

Snail's Pace

Beyond sounding a wee bit upbeat one cannot be effusively self-congratulatory or celebratory about the three percentage-point rise in the pace of ADP implementation in the first two months of 1996-97 over the last fiscal year's corresponding level.

Reading the news of it, as circulated by BSS and UNB, one relievingly finds that the achievement has been seen as a "modest momentum" without any trace of an attempted hype on it. This is where overaccolade goes for objective news-creeding with a reflected glory shared by the news-makers in a process of maturation that must go on to its logical culmination — transparent governance with equally transparent information dissemination.

Frankly though, our appetite for more information remained somewhat unwhetted for not cataloguing in the news item the directives the PM reeled off to the ministries, divisions and executive agencies for 'expediting' the ADP implementation. Essentially it is an extended downside of the positive news that one must focus upon to place it in the right perspective. We are not getting carried away by the so-called momentum much as we appreciate it as an outcome of an intense concentration on the priority projects because of two very cogent reasons: First, we are hanging our hat on a peg that is hardly anything to brag about; for, as everyone knows, we had almost three successive years of notoriously low ADP implementation rates. To have inched only 3 percentage points ahead of the poor specimen of a benchmark in the preceding financial year is hardly anything to gloat over.

In the essence, the utilisation of only eight per cent of the 12000-crore ADP allocation in the first two months puts us at a self-evident disadvantage for the remainder of the fiscal year with 92 per cent to be implemented in the highly disproportionate time-frame of only ten months. The ace in the hole, however, is the higher foreign aid disbursement rate pulsating through the ADP now. But it hinges critically on keeping political peace.

Aricha Plunge

It is many years that a bus has plunged into the river with a full load of passengers and right from a ferry. Accounts of the tragedy vary from newspaper to newspaper but in essence these say there was a problem at disembarkation which the man at the steering could not overcome. Perhaps because he was not the driver of the bus but only the helper. The driver had gone down leaving his post when he had to stop his bus making way for vehicles embarking on ferry. Some reports say the helper put the bus on back gear. God alone knows why he had to do that — as does the man himself who got away before the plunge.

A thorough investigation must be mounted and the driver, helper and as many of the survivors as may be got together must be interrogated to piece together the full true story. And punishment awarded to persons found guilty. A number of problems may also come into the open during the investigation about loading and unloading situations at the Aricha Ghat. These may need to be sorted out without delay and without fail.

There is season for our insisting on such. Automobile accidents top the list of deaths due to unnatural reason. And yet there is hardly any news of punishment dealt out to persons responsible for these. Why? Reason one, important people hardly meet with such accidents. Two, the automobiles laws provide for the lightest of penalties for even those proven to have a hand in the accident. Although these mishaps involve multiple death, the questions of possible mechanical failure and unintentioned human error of judgement make the losses of lives into mere deaths rather than killings and murders. So, automobile, specially bus mishap deaths have ceased to be taken seriously by police. Very few people have ever been punished against the hundreds of accidents that occur and thousands that are killed and maimed.

So let's at least have the investigations and know for sure how these happen. Bad roads, overloading, overworked and undertrained drivers having no professional ethics or obligations, speeding and road-unworthy vehicles — none of these are accidental things and these are what accidents are made of. Each of these are eminently amenable to improvement. Why do not we go for these improvements?

Verdict of Fatigue

Japan's political batteries may not have been instantly re-charged by the inconclusive verdict of the just-held polls but her voters have made certain points for the future guidance of the mainstream political parties there.

The country's luckless run with coalition governments, endorsed one time too many by the electorate, is a sure sign of a profound and near-total popular realisation that while the LDP could not be trusted with absolute power, the untested political parties should neither be gambled upon just as yet. But the big lesson, of course, is directed towards the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), led by prime minister Ryutaro Hashimoto who, through his failed bid to emerge mandated with power must be sensitised to the reality of the Japanese demanding a fully reformed and revitalized LDP on the ashes of its 1993 electoral debacle. But then the party's stock of experience in running governments for most of the post-war period has not been at a discount either: it has emerged as the single largest political party with 239 seats in the 500-seat Diet. This reflects the Japanese people's craving for political stability, an agenda being put into the hands of an organised party like the LDP which is set to lead a coalition government once again. The opposition New Frontier Party looks strong with 156 members in the lower house.

