

## Scandalous Prices

Onion price has rocketed to Tk 50 per KG, three times what it was weeks back, two times the past week's. This cannot be the doing of market forces alone. This suspicion got a fillip by the spurt in salt price which followed the onion nightmare by a day or two. Those that sought to shoot the salt price up through the mechanism of rumours and scare — nothing to do with the supply situation — evidently got their cue from the mad-onion epidemic. The profiteers — retailers mostly of salt — couldn't carry the trick far enough. People smelt rat.

We have at least two lessons here. An unsuspected factor has contributed to the very improbable thing that fell on us out of nowhere. People's faith in what the government says or does is the most powerful weapon to squash any artificial and manipulative move to push up the prices. One may ask very cogently, why is the government now running after corrective measures when it is its business to know the production picture of onion and other items behind the daily menu and prepare the people with their previews. Failure of the government to share with the people what it knew of the onion situation has been bad enough but to have not known it before the disaster struck is far worse.

The second lesson we have here is the inconceivable absence of buyers' resistance to price spirals. This resistance — a main factor in keeping the operation of market forces healthy — could come in three forms. First, the individual buyer's resistance both because he or she cannot afford the tripped up price or is not convinced why the high price should be accepted and paid. Resistance should also come as the result of activists working in groups. Third, the government, through the media, can very well ask the people very plainly — don't pay more. In the absence of all three, the buyers, at all level, have for years been paying more than the MRP printed on the label of packaged consumables.

Onion price will come down as a matter of course — in a matter of weeks. But the vulnerability of the price mechanism, the helplessness of both society and government in the face of its convulsions — as shown by the onion and salt nightmare has been traumatic. Both society and government must learn their lessons from it. Specially the latter because it is in charge. In the meantime, how about a deep and competent probe into this unparalleled scandal? And the government begin its transparency exercise with the publication of the findings. Cannot actions follow the findings?

## Be Stern

What happened in Maheshkhal, Cox's Bazar, a couple of days back is outrageous beyond measure. It was more ominous than gangsterism we have come to dread so much. It was creepy communalism trying it out through the backdoor of public gullibility. In the manner of happening though it was a galling broad daylight affair. And, that is where the menace looks even worse.

The so-called Babri Masjid Smriti Sangsad in Maheshkhal, not content with living in a fading near-hoary memory, decided that it needed an issue to whip up public sentiments to clamber on to their consciousness. They put out a rallying cry against a *jatra* show in a village fair by means of a protest hartal. Result: it incited a mob duly egged on by hirelings to set afire the *jatra* pandal and five houses at the village Adina with injuries inflicted on 16 persons apart from the huge property loss and the lingering tensions.

*Jatra* is a bardic form of dramatic art handed down through the generations and a very popular and common cultural and recreational attraction in the countryside. It is a necessary fixture in the rural fairs which are usually organised around this time of the year. And, if there be any notoriety associated with gambling etc then it should have been fittingly a matter for the local administration to handle, not certainly something that should have brought back the Babri Masjid memory. Or led to a free-for-all looting of valuables in the rural households. How coarse and philistine was all that!

We cannot give indulgence to such a rabid exploitation of people's religious sentiments. But the local law enforcers did just that through a delayed and inconclusive police action. The government should not only be firm against the reactionary forces but also be seen to be firm.

## Neurosurgery in Shambles

Perhaps this would have still remained out of focus for quite some time more. The premature and unfortunate death of Raman Lamba has suddenly brought the whole thing under a flood of light; as a vital branch of medicare neurosurgery is badly neglected in Bangladesh. A leading Bangla daily which interviewed the topmost neurosurgeon of the country revealed the other day that old instruments are being used for complicated coronal surgery.

This is shocking. We do not know how at an age when neurological disorder or ailment is on the rise and exposing medical science to newer challenges every day, we can languish in such dangerous primitivism. This again highlights the insensitivity and inefficiency of government's health-care department. It is not merely a matter of money but also one of attitude. The bottomline is the people who formulate policy and are in charge of maintenance in this sector do not give a damn about tax payers' money.

It also does not do any good to the image of Hippocrates community in this country. Could not they be more forthright and committed from their respective positions? If they felt neurology was a neglected department and they were working with outdated old technology they should have come out in public loudly.

