

Hartal Again

About a half of Dhaka road-users were out of Dhaka on a grand holiday spree of four days, the third of these coming as a gift from the opposition. And workers in Saleha Garments worked all right in BNP leader Redwan Ahmed's factory, as gleefully projected by BTV. But the truth of the day was a complete hartal on Sunday as called by the opposition led by BNP ostensibly to protest the recent unprecedented spurt in petroleum price. That it was also called as a part of their movement to oust the government wasn't left unclear by some leaders.

Sunday's was a complete hartal in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. So what? What does it prove and what does it do? The hartal was absolutely unnecessary to prove that a large section of our people were not happy with the petroleum price spurt.

A full week's press was up to its teeth carrying public reaction to the price hike. Hartal may have added to its denunciation but at a totally disproportionate cost to the economy and public convenience, not to mention adding another blow to the concept of work ethics.

What did the hartal achieve? It didn't do any achieving besides seriously injuring a journalist, mounting an attack on the women activists of the Samnul Nari Samaj and rampaging on an unprecedented scale the National Press Club including a beat-up of lawyers attending a seminar there. In as much as we denounce police excesses and want them to be pressured to explain and atone for journalist Habib's grievous injury, we also denounce the BNP excesses in the Press Club and in front of it. We had cautioned the previous opposition party and the present one against making a practice of this society shut-up called hartal and here are the results of not heeding to that.

We caution the politicians again not to seek in hartal a royal road to power. Hartals did not bring AL to power. Misgovernance by BNP did. In fact, the 34 per cent vote that BNP got in the June '96 elections had lot to do with people being fed up with AL hartals.

We urge both the political parties to create conditions so that hartal can be avoided. Both AL and BNP must act responsibly. Our economy cannot take this politics of hartal any more.

Attack on the Press

Last Sunday's hartal saw vehicles carrying press workers come under attack by the pickets at various parts of the city. From reports published in the press it is clear that they were no stray incidents of violence and the BNP activists went after the autorickshaws of some dailies with a vengeance.

How could it happen? Aren't the press vehicles exempt from the hazards of agitational activities during strike or hartal hours by the announcement of the concerned parties themselves?

Every party has come to state it quite categorically before a hartal programme that press vehicles like those belonging to essential services will be exempted from it. They are expected to be neither obstructed nor attacked.

BNP also made it clear before Sunday's hartal that press will remain outside their disruptive campaign. And as it has now become a custom, press vehicles on that day were plying under the unmistakable identity of *Sangbadpatra* or press written in magnified letters on a red piece of cloth. How could the street activists ignore a party decision? Do we have to conclude that the BNP leaders have no control over their workers and activists? If not, how else can one explain this gross violation of a public announcement?

If BNP did not want the press vehicles to move during the hartal hours why did not it make that intention clear through a prior announcement? Newspaper authorities in that case would have at least been left with a choice as regards the safety of the staffers.

The incident has once again proved the discrepancy between the words and actions of our political leaders. If they have no control over the party workers they have no right to call political programmes that may harm people engaged in their professional duties.

BNP should apologise for the attack on press vehicles publicly if it prefers uprightness to expediency. If it does not own the responsibilities then it should do every thing possible to dissociate itself from it in a convincing manner. Because this is not an incident to be swept under the carpet as a minor aberration. This is exactly how the process of usurping people's right begins. And that is a sacrifice in democracy.

For a Worthy Transit

Barely a week is left before the transit route through Bangabandhu will be open for Nepalese trucks to head for the Himalayan kingdom with goods unloaded at the Mongla port. No doubt an occasion to savour in terms of co-operation among the south Asian neighbours but from available signs, a spring in the stride is necessary to make this facility worth the interest of the user.

With the transit through the northern border of the country scheduled for a September 1 opening, the local authorities have got an unenviable task of working at a break-neck speed to have the ancillary facilities like bank, warehouses, customs, insurance and immigration offices set up in time. Much of this hassle could have been averted had there been a vision about developing infrastructural facilities at areas with potential for transborder trade and communications.

