

## Please Change the Method

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's assertion before the editors of national dailies and news agencies on Tuesday that her government has been trying its best to secure the opposition's return to parliament does not quite carry with us. We are not saying that AL efforts are short of good intentions nor are we glossing over the AL leadership's understandable anxiety to usher the opposition back into the Jatiya Sangsad as an image booster. But to suggest that no stone has been left unturned in getting the BNP lawmakers back to Parliament is nothing short of an overstatement wanting in proofs. Some phone calls made by Chief Whip Mohammad Nasim to the other side and the dancing around in tiny parcels of semantics over the points tossed up by the opposition hardly constitute the stuff whereby a dialogue is facilitated.

We have not deliberately used the phrase "bringing the opposition back to parliament" anywhere in the foregoing paragraphs in the belief which we have never tired of repeating that the opposition's presence in the JS ought to be a guaranteed thing. Why then the exercise at all? Well, we also believe that if there are any genuine misgivings in the BNP mind then these should be removed for the sake of a cohesive and harmonious working of the parliament. Even the best of government party inputs are unnecessarily spoilt through the unavailability of opposition inputs. The very act of going through a parliamentary scrutiny enhances the credibility and effectiveness of governmental actions.

The fundamental drawback in the government-opposition relationship has been the burning of all boats to communication between the two sides. Even the worst of enemies keep some channels open for talks in emergencies. Obviously in a state of near-complete communication shut-down the political parties either go recklessly rhetorical or speak to the gallery. They talk to themselves, maybe occasionally, but hardly ever talk with one another. Politics thus becomes a hostage to partisanship.

We may not doubt the sincerity of AL's motive but we do question the effectiveness of their methods. Please change your methods, we urge you.

## The CNG Fiasco

There are four CNG — concentrated natural gas — filling stations in the city — or the country, if you will. These were supposed to service the motor vehicles that had specially been converted to use CNG for fuel rather than the only fuel for automobiles the world over — petrol and diesel. Well, the four filling stations never for once were fit and functioning at any one time. Lately only one of these are operating, that too on a limited footing.

The CNG Company, floated by the government with Taka one crore as capital, had said at the outset some six months back that six more filling stations were to start work by now at various important points of the city. Likewise they had arranged for CNG-fying vehicles at a progressive rate. The response was not overwhelming, for there was no promotional campaign in the media, but it was encouraging. The economics of the two choices led to more and more car owners going for the conversion — a litre of petrol costing Tk 21 and a quantity of gas of equal automotive power only Tk 6.

But then there was also a great bonus to this windfall profit for all motor vehicle owners — and, in fact, to the whole nation. The CNG vehicles do not spew noxious fumes and pollute the atmosphere. The CNG option promised a clean and clear azure sky over Dhaka in two years if not one — provided of course the three-wheelers were taken off road by hefty chunks, say 10 per cent every two months.

It was a great national cause to CNG-fy all internal combustion machines run so far by imported petroleum products. To make great strides both economically and environmentally. That great opportunity was progressively being compromised, first through keeping filling stations that hardly ever function. Secondly, the workshop that used to do the conversion of the vehicles is now closed. Those with CNG vehicles are now switching back to petrol or diesel. The stacks of appliances for conversion are lying as heaps of trash.

It can all very well be a conspiracy. Other explanations of the CNG fiasco are difficult to build and none of them quite fit the incredible debacle of the company. It is very urgent that the whole organisation be overhauled and, if necessary, privatised to make it into the very very profitable concern it has the potential to be. Immensely profitable to the nation too.

## So Many Gone Awry!

We are on a journey to the bottom of the pit. Over one million people are drug addicts in the country. The International Narcotics Control Board revelation calls for an immediate review of the drug situation in the country. Because in today's world drug does not only mean the devitalisation of a precious human resource but also means a potent aid for the spread of the killer disease AIDS. Already countries like Vietnam and Myanmar are grappling with this problem. The way drug is spreading here there is every chance that it will soon become powerful agent of the greatest scourge accompanying mankind into the twenty-first century.

