

Leading to Nowhere

Political violence is on the rise and the fact that there does not seem to be any end in this crescendo of acrimony gives rise to the highest concern among us. Yesterday afternoon's clash between the law enforcing agency and opposition BNP was the latest proof of this frightening trend. On the one hand the police teargassed demonstrators indiscriminately and there were the BNP activists on the other who blasted bombs and crackers with vengeance. What was this heightened campaign of violence for?

The opposition was well within its democratic rights in its attempt to hold demonstration in the city. The government did not seem to have any reservation about it when it was announced, not any the public knew of. But in reality it seemed hell-bent on not allowing the BNP to hold any street demonstration. Roads were cordoned off by riot police and traffic were redirected much to the hassle of the people on the streets. What was the rationale of the government decision to foil the bid for demonstration? To avoid traffic congestion? No way. Irony of it all is that while police tried to bludgeon BNP activists two government ministers, according to a vernacular daily's report, held their meetings on the streets anyway.

The whole episode then leaves us with a vital question vis-a-vis the basic tenets of democracy. Has the BNP been robbed of its right to hold street demonstrations? If so, under what law? Government may take the position that it was only trying to make the opposition observe the recent DCC prohibition on political assembly on streets. It can also refer to its moral obligation as far as citizen's safety and convenience are concerned. But then how does it strike a tolerable balance between the question of opposition's democratic right and its own administrative and moral obligation?

The government, we are afraid, is compelling us to assume — and this feeling has got stronger ever since the DCC announced the city streets off limits to political programmes — that its action in respect to main opposition BNP has bordered on high-handedness. The differences are getting sharper and wider and are only contributing to the vitiation of an already badly fouled up atmosphere.

And finally we voice the question of the day: where and how will this end?

Diseased at Both Ends

Notwithstanding Bangladesh having an enviable spread of health-care centres strewn all over, the nation has a long way to catch up with the modern nations of the west and Japan and even the Sri Lanka in turmoil. Of the total number of people needing medical attention only 26 per cent go to doctors with a degree. The rest or 74 per cent of the afflicted go to quacks and compounders and abracadabra practitioners and salesmen at the drug-stalls.

Of the 26 per cent going to doctors about 2 per cent visit homeopaths and one-half per cent *hekims* or *kavirajs* having a degree in their line. About 11 per cent go to government health facilities and 13 per cent to private clinics. This should mean that the clinics and private practitioners are enviably placed in the market. And that the qualified town doctors treat some 25 lakh patients yearly on the basis of at least one in a family seeing a doctor in a year. And absolutely no town doctor writes a prescription without first going through pathological investigation reports of the most comprehensive kind. The size of the business — the doctor's fees plus the pathologist's — may beat our imagination.

And there is now this news that there has been a 50 per cent rise in patient's expenses on both the doctor's and pathologist's account. The above figures are all, except the number of patients, from a government survey which also says of the total expense incurred by a patient — 26 per cent is received by those two. While the number of patients is growing by leaps and bounds, the price of treatment should not be increasing at the prohibitive rate it is doing. But that is what is happening.

Whoever can afford to get a treatment abroad is not going to the local specialists. This does not speak well of the treatment offered by the highest in the profession. Be that as it may, our medical scene is not well at either end, patrician and plebeian. The whole situation is badly in need of a rationalisation.

Demolish for the Effect

DCC's three-week-long demolition success we have been so eulogistic about, for its being a model of apolitical impartiality and assertive protection of civic rights, has regrettably come to a cul-de-sac. The civic body which was just about appearing in a glare of positive light after being subjected to well-justified criticism in most other areas, is having to crane its neck to survey a way out of the cocoon it has willy-willy walked into.

Of course, in part, the DCC seems to be responsible for it because it embarked on the campaign rather prematurely without having secured adequate ammunition of approvals from the PWD, WASA, railways and other departments to dismantle the numerous illegal constructions situated on their territories. But in all fairness to the DCC it must be said that it undertook the good work with a commendable sense of urgency rather than deferring it on the ground that others were not cooperating with it. Whereas they should have received unstinted support from the various organisations on whose lands the unauthorised structures stand they have on the contrary met with an inexplicable unresponsiveness. Hence the DCC finds itself in the cornered role of listing out only those structures that are on its territory and razing these to the ground in its own right. There may be three hundred such illegal constructions ready for demolition by the DCC, but a far larger number remain off-limits till such time as other organisations formally let the DCC do so for them.

