

## The Inviolable Highway

Four teachers have been transferred from the Kumudini Women's Government College, Tangail — all at once. And they were transferred to places like Khagrachhari and Rangamat et al. The girls of the college did not like the action. So first they went in a procession to meet the Deputy Commissioner to whom they gave a memorandum to be sent to the Education Secretary seeking cancellation of the transfer orders.

So far so good. The Principal sat with the staff the same day, Tuesday, and 'apprehending untoward developments' closed the college for a week and asked the girls to vacate the hostels. On Wednesday morning the girls took to the street and laid a very effective siege on the Dhaka-Tangail Road, stopping all traffic to and from Bangabandhu Bridge or cutting off communication with Dhaka of dozens of districts.

Bravo. The highway has now been violated even by girl students. No, no gender prejudice here. There exists no value in our society that attaches itself to highways making these something special. Something to be specially protected and cared for.

Of course, it is largely the government's fault that it hasn't been able to inculcate in the masses a 'highway value' — evidently because it doesn't itself treat national highways as it should. A nation's mobility is exactly what blood circulation is to a man's body and life. Clog it, a man dies. And so does a nation — only imperceptibly to those that do not see beyond the day. The political parties have never so far been found averse to blocking roads for holding meetings and receptions, erecting gates etc.

The blame should go also to social and cultural leaderships. All of the nation's agencies and associations have joined in failing the nation in developing the right attitude towards the highway.

The situation is such as to seriously warrant an enactment of law prohibiting and punishing violation of the national highways. This may go unheeded only at the government's own peril. All governments, present and future.

## The Lending Reach

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made two important announcements at a high level meeting which reviewed progress on the post-flood rehabilitation and reconstruction programme of the Finance Ministry last Wednesday. Bangladesh Krishi Bank is to have a branch office in each union of the country; and share-croppers and marginal farmers are being assured of soft-term loans, a goal set quite some time ago but remains unmet to this day.

In terms of practicability and relevance to the pressing agenda of the flood aftermath her second decision comes first for homing-in because establishing more than 4500 Krishi Bank branches all over the country looks like a long-drawn-out process. She has promised a procedural device whereby the local bank functionaries will obviate the guarantee clause through the exercise of a discretion to benefit a sharecropper or marginal farmer on the basis of his enterprise. Those who could stand guarantee for poor peasants in a locality appeared to be dodging requests for the same so that the waiver on collateral has practically been airy nothing so far. Now it will be

entirely for the local bank official to sanction the loan in the light of his best professional judgement totally unfazed by any consideration for collaterals.

The proof of this streamlined procedure will be in the pudding; the respective bank branches are expected to deliver it with an honest, bold initiative they have not hitherto been known for. The real value of agricultural loan at the recipient's end is said to be undercut by up to 20 per cent as a palm-greasing cost incurred at the time of sanction. As a result, repayment of credits has suffered in no small measure over the years. In handling farm loans the banks need not only to be efficient but also incorruptible.

How do we reach out to the poorest of poor peasants given the limitations of the existing banking network underscored with an extra bit of poignance in the wake of the floods? We have a time-bound plan to meet their working capital needs estimated at Tk 3,200 crore by November. In order to distribute that whopping amount on a double-quick basis we should be well-advised to associate the NGO micro-credit network with the massive lending operation.

## An Organisational Marvel

Dhaka is in the grip of cricket fever. For about a week Dhaka has been a city of excitement. Cricket buffs or casual seekers of pleasure they could not have asked for more. Bangabandhu stadium has been a virtual cornucopia of excitement since Wills International Cup competition began there Saturday last. The cricket carnival comprising all nine full members of the ICC is in the semi final stage. So far it has been a study in resounding success. All the ingredients of a terrific competition have been there. We have had drama, entertainment and last but not the least, great crowd appreciation. Few other cricket venues could perhaps boast such appreciative and enthusiastic spectators in such huge numbers. And as a fitting reward of their deep reserves of healthy enthusiasm every game has been money's worth, absolute corker. The New Zealand-Zimbabwe curtain raiser was the tone-setter. It has been entertainment at its plenteous best with the great Indian cricketer Sachin Tendulkar making an awesome display of individual excellence in sending Australia's hopes in smoke day before yesterday.