We urge the political parties to include the menace of drugs in their agenda. Instead of wasting energy in petty bickering and deluding people with empty promises they should have plans and programmes to fight the onslaught embodied in their election manifestoes. We would like to know how the increasing number of drug addicts weighs with our top leaders — Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Opposition leader Khaleda Zia. We want to see their concern translated into some real action. There is no doubt once the prima donnas of our politics take personal interest in these expanding social problem things will look up. Problem is they are yet to realise that. Had they been able to see the bleak future ahead they certainly could not have indulged in the eminently meaningless and fractious exercise they are now doing in the name of politics.

## PM's Meeting with Editors-I

# We Should Do Some Home Work before Meeting the PM

by Mahfuz Anam

*As the representatives of the fourth estate we are under as much scrutiny as those whom we write about. Unless we can render public service more sincerely and more thoroughly, the trust and confidence that public reposes in us will begin to dwindle.*

**M**UCH to Sheikh Hasina's credit she meets the editors of national dailies once every three to four months. 'Exchange of views', as these meetings are officially called, are unfettered and on the record access to the head of the government during which we are free to ask her any question that we see fit. To give the government its due, never have we at least on this writer been told NOT to ask the PM this or that question. I do not know of any of us ever being spoken to for having raised a taboo issue.

So what did we, the editors, do with this free access to the head of the government, which in the case of last Tuesday, was for two hours? At the risk of offending my peers I have to admit, very little, very little indeed. We did not ask the PM any of the burning questions that any journalist worth his or her salt should have. To be frank, if the same time was allotted to a set of good reporters with the same freedom that we had, I shamefully admit, they would have done a far better job of raising national and public issues than we did. Except for some general comments about some sort of rail commuter system to solve the city's transportation system sometime in the future, there was nothing new in what the PM said. The item that most newspapers led the news with the following day — that efforts were on to bring back the opposition to the parliament — had nothing new in it. Unbelievable as it may sound, there was no follow up question from us about any specific step that she either took or was planning to take. What we published was something she had been saying ever since the opposition left the parliament. It was a trite response to a hackneyed question, and neither the nation nor our readers were any better for it.

We got off to a digressive start by asking about the possible rise in the rate of government ads for newspapers. This led to a meaningless 20 minutes of half baked pronouncements (as against discussions) on newspaper, free market, wage board, government control over media, etc. The editor who raised the issue meant well, and had no doubt the interest of all newspapers in mind. But I must most respectfully say, the issue was inappropriate. If we want to talk about the newspaper industry's problems then we should seek a separate appointment for the purpose. Like leaders of every other industry do. We do not have the right to use opportunities like that of last Tuesday's — which is extended to us as representatives of the Fourth Estate, and only as such — to push our sectarian issues.

So what should meetings between the PM and the editors deal with? Before answering that question, we should ask why does the PM invite us to these 'exchange of views' meetings in the first place? Why is it assumed that we are repository of any superior knowledge or insight that any other ordinary citizen or community leader is not? The reason is the place of mass media in

democracy. The right of the public to know what the government is doing is what gets us these privileged accesses. People in democracy have a right to ask what their elected leaders are doing and, more importantly, WHY? As the public cannot and do not have free access to the PM and ministers, we fill the gap. Public expect the representatives of the mass media to question the leaders on their behalf. In fact to represent public interest is our very *raison d'être*. We are, what we are, because we represent public interest. The moment we fail to do that we forfeit our right to the privileged accesses, if not our very right to exist.

So did we represent public interest during our meeting with the PM? I am afraid not, and if we did, it was in a very limited sense. Most of us did not talk. (Why?) Those who did asked very general questions which were phrased so loosely that the PM could get away by giving very general answers which, being a clever politician, is exactly what she did. With no follow up questions from our side, she volunteered information only to the extent that she wanted to, not a word more. And why should she? I think she outwitted us thoroughly and we literally ate out of her hands. The fault for letting down our readers and the general public as such, is totally ours. We failed to assert the public's right to know.