There is a lesson in every disaster. We ask government's health department to sensitise itself to the problems that are plaguing neurology as a healing science and start working along the lines of complaints lodged by the experts in this field.

# Chittagong Hill Tracts Revisited

The problem in the Hill Tracts is more humanitarian than constitutional and efforts should commence at once both at the governmental and NGO level to deal with the situation there. Government has to take bold and imaginative measures for the psychological rehabilitation of the refugees and ex-Shanti Bahini Cadres and in creating jobs for them.

It was in the latter part of the eighties that I became intimately acquainted with the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its problems. As High Commissioner to India I was made a member of the National Committee on the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In 1986 alone, more than sixty thousand tribal refugees from the Hill Tracts had sought refuge in Tripura of India. This bilateral dimension of the problem was the reason for my inclusion in the Committee, which was chaired by Air Vice Marshal (Retd.) A.K. Khandkar, who was then a Minister in the Ershad Government.

One visited the area a number of times during that period for talks with the tribal leaders. A series of protracted talks ultimately led, in 1989, to the formation of three district Local Government Councils in Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. A year earlier, in 1988 I had the experience of having been the first Bangladeshi official to visit the refugee camps in Tripura. It was at once a traumatic and disconcerting experience — traumatic as one saw thousands of refugees living in dreadful conditions, and disconcerting because in those camps of anger and frustration, no Bangladeshi official, even a well-protected High Commissioner, could be sure about his physical security.

A lot has happened since then. Both the Government and the Shanti Bahini have shown wisdom, political courage and foresight in signing the Peace Treaty. As the Treaty itself puts it, it was done "changing, amending, incorporating and writing off" the 1989 District Council Regulations. The work done in 1989 did not therefore go in vain. Thankfully, the last refugee has now returned from Tripura, and the stage is now set there, in spite of the largely politically motivated opposition to the Treaty, for a constructive and indeed exciting phase of development in that region. This region of ours including Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan, is replete with instances of political leaders failing to put stretch in time. But the Hill Tracts, thanks to the wisdom and foresight shown in concluding the Treaty, has turned out to be an

exception. My recent extensive visit to the remote regions of three districts of the Hill Tracts as a Development Worker of BRAC, accompanying its Executive Director, Fazle Hasan Abed, was qualitatively different from my earlier visits. One was then mainly concerned with ending the insurgency situation there, whereas on this occasion it was to determine the ways in which an NGO like BRAC could participate in the poverty alleviation and empowerment of the abysmally poor tribal and non-tribal population of the region. This time travelling freely, one saw and learnt a great deal about the region, its inhabitants and their problems. On this occasion one could savour, unfettered by a feeling of security, the breathtaking beauty of the region and imagine its immense possibilities.

A word about the opposition to the Peace Treaty. One did see, particularly in the fringe areas of the Hill Tracts, inhabited by Bengalis in large numbers, black flags, fluttering as it were, more in ignorance than in protest. For, as one talked to the Bengalis, one realized, and many of them indeed admitted, that they had been the victims of short sighted and motivated propaganda. The failure of the government machinery to explain the salient points of the Treaty did not help matters either. But as time elapses and there is progress on the ground the Bengalis are realizing that much of their initial fears about the outcome of the Treaty had been unfounded.

It is now becoming apparent to the majority of the inhabitants of the region that steps taken to protect the interests and security of the minuscule tribals, and special administrative arrangement for the progress and development of the region do not indeed affect the "Sovereignty and territorial integrity" of the Hill Tracts. They realize that the return of the thousands of refugees, from Tripura, has been possible only due to the security guarantees

the citizens of Bangladesh and their development". There cannot of course be anything unconstitutional in this clearly expressed intention. It has been argued that the creation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council goes against the constitution, Chapter III, Section 59(I) and (II) of the constitution states that local government in "every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law". It is also stated that "subject to the constitution and any other law", they shall perform "within the appropriate administrative unit such functions as shall be prescribed by Act of Parliament, which may include functions relating to (a) Admin-