The demolition work cannot be allowed to stop half-way because this has already restored rule of law in a particular area amidst a sea of lawlessness. The AL has not objected to bringing down the structures wearing its own label which is why the BNP too has not raised a word when illegal outfits flaunting the latter's identity were bulldozed. The example needs sticking in firmly.

Can We Expect an Economic Miracle?

We cannot expect an economic miracle so long we do not allow the grand vision to dominate our minds. We should think global and forget the small, petty and vested interests. We must give up our cabbage patch mentality.

The naive intent of the government, according to newspaper reports, is not to allow a monopoly in the Bangladesh gas/oil industry. It is naive because the global energy market is a near-monopoly, dominated by a handful of firms. What dramatic changes do we propose to bring about in our own cabbage patch?

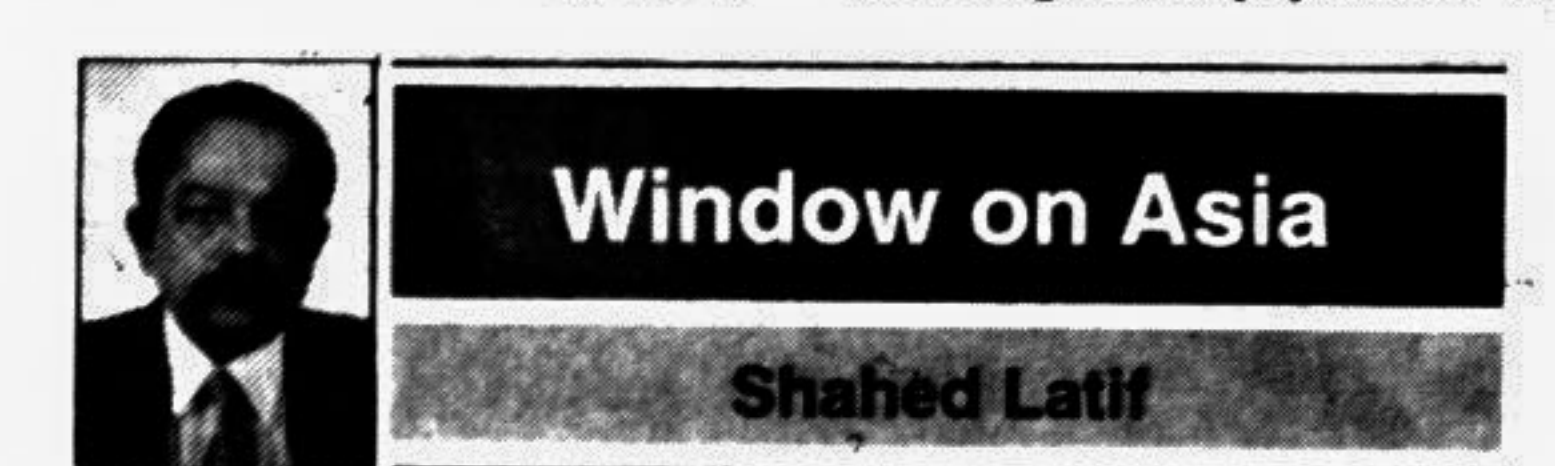
We cannot expect an economic miracle so long we do not allow the grand vision to dominate our minds. We should think global and forget the small, petty and vested interests. We must give up our cabbage patch mentality.

The human factor constitute the greatest hindrance towards the realisation of the economic miracle. I do not think any senior bureaucrat or politician seriously believe that within a decade or two, as happened in South Korea, it is possible to attain an average standard of living whereby no one is poor any more; everybody is well nourished; and, there is wide spread literacy.

In terms of natural resource endowment, our geopolitical situation and the potential of a huge market of 150 million people, we are well poised for a dramatic take off. The massive impediments are institutional — essentially of human origin.

