# The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, December 19, 1997

### 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 anyway 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. This was in response to the students' demand. 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 unfailing daily feature of the morning press since the beginning of the month-long elections acress 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 nonparty 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

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.

Jechoing down the generations in human kind's quest for food. Because "from food all beings come to be, by prospect of this second harvest, food they grow and into food they pass". Food is the breath of an unimagined power to create. to intervene in the creation life. It is vitality saved and with new living forms - is stored ready instantly to be resurely more daunting, more leased as new life. To cut food to fraught with potential consethe minimum, and as so widely quences." In relation to the prein Bangladesh below the minisent discussion, it means that mum, is to cut vitality as well." the question of food is reopened There is less awareness, less in such completely new ways work done, less feeling, less rethat we can hardly take even sponse and finally, though the their most preliminary meabrain is last to be denied, less sure. Now that genetic manthought. It is what our ecoagement could become a connomics and politics — our scitrolled design process, limits of ences of life in their largest natural bounds are no longer sense — mean whether we know valid. Combining genes from it or not." different species, and more gen-Hence, there is a legitimate erally, transgenic animals and concern. Can Bangladesh feed

11 NE us this day, our

the growing population when currently half of them do not plants, is now a reality. The work of evolution is now in our uncertain hands. have access to adequate food? Where the conventional Limits of arable land has already been reached, if not plant-breeders had to cross seeds and wait for a natural cybreached. But it is also true that the limitations of food availcle to yield a result, tissue culture "in vitro" dispenses with ability and consequent deprivations do not in general arise all that and permits a massive from problem of supply but review of whole genetic populations to seek and extract a dehave to do with what is gently sired gene — and then to place called "distribution", or in more this in other genomes. sophisticated terms, food-enti-It should be pointed out at tlement. However that may be. one could wonder in this juncture that the commer-Bangladesh whether an upper cial prospects are tempting and thus vast resources of capital limit of the carrying capacity of the earth would not exist beand scientific personnel of the first world are being poured yond which more human into those projects, with the mouths could not be fed. On the

> 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.

immediate goods of private

Dr Igbal Mahmud writes and 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

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.

of what may 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.

Human Culture	Land needed to support Time one family	
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

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 con-

ference 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 puffier breads. It was reiterated in the business plans that repeat sales were essential to business success - the worst case is a product that will sumptions. reproduce itself or otherwise fail to dissipate so that the farmer has no need to purchase new seed, with the accompanying inputs annually. The peas-

voice to what the economists call, unblushingly, demand. 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 pla-

ants, unfortunately, have no

giarise 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. In the life-sciences, truth means life; life 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 as-

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 of Nigeria says it all when he 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 more towards a new millennium, where over-

coming our pettiness and our

lears, 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.

1881 - 1960) **JOU** can tell how long I have been in Dhaka by the way I

And jeers at Fate.

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

Simpson, "If the first harvest of

quantum mechanics was in

physics with the command over

the atomic nucleus and the re-

lease of a new domain of energy,

the second great harvest is the

command over genetic materi-

als, and with it, the power to de-

sign and shape living forms ...

Trinity site was terrifying as

the release of an unheard of

power to destroy, the new

The rich man has his motor

His country, and his town es-

He smokes a fifty-cent cigar

(Franklin Pierce Adams

To quote Dr Thomas K

open question.

take the crowded roundabout near my house so tentatively on my first attempt to drive my new (second hand) car, that a lorry driver with oily hair almost rams into me from the back. I look into my rearview mirror and make eye contact with him. The lorry driver goes nuts with his horn (and possibly his hormones), pounding and pummelling the steering wheel like it is dough for his morning chappatti. I sit there, stunned.

"You shouldn't have stopped," says my son, a sensible young man in his early twenties, who is sitting next to

Thank you for stating the obvious, I snarl under my

nervous, ma," he continues affably, paying no attention to my snari. I'm not nervous, who says I

"They can sense that you're

am nervous. "Take it easy, ma. They'll keep coming at you, from all sides, if they see you are scared. If you just go for it, they know you mean business - and they stop," he remarks, smiling encouragingly at me.

Don't lecture me. I know what I am doing. And anyway, how am I supposed to 'go for it' 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 cheek 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 hoot 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 twowheel 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 anvone," my son assures me, coolly. (Well, that's a relief isn't

"Seriously, ma," he explains. They will avoid you.

never fear. They all know how

to and when to dodge you. Press

on the gas, get the car to move

and they will all leap out of the

way. I promise you." And believe me, I want to move. Behind us, my lorry driver with the oily hair has continued to shrick with his horn and his hormones and unable to wait for me to budge, has now decided to edge past the left side of my car, attempting - in vain, I must add - to displace a couple of street vendors and some fifty-odd rickshaws parked there. Nobody moves, so Oily Hair is stuck. The noise is incredible. I am still stunned (and still unable to budge).

