

Jails are Hells

If there is anything close to hell on earth then probably it is a jail in Bangladesh. Thursday's Star report on jail inmates' jeremiad once again reminded us of this oft perceived notion. It took the untimely deaths of two young men for the world to know that the Narayanganj District Jail is no more a place for a living person. A gaol with a capacity for 126 inmates it now overflows with a population of 7791 Prisoners spoiling their clothes for the lack of adequate toilet facilities, and waiting for winter to have some sleep at last because it is impossible to sleep in the heat and congestion of summer — are some of the horrid details that tend to question whether we are civilised enough and if we still subscribe to the view that a jail is to reform a criminal back to a law-abiding life.

This paper has been vociferously pleading with the authorities to undertake the task of jail reform for a long time. In the aftermath of the bloody jail-break in Jessore when the whole country was caught in a consciousness frenzy about the inhuman inner reality of prison houses in Bangladesh, it was known that the committee formed with the express view of recommending measures for jail reform did a fairly exhaustive job and it was left to authorities to implement them. But nothing has been heard since then.

What is happening in the jails in Bangladesh is a twin robbing of rights of very fundamental nature. Not only is there continuing a reign of basic human rights violation as the authorities are unable to provide the minimum amenities and medicare but also people are being constantly denied of a legal right. Majority of the jail population comprises undertrial prisoners. These people suffer for months on end whereas they should not be held in captivity over three months unless they are convicted. Authorities pass the buck by referring to the tardy colonial legal system of the country for this extended confinement. But the time has come where the suffering of the jail inmates can no longer be ignored in an endless juggling of responsibility.

It is sad that the present government which appeared so sincere and positively inclined about addressing the inhuman condition of jail dwellers seems to have been caught in the all too familiar syndrome of feet dragging.

Please, wake up and act.

An Ominous Upswing

If the year, which is into its last month, stands out for the sheer volubility of resolutions adopted against incidence of violence on women and children, it seems all set to close on a highly alarming note of insecurity for those two most vulnerable segments of our society. In Dhaka city alone during the last eleven months 488 women and children were preyed on by rapists and 183 were abducted making for a monthly average of above 44 in the first category of crime and very nearly 17 in the second. Since there is a thin line of demarcation between rape and abduction, especially as far as the women or girl children went the incidence of sexual crime might well have been higher than 44 per month.

Dhaka being the capital city is supposed to be the most well-guarded among the country's urban centres. Ironically it is not. This is for the fact that the metropolitan police force is to a very large extent deployed for VIP duties, tailing political and assorted other processions and keeping an eye on public meetings of variegated persuasions. What remains of the manpower is spread thin over stationary and mobile vigilante duties. While the information relay network needs to be modernised with a wide scanner coverage, short-notice arrival of reinforcements will have to be guaranteed.

The incidents of rape and abduction do not happen all of a sudden. There must have been, in most cases, incipient early warnings about them coming which needed to be heeded timely for stopping them on the track. We suggest community or ward level visit and intervention as an antidote to the barbaric crimes against women and children.

Stop This Now

Poisoning a community's water is a capital crime in many countries of the world. This crime is, however, inconceivable in the modern times.

One of Bangladesh's most precious blessings of nature is the Sundarbans. Besides yielding annually wealth worth a billion to multifarious takers, it holds the potential of immeasurably more bounty. And even that is nothing compared to its value as the linchpin holding Bangladesh's ecosystem together ensuring its position as one of the pleasantest living countries in the world.

This treasure trove has been exploited for centuries, but without harming it eventually. With the increase in man's power to plunder and kill nature, Sundarbans has fallen a helpless victim to vandals and rogues of the strangest variety. Man, it seems, is bent on seeing the end of this biggest mangrove forest in the world, one that secures the coast lands of this country against the lashings of world's highest sea tides. As if the continuous wasting of the wonderful 600 thousand hectare forest together with government failures that spur this rather than arrest, was not enough, the vandals have started to kill all life forms in its rivers and channels spread over 200 thousand hectares. First, in their greed to catch a pricey variety of shrimp they trawled the rivers in a way that killed 150 fishes to get one shrimp.