There have been questions if this watchers' euphoria and enthusiasm can make any contribution to the development of infrastructure for this game in this country — the thing we need most in order to emerge as a cricketing force to reckon with. Let not that thought make inroad at this instant into the fact that this meet has been an organisational marvel. But for the Wills Trophy would there have been such an august assembly of world class cricketers in Dhaka? Almost all the stars of world cricket are here moving, performing, and being so tangibly among us. It is like a dream come true. How can conservative criticism beat that?

DOES the sky ever sleep? Dawn breaks and dewdrops glisten on blades of grass. As the day proceeds they burn themselves out like glow worms. Then the youthful sun itself awakes in the afternoon and melts into the dusk like a dusty tired squirrel. In the evening the moon comes up and the stars. The resplendent queen of the sky waxes and wanes. At certain times it is covered with the shroud of death like darkness. And the cycle of morning and evening, the sun and the moon starts all over again. Clouds of different hue graze like herds of cattle in the pasture of the sky. Rain falls in gentle murmur or it hisses like an angry python and the lightning strikes. Does the sky ever sleep?

I wondered similarly about my mother when I was a child and an adolescent. I never saw her resting. Even before the birds were waking up in their nests, she was tending the little plants in her home garden with gentle caress, and I suppose with reverence. I have often seen a mother of another community worshipping the cosmic in the Tulsī plant.

By the time we were up and clean, food was ready on the table, warm and wholesome. When did she cook? Perhaps when my father had his early morning milk and went out for his morning walk. The coffee was sent, my father to the office and we, the older children, to school. Mother then would nurse the little one and when the tiny body glistening with oil basked in the sun, perhaps she read a book and did the other household chores.

By the time we came back she had prepared our food again. When at night we went to sleep she was still up and about. Amidst the dawn and rest I did not know till she fell into a dream-less sleep never to wake up again.

My father was an educated professional. My mother had better opportunities than her compatriots in the hinterland. But did she have any choice? Her marriage was fixed by the family elders. It turned out to be a good marriage. But she had

# “Women and a Society that Cares”

*My mother had better opportunities than her compatriots in the hinterland. But did she have any choice? Her marriage was fixed by the family elders. It turned out to be a good marriage. But she had no voice in the matter. Rather, the little property she inherited, much less than her brother, was also taken over by the privileged male progeny when she was passed on to another household through marriage.*

no voice in the matter. Rather, the little property she inherited, much less than her brother, was also taken over by the privileged male progeny when she was passed on to another household through marriage. My father was a good provider and gave her the money she needed for running the household and keeping everyone fed and clothed. But she was economically dependent for every little thing she wanted, not for herself, but for her children. Her ancestral inheritance, being alienated, her urban house was also not her own, but her husband's. Anyway, she was being well provided for. What more could she want?

This economic dependence was and continues to be reinforced even today by realistic traditions and cultural practices. Theologies that portray women as lesser human beings than men, mentally and morally inferior and unclean were rather strong in my mother's time. At the same time, deep religious faith was her solace and comfort. Yet she was on the periphery of all celebrations, religious or social and watched from behind the door the men conducting the ceremonies.

Is the situation better as societies modernize? Perhaps, for some in urban and reasonably affluent setting. But in many poor communities and rural and urban, “new wife is taken to live with the husband's family and functions as a servant in relation to the rest of the household. Over a period of time, women in these families rise through the hierarchy, as new brides enter the family, children are born and older women die.... The family hierarchy often establishes a social preference for boy over a girl child which in turn reinforces the secondary position of women. If a culture dictates that girls will grow only to serve a future husband's family, for-

mal education may be viewed as a waste of time. In cultures where men generally achieve higher level of formal education, women will find their position eroded.” (Ranjit Kumar, Barbara Murck and Michelle Sweet). It is only natural that in situations where families can afford to send only one or two children to school, girls are often the ones that are kept at home.