Note also the Japanese gyrations of disinterest in contemporary politics limned on the record low voter turn-out since the last Great War.

The Presidential Suggestion

by M Arshad Ali

The election of Justice Shahabuddin on the initiative of the Leader of the House has bestowed unique achievement on her government on many counts and the leader of the opposition acquiescing to it has gained her immense credit.

THAT Shakespeare is not of a single country and particular age but of all ages and climes has once again received a renewed confirmation in Bangladesh even after long four hundred years of his demise. Though the concept of kingship has since undergone numerous changes, both revolutionary and evolutionary, over the centuries, the pith and substance of King Henry's soliloquy "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" remains a tangible and efficacious as it was yore. With the establishment and functioning of the most successful parliamentary democracy in the United Kingdom, the sovereignty of the King has given way to the supremacy of the Parliament, i.e., the King has been reduced to a titular head of the state, a position far from the conception of Shakespearean England. This does not, however, mean that the King has been divested of all powers and functions, and that he has no actual influence in the governance.

In fact, the services the monarch renders are highly significant and the influence he exerts upon the course of public affairs assume considerable importance. Apart from enjoying the formal rights like being the sole repository of all executive powers during the brief interval between the resignation of one Prime Minister and the assumption of another thus maintaining the continuity of the government, the King possesses three rights — the right to be consulted, the right to warn and the right to encourage.

A wise and sagacious King who is serious enough to exercise these three informal rights of advice, warning and encouragement and who holds strong views regarding the affairs of the country may exert tremendous influence upon the policy of the Cabinet.

The King is the symbol of national unity and solidarity. He is the only man who never lands himself in party strife and always works impartially devoid of any bias and free from fear or favour. He is the judge who sees that the game of politics is played in accordance with the rules. It is in the fitness of things that such a wise non-partisan personality assumes the role of a peace-maker when occasion so demands. Elevated above strifes of party politics, having no axe of his own to grind, no personal ambition to achieve, he is in a position to take a dispassionate view of national issues and form a disinterested judgement thereof. It is in this way that he

fulfils his role as a mediator in national politics and renders a yeoman's service to the country he reigns but does not govern.

His is thus a device that forges national consensus on issues that are of vital importance to the interest of the nation. It is the exercise of these rights that makes him an assiduous observer of the state of affairs causing his head to be deprived of peaceful rest and peaceful sleep as King Henry IV suffered from. Much, however, depends on the personality of the King.

President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed should possess similar rights and hold similar influences as being the constitutional head of a parliamentary democracy that Bangladesh like the UK is. And to our proud privilege, Shahabuddin is a man of rare personality and sagacity and of incomparable knowledge and wisdom which are demanded of the constitutional head of a democratic polity as enumerated above in case of the English King.

The election of Justice Shahabuddin on the initiative of the Leader of the House has bestowed unique achievement on her government on many counts and the leader of the opposition acquiescing to it has gained her immense credit. A man of acclaimed administrative acumen, in his earliest career as a distinguished civil official, he rose to the highest office of the judiciary of the country in which capacity he pronounced the epoch-making verdict by setting aside the constitutional amendment during the rule of President Ershad. The head of the first care-taker government of Bangladesh, he has to his credit the unique achievement of holding the first free, neutral and impartial parliamentary election in the country. By reaping this laurel he not only added one more feather to his cap but set unprecedented example that enthused the nation to evolve for itself a permanent mechanism for neutral and impartial parliamentary elections by incorporating in the constitution the provision of caretaker government.

A man never stigmatised with an iota of partisanship, elevated far above the petty personal motives of self-interest, given to dispassionate studies of men and manners, devoted to making disinterested judgement and pronouncing the voice of reason throughout life, it is quite possible for President Justice Shahabuddin to act as a symbol of national unity and stability. It is he who can act as

a mediator between struggling political parties on national issues and forge consensus on them. To this end he has marched forward in the right direction by offering Fateha at the mazar of the Banghabandhu first and then at that of President Ziaur Rahman on the same day. He has called upon the political parties to sink their differences and work unitedly on the basis of consensus in major national issues.