And then someone thought up to poison the rivers and water courses so that these throw up their fishes for easy catching. As a result the Sundarbans is now being fast reduced into a slaughterhouse of all forms of life living in water.

If this cannot be stopped forthwith why should there be a government at all for this nation?

The Rural Non-farm Economy

A large segment of RNFA have the potentiality to deliver higher productivity than agriculture and pull labour out of agriculture. Appropriate credit and infrastructure policies could help these grow faster and firm.

If necessity is the mother of invention, then perhaps rural non-farm activities (RNFA) truly deserve the attention of researchers and policy planners. And, in fact, they do. Even in 1970s, the area, comprising RNFA, remained almost a virgin land in terms of research interests and policy prescriptions, because agriculture constituted the single most important source of employment at that time. During 1974-86 period (and also in later years) workers employed in agriculture remained almost stagnant while non-agricultural labour force increased to triple over the same period of time. Agriculture now, reportedly, employs less than 60 per cent of the total labour force compared to over three-fourths in early 1970s. Employment in RNFA activities increased by about 8 per cent per year. The dwindling capacity of agriculture to swallow the swelling labour force could be attributed to (a) non-expandable land frontier, (b) maximum cropping intensity and (c) low employment elasticity of output.

But growth of RNFA could signal both a good and a bad news. Good news is that when agriculture prospers, NFA flourishes via increase in wages and expansion of markets for inputs and outputs. It is called "pull factor" because high remunerative job opportunities in non-farm sector tend to pull labour out of agriculture. But agriculture itself can push labour out of its range and thus cause a "push factor". It happens generally when sluggish agriculture can no longer bear the labour force. In the context of Bangladesh, the hypothesis that pervades most is that agricultural stagnation forces labour to go and eke out a living elsewhere, albeit in low productive, low wage occupations. The fierce competition results in a decline in labour productivity and accentuation of poverty. On the other side of the divide, few studies have shown that strong pull factor accelerated employment in RNFA activities.

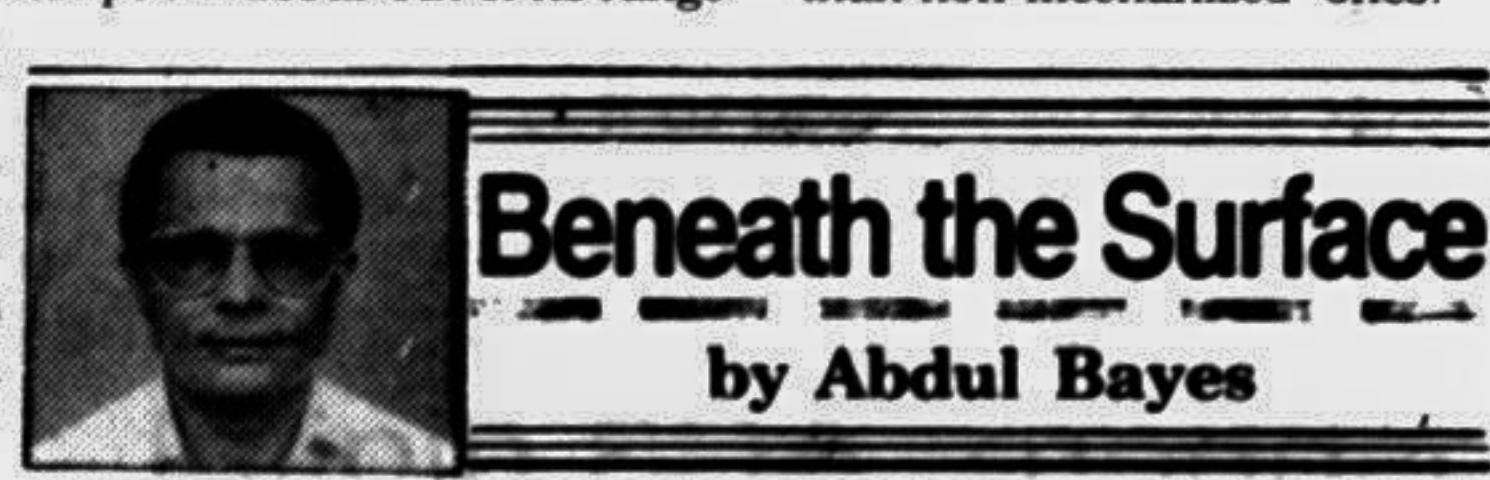
To shed some light on the various dimensions of RNFA, we present some information from a household level survey (1995) carried out by the Centre for Human Resources Development (CHRD) of Jahangirnagar University. For the entire sample (425 households from 22 villages of 22 districts), 60 per cent of the households reported that at least one member was engaged in RNFA. In an earlier study — using BIDS survey of 62 villages (1987) — Mahabub Hossain, Mstafizur Rahman and the present writer found that nearly 57 per cent were engaged in the said activities. The figures point at the importance of RNFA in rural economy. There are five principal occupations around which RNFA appears to hover: Industry (cottage), Trade, Business and Shopkeeping, Transport, Construction and Services. All of these RNFA constituted 44 per cent of total household income in 1995 compared to about 38 per cent in 1987. In other developing countries, RNFA are reported to be contributing 30-50 per cent of rural household income.