The Nepalese request for a quick furnishing of the transit facilities is a timely reminder of our disadvantage when it comes to infrastructural facilities. If we are really serious about fruitful foreign presence for a shot in the arm of our economy then we need some sound planning about infrastructural upliftment. With the Mongla port destined to be a centre of hectic activity in the near future as a result of enhanced regional co-operation, the government should think seriously about connecting the two sides of Rupsha with road and rail link for smooth communication.

CONVOCATIONS are highly irregular in the public universities in Bangladesh. The Dhaka University is holding its 40th convocation after 27 years. Does the irregularity of convocations matter to the students who are the primary beneficiaries of these grand occasions? Does it matter to the faculties? Does it affect the academic and administrative performance of the public universities? In other words, is the irregularity of convocations in the public universities truly a significant problem that deserves to be solved? If it is a significant problem, how had it been created and perpetuated? These issues and questions need to be investigated if we hope to solve the problems of our public universities.

According to the news media, the Dhaka University is expecting to hold a convocation some time this year; the last one was held 27 years ago. The media had dramatised the news by referring to personal disappointments and tragedies. Because convocations were not held for such a long time, about two hundred thousand students had been deprived from receiving diplomas through formal occasions. And some of them shall have never get the chance as they had already left this world for eternity.

Is Regular Convocation Truly Important?

The question may sound meaningless and ridiculous, but it is not.

I was involved with the Bangladesh Agricultural University from 1969 to 1995, first as student and then as a teacher. I cannot recall whether I had ever desired to receive my certificates through convocations after completion of the requirements of my degrees. Perhaps I was so preoccupied and worried about getting a job that the pleasure and happiness of receiving my certificates through convocations failed to appear in my mind. All students had accepted the provisional certificates as original ones; and I was no exception.

When I joined as a teacher of the University, I did not think about the convocation problem. There could be several reasons. First, I was not included in my official responsibilities. Second, I was again very busy to build up my academic career. Lastly, and perhaps the most important, in the prevailing political situation, it would have been highly unusual to think

How Important is Convocation?

by Dr Khandakar Qudrat-I Elahi

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about convocation problem.

The general teachers of the universities take convocation day as a vacation. They do not have to worry about teaching or other official duties on the convocation day as the university postpones all classes. They participate in the grand occasion wearing special gowns and enjoy the day.

It is really difficult to say whether the university administrations had considered or does consider now irregular convocation a problem. However, it is quite certain that the governments in the past had not deemed the convocation irregular a problem for the university administration or academics. The present government's view is perhaps not different from the previous ones.

This convocation problem could not have continued for such a long time if parties concerned considered it a problem. To solve the problem, it is indeed important to know at the very beginning whether the convocation is an important activity of the university education.

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reward them with their earned certificates.

The convocation also serves other objectives besides distributing degree certificates. The students who exhibit special talents in their course works and the teachers who show exceptional performance in their research and teaching activities are also recognised and rewarded in the convocations.

The irregularity of convocation frustrates its purposes in two different ways. First, it causes personal disappointments; students are deprived from the pleasure and happiness of receiving their diplomas through an august occasion like convocation. Second, it hampers the development talents and scholastic activities in the country by depriving meritorious students and brilliant teachers from receiving special awards and recognition.

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be increased to strengthen the backbone of the nation. The government has vested this important responsibility on their government. Therefore, ensuring accountability of public universities is tantamount to ensuring government's own accountability to the public.

Factors Causing the Problem

We have been enjoying political freedom for a half century; first, as the eastern part of Pakistan and then as an independent state. The convocation problem has been continuing for this whole period of our independence. The fundamental factor that had created this problem is the university ordinances.

The government is directly involved with the management of the public universities, because these institutions are financed from public money. The Ministry of Education is responsible to supervise and monitor the activities of all public universities and the President of the country, by virtue of his office, is their Chancellor. By the ordinances, the Chancellor must consent to holding a convocation and distribute certificates personally or through his representative.

