

Transport Headaches

Two news items carried in a Bangla daily within just nine days of each other screamingly make a point that the road transport, irrespective of private and public, is afflicted by indecision of the government, lack of planning and coordination, and anarchy that reigns supreme in the absence of monitoring and supervision. One story deals with the problem facing the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) in the matter of importing the 200 double-decker buses as planned earlier. The second story concerns the arbitrary raise in bus fares. In the first case, a cabinet division's decision taken as early as in 1989 stands in the way of things because in effect it vetoes any expansion or improvement project that might be taken up by the BRTC. The procurement of the proposed 200 buses certainly falls in the category of an expansion programme. So the fate of the programme looks uncertain. In the second case, the fares of buses, tempos, etc have not been officially raised after 1990 but the bus operators themselves have done so arbitrarily a few times over.

If this is how transport business is left to make its own decisions then one has every reason to be apprehensive of the developments in transport sector. That the cabinet decision had been taken in the context of persistent losses incurred by the BRTC before the introduction of leasing system for operation of its buses and various reforms brought about in 1993 must not be forgotten. Now the 47 double-decker buses are making a net monthly income of Tk 14 lakh. If 200 more such buses are pressed into service, there is every likelihood that the supremacy of rickshaws, scooters and minibuses on the city roads will be brought to an end. Comparably more environment-friendly, a double-decker carries passengers four times the number of a mini-bus and the leasing system also adds as an incentive for those buses' improved operations. Moreover, such an orderly operation is likely to have a beneficial influence on the working of bus services in the private sector.

If the government is reluctant to take responsibility for the higher bus fares and wants to leave it to the free market mechanism, let it do so. But even then the fares must have to be reasonable and consistent with a transparency shown in this regard. That transparency can be enforced by publishing the rates chart subject only to moderate revisions based on various factors like increase in fuel and spare-parts costs. But under no circumstances should they be allowed to realise different fares by different buses of the same category.

SSC Examinations

The old yet eternally new Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations have begun. Air abuzz with the unseen butterflies in the stomach of all those appearing in the first major examination of their life, the equally contagious nervousness of their parents, and the vendors announcing the presence of a new summer with items traditionally prescribed for tense examinees like green coconut are all there to conjure up the familiar image around this national ritual in the field of education.

There is, however, one very strikingly new aspect of this year's SSC exams. For the first time, after a fairly long spell of divisive and differential approach to the exams marking the end of the first phase of a student's life and an entrance into mature and broader acres of college life, these are being held under an integrated system. Boards hitherto having separate schedules and question papers have been made to sacrifice their individuality for a single system under which examinees from now on will be answering the same set of questions. Last year, the authorities adopted this integrated system for the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations. We believe this unified approach to major examinations will have its beneficial impact on the education system as a whole.

Although it may mean another ungracious reference to our faulty education system, it is true that there is a huge and disconcerting jump in standard and gravity from the level of SSC to that of HSC in our country. When this sudden acquaintance with difficulty is coupled with the problem of concentrating on some areas in the SSC syllabus ignored or lightly trodden due to the difference in approach of different boards, education quite logically tends to appear as a deadening weight on the spirit. From that point of view, the system is indeed a step towards the right direction. While hoping this will be the beginning of a long process to pave the way for practical and profitable education to be in place, we also expect a discernible improvement in over-all management of an examination for nearly seven hundred and fifty thousand souls all over the country this year. Efforts have already been underway to avert problems that may crop up due to the centralised position of computer in matters of management. Examinees engrossed in their efforts to excel in the first major exam would do well to be switched on to catch up with authorities' efforts to tackle the mechanical glitches. May the most deserving do well to mark the adoption of a new system.

Do Something

A foreign freighter and its four crew are presently rotting at the Chittagong port. The inhuman suffering apparently for no fault of their own has been going on for the last one and a half years. Seemingly no one, not in the least the owning company in Singapore, is showing interest in the stranded vessel and the accused mariners.