First, the state of politics in the country. As of today, a stable two-party democratic system, not vitiated by minority interest or ethnicity, can easily emerge. The homogeneity of our population (one language, one race) constitute a great asset. It is not true in any other South Asian country — not even

Bhutan. However, our politicians are not convinced. They are not convinced that their primary role is to assist in the emergence of a stable, two-party democratic system. They must grab the seat of government and according to the leader of the opposition, it should now take less than two years to return to power. The party in position is therefore engaged in a continuing struggle to hold on to power. Politics, instead of being staged at the Parliament, goes down to the streets and production related activities are brought to a



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

standstill through hartals. How can we expect an economic miracle when politicians are determined to keep us poor and destitute. Perhaps, they think that only then their kind of politics should thrive.

December 16, 1971 was day of hope and aspiration. Since then, the long quarter century remained a period of frustration. No political leadership committed to economic growth and dedicated to the nurturing of a liberal competitive economy emerged — either through an authoritarian takeover or the ideal democratic process.

However, it must be conceded that prospects of an economic miracle in Bangladesh is a very

recent phenomenon. On the day of liberation, US Secretary of State, castigated Bangladesh as a basket case — a country perpetually destined to remain poor. It further proved to be so with the onset of famine in the early 1970s. It is to the credit of the ordinary farmers of the country that they proved the basket case to be utterly false. Food production staged a remarkable comeback. Today, no other place of the world, so much food is produced in so few lands and for so many people. The Bangladesh population of

of the important locations for competitive manufacturing, given the abundant supply of cheap but competent labour.

Possibility of an economic miracle is, first of all, due to confirmed prospects of abundant reserves of natural gas (and probably petroleum as well). Although not in terms of huge abundance, the prospects were not unknown to the international oil companies. However, the recent surge of interest is due to the nature of our natural gas. It is the cleanest fossil fuel in the world. Environmentally sound and sustainable yield of enormous quantities of such an energy resource have now drawn the attention of international oil and gas industry.

It is not only natural gas. The emerging concept of South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), through which ports of Bangladesh would clearly become the gate-way to the north-eastern part of the subcontinent should also open up abundant opportunities for investment and growth, not only in Bangladesh but in an entire region (or sub-region) where enormous resources remain untapped. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and north-eastern states of India, together constitute a vast region where development remained land-locked due to lack of access to rest of the world for efficient merchandise trade and development. Later on, as conditions permit, Tibetan region of China and Arakan province of Burma may be linked to an expanded growth-promoting region. The settlement of the water

dispute with India added an important dimension of stability to our relationship with India. At the same time, India is a huge importer of energy. Our enormous reserves of gas is not enough. Investors would look for the market first and for natural gas — nothing is better than the market next door.

Given the definite existence of pre-conditions for an economic take off, the greatest hindrance to overcome is the nature of politics of today. The parliamentary system of government will tend to remain fragile so long the main opposition party fails to participate in the parliamentary process. The opposition must play its due role as the major watchdog of the activities, omissions and commissions, of the government. It is the verdict of the people and the main opposition party, in particular, should play its due role. Otherwise, the entire parliamentary system will remain fragile and the system of governance will be rated as weak by all concerned.

And, there will always be a limitation on investment when the nation is not strong enough through a well functioning system of government, whose one of the three vital components is the Parliament. The decision of the largest opposition party not to join the winter session of the Parliament is indeed very unfortunate. It will adversely affect the investment rating and foreign investment will continue to remain shy. The consequences of the role of the opposition are very clear: the economic miracle will definitely elude us; although we can see it, we can almost feel it. If there is a consensus among the two major political parties, the miracle can be easily within our grasp.

Fifth Development Plan: Prevailing Perspective

by Md Azizul Hoque

Time is ripe now for political economics yielding place to economic politics so that development diplomacy work positively and satisfactorily to keep politicians, parliamentarians and public representatives and functionaries well informed and on the right track.

THIS write-up argues in support of a 3-year (1997-2000) national development plan, or alternatively, year to year basis Annual Development Plan (ADP) for 3 years in the backdrop of current hectic exercise on the 5th 5-year Plan (1997-2002). The exemplary samples for the above support given reasonably and cogently are 2-year interim plan (1978-80) meaningfully termed as consolidation plan and 2-year plan holiday enjoyed by 2 fiscal years in 1995/96 and 1996/97.

ADP 1997/98 has been officially launched under the reported umbrella of a 5-year (1997-2002) development plan. The draft plan document, commendably prepared in a short time, has yet a long way to go for its being modest and realistic in content and depth on the one hand and okayed by national consensus on the other.

