

## More Wards, More Commissioners

One can see the obvious reason why the Cabinet has decided to amend the Pourashava Ordinance with the objective of splitting each of the present municipal wards into three separate entities. The urban sub-centres are creaking under population pressure, so that if people are to be served in a focused manner then just like in the case of territorial administration the municipalities too need to be reorganised.

We appreciate the spirit and rationale behind the government's pourashava reform initiative; but cannot visualise how even a well-justified proliferation of wards or the glory of nomenclature change will radically improve the municipal services given the precedents being set by the present generation of ward commissioners.

What has been the track-record of ward commissioners as public representatives and operatively the sheet-anchor of the elected Dhaka City Corporation? Dismal. And, this is a question-mark that dangles before our optical disc right beside the non-delivering reputation glued to the leadership image of the elected city mayor himself. The ward commissioners' presence is hardly felt at the local communities except for being besought when somebody needed a certificate to get by. And then there is that hectic activity revolving around grant of contracts for the lucre they hold.

Words have circulated periodically to the effect that ward commissioners have been involved in the law and order or price control committees, but if the test of cooking is in the pudding, then we have had very little of it really. Perhaps we were wrong to be expecting a good dividend from their actions; because, for all practical purposes, they have been toeing their party-lines making a slanging match of their inherently apolitical civic and representative role. In the process, the urban development agenda get swamped by the surge of maintenance backlog.

Needless to say, better representation of women as ward commissioners holds the key to an improved performance of the pourashavas, let alone their effective urban empowerment. The proposed ratio of one woman ward commissioner to three men commissioners could be bettered after their participatory zeal witnessed at the UP polls.

## Lethal Presence

A front page picture in the Ittefaq Tuesday last sent the chilling sensation through the spine once again : an unused ampoule of an injectable drug with an expiry date of October 1997. The frightening discovery came to light when a doctor on duty prepared to break an ampoule to inject the drug into a patient. Reportedly three packets of the said drug, each containing 25 ampoules, were bought by the relevant section of the DMCH from an adjacent pharmacy.

Tuesday's finding is neither unique nor rare. There have been several reports in the past on expired drug being on sale in the market. How these drugs find their way to the druggists' shelves and freezers and in the hospitals is not unknown to the authorities. About hospitals some doctors have suggested an unholy nexus between the lower tier employees of the facility and the unethical business. That is definitely one area where the authorities need to probe but the biggest problem lies elsewhere. It is the weak drug ordinance which has come to dilute all our worries and caution against this enormous crime. The laws of the land are not sufficiently deterrent to scare people away. At the moment if somebody is found to be trading in spurious drugs, he or she simply does not have to pay heavily. The key to any alleviation of the problem lies in planting fear in culprits' minds. The laws have to be firmed up and, more importantly, enforced with unfailing consistency. The lax laws and authorities' blasé attitude over the matter show how infinitesimal is the concern about public health and how much a thin ice we are all skating on.

There was quite a bit of hot air blown around the drug ordinance during the previous government but nothing came out of it. The present government seems to be on the same course although pompous claims of enforcement have been made.

We want to say mere claims and assurances would not do. Spurious and expired drugs were there and they are there. They have to go. The health ministry would do well to remember that it is and it will be held responsible for every ailment or death due to the use of unfit drugs. Let it stir into action to tackle whatever challenges that responsibility might ask for.

## BGMEA Bhavan

We are delighted to learn that government has finalised its allotment of land in the heart of the city to the apex body of garments exporters — the BGMEA — for a building of their own. This will no doubt help boost our export trade in garments which is likely to come under far greater international competitive pressure than ever before.

However, as we welcome this decision we would like to make some points that we think should receive priority attention both of the government and the BGMEA. We think before a single taka is spent on the Bhavan both parties must ensure that every step has been taken to provide the garment workers a safe place to work. It will be a mockery of our democratic values and human rights proclamations if, on the one hand, money is poured in the construction of a modern building while, on the other hand, more and more workers meet unnecessary deaths from easily preventable fires in their factories and from stampedes that usually follow such incidents. It will be reprehensible and morally unacceptable if garment factory owners shy away from providing the minimum working condition for their workers and at the same time spend money for a modern headquarter.

We cannot express strongly enough our outrage at the fact that even after numerous incidents of fire and so many unnecessary deaths most of the garment factories are still to provide that minimum safety and comfort for their workers which all compel them to.

# Uncertain Election Scene

*In the absence of institutions, it is not surprising that persons, who seek to make any contribution, want to be in parliament or the state legislature. This atmosphere has affected all activities, politics the most. The media is the real villain. Its obsession with politicians has crowded out the intellectuals, the professionals and even the activists.*

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

THE electoral campaign has been practically reduced to Atal Bihari Vajpayee versus Sonia Gandhi. In a way, it is between the Bhartiya Janta Party and Congress. True, regional parties are there, trying to hold their territory. But the real fight is confined to the BJP and Congress for the simple reason that there is no other viable political party in most of the northern India states.