The physical and mental ordeal these unfortunate quartet has so far been subject to is quite imaginable. One need not dwell on the depths of despair that forced them to supplicate to the PM for a release from this watery confinement.

Their cry for mercy has so far gone unheeded. With the liabilities of the vessel that owes its current fate to the poor quality of its consigned cargo, outweighing its price everyday, the indifference of the local authorities does not make sense from any conceivable point of view. From the report published in yesterday's Bhorer Kagoj, it is clear that the forlorn vessel, if allowed to float like this can cause great harm to the harbour when the seasonal norwesters begin. Because it is not properly anchored due to the absence of anchoring contraption reportedly out of order now. Even if the local authorities can afford to be mindlessly indifferent to the suffering of four foreign nationals it can in no way sit smug on a potential danger to a place as valuable as the Chittagong port. Pull your socks up and do something. You are doing favour to none. Neither to humanity nor to national interest.

BNP's Programme of Action: What Does it Signify?

If the law and order situation is really restored, parliament is allowed to run like in other democratic countries and the television is geared to an impartial stance, this will prove to be in the ultimate interest of the people in general, of both the major political parties and evidently of democracy itself.

THE BNP high command announced programme for a country-wide political movement beginning the 3rd March. People naturally wonder, some with interest, others with concern but all with curiosity, about the nature, duration and effectiveness of this movement. The nature has been defined and the duration specified, but effectiveness is an unknown quantity and obviously cannot be gauged in advance.

The programme consists primarily in holding meetings, staging demonstrations, taking out processions and creating an atmosphere aimed at stirring up public mind and generating opinion against what they term misdeeds of the ruling party. In real terms, the programme can be better described as an exercise in public education for mustering support rather than a political movement to topple the government. One may as well view it as a prelude to an eventual mass political movement, if situation does not improve in itself or a political compromise is not effected in time.

People are allergic to a number of things. They are no fools and should not be taken for granted as such. This has relevance also to politicians' efforts to drum up support for their cause. Many people become indifferent, if not bored, when they see politicians extolling virtues of some people and policies or deride failures and shortcomings of others. They are more often than not in a position to make judgment of their own which, by and large, are fair and acceptable.

Secondly, many people ig-

nore, even forgive, some journalists when the latter, out of general courtesy to the ruling party of the day or for fear of losing patronage, overlook and fail to report some of the events and their rationale, thereby sacrificing journalistic ethics of fairness and objectivity.

But all, with the exception of a directly involved minuscule population, are allergic to political movements of destructive nature. The spectre of a fearful and devastating political turmoil witnessed during the first half of the last year hangs directly over people's heads like Damocles' sword. Life was forcibly crippled for many days in the capital and the society stood still at zero level. People do not want a repetition of that bitter and intolerable experience, if this could at all be avoided, no matter which political party spearheads it. Unfortunately, people did not have to witness such a situation, had our politicians been goaded by a purely democratic in contrast to a partisan spirit. This also applies to a possible situation emerging in the future.

As for the duration of the present movement, the date of termination was specified to be the end of this month, at least at the first stage. If the BNP grievances are not redressed by that date, a tougher programme will be worked out for the subsequent period, it was stated. Apparently, the demand may look like an ultimatum. If it is so, the ruling party may as well

take it for a challenge and, to satisfy their vanity, be tempted to match it, even to take a tougher line. They could legitimately cite this to be a case of natural reaction.

But, can the demand of the BNP, in fact, be construed as an ultimatum? Common sense seems to dictate the answer to be in the negative. To substantiate, the BNP supporters claim that their leadership publicly stated that it was their policy not to embark upon a programme of hartal, seize and vi-

and foremost, the BNP claims that the law and order situation has deteriorated further through a rise of terrorism since the general election. The Prime Minister had assigned this matter the highest priority both before and immediately after the election. Then there has been an ominous silence. She by then shifted her priority to other issues.

