

Why Rock the Boat?

The broad outlines of the peace deal the press had picked up on the heels of the fourth round of negotiations between the National Committee on CHT and the PCJSS on May 15 bore testimony to the farthest point both sides could get in an unprecedented spirit of mutual accommodation. An adequately empowered Regional Council at the apex of three elected hill district councils, restoration of lands under occupation of the settlers to tribals, rehabilitation of settlers in government khas lands, folding up of the temporary Army camps and their return to garrison barracks, resettlement of tribal refugees from India and rehabilitation of Shantibahini insurgents have all been jointly visualised. The agreed package revealed that even sensitive points were deliberated upon and addressed with the scale tilting towards the tribal point of view subject to the PCJSS's express and recorded commitment to upholding the Constitution and territorial integrity of Bangladesh.

This respect for the constitution of Bangladesh, continuing dialogue in the capital city Dhaka with the PCJSS coming all the way from their camp on the borders, extended cease-fires that by and large held, and quick disclaimers by the PCJSS of the occasional rocking of the boat by the militants have all provided sustenance to the peace process.

But of primordial importance to the whole endeavour has been the qualitative sea change occurring in the political environment relevant to the tribal question as a whole. The positively interactive governments of India and Bangladesh have been duly assisted by the Tripura state government in rendering the field situation congenial to the solution of the repatriation problem. Instead of harbouring the refugees, the Indian government has, in so many ways lately, driven the message that they want the tribal leadership to seek conciliation and not confrontation with Bangladesh. There is no human rights question to latch on to. Because, there have not been violations of these, going by the Amnesty International report.

All eyes are now focused on the fifth round of negotiations between the NCCHT and the PCJSS which have got underway in Dhaka. Hopes are that whatever minor differences have crept into the scenario will be thrashed out as merely matters of detail rather than of principles.

The new points that were raised on the first day of talks are centred on issues that have been discussed thread-bare many times over and a consensual position reached thereon after protracted negotiations. By asking that tribal repatriation be supervised by the UNHCR or ICRC they are reposing confidence in an international organisation rather than in a government with proven *bona fides* as far as the rehabilitation of the refugees goes. We urge the tribal leadership not to reopen issues but to seize the golden opportunity for peace on the hills with courage and far-sight.

Insanity at the PSC

The Public Service Commission (PSC) has been thrown into turmoil over the demand by its employees and officials that the chairman of the organisation resign and three senior officials be removed. Originally their complaint was against the secretary for his alleged corrupt practices. Now they want the chairman to resign because, they allege, he failed to take action against the secretary. Well, this much is understood; but what cannot be condoned is the violent form their protests degenerated into. Not only did they force the secretary and two other top officials out of the office building but also locked their rooms last week. All this happened in the chairman's absence.

Can we ask why the PSC staff chose the time for its violent agitation when the chairman was out of the country and another senior officer was in charge of his office? Was there any necessity for resorting to the violent means? It is totally unacceptable. If allegations of corruption are to be brought against somebody, there are certain procedures to be followed. And these do appear in the official manual which provides a mechanism in this behalf. One cannot expect PSC employees or officials to behave like a mob going berserk and sit in judgement over top functionaries of the organisation.

If the PSC chairman did not entertain their complaints in the first place, they could at least wait for his arrival and reiterate their demand in a peaceful manner. If they were turned down even then, they could very well seek redress from the higher authorities. They did none of these and are now only to be blamed for violation of rules and resorting to violence. We do not say that if a high official is involved in corruption, he cannot be exposed. But this does not give the complainant any right to take the law into their own hands and deliver mob justice on him. We record our disgust over the trend.

A Crowded Secretariat

The secretariat is under an invasion, literally speaking, by hordes of visitors daily. This can give one an impression that the hub of the country's administration is getting enlivened with increasing activities. Well, it can be a false impression for two reasons: a) not all the visitors enter the premises with duly approved passes; b) too many visitors can indeed mar the working atmosphere instead of making the office truly lively.

As a remedial measure the home ministry had instructed the secretariat staff to display identity cards on their bosoms so that outsiders who do not have entry passes can be easily identified. That this has not been proving effective is clear from the fact of an increasing number of visitors swarming the secretariat. What we like to know is how the outsiders manage to get in. Is it not wise to plug the entry points instead of launching a combing operation inside the secretariat building?

