

Time to Open Eyes

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's directive to prioritise the post-flood rehabilitation and reconstruction programme could not have been timed better. The country is in the process of convalescing following the most devastating deluge in her history and the order of the day is to have the restorative measures implemented in the shortest possible time. Although the government has made amends for its initial failure in realising the magnitude of the crisis by drawing on rapidly on a set of emergency decisions, there is this fear — and not an unjustified one — that the speed and urgency it has shown in taking decisions to shore up things may just be betrayed by its own systemic complications.

The PM's address Wednesday last at the National Economic Council homed in on this perilous possibility and marked out the areas in rehabilitation programmes that need be kept not only out of the bureaucratic ambages but also the pitfalls of indiscretion and corruption that spirals the losses and compounds the problems in a crisis.

In order to have the desired pace in the rehabilitation programme it is imperative the authorities get a move on to change the present system. Valuable time is wasted in getting the projects approved let alone implemented. There should be immediate measures to simplify the process both in terms of the content of the projects undertaken and the entire machinery that work towards their realisation.

It is equally important the dual perspective of natural disaster and environment is not missed from government's infrastructural rehabilitation programme. Flood is not an unexpected calamity in this country. Our roads, bridges and culverts should be great deal more strong than they have been so far. Obviously this calls for establishment of accountability from the bureaucracy to the ground level of construction contractor. If that is too expansive a problem to be solved quickly there should not be any ado in incorporating environment as an inviolate factor in the repair and rebuilding work. Too often in the past our developmental quest founded as it is on quick and smooth communication system had been brutally unfeeling and ruthless to environment. To have its revision would be like planting seeds for future calamitous disasters. We cannot help floods but we certainly can minimise damage caused by floods to our resources.

Kosovo Massacre

The United Nations Security Council in an emergency session passed a resolution condemning the genocidal killing of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo by the Serbian security forces but fell short of deciding on military intervention. NATO is said to be preparing for air strikes on the Serbian positions in Kosovo. Even so the world wonders whether another Bosnia is not being enacted there. For, with all that sound and fury signifying virtually nothing on the ground, the Bosnian nightmare does look resurrected with defenceless victims being hounded out to be butchered.

Essentially, if the big powers had really willed to end the Serbian military strangulation of Kosovo they could have done it by now paving the way for constructive negotiations. Since the fighting began between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the forces from Belgrade in February it has been one big swathe of a humanitarian tragedy aptly conjured up by as many as 275,000 refugees of Albanian descent fleeing villages and towns overrun by the Serbian troops all this while. They have become refugees in their own land. And as some of them ducked for safety in a forest thicket, a roving platoon spoke the Albanian language in complete darkness to deceive the refugees into coming out of their hide-out. Only to be butchered in the classical genocidal style of racist power-mongers. Women and children have been the worst victims.

We demand an inquiry by the War Crimes Commission materialising here and now unlike the procrastination that had marked the investigation into the acts of genocide committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Serbians are saying that they have crushed the 'secessionist' Kosovo Liberation Army and would soon withdraw their forces completely from Kosovo. But the world is hardly hoodwinked by this false claim, for it knows that fresh deployment of forces and fighting are taking place behind the scenes.

Kofi Annan must ensure that the UNSC resolution for a ceasefire is immediately implemented by the Serbian that the military commanders and refugees are safely back to their homes.

Sullied Face of Public Exams

Finally the long arm of the law has got hold of them. Criminal proceedings against the culprits who for the last two years in succession made a mockery of one of the two major public exams of the country, are about to begin. The law enforcing agency has chargesheeted 20 people for their involvement in leaking out question papers of last two years' SSC examination.

Nice as it is to know that the baddies have been brought to the book what continues to disturb the mind is the involvement of such a wide variety of people in this sordid tale. From press binder to teacher we have people practically from every profession in this vicious cycle and that does form a very alarming and sad commentary on the state of our society, the moral imagination and restraint of its members.

It is a systemic aberration and we would only fool ourselves to think we have solved the problem by putting the villains of '97 and '98 behind the bar. Unless the system is overhauled we will keep on hearing of Musas and Qayyums.

The reason question is leaked almost every year is it pays off to know the questions beforehand. If the students knew that it won't be of much help to get hold of the questions before the examination they would not be keen on getting them before they are due in the exam halls; rather they would concentrate in their books. Consequently the great commercial interest which is generated at the prospect of question leakage would not be generated.