It is highly desirable that this plan document, unlike all other previous plan documents of 1973-95 period, passes through national Parliament. Preparation and approval of a million dollar plan is a part of the constitutional obligation. We prepare and push forward willy nilly our plan and cleverly sidetrack 'metal detector' parliament. This is highly unethical and self-defeating opportunism.

Given an all-round fluid and volatile state of national affairs at this critical juncture, it is high time that we tighten our belt by 2000 to face Agenda-21 squarely in the ensuing century. For the ensuing century,

5th 5-year plan (2001-2005), may be under the canopy of 15-20-year perspective vision, will be the starting step. Ample time will be there for the plan having clear objective, strategy and modus operandi, inner strength, down to earth academic modelling and, above all, committed emphasis on off repeated self-reliance.

National scene everywhere is influenced by political economy. An unsavoury adage is that politics, an evil necessity, in the poor countries is in most cases the 'business of scoundrels'. Our people are proven hardy, resilient, God-fearing and intelligent. Tragedy is that tyranny of politics tops over all other tyrannies of foreign aid, poverty, endemic deprivation, centripetalism, elitist education etc.

Time is ripe now for political economics yielding place to economic politics so that development diplomacy work positively and satisfactorily to keep politicians, parliamentarians and public representatives and functionaries well informed and on the right track. Training and evaluation are too prerequisites for a good start.

One should not ride roughshod over plan making. An unbelievable event occurred in Bangladesh when the planning authority invited through

tender in the newspapers for preparation and submission of the fifth five-year plan in 1994 and, lo, thereafter swallowed the criticism through cancellation of the tender. Then, again, the planning authority in its infinite wisdom discarded one fine morning the medium term 5th 5-year plan exercise and instead embarked on preparing a Participatory Perspective Plan (PPP) for 1995-2010 at a cost of about Tk 5 crore inclusive of UNDP's grant of Tk 3.80 crore. The discarded plan, according to the then State Minister of Planning, would be (i) people and vision-oriented plan replacing conventional target oriented one and (ii) 100-150 page 5-chapter document. May God bless these captains of the adventurous games.

Participatory discussion meetings were heard to have been held in about 25 districts but local level plans of 10 districts only could be prepared for interim presentation. The draft PPP accompanied by those 10 district plans were placed before National Economic Council (NEC) for approval. No approval was accorded to it because the draft PPP was criticised vehemently as being an inconsistent and non-sensical document.

No doubt, the concept and strategy behind the participa-

tory bottom up planning in the framework of people (i.e. anti-bureaucracy-aristocracy, lootocracy) central and local government is the crying need of the day. Development planning should reflect field conditions. As Prof WA Lewis, Nobel laureate economist, succinctly states, 'Popular enthusiasm is both the lubrication oil of planning and the petrol of economic development. It is a dynamic force that almost makes all things possible.'

Many momentous events are taking place of late in national life. A 30-year water agreement has been made with India. The Ganges barrage proposal, the Teesta barrage problems, the historic opening of Jamuna bridge soon and the Asian highway etc — all have tremendous socio-economic-financial implications. Moreover, early completion of previous regime's 'mandatory' and ongoing limping projects, induction of re-structured (comatose) local government system on a sound footing, macro-economic issues like banking sector reform, privatisation, administrative reform — all these need some sort of breathing time to cool down and stabilise.

The interim consolidation plan for 1997-2000 as proposed by the writer will provide time

and opportunity to contemplate deeply and prepare cautiously the 5th 5-year plan (2001-2005). This consolidation period will facilitate the government for conducive international climate in matters of widespread political and economic diplomacy to tide over the rising expectations of the teeming millions of Bangladesh.

Here a meaningful reference is made to The Daily Star of 26.1.97 wherein a refreshing article entitled, 'Reflections on Development: Experience of District Development Conference' was written by our erudite Finance Minister-cum-Economist-Diplomat in his ca-

pacity as the Vice-Chairman of the Planning Commission. Reference is also made to The Daily Star of 23.1.95 wherein an article captioned 'Performance Evaluation: Bangladesh Context' was written by this humble writer. A mid-term review was at least made of the Third Five-Year Plan (1985-90). It is not publicly known whether Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990-95) has at all been evaluated any time — by Planning Commission (PC), the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and Ministry of Finance (MF). Whose legitimate baby is Plan Evaluation — annual, mid-term, and full-term evaluation? Let us pause, think and act accordingly.