As of today, there is no wave, for or against any party, either in a state or in the country on the whole. Never before — India has witnessed 11 Lok Sabha elections since Independence — has the outcome been so unpredictable. It's more or less a toss-up. Yet, one thing is certain that neither Congress nor the BJP, nor the combination of the Janata Dal, the communists and their allies, will be anywhere near a majority. That it will be a hung parliament as it was in 1989 and 1996 is a foregone conclusion. But this time the members will be more dispersed than before. A coalition will take some time to anvil. The UP may comprise of 20-odd parties, instead of 14 as is its present strength.

In fact, in the last 14 years since 1984 when Congress secured 411 seats in the 543-member house, no party has secured a majority in the Lok Sabha. In the 1991 election, Congress won only 232 seats but it swelled its number through defection and deceit. This time, too, all political parties will be well short of 272, the required strength to form the government. Still both Congress and the BJP claim 200 each. Arithmetically, this is not possible. Both may not reach the number. While Congress has flimsy existence in UP, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Punjab, constituting 226 seats, the BJP

is in not-too-happy position in eastern and southern India, which embrace 155 seats.

Congress, which was at one time ahead of the BJP, suffered a serious jolt in 1996 in the wake of a revolt in Tamil Nadu. This time it will be affected by the stirrings in West Bengal. Congress, despite the Sonia Gandhi factor, is a divided house. Many official candidates will be sabotaged by those who have been denied tickets. The BJP has also its share of dissidence. The intervention by the RSS, the BJP's mentor, has brought about discipline of sorts. But unity is only on surface. Madhya Pradesh still torments the party.

The Janata Dal, once emerging as the third force, is disintegrating. The exit of former Bihar chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav and the death of Biju Patnaik in Orissa have hit the party beyond redemption. Its expelled stalwart from Karnataka, Ramakrishna Hegde, may not win more than five seats but he will cut into the Janata votes and bring down the party's present Lok Sabha strength of 46.

If ever the political situation is retrieved, the credit will go to the communists, who may string different regional parties together to keep Congress and the BJP out of power. The problem with the third force or the national front is that it has primarily existed on paper. It never achieved cohesiveness or credibility. There is wide disillusionment with it.

All the three combinations

have, however, realised that caste identities have eclipsed religious identities. Therefore, the caste factor has become more important than before. Muslims believe that their community will pick the winning candidate of any party against the BJP's. Where they may go wrong is the feeling of resignation, which is overpowering Muslims in certain areas, and which is goading them to try even the BJP. Their argument is that it may not turn out to be worse alternative to other parties for which they have been voting so far.

Therefore, in the face of non-descript options, the election looks like an exercise which the voters, perforce, will go over. They continue to be indifferent and cynical. And whatever enthusiasm was there, it has been squeezed out by the selection of candidates. Some of them have a criminal background. Some have defected from their parent body to get nomination. And some are there by the dint of money. Congress beats them all. It is not bothered about cleanliness. It has adopted the same old faces, which carry the stain of hawala on their khadi.

At the last minute, some parties have changed the names of their candidates because of the diktat by the mafia or the mon-

eybag. Perhaps, India should develop a method whereby a party holds an election, like primaries in the US, to find out who among its candidates has the largest following in a particular constituency. At present, only the party president counts in parties other than the BJP, which is at the beck and call of RSS, and Congress, which is dictated by Sonia Gandhi. Such being the material, the structure that may emerge cannot be but faulty. It is too early to say which party will be part of which structure. But there is no doubt about its ricketiness. It may collapse after one year or so, necessitating a mid-term poll.

One cannot put the blame on the candidates because they reflect the type of leadership a party has. The criterion for political parties is loyalty, not merit. I know of several persons who were not given tickets because they are too bright, too

straightforward, too clean. One party chief has even spelled out his aversion: "The educated create problems and it is better to leave them out."

Yet, this does not explain why there has been so much splitting in parties this time. Even the most loyal have taken no time to cross over to other side or form their own group. The units have broken and re-broken. There is no sanctity of the party as such. There are several reasons for it. One, parties are not related to any policy or programme. Two, the quality of leaders or, what is called the high command, has got diluted so much that it does not evoke respect, much less awe. Leaders are not tall enough. Nor have they any base to impress the members. Circumstances seem to have thrown them up and most of them do not deserve the position to which they have reached. Even the most leading ones are connected with dubious business houses or mafia groups. Their word has lost moral authority.

Another reason is the weakening of institutions. Apart from the media, parliament or the state legislatures, there are no other forums which have any clout. Indira Gandhi was

the one who destroyed the institutions because she wanted to wield power all by herself. Rajiv Gandhi, of even lesser mettle, did not understand what the institutions meant. Narasimha Rao knew their importance but did not retrieve them because it would have been at the expense of his own authority.