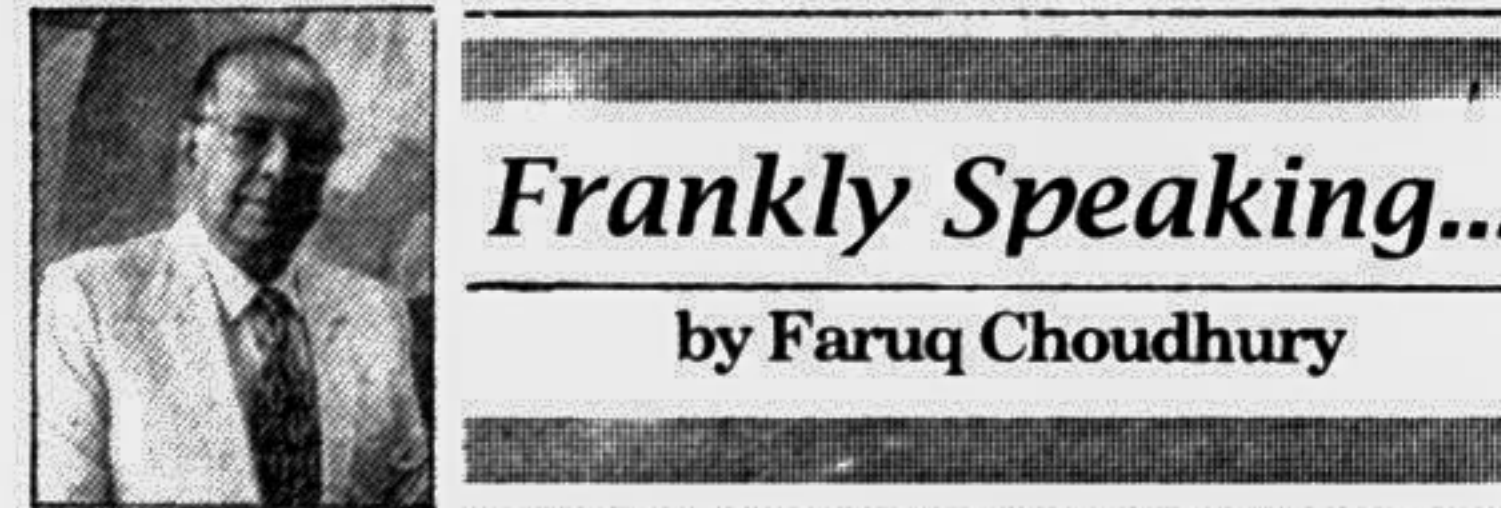
restrictions imposed by law in the public interest" and "subject to any restrictions imposed by law" in this regard in the Treaty are not only reasonable, but also, in view of the situation of that area, desirable. It has also been said that the creation of a Special Ministry for the Hill Tracts and the provision for a Tribal Minister are against the Constitution. Article 56(I) of the Constitution stipulates that there shall be ministers, "as may be determined by the Prime Minister" and article 136 confers power "for the reorganization of the Service of the Republic". The Treaty is intended to bring the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, both tribal and non-tribal within the mainstream of the country's development. One should therefore think twice, before casually dismissing for criticisms sake, a set of forward-looking and innovative administrative measures as unconstitutional.

It is, they say, never the same after a war and special care has now to be taken to deal with the emerging situation in the Hill Tracts. The psychological rehabilitation of the returning refugees may be easier to accomplish than that of the members of the Shanti Bahini, who have just surrendered their weapons. Creating jobs in the region may not be enough and special efforts will have to be made to absorb the members of the Shanti Bahini in areas outside the Hill Tracts. Chakmas constitute the single largest of the 13 groups of tribals in the region and as one of their leaders put it to us, the Chakmas were mainly agriculturists, who turned to education only when their homes, hearths and agricultural lands were submerged by the Kaptai Lake built in the sixties to produce hydro-electricity. The percentage of educated among the Chakmas is higher than the national average and many of them took to arms in the seventies and the eighties. Now, as peace has hopefully dawned in the region, he agreed that they should be

helped in developing their entrepreneurial skills. But then most of the other tribes are poor and illiterate, so are the non-tribals. The percentage of literacy in Rangamati is comparatively high at 44 per cent (mostly because of the Chakmas), in Rangamati it is 26.3 per cent and in Bandarban 26.3 per cent. Female education is lagging behind. In Thanchi Thana of Bandarban, for instance, the percentage of female literacy is as low as 4.6 per cent.

