

The Power Blue

With the whole nation incapacitated for two hours by a massive power failure on the night before last, what a damning indictment issues on the PDB's supine and inept maintenance of transmission circuitry on the strategically vital East-West Interconnector. Only on May 3 were we plunged in a similarly pitch-dark helplessness. That lesson went shamefully unlearned.

Leave aside the tossing of power generation gaps and the occasional walling over these and calls for patience before FDIs flowed in to wipe out the MW deficits, what was involved in the present case centred on our poor handling of whatever little we have. It is the transmission circuit No 1 of the interconnector the PDB personnel must have known like the thumb of their hands which developed a fault that by domino effect rendered the generators of Ghorasal power station inoperative in a cascading succession. This tripping in a chain of disorders raises at least three questions, if not more: first, isn't there a built-in red alert device against an impending disaster, particularly where heavy-duty essential service-catering equipment like transformers, circuit-breakers or generators are involved? Secondly, has there been inspection-based hour-by-hour appraisal of the conditions of such a vital component of the transmission network? Thirdly, isn't there any fall-back mechanism to head off a total collapse?

The way the PDB authorities seem caught by surprise each time a major accident takes place may well be indicative of two things — either they do not know their plants or equipment too well or that they are being discreet in sharing information on their functioning status. This lack of transparency must go. By keeping us in the dark about the present state of the technology they are doing a disservice to the nation. Quite pertinently we ask what has come of the investigations ordered into the massive power failure we had had a couple of months ago?

The unmitigated disaster in the national power grid has proved economically crippling and physically inconveniencing and risky to the old people and children in particular. Power failure on such a scale is unheard of in any country especially at the fag end of the Twentieth Century and sends another awkward signal to foreign investors. Wednesday night's experience has jolted the whole nation's confidence in the sense of remedial urgency reflected by Energy Minister Nuruddin Khan. He must now do all he can to spare the nation from another such plunge in total darkness.

Politics of Convenience

Dhaka University's tuition fee for students has not been raised for at least four decades. If it was ever done, it could not have been later than the early years of Pakistan. Now that the university authority is contemplating a raise in the tuition fee both for the arts and science faculties, student organisations have started showing their resentment against it. The Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) has already announced its protest programme. We won't be surprised if the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) follows suit. After all, popular politics here gets, more often than not, the better of rational and pragmatic consideration.

Student organisations making an issue of this may be convenient politics, but it is obviously inconsistent with the changes that have taken place over the years in economic terms by which education at the university has become more costly for the students. How? Examination fees and other charges have registered increases many times more. If the students can pay those charges, so can they a reasonably increased tuition fee. The other charges realised from the students do not go to the university fund. If the tuition fee is raised, it would.

And who does not know that the university needs to increase its income both for meeting its higher expenses and also for consolidating its autonomous status? We believe the university authority is not going to raise the tuition fee arbitrarily. There is no point in continuing with the rates of tuition fees or seat rents that were fixed, say, in the British period. It does not make any economic sense. The value of 10 or 12 rupees of that time in today's price should come to a big amount. Why complain if the rates are fixed much lower than that amount? Reaping dividends from this issue may be politically expedient for the student fronts of political parties, but it might prove self-defeating for the university in the ultimate analysis.

Tender-related Thuggery

According to a report carried in a Bangla daily, a group of terrorists detained two contractors for several hours so that they could not submit their tenders on time. Earlier the two contractors' tender forms and treasury fees were snatched away and the Dhaka City Corporation was forced to invite tender for the second time cancelling the original one for its public work. The message is clear: that *mastans* are powerful enough to frustrate any tender bid by genuine contractors. Not only did the terrorists prevent the two contractors from competing in the first tender bid, but they also made it a point to do the same for the second time.

This incident is not an exception, rather it has become a rule in the city as well as all across the country. If the thugs can do what they did just in front of the mayor's office, there should not be any doubt left about their reach and influence. The whole business community has become a helpless victim of circumstances characterised by tender-related thuggery, toll collection and musclemansy. Much of the development work has to be adjusted with extortionist demands, forcing a compromise on quality.