Why won't we be able to have an evaluative system that would discourage copying and test the real merit of the examinee? Time has come for the powers that be to ponder over this question. Our education system has to be rethought and reorganised.

So far the Education Ministry has shown an appalling want of resolve and imagination to tackle the problem. Its curative efforts has been limited to a few measures that have failed to stem the rot and are unlikely to gain in effectiveness in future.

Be bold and innovative we say; destigmatise our public exams.

DHAKA University (DU) authority deserves congratulations for having dared to dish up arguments in favour of a rise in tuition fees for students. Seemingly unpopular though, the move is intrinsically meritorious. In a country where the grate grand children tend to pay the same amount of tuition fees as did their great grandfathers, arguably, it assumes a zero rate of inflation for decades and thus stands on an unrealistic assumption. However, the fees were raised, there was strong resistance to negate the knot but, bravely, the DU authority stood up to bell the cat.

In fact, all other universities should also follow the DU suit. It is now simply a matter of force and not of choice anymore. Most of the public universities are, allegedly, facing huge financial crisis. Needless to mention here, perhaps, that the financial bleeding caused by the rise of revenue expenditure to an astounding height tends to tell upon teaching and research activities in the universities. And allow me to argue that a respectable part of the pains could be avoided, albeit quite easily, if and only if wastage of limited resources could be curtailed and at the same time, appropriate pricing of services provided by the institutions could be ensured.

Let me draw upon my own experiences in this regard. Not long ago, I was Treasurer of Jahangirnagar University (JU) for two years. While in my office, I could learn that JU campus res-

Why Should Universities Bleed?

The prices of university services should be right. No government can afford to allow such unhindered abuses of resources in the highest citadels of learning when resources cannot be managed to ensure basic elementary education to the millions.

idents pay a fixed amount for the consumption of electricity. The amount was, I suppose, Tk 250-300 per month. The total yearly payment of electricity bill rose to about Tk 1 crore against a receipt of Tk 8 lakhs only. We advised JU administration to set up METERS in respective houses so that "pay as you consume" principle could be established. Thanks to the JU Syndicate for having honoured our advice and the meters were homed in houses. I was told that, during the last two months, Tk 40-45 thousand has been flowing to JU coffers. This relates to a part of the campus and hence is first a tip of the iceberg. But if the whole campus could be brought under the mandates of the meters, the savings could be to the tune of few lakh taka per month. We hope that the present administration of JU continues to uphold the "pay as you consume" principle.

Another source of financial crisis in JU is its transport sector. The university has to spend Tk 1 crore per year just on this sector. It is a residential university and hence should not be billed so heavily in allowing students to commute to Dhaka few times a day. The price that commuters pay is not even worth mentioning. For example, a student pays only one taka as fare (one way). Teachers

also tend to pay much less than what the cost of transport should deserve. And the tuition fees still amount to Tk 10 per month — an amount that our forefathers used to pay!

Now back to the basics. A subsidy always stands as a stumbling block to the efficient use of resources. It provides wrong signal to the users about the economic costs of the services. Non adherence to this teaching of neo-classical eco-

nomics seems to have the most adverse impact on university financial management. Since education is almost a "free goods" users tend to use it at their own terms.

Why should there be a rise in tuition fees in universities? It is not simply to pour some money to university coffers since we know that only tuition fees cannot (and possibly should not) constitute a major chunk of university resources, at least in public universities. The government MUST subsidize public educational institutions. But subsidy for whom and how

(living on pension money). To go back to JU example, a bus fare of Tk 1 is being paid by the students belonging to both the rich and the poor classes. In fact, in real terms, the rich is sacrificing much less than the poor to further socio-economic inequity. There should be a "safety net" approach in this kind of subsidy for university education. For example, university authorities should collect household income/expenditure data of each student and then pick up 'X' number of students to bear their educational expenses. Those

who hail from the relatively affluent economic class should be ready pay the market price of services.

So, when we say that higher education should be heavily subsidized we, in fact, tend to ignore the socio-economic inequities that seemingly flows from the flawed "social justice" argument. Subsidy should be selective and effective to ensure optimum use of scarce resources. If we fail to correct ourselves, the most vulnerable victims would be the most wanted academic activities and research. And truly speaking, in most of the universities, a substantial amount of resources are being siphoned off to unproductive pockets by putting pressures from vested interest groups.

