

Towards a Direction,
Please

Another year of independence passes. And we trudge on. To where we are not sure. Are we sure we have negotiated some terrain if not a road — any terrain? What if we have lost our way in some treacherous bog? All swamp and quicksand and impenetrable bush — fashioned by suicidal politics hellbent on keeping or capturing power and an economy having nothing in it but lusting after money and property?

Learning and education, justice and fairplay, civility and dependability, art and culture, the sciences and technology, the elements and the natural visitations, nothing not even society itself comes before politics. Which has been reduced by now to a mean mean game of self-aggrandisement.

Not by politics alone did we achieve this state independence. The individual in Bangladesh has still a long way to go to be meaningfully independent. In the sixties Bangabandhu and a most of other sacrificing and wise leaders moulded a politics in response to a surging aspiration for a national identity and a course that could take the nation towards cultural and economic fulfilment. Politics was the technology of materialising the science of effectively marrying society and state and ensuring each individual a life full of rights and duties and work and satisfaction. Our 27-year-old state still doesn't know if it has any role in developing the arts and sciences and, if any, how to go about that.

We have struck both gas and oil. Power shouldn't be our problem for the foreseeable future. And power is item one for economic and social development. And it is in power that we have been foundering for two years. Fossil fuel power, assisted by alternative sources of energy should help us greatly to greening our country again, a sheer necessity for our survival.

Let the Hills Treaty be a pace-setter for overcoming mindboggling socio-political problems and the Bangabandhu Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge be our guiding model for programmes needing a computer's organisation and a clockwork efficiency. Let beating the time schedule and fulfilling the work target in the old Stakhanovite way, as manifest in the Bridge, be our norm in all programmes we take to transform our society past poverty and hunger and disease.

Bickerings would cease when dithering on essential programmes will go. And then this present bewildering sense of directionless will change into a positive mindset. We salute our valiant martyrs who fell so that we may live and breathe in freedom. Happy Independence Day to all our countrymen.

Sounds Anti-green

One reason why few good initiatives see successful conclusion in this country is perhaps the appalling discrepancy between word and action. The damage is less when this lapse is limited to an individual. But when that involves an authority the implications are eminently larger in their negative impact. We have long come to hear of the determination to preserve what little remains of the greenery in the urban areas. But the news of a recent government move printed along with authentic visual in a national daily sounds depressing. Reportedly it has decided to use an acre of green in front of the Parliament House for construction purpose. This particular verdant space was not only a refreshing retreat for the denizens of a concrete jungle where young kids, spacelorn as they are, could often indulge in games, but there are also quite a few vacant spaces around where the proposed construction could take place.

The concerned authorities' attitude to city dwellers' comfort has always been shrouded in mystery. They say one thing but ends up doing the other. On the one hand we have ministers and officials bleating more often than not about state's concern for and investment in filling people's lungs with oxygen through schemes like social afforestation etc., on the other, we have these decisions that whatever be the soundness of logic behind them can never arrest the diminishing trend of green. Not long ago, we heard the quixotic decision of parting with some portions of the Ramna Park for the expansion of the Kakrail mosque. The latest one at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar seems to be a natural extension of that spirit. We are alarmed. Dhaka has already attained the dubious distinction of being one of the worst cases of air pollution. If you cannot do anything to curb the quantum of poisonous gases like carbon monoxide please don't add to that.

Ghastly

This has been tragic to the core and deeply hurtful to human sensibilities. All eight persons including a family of five were burnt alive in a microbus which had collided with a truck at Golara on the Dhaka-Aricha Highway Monday last. They were a wedding party snuffed out in ironic contrast to the intimation in the air of an auspicious occasion.

Whether the micro-bus operator or the truck driver was at fault we do not have even the faintest of idea. For the police and the witnesses merely said they saw the micro-bus catching fire in a turtle on being hit and the passengers agonisingly burning in a coil of flame without any assistance whatsoever. Obviously they missed the moment of collision, even if they didn't, they couldn't sit in judgment on who to blame for the disaster. It happened in split seconds; only the lone passenger who has survived can shed some light.

Something has become trendy in group commutation in the highway these days: hiring of a micro-bus for a trip almost as casually as taking a rickshaw ride without a care for who might drive it and what the conditions of its vital parts could be like.

