

President's Appeal

For a president to feel that the position he holds is a symbol of national unity is very important. President Shahabuddin Ahmed has every reason to feel so and the confidence he can derive from the fact should act in his favour when he takes any initiative to bridge the gap between the government and the opposition in supreme national interest. The president's position is almost entirely ceremonial and few know this better than President Shahabuddin. Yet when the man appeals for unity of the government and the opposition and, on his part, pledges to work to that end, we look forward to a new chapter in our politics.

We all know that the president only said what he meant. The meaning and substance of the speech he delivered to a spontaneous gathering at Tungipara are not shrouded in any ambiguity. Note the president has avoided consensus but used a stronger word 'unity' in its place. And where exactly he would like the government and the opposition to forge such a unity? Not everywhere of course, but on the core national issues. This is quite realistic and without such an approach we as a nation have everything to lose but nothing to gain. The president has, as a first duty of his, reminded the politicians of this vital necessity.

The president has rightly pointed at the economic imperatives that should not needlessly be put on the back burner because of political programmes of the respective parties. There are indeed national issues on which an agreed position — irrespective of political and other allegiances — has been overdue. Sectarian or partisan politics at the expense of national interest has pushed the country backwards by several years. We do not believe that political parties are unaware of this fact. The problem is to cross the lines they have drawn for themselves with a view to maintaining their respective positions — no matter if those are proving too conservative to hold on to.

The president's acceptability to both the government and the opposition, we believe, is beyond doubt. He has given a proof of his neutrality by visiting both Bangabandhu's and president Zia's graves. The impartial healing touch he brings with him should be put to its best use by our political parties.

Merits Deliberation

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made it clear at her party's central working committee meeting on Friday that her government was taking steps to link Bangladesh with the rest of the world through the Asian Highway and Asian Railway. Normally it would not have been a matter of controversy if the opposition BNP had not been sensitive to the issue of transit in general. But well, a delineation, between intra- or inter-regional transit and purely bilateral transit is possible.

The SAARC has done a good deal of ground-work on the former and has had proposals as well on the table for improving communication, transport and transit facilities in the region. The SAARC Report on "Transport Infrastructure and Transit Facilities in SAARC Region", dated July 1994 *inter alia* stated that an Integrated Transit System (ITS) has been proposed for SAARC. This is necessitated by four factors: (a) land-locked countries needing access; (b) constrained transport and transit being examples of non-tariff barriers to international trade; (c) increasing demand for transport created by global and regional trade; and (d) underutilisation of the existing transport infrastructure and facilities in the region. "The SAARC member-countries would also designate the Asian highway network in the region for SAARC transit-traffic and a commensurate network of national railways for the same purpose," the report added.

Let all the existing national, regional and multilateral studies on the subject be made public and available for the sake of analysis, evaluation and enlightened debate among the intelligentsia, regardless of their political leanings, if any. If need be, such studies should be further enriched. Needless to say, these should be followed by a full-scale debate at the Jatiya Sangsad on infrastructural linkages.

All these transparent, interactive and focused discussions, as distinguished from the diatribes against each other, are likely to facilitate the emergence of a national consensus on the subject. We are for taking the whole question out of an acrimonious ambience and dealing with it in a cooler climate of objectively made up of enlightened national self-interest blended with a regional-cum-global approach.

A Dilemma?

It is understood that authorities are in two minds about the wholesale rehabilitation of all those who had surrendered illegal arms by the due date to qualify for amnesty. At the time of the declaration of the amnesty pledge, the concern uppermost in the mind of the home ministry was to soak up all the illegal weapons in the country. In the process, it apparently remained unfocused on the possibility that some of the possessors of such arms might have had track-records of other offences. The amnesty offer covered illegal possession of weapons keeping mum over other crimes. This is a belated realization on the part of the authorities.

As it is, the countrywide haul of arms caches has been limited to barely 658 weapons along with 977 pieces of ammunition and 374 explosives, so that it should be possible to separate the chaff from the grain. In other words, those whose sole purpose behind their surrender was to whitewash their abominable records of culpable crimes can be set apart from the rest who are genuinely striving to turn over a new leaf.

By and large, it can be assumed that they have opted for a return to normal life and should be entitled to one, except where they have to account for any grave offences of which legal cognizance had been taken earlier on. Generally speaking, they need to be reformed and rehabilitated.