Collecting and selling of firewood in the market is the principal occupation of many of the tribals. During the monsoons when it is difficult to collect firewood they are short of cash money and have to live off the jungle mostly by eating bamboo shoots that grow wild. In the winter as they can hardly afford warm clothes, they find it cheaper to keep warm at night by keeping awake burning firewood, preferring to sleep in the comparative warmth of the daylight. People have hardly any access to cash money needed for even the most rudimentary entrepreneurial capacity. Health conditions are extremely poor in the region where malaria is endemic and fatal diarrhoeal disease prevalent.

One is therefore constrained to point out to the critics of the Peace Treaty that the problem in the Hill Tracts is more humanitarian than constitutional and that efforts should commence at once both at the governmental and NGO level to deal with the situation there. Government has to take bold and imaginative measures for the psychological rehabilitation of the refugees and ex-Shanti Bahini Cadres and in creating jobs for them. The NGOs must move into the area in a well-concerted fashion not only in the field of microcredit but also in the areas of education and health. The region rich in natural resources and in agriculture has tremendous potentiality. The Kaptai Lake and the surrounding areas are ideal for developing tourism in a big way. But the immediate imperative is to take urgent poverty alleviation and empowerment measures among the population, who have long been victims of a situation, not indeed of their making.



## Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury

Tracts, who maintain that the terms of the Treaty are unconstitutional, the constitutional path would be to move the Supreme Court. Agitation on the streets would lead to nowhere.

Here, one can only say that the Peace Treaty commences with the unambiguous assertion that it has been framed, "Keeping full and unswerving allegiance in Bangladesh's state sovereignty and territorial integrity in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts region under the jurisdiction of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh." It also clearly states that the agreement has been reached "to uphold the political, social, cultural, educational and economic rights of all the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts region, to expedite socio-economic development process and to preserve the rights of all

administrative and the work of Public Offices, (b) the maintenance of public orders and (c) the preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development". The Regional Council in the Hill Tracts therefore is in conformity with the constitution and is in full recognition of its sovereignty. It should also be noted by the critics of the Peace Treaty that Article 60 empowers the Parliament to confer powers on the local government bodies, "including power to impose taxes for local purposes to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds".

Some have alleged that the Treaty restricts the freedom of movement of the citizens and their right to own property. Articles 36 and 42 of the Constitution respectively state that these will be enjoyed by the citizens, "subject to any reasonable

# Pakistan Awaits New Government at Delhi

Whatever the equation between the governments, people-to-people contacts are widening. I found great desire at every level to meet Indians or to travel to India. I have gathered the same feeling among the people in India. The main hitch is a visa.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

says the Pakistan Prime Minister. He feels that Gujral had too many masters to placate and, therefore, could not act. His charge — and he plays it down — is that Gujral retracted from the understanding he gave him at Male on constituting a separate working group to discuss Kashmir.

In the face of New Delhi's denial, it is difficult to assess who is to blame. However, Information Minister Mushahid Hussain, who was also present during my interview with Nawaz Sharif, claimed that Gujral admitted "before them about his helplessness". But the Nawaz Sharif government may have been influenced by another factor: BJP leader Jaswant Singh reportedly advised Pakistan not to settle anything with the Gujral government because the BJP was coming to power and it would not be accepting anything to which it was not a party. Congress, too, I was given to understand, indicated to Islamabad that they could not afford to give Gujral the credit of solving Kashmir if that was in the offing.

All this may be rationalisation on the part of Islamabad. But there is no doubt that the Nawaz Sharif government appears to have accepted the situation where the solution of Kashmir is distant. That does not mean that Islamabad will lessen its "other efforts". But it means that the his government has come to face the fact that political parties in India have no difference of opinion over Kashmir — something which Pakistan High Commissioner Ashraf Jahangir Qazi reportedly conveyed to his government during his pre-poll visit to Islamabad.

My impression is that the Nawaz Sharif government would feel satisfied if the talks on Kashmir were resumed. He has no time frame in mind. I do not mind how long it takes provided we begin to discuss Kashmir," he told me three months earlier in an interview. His position remains more or less the same. But he will set the ball rolling when a new government is sworn in at New Delhi.

