

## Dead Weight

A worse case of the proverbial Augean stable than the reported Taka 400 crore debt of the different government and autonomous bodies to the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB) since 1971 will not be easily found. The huge burden of arrear the lone government agency of its kind is reeling under, was disclosed recently by the BTB Chairman in a meeting with the representatives of the defaulters. The report also contained that the initiative to make light of this massive weight of backlogged bills has resulted in 60 odd cases and only Taka 42 lakh has been recovered. In Chittagong alone, outstanding bills to the tune of Taka 78 crore are lying with different organisations.

It looks like the legal measures that BTB and other backlog-blighted government bodies have either adopted or considering to adopt are not making much headway in the realisation or recovery of the unpaid charges. The figures divulged by the BTB chief is an eye-opener to an aspect of our economic reality which needs to be taken on more effectively and seriously.

Default culture as a major styming source of economic growth has come to be publicised for quite some time now. Repeated warnings have been issued from the executive acme and some actions are underway to blacklist the defaulters but not enough has been thought of or done to recover the money. The same concern which looms large in the case of money laundering institutions appears to have relevance in the government agencies providing utility services, too. For decades, the state has come to be robbed of huge amount of revenue and the latest revelation from the BTB comes as the umpteenth confirmation of the observation. Corruption among not a few officials and employees of the BTB and other similar institutions seems to be the most dynamic catalyst of this debt culture. Whoever is responsible some methodology has to be derived to recover the huge amount of revenue lying in waste now.

## Last Nail in HSC Debacle

The results of the Rajshahi Board HSC exams have perfectly fitted into the pattern set by the other four boards. In fact, Rajshahi has proven stingier than all but Jessore. Meanwhile analyses have been coming out in the press of the phenomenally poor showing. Most of the reasons found have hit the mark. This academic debacle has not come to harm any who go to colleges where the teaching is good. The victims have all been students in the rural areas and of colleges of indifferent academic performance. English has been the nemesis of most failed students, thanks again to bad teaching. That the suggestion trick did not work this time, is again a gift of the teachers who had made all students dependent on suggestions. All the findings lead to the conclusion that bad teaching is the culprit and the examinees the victim.

Apart from who can easily be set aside as bad teachers, incompetent and uncaring of their obligations, there are compelling reasons contributing to bad teaching. One is crowding. It is a very common experience for both students and teachers that more than a hundred pupils cram into a lecture room to hear a teacher whose voice doesn't reach past the fourth or fifth row.

The newspapers have pointed out that this year there will be many seats going vacant even in the universities, owing to the miserably poor HSC turn-out. This observation, undoubtedly supported by indisputable figures, however, leaves a very important question wide open. What is the determining factor of the number of seats in a college? What is a seat? It is not really an arrangement for mere sitting. It should signify a provision for students to sufficiently relate to a teacher. Or simply, a seat is derived from the teacher-student ratio.

What is the acceptable teacher-student ratio in our colleges — and universities? Have the advertised seats of the various institutions been ever checked against a nationally arrived at teacher-student norm. The basis of seat is missing.

This is a crying problem at the HSC level although not so much at the higher ones. Crowding should be cut down at intermediate colleges to give the students a fairer deal — their money's value to put it bluntly.

## A Happy Bijoya

The Puja celebrates the triumph of light over darkness, of good over evil, of life over death. The gods vanquish the demons and the instrument of that victory is a female deity — Durga or the mistress of a fortress. Durga, or simply Devi elsewhere in the subcontinent, still holds all her weapons and rides her lion and the demons, in the act of being slain, prostrate at her feet only as demons can. Fearsomely. But this martial tableau is not what the peoples of the eastern subcontinent hold in the heart of Devi Durga. First, she is not so much the roaring warrior as she is a paragon beauty, to the utmost capacity of the sculptor. And then she is a daughter come home for a very short *natyog* from her husband's household on Mound Kailasa. And she is at once a mother and daughter to all. Not an iota of the warrior is left in the imagining of this most beloved deity.