We want the authorities to step in and pin such service down on minimum safety requirements. All highway transports must of necessity be fitted with fire extinguishers, let alone first aid boxes.

Independence Day: A Contemplation

by Neeman A Sobhan

Instead of lingering on our inadequacies, lapses and misfortunes, maybe today, we should reclaim some of the unity and shared pride of a remembered day, when we felt empowered and emboldened by the sound of our own voice jointly defining ourselves, not as a crushed mass of humanity deserving pity, but as a worthy and ambitious people who, given only an enabling environment, could achieve anything.

26 MARCH, THE NATION CELEBRATES INDEPENDENCE DAY. Already, the words take on the clipped accents of headlines and documentaries. One prepares oneself for the media hype and all the verbosity of commentaries and analyses, the felicitations and condemnations, the apocalyptic visions of a country that has not lived up to its dreams, the redemptive picture painted by the insistently idealistic musings, the anger, the sadness, the sense of betrayal, the sharing of memories, the renewing of pledges, and all that which marks the mass ritualizing of a historic anniversary.

Admittedly, given our collective temperament, every anniversary of national significance becomes a sentimental trap. In much the same way that a woman feels about her wedding day or birthday, we too, wax lyrical, poetic, bombastic or maudlin, and employ any other excessive emotion from the spectrum of sentiments, in making a monumental fuss about our independence day. V.S. Naipaul, that acerbic writer and critic of the sub-continental sensibility, would have dismissed all this as 'a nation exchanging banalities with itself.' He would be right in his observation, but wrong in his attitude. I feel it is necessary, every now and then, to break down and indulge in the sheer joy of a shared national event or experience. However banal or sentimental, the public act of shared catharsis is essential to the bonding of a nation. For example, however trite and over-

blown, who will deny the untarnished pleasure of dwelling, even after all these years, on that history making moment, which fixed for all time, our entrance into the world as a self-declared independent nation: the announcement at 7:45 p. m on 26 March 1971, from the transmission center at Kalurghat: 'This is Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendro. I, Major Zia, at the direction of Bongobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, hereby declare that the Independent Republic of Bangladesh has been established...'

And yet History itself is un-sentimental and clear-eyed. It merely documents or tabulates, and files away our lives for future reference and for dispassionate analysis. The individual memory and its emotional records are reduced to being the objective sources for detached examination: the testimony of texts and photographed images, of facts and figures, matter and motif, all are boiled down to support a thesis. Human memory, though, of the same historical events, is that untidy personal narrative written in the past imperfect tense or the on-going present continuous. Its no wonder then, that it is such a woolly and unreliable, yet an undeniable and compelling,

narrative. Still, I would rather be reading or writing just such a chaotic personal text, than taking the objective view-point. I call this my annual exercise in the Willing Suspension of Political Despair Today. I deny mere political history and succumb instead, to the seductions of private reminiscences. This protects me from the frustrations of present day Bangladesh, and reminds me of the drama and romance, the adventure and magic of our national birth. It serves to keep alive in my mind the extraordinary, often tragic and horrifying, but finally triumphant days of 1971—that shattering, Chinese year of the brutal Iron Dog, the year of our liberation, which for our generation will be the most momentous event of our collective life.

Today, I reject the wide historical perspective, because it reduces my private experiences, and instead shows up, an unavoidably dismal panorama of the state of the country; a rudderless ship with a faulty compass, lost in a turbulent ocean. I don't wish to see this, not today. To view history properly, one has to acquire the kind of emotional distance that can only be achieved by those who are no longer part of the experience that is to be recorded in the an-

nals of its documented past. The history of independent Bangladesh is being written and we are its punctuation marks: a semi-colon here, an exclamation mark there, sometimes a short pause, or now a longer one, deserving a more substantive halt to assess, recollect and consolidate events and emotions as they emerge, and then to move on, to a new paragraph. And in the scriptural unfolding of Bangladesh, every year we arrive at the end of one paragraph and contemplate the start of the fresh one. Presently, we have arrived at the 29th paragraph, where we stop to view the landscape of the nation's history to date. Of course, we are still only in the first chapter of what will constitute the History of Bangladesh. We who have attended and participated in the birth throes of this country, are too much part of the evolving history to be able to properly view where we have arrived since embarking upon our voyage into the uncharted waters of our independence. If we look at the Independence Day as a time for reading out the nation's report card, we will be much bedeviled by frustration and despair; but not if we look upon this, rather, as a time for re-defining the terms and conditions of our interconnected ex-