If a foolproof system cannot be put in place at the secretariat itself for regulating flows of visitors, it is futile to expect regulation and discipline coming into effect in different areas of administration and life all across the country. After all, intruders are not scaling the boundary walls of the secretariat. Somebody must have extended a helping hand for such intrusion. This should be looked into. The home ministry would do better if it concentrated on managing this problem.

Rains and Floods

Flood control is an utterly useless concept. We can never control the flood. The best way and perhaps the only way is to allow rain and flood waters to pass by to the ultimate destination of the bay of Bengal — as early, as quickly and as easily as possible.

THE rainy season has come with all its misfortunes. It is always the case of too much rain and it rains day after day — for at least two months of the year which obviously leads to drainage congestion. Rivers spill their banks. Villages become islands in a sea of water. There is nothing new to it. It happens every year — almost around the same time.

These are all misfortunes. But how such misfortunes can occur at such routine intervals? It sounds incredible; although the seasonal suffering is inevitable, we just shut our eyes — remain calm and like the ostrich we think that it will pass away very soon.

The rainy season has also come with all its glories. Rains and floods are what Bangladesh is made of. The water and the silt from the Himalayas provide the vital sustenance to the land. Every year the fertility of the soil is enriched. The moisture-rich agriculture is our glory in spite of the misfortunes. We will not survive without the rains — regardless of the floods.

Farmers are fully aware of rains and floods. They survive on the glories and suffer from the misfortunes. They smile when journalists take photographs of flood-stricken villages plodding their way through to high dry grounds. They know the sufferings are temporary. Waters would recede. Flowers will bloom and the land smile again. We live with the floods. We have always done so. To build high walls and prevent flood waters from entering the fields is an impossible task. It will only benefit the contractors and others in league with them.

On the other hand, we cannot build massive concrete embankments and keep ourselves dry. We will not stop the floods by preventive dikes and embankments. Flood control is an utterly useless concept. We can never control the flood. The best way and perhaps the only way is to allow rain and flood waters to pass by to the ultimate destination of the bay of Bengal — as early, as quickly and as easily as possible.

There is a prevailing utopian concept of building huge reservoirs in the upper mountain reaches of the major rivers, control river flows, and low lands will be saved from floods. But high rainfall, concentrated during the months of July and August is the major cause of massive water congestion which cannot be prevented by artificial lakes and reservoirs up in the Himalayas.

It is always going to rain — only in the plains-like in Spain. We got to have the rains. Otherwise, it is going to be a veritable disaster. When there is too much rain — we simply live with it, including sufferings and misfortunes. The problem therefore boils down to improvement of the living and working conditions of all the people of the country — in spite of rains and floods.

Villages are constructed as huge earthen mounds so that in normal years, they remain above flood level. But it is not always true. The monsoon village islands themselves get flooded. Severe erosion takes place on those earthen mounds. The first step for better monsoon living conditions would be to improve inside village flood and drainage conditions. It needs research, development and demonstration. We need cost-effective solution to the problem of living with the floods. For example, it may be feasible, subject to detailed investigation, to construct a protective embankment around deeply flooded villages along with adequate drainage channels. Tree plantations may prevent water erosion at vulnerable points.

On the other hand, such solutions may not be feasible where the villages are the aggregation of a number of clusters of households — a typical situation in the char lands of the highly exposed river delta areas. The first task will therefore be to undertake land reform earmarking village areas for all households together instead of spread out clusters.

The intention of my suggestion is to ensure economic size villages instead of the concept of a present village where the number of homestead

may vary from few dozens to few thousands. In deeply flooded areas we must think of large village protected from floods — without any drainage problem within and all types of utilities well established so that life and work can go on without much hindrance.

Think of a Swiss village covered with snow but life does not stop in winter — in fact the cold months are the time for more work at home when the Swiss have developed precision engineering instruments and equipment at workshops located in snow bound mountain villages. Likewise, we should focus on improved village infrastructure within which there are no floods, basic utilities like electricity, fresh water, telephones exist; while communication by river boats should not be hampered due to flooded water ways if proper navigation equipment can be maintained.