This metamorphosis signifies a definite shift of the Puja from a religious ritual to a regularly secular festival. The festival aspect has grown with time to attempt to involve the whole of a multi-religion society. From religious rigidities the Puja has travelled to an all-embracing liberalness of culture.

Originating in a legend, the Puja has come to be a throbbing living thing. On the day of the conclusion of the Puja festivities we wish our readers and patrons a Happy Bijoya.

# Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as President is Good News for Democracy

First, he is not a party president; second, he is a man of unquestionable honesty and integrity. He seems to fit in the role-model of virtue as adumbrated the French philosopher Montesquieu.

THE recent opinion poll on the first hundred days of the AL government, published by Democracy Watch, throws up certain interesting findings in the context of Bangladesh political architecture. Positive reaction of 41 per cent of those interviewed for the performance of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in contrast with only 20 per cent given to the rule of Begum Zia of BNP is certainly reassuring. In the overall consideration of the governance, the opinion poll could help the government in moving forward with greater vibrancy and dynamism. Conventional opinion Sampling or Sondage in the US and Europe is normally confined to 1500 and 1200 people respectively. One might as well wonder if the number of subjects interviewed by DW 10,000-plus, reported in this case — seems to be more than the conventional gallop polls would permit.

In any future such venture, however, DW might as well add the questions of division of assets with Pakistan as well as the return of the Pakistani still camped in Bangladesh. This would perhaps balance off the sponsor's questions on Transit issue and possible import of power from India. The same poll also shows that 70 per cent citizens consider Bangabandhu as Father of the Nation and 77 per cent people would like the perpetrators of August 15, 1975 and November 3, 1975 to be brought to book. Majority of those interviewed think that AL government has not politicised the administration. Fifty-two per cent people opined that government law-makers are performing satisfactorily in the Parliament whereas 60 per cent expressed dissatisfaction over the performance of the BNP law-makers.

Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed took the oath of office as president on October 9. This is his second stint — the first one being as caretaker president in 1990-91.

His assumption of the high office of the state is important for more than one reason. First, he is not a party president; second, he is a man of unquestionable honesty and integrity. He seems to fit in the role-model of virtue as adumbrated the French philosopher Montesquieu.

A motivated writ not withstanding, the Supreme Court in its landmark judgment recently made it absolutely clear that his election was both legal and constitutional. As acting president we understand from the administrative grape vine, he opposed Begum Zia's move to appoint a retired Brigadier as DG Anti-Corruption. He reportedly wrote a long note arguing why the person concerned shouldn't be made head of such a sensitive organisation. The former PM, within hours of her assuming charge, appointed the very same person to the post opposed by the acting President. This was the litmus test of his unexceptionable moral standing. Within days of his second tenure, President Shahabuddin Ahmed has approved the Rules of Business, so vital in ushering the government onto the path of re-establishing true parliamentary system of government. Walter Begehof, perhaps better than anyone else, expounded the spirit of the parliamentary form of government. While the Cabinet bears collective responsibility, the members of the cabinet are all equal. The prime minister as the chief executive, is the *Primus Inter*

prise (first among equals). Accountability and transparency emerge as the mascot of the system.

It is in the above context that President Biswas went against the spirit of the parliamentary form of government by not signing and approving the Rules of Business handed to him by the former Cabinet Secretary. His inability to sign has nothing to do with his having been a member of the 'peace committee' on nomination by the BNP. One had expected that he would have risen above his party: he

head of state would impose his/her address on an elected government. As a matter of fact, the government has shown more courtesy and consideration to the former President than the previous government.

