optimal level are very bright. Now that the government has agreed to host the next aid club meeting in Dhaka, it will feel the added pressure of living up to its commitments to reforms on the one hand, and using up as much of the pledged amounts as possible, on the other. This is warranted both for proving its bona fide as a worthy borrower and also for a transparent account of its economic and social reform programmes. Let the government be equal to the challenges, because the ultimate beneficiary will be the entire nation.

Indigenous Research

It has been claimed as a pioneering technique in jute research. Indeed, Dr Rafiqul Islam Khan's genetic engineering with jute tissue, as claimed by him, has catapulted research with the plant into a new era of bio-technology. The new technique is for developing insect-resistant and disease-free jute plants. We now call for an intensive field-level research into it. If his findings verified to be true we are indeed likely to see a great boost in jute cultivation. When the genetically developed jute seeds will be available at the farmers' level — no less than four years will be needed for that to happen — farmers will be spared of the pesticide cost.

Past experiences with pioneering research works by local scientists have not been very happy. In most cases, lack of patronage or sponsorship — both government and private — brought the scientific breakthroughs to nowhere. The potential benefits of such research work have remained unrealised. Its negative impacts both on the scientists and their research activities have been incalculable. Scientists lose their motivation and leave the country out of frustration.

We now want to see a sea-change in this situation. Local research must be encouraged and have practical application for understandable reasons. The techniques and appliances developed locally are more likely to be cheaper compared to the imported ones and also suitable for our local conditions. Moreover, a culture of innovation is necessary for a nation's confidence in its creative ability.

How was the By-elections in the Northern District

by Morshed Ali Khan, back from Rangpur

The writer, our Staff Correspondent, who was in Rangpur on the polling day, September 5, visited several polling centres of Rangpur-2.5 and 6 constituencies. He observed the polling arrangements and the polling, often marked by violence, talked to officials and candidates as well as voters. The following are his eyewitness accounts.

On the day of the by-elections the sight of the front pages of the local newspapers in the northern district of Rangpur was rather painful. Photos of the eight (dead passengers) of a tragic bus accident that had occurred early morning of the previous day marred the expected dominance of the all-important by-elections in the Rangpur-2, 5 and 6 constituencies. Those seats were vacated by the late JP leader H M Ershad who had won from there quite convincingly in 1991 and also in June 12 general elections this year.

The victory of JP in the two previous elections from the same constituencies of Rangpur, and its loss of two seats to AL in the by-elections probably indicates a growing public support for AL in the area after some time but it also indicates that the JP and AL, especially at the central level, are gradually reaching a greater understanding in their alliance. Prior to the by-elections, speculations were rife in Dhaka that JP was ready to give up a seat to AL in this district. The idea was conceived by some JP front-liners, that the area would be blessed with a minister, may it be from another party.

In the Rangpur-5 constituency, better known as Mithapukur, eight candidates including five independents, participated in the race. The JP candidate, Shah Alam, a wholesaler and manufacturer of bidi, having more than 12,000 agents in the district, was the hot favourite in the predominantly JP area but lost to AL nominee, a former CSP officer, H N Ashikur Rahman, by 6,192 votes.

The BNP candidate, Khondakar Golam Mostafa (Batul), along with five independent candidates, had his deposit of five thousand Taka forfeited as he failed to secure one-eighth of the total votes cast.

The results clearly indicate that the race in the Rangpur-5 constituency was fought between JP and AL. At the field level there was no sign of an understanding. Shah Alam, at around 3 pm on the polling day, severely criticised his opponent with allegations of unleashing terror and preventing his supporters from voting. The police stood by silently when vote rigging continued, alleged Shah Alam while talking to a group of reporters near Laldighi on the Rangpur-Dhaka highway. "If I still win from this seat I must say God has helped me," he said.

The constituency with its 2,28,834 voters and 96 polling centres was visibly divided into

two parts. The polling centres situated on the 10 km stretch of the brick-laid road, on the western side of the Rangpur-Bogra highway, leading upto Faridpur Union, the village home of Ashikur Rahman, probably drew more votes for AL than anywhere else in the constituency. Whereas, areas on the eastern side of the same highway belonged to Shah Alam, the influential local bidi businessman.

