

My Turn to Talk about Democracy

The pursuit of power and make-quick-money seems to have taken over genuine democratic politics. The trend has been exacerbated due to skewed state/society relationship which has not yet been counterbalanced through private sector opportunities and accumulation of wealth and social mobility have remained firmly entrenched on getting and holding on to state power.

ALL political parties in Bangladesh, including the two main major ones, incessantly talk about their prophesied faith in democracy, and never miss any opportunity to demonstrate their 'dedication' to its ideals. Unfortunately, up until now, all those commitments have rhetorical rather than substantive. If the major political parties were truly dedicated to their declaratory stance then the history of democracy in Bangladesh would have been different. This factor alone is responsible for the present state of affairs in our country. It is now our turn i.e. citizens' turn to talk about democracy.

One would, however, argue otherwise. How can there be no functioning democracy in Bangladesh when an elected and representative government is ruling the country? And don't the existence of democratic institutions, a pluralistic society and a multi-party system characterize Bangladesh as a democratic polity? Indeed it does. But what is to be kept in mind is that under these myriad paraphernalia of democratic trappings there remains a deep malaise at the very heart of our political system. Surely the tangible ingredients of democracy are all there but do these alone make the system effective? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because the tangibles are definitely needed but in order to have a truly functioning democratic order, intangibles matter as much as the tangibles. Democracy is not only a form of government but also a way of life. It is the values, spirit of freedom, and one's innate desire for self-rule which matter more, and whose manifestation are found in the various institutions of a given country depending upon its history, socio-economic and cultural context.

Here in Bangladesh we have established the political democracy since 1991. Peaceful elections and transfer of power have taken place. Successive governments have been legitimated by law and elections but have not, in my opinion, been legitimated by performance especially economic ones. The burdens of the task, one must understand, fall squarely on our political parties. They have miserably failed in disseminating democracy's benefits and carry out their designated task. Indeed malaise affecting our polity and democratic order emanate from the nature of

party politics in our country. Both the major parties must share this burden of failure and letting the people so badly.

First, let us take the example of arduous task of nation building and state building. National cohesiveness and unity are fundamental preconditions of democratization which precede all other phases of the process. Bangladesh is a homogenous country — so much so that it could have been reckoned as national strength had we been united, at least, on fundamental issues. Unfortunately, there are so many deep and wide divisions within our society. More unfortunate that we are still in search of our identity and a suitable state apparatus. But it should be pointed out that in spite of apparent contradictions in Bangladesh nationalism and divisions within the society there is not mental reservations among the people at large about the political community they belong to. No critical groups including extreme religious right question the sovereignty of Bangladesh. Even the most progressive ones — the extreme left — would not support Bangladesh joining the province of West Bengal of Indian Union. So an honest and sincere compromise between the secular, religious extremists, and nationalist forces would have gone a long way in resolving the issue. The political parties' role in this matter should act as a catalyst.

But instead of practicing the art of negotiation, compromise and accommodation to bring about a national solidarity and consensus both BNP and AL are in seemingly perpetual confrontation ranging from vital national issues to trivial ones. Both BNP and AL are oblivious of the fact that they each represent formidable social forces of our polity. It is simply horrendous

to think that one can eliminate other through force or other mechanism or impose one's own version of history on other. Interestingly, that is what they have been doing perennially. I am afraid this political culture of confrontation we have today is the sole product of our political parties' making. Their emotionally charged confrontational behaviours are being slowly and steadily getting instilled among the populace, which I feel is alarming development.

How has the society been affected by the confrontational behaviour can be discernible from recent experience I had and cannot resist the temptation of sharing it. Very recently