A statement that, inter alia, did not even make a reference to the father of the nation, could not ask for any further consideration. This is the principle — the principle of the very basis of the War of Liberation. The Parliament represents a people which became a sovereign nation in 1971 after a bloody War

the sacred body of the constitution of Bangladesh, thereby indemnifying the murderers of Bangabandhu; he allowed Gholam Azam to come to Bangladesh on a Pakistani passport, and allowed others to be rehabilitated in the body politic of the country. These included Shah Azizur Rahman and many others whose anti-Bangladesh activities the nation never forgot. Bangabandhu never gave amnesty to these collaborators who were carrying the stigma of specific charges, like murder, rapes, burning and looting and abetting in the setting up of Al-Badr and Al-Shames in killing the people and destroying everything that went along in the name of Bengali nationhood. That is how they murdered the intellectuals in the very last days of our War of Liberation in a fit of desperation.

This is our indigenous history — history of the shaking of a nation. Don't we remember that the hero of the World War-I and the collaboration of the victory government Marshall Britain spent the last days of his life in strengthening ties with neighbours? To even suggest by implication to blame Bangabandhu for the rehabilitation of the collaborators in Bangladesh is invidious and offensive.

The same column's underlying intent regarding the dismissal of general Nasim is less than correct. My column of June 4 employ demonstrates that in the whole charade of Presidential process from May 18-20, there hangs a tale, and palpably so. The Daily Star leader of May 22 rebuts any suggestion that the President's ac-

tion was correct. I refer to this editorial time and again because it subsumes in it the story of nation trying to find its way. It tells the saga of a people striving to come out of darkness and obscurantism of an unaccountable system. This editorial ranks in merit and import to those one finds in the times of London, the New York Times, Le Monde, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, on Ashai Shimbun. One ought to read and re-read it as much as one ought to remember the importance of what Mosca called 'juridical defense' needed for the growth and development of civil society. Or should we, for that matter, forget the Yamashita principle? Why should the coincidence be always so loaded? Why should we prove our existence only at the cost of Freedom Fighters? How many sacrifices the nation needed on August 15, Nov. 3 and Nov. 7? How many were expendable from 1976 to 1981? Why all the army officers in hanger on September 23, 1981, had to be Freedom Fighters? Why again in the events of May 18-20, 15 officers had to be Freedom Fighters? Or in the civil side, also, why most of the officers retired or OSD-ed between 1975-95 had to be Freedom Fighters?

In my column of 29-7-96 under the heading 'Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as President — a Healing Touch', I tried to underline the importance of consensus on vital national issues. The President within days of assuming charge has unmistakably put his imprimatur on the national agenda. We deeply appreciate the efforts of the Prime Minister in securing Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as President. And the President deserves all the support — national and international — in his effort to secure what Cicero (106-43 BC) stated: 'SALUS POPULI SUPREMA EST LEX — the welfare of the people is the ultimate law.' But as Constitutional Head only.

## ENCHIRIDION

Waliur Rahman



was the President of the Republic. Unfortunately by tampering with the speech given to him by the government for addressing the inaugural session of the Parliament, he again took a position against this spirit. It was very unfortunate that a columnist of The Daily Star on October 17 tried to divert the attention of the conscientious readers by suggesting that the head of the government did not show the President courtesy by not paying him a visit to clear out the differences regarding the inaugural address of the current Parliament. It was riddling at worst and a bizarre suggestion at best. Contrary to what the columnist implied, in no country of the world, including the United Kingdom, the

of Liberation. Three million freedom fighters sacrificed their lives at the call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to liberate their country. There was no room for negotiation to make a deal. The prime minister established the primary of the head of state a la protocolaire by briefing him twice on her visits to Saudi Arabia and then to China. Her predecessor never considered it necessary.

It is alright for the facile apologists to not only forget history, but distort history, to suit expediency on short-term interest. Who doesn't remember the act of rehabilitation of the collaborators in Bangladesh? It was president Zia who not only inserted the Indemnity Bill in

## 'United' They Stand Despite Differences!

Nikhil Chakravarty writes from New Delhi

One of the conspicuous weaknesses of the present united front is that cutting across party lines, the caste loyalties have emerged stronger. If Mulayam Singh looks after the Yadavs, Ram Vilas looks after the Paswans, and Deve Gowda looks after his own following from Karnataka.

but they could not spill into a crisis mainly because of the feeling that the public in general would not like the United Front to be thrown out of power.