A man of his stature adorning Presidency of the country, he cannot but be concerned over issues that involve the interest of the nation. This concern of his found expression when the other day he suggested the solution of the intractable problem of campus violence that has gripped the campus putting the educational arena at jeopardy and the entire nation at that. In putting forward the suggestion of a temporary moratorium on so-called student politics which has mostly degenerated into terrorism and violence at the manipulation of interested quarters, the President has exercised his three rights of advice, warning and encouragement simultaneously. His profound anxiety over campus terrorism is a warning as to the alarming dimension of the problem which brooks no delay for its solution.

He advises as to the modus operandi of the solution that a broad-based consensus among the major political parties to dissociate themselves from their respective student wings should be arrived at. He encourages political leaders of the country to bring into play their collective wisdom to find a solution to the problem that has been eating into the very vitals of the nation in that the budding geniuses of the country are being cut in the prime of their life in the very lap of their alma mater where they are sent to equip themselves with tools of decent life in stead of being armed with weapons of grisly death as they are done to snatch away the lives of their comrades-in-knowledge. This is why in stead of misinterpreting the suggestion which is prone to be so because of past history in this regard, but the exception this time being coming as it does from a President of Justice Shahabuddin's stature who has more embellishments than description, our leaders may decide the issue on the floor of Parliament — the proper forum for mooted national issues — to arrive at an agreeable decision in the best interest of the nation.

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Let Battle Commence

Neville Stack writes from London

Britain is continuing its recovery, but from a woefully low industrial and moral base. Social policies of both parties are focused on creating, or re-creating, One Nation. But the wounds of anxiety, insecurity, negative equity, family breakdown and degrading and debilitating unemployment will not be healed by slogans.

AS in all the best battles, the opening shots in Britain's election campaign were fired with precise aim and deadly intent. But soon the verbal bullets were flying wildly in all directions, inflicting collateral damage on friends as well as foes.

No wonder, when the contest is between the Untrustered and the Untrusting.

Both the governing Conservatives and the wannabes of Labour are, in effect, coalitions of disparate and sometimes conflicting schisms. To keep the peace, prime minister John Major is performing a balancing act worthy of his late father, the celebrated American serio-comic tightrope walker.

With tactical skill and a confusing mix of boldness and timidity, Mr Major is holding his party together, albeit at the price of conceding some of his nicer instincts. But with a majority down to three and falling, he is preparing to fight for his political life.

He and opposition leader Tony Blair used to be quite friendly, but the affable Blair grin is becoming more tigerish by the day, while Mr Major's appears a trifle wan.