After the arrest of terrorists like Bikash, such infringement on tender business should have received a jolt. Clearly it has not. We, therefore, request the home ministry to keep up with its good work and put all the terrorists behind the bar. Business and development work must be allowed to progress in as much free and peaceful a social setting as possible.

Putting People in the Centre of Our Thoughts

by Justice Shahebuddin Ahmed President of Bangladesh

A slightly edited version of the speech given yesterday at the Second Assembly of the Asia Pacific Civil Society Forum.

A Civil society represents the ordinary members of a society. They are either organised professional groups or unorganised people such as the rural poor. The vast majority of the population, irrespective of their class, religion, ethnicity and culture, represents the civil society of a country. A civil society aims at creating a society in which its members can live in peace, honour and dignity free from fear of any kind. It co-operates with the State functionaries for promoting democracy in its truest term — a democracy which pre-supposes free and fair election and guarantees effective participation of the people in the decision making process at all levels of administration. Transparency in governance and accountability of the State functionaries are essential requirements of a good Government. Besides democratisation, a civil society strives for pollution-free environment, realisation of human rights, solution of problems like poverty, illiteracy, migration, social conflict, and elimination of discrimination against women. A civil society also strives for improving the quality of life and emphasises moral values and character building of the people from younger age. Of course, these are also the aims and objectives of a Government, but a civil society comes forward when the Government fails to meet the people's expectation; it may also itself take initiative or co-operate with the Government for achieving these objectives.

Participants of the Asia Pacific Civil Society Forum represent a vast geographical area where diverse socio-political conditions exist; but some of the problems as referred to are common to Civil societies of all the countries in this region. To appreciate the problems faced by the Civil society of Bangladesh, a brief historical background is necessary. Bangladesh, as we all know, is a part of the Indian sub-continent and as such it inherits five thousand years of the sub-continent's common history beginning from the days of Indus valley Civilisation down to the middle of this current century. The sub-continent was ruled by the British Imperial power for about two hundred years from the middle of the

18th century to the middle of this century, to be precise till 14 August 1947, when they would up their rule and left giving us independence. But the independence came at the cost of the unity of the sub-continent; two States — India and Pakistan — were created out of it and Bangladesh, formerly East Bengal, became a part of Pakistan. Creation of Pakistan by partitioning India came in fulfilment of the demand of the Muslims of the Sub-continent based on free expression of their opinion through general elections. Since Pakistan was a result of democratic expression of peo-

ple's verdict, it was believed that Democracy would be the main pillar of the new state structure of Pakistan having two wings, separated from each other by about two thousand miles of Indian territory. But this natural expectation was not fulfilled. During the 24 years of existence of united Pakistan, 14 years were the period of unconstitutional, autocratic military Government. The Civil society of the then

avowed objective of establishing people's rights under a democratic set-up. Its Constitution accepted democracy as its main pillar, but here also, in Bangladesh, democratic process got a setback and military rule was imposed twice by abrogating the Constitution. The military rule in Bangladesh covered about fourteen out of twenty-five years of its independence. This military rule was overthrown by a mass movement of

Again, for enforcement of rights of people, an independent Judiciary is necessary and clear provision is there in the Constitution for independence of Judiciary and its separation from the Executive; but though all the political parties speak very loudly about it while in opposition, sidetrack it when coming to power. But the Civil society is very alert and it is expected that under the present Government the long expectation of the people for independence of Judiciary including its separation from the Executive will be realised.

Civil Society of Bangladesh should look into some peculiar problems which are not found in other countries of this region. Political parties, here as elsewhere, formulate public opinion and mobilize public support for gaining control of the state machinery. But political parties here do not hesitate to adopt any means, fair or foul, to achieve this objective of power-capturing. They use students, industrial work-force and even religion for political purpose. There is hardly any congenial atmosphere for pursuit of knowledge in the educational institutions from where all moral values and education itself are fast evaporating.