Agro-processing Sector, Growth and Poverty Alleviation

Agro-processing industries in Bangladesh are still at a very nascent stage, but have a great future. Development of this sector serves all the national economic objectives like rural development, elimination of rural unemployment and underemployment, poverty alleviation, export growth and full employment in one stroke.

ONE recent World Bank study has shown that over the last twenty-five years or so some third world countries have made impressive progress in some of their individual sectors. There are eleven such success stories like Bangladesh's garment, Iran's diamond, Indonesia's plywood, and Colombia's fresh flower etc. which have made significant breakthroughs in their respective economies. In this list of successes, however, Bangladesh's garment sector comes at the top. It is indeed so if one looks at its contribution to the export earnings, employment generation and the development of the economy as a whole. Garment industry in Bangladesh, which is a hundred per cent export-oriented industry, now contributes about 52 per cent to the country's total export earnings, provides employment to about three-quarters of a million work force, and has great potential of promoting further investment, employment and income through backward-linkage industries like integrated textiles, buttons and zippers etc. However, no one could imagine in 1975-76 that such an explosion of investment, employment and income could take place in this sector. By 1979-80, this new industry exported only about \$1 million worth of goods, but by 1995-96 it has grown to over \$2.5 billion.

However, there were three factors responsible for the phenomenal growth of this new sector. These are (a) the availability of the US quota; (b) the favourable environment created by the government by way of exempting customs duties on the imported inputs by instituting Special Bonded Warehouse facilities; and (c) the pioneering initiatives taken by the business leaders of the Korea-Bangladesh joint ventures. The latter came about when the Koreans were trying to exploit the

Bangladesh export quota as their own quota has exhausted. However, when the initial success of this pioneering group was followed by a large influx of new domestic entrepreneurs, then investment, employment and output of the sector grew phenomenally which has made the sector what it is like today.

Can the Garment Example be Replicated Elsewhere?

The surprising thing about the break-through in the garment sector is that this sector developed with all imported inputs except the cheap labour of Bangladesh. Even that labour had to be trained to do the sewing and stitching job with machines. Now, of course, after about fifteen years of steady growth of export activities in this sector, entrepreneurs are seizing the opportunities of developing local industries for producing fabric, button, and zipper etc. This is the historical pattern of development of backward-linked industries. The moot question, therefore, is whether this example can be replicated in other potential sectors of activities where Bangladesh has comparative advantages, apart from cheap labour. One feels sanguine that such replications are coming about in the areas of leather products, fisheries, textiles, computer software development, and agro-processing industries. The first two sectors have already made some strides, the third has a checked history in Bangladesh but has potentialities, the fourth is new but has a future since it can exploit the latent intelligence of the Bengalis, while the fifth, although

seems to be at an embryonic stage now, has the greatest potential of development.

This last observation is made on the basis of two types of factors. In the first place, Bangladesh has the most fertile soil producing varieties of fruits and vegetables for domestic consumption which have high potentials for export market. At present, some fresh fruits and vegetables are being exported to London and Middle East but in small quantities. Fruits like pineapples and mangoes, which are produced in

If fruits and vegetables can be widely cultivated for export market during the off-season, then rural underemployment and open unemployment can be eradicated easily. A skillfully developed scheme of dovetailing the production of rice, wheat and jute with expanded scale of fruits and vegetable production, coupled with the programme of developing poultry, livestock and fishery, can serve the national objectives of rural development, achievement of full employment, poverty alleviation, export

growth and overall economic development of the country without much difficulty.

How to Create a Favourable Environment?

The government can, as a first step, eliminate all tariff anomalies like high rates of duty on inputs and low rates on the finished output. As far as export-oriented agro-processing industries which have the greatest potential of exports, are concerned, there does not seem to be much anomalies now. But there are some other problems. In the first place, these industries have to test out their processed products (i.e., canned and bottled) in the domestic market first before they can launch these products in the world market. The duties on the inputs of these products, which are sold domestically, are very high. The duty rates are on inputs like preserving jars/bottles (22.5 per cent), tin cans (30 per cent), crown caps (7.5 per cent), lug caps (15 per cent), aluminium foil (45 per cent) and 30 per cent supplementary duty) and flavours (30 per cent). Such high rates of duties and supplementary duties raise the costs of production too high particularly when one has to pay VAT on these imported items. These rates should be lowered substantially to somewhere between 7.5 per cent and 10 per cent to give the newly emerging agro-processing industries a chance to test out their products in the domestic market. They definitely need a breathing spell. If in a period of five years, let us say, these industries do not begin to export, then these rates can be raised. In the second place, one finds that there is a 45 per cent duty on the import of finished goods like fruit juice in cans/bottles, tomato ketchup, and citrus fruit juice etc. But when these are imported from Bhutan, there is a 50 per cent reduction on duty (22.5 per cent). This hurts the domestic industries producing for domestic market with high duties as mentioned above. There is a need for considering the case of domestic producers who are struggling to be efficient and the favoured treatment of Bhutanese products is detrimental to the growth of these industries. What is far worse is the fact that Bhutan doesn't produce the raw materials of these finished products. They