istence and identity, a time to re-pledge our commitment to the exploration of our potential for survival and for true independence. Perhaps, now is also the time to say: so we have had more failures than successes; so we have been often thwarted in our journey into democracy and the exercise of basic human rights; true, we are on first name basis with pain and grinding poverty; agreed, that we have not been able to chalk out a clear vision of our destiny to inspire and propel us in the right direction; and we cannot deny that we are still mired in moral and economic dereliction, not to mention, the maddening frustrations of daily life. But isn't all this a part of the human condition itself, one which we must all solve? At least, the problems, however overwhelming, are OUR problems. They have not been imposed on us from outside. They are part of the peculiar combination of our circumstances, which include not only natural cataclysms, but also the man-made ones, created by the political elements at the helm of the state, and exacerbated by the choices they have made, and the policies they have pursued. But we must remember that these are only the temporary writers of the script of this nation's

history. The new generation that is waiting in the wings, may bring a whole new narrative style, create a tour de force in the political and economic unfolding of our story, change the protagonists and the supporting cast of characters.

Thus, instead of lingering on our inadequacies, lapses and misfortunes, maybe today, we should reclaim some of the unity and shared pride of a remembered day, when we felt empowered and emboldened by the sound of our own voice jointly defining ourselves, not as a crushed mass of humanity deserving pity, but as a worthy and ambitious people who, given only an enabling environment, could achieve anything. That heady surge of excitement and enthusiasm, which was bequeathed us by all our brave compatriots—heroes each, who held in the spirit of a strong and free Bengali nation—that particular rush of undiluted joy in the blood stream, is what we need to remember and hold on to every year, till we achieve the real landmarks of freedom: human well being and economic emancipation for all. To keep alive our hopes and beliefs in our nationhood and our ability to survive, perhaps even to dream of achieving the grace of humanity, if not greatness, for our people—all this is what we need to contemplate and celebrate on the Independence Day.

Out of a glowing Past, overcoming the problems of the Present and into the bright Future of the coming millennium, that is my footnote to the calendar day: 26th MARCH.

Let's Not Ride Waves of Disunity

by A R Shamsul Islam

It is urgently demanded of us to dispassionately analyse and acknowledge how far apart we are from the objectives of national unity, why we have lagged behind so dismally.

IF a single time is to be singled out when the nation stood most united it is undoubtedly the occasion of the Liberation War of 1971.

Nearly the entire nation fought almost barehanded against the most modern, sophisticated Pak army. Even at that critical juncture of history there were some elements amongst us who sided with the occupation force. Firstly, there were fundamentalists like the Jamaat who loved Pakistan as it was based on religion. The Rajakars, Al-Badars, Al-Shams etc were their offspring. Secondly, a faction of the leftists and extreme rightists opposed the Liberation War. Political leader like Abdul Huq wrote to the Pak President urging him what he said to save Pakistan by crushing the rebels. Thirdly, at least some of those who fled the country in the face of army crackdown were not believers in Bengalee nationalism. Still they advocated the Liberation War as without its successful completion they found no chance to return home. Eminent poet, litterateur Ali Ahsan quoted 'ayats' from the Holy Quran in support of the freedom struggle.

When the war drew to a close the unity began to wane for reasons obvious. Firstly, circumstantially oriented nationalists surged back to their own self. Secondly, the defeated Pakistan launched conspiratorial activi-

ties to destabilise the newly independent government to force the country to the neighbourhood of its former entity in a new name of say, Muslim Bangladesh. Thirdly, some of the activities of the Indian army like taking away arms, ammunitions, etc, surrendered by the Pak army, to India hurt the people and made them skeptical about the intent of the neighbouring country. Fourthly, the way the Awami government dealt with the post-war problems left much to be desired. Fifthly, besides Pakistan, some other foreign countries started fishing in the troubled waters of Bangladesh.