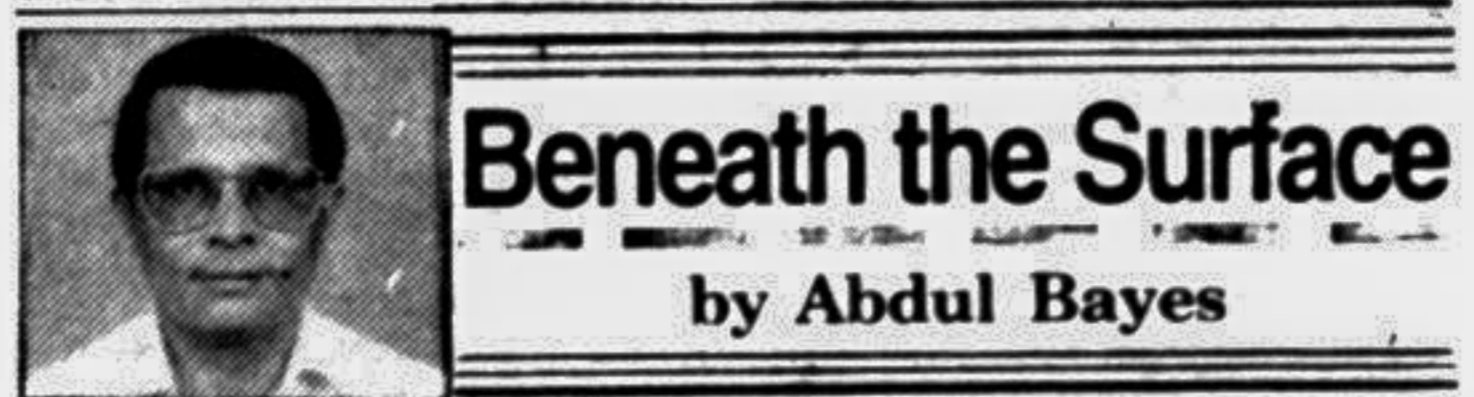
Universities do not seem to cut their coats according to cloths. The appear to plan for a much bigger coat than the availability of cloths would have suggested. And quite obviously, to put cloths to coats, the authorities are forced to axe developmental activities and run for higher and higher revenue expenditures. The practice needs to be stopped immediately, otherwise a time might come when these will be nothing left to pursue development activities.

Who will then bell the cat? First, there should be a consen-

sus built up on these basic issues. Round table conference should be held where teachers, students, employees and guardians should sit along with university authorities to deliberate on and give suggestions to the problems that universities are faced with.

Second, there should be courage displayed by university authorities. One needs to have that courage to establish a cause even at the risk of one's own popularity inside the campus. The society expects such courage from university teachers — who are at the helm of affairs — who would do something for the benefit of the society at large. After all, it is the taxpayers' money that we should utilise properly. And lastly, there needs to be some change in management style. The age-old practice of management of universities should be revised and serious thoughts should be given on the drawbacks of "over democratisation" of university management. If for argument's sake, we assume that lack of democracy in the past debilitated university education, we should at the same time realise that "over democratisation" is going to kill it.

The prices of university services should be right. No government can afford to allow such unhindered abuses of resources in the highest citadels of learning when resources cannot be managed to ensure basic elementary education to the millions. The bell rings to tighten the belt.



Beneath the Surface by Abdul Bayes

Tinkering with Bihar — Costly for BJP

The BJP is putting up a brave front and talking even in terms of pursuing the Bihar problem even after the President's advice. But the party has lost face in the country.

U NWTINGLY the Bharatiya Janata Party has landed itself in a situation where the coalition it leads at New Delhi may fall earlier than expected. The tinkering with Bihar has proved costly for the party.

Two things have happened. One, the entire opposition has gone to the assembly and they went their own way. That was the biggest advantage to the BJP. Congress wanted government to collapse under its own weight. Others waited for Congress to take the initiative. The Bihar issue brought them together. They seem to have realised that if the BJP-led coalition could recommend to President K R Narayanan the dismissal of the Bihar government, which proved its clear majority in the assembly a day earlier, none of the non-BJP administrations was safe. Few have been taken in by the reasons given for the takeover.

Indeed, if at all there was a case to oust the Bihar government, it was at the time when Laloo Prasad Yadav, then heading it, was found involved in the Rs 1,000 crore fodder scam. The Janata Dal-led coalition let him off because he stepped down and made his wife, Rabri Devi, the chief minister. This was a blatant violation of democratic norms. But he got away with it because the Janata Dal could not afford to ignore his crucial support in the Lok Sabha. Baking up the one-year old case does not make sense. There has to be fresh charge.