Villages will exist as islands for a part of the year and transport will be by boats and within villages, labour-intensive manufacturing can be promoted! While there will be no field agriculture, poultry and dairy animals can be reared and home-based industries like embroidery, weaving, garment-making, show making etc., can flourish. Also, fisheries can be promoted in the huge monsoon water bodies. In China, intensive vegetable cultivation on rafts in water bodies is a long-standing practice in the delta regions which are deeply flooded so that local needs of villages can be secured. There is no reason why we cannot develop the same practice.

In fact, regular field agriculture cannot be ruled out as well. The low lands of China and Thailand, where only the vulnerable deep water paddy can be grown are converted into flood free platforms and deep long narrow canals for high value horticulture crops and fish cultivation — round the year.

Flood protection of major towns and cities will be of equal priority. We must resolve the monsoon drainage problems of major cities of the country.

Like Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and others as a part of basic infrastructure development to attract both local and foreign investment. Of equal importance is the all-weather road communication throughout the length and breadth of the country. All district towns must remain connected round the year. At present, the first onslaught of monsoon destroys this vital transport linkage. This happens year after year. Why? The temporary damage to communication brings in permanent damage to our prospects of economic growth.

Let us not try to stop the floods from the low lands through billion-dollar schemes. Let us concentrate first on a secured high way infrastructure and then on flood-free cities and towns. The third step will be to build flood-free protected villages.

We are now deep inside the monsoon season. We can hardly venture out of Dhaka City. Last weekend, it took me 24 hours to reach Rajshahi town from Dhaka and I could return in 16 hours via Kushtia and Faridpur. With the opening of the Jamuna bridge by the middle of next year, travel to North Bengal will improve but the connection up to the bridge from Dhaka is in a really bad shape. Therefore, to bad planning, we will continue to suffer in the next rainy season as well, in spite of the billion-dollar bridge.

Quality of planning is therefore of essence. We must focus on the priorities first and therefore must develop the capacity to identify the priorities. The entire country practically goes under water during the rainy season. We need not be unnecessarily worried about it. Switzerland is under 10 feet of snow for at least two to three months of the year and it really does not matter for the economy or the working life of the population.

Out of the vast sheet of monsoon water bodies — spread out all over Bangladesh, we have to ensure that towns, cities, villages and the road network connecting human habitations are above high water levels. Once this is done, we are as safe as Switzerland is today from snows in winter.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE REPORT

Its Your Money Being Robbed in Broad Day-light

How can you build up an edifice for democratic governance without ensuring transparency and accountability in disbursement of public funds? Besides, what is that meaning of so much debates and discussions on budgetary measures on the floors of parliament, if the parliament is not equally careful to ascertain the end-results of public expenditures?

NOWHERE the country's rudimentary stage of democracy seems more evident than perhaps in the area of accountability of public expenditures. It is indeed appalling to learn that carelessness to financial accountability among government ministries and agencies has reached such an outrageous level that none seems to care even to preserve necessary information to account for the money it spends.

Reports suggest that the government ministries and agencies — that are responsible for spending public money as approved by the nation's parliament — almost systematically give a damn to the audit objection made by the country's Comptroller and Auditor General. According to a recent report of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), most ministries and agencies take three to seven years to respond to audit objections and remarks. Not only that, the Committee found that scores of audit objections and remarks are filed up — unattended, uncared for, unresolved — with every ministry since 1971.

Nothing could be more shocking or frightening than such a state of accountability and transparency in a society that claims its commitment to democratic governance. If government ministries and agencies can systematically put aside legitimate concerns and objections raised by the country's constitutionally appointed auditor, what the political leaders want to mean when they claim that they believe in accountability and transparency? Do they mean that they might well be subject to those democratic parameters, while the government servants are not or cannot be?

Moreover, what difference it makes when government bodies come up with their responses to audit objections after three to seven years of spending money? What good could be accomplished with those 'responses' when the money is spent with a near-perfect understanding that the spender may never be held accountable for those expenditures? What could be a better example of a grand scale mockery with public funds?

It is simply incomprehensible — if not absolutely contradictory — that a democratic society lets its government servants spend public money without effectively subjecting them to systematic public scrutiny. Unfortunately, that's what is happening in this country for decades. Thanks to built-in mechanism of indifference in bureaucratic empire, hundreds and thousands of audit objections and remarks, made by appropriate authorities, remain unresolved for years.