At Taraganj Govt Primary School centre, on the eastern side of the highway, voters particularly women, first arrived to be welcomed by party agents in their crowded camps, each equipped with a voters list. The voters, after obtaining

their serial number, jotted on a tiny piece of paper, proceeded towards the centre. Inside the centre, polling officials first checked the number with their voters' list while the three female AL, JP and BNP polling agents watched from the corner. In some cases, the polling officials asked the voters their name and their father's name. The JP agent, Siddika, told this correspondent that they knew every female voter in the area and "there was no way that forged votes could be cast." Outside the centre, BDR, police and Ansar personnel kept vigil.

But things were not as peaceful at the Imampur centre on the brick laid road. At about 11:30 am, few hundred people gathered

on the road and a self-proclaimed JP polling agent Babor Ali told this correspondent that the centre had been taken over by AL activists who also beat him up. In the melee my lungi got loose and I somehow escaped the attack," Babor said. Inside the centre a smiling Presiding Officer Fakrul Islam, confirmed the occurrence of the incident and said that voting was temporarily suspended as they had run out of ballot papers. He said that he could not decide whether to stop polling or continue. None of the BDR, police or Ansar personnel present there had any communication device to inform higher officials. A BDR Havildar Selim, in-charge of his platoon, said

that when the incident took place he sought permission from the Presiding Officer to intervene but was told to keep quiet. Although voting continued at the centre till the end of the day, but the results were withheld by the Returning Officer when reports of rigging reached the district headquarters in the evening.

At Rahmatpur Primary High School Centre on the same road a village fair with makeshift shops was underway in front of the centre. Inside, there was no sign of any polling agents other than those of AL. One person who claimed to represent JP failed to show his ID card as an agent. Ashikur Rahman, present on the spot told this correspondent that he was hopeful that hundred per cent votes in the area would be cast for boat — his party symbol. At about 12 noon, some 1,100 votes out of 2,800 had been cast in the centre. Morichon, a female voter standing in the queue to vote, said that she had never voted before in a good situation. What was visibly remarkable was the lack of training of the polling officials. Some forgot to use indelible ink, others did not verify the names of the prospective voters while in many cases voters were allowed to cast their votes on the same table where the officials were sitting.

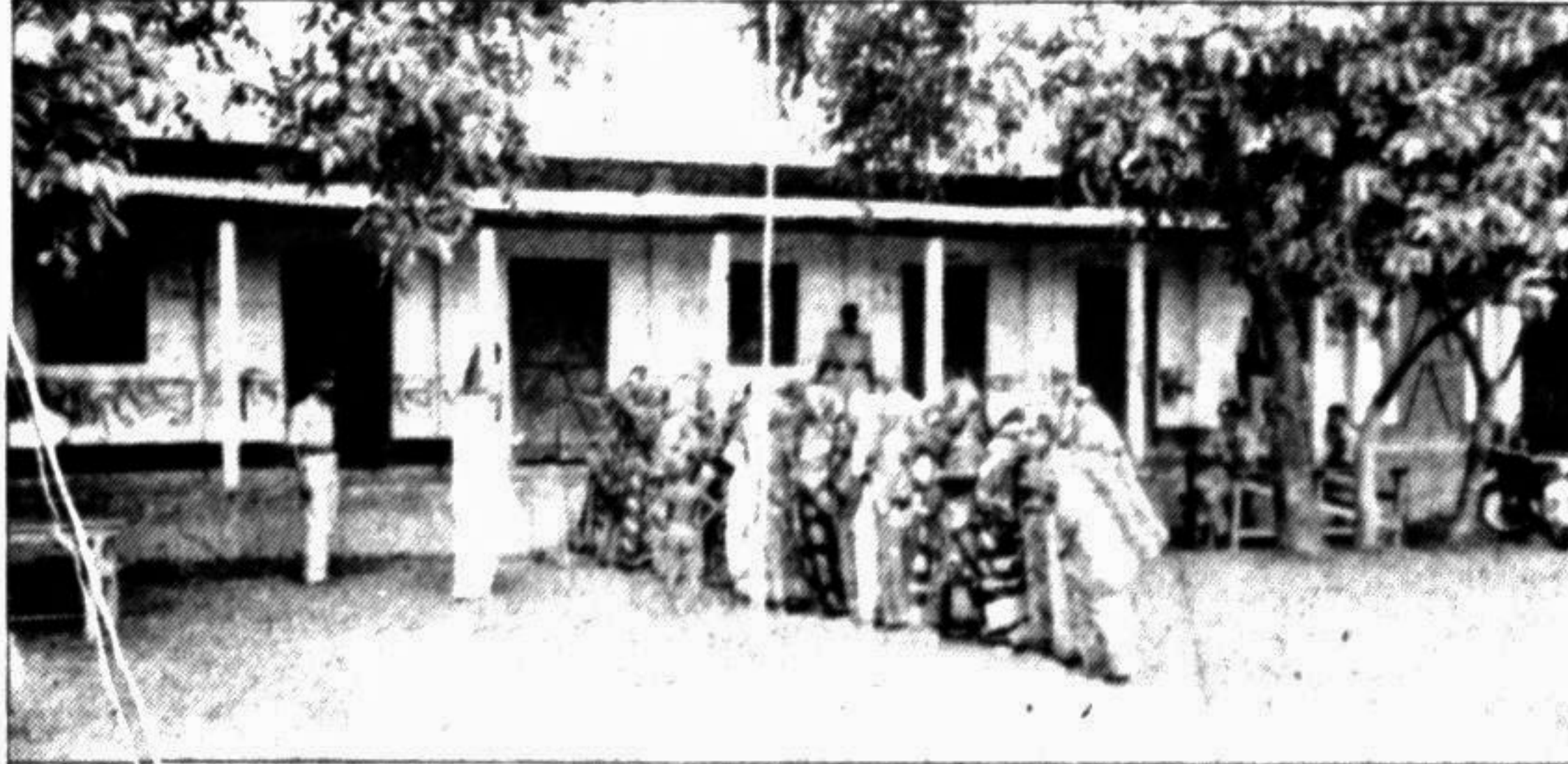
At Jamalpur Farida Begum High School centre, on the same road, the Presiding Officer, Belal Hossain, said that by 12:30 pm some 2,200 out of 2,915 votes in the centre had been cast. Inside the centre, the headmaster of the school, not