Under such circumstances, when modernization leads to the introduction of the nuclear family, women may not necessarily see an increase in their status. In fact some analysts argue, “the demise of the extended family structure, has in many

places instead of food crops often meant that women did the work and men took the cash” (Kamla Bhasin). In the process women's agricultural skills in subsistence production were discarded as unscientific and hence redundant. On the other hand, women were excluded from having access to the new technology sending a signal that they do not play an equal role in agricultural production. This same pattern is often replicated in other sectors where economic development is enhanced by technology.

Within this exploitative development paradigm two key patriarchal establishments according to theologian philoso-

pher John Berry come into play — that of the classical empire and colonization both of nature and of lesser man. The colonization of previously ecologically sustainable societies generally led to the involvement of men in resource — intensive, environmentally damaging activities or to their migration away from home in search of employment. In either case, but with reduced authority and access to resources, women were left to carry out life sustaining activities such as subsistence food production and fuel gathering and to manage crucial environmental resources such as water and soil” (Ranjit Kumar et al.). But the killing of nature, as Kamala Bhasin argues, affects the poor, especially the poor women in peasant societies much more. She is the one who has to walk longer distances get water, fodder and fuel, while people's resources

like common land, forests and water become hunting ground for developers, the powerful corporations and quite often of the modernizing nation-state. What is significant is that, as the inevitable transition takes place from agrarian to industrial and post-industrial societies, the needs concerns and contributions of women continue to remain unrepresented in many large-scale development programmes.

Pursuing the argument to the extreme, Vandana Shiva asserts that reductionist science and technology are neither universal nor value neutral. These have historically developed along patriarchal manipulative lines which have sanctioned the degradation of nature and legitimized the subordination of women. In her own words, “Modern reductionist science, like development, has turned out to be a patriarchal project, which has excluded women as experts, and has simultaneously excluded ecological and holistic ways which understand and respect nature's processes and interconnectedness as science.” Whether one agrees with the conclusion or not, one historical reality cannot be brushed aside. Some of the processes inherent in resource — intensive modernization has eroded the status of women and nature both, as passive and non-living commodities.

Now that sustainability has become the buzz-word in development discourse let us not forget that “women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically but also through their role in providing sustenance.” (Vandana Shiva).

Women know the pains of creation and therefore they hate destruction most. “This is why in struggles to save forest, in struggles against pollution, in movements against militarisation women are at the forefront. Women are more likely to insist that killings be stopped.” If

living in harmony with nature and community control over local resources rather than centralized control are considered as pre-requisites for sustainability and equity, we must learn from women who live closest to nature and who for centuries have been preoccupied with nurturing and caring. At the same time, the gender biases inherent in the earlier modernization paradigm must be reappraised. The benefits of knowledge, of advances in technology that respect nature as a living system, must be made available to women through an affirmative agenda.

All the above hinges on economic empowerment of women, elimination of ownership restrictions for example or for that matter, more than equal access to capital-resources, markets, jobs and professions. “If a woman is not allowed to engage in income generating activities can she have a voice in decisions on allocation of family revenues? Perhaps, more importantly, when a woman does earn income, is she allowed to exercise control over its use?”

And that leads to the political issue of decision-making power, at the household, community, regional and national level. In that context cultural factors need to be recognized since that influence the patterns of leadership and decision-making at local levels much more than legislative initiatives emerging from the national government.