What is still more shocking is that nobody seems to care how the public money — that has been collected through an ever-widening net of taxation and globally orchestrated soliciting, and appropriated with spirited debates and discussions in the parliament, are actually spent by government functionaries? Nobody seems to care whether the money spent was aimed at attaining the purposes for which it was appropriated by the parliament. The just concluded budget session of the parliament spent weeks in deliberating on the budgetary measures, how many hours did it spend on taking stock of how the appropriated money of the last budget was spent?

Yes, the parliament can easily pass the buck to the PAC, as it is specifically responsible for overseeing accountability of public funds. Then again, it appears that nobody in the country should be more frustrated than the PAC in taking stock of public expenditures. The backlog in available audit reports is so repugnant that the whole exercise of auditing often borders around absolute redundancy.

Not only that, many of the principal accounting officers of the government — who are secretaries of the ministries and senior executives of different agencies — openly admitted to the PAC that they were simply unaware about the existence of old audit reports. This is unthinkable in an

environment of accountability, an apparently hapless PAC concluded. None can dispute with the PAC that it is unthinkable in a democratic society. But, fact of the matter is, it's not a pigment of imagination, it's a rock-hard reality in the country.

Unfortunately, it is not likely that this problem will go away in the foreseeable future. Possibility is rather very strong that it will continue to persist until and unless an appropriate mechanism is put in place to bring the whole process of managing public funds — from allocation to appropriation, distribution to disbursement — under a transparent and accountable system effectively supervised by the nation's parliament.

Viewed from this perspective, the recommendations, outlined by the PAC, appears to be shortsighted, if not somewhat misconstrued. For example, its principal recommendation calls for formation of audit cells with adequate manpower headed by a joint secretary in each ministry. This gives the impression that in the minds of PAC members the principal problem with backdated, systematically-ignored audit reports was lack of adequate manpower.

Nothing could be funnier than that. Do they think that a bigger, bloated bureaucracy will be more accountable, responsible and transparent? Already the country's bureaucratic leviathan has been growing faster than the nation's population growth rates. It eats up about 15 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product by contributing only 2.5 per cent to it. It is simply mind-boggling to try to understand that a committee like the PAC could come up with proposals for further extension of it.

By all indications and evidences, the problem squarely lies with the mind-set of government officials. Otherwise, their carelessness to audit objections and remarks could not have blown up in systemic proportions. Addressing such a systemic problem would require nothing less than a thorough overhauling of the country's archaic public auditing system. It is still overwhelmingly guided by the laws and rules framed during the colonial period. Such an outdated auditing mechanism serves no purpose but to promote tangled waves of red-tapism and redundancy.

Second, let the public auditing system of the country be run by a politically appointed individual — who should be widely known for capability and dynamism, honesty and integrity — and above all, who would enjoy broad support from major political parties. Provide him with an appropriate administrative and legal framework so that audit reports, based on international audit standards, can be done effectively and in a timely manner.

Third, let the PAC hold public hearings on audit objections and remarks. The entire proceedings of such hearings should be open to the media as well as the members of the public. At the same time, make it mandatory for the auditing authorities to keep the public informed of their findings on a regular basis — through monthly, bimonthly and annual publications. Such publications should be available to the media and the members of the public.

Until such a solid and time-tested framework for auditing of public funds is put in place, all claims of transparency and accountability will continue to sound hollow, and nothing can bring an end to the broad-day robbery of the public exchequer that has been going on in the country for decades. After all, how can you build up an edifice for democratic governance without ensuring transparency and accountability in disbursement of public funds? Besides, what is that meaning of so much debates and discussions on budgetary measures on the floors of parliament, if the parliament is not equally careful to ascertain the end-results of public expenditures?

CROSSCURRENTS

by CAF Dowlah



Kaiser Rasheed: A Tribute

by Zaglul A Chowdhury

IT is difficult to believe that Kaiser Rasheed is no more. Not that he died prematurely.