Meanwhile, Chhatra League forcibly occupied Halls and Hostels one after another. Simultaneously, other Awami

to a public demand of the Prime Minister, a list of about 50 persons killed had been provided by the BNP to the President with the request to undertake an impartial investigation. Unfortunately, as the ruling party failed to make a similar request, the good offices of the holder of the highest office of the Republic could not be availed of. The opposition now faces yet another ordeal. Their peaceful meetings and processions are now being disrupted by throwing bombs, stabbing leaders and forcibly preventing people from joining meetings. The police does render service, but mostly it is lip-service. The opposition wants a fair deal, impartial treatment and is restraining their aggrieved elements from starting a violent movement. The situation is fraught with grave danger and has all the potentials for deteriorating further and faster.

Another major issue taken up by the BNP is the conduct of affairs in the Parliament. The recently-concluded 4-point accord saved the efficacy of parliament, the symbol and workplace of democracy. Again, as ill luck would have it, both sides have started claiming that the other is violating its provisions. The BNP being in the minority has the obvious disadvantages. According to them, their members are denied right to speak and to speak adequately on legitimate issues in contrast to government bench members. The Speaker is not

impartial, they added, and the television coverage is still discriminatory. The government, however, took a laudable decision to make the parliamentary committees truly representative. But refusal of the opposition demand to allocate membership of these committees proportionate to the relative strength of various political parties in the Parliament has left a good decision from being unimplemented. Needless to say, this highly delicate and sensitive subject directly calls for deft and careful handling.

The above issues are, in fact and essence, no issues of substance, according to some political observers who are reputed to be endowed with far-sightedness. If the law and order situation is really restored, parliament is allowed to run like in other democratic countries and the television is geared to an impartial stance, this will prove to be in the ultimate interest of the people in general, of both the major political parties and evidently of democracy itself. This will take wind out of the sail of the BNP, which will then be hard-put to find burning issues and denied a cause celebre to embark upon an effective political movement against the ruling party. The opposition will also benefit by way of being able to make a peaceful movement in the true democratic manner, with a view to judging its strength not in the battle field but on the ballot field. The democracy will then get a new lease of life and the people in general will regain their virtually lost confidence in politicians and their thankful or thankless job.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

olent street movements which cause disruption in the society, create difficulties in the life-style of the general people and seriously damage economy of the country. BNP's present programme of action excludes all these disruptive and harmful elements for the society, and people. But, in the event they fail to get redress, they would be obliged to go over to the second stage of the movement. This does not augur well for anybody, the society or democracy.

Let us now examine the major demands of the BNP and the difficulties the ruling party faces in meeting them. First

League-supported organisations started flexing their muscles against their rivals. Conflicts took place at various places and at various times. Those who are destined to win generally won. They became too bold with the notion, right or wrong, that the huge governmental apparatus would directly or indirectly support them and will come to their rescue in times of need.

The recent political atmosphere is agog with allegations to the effect that numerous killings, tortures and detention on false charges of BNP leaders and workers have taken place and are continuing. In response

Funding of Elections in India

by Nikhil Chakravarty

Lavish spending in the election rose progressively, so much so that it became common talk that no individual with modest amount at his disposal would ever hope to enter in State Assembly, not to speak of getting elected to Parliament.

much about it. Her philosophy seemed to be, and she should justly be praised, and since the end was to capture and retain power by democratic means, it did not matter what means were resorted to reach that end.

Funds for political parties did not come as charity. If big business houses donated generously whenever the Congress bosses asked for it, they certainly had reason to invest in political parties. For instance, the system of lobbying appeared in our public life, and it was known which among the politicians backed — or looked after — the interests of which business houses. A new phenomenon, though in an incipient form, was the arrival of businessmen or their progenies or cohorts getting into legislatures and Parliament. Once the process started, the opening for corruption became both vertical and horizontal. Even in lower tiers of governance like local self-governing institutions, this invasion of moneybags was noticeable. This became so widespread in some areas that the old guard among political leaders were visibly disturbed.

