

Deadlier Accidents

Nine persons including a child and five women were killed in a bizarre road accident on Saturday. A minibus trying to overtake a fast moving standard one, confronted a rickshaw coming its own right way from the opposite direction. To parry it, the culprit mini banged into another passenger-loaded bus standing at a stoppage. Both the buses, under impact, fell off the road to the water-filled ditch by the Dhaka Chittagong Highway. Besides the dead, 50 passengers were injured, some of them seriously.

Road accidents involving buses, trucks and other motorised vehicles fall into certain categories in terms of their causes. Most such vehicles, buses particularly, are road-unworthy, running a high risk of accident. This part is operation-related and directly involves the owners. Bad policing, starting from registration and fitness licensing to controlling operations, is one very big factor behind these accidents. Police could check overcrowding and speeding bringing the accidents down to a half of their present number or at least lessen the frequency.

There is one crucial factor left: the owner-driver collusion over both overloading and speeding that maximises their profits and earnings to an impossible degree. The police, failing very traditionally to control this, induce the driver, the owner's man-on-the-spot, the captain of the wheeled vessel with anything between 50 and a hundred lives depending on him, to run to indiscretion and misjudgement. It is universally true for Bangladesh that the bus drivers suffer from fatigue and overwork as the day or night — for night coaches — gets late.

Overtaking cannot be banned wholesale but for stretches it must not be allowed to occur. The government, to the glee of transport operators, have been very very negligent in ensuring a minimum proficiency on the part of drivers of buses and trucks. The various malik samities must be made to accept some norms — of their own volition and in response to administrative behests. Norms that would first strictly ban overworked driving. Drivers must take turn doing shifts — as is the practice everywhere in the civilised world. A fatigued driver rushing to pick up more and more passengers must be made a thing of the past. In most cases the owners do not get the sum that come from extra passengers. They must ensure that there are no extra passengers. And a time-table must be strictly enforced on all buses making speeding unnecessary. Without the malik samities' cooperation and direct involvement the road accident toll can hardly be expected to lessen. And let no one who is not SSC-passed should be allowed to sit at the steering of passenger buses and public carriers.

Murder of a Headmaster

It was not an oft-heard case of waylaying or ambushing a rival by miscreants in the darkness of night. It was murder of a school teacher — headmaster of a school at the Aajgara village of Terokhada union in Khulna division. Report has it that the bandits, suspected as members of the so-called Sarbahara Party, called Towhidul Alam out of his office to a nearby field before wounding him fatally with bullets and sharp weapons. Let alone values even clear daylight, schoolful of students could not daunt the killers.

Local law enforcers have reportedly put it down to bad blood between two neighbouring villages following a police raid into one of them. More than the motive, however, it is the target of the killing which causes alarm among us. Brutalisation of the society has come to a point where gun can silence a respected member of it if only somebody can be physically strong enough to pull the trigger?

It must be remembered there are pockets of inviolacy in every society which work as ramparts against the corrupt and bestial influences of time. When these pockets or bastions collapse in the face of onslaughts by the forces of darkness, the hope for a healthy civil society is as good as dough.

We understand Sarbahara is quite an intractable presence in the south-eastern parts of the country and that the local administration has been locked in a long-drawn-out battle with its members. But is it tenable that this intractability would transform itself into organised crime and the state would be unable to protect the life and property of law abiding respected citizens?

We think government needs to interpret the message filtering through incidents like these in a holistic and serious manner in order to play the role of a defender of citizen's rights effectively.

Edible Oil Tangle

It seems we are hell-bent upon banishing mustard oil from the edible oils scene. Else why should we have dealt yet another blow to that dead horse of a cooking medium which has been substantially replaced by palm and soybean oils and variegated other stuffs. While the discriminatory duty on the import of mustard oil seeds has been retained, that on import of palm and soybean oils has been actually reduced adding salt to the injury. Even allowing for the uncanny genius we have for hurting a weakling or any crestfallen thing, this fiscal misstep is inexplicable and thoroughly devoid of economic sense.