Let us have a shared vision — vision for protecting our communities, culture and habitat from invasion from all quarters. We sincerely wish to see that the Century we are about to step in will be better than the one we have been through.

East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, did not accept this position. It thwarted the attempt of the Central Government to impose upon the majority people the language of the minority as the only State language of the country. This military regime was ultimately ousted from power in 1969 by a strong movement of the people of this part of the then Pakistan. This was followed by the Liberation of this wing from the autocratic rule of the Central authority.

Bangladesh was born as a People's Republic with the all classes of people including students, workers and intellectuals. Democracy was restored in the beginning of 1991. It provides for the Central Government, alongwith local Government at all levels of the administration. To this restoration of democracy, contribution of the Civil society is the greatest. To oversee the enforcement of fundamental rights as enshrined in the Constitution a number of Human Rights Committees have been set up by the Civil society. In addition, the present Government is going to set up an Independent Human Rights Commission.

dominates the countryside. In urban areas the caste shackles have only loosened, not broken. A government report itself admits that "there is an urge among scheduled castes, especially the educated among them, to claim social acceptance."

Regarding the economic plane, Ambedkar's warning has turned out to be correct. The development of the last 50 years has been so lopsided that disparities have increased regionally, religiously and classwise. The obsession with liberalisation has silenced even a discussion on the ideal of egalitarian society. The government has no programme to lessen distances as Nehru had. Nor does it ever talk about even ritually.

Bangladesh welcomes the move of the Civil Society leaders of the Asia Pacific region to put people in the centre of our thoughts and to get people across our culture and national boundaries to work collectively towards protecting our rights from violations by the state and the free market. Let us have a shared vision — vision for protecting our communities, culture and habitat from invasion from all quarters. We sincerely wish to see that the Century we are about to step in will be better than the one we have been through so that our children can find the space to be a more creative one.

For Emancipation and Dignity

During the days of Mahatma Gandhi, there were movements to do away with the caste system. There is none today. Jawaharlal Nehru tried to fight the caste system administratively. He asked the officers not to mention caste against their name.

If we wish to preserve the Constitution in which we sought to enshrine the principles of government of the people, for the people and by the people, let us resolve not to be tardy in the recognition of the evils that lie across our path and which induce people to prefer government for the people to government by the people, nor to be weak in our initiative to remove them. These are the words of BR Ambedkar, who piloted the Indian Constitution some 47 years ago to secure all citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.

Against the background of rioting in Maharashtra and Gujarat a few days ago, it is clear how tardy is the country in recognising evils, much less removing them from the path. The society is more caste ridden and more divided than ever before. Now we also have people, bind with prejudice, disfiguring the statues of Ambedkar in the country. Some among them are authoring books to prove that he was a toady, the one who gave shape to the Constitution which has held the country together.

For their political ends or personal ego, many among the upper castes, who trade in hatred, have disturbed the rhythm of life in Maharashtra and Gujarat. They would like to foment similar troubles in the rest of the country. Their prejudice against dalits is so deep and liberalisation so superficial that they will go to any extent to deny the dalits equality. They want to prove who rules the society. They would rather destroy the policy than concede the tremendous service that Ambedkar, a dalit, has rendered to the country and even to the Hindu society, which never treated him or people like him as human beings.

As long as the Constitution is there, India will remain indebted to Ambedkar. He has been described its father. His

contribution to Hinduism is by no means less significant. Millions of dalits like him wanted to embrace Buddhism en bloc because of the humiliation they suffered in the society. But an appeal by top Hindu leaders kept them back in the fold.

Had the dalits quitted, the Hindus would not have constituted the overwhelming majority of 82 per cent in the country. Despite the long and unending discrimination and segregation, the dalits or, for that matter, Ambedkar's followers have continued to stay Hindus. They have no reason to be because the treatment of hatred continuous to be meted out to them.