The writer is retired joint chief, Planning Commission.

OPINION

Financing of Political Parties

Afzalur Rahman

This refers to an article titled 'How about introduction of Public Financing for Parliamentary Elections' by Mr CAF Dowlat which was published in The Daily Star on October 22, 1997. He referred to the address made by the Hon'ble President at the FEMA workshop recently. The most notable mention that the Hon'ble President referred to was the influence of black/white money in parliamentary elections and the flouting of election laws by the prospective candidates, and the lack of enforcement of laws by the Election Commission.

Now that democracy is taking its roots in Bangladesh with two successive elections under a neutral caretaker government where the public were able to exercise their right of franchise freely, it is expected that this will be slowly but surely institutionalised. It is about time that we start looking at the experiences of other countries which are practicing democracy and pick up from their experiences and try to fit in to our country's social, economic and cultural background.

Since 'Democracy' is a government of the people, by the people and for the people, it is implied that people's participation is central to make democracy a success. Every country has its own norms to practice democracy and to some extent the basic principle of organising under a party platform to achieve the desired goal of winning an election and forming the government is prevalent in Bangladesh. A party is normally formed with certain declared objectives and a declared manifesto to attract the general public to achieve their support i.e., their vote at the time of elections. To support a party's activities to drum up support in the form of organisational activities and to attain the participation of the people, huge funds are required.

It is a known fact that such funds are sourced from both external and internal sources by the political parties in our country. The internal sources of funds generally take the form of primary membership fees, monthly or annual subscriptions from the party faithfuls and donations. Amongst the donations, the largest chunk comes from the business community who support an individual party for reasons ad judged by them. In certain countries of the world, such contributions are an allowable expense for tax purposes subject to

fulfilment of certain conditions and ceilings. There are huge corporate supporters of Labour party and the Conservative party in the UK.

Similarly, there are corporate supporters of the Democratic party and the Republican party in the US. These two are the thriving democracies of the modern era. This in my view brings in transparency to the whole system of party-funding. Although in Bangladesh every conscious citizen of the country knows beyond any shadow of doubt that corporate supporters and interest groups are providing funds on a regular basis to the political parties, yet, there are no disclosure requirements as per law. I feel this matter need to be addressed through initiating public debates in the form of workshops, seminars, mass communications and a lead might be taken by the government or the NGOs who are involved in seeing flourishing of democracy in Bangladesh such as FEMA.

While the internal funding of political parties are less sensitive, it is the external fundings that are very sensitive to the conscious citizens, mainly the influence such donors would have should the party form the government after an election, and it is no secret that our major political parties are provided funds by countries within the regional gambit, especially during elections. It is for this reason that a system of disclosing the sources of funding of the political parties be reflected in the 'accounts' and 'annual report' of the parties which should be available during Annual Party conventions. To bring credibility to such accounts these should accompany an auditor's report. During an election, these should be provided to the voters by the contesting political parties to enhance their image and avoid any misconceptions about them.

Although the views expressed are very non-conventional, yet in my opinion, this would do a lot of good by way of removing doubts from the minds of the general public about the major political parties in our country and, whichever party wins, mainly takes a lead in this direction will, no doubt, gain political mileage which will definitely have an impact in future elections, be it local or national and will pave the way for the other parties to follow suit.

To the Editor...

Deportation from US

Sir, It has saddened me to know the Oct 4th declaration that the US Congress granting three-week Grace Period to all illegal immigrants who must secure their 'Green Cards' or return home, affecting more than five millions, coveys inhuman 'injustice' especially where many have been living for several years, some as long as five to ten years or more. Also worse still many of their children born in the States, make one wonder where Justice and Liberty have vanished after having the first seed sowed in the States.

Furthermore, to add to this crisis, yearly lottery take place permitting new immigration, instead of solving the age-old problem of the alien population also relieving them of their mental anxiety that is destroying their health and hope.