import mangoes and citrus fruits etc. from India. The favoured treatment to Bhutan on these items is helping Indian producers of raw materials and hurting those of Bangladesh. The new government should re-examine this issue carefully.

One general point should be emphasized again. With the drive towards trade liberalisation, tariffs on all outputs and inputs should not be reduced in one shot. If tariffs on inputs are reduced drastically, then the local industries which are trying to develop their products to supply to the domestic export industries will be wiped out to the detriment of the country's industrialisation. A period of five to six years should be given to such industries for their competitive survival. The second point is that some chosen sectors of exports should be given a chance to develop within reasonable tariff protection for some time. Just as garment sector was given a number of facilities, other potential export sectors also should be given similar facilities for a reasonable period. As has been argued before in another article on this page, there is no need for a wholesale reduction of tariffs at this stage.

Concluding Observations

Agro-processing industries in Bangladesh are still at a very nascent stage, but have a great future. Development of this sector serves all the national economic objectives like rural development, elimination of rural unemployment and underemployment, poverty alleviation, export growth and full employment in one stroke. The government should create a favourable environment to promote this and the other related sectors like poultry, livestock, fishery and diversified crops to bring about a real change in the welfare of the people as it has stated so many times.



INSIGHT
by
Kabir U Ahmad

abundance and a lot of which get rotten every year, are the prime items to be exported after being processed and canned or bottled. Similarly, there are various kinds of vegetables like mushrooms and beetroot etc. and salad items like tomatoes, cucumbers and lemons etc. which can be grown in large quantities, can be canned and exported. The important thing here is to note that the costs of production of these items are very low and these items have demand all over the world. Secondly, in the production of these items, land and labour can be intensively utilised, in some cases seasonally and, in some other cases, all round the year in controlled environment.

Why doesn't the government come up positively enough to accept initiatives in such a direction?

How to Create a Favourable Environment?

Any attitude that negates the prospect for staying true to pre-election pledges would eventually force the government to face awkward situations as the next general elections get nearer perhaps three or four years from now. This is indeed a high profile and sensitive issue and deserves to be treated with a positive

mental frame and enough courage.

To encourage private channels would indeed enhance the national security of the country because a mere convincing degree of transparency of government and state affairs would then be inevitable. Private channels can do a better job of investigative reporting rather than serve as modes of sheer popular entertainment. We have to realise that the question of autonomy is not just a narrow thought which merely addresses a qualitative change

in the existing TV channel.

It is a package of reforms that broadens the scope of actions far beyond the limited view of applying autonomy. It also means turning on to the satellite hook-up without any unnecessary delay so that our culture gains international exposure. It also finally means — implementing a market-oriented reform in the visual medium through privatisation.

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How Distant is TV's Autonomy and Privatisation?

By M Shahiduzzaman

TO many of us, perhaps a much reformed and informal image of the TV, was what was expected soon after the change in government. But that was not be. The same old lethargy, excuses, inefficiency and an appalling lack of creativity have crept in. It seems to me that the real problem lies in the internal structure of TV. People with powerful vested interests dominate the TV hierarchy, whose years of habitual obedience leave them with no creative genius to innovate anything new. Otherwise, there should have been no problem to introduce extensive discussion programmes before and after and in between the live telecast of parliamentary proceedings. Scholars from various disciplines like Political Science, International Relations and related fields, as well as intellectuals in diverse fields could have participated in TV talk-shows. You do not need a fully rehearsed, recorded and formal approach to have talk shows. It is possible that TV producers are still too nervous to allow free and open discussions on TV. Otherwise, if autonomy makes any sense at all, why should there be such hesitation to invite people from a diverse spectrum to offer comments, rebuttal and lively discussions? There is predominance of an invisible hand of restraint which disallows anything beyond sheer boredom in most of the programmes where there is such scope for educative reflection of public opinion. Recent pronouncements that the question of introducing the TV's autonomy is a complex issue and it has therefore needs to go through a process of seeking diverse opinion before formulating and applying the autonomy, is at best a negative approach. Autonomy is not just a matter of consensus or opinion-seeking and a long-drawn process of consequent bureaucratic paper work, as perceived in the pre-

