

## We Denounce It

We, with the rest of the nation, condemn the police beat up of JU teachers and students on Wednesday morning and wouldn't want to qualify in any way our denunciation of the barbarous and cowardly act. Unfortunately for all of us this happened with the Home Minister not a furlong away from the spot. Minutes before he had braved a barrage of missives from the students, with patience and perhaps understanding. The police it is evident, tried to avenge what they felt to be an insult to their minister without caring to ask him as to what he wanted to be done.

The minister had gone at 10 in morning to talk to the students who have been laying a siege on the national communications heartline at Savar. He did not abandon post and stayed there past the difficult post-beat-up situation to talk the students and university authorities into lifting the siege. He could retire at 4:30 in the afternoon but only after pledging a probe into the police crime and also to move the Amin Bazar truck stand to a place a kilometre away from national highway.

This is not solving the problem, an old one that keeps on erupting periodically. The roots of it must be found and treated. And before this is achieved, the culprits of the attack on the JU bus that started it all, must all be found and prosecuted. This not done the rest wouldn't have any chance of being ever accomplished.

One thing must be understood by all quarters, specially students, that a highway, any highway, cannot be blocked whatever the provocation. The JU students, aggrieved as they were very rightly, were wrong to sort of hold the nation in hostage. The sanctity of the highway must be understood and valued by all. Nobody has the right to blockade roads, leave alone highways.

To talk of another serious problem, what can the nation do with such a police organisation? How can they be disciplined into any semblance of responsibility?

## UP Election and Violence

An enraged husband in Gazipur has reportedly strangled his wife to death for not casting her vote in favour of his preferred candidate in the ongoing UP polls. It could be a very poignant commentary on the general level of naiveté regarding an individual's electoral rights and consciousness in this country but what it readily points finger at is the general rise in violence around this election of the local representatives. Reports of killing and postponement of elections owing to clashes have been an unending daily feature of the morning press since the beginning of the month-long elections across the country from the first of this month. Not that violence in UP elections are a rarity. But the intensity seems to be higher this time. The heated political atmosphere and confrontational streak in our politics has definitely played its role. Criminals who would have otherwise lent the cutting edge to the activities of the political parties and their student fronts in the cities are reportedly working for candidates in many areas. This has happened despite the Election Commission's repeated adjuration to keep the UP elections free from party influence and subsequently, violence. More than 80 per cent of the UP election candidates are using party identity in flagrant violation of the electoral norm. And they are doing it quite unabashedly. Local people whom our correspondent met on a tour of the electorates in Jessore recently were promptly ennobled that the UP election was a battle between AL and BNP. Given the impact this election has on the local influence structure it is only expected that all sorts of interest groups will come into play sooner than later but the challenge lies in helping it retain its individualised non-party character. The violation of electoral code and poor materials supplied by the authorities for conducting the polls do tell that a lot was left to be desired by the authorities at the preparational stage. An event that has been a revelation in spontaneous popular interest and is set to see the election of the female candidates through direct vote for the first time, definitely deserved better management and tighter leash of the authorities on hindering factors.

## Nudge for Jail Reform

On the Victory Day night under-trial prisoner Kazi Sabuj, 25, died at Narayanganj Hospital taking the toll of custodial deaths to three within a matter of eleven days in the month of December alone. In a flash-back, Tuhin and Jainal Abedin died under treatment at the same hospital on December 6 and 8 respectively. There is no reason to be prejudiced about that hospital being blighted with any evil spirit roaming its four corners. Those instances of sad demise, whatever might be the post-facto explanatory flair of making them look as natural deaths, were, by and large, climactic results of custodial inattention, to put it very mildly indeed. In fact, so very outraged people might get in the suddenness of such mishaps with the dead ones' relatives invariably going public with their grievance of oppressive treatment meted out to their near and dear ones that these appear as human rights violation to us, let alone the international watch-dog bodies which set very high standards of behavior for the police or jail authorities.

Humane treatment is becoming a right of the prisoners, to say nothing of the under-trial prisoners whose guilt is yet to be proved. Persons in police or jail custody are the administrative, moral and legal responsibility of the authorities concerned. Why should youngman Kazi Sabuj have died of diarrhoea at the hospital when the disease is so much curable?

Let the truth about this incident come out with nothing whatsoever swept under the carpet. And finally it is yet another reminder of the dire need for jail reform that cries out to be heeded.

"Give us this day, our daily bread", a plea echoing down the generations in human kind's quest for food. Because "from food all beings come to be, by food they grow and into food they pass". Food is the breath of life. It is vitally saved and stored ready instantly to be released as new life. To cut food to the minimum, and as so widely in Bangladesh below the minimum, is to cut vitality as well. There is less awareness, less work done, less feeling, less response and finally, though the brain is last to be denied, less thought. It is what our economics and politics — our sciences of life in their largest sense — mean whether we know it or not.