However, this feeling may not be enduring, and one would not be surprised if some or any of the United Front partners chose to break away and join hands with the BJP. Alternatively, the Congress might get tired of supporting the United Front and there might break out some serious differences between the Congress and some parties of the United Front, which may end up by the Congress withdrawing its support to the Deve Gowda government. It is true that Prime Minister Deve Gowda himself had been going out of his way to curry favour of then Congress President Narasimha Rao. Some of the United Front members had even raised objections against the Prime Minister's close entente with the Congress president.

Deve Gowda's individualist functioning has contributed to misunderstanding within the

United Front. His widely publicised meeting with Bal Thackeray came as a shock for most of the United Front, and his subsequent explanation that he had gone to condole the demise of his (Bal Thackeray's) wife and son, hardly cut any ice. The whole episode was so bizarre that it seemed the Prime Minister was literally taken for a ride, thanks mainly to his man Friday Minister Ibrahim who had arranged it. Other issues of difference within the United Front have cropped up. For instance, the Prime Minister's announcement in his August 15 speech from the Red Fort, promising to set up Uttarakhand has been widely welcomed, but it has annoyed CPI-M, who find that this has already bestirred the leaders of Gorkhaland asking for a separate state. It is doubtful if the generous concessions to foreign investors that the Prime Minister has announced in a recent CII function would get the approval of the Left parties. Even the question of the Prime Minister choosing to stand for Rajya Sabha instead of Lok Sabha

has already been publicly criticised by CPI leadership.

What has emerged in the first 100 days of the United Front government is lack of coordination and cohesion among the different parties constituting the present government. At the beginning it was said that the coordination would be achieved through the Steering Committee of the United Front. But that seems to have been a very tenuous exercise because, for one thing, the Steering Committee does not meet regularly. After the euphoric first week, there is very little evidence of the Steering Committee having been really engaged in the act of steering the United Front vessels.

The functioning of the United Front in Parliament has been more in the nature of individual Ministers managing their own portfolios as private enterprise. How much of what Mr Chidambaram is doing in the Finance Ministry is known to his ministerial colleagues. Mr Gujral has been running the External Affairs fairly success-

fully; his crowning success has been the CTBT, and then his trip to Bangladesh has opened up new possibilities of strengthening ties with neighbours. But Gujral has had a long innings as a Central Minister and he was a prominent Foreign Minister in V.P. Singh's Cabinet. If he had on his own consulted colleagues and even leaders in the Opposition, that is because of his personal trait, not because of the compulsive discipline of the United Front. The lack of cohesion in the United Front government was openly demonstrated on the last day of the Budget session when the official motion allocating thirty per cent of seats in Lok Sabha and other bodies to women could not be passed because of total confusion among United Front members themselves.

It may be argued that a united front government can hardly be expected to function as unitedly as a one-party government. But a united front government needs at least a semblance of unity. It cannot survive only on the negative diet of keeping its adversary party out of power. One of the conspicuous weaknesses of the present united front is that cutting across party lines, the caste loyalties have emerged stronger. If Mulayam Singh looks after the Yadavs, Ram Vilas looks after the Paswans, and Deve Gowda looks after his

own following from Karnataka. It is this fragmented mentality that goes against the very basis of a united front outfit. The Common Minimum Programme by which the present government is supposed to swear, is itself a very broad document. It can hardly be the guide-book for a government. Besides election manifestoes, such documents are not adhered to by most governments.

What is needed is a unified understanding of the problems facing the country, and then to draw up the priorities which the government may choose to take up. This is however totally lacking in the present ruling establishment. Consequently, the ministers have been running their ministries relying on their own wits, the parochial interests they represent and the pressures from the market and the touts who bring goodies along with the pressures. That is why even in the present climate of nation-wide aversion to corruption in political life, one does not find the United Front Ministers taking up the question of corruption seriously and energetically. How can Prime Minister Deve Gowda go in for a massive drive against corruption when the party to which he belongs is presided over by a Chief Minister whose name is today known all over the country as one who has abetted in the infamous animal fodder scam?