The allegation of breakdown

in the law and order machinery also does not tell when the Home Ministry's own assessment is that out of 539 districts in the country, 215 are disturbed. It has specially listed four states: Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, apart from Bihar. Why to single out Bihar for dismissal if the motive is not political?

The second development to the BJP's disadvantage is that the chinks in the coalition have begun to show. It has become easier for the opposition to prove weak links. Except for the Samta Party, which is an opposition party in Bihar, and the Shiv Sena, which shares communal outlook with the BJP, all other allies have taken exception to the dismissal. It means that the coalition partners, who constitute 70 odd votes in the Lok Sabha, can turn against the BJP at any time on the basis of their perception and pull down the government. It is not a good scenario for the party, which could save the coalition only by seven votes when asked to prove the majority in parliament.

Left to Home Minister LK Advani and the BJP hardcore including its chief minister, Thakur, they would have pressed for the Bihar government's dismissal. But the cabinet, which met to consider the President's advice not to bring the state under Central rule,

was divided. One of the BJP ministers even voiced his opposition.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who was not in favour of dismissing the Bihar government from the very beginning, clinched the matter by advising from New York not to go against the wishes of the President. Advani chairing the cabinet meeting had to eat a humble pie.

He feels hurt on another point. Somehow he got the impression after meeting the President before the cabinet deci-

the ground that there are serious allegations of corruption against the ministry. The President in his communication to the central government has reportedly pointed out that it had to give a warning or a show-cause notice to Bihar to put its house in order before imposing central rule in the state. In all fairness, the President's communication should have been made public. This is clearly against the announcement the BJP-led government made after assuming office that its working will be transparent.

What it boils down to is that the ground has to be prepared for the imposition of Article

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

sion on central rule that things would have become easier if the government kept in mind the Supreme Court judgment on the dismissal of the Bommai government in Karnataka. The idea of keeping the assembly in animated suspension was on the basis of advice in the judgement. Unfortunately, all the directions of the Supreme Court were not followed.

The BJP's mishandling has, however, done one good thing: it has made the use of Article 356,

356. In its report, the Sarkaria Commission on the centre-state relations has said: "The use of the power under Article 356 will be improper if the President gives no prior warning or opportunity to the state government to correct itself. Such a warning can be dispensed away with only in cases of extreme urgency. This power cannot be legitimately exercised on the sole ground of stringent financial exigencies of the state. It cannot be invoked merely on

the ground that there are serious allegations of corruption against the ministry. The President in his communication to the central government has reportedly pointed out that it had to give a warning or a show-cause notice to Bihar to put its house in order before imposing central rule in the state. In all fairness, the President's communication should have been made public. This is clearly against the announcement the BJP-led government made after assuming office that its working will be transparent.

It is obvious that the BJP had some other ideas on Bihar. State party chief Sushil Modu said soon after the decision on

central takeover that the BJP was looking into the possibility of forming an alternative government. Some members of Laloo's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) were dangled the carrot of ministership before them. Probably that was the reason why the assembly was kept in "animated suspension." The BJP and the Samta Party would have then got a chance to entice members from the RJD. Fortunately, the President did not oblige them.

Whether the BJP realises it or not, it has caused so much damage to the coalition that its collapse is not a far-fetched idea. Some predict it in November when parliament reassembles. Nonetheless, the party may get a reprieve if it does well at the assembly polls in four states on November 25. Doing well at the assembly polls means the BJP must retain its rule in Delhi and Rajasthan and oust Congress from Madhya Pradesh and Mizoram. Not even the most optimists in the BJP see this happening.

True, the BJP is putting up a brave front and talking even in terms of pursuing the Bihar problem even after the President's advice. But the party has lost face in the country. To mollify public opinion, the least it can do is to recall Bihar governor Suresh Singh Bhandari, who from the day of his appointment has led a campaign of vilification against the state government. The very fact that the President has rejected his report should have stung his conscience and he should have resigned on his own.

To the Editor...

Weekly holiday

Sir, I refer to a news on 28.9.98 in a local daily wherein it was said that the existing two-day weekly holiday was likely to be changed.

There will be one-day weekly holiday on Friday before since there is no alternative Friday as 'holiday'.