"Why aren't you moving, ma," my son asks, in a controlled kind of voice. (I think he may be getting upset.

My son does not understand what is happening around us. He does not understand that I am not moving because, in addition to all of the above, there are all these cars around me, in front of me, behind me, and vir-

"I don't think it is a good idea to make rude gestures at

tures. 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?

us to get off the road. And at the same time as all this is happening, a couple of cars are trying to make U-turns on a road leading out of the roundabout, with the result that several carts. rickshaws and hundreds of people trying to climb into the tempos on the roundabout, are all being dislocated and pushed toward us.

is obvious there are more of them. Fair enough, we have more people too. But there is something else. When we were young, we couldn't afford a car. Have you noticed how things have changed since then.

bored. "That was then. Things have changed. Everyone has a

That's when I lose my fear. hit the gas. I take the crowded roundabout with courage and a total disregard for humanity. scattering rickshaws and pedestrians at will, nudging all vehicles smaller than mine off the road, refusing to glance at infants hanging precariously off scooters or old ladies climbing into tempos, ignoring lorry drivers with oily hair and fourwheelers with no manners. I blow my horn all the time, even when there is nothing in front of me.

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

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, Siddheswari 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 bypassing 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 pro-

M A Jalil 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 Ra-

bindranath 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

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 our-

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

Experts say the following are now becoming trendy with the

knows what it means.

 general and growing level of aggression especially copied playground language has

become noticeably coarse; words like prostitute, lesbians or your mum is....etc are indiscriminately 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

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 Shafi (rtd) House No 82 F, Road No 5, Banani 1213, Dhaka

#### Q4\_\_J\_ L \_ J \_ \_ 1 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 riches — 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.

Tarig Ali 76/2, Gulshan Ave, Dhaka-1212 tually on top of me.

strangers," my son remarks. I am not making rude ges-

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

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 fourwheel drive, and honk at all of

Is it my imagination, or has something changed about the vehicles on the road? I mean, it

"Yeah, ma," my son looks

car these days."

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

### **OPINION**

### Is this Politics, or Polemics?

A H Dewan

In the backdrop of political turmoils in India and Pakistan the situation prevailing in our country is also being drifted to stage the same, apparently with deliberate abstination from Parliament by BNP. In fact what is being played by both the government headed by AL and the opposition BNP can be purported to be ominous. The killings of people are in spate, mostly out of political feuds, and the threat of civil disorder cannot be ruled out. Both the parties are to blame and bear consequences.

We see them equally active in shouting hoarse for culture of democratic norms. But truth is that democracy requires guarantee of security of life and liberty, first and foremost. Sadly enough none is practically found to be practising what they are preaching. The government's claims for transparency and accountability clearly fall short of instances to prove that

For instances, the unilateral introduction of new officetiming and shifting of a sensitive bridge without discussion caused vehement indignation among the concerned section of the people.

Democracy entails patience and enshrines right to agree to disagree. But in Bangladesh the right is used only to malign the opponents. It is not expected that the present government can beguile its subjects and does things against their interest, although there may be many shortcomings in its governance. Same was also assumed of BNP when it was in power.

Therefore, it seems quite unbecoming of BNP to smell interests of India being served in

whatever knotty issues of national interest AL government endeavours to resolve. BNP was elected to the Parliament with a measurable strength to criticise harshly against government's action and bow AL to its suggestions by making its presence in the Parliament. But BNP has preferred to boycott the Parliament, taken to streets, and resorted to damaging government and private properties and frequent hartals to the sheer detriment of national

From the recent incidents in Chittagong, we are led to believe that our leaders are least careful about what may ensue of the programmes and counter-programmes they undertake. They go out and out crazy to incite their supporters to prove their might and muscle to combat the opponents. Three such successive programmes turned Chittagong into battlefields that left more than a dozen people killed and hundreds injured in less than two weeks' time. And what happened in Chittagong may flare up in other places too. Many laid down their lives in the struggle to overthrow the autocratic regime of Ershad, and democracy was restored on the glory of these sacrifices.

But it is most unfortunate that valuable lives are still continuing to be snuffed out in numbers more than before. Pity is that there is no apparent approach from either side to the attempt to stop this rot. Can we call this democratic culture?

Democracy here in Bangladesh has nose-dived, and politics has been overtaken not only by polemics, but predominantly by weapons.