We are not latching on to sentiment or nostalgia to advocate the cause of a few-thousand-year-old sizzler of culinary delights in this part of the world. We are being only pragmatist delving into the economics of a still purring rural industry. It is a choice between playing with the future of four lakh workers in 1200 mustard oil mills and that of keeping one thousand employees in shape at the 66-70 edible oil refineries there are in the country. Besides, the oil-cakes produced by the mills or ghanis are used as cattle fodder, fishing bait, livestock feed and biofertiliser.

The Tariff Commission cannot afford to underestimate the importance of mustard oil which currently meets one-third of our edible oil requirement. Let the import duty be friendly to mustard oil seed. But our efforts should be to locally grow all the seeds we need.

An Ever-growing Underclass of Our Society

As the time advances, the market gets into a state of hyper inflation and a poor pensioner struggles merely to survive; his pension once fixed remains unchanged except its half-hearted increase by certain percentage whenever a pay commission is instituted or an interim relief is provided to the serving employees.

SCHELDOM has there been so vast a class of people so much marginalised in its existence that it hardly figures in the national dispensation of justice and welfare for its citizens. Indeed, a large body of pensioners — because of their disciplined back ground, advanced age, physical infirmity, poor organisation, and lack of collective clout — could not ever voice their grievances adequately; neither the miseries of many of them were heard by the authority, known to the public or redressed in general. With their paltry pension money they suffer in silence under the rigours of double-digit inflation in the country's economy. They do not have either the street power or stamina to fight a protracted legal battle to resist the usurpation of their legitimate rights by the indifferent authority. It is because of such constraints on the part of pensioners, their inability to constitute any political clout has, in spite of the pensioners' substantive strength, been taken for granted by successive governments. As a result, none of the regimes ever seriously turned their attention to the well-being of these hapless people.

It is an irony that the pensioners' plights are not only overlooked or ignored, their conditions are often judged on the basis of solvency and also on the basis of the affluence of the exceptional few of their compatriots who perhaps inherited substantial family property or committed excessive plunder during the service career. However the muted majority of the

pensioners survive with multitude of problems virtually on the scraps doled out by the authority. Once they receive the equivalent of 50 per cent of the pensions commuted for meeting their immediate post retirement exigencies the retirees are left with remaining 50 per cent of the pension fixed on the basis of salary drawn at the time of retirement. Now as the time advances, the market gets into a state of hyper inflation and a poor pensioner struggles merely to survive; his pension once fixed remains unchanged except its half-hearted increase by certain percentage whenever a pay commission is instituted or an interim relief is provided to the serving employees. The spirit behind the exercise seems to be too give only a hand-out to the helpless — one-time faithfuls of the Republic.

The basic fallacy of the dispensation is obvious. There is clear lack of recognition — if not understanding — that the pension is not something to be doled out. On the contrary, it is a rightful benefit due to the retirees and, in fact, the deferred payment for the services already rendered. Because the overall financial remuneration payable to the employees is actually the composite of pay and pension. This implies that the pension of the retirees must be treated at par with serving employees for the purpose of inflationary adjustment whenever it

is effected. It is to be understood that any increase in the employees' emoluments is and has always been primarily an adjustment for inflationary reasons and both 'pay' and 'pension' come in its purview. With an inflation in the market hitting everyone equally hard how can there be a discrimination against the pensioners while making such adjustment only for the serving ones? Or how can there be difference in the percentage of increase while

look reasonable that the pension of a retiree is calculated on the basis of the last scale drawn by him, the benefits accrued for the pensioners even of the same salary group are bound to be different. Because one may be able to avail of the benefit of a new pay scale just on its introduction while another at the end of it. There is distinct difference between the two. But the most cruel aspect of our pension is its inter-group distinction thereby drawing line between

draw the same pension and perk under a particular pay scale even if they started with different pension scale according to the prevailing pay scale at the time of retirement. Even when the present distinction between the old and new pensioners will be removed the government will have to shoulder the responsibility only of the part of the liability because 50 per cent of commuted value is already settled as one-time payment to the retirees unless someone outlives the period for which the pension was commuted.