Hence, there is a legitimate concern. Can Bangladesh feed the growing population when currently half of them do not have access to adequate food? Limits of arable land has already been reached, if not breached. But it is also true that the limitations of food availability and consequent deprivations do not in general arise from problem of supply but have to do with what is gently called "distribution", or in more sophisticated terms, food-entitlement. However that may be, one could wonder in Bangladesh whether an upper limit of the carrying capacity of the earth would not exist beyond which more human mouths could not be fed. On the other hand, if it was ever true, that was up to the point at which frontier science began to make the design of foods an open question.

To quote Dr Thomas K. Simpson, "If the first harvest of quantum mechanics was in physics with the command over the atomic nucleus and the release of a new domain of energy, the second great harvest is the command over genetic materials, and with it, the power to design and shape living forms... Trinity site was terrifying in the release of an unheard of power to destroy, the new

prospect of this second harvest, an unimagined power to create, to intervene in the creation with new living forms — is surely more daunting, more fraught with potential consequences." In relation to the present discussion, it means that the question of food is reopened in such completely new ways that we can hardly take even their most preliminary measure. Now that genetic management could become a controlled design process, limits of natural bounds are no longer valid. Combining genes from different species, and more generally, transgenic animals and plants, is now a reality. The work of evolution is now in our uncertain hands.

Where the conventional plant-breeders had to cross seeds and wait for a natural cycle to yield a result, tissue culture "in vitro" dispenses with all that and permits a massive review of whole genetic populations to seek and extract a desired gene — and then to place this in other genomes. It should be pointed out at this juncture that the commercial prospects are tempting and thus vast resources of capital and scientific personnel of the first world are being poured into these projects, with the immediate goods of private gains and corporate profit.

That is what I am going to write about — tremendous possibilities for life for the many or death for them in Bangladesh.

Dr Iqbal Mahmud writes and I quote, "Breakthroughs in biotechnology could help scientists to produce 'real' food artificially. We shall get food without farms. Per capita availability of land will no longer be a limitation in Bangladesh in 2020.

The amount of land needed to support a single human fam-

ily has diminished dramatically from paleolithic (old stone age) blade makers 35,000 years ago to modern Japanese rice farmers — an excellent example of evolutionary acceleration that can instill a sense of optimism in Bangladesh.



**Do! Dare!**  
A Z M Obaidullah Khan

Clearly, land is not a constraint for food production if we can make the technological transition in 2020. Given the genetic resources available in the country and our abundant fresh water resource there is absolutely no reason why we cannot capitalise on the emerging technologies.

Human Culture	Land needed to support one family	Time
Paleolithic hunters	1000 hectares	35,000 yrs ago
Neolithic cow-plow peoples	10"	8,000"
Medieval peasants	0.67"	1,000"
Indian rice growers	0.20"	100"
Japanese rice growers	0.064"	now

Clearly, land is not a constraint for food production if we can make the technological transition in 2020. Given the genetic resources available in the country and our abundant fresh water resource there is absolutely no reason why we cannot capitalise on the emerging technologies. This is not only true for the crop sub-sector but also for fisheries (a resource we have so far tapped just on the surface) and livestock sub-sectors. Thus, scientific and technological possibilities for not only supporting the high density of population with proper food but also exporting food to countries where the natural environment is less endowed with biological resources are bright indeed!

I have no quarrel with the exciting possibilities that Dr Mahmud writes about. Methods

of what was simplistically be called "genetic engineering" seem to have brought us to the point at which organisms can be deliberately designed to the end of being food alone. But there is a large question mark.

If living systems can be designed, then the term "efficient" will become evidently crucial. A new kind of systemic economics is clearly necessary when such a design falls to our lot.

What I mean thereby is the requirement of a new commitment which will make equitable use of the earth's resources for the ultimate benefit of the little people in Bangladesh or elsewhere in the Fourth World. Solutions to the problems which are now called "scientific" are not enough. A consistent economics has to be developed more wedded to the right to life by the many, than the intellectual property rights of the few. More than ever, we are confronted with the realisation that there is only one science — economics, politics, ethics and biology all at once.

What we have just talked about are possibilities. A few have already been accomplished, some are likely, some, remote, and many, technically possible. But in what is called the real world, they are unlikely to be done. A question is asked, is it economic to do so? What is the pay back?