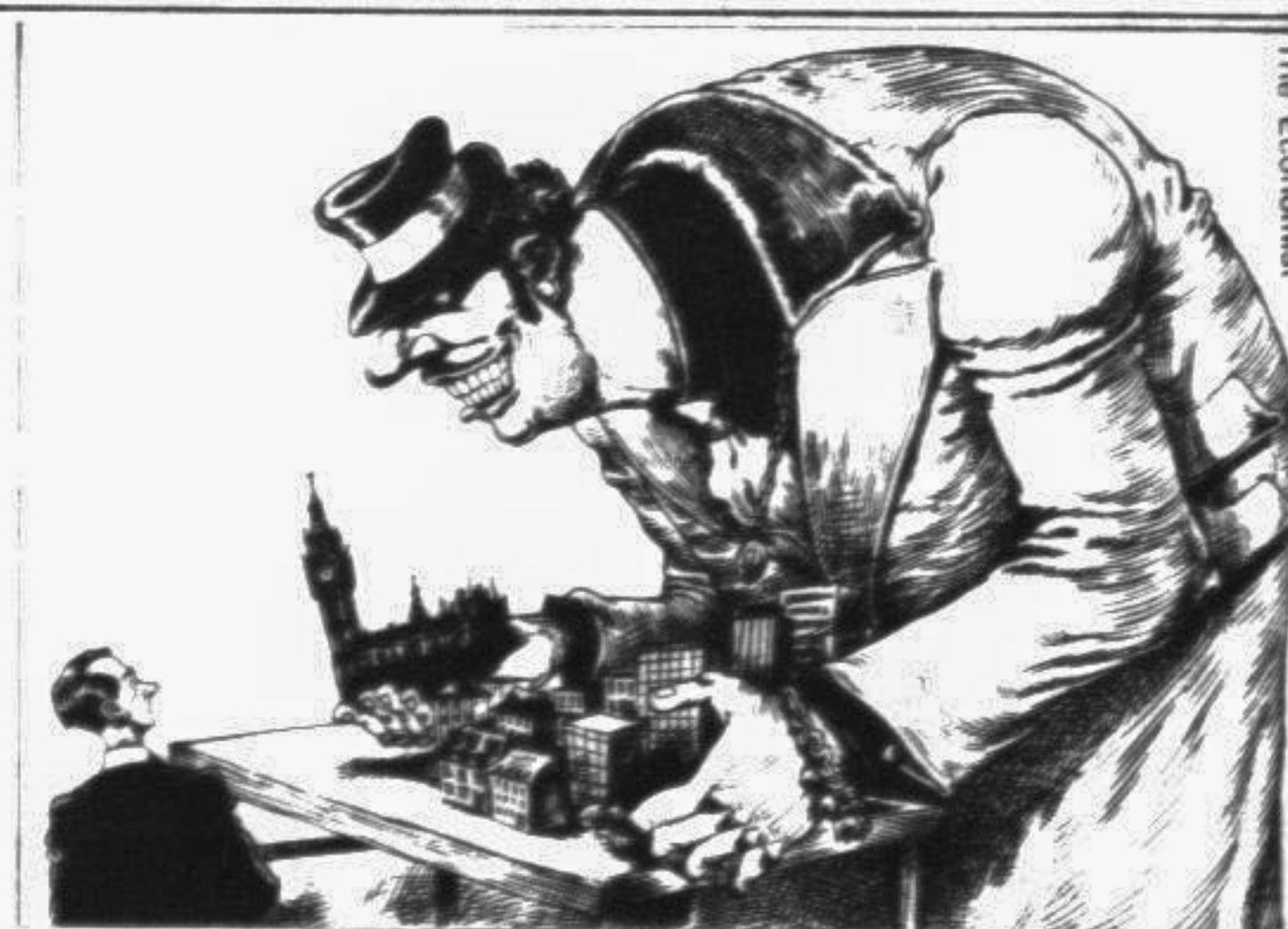
In order to pacify his right-wingers, Mr Major fired a broadside against the European Union and some of its institutions, to the dismay of those in his own cabinet as well as the back benches who see enthusiasm for Europe as the only practical hope for the future. However, regardless of what the other member-states may do, the European trumpets remain unblown on this side of the Channel.

Seeing all this as merely crude populism, Mr Blair and those of his cohorts who can understand what he is getting at, redouble their efforts to convince the votes that "stakeholding," a form of neo-corporatism that has been around for decades, is the way to reunite and, more importantly, re-enthuse the nation. All this, and Europe too.

As for Mr Blair, his laser-like concentration on winning the 1997 general election, which is increasingly likely to be in autumn, is not distracting his own dissenters and discontents who lurk beyond the beam awaiting their moment. The Manichean mirror-image of the Tory Right, they also oppose Europe, but because it is not left enough.

All good rough stuff. But the polls show that Europe is a non-issue as far as the British public is concerned: they are bored with all the platitudes and have almost as many misgivings about foreign politicians as they have about their own.

The inexperience of office is a weakness for the Blair government-in-waiting (like many of his front bench he was still at school when Mrs Thatcher



swept in 16 years ago, and the governing party is profoundly distrustful, according to the polls.

Much of the present huffing and puffing is merely skirmishing in No Man's Land, basically Mr Major's attempts to hold the centre ground.

The coming big issue for both sides is the structural change which Mr Blair is determined to impose on the British system. And to which Mr Major is implacably opposed.

If (when?) Labour get in, root and branch reforms will follow in swift succession. A bill of rights, freedom of information legislation, returning of the powers of the government-appointed quangos (quasi-governmental organisations) to elected local bodies, unbundling the United Kingdom by giving Scotland and Wales their own tax-raising parliaments, disenfranchising hereditary legislators in the house of lords, the revising chamber.