sent contest by those who matter. Autonomy is actually a matter of mental preparedness to exercise and operationalise a practice in a similar manner as other such TV set-ups like the Doodarshan or the BBC are doing. You have to build up the culture by putting the ideas into operation and then learn to apply the autonomy through a process of trial and error. Let there be mistakes, criticisms and bold efforts. After all, we have to implement the culture of TV autonomy by actually inculcating the mental attitude to accept it, to adapt to it, and remove part psychic barriers of doubt on what should be said and what should not. The political culture in our society has always been opposed to allow a free flow of discussion on the visual media. That in-built trend must be buried. After all there are so many diverse views that occupy human minds on so many issues which could be brought onto the screen instantly. Interviews of controversial people, group discussions on economics, foreign policy, global issues and social programmes or ordinary people's inclinations are areas that can be operationalised straight away.

The TV can recruit young, educated university graduates with excellent English and Bangla speaking ability in order to meet the needs of both foreign and home audiences. Producers should seek out talents from universities, or invite academicians for lively, combative discussions. There is no dearth of capable people who could be anchored on or initiate lively and even provocative dialogue.

How about having group dialogue on parliamentary culture, and discussions on corruption, terrorism as well as similar issues of national concern? The TV must move towards a flexible policy of exposing social realities as they are. There cannot be any success unless TV executives

extend their hands of invitation to the people to come up with new ideas.

It is high time to introduce a satellite slot for the TV. Its a national disgrace that Doodarshan rather than BTB boasts the only Bangla-medium satellite channel. It is sad that national leaders fail to give priority to the TV's prospect for international exposure.

Besides, privatisation of TV is extremely important to develop effective government accountability. Only then, can we hope for a better-exposed civil culture with a more instant application of the technology that reveals diverse elements of contradiction. Following the encouragement of private TV channels; new jobs and more display of advertisement, diverse choices for entertainment could all become relevant forms of communication for a society like ours, striving towards a culture of greater national integration.

There may be people capable of investing in private channels but it seems that nobody is willing to encourage such efforts at the governmental level. Privatised TV channels will offer healthy competition of ideas and will greatly promote a more accountable government. But we see no concern to veer in such directions. It is necessary to develop investigative TV reporting for the sake of upgrading the social order and prompting justice. Private TV channels can do a much better job than state-controlled bureaucratic set-ups which do not simply possess the psychology of competitive market-oriented behaviour.

The Prime Minister, during her pre-election TV interview, had categorically promised her willingness to encourage privatisation of the electronic media. But there seems to be a conscious inclination to avoid such an approach at present.

Why doesn't the government come up positively enough to accept initiatives in such a direction?

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Recalling Justice Muhammad Ibrahim

by Aziz-ul Haq

BORN in 1898 at Bishnupur village of Sadarpur thana in Faridpur district, Justice Muhammad Ibrahim breathed his last in Dhaka in 1966. He lost his mother in his boyhood. His father took special care in imparting appropriate education to his gifted son. Ibrahim showed signs of extraordinary talent early in his life. After his initial education at his village school and at Baishoshi High English School, he was admitted to Barisal Zilla School. He passed the Matriculation examination and was placed in the first division with distinction marks in Mathematics, English and History. He then passed his I. Sc examination from Dhaka College. He graduated with Honours in English literature. He continued post-graduate studies in Economics but did not take the M.A. examination.