However, among the above mentioned five sources of employment, Trade and Shopkeeping continues to take the lead accounting for about one-fifth of all rural households' involvement.

Construction constitutes about 13 per cent and rural processing, meager 8 per cent. Almost 60 per cent of both landless and landowning households reported to have engaged at least one member in RNFA.

Participation in RNFA is found to vary across activities. Participation in industry, transport and construction activities seems to be poverty-driven. Excepting in services, education does not seem to influence participation. Age is found to be a statistically significant in factor influencing participation RNFA. Due to space constraint, we shall report on only estimates of value added, capital intensity and labour productivity in Rural Transport Sector: rickshaw, rickshawvan, cart driving, non-mechanized boat and mechanized boat.

Contrary to general notion (and apprehension) mechanized boats employ 781 man-days of labour and on average 3.25 workers. This compares with 497 non-days and 2.00 workers on average in non-mechanized boats. Again, on average, mechanized boats required initial capital of around Tk 47,000 compared to 10,000 in non-mechanized boats. Labour productivity per day turned out to be Tk 130 for mechanized boat and Tk 110 for non-mechanized boat. Mechanized boats use nearly 15 times more capital but gives 24 times more productivity than non-mechanized ones.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

rickshaw and rickshawvans are mostly operated by family labour but there is considerable employment of hired labour in cart and boat operation. A larger proportion of cart operators (one-fourth) had productivity lower than the prevailing agricultural wages. But 5-10 per cent of rickshaw and van operators and non-mechanized boat operators failed to earn a level of agricultural wage. By and large, RNFA pulled most of the labour from agriculture. Majority of the respondents of transport sector (two-thirds) reported that their economic condition improved over the last five years. Those reporting a deterioration were mostly from cart driving and non-mechanized boat operators.

In RNFA, a significant portion of employment is poverty-induced. These are enterprises which employ traditional technology and are run largely by female labour. Only technological transformation could keep them alive and able to compete with others. A significant portion of resource poor households (landless) appear to be engaged in trading and transport operations. Although these require small amount of capital, the average productivity is much higher than agricultural wage rates. The average productivity in petty trading was found to be 60-70 per cent higher than agricultural wages.

It thus appears that not all that happening in the RNF sector could be added to be pull factors. Yes a small segment of these in fact are so. A large segment of RNFA have the potentiality to deliver higher productivity than agriculture and pull labour out of agriculture. Appropriate credit and infrastructure policies could help these grow faster and firm. However, the conclusions so drawn should be treated with caution till a final version of the analysis lands, hopefully, very shortly.