I was surprised to find the other day in a Haryana village, only 35 kilometres from Delhi, the same distance between the upper castes and the dalits which I perceived several decades ago. The two have separate habitations, separate wells, separate crematoriums and separate places of gathering. For the dalits, it is the same squalor and the same concentration of their dwellings along narrow hole-filled places. Social contact between the upper and lower castes is rare. An inter-caste marriage is unthinkable. "The couple will be murdered," said an upper caste member while raising his voice.

I wish the Hindutva ideologues would write on the privations of dalits or the rigours of caste system to shame the upper castes. I wish BJP chief LK Advani would lead a *Rath Yatra* to fight against the evils of caste in the Hindu society. I wish he realise that people are more important than a *Mandir*. The BJP, supposed to espouse the cause of Hindus, has

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

never initiated a movement against segregation, which most of their leaders practice.

For the BJP, the dalits are political commodity, not social. It is sheer power politics that dictates its policies. In Uttar Pradesh, it sups with the dalits' Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) because it gives it a share in power. It aligns itself in Maharashtra with the ruling Shiv Sena, which makes no bones about its bias against the dalits. The BJP is said to be wanting an all-India alliance with the BSP in the next general election with an eye on power at the Centre. Strange, the BJP should accept as ally a party which has not changed its philosophy that the upper castes are twice born, superior to the lower castes.

During the days of Mahatma Gandhi, there were movements to do away with the caste system. There is none today. Jawaharlal Nehru tried to fight the caste system administratively. He asked the officers not to mention caste against their name. Nameplates came up in the secretariat and elsewhere without surnames. He had even the column on caste deleted from application forms. Now all that is gone. The caste has come back with a vengeance.

In some states like UP and Bihar, even the judiciary has reportedly got divided on caste lines. All political parties are, in a way, encouraging caste because they treat the dalits and

the backward as vote banks, not human beings. Whenever there are protests against such an approach, the low against untouchability is cited as if a social evil is eliminated through legislation.

Ambedkar had warned that India could lose its democratic system if it did not pay attention to two things. One, equality on the social plane and, two, inequality in the economic field. On the social plane, he said: "We have a society based on the principle of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others." Even after 50 years of independence, the unequal society

dominates the countryside. In urban areas the caste shackles have only loosened, not broken. A government report itself admits that "there is an urge among scheduled castes, especially the educated among them, to claim social acceptance."

Regarding the economic plane, Ambedkar's warning has turned out to be correct. The development of the last 50 years has been so lopsided that disparities have increased regionally, religiously and classwise. The obsession with liberalisation has silenced even a discussion on the ideal of egalitarian society. The government has no programme to lessen distances as Nehru had. Nor does it ever talk about even ritually.

are starving one wonders who among them was ever serious about a socialist state, an objective enunciated in the preamble of the Constitution. There is no social stigma to crime as long as the criminal is wealthy and not in jail. At weddings of top smugglers one can see ministers and top bureaucrats. And as the guests drive back, they, no doubt, can see hundreds of poor waiting at nearby dustbins for left-overs.

Ambedkar was right when he said that the downtrodden classes were tired of being governed. They were impatient to govern themselves. The urge for self-realisation in the downtrodden classes must not be allowed to devolve into a class struggle or class war. It would lead to a division of the country. That would indeed be a day of disaster. As Abraham Lincoln said, a house divided against itself cannot stand very long. Such should have been the themes for discussions and books. By spreading hatred against Ambedkar, the upper castes only alienate the dalits, who believe that he fought for their emancipation and dignity.

The Lost and Found Story and Responsibility

by Chandra Shekhar Das

What some guardians of a school-geer did on a momentary impulse is a very diluted contribution to social restlessness when compared against the unabated cultivation of irresponsibility by our politicians.

TWO days after he was reported missing, little Zeeshan was rescued by the law enforcing agency on the tenth of July. Unharmed and in one piece. No group of organised child-lifters had lifted this school-geer on his way back home. Neither any always-on-the-cards accident accounted for his houndin act that led to the unjustified hullabaloo, tears and tension.