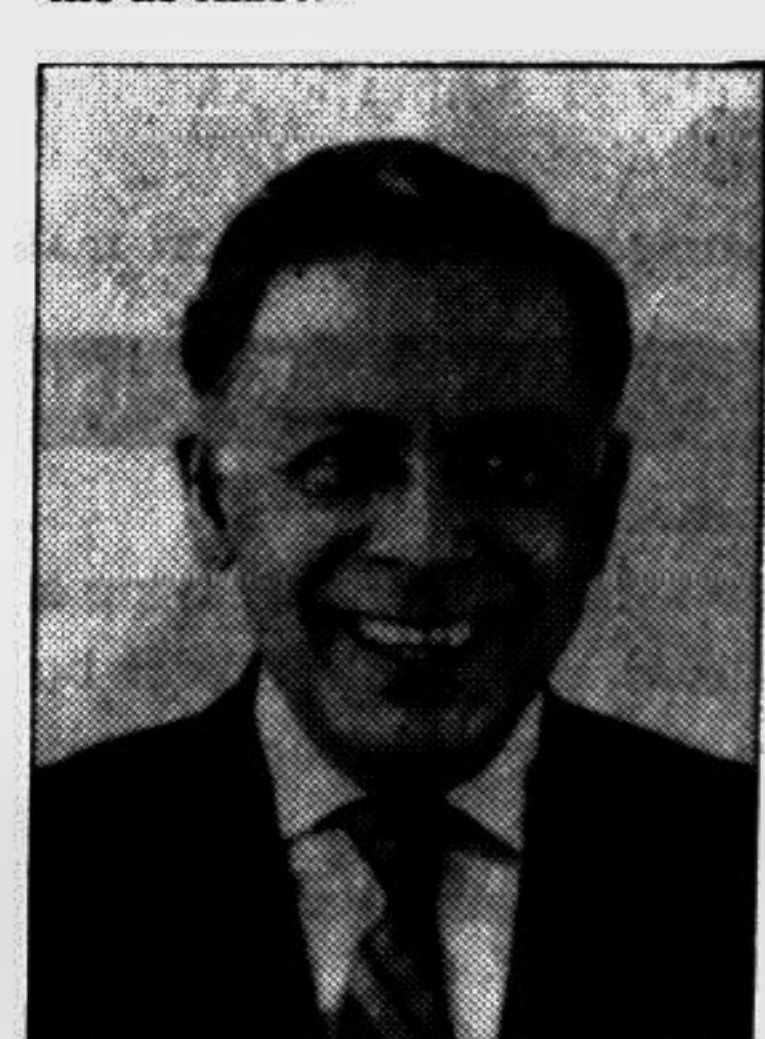
But what makes it difficult for me to reconcile with his death is that I met him just the other day — so vibrant and lively! Even at the late sixties he was very energetic. He would always wear an innocent smile on his face and talk on any subject with that rare ability to attract the listeners to his conversation. In different social gatherings and homely get-togethers in the capital, the once-famed foreign service official of the erstwhile Pakistan was an attraction. He would keep an attractive lively and exhilarating, and the people around him will listen to him with spell-binding attention. Whoever has not seen him in such atmosphere, he or she must have missed a person who could win friends and admiration in a moment's time. Some months ago I was at a marriage ceremony of a relation. Someone told me, "Let us take a seat in that table because Mr Kaiser Rasheed is sitting there — we will be privileged to enjoy his company". True, his characteristic aplomb made that half an hour we sat in that table all different!

It was more than two years ago that the present Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury (HRC) invited me for a dinner at his house. The occasion was to meet Mr Eric Gonsalves, the former secretary in the Indian foreign ministry, who was visiting Dhaka. He is an old friend of Mr Chowdhury, who was once posted in New Delhi and defected in 1971 as minister in the Pakistan high commission and led the diplomatic side from there in the liberation war. Several other persons were present at the dinner — mostly eminent people. Mr Gonsalves was a notable cadre-service official of Indian foreign service and later earned laurels as a reputed writer and columnist. Obviously, he was the centre of attraction in the discussions at the gathering — we all were benefitting from his discourse. Then came Kaiser Rasheed. He is the immediate younger brother of Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury but senior to him in

service because Kaiser joined foreign service in 1951 and his elder brother in 1953. It is because elder Chowdhury wanted to become a barrister and went to London but later decided to join foreign service and that is how joined government job after his younger brother. Mr Gonsalves joined Indian foreign service in 1949. Like commonality in different professions, the foreign service officials of India and Pakistan in those days maintained personal relations — cutting across political differences between the two countries. So, Mr Gonsalves knew both the Rasheed brothers who were senior officials of Pakistan foreign service. After Kaiser Rasheed came in the dinner, focus of discussions centered on him. The discussions on different subjects were so interesting that the dinner was served late. I knew Mr Gonsalves before in New Delhi where I was posted for several years as a journalist in the early eighties. He used to directly look after the Bangladesh desk along with several other countries considered important to India. At the end of the dinner he said, "Kaiser is as usual simply marvellous — he can keep the listeners spell-bound — I knew his name as an outstanding officer much before I met him". Mr Gonsalves had only echoed what most others say about Kaiser.