Asked if the army would agree to his approach, he said there was no question of the armed forces interfering. "I am under no pressure from them," he said. After having effected amendments to the constitution, curbing the power of the President to dismiss the Prime Minister and to dissolve the National Assembly and state legislatures, Nawaz Sharif feels confident. Several intellectuals and editors told me that the phase of martial law in Pakistan was over. "People will not easily accept it as the armed forces themselves realise the futility of this step," they argue.

The situation that Pakistan faces at present strengthens such a thinking. Economically, the country is in great distress. The IMF has helped it to stave off the crisis. America, which controls the IMF strings, prefers a faltering democracy to martial law rule. Nawaz Sharif's anxiety to make up with India is not because of Washington's prodding alone. With his business background, he firmly believes that economic links are the sinews of friendship.

"I won elections on good relations with India," said Nawaz Sharif. "I shall adopt the same plank if and when Pakistan goes to the polls again." This is true because some political leaders are afraid that left to him, Nawaz Sharif would go "to any extent to foster good relations with India." This is not to the advantage of Pakistan," they say. Nonetheless, they regret that "Gujral failed to exploit the opportunity."

My feeling is that the climate in Pakistan for talks with India is still favourable. But Kashmir will need to be discussed. Even otherwise, New Delhi is committed to do so under the Shimla Agreement, which lays down that the two sides will hold talks to find a final settlement. Nawaz Sharif gave me the impression that he

would be willing to discuss all issues, including trade and travel, provided Kashmir was one of them. He was prepared for a simultaneous dialogue on all subjects. And it is quite possible that he would implement the recommendations of such working groups as finished their task earlier than the group on Kashmir.

Whatever the equation between the governments, people-to-people contacts are widening. I found great desire at every

level to meet Indians or to travel to India. I have gathered the same feeling among the people in India. The main hitch is a visa. New Delhi, even after the Gujral doctrine of unilateral gestures, is as cussed in issuing visas as Islamabad is. Even after the grant of visas, police harass visitors in both countries. Still the enthusiasm has not waned any way.

Scores of Punjabis from India attended the Basant festival in Lahore on February 22. This festival, celebrating the days has lost popularity in India. But the Punjabis, 67 per cent of Pakistan's population, celebrate it with great gusto. Feasts and kiteflying continue for two days and two nights in main cities of Punjab. There is

so much ostentatiousness that even the glitter of Diwali looks pale. The expenditure runs into crores of rupees. A kite alone sells for Rs. 500. Floodlights are used to fly the kites. This wastes energy and adds to the detriment of computers. This has also resulted in the failure of power too often.

"You still call us fundamentalists?" remarked a friend when I described my amazement over the extravagance and the display of fashions after visiting half a dozen parties. But here too, in the midst of loud music, several people asked me: "What will happen at the polls?" I evaded the question by saying that it was a toss-up. Still the number of people who strained their ears to hear mine were many. It showed their interest in their concern. I felt that if they realised that the complexion of government at New Delhi would affect them as well.

## OPINION

### The Horses without Carts

Alif Zabr

When an infrastructure is old, poor, and inefficient, increasing the number of personnel does not necessarily increase the efficiency of the system.

The system has to be overhauled first and then the internal interlinking and coordinating services have to be strengthened, followed by the tuning of the system for optimum performance (in public interest, no other interest).

The next phase is to fill in the gaps in personnel to operate the critical points of the working system. The staff must be trained and disciplined. When dishonesty is present, and the sense of duty is absent, then any system will stall. Why operate with a high system loss?

The above formula may be applied to the performance standard of the city corporations or municipalities. In Dhaka, the DCC has utterly failed and practically broken down, for several reasons.

Forward planning was inadequate to anticipate the growth rate of works and responsibilities every five years forward. The municipal system was not enhanced with budget and technical resources every running year of every project services offered and available were much less than the rising de-

mands). The responsibility for lack of judgement and foresight delved on the officers, and failure to get the work done by the teams is also ultimately pinned on the officers (the staff do not think and plan and take corrective actions — the officers do).