Zeeshan was reportedly found in the vagrants' centre at Mirpur after police, prodded by the pressure of public concern through media coverage, launched a successful drive at the possible nooks and corners to ferret out the missing lad.

The return of an unscathed Zeeshan desirably nipped a sensational child-lifting story in the bud. But it gave birth to a few disturbing thoughts. Thoughts that may look pretty disconnected at the first sight, but viewed from the angle of society as an inter-linked organic whole and the ripple effect of every isolated and small incident has on it, they exhort the incorporation of a badly missed ingredient in our national character — responsibility.

Zeeshan, as the press reported, was a little boy whom his natural sense of wonder pulled out of the worn-out track of the routine, monotonous life for a walk down the line of advertisement. In this world of anti-heroes he, perhaps, being influenced by the tales in the adventure books, made a futile attempt to do something extraordinary, if not exactly heroic.

What Zeeshan did was an instance of the fantastic predilections of a child's mind. But I am afraid, the same cannot be said about what some guardians of Zeeshan's schoolmates did. While the lost kid was being escorted home, they staged a demonstration on streets adjacent to the school airing slogans against child-lifters. True, they had reasons to panic over the sudden disappearance of a school student. Particularly after being pitted mentally against the child-lifters, courtesy all those confirmed, unconfirmed reports of child-lifting. But did their outburst which sounded more of an impulsive act help the matter in any way?

Apparently not. For all practical purposes, their vented anger had the effect of a fresh dose of anathema heaped upon the already battered notions like social justice, law and order.

If read in the backdrop of those fatalities, the latest incident's fatal mob violence that resulted in the death of five young men, tends to lose a lot of its underpinnings as a case for moral condemnation. In fact, it would not be preposterous to say this kind of outburst and utterances which grossly lack in responsibility as a behavioural component, give a label of automatic justification to pogroms like this. "If law and its enforcing agency cannot live up to the expectations, people's wrath and mob justice will naturally take over". These are the stock defence mechanisms we resort to. We camouflage our own irresponsibility in the failure of a few individuals of a system. This is a self-defeating technique. Such a restive and volatile state of the society is a godsend for the criminals and people who are out to settle old scores. A simple query to ourselves would make the case clearer. How many 'real' child-lifting cases have been reported in the press so far? How many child-lifters have been nabbed for that matter? In comparison considering the deaths due to mob violence, has already led to findings that suggest camouflaged killing. By preferring not to fight this trend socially and by behaving irresponsibly we can only invite the criminals on the hunt.

People by and large have lost faith in the instruments that are entrusted with the job of meting justice in the civil society. And the rabid, revanchist elements in the society are ap-

parently going spares to make the most of this distance between people and the law enforcers.

What some guardians of a school-geer did on a momentary impulse is a very diluted contribution to social restlessness when compared against the unabated cultivation of irresponsibility by our politicians. In their desperation to undermine their political rivals they are ceaselessly taking recourse to irresponsible public utterances capable of taking what little respect for politics and rule of law is there. What message does the opposition leader give when she, at the cost of relevance and propriety of an occasion, states that the government is unable to protect the children. Same goes to the leader of the ruling party when she, from the apparent compulsion of vindictiveness paints everything about the previous government as corrupt and inept.

Perhaps the most glaring example of political irresponsibility was displayed in the support given by the BNP to the July 15 strike in protest of the sacrifice of the Prophet of Islam in Israel. It was convenience rather than reverence. It did not take long to see the result — backing parties want to use religion as a weapon for petty gains and populist gimmick. That one act of irresponsibility considerably emboldened the opportunists and criminally inclined religious zealots to insult a widely venerated person like Justice Shahebuddin Ahmed and that too in a function fully steeped in religious sentiment. Parties with huge and popular following

would do well to remember that this kind of irresponsibility is the other name of playing with edge tools.

It is high time politicians in this country realised that responsibility is an essential ingredient of democracy. This one thing can ensure the element of grace which our political culture is so badly bereft of. And one thing the parties would do well to remember is that grace is neither weakness nor a bad investment. It can only enhance their life in a pluralistic culture.