In 1985 when we were in New York for the United Nations General Assembly session, it was decided that a Bangladesh national would be the next president of the UN General Assembly and he would be foreign minister Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury next year. The matter was a big pride for the nation since the country did not occupy this prestigious position before and there was hardly any likelihood that this chance would come again for Bangladesh for many years in the future. At the UN lobby, an elderly European diplomat was asking "Is the person going to be UNGA president brother of Kaiser Rasheed? Because the names appear similar". It means even a former diplomat

and sitting foreign minister of the country at that time was known at least to some people as the brother of his younger brother! When I told this at a later stage to Mr HRC in a jocular vein, he did not mind. He said, "It is true — Kaiser was known to many people in those days". Then he would smilingly add, "because of our similarity in face — many would mistake me as Kaiser!"



What are being mentioned here are no exaggeration. Whoever knew him would agree that Kaiser Rasheed was a person of extraordinary charm and knowledge. Frankly, we would go to his house in leisure time — mostly Friday evenings — to hear many enchanting stories from him. He had very sharp memory but what was most striking about him was his presentation and choice of words. I must admit that only seldom I came across such fascinating and beautiful English that used to come from him. He would also speak chosen Bengali and would frequently quote from Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul and others. Hasan Shahriar and I were visitors in his house on Fridays when many friends would come. He was extremely generous in treating his guests, who would enjoy listening to him. We spent endless hours in the Dhanmondi Road No 2 residence. Of late, I visited seldom

because he would not let you leave the place so early. His was a great affectionate heart.

Joining the foreign service in 1951, he continued till 1966 when he resigned. He accomplished many tough assignments abroad during his professional career. Late Z A Bhutto, when he was Pakistan's foreign minister, watched with great admiration the professional excellence of this officer from erstwhile East Pakistan whom he made director in his office. Sadly, his was not utilised at all in this country despite he being an extraordinary officer of those days. He was a different kind of person who would remain content with good food, golf, lively environment of friends and relations, and more particularly, enjoy intellectual and other discussions covering diplomacy, politics, literature etc. He would not try or lobby for anything and hence a person of his talents remained without such service to this nation although different governments could have been benefited by his services.

"Kaiser broke the serial in service by joining before me and this time he did the same by leaving this world before me although I am elder," a sobbing Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury uttered at his Janaza where many people, SAMS Kibria, Abul Hasan Chowdhury, Moudud Ahmed, Rezaul Karim, A K H Morshed, Mohi Chowdhury, C M Morshed, Niaz Chowdhury, Justice Hasan, friends and relations were present. "I will always miss Kaiser Bhai — what a lively person!" said Mr K S Nahi.

He was much elder to me by about twenty years and I used to call him 'Mamu' as he was a cousin of my mother. But we were more friends. When my father died several years ago, he came to our house to console us: "Mamu — don't feel bad — try to keep yourself cheerful — do not you see I am always smiling — I have my own frustration and bad times but I remain lively". True, seldom in life I have come across such a person who sought to be in jovial mood and smiling all the time. Many of us will miss such a nice person and a great talent.

Repression on women

Sir, Recently, cases of rape, arson, violence, acid throwing, wife beating, child lifting, mental repression on women such as dowry and more are frequently reported in the mass media. A number of renowned women personalities of the country through individual and

on organisational capacity expressed their outspoken concern on the issue. A few male personalities are also expressing similar views on the subject. Tough laws are there and are being enacted, yet there is no improvement.

The term morality is such an ethical matter that cannot be taught or established in a society where unrestricted and free flow of entertainment culture dominates. These are cable TV, cheap and commercial Bollywood/Hollywood actions, titillating and eye catching women posing for pornography. These have already built their own nest without much social opposition. A very recent entry of a new culture — the fashion show and open air concerts have silently made rigid foundation in our existing culture system. With free flow of these unrestricted cultural exchange (or change?), our original culture is crying under the foot of the society and in a verge to extinct.

MAS Dhaka