And, a prospect the Tories view with dismay, a referendum on proportional representation, cementing a centre-left alliance with the Liberal Democrats. For that could mean the end of the confrontational politics which has always given the governance of Britain the long-term stability of a seasaw.

In a first-past-the-post electoral system where, due to tiny swings in marginal seats, the government elected is usually inflicted upon the majority who did not vote for it, Mrs Thatcher had only 47 per cent of the total vote, yet she ruled the country as if her mandate was absolute and Mr Major manages with an even smaller percentage.

The elections in May are expected to be a melt-down for town hall Tories.

If we get the timing right to catch the public mood of cynicism with all politicians, they will see this referendum as a move to escaping from the straitjacket and moving to a consensual system. We are con-

fident they will vote for change," a member of the Labour hierarchy told me. "We think it could keep the Tories out for a generation."

This is an election pledge and the party will split if we don't keep our word. Anyway, The Lib Dems won't come on board without it."

And, of course, the grim issue of economics overshadows all, even at this early stage.

Both leaders are attracted by the Asia-Pacific model, but they also realise that the separate secrets of success, which are sometimes contradictory, cannot be grafted holus-bolus on to a country that has taken a thousand years to evolve its own, unique, style.

Much of what the leadership of both parties has learned in Asia — particularly in much-admired Singapore — will figure largely in both election manifestos. Strategies for education, social security, longterm investment, and a paternalistic concern for family values are being drafted in both camps as I write.

Britain is continuing its recovery, but from a woefully low industrial and moral base. Social policies of both parties are focused on creating, or re-creating, One Nation. But the wounds of anxiety, insecurity, negative equity, family breakdown and degrading and debilitating unemployment will not be healed by slogans.

Yet Britain is still a haven for liberal principles — uncorrupt government, and economic liberalism. "Otherwise, why do so many foreign investors beat a path to our shores?" commented a Tory grandee. "We have many blessings and we should be counting them more loudly."

"We have to remember that Britain had its economic miracle a hundred years ago, when we were inventing machines and techniques that influenced the world. And we are still doing it."

"We need to turn the tide, but not pull the plug."

OPINION

To Make Dhaka Roads Worthy of Smooth Communication

Showkat Hossain

The traffic system and the roads of Bangladesh with their present status cannot be compared with any of the Third World countries. While the other countries, specially of Southeast Asia having identical socio-economic problems, are improving their condition, we in our country are watching deteriorating situation. We must not forget that only erection of tall buildings in the cities will ever crown us with the status of a planned city. Unless we can improve our city communications by making the roads worthy of easy movement and the traffic system more effective and law abiding, the city of Dhaka can never attain the status of a real city in truest sense of the term.

Lot of writings have been published and we know numerous suggestions on the issue. But the first and foremost thing which needs to be assured is strict implementation and observance of traffic rules. I am sure everybody will agree with me that we can never expect our illiterate mass depending on rickshaw and auto-rickshaw driving to be law abiding citizens. On the contrary, they have the feeling of violating any law to get any advantage. To them, democracy means freedom to manoeuvre anything, anywhere and in any direction. This is due to their ignorance and lack of education. So, from them spontaneous respect to traffic rules can never be expected. But the question remains, how to make them abiding? Here we can take the example of neighbouring countries where punishments for violations and the machinery for implementation of the same are so strong and effective that one can never dare to violate any laws and rules.

First we have to ensure that the implementing machinery much more dedicated and effective. In order to do that traffic sergeants and police are to be motivated and very strong and powerful vigilance team should be put in operation directly accountable to the higher authority concerned. Cases of negligence of duties and corruption by the implementation machinery on the roads should be

dealt in such a manner that such offences are not repeated. I feel, if the traffic police and sergeants sincerely desire to introduce a healthy traffic system on the roads, they can do it by their dedicated service and brushing aside from their mind the issue of personal or collective gains. Because, what is seen on the roads as one passes through Dhaka Cantt? Auto-rickshaw drivers or rickshaw-pullers have the tendency of violating traffic rules. But the same people are so much law abiding and gentle while plying inside the Cantt roads that they never dared cross the yellow line on the middle, overtake each other unnecessarily and never dared cross the border line in front of a traffic signal.