This provision of the ordinances is the root cause of the convocation problem of the public universities. Three reasons can be discerned. First, the foundation of democracy in our country is very weak. For the greater part of our half-century freedom, we have been ruled by the military people. Therefore, most of the past heads of state were politically controversial people.

On the other hand, our student organisations had played very progressive role in the past; they did not accept the people who had occupied the state power undemocratically; they had prevented convocations conducted by these people.

Second, when Pakistan was created in 1947, there was only one university in the whole of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh — Dhaka University. Obviously, it was not a problem for the provincial governor to spend a day in a year for the ceremony.

The present situation is completely different. There are 11 public and 16 private universities in the country. The government has already announced to establish 6 more universities in near future. Additionally, all universities are expected to introduce semester system.

Under the circumstances, two very damaging outcomes will be produced if the President

wishes to preside over personally the convocations of all universities of the country regularly. Firstly, President's official duties and responsibilities will be greatly hampered and thereby sacrificed. Secondly, it will be very expensive in terms of both public money and use of public employees.

The fact is quite obvious that it is neither reasonable nor feasible on the part of the President to administer personally university convocation ceremonies any more.

What is the Solution?

I hope my readers will agree with me on four points.

First, both from the administrative and academic point of view, holding convocation regularly and routinely is very important for the universities.

Second, the fundamental cause of the convocation problem is their ordinances. These ordinances require the President to consent to holding of the convocation and administer the occasion personally or through his representative.

Third, the system of Provisional Certificates has perpetuated the problem.

Finally, under the present circumstances, it is neither reasonable nor feasible on the part of the President to administer personally university convocation ceremonies any more.

Based upon the above information and theories, two steps may be considered to solve the problem: i) release the President from the responsibility of administering the convocations; and ii) discard the Provisional Certificates system.

Relieving the President from convocation responsibility requires amending the university ordinances. It is indeed a time-consuming matter to amend these ordinances. But solving the problem is indeed a pressing need. In this situation, an alternative arrangement may be made without waiting for the amendment. This alternative is: 'all outstanding convocations be completed as soon as possible by a representative of the President. And this alternative is permitted by the ordinances.

To avoid political controversy about the alternative arrangement, the President might consider choosing Justice Habibur Rahman, the Chief Adviser of the second Caretaker government, as his representative.

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To the Editor...

For proper plantation

Sir, Plantation programme is very good for environmental balancing. Because of this now-a-days the people have become very inspired and planting various trees in their own lands. We are the inhabitants of a poor country having poor knowledge of planting, the authority concerned should take necessary steps through the daily newspapers by publishing a chart so that the people can get the primary knowledge of planting like the row and the distance between one plant and another. This is very important because we see that trees are planted without maintaining any proper gap. I think people will be benefited by this information.

Rafat
Kamarjuri
Gazipur

Adding fire to the fuel

Sir, When you support a team in a football match, you cheer them up. But, as they start losing, when even ace player (may be your hot favourite) misses a pass or delivers a wrong shot, he gets wrath even from you. Sometimes, you fail to control and hurl filthy unparliamentary language against him. Similar is the case with us now. We favoured our team with much hope that they would lead us (common people) to better life and prosperity than it was before. But what we see, prices of commodities are on the rise. Mr SAMS Kibria (MoF), once a DS's "On the Record" column writer and adviser to AL chief, shouldn't have made such record.

As items getting dearer, tendency to hoard and to create artificial short supply against demand has prevailed. This situation has led to abnormal price-hike and to a platform for corruption. This is what happening and our team is keeping mum on this. In such situation, sudden increase of 61 per cent fuel price, offering a lame excuse, is going to maim our daily life. During budget session, profit and loss incurred by government were amply discussed and made on the air. But, we heard nothing on Tk 200 crore worth of loss of BPC, either from the MoF or from the Energy Ministry. Couple of months old budget has induced enough artificial price.