After 1975, anti-Mujib and anti AL forces seized power. The fundamentalists, extreme leftists like 'sarvahas' etc who remained underground or were moving at a snail's pace almost sped out of their holes and brandished their claws. Bengalee nationalism, tinged with religion bordering on fanaticism and communalism, was bred. Cracks of disunity that remained somewhat hidden or restrained with a palliative treatment began to appear clearly and got widening. Even when the 'pro-liberation' government has now again come to

be seated the task of redeeming the nation remains at bay.

Since independence in 1971 economic crisis and social unrest have a paralysing effect upon the nation. Unfortunately no political philosophy, no economic programme worth the name has come up to ameliorate the distress of the people. Every government was long in rehearsing rhetoric but awfully short of substantiating desired progress.

National unity is the end product of justice, mostly economic justice. It has remained absent in Bangladesh in all regimes. On the contrary, exploitation has played its full course of action. Personal fattening up culture at the cost of the destitute millions has grown up as an omnivorous cult.

Unity may be of two kinds — makeshift unity by external forces and lasting unity by internal harmony and amity which is tantamount to integration. As for example, when a country is at war with another people may get united to fight against the enemy. But the unity thus cobbed up is likely to fall off after the war is over. While going by a train it is visited by dacoits the victim

passengers may form some sort of unity amongst themselves to resist the dacoits but that does not anyway mean a harmony among them. In fact, a genuine sense to feel for others, to stand by them in their distress, to do something for the less unfortunate downtrodden, not so much of a social obligation as of a real love for countrymen, are what may be defined as parents of unity. Justice and serving zeal are the core ingredients of unity. Greed and inequity are its killers.

There is an agonizing absence of a benign force to unify the nation. We are sandwiched by a battle, overt and covert, hard and soft, between secularism, often misunderstood and misapplied as 'no religion', and Islamism, sometimes wrongly stretched to fanaticism. The nation has wasted enough time to wangle over pro-Indian and pro-Pakistani attitudes. Practising true democracy we could have got rid of

this menace and maniae. Democracy could have enriched us with a sense of patience, tolerance and judgement. We could have dug out the real self of the things by application of patience. We could have decided upon, by gift of tolerance and judgement, what were to be taken in and what were to be taken out holding national interest above all. Much of the fuss and figment had to flee. Ironically, true democracy has not flourished.

It is alarming that the hysteria of disunity has reached out to the Bengalees living abroad. Reports on quarrels and confrontations overseas between Bengalee immigrants ranging themselves as pros and antis of political parties, mainly the Awami League and BNP, have started coming in increasing numbers. One may remember that when Khaleed Zia visited the US to address a conference of the immigrant Bengalees, pros and antis were driven to

loggerheads.

National unity is no professional or patch-up work. Hiring a mentor, like that of a coach in cricket or football to train up a national team, to attain national unity is simply ridiculous. We ourselves have to do it. National unity is a continuous process set to motion by an unflinching conviction to live together, physically and mentally, with sympathy and empathy, to share joys and sorrows fairly equally and to shape jointly a better destiny for all. There is no alternative to a feeling of ONENESS. It cannot be achieved without political, social and, above all, economic justice, amity and democracy. Applying those virtues unity will tend to develop into integration where fear of disunity may be reduced.

The affairs of our national unity are in great disarray. If we have any desire, though need is absolute, to take a plunge into the matter, We cannot afford to remain unaware that time is quickly running out.

The writer is retired Principal, Gout Mohila College, Pabna.

To the Editor...

Leave the thoroughfares

Sir, The AL and the BNP have struck an agreement to pave the way for the opposition party to go back to the Parliament. However, one of the points agreed upon is the use of public thoroughfare for holding political meetings. This absurd demand of the BNP and the hasty consent of the Awami League will play havoc with the already fragile traffic system in the city. We have seen from experience how the civic life in Dhaka had been disrupted in the past by holding public meetings at Shapla Chattar, Purana Paltan, Naya Paltan, Zero Point, Panthapath, Mamik Mia Avenue and Bangabandhu Avenue. We will not tolerate any further disruption of civic life in our city. The one good thing the present DCC has done is to take the courageous decision to ban public meetings on streets.