As it is generally practised in our country most of the retiring officials exercise their option for getting 50 per cent of his pension commuted for one-time cash payment which is roughly equivalent to 10-15 years value of surrendered half of pension. The residual pension is then given to them on a monthly basis. If an official outlives the period for which he received his commuted value of pension, he should be entitled to restoration of the surrendered half of the pension. This means that he would start receiving his full monthly pension at the expiry of this period. This is a new problem that has started surfacing, of late, and there seems to be no rule at once to dispose such case off.

The pensioners being old and infirm are most hardhit not only by market inflation



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

giving an interim relief? Any double standard in this regard is not only morally reprehensible as it is contrary to natural justice but also legally indefensible as it violates their constitutional right of "equal treatment".

In our pension system, there are several dichotomies and anomalies that merit attention. One of them is, of course, to categorise the pensioners into different groups according to the pay scale with which they retired and their pensions were calculated. Although it may

'old' pensioners and 'new' pensioners. If the pay and pension are the components of the same package both are to be treated on the same footing.

As an 'old' pensioner has to live with the changed market realities and social ethos mainly for which the pay scale of the serving employees are periodically revised his (old pensioner) pension also must be recalculated with each such revision. Equity demands that all retirees of same grade/rank and same stage therein should, contrary to prevailing distinction,

Imperfect Democracy, Insoluble Problems

There is a dire need to reform the system, particularly the electoral process. The idea should be to ensure that every individual in the country must feel that his or her participation is important and constant, that after exercising the vote once every four years, he or she does not become meaningless, at least till the next elections come around.

ANY exercise in democracy without the participation of the people at the grassroots is an exercise in futility. Democracy enjoins the continuous freedoms of expression and action. The process does not end by simply exercising the right to vote and giving away a mandate for the leaders to administer. Above all, only the absolute majority formed by that vote in any entity, may it be a constituency or the entire country, have a right to exercise that mandate. When a mandate is exercised by a minority faction having a majority due to an imperfect system as is usually the case, problems not only proliferate they multiply. The inter-action of insoluble problems in turn leads to disunity as each minority faction bands together in a bid for power and when they cannot get that power then out of sheer frustration, they try to secede from the union. While nothing in life can really be perfect, unless we try and make our exercise in democracy close to near perfect, at least at the grassroots, we may cease to exist as a nation.

The aspiration for evolution can happen as an evolution of the present mandate i.e. if the rulers set about their task in a concerted manner and not spend their entire energies in seeking longevity. For the existence of the nation a period of authoritarian rule may well be necessary, it is better to have that rule than cease to exist as a national entity. There is a dire need to reform the system, particularly the electoral process. The idea should be to ensure that every individual in the country must feel that his or her participation is important and constant, that after exer-

cising the vote once every four years, he or she does not become meaningless, at least till the next elections come around. This can only be done by making a pragmatic nation-structure that does not give lip-service only to democracy but inculcates the modicum of accountability that democracy enjoins along a broad spectrum at the very base of the system.

The base of any democratic system is the Local Bodies system, the core unit for any democracy. Regrettably, except intermittently this has been lacking in Pakistan for the past 50 years. The present system at this base level pits candidates against each other in an electoral contest to form the Union Council. In a faction-ridden male-dominated society, divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, any faction that has the most votes, even if they are not in absolute majority, will manage to have their candidates into the seats of power, whereas conceivably the major part of that constituency may be divided among themselves and thus despite their size they become a minority in the Council, their divisiveness giving them lesser number of seats.