To the Editor...

Safe food preparation

Sir, Food-borne diseases are extremely common in Bangladesh. Almost everyone experienced episodes of vomiting or diarrhoea attributes of 'food poisoning' from time to time. The food poisoning may be due to bacteria, e.g., salmonella or shigella; bacterial toxins, e.g., staphylococcal enterotoxin (the most common form of food poisoning) or viral, parasitic, fungal organisms; their toxin products or may be chemical in origin.

Therefore, hygienic preparation of food is essential to good health. World Health Organisation (WHO) has issued a list of ten 'golden rules' for 'safe food preparation', as follows:

- 1) Choose foods processed for safety: while many foods, such as fruits and vegetables, are best in their natural state, others simply are not safe unless they have been processed.
- 2) Cook food thoroughly. Many raw foods, most notably poultry, meat and unpasteurised milk, may be contaminated with disease-causing organisms. Thorough cooking will kill the pathogens.
- 3) Eat cooked foods immediately. When cooked foods cool to room temperature, micro-organisms begin to proliferate.
- 4) Store cooked foods carefully. In almost all cases, it is the young men in groups of two/three invariably on motor cycles or on three-wheelers that carry out such act at any time of the day. The young ones do not do it for drugs any more; they now do it for rewards.
- 5) They now want everything like the Nike shoes, the designed clothes and some pocket money for entertainment, and they are not prepared to work and save. Muggers can make substantial sum in one/two minutes. The other day two identified advocates were mugged near the High Court Building. The young ladies could not get any assistance or record the three-wheeler's number in fear.

8) Keep all kitchen surfaces meticulously clean. Since foods are so easily contaminated, any surface used for food preparation must be absolutely clean.

9) Protect foods from insects, rodents, and other animals. Animals frequently carry pathogenic micro-organisms which cause food-borne diseases. Storing foods in closed containers is your best protection.

10) Use safe water. Safe water is just as important for food preparation as for drinking. If you have any doubts about the water supply, boil water before adding it to food or making ice for drinks. Be especially careful with any water used to prepare an infant's meal.

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What shields muggers?

Sir, Muggings have reached epidemic proportions in our beloved mega-city Dhaka, where everyday many cases of such incidents are reported. If we could take statistics on these known and unreported cases the figure would astonish even the law enforcement authorities. In almost all cases, it is the young men in groups of two/three invariably on motor cycles or on three-wheelers that carry out such act at any time of the day. The young ones do not do it for drugs any more; they now do it for rewards.

They now want everything like the Nike shoes, the designed clothes and some pocket money for entertainment, and they are not prepared to work and save. Muggers can make substantial sum in one/two minutes. The other day two identified advocates were mugged near the High Court Building. The young ladies could not get any assistance or record the three-wheeler's number in fear.

Many other women and men in our circle have been mugged in our streets of the metropolis. A friend of mine was held up at knife-point and robbed as he put the key in the door to his flat. Recently, a couple was followed right from the time they took the rickshaw and mugged of their belongings in broad day-light.

What factors in our society generally then shield these muggers operating under the very nose of the law enforcement authorities? To my mind, the following conditions help these youths: indifference of others; runaway growth of population and thereby unemployment, vices etc.; failure of the political parties (when in power) to evolve system of check on minor crimes and nature of punishment muggers generally get; not enough bold printing of registration number on the vehicles; our carelessness in carrying valuables, and finally, system of payment in cash — even government/autonomous bodies do not accept cheques or credit cards.

Citizen Dhaka

Stages of transparency Sir, Three cheers for the government and the police for rounding up some of the criminal gangs running havoc in the society.

Justice delayed is justice denied. The public have developed a sceptical image of police processing of cases. The hanging judicial reforms have held up lakhs of pending cases. In administration, the back door is in the forefront (in successive regimes).

The system. It stinks. We need an internal revolution to speed up routine work. Announce — no speeches please. A Husnain Dhaka