OPINION

CHT Peace Accord

Salah Tanveer

The signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace accord is currently being hailed as a landmark among many circles. The principal opposition parties are engaged in hartal and in a massive mobilization of public opinion against this accord.

There is no doubt that the treaty calls for a departure from normal administrative patterns in other parts of the country. The granting of some sort of autonomy to the CHT tribals raises alarms in many circles as to whether is a prelude to an independence movement by the tribals. It may also be forcefully argued that such extraordinary concessions will encourage other tribals in the Sylhet or Madhupur area to seek similar status. Further, it is clear that the local council — envisaged in the accord, will have the right to determine who can and cannot come and live in this area. As one Bangladeshi netter observed, why should any Bangladeshi be disallowed to live in a part of Bangladesh when indeed there are no such restrictions on the tribals? Such concerns are indeed serious under normal conditions.

On the other hand, from a tribal perspective, being a small minority of a bigger political entity, they feel that they have had little leverage in the political process that shaped the destiny of the piece of land that they are their ancestors called 'home'. They had little to do with the dominant forces that carved out Pakistan or the ones that brought about Bangladesh.

In the name of development, they have been subject to massive flooding from the Kaptai project, with little or no compensation. There is reason to strongly doubt if they would have been subject to such careless treatment, if those in positions of power considered them the same as the rest of us.

Further, with the continued migration of nontribals, who do not share their culture, language or religion, feel disenfranchised in their own land. There is no understanding shown by successive governments to their concerns. They are told to forget their identity and see themselves as "Bangalee" — not too dissimilar in spirit to what was proposed in another day and another time: Forget that you are Bengalis; from this day onwards, you are Pakistanis.

Our political leaders, and indeed the Bangladeshi intelligentsia at large, failed to realise that the most effective way to subsume individual tribal identity into a larger Bangladeshi identity was to make them feel welcome as Bangladeshis. This statement holds for all minorities. This was not going to be achieved when minority demands are met with denial and dismissal. Further, in the early stages of the armed revolt, our response has been to send in more troops to try to contain them militarily. We cried foul about India's involvement, while not recognising opportunities for political settlement. A quarter of a

century later, after we have managed to radicalize a significant portion of the tribal populace, an accord has been signed.

With the past background, it is not surprising that the terms agreed upon reflect the distrust the tribals have of Bangladeshi authorities and the military. Given the past mistakes of our political leaders, the extra ordinary measures of this treaty should be seen as a chance to extricate ourselves from the tight corner that we put ourselves in. There is no certainty that this will work, or that other Chakma leaders opposed to the accord will not make the treaty look useless. There is also no guarantee that other tribal groups elsewhere in the country will not rise and seek similar privileges. Hopefully, our leadership will have taken a lesson and will confront such future situations in a more sensitive manner so as to avert any such eventuality.

Those who are up in arms over the treaty provisions should ask — what are our alternatives? If this problem was solvable militarily, we would have a solution some 20 years back. In the long run, isn't the integrity of the country better protected if we mend fences with seriously disaffected parts of our population, rather than try to impose upon them the will of the majority? This does not mean that the every demand of every group must be met — that simply we are sensitive to their genuine concerns and try to meet them at least half way.

The Systems Loss in the Garment Export Industry

A Zabr

We are all proud of the achievements of the garment export sector. Most of the credit goes to the early pioneers who slowly but surely build up the market themselves during the initial period, without much 'awareness' by the government. They have accumulated about two decades of experience and expertise. Still, it appears, things are not working smoothly and at routine level. Why the small day-to-day hurdles have to be brought to the press level?

But it is noticed that no government or regime can satisfy the BGMEA. It comes up with a list of demands at periodical intervals, regardless of the regime in power. The latest is the 25-point demand. There is a pattern in this exercise: the demands never end, the demands go on increasing, and the frequency of demands does not

decrease. What is the inference from this pattern of working?

Of course, global and local conditions are changing much faster than normally expected. The question arises: how is it that no regulatory agency can anticipate the changing requirements of this industry; and the rule makers always seem to be caught napping, unlesss pointed out in the form of demands?