In a constituency having an ethnic or a religious divide, any ethnic or a sectarian faction having 20-25 per cent of the vote can come to power, denying the balance 80-75 per cent any participation in Local Government. Not only is this situation fraught with danger,

we continue to skirt along the faultlines of calamity. Therein lies the essence of the problem, democracy's illogical first-past-the-post system that is geared to recognize the authority of a bloc of votes rather than the absolute wish of the actual majority. This knowledge also causes a sense of apathy and helplessness among the voting populace, many simply do not go out to vote because they come to the conclusion that their vote would be meaningless. For a Union Council and like bodies, the laws must be amended to

representative on the Council and that during the tenure of the Council, that representative will be their constant voice in exercising the peoples mandate. While every grievance can hardly be solved, the peoples' participation will at least be ensured in that almost everyone in a particular constituency will have the satisfaction that at least their grievance is heard.

The Union Council functions as the Local Government, the person getting the most votes becomes the Chairperson.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

ensure that candidates from the slate are elected on the basis of votes they get, i.e. those who get at least 5 per cent of the vote should sit on the Council.

Theoretically speaking, there could be as many as 100 candidates who may vie to get elected but conceivably only 20 members sitting in the Council. Even the figure of 20 is very unlikely and at the maximum there may be 15 or so. The important thing to recognise here should be that with the constitution of such a Council, almost every person in that constituency would have his/her

So that a plethora of candidates do not line up for elections, some of them non-serious, the mandatory requirement for candidacy must be at least 1,000 electors from the constituency signing the candidature form, this will knock out frivolous candidates. With the Census nearly done, the requirement of a 1,000 signatures can easily be met. If the aspirants cannot organise a 1,000 committed supporters, how are they expected to get much more than that to win elections?

If the person getting the most

votes gets less than 30 per cent of the votes cast then in all fairness there may be a run-off election among the first two vote-getters for the post of Chairperson. At the same time, we must ensure that by law at least 40 per cent of those elected must be women, if more get elected so much the better.

To achieve this parity, candidates can get to transfer a percentage of their votes that even women who have less than 5 per cent of the vote on the overall count, can get up to the magic figure of 5 per cent to get elected. Democracy is a sham unless it actively inducts women into power at the base level. It is extremely important to bring women at the grassroots into the democratic process. With women empowerment in the Councils, more than 50 per cent of the population that is presently on the sidelines will be enfranchised. In contrast to men, women are rarely separatists. Women are presently marginalised in the matter of governance to the detriment of the nation, economically, politically and socially, some outstanding women notwithstanding. The subjects of governance they can handle efficiently and effectively are being managed by incapable men with hardly any commitment and with a penchant to only lining their pockets. The inclusion of women will ensure full participation of every section of the population in the democratic process, with a strong voice in decision-making.

ing.

Let us now consider a Union Council of 15 members with 9 men and at least 6 women. What is important to the population at the grassroots? Leaving aside food, clothing and shelter, what is required are revenue generation, educational and health facilities, law and order with justice at the doorstep, electricity, water and sewage, welfare etc. The "ministries" monitoring these socio-economic requirements can be divided among the Council members so that there is direct responsibility. Each Council should have a paid Secretariat with employees having tenure alongside the elected ones i.e. they can be selected by the Council and terminated by them. The actual functioning can be devised in a more deliberate, rationale manner. People's participation in a democracy is the most important ingredient of nationhood. For a nation to prosper, it must be organised at the grassroots level, the aforementioned represents a simple formula, the actual mechanism can be adjusted to the genius of the people. Unless we get our foundation strong, we cannot even begin to think of democracy at Provincial and national level.

Therefore we need a time-out, a period of rebuilding of institutions on logically correct lines. Because we have an imperfect democracy, it is exploited by those where only interest is power and how to milk power for their personal financial benefit. For Pakistan nothing is more important than to have Local Bodies election as a meaningful exercise in people participation, the present exercise is a farce, a fraud perpetrated on the people of this country.

To the Editor...

Award to Dilip Kumar

Sir, The AP/UNB photo (D.S./25.9.98) showing the Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar conferring Nishan-i-Imtiaz, Pakistan's highest civil award to Dilip Kumar for his outstanding contribution to performing arts in South Asia inadvertently mentions that the thespian, born in Peshawar, migrated to India in 1947 and has appeared in 150 films.