Another development distorted the even flow of democratic life which helped to facilitate corruption in a totally unexpected way. When Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency, she did so out of fear of the rising tide of more discontent which Jayaprakash Narain and his supporters took

up as a crusade for clean political life. JP's campaign in Gujarat began with the campaign for the ouster of the regime of a thoroughly corrupt politician, namely Chimanbhai Patel; and from Gujarat, JP came to Bihar to take up the same crusade. As his movement became the rallying point of all those ready to fight corruption, Indira Gandhi got scared because this was precisely the time when she was grooming her roughneck second son Sanjay as her political heir. To protect and promote Sanjay Gandhi's mafia style politics, she declared Emergency and held on to it for 19 months. This was the time when freedom of press was suppressed, all Opposition parties gagged and thousands detained without trial, and on top of all this, Sanjay Gandhi's mafia terror became the ruling establishment. The iron hand of Indira's Emergency acted like a shield for Sanjay's corruption and political violence.

When she felt that all Opposition had been crushed, she went for election mistakenly calculating that the election would legitimise Sanjay Gandhi's rule and thereby a corrupt and ruthless mafia would rule the country. Although the Congress under Indira had to suffer a crushing defeat, the coalition which came to power under the signboard of the Janata Party broke because of its contradictions, falling a prey to the wire-pulling by Indira Gandhi who made an effective bid in the election politics.

The electorate returned her to power though the return of Sanjay rule was averted partly because of her fear of public resistance and also by the physical disappearance of Sanjay Gandhi himself in an air crash. While the democratic form of political functioning was restored, the tempo of political corruption did not go down at all. It was during Indira Gandhi's return to power after 1980 that the new feature of political corruption started with those in power managing to collect heavy kickback from large-scale government purchases, particularly from defence hardware from abroad. It was during her last year that the German submarine deal was negotiated and then clinched under Rajiv. Soon after came the infamous Bofors gun deal, whose exposure in the media rocked the political high-ups of the country. Although the government with its wide network even in political circles did try to confuse public opinion, it was clear that in the eyes of the public as a whole, Rajiv and his wife's family have come to be regarded as the beneficiaries of the Bofors kickback deal. From this point onward, the corruption in the public eye tainted the personal standing of political leaders, as the scams could hardly be explained away as their labours for the collection of party funds by legitimate means. In other words, the finger-lash excuse of collecting funds

for the party could no longer save the political leaders from the suspicion of large-scale personal corruption.

The other cases of outright corruption involving Sukh Ram and Satish Sharma, Sheila Kaul, Kalpana Rai and Narasimha Rao's nephew and close relation — from oil exploration and petrol pump dealership to telecommunication tenders and urea scandal, there is no doubt that Narasimha Rao's prime ministership marks the high-water mark of political corruption everseen in independent India.

This has also been the period of the initiation of open-market economic reforms. The authors of these economic reforms led by Dr Manmohan Singh dispute the charge that the liberalisation of the economy opened up sources of corruption never seen before. For one thing, in the great securities scam in which the common shareholders were swindled by unscrupulous securities gamblers to the tune of over Rs five thousand crores — the Finance Ministry which is supposed to be the watchdog of the share-market and credit system, did not intervene at all despite warnings by the media and a number of parliamentarians. Secondly, it needs to be noted that with the withdrawal of controls and persistent invitation to the foreign corporate investor — alluring them with concessions even to the extent

of the government formally assuring guaranteed returns for their investment — the foreign multinationals got extraordinary opportunities. The disgraceful conduct of the government in letting off the Union Carbide for the Bhopal gas tragedy made it clear that the present government is in no position to discipline the foreign investors. This has been confirmed by the dubious handling of the Enron and Cogentrix projects by the Government, both at the Centre and the States.