It is therefore, important that women get organized to protect their rights and ensure the enforcement of the law and justice. This is particularly important for a society in transition like ours. Are the court system, mediators or community leaders who dispense justice, fair and unbiased? Faith that women have in the fairness of the system can offer insights into how well justice is administered in a society whether by a court of law or by village salish. There is no getting away from the truth, uncomfortable to some, that women must be at the core of a sustainable society.



societies been to the detriment of women, causing them to become more isolated from one another and the wider community.

The evolution of societal patterns that systematically exclude and subjugate women has been analyzed by some anthropologists and social thinkers in their historical perspectives. Some argue that the transition from partnership societies to dominator societies began at the time that hunting for food became prevalent and undermined the role of women as primary producers in gatherer societies. Others speculate that when societies acquired the ability to fashion weapons these weapons became the means of domination.

Again in earlier agrarian economies, women were at the centre of things when households were the centre of production. “The introduction of cash-

phers John Berry come into play — that of the classical empire and colonization both of nature and of lesser man. The colonization of previously ecologically sustainable societies generally led to the involvement of men in resource — intensive, environmentally damaging activities or to their migration away from home in search of employment. In either case, but with reduced authority and access to resources, women were left to carry out life sustaining activities such as subsistence food production and fuel gathering and to manage crucial environmental resources such as water and soil” (Ranjit Kumar et al.). But the killing of nature, as Kamala Bhasin argues, affects the poor, especially the poor women in peasant societies much more. She is the one who has to walk longer distances get water, fodder and fuel, while people's resources

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## Not quite so!

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Normally, New Eskaton main road to Bangla Motor intersection used to be undisturbed during morning hours, but ever since the change of route from Panthapath to Maghbazar, things have turned chaotic with rotten smell of fishes from vans and rickshaws carrying them. This is due to the diversion of the route.

Now, it all appears that it was easier for the Army and Navy to control traffic at Mohakhali, Banani and Gulshan areas for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, we hope the defence personnel can also work wonders at other places!

Humal Nabila  
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## "Military Police & traffic control"

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ber him for this. All were done with the help of the Army.

My request to our Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition — please do not withdraw the Army from the traffic control; on the contrary hand over more chaotic areas to them or streamline the traffic system to bring traffic discipline.

Mazhar Haq  
 Road 28, House-52  
 Gulshan, Dhaka-1212

## Always in the kitchen?

Sir, On Monday last a Bengali daily printed an article the heading of which drew my attention. The author, no less a pilot, claimed that women should not become flyers. With great pain, I read the article to find out what scientific theory he based his essay. Unfortunately other than a few archaic and irrational ideas there was no information to justify the printing of this article in a responsible newspaper.

In the day and age where we are all adjusting to new mil-lennium where men and women will be working on an equal footing it was shocking to read an article justifying to take the womenfolk's back to the kitchen.

The writer should know that, even in our country, some men are doing household chores including taking care of the baby. This trend will increase as both men and women need to work to meet their economic needs. Unfortunately men can't bear child, otherwise I am sure many would have volunteered. In many working places men work as women as their boss without any resentment. The world is changing, the writer should wake up to that fact.

Akku Chowdhury  
 Banani, Dhaka

## MWC extravaganza

Sir, When Rome was burning Nero was plying with his flute. And now when millions of poor Bangladesh have just suffered the century's worst flood and are living in throes of extreme poverty, hunger and disease and when we are supposed to help, assist, rehabilitate and feed the flood affected people, some of us are engaged in the cricket extravaganza, spending crores of taka in making a grandiose, ostentatious and pretentious show in the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

Is holding a Mini World Cup in a poverty-stricken country a panacea for all ills of the country?

We also wonder why Bangladesh is not participating in the Wills International Mini World Cup when we are the host country. We are a registered ODI (one day international) status holder and we are also playing in the 1999 World Cup.

Would our Ministry of Youth and Sports and the concerned organisers of the Mini World Cup in Dhaka kindly clarify the matter?