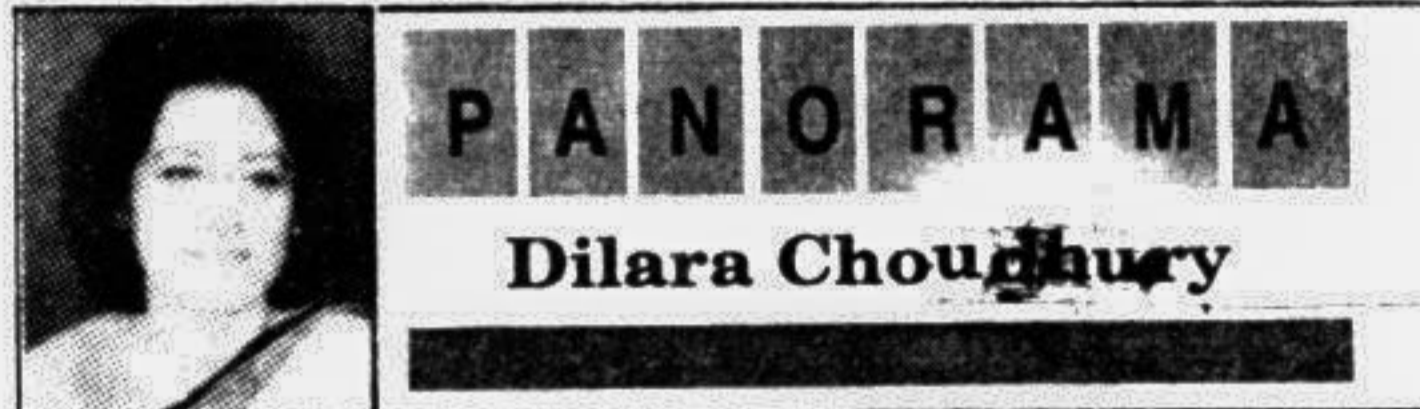
and the nation seems hopelessly divided on trivial issues. And when a nation is not so fundamentally, it cannot afford, to quote Laski, "to bicker safely." Thus the political parties' inability to bring equilibrium is what makes the bickering among various social groups so frightening.

Second, let us assess the role of the political parties in institution building. It is a common knowledge that without proper political institutions the common man can never expect to enjoy the beneficial fall-out of a democratic order. And in this regard what have been their achievements? By any standard, I am afraid, meager. Most disappointing has been their inability to make the Parliament the forum for debates on national issues. Both Fifth and the present one have mostly been dominated by the existing ruling party. Vital issues have not been discussed and the institution of Opposition not allowed to function properly. Obviously, the agitational politics has taken over the constitutional politics. The hartals, street and campus violence are all manifestation of the dysfunctionality of our Jatiyo Sangsad.

Judiciary, another vital institution for sustaining democracy, has not been given any chance to become truly independent. Even after twenty-three years, since it was made an appendix of the executive through the infamous Fourth Constitutional Amendment, which subsequently was made somewhat independent through Martial Proclamation, the Judiciary has not yet been fully independent. A Bill to that effect is pending in the Parliament but no positive steps have been taken by either the BNP or the present government.

responsibility for fostering negativism and intolerance in our political culture. Their incessant accusations and counter-accusations, talk of numerous conspiracy theories, pointing fingers at each other, mostly dealing with non-issues rather than vital ones confronting the nations are exacerbating and fragmenting an already wounded soul of a nation. The Parliament, which is supposed to be the focal point of national debates, has become the place for name-calling and mudslinging. As a result, the conflicts among various groups, which is an inherent characteristic of democracy, have not been brought into an equilibrium by the state machinery —

bear the major share of the responsibility for fostering negativism and intolerance in our political culture. Their incessant accusations and counter-accusations, talk of numerous conspiracy theories, pointing fingers at each other, mostly dealing with non-issues rather than vital ones confronting the nations are exacerbating and fragmenting an already wounded soul of a nation. The Parliament, which is supposed to be the focal point of national debates, has become the place for name-calling and mudslinging. As a result, the conflicts among various groups, which is an inherent characteristic of democracy, have not been brought into an equilibrium by the state machinery —



during a ladies' get-together dilly-dallying we were discussing the alleged failure of our two women leaders and someone jokingly said that might be we need men instead of women as leaders. A friend of ours leaped to her feet, all red in the face, and said that the present leader is better than any male leader, certainly better than someone like Ziaur Rahman. Now nobody was talking about any particular person per se but as emotional as we are now, things were twisted and taken out of the context to a completely different direction. In another occasion a couple fought publicly, again when the husband made jokes about things being named after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

Traffic Congestion in Dhaka City: Whither Solution ?

DHAKA City's traffic has turned into a veritable mess. The problem, though much talked about but hardly attended to, has now assumed an alarming proportion. People are awe-stricken to get out of their houses and even if they have ventured out on the road, they are not sure if they can return to their houses quite safe and sound. Other than being late in the offices, work places or on any scheduled appointment, mental disgust and exhaustion and loss of effective manhours is a colossal drain on the resources for the whole nation. The road scene in Dhaka is something awesome, especially at important crossings and intersections like Mahakhali-Tejgaon, Sonargaon Hotel, Hatirpool, New Market, Gulistan, Bangladesh Bank and Dalnik Bangla.

The major reason for such road congestion is the huge increase in the number of rickshaws, most of which are allegedly unlicensed. Dhaka, now, is one of the most densely populated cities of the world having an area of about 340 sq.km with only 2200 kms of roads. Shockingly, the length of foot path is only about 170 kms while the total number of various transport is about 7.5 lakhs. Many of these slow moving non-mechanized vehicles that comprise mostly rickshaws, push carts, and vans have largely contributed to the problem of traffic jam and congestion.