Either it is insensitive administrative, or some sort of pressure tactics are being employed by the Association to get more and more favourable treatment, some of which may not be in public interest, that is, may suit some vested interests only. Is this the 'darling syndrome' of a spoiled child. Let us keep in mind the negligence of fire safety.

It would be better if the office

bearers meet the press and clarify this non-routine way of agitation and getting things done. How is it that the garment industry has not yet reached a routine level of working even after a decade? It is a pointer that the coordination and cooperation mechanism is not working in the way it has been planned and is being implemented. There is systems loss in the paper work and officialdom. By the way, what is the overall efficiency of the garment industry during the last 10-year period? BGMEA internal statistics are never published, except the export figures. What the computers are doing?

After a couple of months, another list of demands would be released, judging by the average. Something is wrong somewhere, as the grumbling never stops.

Call a Hartal, and it's a Hartal

by Matur Rahman

SHOULD hartal be the expression of protest and struggle in Bangladesh time and again? This question has been debated over the past decade by quarters within political parties and outside. The matter has been muddled over opinion polls have been carried out and much has been written on the issue. However, all these views have come up against a blank wall. Nothing has been taken into consideration. Experience shows that hartal remains the main programme of the opposition parties. And the call of hartal never fails.

Hartal has gained prominence in political programmes ever since the upsurge against Ershad's autocratic rule. Even then, one could note people's aversion and disinclination towards hartal. But hartals were observed. Over the past five or six years, Awami League and BNP have chosen hartal as their main action programme. It is the leadership of these two parties who have made this programme, the most crucial and extreme programme, all too easy. The way things stand now, a simple call for hartal means that hartal will be observed. Yet we know very well that, just as in the past, public opinion is still very much against hartal. A nationwide survey conducted by Bhorer Kagoj in March 1995 revealed that 51 per cent of the people were opposed to Awami League's hartal on 12 and 13 March that year. Another survey on 4 April 1997 reveals that 81 per cent of the people were not in favour of hartal. This indicates that public opinion against hartal is growing.

BNP leaders are repeatedly reminding us that during their rule, Awami League observed 173 days of hartal. Perhaps BNP researchers have calculated this total with the inclusion of all hartals, nationwide and local. Awami League hasn't refuted this either and so everyone takes it as true. Even though in power, on a local basis Awami League still calls hartals, blockades and siege programmes here and there. On the other hand, during the rule of the present government, BNP has observed 38 days of hartal during this 18-month period. Of this six days of hartal were observed nationwide, including Dhaka (one day being in Dhaka and in the divisional towns). At this rate, BNP will be able to break Awami League's record. The only problem of BNP is that now, more than ever before, people are opposed to hartal. The BNP party cannot simply rule out this reaction of the people. And so, despite being egged on by Jamaat or splinter parties led by Kazi Zafar, they are exercising a certain degree of restraint.

Against the Stream of Time

Actually, it is not only during the present times that debate has been raised over hartal. To observe hartal or not was point of dispute within the 15-party alliance headed by Awami League during the movement against autocrat Ershad's military rule, and later in September 1983 during the movement of the 15-party and 7-party alliance. From then the tendency of political parties to call hartal after hartal was noted. With total disregard to public opinion, the parties went ahead with their stringent programmes, feeling that if they continued in this manner, success would be inevitable. But that is not what experience has taught us. The struggle of the sixties has taught us that it was not hartal alone, but public mobilisation and participation of the people the key to victory.

During Pakistan time, from the students' movement starting from February 1962 against the 'Iron Man' Ayub Khan till 7 June, 1966, only three general strikes, that is hartals, were observed. Those strikes were on 17 December 1962, 27 September 1964, and 7 June, 1966. The 7 June hartal was observed in support of the six-point demand. At the time, large number of meetings, and students' strike programmes were held.