We, the dwellers of this city, cannot be mute observers any more to the strangulation of our traffic system. Let it be a warning to BNP and all other parties to leave the streets and thoroughfares of Dhaka for the movement of traffic only. There are enough open spaces still available for public meetings.

There is still time for Awami League and BNP to re-consider their agreement on this vitally critical issue in greater public interest.

A Khan
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Share market concern

Sir, The share market index has been going down for the last few months causing immense concern for the investors, brokers, dealers and market leaders. The index has plummeted to near 600 from a high of more than 3600 in about a year. But surprisingly enough, the government appears to be totally indifferent to the situation. I wonder, in any country with a facade of formal economy, if the government would survive after a share market debacle of this magnitude. If the country's economy is in good shape and the fundamentals are correct, as is claimed by our leaders, the share market malaise must have been caused by some ex-

traneous fault or manipulation which the market regulators and the government are failing to pinpoint and address. Confidence of investors' confidence appears to be the main reason behind this consistently bearish trend. As a small investor, I believe the following issues need to be recognised and addressed with a view to restoring confidence.

As per the findings of the probe body appointed by the government after share market scam in November 1996, criminal proceedings were drawn against some of the alleged manipulators. In a high-pitch action, arrest warrants were also issued against them. Since then, nothing has been heard about the case. Meanwhile those at the top of the list of manipulators appear to be in the good graces of the government.

As a regulator and watchdog of the capital market, the Securities & Exchange Commission is required to have a body with high level of expertise and experience. The one that we have to distinguish by its naivety alone. Notwithstanding their honesty, the persons at top of this organisation are devoid of any experience of the capital market and its operation. So a process of trial and error is their favourite method of taking decision.

However remotely, the Banking Division of the Ministry of Finance was the organ within the government responsible for overseeing the capital market. The Capital Market Development Programme, as initiated by this division with the assistance of the ADB, was a positive contribution of the government towards market reform. But with recent decision of the government to wind up this division, it appears that the government is washing off its hand from the operation of the capital market. The investors now find themselves totally at the mercy of manipulators and naive regulators of the SEC.

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Card phones

Sir, The problem is certainly not technical, as this is proved technology for many years. Card phones/booths may be contracted to private sector, to

smash up the vested interest groups. Private telephone service is profitable for two main reasons, a) a local call is Tk 4 in place of Tk 1.75 and b) corrupt practices in billing.

The government has utterly failed to satisfy telephone demand and is following 'dog-in-the-manger' policy. The release of the new Telecom (and Broadcasting) policy is being delayed intentionally (similar delays in power and gas sectors).

What is the definition of 'transparency' and 'good governance' more propaganda than achievements!

A.Z.
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Incident of Feni

Sir, Nowadays, some very disturbing incidents are taking place of which never happened before. One incident was reported in the DS on March 1, '98 under the heading 'Gangsters terrorise Shell, Cairn officials in Feni'. It was stated that gun slinging gangsters on February 28, 1998 terrorised a team of oil company executives including the top officials of Shell Oil and its British partner Cairn Energy and the British High Commissioner, barring them from visiting a village in Feni. Their fault seems to be that they were going to attend a private function organised by the local Director of Shell Oil who happened to be a BNP supporter.

It is very shameful and a great blow to the image of our country. The ruling party must not allow this sort of incident to happen, ever. Those who are responsible for the distasteful occurrence must be dealt with severely.

I am very disappointed on reading the March 3 issue of the DS in which a paragraph was about the incident in Feni. It was written, 'Although it is alleged that the local Shell Director's political rival, an influential Awami League leader was responsible for the incident in Feni, it is now suspected that a faction of BNP had done the mischief in the name of the said Awami League leader.'

Well, the Shell directors who made all the arrangements for the honourable guests had ruined everything simply to implicated AL?

Nur Jahan
East Nasirabad, Chittagong

OPINION

City Corp Election Campaign?

Alif Zabr

The Mayor of Dhaka appears to have opened the election campaign for DCC, to cope with the BNP onslaught. He has once again come out with his grouses at a recent international seminar in Dhaka on metropolis management.