According to some source of the Dhaka City Corporation, there are about one lakh licensed rickshaws in the city but unofficially perhaps three lakh rickshaws are plying on the road. Most of the rickshaw pullers are the worst victims of either flood, or drought or river-erosion or job-losses in the villages where they had been living since birth.

They migrated to the capital city and the most easy job market they entered was to get a rickshaw on rental basis. Undoubtedly, these poor rickshaw pullers continue to eke out a living but it can be said without any contradiction that these rickshaws are largely to blame for such a messy situation on the city roads.

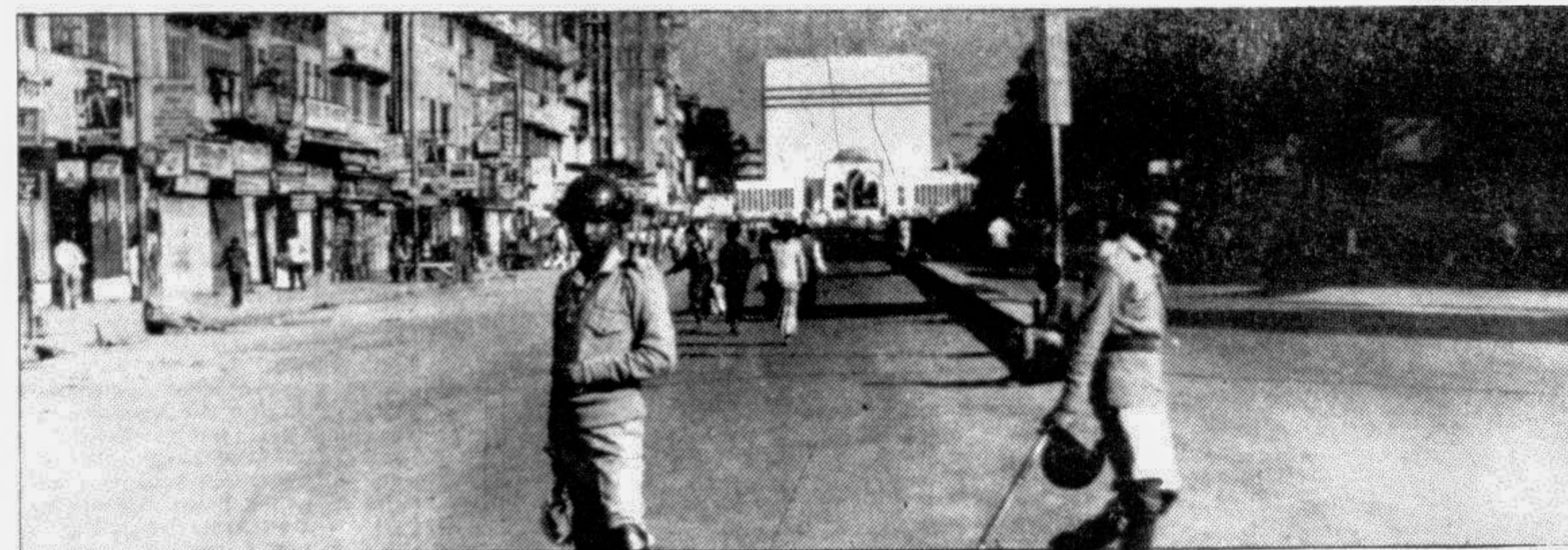
In absence of any separate lanes for these rickshaws, they occupy the whole road space and interfere with the movement of the mechanized vehicles. In normal situations, to ease road congestion, motor vehicles are expected to ply city roads at an average speed of 30 to 40 km per hour, but due to traffic congestion, mostly created by these rickshaws on the same road lane, these fast moving transports can only make 15 to 20 km per hour. It is learnt that there are about two lakh 50 thousand motorized vehicles on the road in the greater Dhaka which includes about 50 thousand autorickshaws, tempos and motorcycles. When these motorized and non-motorized vehicles ply on the same road and lane the main cause of traffic congestion appears to be the city's scarce road space. Because, on the other hand, large part of road space remains occupied by parked vehicles, creating a grid lock of cars and buses and rickshaws on the road. Except one major road, namely the airfield road, all thoroughfares in the city are accessible to all types of vehicles at all hours of the day and night.