Increasing the number of workers in this unworkable system will not improve the efficiency. The difference between quality and quantity has to be noted at several stages: planning, operating, maintaining, monitoring, prosecuting. The team must work as a whole, and the weak links have to be corrected.

The recent decision to split each Ward into three and having three Commissioners instead of one looks all right on paper. But the simultaneous exercise of improving the system has not been announced. How extra number of human resources can improve the situation dramatically, and not marginally?

In fact, the reorganisation of the municipalities should have the first exercise, followed by personnel changes or additions.

What the additional commissioners will do? They will prepare pending or priority

lists and clamour for attention and action, when the system cannot service the demands of the new commissioners.

The monitoring and prosecution wing of the system has been paralysed due to corruption and absence of disciplinary action. It is all beating about the bush, before the weak links have been normalised.

There is another potential pitfall, the influence of politics during the elections of the new ward commissioners. The Mayor cannot work with outmoded ways of running a mega city. Now the system is being "over-populated" (according to the notorious law which says that bureaucracy always increases, never decreases).

Political decisions should be fool-proof, to retain whatever credibility is left in this country of super-politicians during any regime. The current regime should not feel shy of admitting that it is also suffering from the effect of the polluting political environment. One is judged by the company one keeps.

First modify the system; second, the updated infrastructure should be in place; third, the personnel should match the system. Why go in small, ad hoc political increments? The slip is showing! Remove garbage in all the sectors of the society!

## To the Editor...

### Diplomatic traffic jam

Sir, Maybe the US is right that unless Iraq destroys all her biological and chemical weapons, there is no chance that the sanction can be lifted. On the other hand Iraq is also correct that this UN Weapons Inspection team is stalling and made this entire affair into a never-ending game with the majority of inspectors from the US and UK. So what we see now is a diplomatic traffic jam when neither side wants to give in. The scenario has the same elements which took place back in 1991 during the Gulf War.

This time the facts are though the same but the motives and players have changed. We see, this time, that France,

the Middle East, Russia, Germany and China have objected to a military strike in Iraq by the US. Russia has gone ahead even further and declared the possibility of a third world war even. What does all of this prove? Are we witnessing the death of US domination or is this nothing but the suicide bells of the Iraqis?

Masroor Ahmed Deepak  
Dhaka

### Bus stop needed

Sir, Students of 54 countries study at Islamic Institute of Technology (IIT), Gazipur, in different engineering programmes. IIT is located at Board Bazar, Gazipur which is 30 km north of Dhaka. But it is

a matter of great regret that bus services between IIT and Dhaka is very poor. Though some local buses ply from Board Bazar, these are not safe. The BRTC City Service has its stop at Toga Bridge and the Premium Bus has at Uttara. But if the authority concerned kindly opens another stop at the IIT Gate or close to IIT, the students of the institute will be greatly benefited.

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### NOTICE

There being no FOCUS page today, the article on environment scheduled for today will be published in the next FOCUS page.

## 60 Psychiatrists for 12 Lakh Patients!

Shahabuddin Mahtab

President Abraham Lincoln (who suffered from depression a common mental ailment, though of lesser visibility as compared to schizophrenia, most of his adult life commented on his illness as follows: "I am now the most miserable man living. If only I were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would be not one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better it appears to me."

In similar vein Sir Winston Churchill described his illness as "my black dog." The boxed news item DS 15/2/98 stated

that there were 12 lakh schizophrenic patients in the country. The total number of others will be many times more.

We are sure that there has been very valuable and learned discussions at the "First International Conference on Psychiatry 98" at Dhaka. This is only a preliminary beginning in the mental health sector. Its success would be what we do at the conference. In very many cases the follow up has been meager.

To our knowledge there is an Institute of Psychiatry in a very nucleus form. A building is also

under construction in the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area. The courses offered are of short term duration. Full time post-graduate courses at least of a year's duration is necessary. As students are not so willingly attracted to be trained as psychiatrists, special incentives such as creating posts upto the Thana level, providing foreign and postgraduate courses etc. are necessary. Let our target be to have 6000 psychiatrists by the year 2000. It is neither impossible, nor this is a dream.

We must shed our apathy, insincerity, selfishness etc. to achieve our goals. No foreign consultant or a foreign country can do it for us.