Dilip Kumar's family settled in Bombay (now Mumbai) much before the partition. His father was a fruit merchant in Bombay's well-known Crawford Market.

Dilip Kumar had his education in Anjuman-e-Islam School and later enrolled himself at the Wilson College — both the institutions being situated in Bombay. Starting his film career in 1944 in Bombay Talkies' "Jawar Bhatta", Dilip Kumar in the span of over half a century has so far acted in not more than 50 movies. Throughout his career he has been very choosy about his film roles.

Another of his contemporary, late Raj Kapoor also hails from the NWFP and the Pakistani authorities would be doing justice by recognising the latter's immense contribution to cinema in South Asia. Needless to emphasise, Raj Kapoor has been aptly described as one of greatest showman of the sub-continent.

Robert Kader
34, Mehdiabagh, Chittagong

Please help

Sir, I am a widow of seventy years. We have lived in Dhanmondi residential area since 1962. All my children have gone abroad and never bothered to return home. I am living alone with a trusted bua. I am having a big problem these days with water. There is no water in my house. The problem started because nearly all houses in our road have been

converted into apartment blocks. These owners illegally connected "Jet machines" with the main water line of the road and are using water directly from there.

I went to WASA office in Lalmatia. It was difficult for me to climb three stories and meet the engineer. They solved the problem on the day by selling 100 taka worth of water into my roof top water tank.

An WASA employee in Lalmatia told me, "Khalamma why don't you fix a Jet machine?" He said it would cost 14,000 taka and he would fix it up.

When I told him it was illegal he replied that everyone was doing it.

Now, as a pensioner, I can't afford to spend that money. Moreover, I do not want to break the law of my country. Can I obtain a permission to fix this 'Jet machine'?

Or how can I ensure water for my day-to-day requirement?

A Resident of Dhanmondi
Dhaka

Wrong development trends

Sir, Dhaka metropolis appears to be developing in the wrong direction. We have a surplus of private medical clinics, tutorial centres, private telephone outlets, mushrooming English medium schools, 'note-books' for examinations, too many unauthorised vehicles on the road, too few drains for too much garbage (how garbage finds its way in drains?).

There are too many loan defaulters, and the capital market has not 'officially' collapsed. The Parliament has become a luxury (nothing 'Awami' heard there). Corruption, nepotism and hard crimes are developing at an exponential rate. On the other hand, what percentage of the two billion tons of delta silt can we use as fertiliser (environment-friendly), through flooding of the low-lying arable lands? There is hardly any R&D, and no alloca-

tion in the 5-Year Plan. The topic is taboo, and we glorify the negative aspect of over-flooding. Who are supposed to offer ideas to the government (we do not believe in think-tanks)?

The list is endless, and the political sermons also never end. We are starving in a hand of plenty.

A Demoralised Citizen
Dhaka.

Whither democracy and leadership?

Sir, The 'Quest for a Credible Political Leadership' (Perspectives column, Mar 16) was a clear analysis of the torturous pilgrimage to leadership displayed by our *netas* and pseudo *netas* since liberation, as observed in slow motion. 'Imported' leadership (non-political) had to be tried for 16 years to stem the rot, but the grafting did not work, as events in 1990-91 revealed. Even now, some bad roots have to be uprooted and thrown away. Who are going to identify these, in national interest?

Now after two 'democratic' general elections the *foo-tu-rey* is not *br-i-g-et* (the future is not bright), as the local witticism goes. Today our political leadership is heavily coated with layers of unwanted and undesirable subjective and localised cosmetics, party-oriented; hollow and rootless inside. We are more fond of the futurology vision than the vision of incisive probe of the current playing fields.

At present, we are passing through the well-defined phase of opportunism in politics, speaking in general terms, as known to the students of politics. The hidden game is the phase of consolidation, with a lot of mantras, isms, icons, voodoo thrown in, to confuse the followers with a complex ideology which cannot be pinpointed for corrective action. Self-cleansing needs moral-courage and a willingness to make sacrifices. Riding the

bandwagon is a different approach.