Why did it happen? Because we — the editors — did not do our home work. We did not take the occasion seriously enough. I may be wrong — and I hope I am — but I feel we take it as a social occasion rather than a professional event. In fact meeting the head of the government is one of the most important professional events that there can be for an editor. But we do not seem to treat it as such. This is not the first time that this happened. As in the past, we did not realise that when the news about our meeting with the PM becomes known, there is a general public expectation that some answers to their questions will be forthcoming. I got numerous phone calls yesterday asking me why I did not ask this or that question, leading me to feel so fundamentally ashamed for having let down my readers. I think we editors must realise that our position is one of PUBLIC TRUST. As the representatives of the fourth estate we are under as much scrutiny as those whom we write about. Unless we can render public service more sincerely and more thoroughly, the trust and confidence that public reposes in us will begin to dwindle. I may appear to be trying to 'teach' others as to what an editor's role should be. That is not my intention, and I apologize to my fellow editors if I appear so. I think we should have the humility and the readiness to be able to criticize ourselves when we let down the public who repose so much trust in us. For the sake of public service, let us do some homework next time the PM invites us to an 'exchange of views'.

## To the Editor...

### Who are the worse people...?

Sir, I am responding to the letter published in the recent issue of the DS entitled 'Expecting the police to behave?'. The situation described is actually quite common and is not unique to Bangladesh, but in fact a global issue. The question is: why do people of high rank disgrace citizen of perhaps low status?

Is this due to what is commonly termed as 'showing off' or is it due to other factors? This can be answered with proper research. Perhaps one can speculate the root of the problem may be associated to the lack of knowledge or psychological disturbances.

However, if these hypotheses are correct, but if one has strong religious faith then fear of Allah would almost certainly refrain him or her from such disgraceful actions. It has been narrated by Abu Huraira (RA) : The Prophet (SWS) said, 'The worst people in the Sight of Allah on the Day of Resurrection will be the double faced people who appear to some people with one face and to other people with another face.'

Dr Abdul Rob  
Dept of Biological Sciences,  
University of Essex  
Colchester, UK

### Oh, so rude!

Sir, One thing I certainly had to change my opinion of, since I started writing. And I am saddened that my previous opinion turned out to be wrong. It points out to a terrible fact, that we may be educated now but we are not enlightened yet. I have received many replies and comments on my write-ups. After receiving and reading all these I had to change my opinion of something, which came as a shock to me. All the educated men who wrote back to me from abroad were very courteous, polite and gentle, even when expressing their disagreement. Proving that by living abroad they have made true gentlemen of themselves. Which is really wonderful and I do hope the foreigners will also hold them in high esteem as I do. But sadly enough, unlike them, not all men who wrote back from home were polite.

Why does one have to be rude? After all one can always express one's disagreement politely and in decent language. Courtesy doesn't cost anything — or does it? It seems it does in our country, for not many people show politeness in words or behaviour here. They rarely use 'thank-you', 'excuse me', 'sorry' etc.

Coming back to opinions; every person holds a different one. That's what makes us human beings — so varied and interesting. But then we can express our varied views and get on with discussions without being rude to anybody or making any personal attacks. Because what is being discussed is nothing personal. It is just the general drawbacks of our society, without any particular person

### Lessons in democratic norms

Sir, Why can't we learn from the norms of democracy in other democracies? The American democracy, despite its certain failings such as its inability to deal with high level of social inequality, often presents itself as a model of bipartisanship which is built on tolerance and mutual respect. Democratic presidents routinely quote Republican presidents in major national speeches. Recently, while celebrating the 81st birthday of former President Ronald Reagan, a Republican, President Bill Clinton, a Democrat renamed the Washington National Airport as Ronald Reagan Airport. Historians would not rate President Reagan a great president. But no matter. It is not just a reward for one's job. But a memento. Following this example, I feel like suggesting that an airport not just a new airport or an existing one in North Bengal be named after former PM Begum Khaleda Zia. This would be a nice gesture on the part of the present Awami League government. But there is one little problem. Following the American example, it would be befitting to do such a thing at the birthday of the former PM. And what that day would be!