authorised to be there, was found helping the election officials. Belal Hossain said that he had personally asked the headmaster to help. When asked whether he was aware that the headmaster was not an authorised person, Belal Hossain replied in the affirmative. Here, only one polling agent of the JP other than AL agents in every room, was found inside a booth. The AL polling agents said that others had just gone out to have lunch. Outside the centre, many people, when asked whether they had voted, showed their thumbs with ink all around the nail, as was obvious in the affirmative. It was obvious that they were showing the pad-ink stain used for thumb impression — not the mark of the indelible ink which is supposed to be a straight line just below the thumb nail.

At an intersection, towards the highway, the road was laden with fresh brickbats. A group of about fifty agitated youths told this correspondent that AL and JP supporters were locked in a clash at the Nankor High School centre few hundred yards away and the fight spread when the JP supporters were chased.

At Nankor Centre, at about 1 pm, some 2,000 out of 3,885 votes had been cast. About three hundred people, some of them armed with sticks and bows and arrows stood on the road hardly ten metres away from the centre. No voters were seen at the time in the centre. The Presiding Officer, Gaziur Rahman who was carrying his lunch from a tiffin carrier, told this correspondent that an armed group of about 100 people, tried to take over the centre in the early hours, as a consequence polling remained suspended for over 15 minutes. Outside the centre, then the huge crowd started to chase another group while the security men and the Magistrate on duty looked on. When asked how voters could come to vote when such a chaotic situation was prevailing just outside the centre, Pranab, the on-duty Magistrate, replied that this was happening outside his jurisdiction.

Nowhere on this remote 10-km brick-laid road, having more than 25 polling centres, the BDR, police, Ansar or the officials had access to any communication device. Throughout this visit, only one convoy of two army vehicles was seen near the Rangpur-Dhaka highway heading towards Nankor. This correspondent also visited Pirganj Govt High School and Laldighi High School under Rangpur 6, and found smooth polling was going on.



Taraganj Govt Primary School centre at 9:55 am on September 5. Female voters peacefully queue to cast votes.



A smiling Presiding Officer Fakrul Islam of the Imampur centre which was later shut down.



Shah Alam, the JP candidate from Rangpur-5 talking to reporters at around 3 pm on September 5.