O. H. Kabir  
 6, Hare Street,  
 Wari, Dhaka-1203

## To the Editor....

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Amartya Sen and the intellectuals

Sir, With profound interest, I have been following the articles published in the DS on Dr Amartya Sen. A number of our renowned intellectuals have written on their long familiarity with Dr Sen's work, the good that he has done for us, and the humane face that he has given to economics. They expressed their pride because Dr Sen is a Bengali and is from this part of Bengal.

But my question is: if they appreciated Dr Sen so much, where were they before he won the Nobel Prize? Did he ever receive any recognition from us? We with happiness elaborate on the 'Bengaliness' and the 'Southness' of Dr Sen, and yet it had to be a recognition from the 'West' to make us start talking about it.

Isn't it time that we start to do our own thinking and are first to recognise our friends?

Mohammad Rumi  
 Mirpur, Dhaka

### Politicians, think about Runa

Sir, The picture printed in the DS on 22nd October, '98 of the little girl Runa who has become the victim of our country's dirty politics is in reference.

Have our political leaders become so inhuman that the life of an innocent child holds no moral value? Is this the reason for which the people of our country sought freedom in 1971 so that we could destroy our own nation?

Even though Runa's medical treatment is being done at the cost of the government, will it make her life any better without her hands? Will she be accepted by our narrow-minded society as a normal human being? As it is women in our society are still being repressed by the opposite sex — more so in the rural communities, how can a little girl who has yet to understand all this with this stigma that will be her companion for the rest of her life?

Politics will not help us attain a better future for our country — what we need is a leader who is dedicated to the good of the country so that we have something significant to offer to our future generations.

Zeenat Zaman  
 House #10, Road #7, Sector #7  
 Uttara, Dhaka.

### Fact-finding Report in the 'Alternatives'

Sir, First I would like to congratulate you and your team 'Centre for Alternative' for the initiative and the special pages published in The Daily Star. I also appreciate your choice in selecting topics that are very timely.

As a reader of this special section and as a citizen of the country I would like to give a small suggestion about selection of topic in any of the near forthcoming issue.

I think, we all are aware of the 'Fact Finding Report' by the Fact Finding Committee in Jahangirnagar University which

is very sensational and horrifying — and farcical punishment has been given to the culprits. Everybody is mysteriously keeping quiet. What the government is doing is explainable but what our civil society is doing is not permissible.

Can't you publish articles on this topic in any one of your forthcoming issue?

Reshma Chowdhury  
 Department of Political Science  
 Dhaka University

### JU and our society

Sir, The very name Jahangirnagar used to engulf me in sacred, serene and sublime thoughts. As a student (1985-1990) of JU, I nourish very pleasant and sweet memories. Unlike other universities, we were free from session-jams and terrorism. Moreover, there existed a very cordial relationship between the faculty members and the students. Everybody on the campus used to be polite and helpful. But the reports of terror at Jahangirnagar have jolted me. My feelings have undergone a revulsion.

The recent incident on JU campus have posed a serious question in my mind: Are we capable enough or do we deserve to have a free, independent and sovereign country? A university, no doubt, a sacred place and can never be the den of rapists and terrorists. But what about our motherland? Is it not sacred? Did we not wade through the blood of innumerable martyrs to achieve our beloved country? Over two lakh sisters and mothers were violated by the enemies. Did we go through such ordeals only to witness corruption, crime and terrorism everywhere in the society? Everyday, you will find two/three reports of rape, gang-rape and murder in the dailies.

“One guy called and handed me... saying ‘here take this’” (quoting Runa). It was a bomb, which exploded in Runa's palm. The doctors at Dhaka Medical College Hospital amputated wrist down to prevent further aggravation of the child's condition. Of course, if Runa would not have been made a victim of politics, the best we arranged for her was to be a housemaid, like her mother, Fatima. Dr. Monirul Alam said, “After the pain is relieved, she will be happy.”