This great country demands of its government at the Centre, rare qualities of vision and accomplishments. Prime Minister Deve Gowda is yet to display sign of such qualities.

—Mandira  
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## To the Editor...

### On opinion poll

Sir, The public opinion poll conducted by Democracy Watch and reported in The Daily Star (October 15) is laudable and a step in the right direction. However, I have three observations to offer to improve the statistical rigour and validity of the polls.

First, the data reflected a city-based population (nine major cities). Thus, the opinions of the rural population (a major segment) were not reflected in the polls. Perhaps, a better stratification of the sample will provide more nationally representative results. *a priori* stratification will also allow pollsters to examine response patterns within the sub-samples.

Second, the sample size (10,406 respondents) seemed quite unnecessary. While large samples reduce sampling errors, they can contribute to various non-sampling errors (too many interviewers imposing their own biases, data processing errors, non-response errors, etc.). It is instructive to note that a sample size of only 2000 from a population of 250 million was adequate in predicting the margin by which an American president would win the elections. Hence, depending on the desired precision and confidence, sample size can be statistically determined that will reduce non-sampling errors introduced by over-sampling.

Third, the method of selecting the respondents reflects some bias. For example, DW's study shows 7 per cent were not literate, 3 per cent had primary education, and 80 per cent were HSC or above in educational attainments. This does not seem to reflect a representative sample. This bias can be alleviated through the use of probability sampling techniques.

I would encourage Democracy Watch to continue conducting more polls to reflect the people's hopes, aspirations and opinions. It is a valuable service provided to the nation.

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### BTV's Mati-O-Manush

Sir, The crown and glory of BTV's agricultural programme is Mati-O-Manush and the heart and soul of this lucid, educative and also entertaining telecast is Shaikh Siraj. But to our great surprise and shock he has disappeared from the scene all on a sudden. Where is Shaikh Siraj, why has he been debarred(?) from the popular programme?

Shaikh Siraj's exclusion from the Mati-O-Manush programme tells upon the prestige and image of BTV and also raises, in some minds, question about the much talked about BTV's autonomy.

We demand a clarification from the Ministry of Information and call upon the authorities concerned to ensure that Shaikh Siraj comes back in Mati-O-Manush.

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### Sharing of water

Sir, Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad while addressing the 51st session of the UN General Assembly in New York told that 'Bangladesh had resumed bilateral discussion with India to resolve the vexed problem of water sharing amicably in an atmosphere of mutual confidence and trust. He also drew the attention of international forum by saying, "Our outstanding problem with India over the sharing of water of the Ganges river is not unknown to them." Emphasis on adequate water for agriculture, irrigation, fisheries, river traffic and for maintaining ecological and environmental balance. (The Daily Star dt. 9.10.96)

Being a full-fledged cabinet member our Foreign Minister recently met West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu and discussed with him the necessity of water. West Bengal Chief Minister felt the necessity of 'little more' water for Bangladesh. Further discussion with Indian government will be held later on in this regard. However, the problem is likely to be solved

before the next dry season as assured by the government.

The statement of our Foreign Minister to UN General Assembly implies that our government is unable to convince India about the gravity of the situation and failed to establish the right to due share of water. Question arises if India is interested to give water to Bangladesh as stated by the government earlier, then what is the necessity to draw the attention of international forum to this outstanding problem with India. When the matter is going to be settled amicably on the basis of 'good will', 'political will' and good intention then drawing the attention of international forum will be meaningless. Foreign Minister's statement to UN indicates that India is not interested to give water to Bangladesh. Let there be some light on it.

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### The Taliban tale

Sir, The Taliban, a fundamentalist faction of Afghanistan, has captured Kabul. Immediately upon this, it has executed Mr. Najibullah, the former and communist leader. This was his offence. The Taliban did not follow any law while having him — violating all norms, they have killed this former president.