Deve Gowda Completes 100 Days

After completing 100 days in office — September 8 was the 100th day — he has proved that he has the tact and tenacity to run the 13-party government more or less smoothly. In the words of a minister, who has served many prime ministers, "I had not seen such a good handling before."

with editors and senior journalists. She stopped that too. She became a prisoner of her own prejudices and called such journalists as were 'committed' from her point of view. What it meant at that time was a clutch of journalists who are at best pseudo-communists. Subsequently, she slammed the door at most journalists because she could not rely on them for projecting her authoritarian rule and the extra-constitutional power of her son, Sanjay Gandhi.

Merarji Desai seldom talked to journalists. He talked at them. They had to seek an interview, which was not easy to get.

Rajiv Gandhi would avoid a press conference at Delhi. But whenever he visited a state capital, he sought journalists and talked to them. A callow is politics, he probably found pressmen in the capital formidable. Whenever he invited editors and senior journalists, it was for the purpose of discussing a particular problem, be that Punjab or Assam. He was flanked by a battery of officers at such settings.

V P Singh's regime was too short to indicate any pattern. He held a couple of press conferences at Delhi. But he did not take to the practice of calling editors and senior journalists and briefing them. Otherwise, he was accessible to the press.

Narasimha Rao was enthusiastic about press conferences at Delhi in the earlier part of his five-year tenure. Later, he gave them up and started calling 60 to 70 of them to his house over dinner or afternoon tea for ex-changing views. After the denouement of the Babri Masjid in December, 1991, he shun journalists and invited only a few to explain his side; for example, the 1993 riots in Mumbai. Once issues like the bank

probably better if the restriction was limited not to attribute observations to the prime minister.

I am not violating the code of ethics when I say that I found the prime minister relaxed and exuding confidence. He did not seem to bother whether his government would last for five more weeks, five months or five years. He conveyed the point that he was no pushover. At the same time, he did not like to

Having worked as the Karnataka chief minister and sitting in the Lok Sabha as a backbencher, he knows the ropes of administration as well as politics. He may not say much but it would be a mistake to believe that he does not know much. Cynicism has, however, crept into his remarks.

He is polite, patient and his humility is striking. Undoubtedly, he is down-to-earth politician, with no pretensions, no air. But his critics say he has no vision. His reply is that if he could reach funds to the people for whom they were meant, he would have taken care of the future. He is a determined man; this is evident from the manner he has learnt Hindi in less than two months.

After completing 100 days in office — September 8 was the 100th day — he has proved that he has the tact and tenacity to run the 13-party government more or less smoothly. In the words of a minister, who has served many prime ministers, "I had not seen such a good handling before."

Deve Gowda may not have set the Yarana on fire but his government has a budget which has sustained the liberalisation programme, without upsetting communists too much. He showed his human side when he generously handled the feat-to-death by Sunderlal Bahuguns. He agreed to re-as-

sess whether the Tehri Das would be able to withstand the tremor in a seismic area — something which his predecessor did not do so, even after making a promise.

Senior bureaucrats tell me that they have the Prime Minister's instructions to give their advice in writing to their ministers. This may lessen, if not stop, oral orders, which have played havoc with the administration and which have allowed ministers to get away with everything.

I wish Deve Gowda's visit to Mumbai had been arranged differently. Even if Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray had expressed his desire to meet the prime minister, he should have asked him to come to the Raj Bhavan. The residence of Amritabh Bachchan as a venue of the meeting was not proper, not because I have any prejudice against Bachchan but because Deve Gowda is after all the prime minister of the country. Enquiry about the health of Bachchan's ailing father, India's great Hindi poet, was all right but it should have been confined to that.

What Deve Gowda does not seem to realise is that the period of vicification is yet to come. He will be able to shrug off sneers, smears and the outright bias of his opponents. It will require all greatness thrust upon them. Greatness was never thrust upon more reluctant shoulders than Deve Gowda. He was not even a candidate. But then what does he do except to plug away diligently?

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

scam or the hawala hit the headlines, he kept journalists at a distance.

Prime Minister Deve Gowda has not held any press conference at Delhi so far. He, however, has started inviting selected editors and senior journalists for answering questions. The other day, he called half a dozen of them over breakfast. I think he would have made a good copy because of some acerbic remarks he made. But his press advisor said the entire session was off-the-record. It would have been

throw his weight about. Still, when needed, he would have his presence felt. He did want to shirk responsibility or look for a scapegoat.

During the one-hour conversation — Bihar chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav's telephone call was the only one which was put through — he did not duck any question. The way he reeled out facts and figures on several matters suggested that he was very much there. It would be difficult to sell him anything which was not legal or above board.