Dr Simpson in his essay, "The scientists of life and World Food Problem", refers to a conference on genetic engineering and agriculture, held under the auspices of a major American Scientific Society with international participation. Each half of a day's programme was divided into two parts: The first, scientific reports, the second, reports of corporations supporting genetic research. There were projects for the more profitably marketed commodities like harder tomatoes or puffer breads. It was reiterated in the business plans that repeat sales were essential to business success — the worst case is a product that will reproduce itself or otherwise fail to dissipate so that the farmer has no need to purchase new seed, with the accompanying inputs annually. The peasants, unfortunately, have no voice with the economists. They have no money, so they have no demand. In overt market science, to voice no demand is to command no science. Modern genetic science is thus pursued in an environment of secrecy, economic competition and private gain.

Many will argue and I plagiarise from Dr Simpson that it is best that industry, finance and science combine their efforts in this way, that the vigour which flows from private competition will translate into scientific enterprise. Unfortunately, however, the market test seals the doom of millions who would continue to die

of degrading hunger. The reason is obvious, when science is priced by the market criteria, it is the First World Markets which are decisive. To quote Dr Simpson, "When it is announced by careful studies that the earth cannot support the growing population of the Third World, what is meant evidently is that the earth will not support the Third World on First World terms. The food that can be grown to support the Third World will not be grown, the crops that could be developed will not be developed. The genetic engineering which would make possible the availability of food at new levels of abundance will not be done. In the sciences truth has its price."

People in Bangladesh cannot pay. So, for them the life-sciences are sciences of death. Sciences, at the moment, are taking their old course, in the service of restriction and destruction. But it is not their fault, they work within a framework of political assumption and economic purpose. Our first task is to reexamine those assumptions.

We can and must do something about it and we can do it here and now. Advances in knowledge are to be received not as right for the few, but privilege for the many, not as possession but as entrustment, not as prerogative for an individual, but as gift for all. Ben Okri says, "As the millennium draws to a close we must not succumb to the notion that we have failed. This is precisely the time to dream, the best dream of them all, that no people will die of starvation, that tyranny will not be able to exist unfinished, that liberty be given a more glorious song, that human race — after so long standing in the shame of its failed possibilities — should now move towards a new millennium, where overcoming our pettiness and our fears, we might astonish even the gods."

## Fast Enough for Bangladesh?

*If you haven't driven on the streets of Dhaka for a couple of decades, your jaw drops open somewhat when you see the people. They keep coming, right into your car, right into the roundabout, as calmly as though they are all out for a stroll in Ramna Park or something. Old, young, middle-aged, infants, toddlers, men, women, teenagers, garment workers, tempo conductors, panhandlers, crippled beggars, tea boys, flower girls, fruit vendors, clerks, commuters. Humanity is huge and varied in Bangladesh.*



**Coming Home...**  
Almas Zakiuddin

in the middle of this wretched roundabout?

I mean, take a look at what's happening, first. There I am, stranded in the middle of the roundabout, with approximately seven hundred rickshaws coming at me, from every which way. I am not joking. I like rickshaws, really I do. I like to ride in a rickshaw when I can and I think they are environmentally friendly and all that. But how am I supposed to move when they come at me from every which way, from the back, alongside my car, at various angles, even from the front. (Have you noticed how rickshaws not only travel the wrong way around a roundabout, but also they have the check to stare and gesture at you in astonishment if you happen to be driving the right way?)

There is no such thing as the right way. No such thing as right of way, either. Just hook positively, look confident, put your foot on the pedal and get a move on, ma," my son suggests assertively.

His ma, of course, does no such thing. There are all these people in front of me. I mean, if you haven't driven on the streets of Dhaka for a couple of decades, your jaw drops open somewhat when you see the people. They keep coming, right into your

car, right into the roundabout, as calmly as though they are all out for a stroll in Ramna Park or something. Old, young, middle-aged, infants, toddlers, men, women, teenagers, garment workers, tempo conductors, panhandlers, crippled beggars, tea boys, flower girls, fruit vendors, clerks, commuters. Humanity is huge and varied in Bangladesh.

I can't do it. I can't move. I am bound to hit someone. There's an infant balancing precariously on the edge of a woman's lap as she clings with one arm to a man on a two-wheeled scooter. They whizz past me. I stare at the infant. What if it falls. I cannot deal with the horror, the sheer terror of that thought. How on earth will I ever be able to avoid hitting someone, all of them, all these people, these carts, tempos, scooters, rickshaws...???

It's too crowded to kill anyone," my son assures me. Coolly. (Well, that's a relief isn't it.)

dition to all of the above, there are all these cars around me, in front of me, behind me, and virtually on top of me.

"I don't think it is a good idea to make rude gestures at strangers," my son remarks.