Some in this regard opine that the new office timings may be as follows:

1) Saturday through Thursday with working hours from 8 AM to 2:30 PM.

2) Saturday through Thursday with working hours from 8:30 AM to 3 PM everyday except Thursday. On Thursday there will be a half-day holiday i.e. the working hours would be from 8:30 AM to 12:30 PM.

Of the above two options, the latter has more demerits than merits, if any. Firstly the extended hours daily beyond 2:30 PM (up to 3 PM) will be too taxing on the employees since by the time they reach home, the time would be too late for lunch as many of them live far away from the capital. Only a few senior officials have full time transports while some have to and from office lift facility. The bulk has to depend on public transports which are too small in number to cater to the needs properly. In this situation, one can't help missing lunch. Missing lunch means inviting health problems.

Secondly a half-day holiday means almost a full-day holiday because people would take advantage and leave office much earlier on weekends and leave for home. And on the opening day they will report late. Thus around 3 hours leaving office early on week and arriving late by around such time on opening day almost makes an extraday weekly leave at the cost of work. Hence a half-day holiday means almost a full holiday. This would defeat the purpose of the revision of holiday schedule and hence no desirable.

The first option i.e. a one day weekly holiday on Friday with working hours from 8:30 AM to 2:30 PM daily appears to be ideally suited here. This worked well earlier without question, and so would do now. This therefore merits consideration of the authorities concerned in eager interest of Bangladesh.

Abdullah Dhaka.

Calling CAB

Sir, My grocer showed two brands of soybean oil, locally packed, labeled one litre each, and told me the price of one was Tk 55, while that of the other Tk 65. When I asked how the latter one impete in the market with 18 per cent higher price for the same product, it was revealed to me that one bottle contained 800 cc, while other contained 1000cc (one litre).

Since most of us have lost faith in government inspectors at different production, distribution and retail levels, may I ask how many cases the Consumer Association of Bangladesh have detected, and had the energy and patience to pursue the cases till prosecution or discharge by the courts? Suits/prosecutions are hardly publicised in the media.

There appears to be something wrong in the structure and status of CAB. Its unformed presence (including red booths) is not visible in the markets and shopping centres. Why the government is indifferent to its activities — a function it is unable to perform itself? The CAB magazine should be a high profile media to be looked at the newspaper stalls. NGOs cannot be associated with CAB for field operations and strengthening of its base and structure? Perhaps the real bottleneck if funding.

A Zabr Dhaka

It'll be too late

Sir, The proverb "Black will take no other hue" seems to be eternally true, especially now when the country is just getting through the worst natural calamity of the century. The criminals are taking revenge on their rivals by killing them. The extortionists are claiming their booty even from the marooned masses.

The police after the Rubel murder have deliberately let loose their hold on the criminals and many of them are coming out on bail. One fails to understand as to how those charged with rape, murder and dacoity in the past cases have not been framed properly or the courts are not viewing the social interest seriously. That is to say, the society's interest, safety and security have been nobody's business! We wonder how the government is tolerat-

The whole truth, nothing but the truth

Sir, This refers to a news item under the caption "Relief Quota" published in the DS on 21 Sept '98 in which one ALMP from Sherpur, Mr Abdul Bari complained against the Food and Agriculture Minister Begum Matia Choudhury for influencing district administration in distribution of relief materials. Giving details of disparity in distribution of relief from area to area and is not getting the right share he warned, "If the situation continued, he would not be able to come out in the next election."

I congratulate the MP for being so honest and truthful.

A number of letters were published in different dailies suggesting to the government to form an "All Party Relief Committee" to remove doubts from the minds of the people and most importantly from those of the donor agencies that no politics is played with relief goods. Now that the truth is told by an MP in a press conference, the PM might as well think of forming a trust with trustworthy people from all walks of life for this noble and extremely sensitive job of relief distribution. Otherwise, distribution by one political party, that too the party in power, will never get the credibility of being honest.

It never did — 1974 for example.

Mahmood House # 59, Road # 7 Dhaka Cantonment

Postal service

Sir, I have always observed that the Postal Department of our country has been one of the

most active and dutiful among the governmental departments. But recently I have been let down by the department on several occasions.

Last January, as we were told over phone by a relative a letter from Canada did not reach us. Mentally, towards the end of last year, I received an interview card after the interview date had been over.

On 12th September 1998, I received another interview card which was dated 6th August '98 and the test was scheduled on 4th September, 1998. Because of this late delivery, I missed an opportunity for securing a job.