Overcrowding on the road only increases evacuation time and exposes passengers to greater risk of accident and injury. Carrying a seriously sick patient or the rescue effort to take an injured passerby to a

hospital, because of such congestion on the road, becomes enormously difficult. Statistics made public by the government in 1995 revealed that about 17,000 people died in the whole country due to road accident as against 30,000 sustaining such injuries during the decade ending in 1996. Most shocking, the actual number seeking admission in the hospitals especially in RIHD in Dhaka far exceeds the number recorded in government report. It was further learnt that in 1994, Dhaka accounted for 45 per cent of all road accidents. An analysis of the accidents in the Dhaka Metropolitan Area in 1991-92 found that pedestrians were involved in half of all road accidents and comprised 60 per cent of all RTA (Road Traffic Accident) fatalities and non-motorized vehicles like rickshaws and vans accounted for only 11 per cent despite almost half of all vehicle trips being by rickshaws.



Gulistan, Bangabandhu Avenue: The typically crowded city centre. The same thoroughfare (below) on a hartald day: The clean look! — Star photos



trians may be joy-walking to cross the road; (j) movement of animal-propelled or human-pedaled slow vehicles along with motorized faster ones through the same road.

Other than these factors, contributing to road accidents is the lack of any on-road riding test and the exemption from vehicle fitness inspections in the country. In an effort to tide over the crisis in road safety aspect, the measures listed below are required to be tackled on priority basis:

Road safety management: An effective road safety programme, it has been argued by experts in highway engineering, requires the co-operation of many sectors including those involved in road construction and management, vehicle fitness, and road user education and enforcement. In many countries, especially in Bangladesh, inter-sectoral rivalry vitiates these working relationships leading to failure in road safety management. The National Road Safety Council (NRSC) that was established in 1995 under the Ministry of Communication has not been able to promote road safety in Bangladesh because none of the professionals from the medical, engineering or academic sector who have previous experiences in these areas have been chosen for the NRSC. That eventually led to failure in framing a road safety action plan or considering steps how a plan would be implemented.

Road engineering and planning: Despite the fact that data indicate that road users are primarily responsible for causing road accidents, the contributing role of road environment can hardly be ignored. Factors that crop up in this aspect are: (a) road accidents tend to occur in clusters; the correction of these clusters or hazardous locations has proven to be the most cost effective accident reduction measure; (b) most roads in Bangladesh have evolved rather than being designed and purpose-built and hazards are mounting up every now and then; road environments can be designed to reduce the risk by minimising the chance for road users to make errors.

Non-motorised vehicle: As said earlier, there are about 300,000 rickshaws (twice the number of motorised vehicles) that occupy about 73 per cent of road space. Road space required by a rickshaw passenger is 21.9 sq.m compared to only 8.7 sq.m for a bus passenger. Number of rickshaws per thousand population, it is gathered from a reliable source, is about 60, possibly the highest in Asia. In countries, outside Bangladesh about 65 per cent passenger trips are made by public transport system like bus and metro rails but in Dhaka it is less than 10%. In such a situation, it is almost impossible to solve Dhaka's traffic problem such as jams, congestion and accidents without improving the public transport system. At the moment, about 7,000 new buses are required and that must operate in private sector to ensure comfort to a great extent. One statistics reveal that there are about 50,000 auto rickshaws in and around Dhaka city which are also causing traffic congestion and pollution.

Pedestrian issue: With about 2000 km of roads extending in and around the Dhaka City Corporation, the length of the sidewalk is about 100 km and more than 70 per cent of the sidewalks can't be used by pedestrians in as much as they are in the possession of hawkers and other shop-owners. **Maintenance aspect:** The present problem of traffic congestion resulting in frequent accidents stems from a lack of co-ordination between different utility agencies. It is observed that roads are dug quite haphazardly and often without proper and prior notification, sometimes several times in a year, and kept unrepaired for long periods which reduces road capacity and causes severe traffic congestion. Drivers of cars, buses and trucks without adequate training, valid driving li-