At this juncture, increase of fuel price close to double, in some cases, would certainly have impact on all items and operation cost of vehicles. Ultimately, all production and processing cost will increase. Thus, from manufacturer to trader and vendor all will have an excuse of raising price without any check. Such price-hike may be obvious and also unscrupulous. So, it will lead to general dissatisfaction. Common man will be hard-hit. All supporter of our team, out of desperation may utter peace of mind against our team leader and his linkman and scorer for bad pass and miss-delivery. We learnt from the press that BPC

was making huge profit due to monopoly and purchase price plus overhead and sale price difference. Even some of the profit is consumed by BPC as fat bonus. Whereas, had there been a competitor, then efficiency and performance of BPC could have been compared to justify such overhead and bonuses.

If the present selling price of petroleum products has been increased by keeping the same rate and prodigal overhead, as before, then it will be like: 'To Rob Peter and Pay Paul' affair. I suggest, General Nuruddin, should first find out the costing and pricing mechanism in depth, before he throws us in deep waters. Why shouldn't we try, much-discussed, privatisation in this area, too. USA also imports oil; their fuel price is (\$ 1.20 per gallon) less than what we have in our country. Our energy ministry didn't mention price of fuel in the USA. But for excuses, we always give reference of Indian market; for that, people call us India prem. What India follows cannot be quoted as an isolated case, then it will lead to wrong decision-making. Their affairs should be judged in their perspective and our one, be in our perspective.

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Recreation in Bangladesh

Sir, Laughing and recreation are next to medicine. Though natural calamities, over-population, corruption etc., stand as an obstacle to normal life, we the citizens of Bangladesh are brave people. It has been proved true several times. Observers both at home and abroad strongly believe that the spirit of bravery plus optimism has been influencing all of us in the dark hours of life since 1971.

Keeping that in view, some of the old people including myself desire to form a Laughing Club for pure pleasure and joys in life. For mental recreation, we would like to organise trips to places of historical importance, industrial units, long drive in the countryside, deep forests, place of natural beauty, the sea beach etc. Wit and humour make people understand the bad influence of negation in life.

Let us start the work in this field to change the conservative attitude of ours in recreational worlds for healthy human environment. Laughter is the best medicine in normal situations. It is as essential as fresh air.

Abul Ashraf Noor
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Ruthlessness

Sir, In recent times, it has become sort of a 'culture' to damage motor vehicles in the name of 'protest' for any reason — be it a road accident on any other incident totally unrelated to the movement of vehicles. The government should and must ensure the normal life of people whenever they make any

rash decision like the raising of fuel prices few days back. The people who have put up with this government decision are afraid to take to the roads with their vehicles as some rowdy elements are launching sudden attacks. As a result, we are living a life, abnormally tense for the past few days. Meanwhile, the ministers are sitting back after saying that the fuel price-hike would hardly have any negative impact.

Chowdhury Naim Rahman
Chittagong

A virus affected national income

Sir, Fishing is an important income source in Bangladesh. It goes without saying that Bangladesh earns ample foreign exchange by exporting fish, especially shrimp. Khulna, Satkhira and Bagerhat, known as 'the Kuwait' of Bangladesh, are the suitable field for shrimp. Most of the people's activities of these localities are concentrated on this project.

But recently these areas have been affected by so-called virus. As a result, people have to bear huge loss every year and their economic loss is aggravating day by day. My earnest appeal to the authority concerned is for attention and speedy necessary action.

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CORRECTIONS

In my article, (column: INSIGHT) "Was the Petroleum Product Price Increase Necessary?", published on Sunday, August 24, I regret to say that there were some mistakes. First of all, instead of BCIC it should be read BPC (Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation). Secondly, in the last column, the second and the third paragraphs should read as follows: "Third, Bangladesh Economic Review 1997-98 reported that BPC made profits of Tk 248.79 crores in 1990-91 which came down to Tk 75.70 crores in 1995-96 and to a loss of Tk 448.10 crores in 1996-97" (Table-22, page-117). But in those years, BPC contributed to the Treasury Tk 210.00, Tk 66.00 and Tk