Dr Sabirna Q Rashid  
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

### Dealing with drug dealers

Sir, A sizeable number of youngsters in our society have turned into drug addict inflicting heavily on the family and the nation. Drugs are openly sold in Dhaka and in other townships under the nose of the police. Young people sometimes taste this poisonous things only out of fun at the instigation of friends and gradually become addicted to it. Thus it brings in curse to the youngman, to the family and ultimately to the nation, leading it to destruction.

In south Asian countries like Malaysia, Singapore and in others, any type of drug is completely prohibited and the offence of carrying, intaking and doing business with it is punishable to death sentence.

I, therefore, urge upon the Home Minister to enact a law to try the offenders.

Abdul Kayum  
Satmasjid Road, Dhaka.

### The ego war

Sir, Are we noticing a moral victory for Iraq? By the looks of things I think the answer should be YES! At the moment the US and the UK are the only members of the UN Security Council left out all alone to cool off. The rest are in favour of not attacking Iraq. Accordingly the law will point against the US. And if the US are too stubborn and launch their missiles then the relationship between the West and the Arab nations will break down, to a great extent. So what happens now? Will the US back off, suffer humiliation and ask their boats to come home, or order them to fire their missiles and risk an all-out war? We have to wait to see the next episode — so stay tuned folks, same time, same channel ... to see the thrilling ending.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak  
Dhaka

### ... Because, it's a model town

Sir, When one comes to Banani model town, he or she expects to see an area with posh buildings, nice wide roads, nice and clean drains on both sides etc., because it is a model town

### And fit to be adopted elsewhere.

Buildings are more or less posh because those are private but thanks to the Municipality — the roads are broken and dirty, drains are dirty and overflowing as there is no flow of water in any direction. Mosquitoes are abundant because of filthy environment all around. Whenever you look, you have an impression that there is none to look after the area. To make the situation worse, permissions are given for multi-storied buildings. It is OK as more accommodations are needed but infrastructures have to be made to suit the demand.

On the other hand, the stakes are very high because it is a 'model town'. If anybody fails to pay the taxes on time then his or her life is made miserable by the Corporation. But when the Corporation fails in its duty — nobody bothers.

A Resident  
Banani Model Town, Dhaka.

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## Rowdysim at Shaheed Minar

# Claims and Counter-claims

*Bangladeshis may differ among themselves on most issues, but they are almost unanimous on their pride and reverence for all that is associated with the memories of the revered martyrs, who made the supreme sacrifice for establishing the cause of the Bengali language and heralded the national movements that ensued.*

**A**N unholy event took place at a rather holy place on a holy occasion. The place was the Shaheed Minar, the occasion was the Shaheed Day, the 21st February, and the event was rowdysim in its naked form. Some unidentified people started to rumple up the beautifully laid out diverse patterns of flowers on the altar of the Shaheed Minar, throwing flowers in a haphazard manner. This coincided with the arrival of Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition, to lay wreath as a mark of respect for the beloved martyrs of the great language movement.

The Awami League put the blame totally and squarely on the BNP activists as being responsible for rowdiness and desecration. They asserted that members of the BNP student and youth wings were found in a large number in that area, awaiting arrival of their leader. To them, it was, therefore, natural to assume that the entire episode represented a highly disorderly and disrespectful conduct of these persons. The BNP, on the other hand, retorted strongly. In their opinion, this act was nothing but a well-concocted plan of the Awami League to debase and vilify the principal opposition political party.

The incident was, no doubt, a nasty one. Not merely because it was an act of disorderly conduct to upset an orderly setting beautifully arranged to place one's eye. Evidently, more so, because it was designed to mar a set up that represented abstract portrayal of the multidimensional value and depiction of the glorious deeds that this noble day signified. Bangladeshis may differ among themselves on most issues, but they are almost unanimous on their pride and reverence for all that is associated with the memories of the revered martyrs, who made the supreme sacrifice for establishing the cause of the Bengali language and heralded the national movements that ensued. No one with common sense would tend to believe that any Bangladeshis would like to and deliberately attempt to desecrate the focal point and the very seat of observation of the anniversary of this glorious day. But it happened. The big question is who did it and why?