To complete the list on corruption. Now slowly the awareness is dawning before the public that the foreign corporate entities — whom the Finance Ministry has been trying hard to attract and invest in India — are no angels and corruption in their case takes gigantic proportion which destabilises the financial stability of the market in India. With the powerful campaign for foreign corporate investment which the Finance Ministry has initiated with the clearance of the Prime Minister, will it be able to give a clean chit to the foreign companies so invited? It is a dangerous mine-field in which the Government might get involved since Chidambaram has been dutifully carrying out Manmohan's line of total open door.

As for corruption in high places, there is general agreement in the country that drastic steps would have to be taken without delay if the erosion of democratic governance is to be halted. But no national consensus has yet been reached as how to rid the country of the malaise.

— Maudira dian columnist.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Telecom regulatory agency

Sir, The Bangladesh T&T is not going to be privatised. Then the name of the Board may be changed, so that it does not sound like a 'regulatory board'.

The new regulatory authority has not yet been announced. The power and telecom administrators have been going slow on reforms since 1991. The World Bank carried out a restructuring survey a couple of years ago, but the policy decisions are slow and not very transparent.

Bureaucracy and the purse in the private sector influence political decisions supposed to be taken in public interest. When the major opposition party comes into power, a great deal of sensitivity is subdued in compromising stance. The regime should talk less on politics and more on administration and reforms.

A Husnain
Dhaka

Faulty licence: Cause of death

Sir, In a civilised and disciplined country, road accidents generally occur due to technical faults, like brake failure, flat tyre etc. In our country, it is due to reckless driving of the inexperienced drivers, who appear to have someone bribe out to get the driving licences. These are mainly the bus and truck drivers, who often get drunk or drugged while driving. Pitiable condition of highways, roads and sudden bursting of soil carrier (matl katal) trucks are also

the other causes of road accidents.

However, reckless driving is the prime cause of road accidents. The other dangerous aspect is, "how quick they can be dropped and fetch passengers from one place to another." Therefore, it is the authority concerned, we should blame for the deaths. In other words, life of many eminent citizens like, Rumania, Elyas Kanchan's wife, film producer Alamgir Kabir, Mrs Moni Sing and a teacher of Notre Dame College have been brutally snatched away by the faulty hands of drunken, unlettered and the worthless lot — "bus and truck drivers".

On 12th of February, 97, my wife, my six-year-old daughter and some close members of my family, including a two-month-old baby escaped a sure fatality, when their microbus was hit from behind by a bus near the Jatrabari Gas Station at 9 pm. The bus as usual forced its way to overtake and eventually hit the microbus which fell upside down. Thanks to Allah and to their better luck that they all survived without any injury. I suppose, we should all merge together a make an appeal to the authority concerned to consider the following:

1. Driving licence should not be given, until an applicant is fully qualified.
2. Bus and truck drivers with at least 4 to 5 years of experience should be allowed on highways.
3. A patrol police should be immediately put in service to manure reckless or speedy driving.
4. Defaulters should be heavily fined or punished.

Microcredit summit and arms race

Sir, The Microcredit Summit was dedicated to devise ways and means to combat global poverty and make the poor self-sufficient. One of the most successful son of this soil Dr Mohammad Yunus has been specially mentioned as the founder of Grameen Bank, dedicated to eradicate poverty from Bangladesh. We do not challenge the sincerity of others, who attended the summit.

But there should be a summit in favour of small nations, who are LDCs. That should put an embargo on the arms race. If arms expenditure can be curtailed then the money could be utilised for poor nations' socio-economic development. Poor people can benefit in any country, if provision is created for them in self-development out of savings from arms expenditures.

So the big nations should stop arms sale as part of campaign to free the world out of poverty. And only then the summit will be genuinely successful in its anti-poverty campaigns.

Dr Syed Ala-Uddin
Dhamondia, Dhaka

BTV and deprived people

Sir, Please refer to my letter published in your esteemed daily dated June 20, 1996, captioned 'PDB, DESA, and Akbar The Great' in which I tried to draw the attention of relevant authority to devise ways and means for rational distribution

of power and avoid load-shedding between 8 pm and 10 pm particularly on Sunday, as BTV has arranged to show a film on 'Akbar The Great'. The great Akbar with his human limitations is still alive in the golden pages of history and comes to us as a man in reality. Unlike Sindhbad, Akbar is not a fiction. Among the political stars of the sub-continent, he shines as the most important luminary.