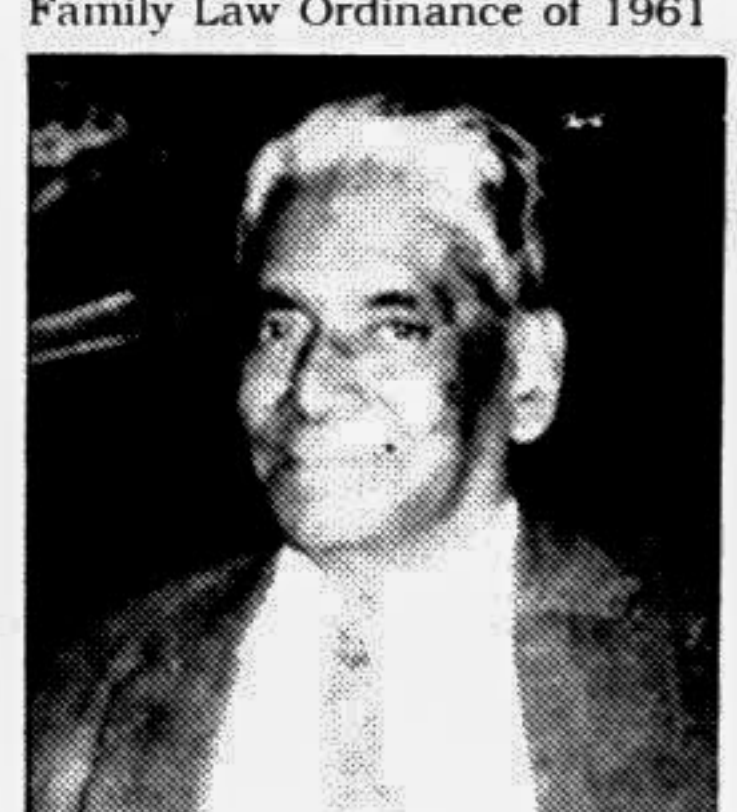
Inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, Moulana Muhammad Ali and Shaikwat Ali, he was attracted to their political activities. This resulted in a difference between him and his father. His association with politics firmed up his faith in unified action by all sections of our people against foreign rule. During that period he came in close contact with a distinguished educationist and lawyer — Dr Nareh Chandra Sengupta (1892-1961) who was Vice Principal of Dhaka Law College and later became Professor of Law at the Dhaka University. Dr Sengupta was impressed by young Ibrahim's innate talent, his freedom of thought and his urge to serve his people. With Dr Sengupta's encouragement and guidance Ibrahim seriously studied law. He joined the legal profession and practiced initially at Faridpur and then moved on to Dhaka.

While practicing law at Dhaka he started teaching law, as a part time teacher, in the Dhaka University. He was appointed Public Prosecutor in 1939. In 1943 he was made Additional District and Sessions Judge and was posted at Barisal. He was District Judge in Barisal at the time of partition in 1947. In 1950, he was elevated to the position of a Judge of the Dhaka High Court. After he retired from the judiciary, he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dhaka from November 1956 to October 1958.

Following the promulgation of Martial Law in Pakistan in October 1958, President Ayub Khan promised a new constitution to his people invited by the President. Mr Justice Ibrahim agreed to be the Law Minister of Pakistan. He did so in the hope of contributing something concrete to the stability and prosperity of his people, but the trend of political activities in Pakistan soon disappointed him; serious difference developed between him and the ad-

ministrations dominated by the army, the bureaucracy and self-seeking politicians.

He was uncompromising in his opinion on essential changes in Pakistan's constitutional and administrative structure in the interest of democracy, rule of law, good governance and stability of the state torn apart by a thousand miles of foreign territory and with deep-seated differences in language, culture and conditions of life. He emphasized that the majority of people lived in East Pakistan in serious poverty and afflicted by visible discriminations. He insisted on political autonomy, adequate participation in governance and fair allocation of resources for development of East Pakistan. He exercised his wisdom and authority in giving practical shape to the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961



which was a great boon to the women population in our tradition-bound society. President Ayub Khan introduced a system of "Basic Democracy" which took away the rights of people to directly elect parliamentarians who would frame policies and enact laws. This was unacceptable to Ibrahim. He played an active role in creation of a combined opposition to stall further deterioration towards anarchy. He came back to Dhaka and did not return to the capital of Pakistan until he died on 13 October, 1966.

The Dhaka University was established in 1921. Mr Ibrahim was closely associated with the university in various capacities. During the short period of Vice-Chancellorship he was very particular about facilities for students residence, access to text books and co-curricular activities. He permitted the British Council to set up a well-stocked library on the university campus. I first came in close contact with Justice Ibrahim as an enthusiast on the Dhaka University Old Boys' Association of the present Dhaka University Alumni Association. The first drafts of the association's constitution were done mostly in the early fifties

at his Bakshi Bazar residence. The Grand Assembly of the association was one of his concepts. Justice Ibrahim was president of the association for several terms. When he was Minister of Law in Pakistan we organised an alumni reception at the place which now is a part-campus of the Teacher Student Centre.

Mr Justice Ibrahim was chairman of the Provincial Boy Scouts Association for several years. He was an invaluable inspiration to his younger colleagues. I had the privilege of working with him as the secretary of the Provincial Council of Boy Scouts. At that time we were visited by John Thurman of Commonwealth Boy Scouts Association who was full of praise for Justice Ibrahim's interest in youth affairs.