Every action, if not accidental, is prompted by a motive. Let us try to figure out the underlying factors of motivation of BNP cadres, if they really undertook such despicable actions as alleged. It was true that a large section of BNP supporters were present on the road leading to the Shaheed Minar. They were awaiting arrival of their leader to lay wreath at the martyrs memorial. Quite a few also accompanied the leader. As soon as the BNP Chairperson approached the Minar and was about to lay the wreath, some of the rowdy elements at the top of the base of the Minar started tearing off and throwing flowers helter-skelter. The BNP claims their supporters were mostly at the bottom of or alongside the stairs and not at the top. The police took no action then, but arrested a few of the BNP workers later. The Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University and the Chairman of the Observation Committee were there to receive the distinguished guest and they also saw her off duly. The government-controlled television also, by a strange act of coincidence, and a rare feat of promptness, put up a special show within a couple of hours. The TV made a futile attempt to correlate the presence of the BNP leader with the alleged demeaning act of her followers.

It is, therefore, extremely difficult to identify the true reasons and real motivation of a planned drama reportedly staged by the BNP itself. One

feels highly constrained to assume that either the BNP or the Awami League supporters would stoop down so low as to show any gesture of disdain or disrespect to the cherished memory of the language martyrs, let alone to desecrate the very altar of their memorial. The Language Movement and its glory is shared not merely by one political party, it is the pride possession of all Bangladeshis citizens.

There were, indeed, some exceptions, like in all such cases. But, their number and strength are quite insignificant, whoever they may be they certainly are not genuine supporters of either the BNP or the Awami League. Secondly, would it not be absurd to suggest that the BNP cadres would be deliberately engaged in such acts of national vilification and desecration of a national monument in the very presence of their own leader, thereby risking to tarnish her image? Why should the BNP leader indulge in an act, which even to a common man, will be regarded as politically suicidal?

This does not corroborate to logic. But the act has taken place. And some people did it. They must have been goaded to act by someone for some reason. If the BNP cadres would not be foolish enough to undertake a demeaning action which might implicate their leader, this act must have been done by someone or some organisation who would gain by way of executing any feat of disapprobation or denigration of the leader of opposition. It could perhaps be easier to digest the fact that some young folks had been hired by interested quarters for enacting this horrible drama in exchange for some material incentive. Any other reasoning beats logic.

Our political culture, of late, has gone down so low and disgraceful that we spare no means, more foul than fair, to discredit and belittle our political opponents. This unsavoury, rather loathsome, tactics had been employed in the past also.

There were instances when disruption of public meetings addressed by the leader of opposition had been attributed to the same party which organised the meeting. Those who were really responsible belonging to the ruling party, though strange it would sound, were roaming the street freely and proudly, perhaps awaiting a repetitious opportunity.

Another substantial departure has been witnessed lately by way of offering ministership, may be of second and third grade, to lure away opposition members of the Parliament. This humiliating tactic was aimed almost entirely at enhancing legislative strength of the government party at the cost of the opposition. This constitutes a gross violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of any democratic constitution in the world. Any excuse that such opposition members apply for such prize governmental posts on their own and without being approached to gain any incentive, does not stand to reason. This new method has recently been employed, according to many, by the government party in their gradual but unhealthy march on the road to attain a two-thirds majority in the Parliament. This practice would, in fact, if not technically, tantamount to floor-crossing which negates the very spirit of all democratic norms and practices. People are now increasingly becoming more democratically minded and are sure to see through any game of deception which our political leaders must shun in their own and country's interest.

The writer is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.



## Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

## OPINION

## Political Culture Thawing?

Alif Zabr

One BNP MP was reprimanded for taking initiative on freer thinking. Another deserted the party and became an instant state minister in AL (How's that?). What is happening inside the main opposition party, enjoying the confidence of one-third the voters? One can smell the staleness keeping away from the fresh air of the Parliament (and the publicity follow-up). One in three voters have lost their spokesperson, in the JS. 'How's that?' — once again. Letters on the theme 'Where's my representative in the parliament?' are appearing in the press. It is difficult to shun the limelight, and easier to shout 'bitter lemon'!

As a voter, I see a ray of hope. Do we see the beginning of some change in political culture? Change is badly needed, to sweep the old political debris and garbage, and offer the people new styles in politicking. Tradition from evolutionary, but the entry into the 21st century will be windy, even on the economic front. Information technology has already blurred the usual frontiers and defences. Opacity

is being replaced by transparency. There are fewer places to hide.

How to survive at the top? Drink feedback, and think. Another handy tool of the day is team-work. It is lonely at the top. Keep company, to rekindle the cheer and camaraderie. The times are bad. Stick together. More important to monitor the noises coming from down below, than from the other camps. Other camps are also prone to the same viruses. But the greatest danger is from the whispering breeze of the environment — of the people. The masses do not like to be left behind in oblivion. The pampered are a little bit spoiled. Do not spill the spoils, it will spread further.

The ruling regime are in the same predicament, as the common denominator is the human factor. The latter can never be predicted with any degree of accuracy. This uncertainty is greater than Heisenberg's Principle. There is an added load factor, the wielding of power and influence. This amenity is sticky, and the loss is greater.

## "To Go or Not to Go"

MAS Molla

I fully endorse the views expressed in the DS editorial published on 8.2.98. It logically stated: 'Participation in the deliberations of the Parliament is a supreme moral and ethical obligation of MPs who are pledge-bound to voters through an unwritten contract to represent them at the highest law-making body in the country during the tenure of their elected office.'

The editorial forcefully added: 'If democracy is the rule of the people and election is the expression of the will of the people, by definition, and by moral law must take precedence over everything else.'

Therefore every MP of both position and opposition benches should attend every session of the JS. The MPs should discuss the problems within themselves inside or outside the Parliament. But no MP can break the pledge with the electorate.

I would like to add some more points. The major opposition should not think that the AL could come to power (or to serve) for their long two-year JS boycott during 94-96. I think, the causes of such a charge in the party in 'power'

How to mingle with the people at the grassroots? Come down from the pedestal. Pedestals are not mobile, in these days of mobile phones and shuttle diplomacy. *Manchas* cause traffic jams (more coming — *manchas* or jams?). Dispersal exercises are being practised by the players and teams. There are no *chaars* (sand shoals) in our politics; it is flooding or signal no. 5 to 9. Our political front elevation is like our high-rise buildings, with no room to manoeuvre.

Our nationalism has more potential energy or more dynamism? One is static and the other destructive. Perhaps we need more training on the steering wheel. Credit to our *sarengs*, for safe steering between the submerged sandbanks. The PE has come down quite a bit, due to excessive demands through the decades. The politicians are looking for more sources of power; but all Nature provides is gas; and inflammable gas at that, right at the source (well), which burns out prematurely. No patience anywhere!

We are left with two options: patience, or change.

The government has nothing to lose but the opposition would have a gain at least in face if the bridge is restored.

The second demand is, perhaps, in the process of fulfillment. Both the position and the opposition should sincerely work for that. The opposition should come forward with a genuine list.

The third demand of the BNP is illogical and anti-people. The opposition knows — as we all do — that if the Topkhana Road in front of the Press Club is closed, the Abdul Gani Road, even if opened for public traffic proves inadequate and traffic jam lasts for hours together. The government-prescribed venue — Osmani Udyan — is very near to this site. The Manik Mia Avenue has virtually no alternative. Besides, the recently erected road island has three rows of saplings. A rally on this road may make the island barren again! The DS editorial, however, proposed the big open space in the corner of Bijoy Sharani and Airport Road.

The opposition should return to the JS just after the fulfillment of the first demand. The second demand is actually a matter of law.