Well, morning shows the day. This incident is enough to speculate what this 'force' will do. They ordered the women to stay home. The UN has condemned this killing which can't avoid its responsibility. While evacuating its officials, the UN should have taken Najibullah with them. The UN will possibly make efforts to bring peace in the country. But will any real peace be achieved? The Taliban has another faction. They will not let them work smoothly. So how the UN works in this situation is a matter of concern.

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### The greatest tragedy of life?

Sir, The news item, published in The Daily Star dated 8.10.96 under the headline 'Mayor Hanif terms it the greatest tragedy of life' has caught my attention.

Bravo, Mr Hanif — the Mayor of DCC for telling the truth and showing the courage of expressing his pain regarding non-cooperation of his own party government. Despite being one of the party's stalwarts he has shown the guts to be honest and speak the truth.

Mr. Hanif became mayor of DCC by giving assurance to the footpath hawkers and small roaming traders that, if voted to mayor, he would not evict the hawkers from footpath. He also promised to rehabilitate them soon in appropriate places. All the hawkers and footpath traders cast their vote for him and made him the mayor. One can remember it well that just before the election, his rival candidate (his predecessor) had a programme to evict the hawkers and footpath traders to regain civic facilities of roads and road sides of DMC. So, Mr Hanif's commitment to the hawkers and footpath traders gave him an edge on his opponent candidate.

But the irony is, the present mayor himself has been compelled recently to clear up the road and road sides by evicting these footpath traders for the same objectives.

Sometimes back the mayor blamed the previous government for not co-operating with him because he belonged to the then opposition party. Now he is blaming his own party government! The mayor may not be aware of that there might exist some evils may be in his own party fellows who are tumbling his good intentions.

By confessing the truth and expressing the pain and greatest tragedy of his life the mayor has created a commendable record.

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## OPINION

## The Political Fertiliser

AZABR

It was refreshing to read about the initiative taken by the new President suggesting a moratorium on *active, party-basis* student politics on the campus. Coming from the President this advice ought to be considered seriously by the political leaders, in national interest. Mere mud-slinging campaigns won't do, as we have seen. The witch-hunting is a temporary relief, because the root has not been pulled out. Withdraw the supply of political fertiliser, and the political gardeners who water this infamous soil.

We see the sad spectacle of the whole country being divided into two political camps, starting with the bureaucracy and the University administration. Even the teachers are not immune from it. The trade unions are not faring better; and hindering deregulation and privatisation moves. Strengthen the party and weaken the country? That is the choice before the nation today.

The majority of the voters are too poor to take part as political workers, as they have fewer economic options. The standard of politics has to rise, or the political leaders may be rejected by the masses (Ershad was dumbofounded by the speed of the movement against him). This movement may come suddenly, as the public mind is fickle; they have suffered much; and are eager to see the follies of the political games.

The political exploitation of the naive voters by the sly politicians has to end, otherwise we may forget the double-talk about the so-called 'seven per cent growth rate. Politics and economics cannot be separated.

The relevant parties should have the guts to talk about the damage done to the country's economy during the 18-month political agitation prior to the general elections. The political justification given for the movement is not enough, because it is one-sided. All the voters are not politicians. This important point is conveniently forgotten by the politicians of all colours and shades. The political verdict is not the final verdict, philosophically speaking. Life is more than politics.

The President has also hinted about the fundamental right of student politics. Let us hope a section of the political leaders will not, hopefully, create an attitude confrontation, as was done during the regime of the preceding president. When a sound principle is questioned, the principle wins, as recorded in history. It is a question of time (and suffering).

A disturbing trend is creeping in — political murders or killings. It has started at the low level of political leadership; and may not take long to creep up. Watch the stages of development of this sly evil: first, the interparty clashes; then stray killing of the opponents. The next stage is factions within the group, followed by internal killings.

Arms and the Man — the solution starts there are too many illegal arms in too many wrong hands. The situation is potentially dangerous. If the all the triggers start firing within a short span of time, who will protect whom? There is a more fundamental question. Then — what is the point in continuing to live? What for?