We remember, for these three hartals, small leaflets were distributed, posters were displayed and meetings were held at the street corners. I still remember going along in groups, posterizing through the night of 15 September 1962. And on 21 January 1969, a hartal was called to protest the killing of student leader Asad on 18 January. What a spontaneous hartal it was! Leaders and supporters of political parties must remember that day well. Next, on the hartal of 24 January, the mass movement became a mass upsurge. This two-day programme was observed at the initiative of the all-party students' movement. At that time, the Pakistani rulers failed to quell the people's movement even by clamping curfew. The city was teeming large with people, one procession following the other endlessly. Then hartal was observed throughout Pakistan on 14 February. And on 24 March, Pakistan's 'Iron Man' Ayub Khan had to step down from power.

Then from 1969 to 1971, a historic movement took place, incorporating various types of programmes which reflected the expectations of the people. Responding to the historic speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 7 March 1971, the people wholeheartedly joined the non-cooperation movement which culminated in the armed struggle initiated on 26 March that year.

No one keeps in mind any longer the strategies used to oust the colonial rulers of Pakistan during the sixties. At that time popular support and mass mobilisation were the main levers of movement. It is extremely unfortunate that from the very onset of the eighties, all political parties, whether left or right, have chosen to resort to the extreme programme of hartal rather than mobilising public opinion. And to support the hartals, there is a growing dependence on damaging cars, government and private property, resorting to firearms, explosives and violence.

The Easiest Programme

During the rule of President Ziaur Rahman, in 1980 a nationwide hartal was observed after

many years, protesting the killings at Rajshahi jail. From then, during the seven years till 1987, at the simultaneous initiative of first the 15-party alliance and then the 15 and 7-party alliance, a total of 20 hartals were observed. This included a 48-hour, that is two-day, hartal as well. On local level, 31 hartals took place during that period.

From June till December 1987, a total of 19 days of hartal was observed. This included six 48-hour hartals and one 72-hour hartal. There were only two half-day hartals. These data were collected by the writer in January 1988 from various newspaper reports when writing an article on hartals.

Thus hartals continue on an upward trend in Bangladesh. During Ershad's rule we saw the hartals being 'upgraded' from half-day to full-day, from 48 hours to 72 hours. And during BNP's rule, Awami League did not resort to merely one or two days of continuous hartal, but even six-day hartal with certain relaxation. Now hartals have become an easy programme for the political parties.

When BNP was in power, it had a lot to say against Awami League's hartals. Now BNP itself observes hartals at regular intervals, even though former Finance Minister Saifur Rahman has termed hartal and infectious disease. On the other hand, after creating a record in hartals itself, Awami League now is decrying such programmes. Admittedly, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said that she has spoken a lot in favour of hartal and now does not want to speak against it. London's renowned journal The Economist (27 September-3 October) has written that BNP's repeated hartals will accelerate decline in Bangladesh. Presently political stability is most essential to attract foreign investment. Hartal is damaging stability and having a debilitating effect on trade and business. However, BNP states that it is observing hartal to save the country from a worse predicament. On the other hand, the government party lacks the moral strength to call for an end to hartals, having resorted to such strategy itself when in opposition.

Responsibility ends with hartal

During the last BNP rule, Awami League would carry out its campaign for hartal by sending statements regarding the programme to the different newspaper offices or the offices of foreign radio stations and would also carry out certain

The key to the success of any movement or struggle is popular support and the capability of mass mobilisation. Everyone, including leaders of the government and opposition parties, should keep it in mind. Otherwise, hartal will tarnish the image and damage the strength of political parties as well as cause greater damage to the nation.

other publicity work. Then, on the day before the hartal, they would have a rather perfunctory torch procession and a lot of bomb explosions. Now too, the BNP leadership announces a hartal and thereby ends their responsibility. The too have the obligatory torch procession. Awami League would have picketing at key points of the city. On the day of the hartal it would have processions. Many of the central leaders would take to the streets. BNP does not even bother with that anymore. BNP announces the hartal but mainly Awami League activists control the streets. Thus, a serious political action like hartal has been reduced to something ridiculous.