It was nine-thirty in the course of an ordinary morning when an ordinary harpal. Fatima started work at her master's house, leaving her two children by the stairs, as usual. Runa and her three-year-old brother were routinely playing near the pavement. A man walked towards Runa and handed her a tin can of explosives. The “dark” child was only eight years old. Fatima, later at the hospital, with discursive affirmation concluded with fatalism. Dr. Alam remarked, “The chances are that Runa's disability might be used as an asset.” Thus he recommended that the female child be taken to C.R.P. in Savar, so that when she attains maturity, she does

not find herself habituated in begging. Marriage, the traditional life-goal, was of course ruled out by Fatima simply because now the dowry would be too high.

Runa's left hand is of no use anymore. We don't do much with left hands anyway! Maybe many (if any) think that the scars on her body will light no revolution, which will write an epitaph of exploitation. The crowd, which surrounded me and the victim, all took a few looks at the front-page picture of Runa printed in the news-daily The Daily Star, 22nd October). Yet probably the calamities scattered around the ward subdued the peculiarity of the present case. So I take this appalling act of barbarity and criminality to convey a few simple principles of the younger generation.

We do not approve degrading human beings to any concept of the body, be it political, economic or otherwise, if in so doing results in the consequences of exploiting human beings. We, to say the least, view all present politics with ambivalence. Specially, reforms are in dire need in the power structure of the state and common fear of cor-

### "Why do serious crimes...?"

Sir, This letter is in appreciation of Dr M Masumi's article “Why do serious crimes like rape occur on the campus at all?” which appeared in the DS on 7 October, 1998. The fervent appeal by the honourable President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to the political parties to refrain their political student fronts from doing unhealthy politics did not produce any result.

Syeda Farhana Rahman  
 House no. 4, Road no. 9/A  
 Sector-5, Uttara M/T, Dhaka

### My Daughter Runa and the Next Revolution

Under our contemporary “care-taker” government for five years with no direct link with any present party system politics. If old political theories fail, new ones have to be devised. If old ones are open to abuse, lacunas must be filled. And we believe the people have that right in conjunction with the internationally recognised right of every people to self-determination.

As we recognise all citizens as equal in the eye of law. It is obligatory on the part of any person or persons, even acting collectively, to take responsibility for his/her harmful conduct, which deprive (another from the equality equilibrium. As for the present, we ardently request, laws be passed to take this into account, especially in relation to hartals. And it is unequivocally stressed that we do not believe in punishment being more than the gravity of harm caused. Though, may not be contextual, it is just emphasis that we do not support the death sentence.

We believe that the most fruitful way of minimising injustices is to make people conscious of them. Accordingly, we see education as the most productive way of alleviating dom-

As observed by Prof Masum, the 1973 University Ordinance has aligned a large number of teachers to the political parties and the teachers are either in the administration or the opposing the administration.

I fully agree with him. Are these teachers really interested for the education and the values for which the universities are established? As a matter of fact, many teachers think that with out belonging to a group, one does not get the right things. The worst thing happened when restructuring was introduced in the universities of Bangladesh. Now a teacher is promoted to the next higher post on point basis without referring the suitability of the same to the foreign experts as was the practice in the yester years. The experts are appointed by the group who are in the administration.

The conclusions are obvious. The most pertinent question that arises whether we need the elections of the Vice-Chancellors as per 1973 Ordinance. Teacher having affiliation to the opposition political party has been elected or appointed by the ruling political party as a Vice-Chancellor. Such appointments as is practiced now cannot bring academic environment in the universities as the Vice-Chancellor cannot but obligate to overlook all the mis-deeds by the student front of the ruling political party. This has happened in Jahangirnagar University when a serious crime like raping of female students by their fellow students received but a little attention by the administration.

The only exception is the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology where serious crime like raping of female students received but a little attention by the administration.

Prof Dr Kh M Mannan  
 Dhaka University

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