I am not making rude gestures. All I am trying to do is tell the rude driver of a rude four-wheel drive behind me to wait, until it is his turn. Can't the moron see that I can't move, I am stuck because there are people, rickshaws, other cars in front of me? Why can't he wait, until it is his turn?

This is Dhaka, ma. There is no such thing as your turn, here. Everyone just grabs what they can," my son shrugs. (Have you noticed how cynical the young can be, especially these days?)

And the four-wheel drive is not the only problem. Oily Hair has abandoned the left side of the road and is now overtaking me on my right, honking and driving past me with his hair and his hormones both under great stress. Behind the lorry, there are three other cars, all shiny and big and hideous, which edge up behind the four-wheel drive, and honk at all of

"You're going too fast, ma," my offspring remarks.

Am I, now I wonder, am I going fast enough for Bangladesh?

## OPINION

### Is this Politics, or Polemics?

A H Dewani

Bangladesh was quick to choose his famous song "Amar Sonar Bangla" as its national anthem. Tagore's contributions to Bengali literature is part of our heritage too. So what's the deterrence to establishing a hall on any university-campus after the name of this great poet? I think, honouring him in this way would be honouring ourselves.

Heza 620/3A, Khilgaon Dhaka-1219

### What a downside!

Sir, In an article in the Sunday Times recently, it was reported that a 9-year-old girl was dragged into the West (England) London Primary School lavatory and raped by 5 classmates.

One can wonder how students as young as 9 years could perform rape as alleged at that school. Yet such happenings are not uncommon in educational institutions of the West as the media reports suggest. Rape of school girls is intermittently reported in our national papers, too. Children as young as 10 act out violent scenes from TV programmes and videos and found using language that would make previous generations blush. In our times, the word "rape" meant nothing to a 10-year-old of either sex; now every child knows what it means.

Experts say the following are now becoming trendy with the youngsters: — general and growing level of aggression especially copied from TV. — playground language has become noticeably coarse; words like prostitute, lesbians or your mum is...etc are indis-

criminally used and they know that these mean. — passing of notes in the classrooms is no more for the fun's sake, these are now more explicit.

— aggressive and associated behaviour are on the increase. Now that moral values are being eroded in a million different ways, immediate attention would be desired to arrest the situation.

Col Mirza Shaif (rtd) House No 82 F, Road No 5, Banani 1213, Dhaka

### Star's bad patch

Sir, We like reading The Daily Star. The reason is this newspaper represents the views of the majority who believe that not only was 1971 our greatest moment in history but also that the fuelling and firing of the economic engine is the only way to perpetuate that moment. We see it as a newspaper which sets the focus of its readers around the rich — intellectual and material — that the 21st century holds.

The ideals that we think are embodied in this newspaper are badly mauled when this newspaper treats vandals as subjects of police brutality. The woman who was made to appear as a victim as her lathi was being snatched away by policemen and she was baton-charged, was, to my mind, a vandal herself. Whoever captioned her the way he did does not obviously subscribe to the ideals that The Daily Star purports to hold.

Tariq Ali 76/2, Gulshan Ave, Dhaka-1212

## To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Metropolis panting

Sir, A UN report says that Dhaka's population in 1996 was nine million and its population will grow to 19.5 million in the year 2015. Is Dhaka going to be the slum city of the world? Open spaces, parks and playing fields have to be developed if the city has to breathe, and its citizens saved from disease and deteriorating health.

Shahabuddin Mahtab 51, Siddheswar Road (Apartment A-5) Dhaka-1217

### Fake fertiliser products

Sir, Fake fertiliser products are on rampant sale all over the country. In absence of any fertiliser administrative body, there is none to challenge and speak against the sale and use of such spurious products.

There is however a Fertiliser Act in the country but without any implementing authority. The lone official fertiliser consultant (IFDC) to the Ministry of Agriculture have no job except publishing some news bulletins on fertiliser consumption, sale, stock and price. But sometimes they act as a recommending authority for some old and spurious fertiliser by passing the official fertiliser

standardisation body. As official consultant they never utter any word against such fake and spurious fertiliser products. Although field staff of Agriculture Extension Dept. are supposed to advise the farmers on use of right type of fertiliser, they do not perform this job. As a result, farmers are compelled to use those fake products in face of high price and non-availability of fertiliser. The impact of using such fake products is depletion of soil condition and reduction in yield.

It is therefore requested that the Ministry of Agriculture may take necessary legal steps against marketing of such fake and spurious products in the interest of farmers and crop production.

M A Jallil 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

### Why not a Tagore Hall?

Sir, There are several residential halls on the DU campus named after great men and women. But none yet after the great poet Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore.

Tagore obviously was not a citizen of this country and may be there would be some controversy if we named an academic hall after him. But new-born