My request to DESA through your letter column did not go in vain. Their arrangement for load-shedding did not intervene and stand in the way of witnessing such a hero who in the 16th century established the great Mughal Empire covering the vast stretches of land, from Baluchistan to Burma and Kashmir to Deccan.

By the way, I want to remind the forgotten character of history once again that not only did he establish the great Empire like that of Ashoka of Mourya, he also set up an ideal for a sense of direction and put the empire on a socio-economic footing. Akbar devised new machinery for statecraft by bringing in secularism in politics.

It was during Akbar's reign that the Indian subcontinent prospered and flourished in arts and architecture, poetry and literature and with it, arose a new civilisation and culture.

The producer who visualised to highlight in the screen such a great man from the torn-up pages of the history of 16th century, and secondly, the man behind the BTV, who pioneered the idea to relay on Bangladesh TV, are both praiseworthy.

Now, what kind of felicitation should be extended to the gentleman who deprived people by stopping the film?

To our great surprise, we learnt through an announcement that such a film is going to be stopped due to non-supply of the first party as the severe cyclonic storm and tidal bore in Jaipur that damaged the prop-

erties of film industry. Cyclonic storm, it may be reminded, that it was formed in Bay of Bengal and ultimately lashed Jaipur in Andhra Pradesh in October 1996. Four months have smoothly elapsed and no hand-out was required to be issued since the storm hit the Jaipur coastal belt in October.

We understand, a contract/agreement is generally made in its totality or in buck and not in a piecemeal way. And in that case, as soon as the payment was made and contract signed, all the episodes of the film ought to have been handed over to the second party, i.e. BTV.

One wonders how the natural calamity can destroy all the episodes of the film. Modern technology has innovated the technique of preservation of film through archives.

In the aforesaid context, now BTV may please arrange to display the film by negotiating with Archives in India to wipe out misunderstanding in the minds of general public, if there be any.

Syed Salehuddin Mahmood
21/B, Sheikh Sahab Bazar
Azimpur, Dhaka

Thana HQ at Kashinathpur

Sir, Kashinathpur in Pabna is a reputed business centre. Heavy dealing in jute and leather, two important foreign earning exportable items, occurs here round the year. Besides, its famous cattle market (haal) adds revenue to the state exchequer regularly. There are more or less good facilities of education from primary to degree level, electricity, cold storage, telephone exchange to make it a burgeoning habitat. It is also known as a gateway to north Bengal.

By and large it is a growing centre both commercially and industrially as well as residen-

tially. And thus it needs many more facilities besides the above. Most important of these is establishment of a Thana Headquarters. In fact, an important place like Kashinathpur should have been made a Thana Headquarters much earlier. Thus the most required facilities to ensure smooth trading and production as well as the growing human habitat could have followed by now.

However, we know a proposal in this regard, was forwarded to the authorities, but we don't know why it is yet to be implemented. Therefore we request the authorities concerned to kindly look into the matter so that the process of establishing a Thana Headquarters at Kashinathpur gets started soon in the interest of both development of the area and government revenue earning.

Md Abul Kashem Mia
Retd Head Teacher
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Santhia, Pabna

Ghastly tragedy

Sir, The horrifying death of a teenage boy trapped in a cloth shop is a sheer negation of safety laws universally accepted as a standard law, as no person or persons could be confined in a place without emergency exit. And in this case, it is clear that the boy was locked inside the shop with no emergency outlet. The emergency exit could have minimised the extent of tragedy and the life of the boy could have been saved.

The law enforcing authorities must enforce the emergency laws with much more severity. The proper investigation into the cause of death of the boy and adequate compensation to the family of the victim should be ensured by the proper authorities.

Al-Haj S M Khalid Chowdhury
Dhaka