Let me now turn to the crux of the traffic problem in Dhaka. The entire road communication of Dhaka city is seriously hampered due to frequent traffic jams. The reason of the traffic jam can be identified as follows: Over-populated metropolis has a tremendous effect on the traffic. In absence of free footpaths in many roads, the pedestrians usually move according to their own will, crossing any road. Where there are footpaths, they also follow the same practice as they are ignorant about the system to use the city roads. They are even reluctant to cross roads on zebra crossing and find it easier to cross roads from any direction anywhere. Authorities are seen erecting barricades on the dividers in many roads to stop this practice. But this exercise may go futile if sufficient number of overbridges or underpasses are not constructed for the pedestrians. And these will have to be free from hawkers and beggars. We have to bear in mind that we are making all plans for an uneducated teeming millions.

We have about ten different types of vehicles plying all through the day and night and on all the city roads. These vehicles are of different speeds. A road having movement of vehicles having such different speeds are bound to create traffic

hazards all the time. This factor should be taken into consideration with great importance. Movement of trucks can be restricted during day time from 6 am to 6 pm and plying of rickshaw may be restricted on all important and busy roads.

Whatever police force we have to deal with the situation are not sufficient enough. Moreover, the traffic police and sergeants are also not adequately trained and educated to perform their duties effectively. Apart from that they indulge in corruption while on duty, making implementation of laws and rules ineffective. All the drivers of buses, trucks, minibuses, auto-rickshaws, rickshaws, push carts and those of cars not driven by the owners are uneducated. They do not even have the basic knowledge of traffic rules and regulations like how to park a vehicle, where to park, how to overtake and how to abide by the traffic signals. Movements of vehicles releasing smoke on the roads are a common phenomenon for which the BRTA can be held responsible for issuing fitness certificates for these vehicles. These vehicles are never checked or intercepted by the traffic sergeants or police. On the contrary, for minor problems, genuine transport owners are harassed. Because they do not pay any regular toll to the traffic police and sergeants. Nobody knows the number of these unregistered auto-rickshaws and rickshaws. There may be millions. But the question remains: how these unregistered vehicles can ply on the roads? Don't we have any authority to take care of this problem?

We have a common scene in the city where we find construction materials are piled up and kept on the roadside creating problem for smooth traffic movement. Cutting and repairing of roads by agencies like city corporation, DESA, T&T, WASA, Titas Gas etc., are done throughout the year during peak hours. The problems it causes for movement of vehi-

cles including severe traffic jams are well-known to the city dwellers. Sometimes these result in fatal road accidents. There is hardly any planned parking areas for vehicles which results in the parking of buses, auto-rickshaws, rickshaws and tempo anywhere and at any point they like. All these problems are due to the absence of a well designed city planning.

There is hardly any city in Southeast Asia which can afford to maintain the hazardous vehicle — "rickshaw" — for centuries together. Many big cities of India, Pakistan, China, Thailand have withdrawn rickshaws and replaced them by fast-moving vehicles. Of course, they had to make long-drawn plans and programmes for this. But the fact remains, they really felt it necessary to withdraw this slow-moving and risky vehicle because of increasing demand of faster vehicles to save time, traffic jam and life. If we look at Calcutta, we find they have altogether a different type of rickshaw, pulled by man involving more risks. But these rickshaws are never allowed to ply on the main roads. Their movement is confined only within the lanes and bye lanes. We also had the meter in auto-rickshaws before 1971. Unfortunately, after being independent some vested quarters removed this meter system and it was never seen. Nobody knows whether any meter system will be brought back in the coming days or not. If so, who is going to be that courageous person to make this reform? We save time, traffic jam and life. If we look at Calcutta, we find they have altogether a different type of rickshaw, pulled by man involving more risks. But these rickshaws are never allowed to ply on the main roads. Their movement is confined only within the lanes and bye lanes. We also had the meter in auto-rickshaws before 1971. Unfortunately, after being independent some vested quarters removed this meter system and it was never seen. Nobody knows whether any meter system will be brought back in the coming days or not. If so, who is going to be that courageous person to make this reform? We save time, traffic jam and life. If we look at Calcutta, we find they have altogether a different type of rickshaw, pulled by man involving more risks. But these rickshaws are never allowed to ply on the main roads. 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