Running an overloaded and crowded mega city in the Fourth World is a herculean task due to high urban migration and huge daily movement of transient population who enter and leave the city daily (in Tokyo several million transits are recorded daily from the suburbs).

The political logjams alone cannot run the big cities, which are developing in an unplanned way, the problems simply pile up, and then become unmanageable. Ad hoc measures and improvements within an outdated system will not work, the system has to be modernised. Depending on quantity of human resources is a fallacy. Professional techniques have to be introduced, backed by equipment, with maintenance workshops, service chains, and trained technical staff.

At present, the municipalities are running on the old British colonial model, when

the growth rate of cities was evolutionary in a routine manner, in the absence of development plans as seen in free independent nations. The city management has been least affected by reforms and development projects of the successive regimes, because the national priority had always been low; and continues to be neglected. We have empowerment of women and human rights, but none is interested in enhancing garbage removal, and de-environmenting traffic jams!

Because the technical departments are weak, and the staff under-trained and under-experienced, to work fast and efficiently, the systems loss in the municipalities have been traditionally low. The divisional and some district headquarters are now booming, except in city management.

Solutions are available, but the political will is lacking in transient regimes bent on consolidation of power. Master plans are not complex exercises, as the problems are well identified, and the solutions can be compared with systems operating in the developed

countries.

The previous regime left no 5-Year Plan for implementation, and the present regime has yet to finalise one (especially the funding and the phasing components). Human rehabilitation programmes are part of the necessary evil, but these have to be faced with political consensus. The present attitude on the latter issue is not very encouraging. The man in the street sees the problem as a tussle between the two main political parties, but the experts and the leaders should be able to analyse the snags to the higher approaches necessary for smooth national development.

The Mayor has become practically immobile with the huge and complex work-load. Ironically speaking, what we are going to see now is the introduction of some popular political gimmick projects, programmes and schemes to keep the 10 million residents of dirty Dhaka in good humour till the election time.

This is the way out politicians work. Why blame the past Mayor, the present Mayor, and the future Mayor.

Containing Dissipation in the Education Sector

An Observer

A local press report, analysing the higher education sector, felt that Bangladesh has some potentiality to attract foreign students from the South, SE and East Asian blocs, who formerly used to go West, but now cannot do so due to the recent financial collapse and unattractive foreign exchange rates in the adversely affected countries.

It is not wishful thinking. A similar fashion is going abroad for treatment. If the government, and the politicians, are keen to care enough for the next generation, the educational infrastructure could be reinforced, and the gaps levelled, to set the ball rolling in this 'education industry', which is earning billions of dollars in the developed countries.

This is the time to incorporate the ideas for revamping into the forthcoming National Education Policy, awaiting release. But the draft inputs into this report are not being published or discussed with sufficient tempo. The transparency has to be established before the operation goes into first gear.

The nation has to get rid of the consensus bug biting the nation since democracy was introduced (or was it reintroduced?) in the country in the early 90s.

First the campus environment has to be cleaned and cleared up, starting with political overtones (students and teachers), and the session jams eliminated, so that it easy for the local students to gain admission and study in a congenial atmosphere. Once this basic service starts working, the foreign students can come in increasing numbers, after the administrations provide marginal improvements and services as bonus offers.

Higher education in the public sector is in a mess, with decadence, indifference, absence of BMRE (notice the row in the Architecture Faculty) and lack of motivation on the part of the educators (income opportunities on the side). This is reflected in the reaction induced amongst the current and future students. The latter prefer to keep away, if circumstances al-

low. The private universities are too expensive for the average students from the middle or lower economic groups; and the standard of education and the facilities available leave much to be desired (refer to the unkind UGC observations).

These problems have to be addressed by the leaders of the society, led by the Ministry of Education. Such exercises should be more frequent in the metropolis. To introduce a 'clear-cut' to intruding field maintain a level playing field in higher education in the public and private sectors. The human resources are enough to run the show with some foreign technical assistance in tie-up arrangements; provided the logistics are taken care of in a number of phases.

The national malady is the iron grip of the politicians in almost all the sectors of the society. The nation's number-one task is how to neutralise this polarisation, if the nation is to move ahead smoothly, and not staggering as it is doing now.