A fundamental question has to be faced squarely, and debated realistically: what are the pre-conditions in a budding nation for the introduction and sustainability of democracy in a developing country where the majority are illiterate and live below the poverty line? Why a Kee Kwan was necessary, and a Ma-hatir? Why, in Indonesia, only two great leaders led the country for 60 years? There are other examples of benevolent one-man leadership in a society of commoners. The same argument holds how a Sheikh Mujib could be adored as a Bangabandhu.

An Observer
Dhaka.

Residential problem at DU

Sir, Dhaka university along with most other universities is suffering from this problem for years. Since the number of students is increasing no new hall is being built and which partly results the total degradation of this university. I am now very much ashamed of calling it "The Oxford of the East." Though once it was called so, it could not occupy any place among the 50 universities in Asia in the survey of a recently published magazine though once it was considered to be one of the 10 in Asia.

Many reasons lie behind it. One of the major causes is its increasing residential problem. For 28,000 students, only 14 halls are there where 14,000 students dwell somehow. Among the rest many are bound to stay outside the halls through hundreds of difficulties. Among the 14 halls, only three are for the females which is very insufficient.

Indiscipline is visible everywhere in the halls and students lead a very unhygienic life which is indescribable. Students are compelled to share the beds. But how is it possible

to share one table? Students getting allotment cannot stay in their seats as those are possessed by the so-called 'cadres', consequently they take resort to politics, a very pernicious thing for a developing nation like ours.

For that I think, if the students were provided proper accommodation they might not have got themselves involved in such a destructive thing and could have studied much better to face the challenges of 21st century.

Kamal Uddin
Department of English
131, Kabi Jasmuddin Hall
Dhaka University.

Bengali film on BTV

Sir, Recently, the time for Bengali film show on BTV has been re-scheduled to its previous time on Friday. The producers of Dhalywood expressed their depressed mood to this, because the new films are released on Friday. Is there any problem or obstacle to showing Bengali film on Thursday night? I request to the BTV authority to reconsider the matter immediately.

Md Ahmadul Haque (Topu)
Kashimpur, Bhôlahat,
Nawabganj.

To IIT authority

Sir, I thank Islamic Institute of Technology (IIT) authority for introducing 4-year BSc. Engineering programme and to allow Bangladeshi students in this programme. We in USA are known to IIT. As an international institute IIT's syllabus should be highly standard. But the syllabus of BSc. Engg. Programmes of EEE has frustrated me when I saw the IIT Calendar '97. I found that the Course in VLSI Circuits and Digital Signal Processing is totally absent there.

Instead of these basic courses students are studying fluid mechanics, strength of materials etc., which does not

help any BSEE graduate to go forward in their education or in their carrier.

So, as an international engineering institute I request the IIT authority to a concert this matter.

Dr Faruq Akber,
Institute For Geophysics,
University of Texas (Austin)
Texas, USA

Chittagong International Airport

Sir, Enlargement and modernisation of Chittagong airport to make it suitable for international flights is being taken in hand shortly. It will become the second largest airport of Bangladesh and many wide-bodied aircrafts will use it to the great convenience of people of Chittagong regions. It will also relieve pressure on ZIA of Dhaka.

For such an important airport a suitable non-controversial name should be selected. Parochial consideration and which serves narrow party interest should not cloud the decision about naming. In my opinion, the most suitable name, to which many will agree, is Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani. It will be a befitting name.

Iskander Meah
Gulshan North, Dhaka

"Make It Public"

Sir, It is a pity that the probe committee's report on the June 15 '97 explosion of Magurchara Gas Field has not yet been made public. We want it public as early as possible for national interest.

The operating company Occidental is supposed to pay due compensation to the parties concerned. It cannot be denied that the Magurchara blow-out caused great environmental disaster to the people and the Nature as well.

Abul Ashraf Noor
House # 9, Road # 4
Sector # 5, Uttara, Dhaka