The Postal Department should look into the matter and take steps to restore their reputation.

Richard Gomes 3/1 Protap Das Lane Shingtola, Dhaka-1100.

Demolition of dilapidated buildings

Sir, We have come to know from news reports that Rajuk is going to launch a drive soon to demolish about 500 old and dilapidated buildings especially in old Dhaka which have become very dangerous and risky for human habitation.

It may be mentioned here that the house owners of Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara areas are rich and influential persons and they have easily obtained huge amount of loan from House Building Finance Corporation and other sources for construction of their buildings but most of the owners of old and dilapidated houses in Dhaka are poor and not important persons and as such they are not able to get any loan or help or assistance from any quarter for construction, repair or renovation of their houses.

We would request the authorities concerned especially the Ministry of Works and Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation to come to the aid of the old and dilapidated building owners of old Dhaka and help them construct their houses on humanitarian ground after demolition of their decayed ancestral homes.

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OPINION Sikandar Abu Jafar and Shwadinata Purashkar

Dr Sajed Kamal

One of the major obligations of freedom is to acknowledge and honour everyone who had a role — minor or major — in achieving freedom. Among them some may have had a specially significant role, and they are to be honoured accordingly. This is not an easy responsibility. Just as the history of a freedom movement is not made up of one person, all the roles do not get evaluated overnight. Some roles are not even readily noticed by others. But to keep searching for such roles, to go on evaluating such roles, and then to honour them — there's no substitute for this responsibility. It is in our efforts to carry out this responsibility that we realise one of the major sources of freedom and also an inspiration and a vaticum in our even harder task of keeping freedom alive and letting freedom flourish. It is in our ability to properly carry out this responsibility that we find the true significance and intrinsic meaning of "Shwadinata Purashkar" (Freedom Award).

The award for the Shwadinata Purashkar then becomes an outward expression of that responsibility. Likewise, it is a matter of one utmost sadness when we ignore someone who had a particularly inseparable and universally acknowledged role to play in achieving freedom. When that happens, it doesn't really become as much a matter of ignoring or dishonouring him or her as much as it trivializes and dishonours freedom itself. Whether such things happen due to mistake or wrongdoing, it must not end there — as long as we are still able to value and love freedom, and so long as we still have left within us a bit of consciousness, conscience and dream of freedom.

Over the years the Bangladesh government has announced "Shwadinata Purashkar" and awarded it to several persons, living and dead, for their especially significant role in our freedom movement. This award and initiative is commendable and it is a major step toward, and an indication of, carrying out the national responsibility we have towards freedom and the roles in achieving freedom. With my appreciation for the government's initiative and my re-

spect for those honoured, with profound sadness, I also notice that the name of Sikandar Abu Jafar is absent from the list of the recipients of the award. Moreover, his name is absent from the list announced thus far of the names of those who are to be the next recipients of the award.

Sikandar Abu Jafar's name is inseparable from both our freedom movement and attaining freedom. His specially significant role is universally acknowledged and it is on the lips of every freedom seeker and freedom fighter. In fact, without his song "Amader Shangram Chhobe" (our fight go on) anything to be said or remembered about '71 remains incomplete. His poem "Bangla Chhoro" (get out of Bengal) crystallised the feeling of the Bengali people's intense protestation and rejection of the infamous martial ruling by the Pakistan regime. I can say this much that, in the area of freedom, Sikandar Abu Jafar is no less deserving than any other recipient of the award. In the words of Poet Sufia Kamal: "In his fearless, courageous, fighting, strong and truthful voice he has acutely protested against unfairness, oppression and injustices. He vigorously spoke up during the Ayubi regime. He wrote 'Bangla Chhoro' and 'Amader Shangram Chhobe'." It is possible to say a great deal more about the specially significant role which Sikandar Abu Jafar played in the freedom movement and in achieving freedom, but I don't think that's necessary.

When the authorities announce the "Shwadinata Purashkar" next time, I hope that the name of Sikandar Abu Jafar will be included in the list of its recipients. The responsibility of showing proper honour does not rest only with the individual, but also with the nation. Through such honouring, in fact, a nation honours itself and facilitates the difficult path of keeping freedom alive and letting freedom flourish. In that journey, forever a vaticum and an inspiration will be Sikandar Abu Jafar's "Amader Shangram Chhobe".

The writer is a poet and a teacher at Brandeis University, USA, and consultant, BRAC.