The sharp political weapon which was used most calculatingly against the Pakistani colonial rule, is now being used with abandon against the democratically elected governments. We are rather shocked to note that those involved have no interest in activities with which they should be involved. Political parties to not distribute leaflets anymore, do not have posters proclaiming their demands, do not have street meetings. There are no processions even public meetings are few and far between. But in the sixties, we joined so many processions. The processions would start at Dhaka University or at the Shaheed Minar, go through Nawabpur and Islampur, past Dhaka Central Jail and end up where they began. And all this would be most peaceful. Student or political leaders were very cautious about issuing any instigating statements. Cars wouldn't be damaged, shops wouldn't be attacked and bombs wouldn't be exploded. That is why there was more people's participation, spontaneous support. The people who had witnessed the rallies and processions of those days, should be ashamed to see the same programmes now. The processions now generally start from their respective party's central office and end at Press Club with the main objective of being photographed. The tussle to get in front of the camera is most embarrassing. Dhaka's population has increased largely. Even so, we fail to see any spontaneous large gathering at programmes or hartals of Awami League or BNP.

People's Support is the Ultimate Power

As things stand at present, there is no need for public opinion or mobilisation for any political movement. Whether the people support the political party's demands or programmes is not a matter of consideration whatsoever. We may point to a particular aspect here. BNP feels that since Awami League came to power on a wave of parliament boycotts, hartals and blockades, they too can follow suit.

And now a mere call for hartal means that hartal will take place. A political party simply has to announce hartal on any issue and the hartal is a success. It's not just Awami League or BNP, we've seen hartals of the five-party left front and Jamaat-e-Islami as well. Hartals have become mundane affairs. But, for the general public, these programmes mean sheer suffering.

The key to the success of any movement or struggle is popular support and the capability of mass mobilisation. Everyone, including leaders of the government and opposition parties, should keep it in mind. Otherwise, hartal will tarnish the image and damage the strength of political parties as well as cause greater damage to the nation.

The author is Editor, the Daily Bhorer Kagoj

To the Editor...

'Prime Minister's Meeting'...

Sir, It is unethical journalism to try to write authoritatively about a meeting which is closed-door and not open to reporters. Based on hearsay reporting on such events inevitably involves distortion of facts and half-truths. Mr CAF Dowla's article on 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Secretaries' published in your paper on 10-12-97 suffers from these faults very badly. Firstly, no erstwhile CSP officer suggested that to cope with the problem of dearth of skilled officials they should be given contract after retirement. Rather a senior Secretary (ex-CSP) suggested that to meet the crisis senior officers with proven ability should be given accelerated promotion even by suppression of seniors if need be. He also proposed that appointments be made from different sectors (academia, business etc.) through lateral entry. A non-SCP officer who is now a Secretary made out a case for raising the

retirement age to sixty as another alternative. None of these ideas figured in the article of Mr Dowla who wrote his imaginative piece in gay abandon.

A journalist of his ilk may write irresponsible and unethical pieces but should a paper like The Daily Star print such unsubstantiated speculative piece?

One who was present

'Agriculture Colleges in Bangladesh'

Sir, On 28/11/97, one of your ex-student Mr Tariq, in your opinion column, through his above titled write-up had passed some odd comments about the senior teachers of Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI) which have greatly shocked the teachers of BAI. He is welcomed to the institute to discuss the experiences

he had gathered about his teachers while he was a student of BAI instead of passing satirical remarks against the teachers through newspaper columns. This will help the senior teacher of BAI to make best academic use of their wisdom teeth!

Well, in response to the suggestion made to me by Tarik regarding BAI's autonomy, I would like to inform that a logical framework for securing BAI's autonomy has been moved by us which has duly been forwarded to the relevant authority by the Minister of Agriculture and Ministry of Education. We are hopeful that this time we'll make it.

Further it may be informed that the higher authority is of the opinion that BAI autonomy case may be considered because it has almost completed its 60 years of service to the nation.

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