When he was Vice-Chancellor, the Rotary Club of Dhaka invited him to address them on an important occasion. Among other things, he told us that "juvenile delinquency in any society is the reflection of adult inadequacies and indifference in that society."

While he was living in the Dhanmondi residential area he used to visit us once in a while. On one occasion, he told my toddler son that he comes to see his young friend rather than his parents. This made an instant impression on the child and they went on talking on the flowers and vegetables in our garden. Real warmth of heart dispels distance of age and status.

On one occasion, he asked me if I had a vision on how I would want my life to be. I failed to provide a vision. He then narrated what vision he had. He said, early in his life he had a dream when a revered looking elder asked him if he would like to be rewarded most in this life of hereafter. His answer, he said, was, herein. He lived a full life of success and eminence.

He was not enjoying good health during his last days. I used to occasionally visit him at his Purana Palton residence. During our talks he often used to ask how we were preparing ourselves to have a democratic society where human values of coexistence, cooperation and mutual respect would be the guiding principles of social life.

Like a good scout, Mr Ibrahim was a man of integrity — clean in thoughts, words and deeds. He, usually, was a man of few words but very effective in presenting his ideas in a nutshell. He was soft-spoken and an endearing elder. To listen to him was to learn without being unnerved. Those who were known to him closely, miss him very much. May his soul rest in eternal peace.

The writer is former Adviser and past Governor Rotary International, District 3280, Bangladesh.

To the Editor

FBCCI Conference Room and the PM

Sir, Recently a little bit of renovation works have been carried out in the FBCCI Building at Motijheel C/A. Front side of the building has been covered with glass on aluminium framings. It gives elegant look compared to what it was before. Inside of the building, the Conference Room has also undergone further renovation. All these have been done aiming to give good impression that we are neat and civilised to the outside businessmen who visit the apex body of our businessmen in Dhaka. The whole exercise in this context is praiseworthy.

But I do not understand why the Prime Minister was required to inaugurate ceremonially the renovated conference room? What was so important in doing that? A renovated Conference room does not demand any ceremonial inauguration. If, anyway, the Chamber people felt the other way, then the Chamber President or a senior member of the Chamber could have done the job. It is really surprising to see that the Prime Minister could also be made to agree to be the chief of such a run-of-the-mill ceremony.

I believe that the Prime Minister's position is more dignified. I urge upon all concerned to be adequately aware to keep the position of the Prime Minister where it is to be kept with dignity.

Rickshaw-pullers

Sir, With due fellow feelings and every sympathy for our rickshaw-pullers, who have rather vaguely been the dominant contributors in every spheres of our transport system,

I want to ask that whether all that sympathy behind their right to ply about is actually benefiting them. Gradual lift of the rickshaws is the only remedy to allow them to prepare for earning a better living. Sympathy is a discouragement in disguise! In Calcutta, rickshaws were gradually lifted phase by phase. Today, it is slowly making a permanent exit. Jyoti Basu's government had enough of consideration and time for their pullers to prepare and meet the challenge. Recently, UNESCO, conducted a survey in Dhaka. The findings of the survey suggested that rickshaws were the main cause behind traffic jams. The helpless rickshaw-pullers are not only causing traffic congestions and the other odds but also are taking a hell of a pain to toil hard to pull along, which is unfortunately, shortening their life expectancy.

It is about time the authority concerned should start gradual removal of rickshaws. Let our three-wheel pullers come forward for a better earning, instead of letting them remain ever dependable on pulling rickshaws, which is cruel.

Khawja Vqar Moinuddin Dhaka

Tragic death

Sir, We observe that some of our political leaders and bureaucrats are in the habit of expressing their shocks at the accidental or unnatural deaths of the members of the public. They regularly, without fail, mourn such death, convey sympathy to the members of the bereaved families, pray for the salvation of the departed souls and also demand for payment of compensation to the families of the victims.

While we acknowledge and admire the condolences of our political leaders and bureaucrats with great respect and honour, sometimes we wonder as to whether such messages are meant for the sincere intention, goodwill and sympathy for the grief-stricken families and also for the salvation of the departed souls or the condolences are merely a routine formality and a show business for the personal publicity and gain of some of our political leaders and bureaucrats.

We believe that prevention is better than cure. Why do some of our political leaders and bureaucrats instead of taking pragmatic, concrete and precautionary steps try to shed crocodile's tears at the tragic and unnatural deaths of the members of the public.

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