In the absence of institutions, it is not surprising that persons, who seek to make any contribution, want to be in parliament or the state legislature. This atmosphere has affected all activities, politics the most. The media is the real villain. Its obsession with politicians has crowded out the intellectuals, the professionals and even the activists.

It is not a happy situation. It only adds to confusion. All becomes tentative. But uncertain politics does not mean an unstable system. There will be pulls and pressures, even horse-trading, but all within the precincts of the system. Those who know India will not be unduly perturbed even if the polls do not throw up any single party or person to lead. Italy had 63 coalitions in the last 50 years, India only three or four during the same period. Political stability does not have anything to do with unstable parliament. Indians are beginning to understand it. Foreigners will do so in due course and shed their fear in investing in India.

## Dr A R Mallick: A Personal Tribute

by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

ATE Dr A R Mallick (1918-1997) died this day a year ago. I am one of those, and they must be counted in hundreds, who deeply mourn his death. In his death we lost a towering man, a noble soul, a natural leader.

As I remember, I first met him in London, early in October 1952, and on my way to Oxford. A R Mallick was in his second year in London, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, working for his Ph.D. A year later he was leaving London, after having obtained his degree, and a small group had assembled at the Charing Cross railway station to say farewell to him. He and his friend Abu Rushd Matinuddin (Exeter College, Oxford) had come by the same boat and were leaving by the same boat. For them, it was a moment of joy, for me, destined to stay on for one more year, of the very opposite.

Mallick Bhai, as it became our

form of address later on, could read my mind alight and said a few consolatory words. He remembered very well what I had said sometime back that I would even hug the poorest looking street cur from my homeland, repeated this memo- rable saying approvingly. This he did to show how well he could share my nostalgic mood.

A No.

Q : Did you give any inter-

view to Prof Abu Sayeed for his book titled "Facts and Docu-

ments"?

A : No. I didn't give him any interview.

Q : There is an interview of you in the book and you gave it.

A : This is not true.

Q : Were General Zia arrested by the soldiers on November 3?

A : He was arrested, but I don't know by whom.

Q : Did you not try to know that who arrested Zia?

A : I don't feel it's necessary.

Q : Was he freed on November 7?

A : I heard that he was freed on day after November 6 night.

Q : General Osmany had written eight volumes of book on Liberation War and pre and post-August 15 incidents. The scripts were kept at his Sylhet house "Noor Manjil". As a member of General Osmany Trustee Board, you brought the scripts and kept those in a bank.

A : This is not true.

Examination by advocate

Abdur Razzaq Khan, defense lawyer for accused Lt Col (retd) Sultan Shahriyar Rashid Khan :

Q : Did you contest the parliamentary elections?

A : Yes, in 1979, 86 and 91. I was elected an MP in 1986.

Q : When did you join Gano Forum?

A : When Dr Kamal Hossain formed Gano Forum in 1994.

Q : Who were in Brigadier rank when you returned the country in 1973?

A : Brigadiers Jabbar, Majumdar, and Majed-ul-Haq returned to the country. Among the senior other officers Lt Gen Khawaja Wasifuddin and Maj Gen SI Karim also returned.

Q : Who did include Zia in the pay commission?

A : I don't know.

Q : Did any one raise the demand for a separate pay commission for the armed forces?

A : General Shafiqullah along with me went to Bangabandhu and told him about a separate pay commission for the armed forces. Bangabandhu instantly asked Monoranjan Dhar to take up the matter.

Q : Had Home Minister Mansur Ali make telephone call to you after you woke up from bed on August 15 morning?

A : Yes.

Q : He told you that some people captured the radio station or were trying to capture it.

A : He also asked you to do something.

A : In 1978.

Examination by advocate

MA Wahed, state defense for accused

accused Major (retd) Shariful Haq Dhalim :

Q : When were you promoted to Major General?

A : In April, 1975.

Q : The freedom fighter officers were provided two years seniority. For this, there was a conflict between the freedom fighter officers and the repatriated officers.

A : This is not true.

Q : Did you ask to prepare troops after you became confirmed that Bangabandhu has been killed?

A : Yes.

Q : When did you come to active politics?

A : In 1978.

Examination by advocate

Shafiqullah, defense lawyer for accused

accused Lt Col (LPR) Muhiduddin :

Q : Can you remember the names of sector commanders of BDR when you were the chief in 1975?

A : One of those was Major

Manjur Rashid Khan, a lieutenant colonel, who was later hanged.

UNB.

Further texts of cross examination will be published as and when received.

spokesman and an emissary of the Bangladesh government in exile, led by the indefatigable Tajuddin Ahmed, touring the length and breadth of India. The sole object was to win the assent of our Indian neighbours in favour of our national struggle. In course of time, the same mission took him beyond India, to UK and USA.

The story is well told, both

by himself in his memoirs, and

by his companion those days, Dr Ansuzaman. The one

writes in a matter of fact style,

and the other, whose narrative

is confined strictly to the events

of that fateful year, writes

equally an account of the mission, without any talk of

together with the efforts of Justice

Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, those

of Dr Mal