To the Editor...

'Neutral Media' Sir, My attention has been drawn to the letter of Md Anwarul Kabir of Dhaka published on August 29, 1996 under the heading 'Neutral Media'. In it he countered the views of Natasha Kamal which she expressed in her letter on 8/8/96, blaming The Daily Star for not maintaining neutrality. I want to inform Md Anwarul Kabir that not only Natasha Kamal, a great number of people share the same feeling about this paper. They all share this feeling that, The Daily Star was siding with the then opposition and now is on the side of the present ruling party. Those who share this opinion are all educated people, as uneducated ones won't be able to read this paper.

In the 29th August issue there was an editorial, 'Let Them Do Their Job'. I am referring to a few lines from it. "It takes at least two to run a government. The nation could be rid of one of its greatest obstacles to progress and development if the opposition decided to play its role as that proverbial Her Majesty's loyal opposition and not as a pain in the neck." I would like to ask Md Anwarul Kabir where were these valuable advices from the Editor, whom he is defending,

when the then opposition boycotted the parliament and took to the street agitating for two years? Editorials at that time supported those programmes and criticised the government.

On September 4, '96 another editorial 'So Unbecoming', from the mighty pen of the Editor of The Daily Star was published. A few lines from it are like this: "The Jatlyatabadi Chhatradal (JCD) gave a demonstration of its militancy on Monday in the city's street. Its activists were protesting the arrest of JCD's acting president Nasiruddin Pintu." In another place the editorial said, "The JCD may have had grievances against the government but why attack and damage private cars?" And in another place the editorial opined, "Let the political scores be settled politically — and not in the street. We ask everyone to put an end to the smashing of private cars and the destruction of public property without bating an eye-lid."

The havoc which had been wrought by the then opposition political party in the last two years in the regime of the past government is still raw in people's memory. Countless vehicles had been smashed, public and government property had been destroyed without mercy,

whose scar is still visible. Where was then the learned editor, with his condemning words? He never uttered a word of criticism of those activities.

So, would it be wrong to say that The Daily Star is not maintaining neutrality? If this attitude is not called partial, I don't know what is.

Yet, I certainly appreciate publishing those letters which are not in favour of it and hope the trend will continue.

But it would have been much better if nobody could find fault with this paper, could question about its neutrality.

Nur Jahan 1390, East Nasrabad Chittagong.

— We feel honoured that our readers are so concerned about the objective and neutral stance of this paper. We have, and will, always try to uphold the highest norm of the profession. — Editor

Taxi services in the city

Sir, In our city there is no public taxi services. There are some rent-a-car shop who

Street foods: How safe?

Sir, Street foods are very popular and common in our country. People are seen consuming contaminated, spoiled and improperly cooked foods. Most of the items are dangerously contaminated with enteric bacteria, viruses and parasites. Outbreaks of gastrointestinal and other diseases are associated with these food items. Most of the street foods are exposed to street dust, flies, contaminated containers and water. Unhygienic practices are followed while preparing, serving and handling of foods. It is very common that used plates and glasses are repeatedly washed in the same bucket of water. Many food items are coloured with dangerous or-

'Scientist evolves new technique ...'

Sir, I am strongly protesting your news announcement on the business page of Thursday's Daily Star entitled, "Scientist, evolve new technique to develop disease-free jute plants". The whole press release is a thorough misrepresentation of facts, although I have to admit that it is not your fault, since the information was released at an IJO press conference. I was present at the seminar where this breakthrough was presented. What Dr Rafiqul Islam has reported is not of enough scientific merit to even justify an international publication. The work is incomplete and does not meet the standard specifications required to make such claims. Moreover I pointed this out in the seminar on

M Jahangir Alam M Phil. Research Fellow, DU, and Mrs Khurshida Begum Lecturer, Rajuk UMS College Uttara, Dhaka-1230.

Wednesday, Dr Rafiqul Islam could not even properly answer my queries when I questioned the incompleteness of his work. The IJO chief and other senior representatives were present when I made my queries in a full house of scientists from agricultural organisations. I have sent a protest letter to the executive director of IJO. Not only are Dr Rafiqul Islam's claims a gross exaggeration, but that the work he has reported had already been achieved and published in our Department at the level of an M. Sc. student thesis.

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