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Respect the land

Sir, When we consider a subject as serious as the environment, we often focus on its most tangible aspects — the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we find on the table. Those things are critically important. But to me, or rather all my mates, the environment is also about something less tangible, though no less important. It is about our sense of community — the obligation we have to each other, and to future generations, to safeguard the Almighty's Earth. It is about our sense of responsibility, and the realisation that natural beauty and resources that took millions of years to develop could be damaged, blighted and depleted in a matter of decades.

Today, the threats to our environment are crystal clear to see and much greater in scope and number than a few years back. We live in a world where climate change, deforestation,

holes in the ozone layer, air and water pollution and arsenic poisoning, in our country, are growing sources of concern. Our challenge is to find new ways to address those problems by reaching back to our oldest values of community and responsibility by inspiring a greater respect for the land and the resources we share, even as economies and societies advance and develop around the world.

If we are to protect and preserve our environment on a global scale, we all must do our part, as nations, as clubs, as families and as individuals. The need for awareness has never been greater, and the opportunity for us to make a difference is just as great. If we practice and teach the right kind of care and commitment for our environment, it will continue not only to bring us its natural gifts, but also to bring us together.

Farhan Yussouf
On behalf of the club Community Service Club, Scholastica, Dhaka.

Circuit House road

Sir, Since the Bailey Road has been made into one-way road, the traffic pressure has fallen on the narrow Circuit House Road. It has now become a multi-way road for the flow of traffic from both sides. As a result, on week days there is a traffic jam at peak hours with honking of cars and scooters rendering the air unbearable with sound and smoke.

Having no sidewalks, the unfortunate pedestrians have to squeeze between cars, baby-taxis and rickshaws to negotiate their way to bazar, kindergarten or other business with every possibility of accident. With open drains on both sides, falling into one of them is nothing unlikely. This being the dismal situation we request the authorities concerned to take action deemed necessary to make the Circuit House Road

safe and passable for pedestrians.

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The 'Divider' culture

Sir, In the horizon of our politico-municipal administration in Dhaka city, a new culture seems to be in the offing. Hectic activities are noticed in constructing road dividers in all roads/streets which are now lacking in these, irrespective of their width and location. These are all kind of roads, some of which are not-so-wide, but where traffic jam is almost rare, e.g. road from Kataban to Nikhet or Sonarganga Road leading from Panthopath junction to Hatirpool.

On the other hand wide streets like Manik Mia Avenue or Satmasjid Road or Road No. 27 (old) — now 16 (new) — have never been found congested with traffic generally except at school times. Yet wide dividers are being swiftly erected in Manik Mia Avenue and it is apprehended that the same phenomenon will appear in the near future in the other two roads of Dhanmondi RA. The most striking feature in the Manik Mia Avenue is that in the wide island dividers being erected there, date palm saplings are being planted, probably with a motive, as the critics say, adding that the purpose could have better been served by planting thorny 'baba' saplings.

In fact, local government institutions like city corporations 'pourasavas', etc., are meant to be service and welfare-oriented and 'politics' should have nothing to do with their functioning. The Mayor of DCC rightly said immediately after his election that he was essentially the elected mayor of all the rate-payers, irrespective of their party affiliations and it is said that he originally declined to accept the Presidency of

his party's city organisation. Of course, in a later stage of his Mayoral career, he played a much different role in the political arena, for which he might have his own reasons. But that is a different story.

Recently, in the melee of the multi-storied construction boom prevailing in the city, the city corporation is playing the role of a silent spectator, while roads and footpaths are being encroached upon by developers with impunity with all kinds of building materials, rubbishes and dugout earth spread over anywhere and everywhere. Yet, there is no sign of any action being taken by the city authorities in spite of warnings issued by them. In some areas, footpaths are being used to park 'cars on sale' by various car dealers under the very nose of the police and city corporation administration, who seems to have forgotten that footpaths were constructed with rate-payers' money. In the same breath, hectic work is being carried on in constructing the above-mentioned road 'dividers', sometimes resulting in traffic jams in areas where there were no jam.

A Citizen
Dhaka.

Bangladeshi programme on ATN

Sir, Bangladeshi programme on ATN is getting popular day by day among the viewers in Bangladesh as well as in other countries were ATN programmes can be watched via satellite. But one thing is not clear to me why in the last days' song programme titled *Haraye Khui* mostly old Indian Bengali songs are being presented. Don't we have good old Bangladeshi songs to present in the said programme?

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