ences and experience have added to the problem of increasing number of accidents. Issuance of driving licenses are often lax and can be had just on payment of certain fees along with kickbacks that take place behind the scene. **Travel demand management aspect:** Many developed countries have resorted to travel demand management in order to curb traffic congestion. This important tool aims at reducing the impact of traffic by influencing people's travel behaviour. TDM can be achieved through growth management, road pricing, auto-restricted zones, parking management, ride sharing (car pooling), alternative work hours (staggered hours), flexible time compressed work week. Reports have it that some developed countries handled traffic management through such means. **Traffic management issue:** Road junctions either in Dhaka or outside are not properly channelized. Faulty road alignments and slopes, absence of road medians, lane marking, high occupancy vehicle lanes especially for super heavy buses plying on long distance, road communication exacerbated problems of traffic management and often led to fatal accidents. Roads were constructed much earlier with hardly any thought about the size of vehicles that would be plying on them. Experts opine that step like street widening, intersection widening, one way street, grade separation, bus bays, and parking control can improve the situation to a great extent. In the Dhaka city, it seems there is no parking policy in force. Commercial buildings in Motijheel, the hub of the city, have hardly any parking facilities. Elephant Road and Nilkhet intersections approaching New Market experiences severe traffic congestion. New shopping complexes are coming up in Mirpur Road, Hatirpool area, Mouchak area etc. with no provision of parking facilities. **Enforcement aspect:** Our experiences suggest that enforcement of traffic rules, thus easing congestion and jams could hardly be achieved because of shortage of trained traffic police personnel. Traffic police personnel posted at important road intersections move their hands right and left no doubt to control traffic but hardly achieve the required objective believably because they are not properly trained. At the same time, traffic laws in many colonial times and need updating to keep abreast with current situations. More shocking, road users — both vehicle drivers and pedestrians show tremendous apathy and callousness to existing traffic regulations. **Bus drivers and auto rickshaw drivers trying to stop their vehicles at all points on the road to collect passengers at will have only added to the woes of the general public. Traffic police maybe because of their (unholy) alliance with these bus and auto drivers can hardly curb this nuisance and things as such run with no solutions in sight. No sensible government or society could allow these shocking episodes go unchecked. In the face of such a disastrous situation that stands as a negative all development efforts in the country, the whole community must get involved for deriving a meaningful solution and if necessary must get on the road to play its role either as individuals or on collective basis.**

The writer is Controller of Examinations, BUET.

Long on Pledges, Short on Action

Suman Pradhan writes from Kathmandu

EIGHT years ago, Nepal promised to safeguard human rights, raise the status of women and give citizenship rights to migrants in a new constitution drafted after the democracy replaced absolute monarchy.

As the sun rose above the capital city Kathmandu on Constitution Day recently, opposition leaders and human rights activists gathered before the government secretariat to protest that the promises have not been kept.

The Nepal Satbhavana Party (goodwill party) which champions the cause of 3.4 million people of Indian origin settled in the southern Terai plains bordering India, has been seeking citizenship documents for them.

Saying 'Madness' or Terai dwellers are discriminated against and cannot find jobs, vote or own property till they get citizenship, the NSP burned copies of the constitution in protest. NSP leaders said constitutional provisions on citizenship place hurdles for the madhesis in exercising political rights, a fundamental freedom enshrined in the constitution. Said Gajendra Narayan Singh, the charismatic leader of the NSP, "the constitution discriminates against madhesis and if you try to suppress demands for justified amendments, you do that at the cost of democracy." Many Nepalis may not agree with the NSP's claims or its shock tactics, however, the citizenship issue here is an emotional one with powerful arguments on both sides. Whatever the divisions, most are agreed that fundamental freedoms and rights enshrined in the constitution have yet to be put into practice. The NSP demand is seen as a manifestation of those aspirations, they say. The overall rights situation in the country is better than in the days of absolute monarchy days, but has still not reached the level desired by a majority of the people," says Dr Kapil Shrestha, president of Human Rights Organization of Nepal (HURON). "We are in a transition phase." The present constitution is a product of the popular movement of April 1990 which restored multi-party democracy in Nepal which for three decades had been an absolute monarchy. After a violent uprising that year, Nepal's monarch King Birendra lifted the ban on political parties ushering in an era of democracy and pluralism. A new constitution promulgated the next year borrowed heavily from the Indian constitution. International rights conventions and declarations were signed and ratified, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Political freedom and basic human rights were enshrined in the new democratic constitution and men and women were decreed to be equal in all respects. Even so, eight years after the

As a result, people's faith in this vital organ has eroded. We do not like when the American Ambassador states that majorities in Bangladesh have no faith in our judicial system but can we really deny that fact? How can we think of establishing rule of law when human rights are routinely violated — in the form of women being languished by fatwa and rape as well as death in police custody — and judiciary remains under the influence of the executive?

Third what is the track record of our political parties in making people's participation effective through genuine devolution of power and installation of institutions of local self-government? Again the track record is neither pretty nor encouraging. Isn't it a shame even after twenty-seven years of independence we are still struggling to find proper institutions of local self-government so that people can indeed participate in the governance of the country? What has, however, happened is without proper local self-government institutions common people have been mobilized at the grassroots level due to increasing NGO activities. As a result there may be serious social and political conflicts when people's hopes, aspirations and demands would not be materialized due to the dearth of proper channels and institutions. The magnitude of social unrest, conflicts and violence can be such that they may undermine the very foundation of our nascent democratic order. Are the political parties paying enough and serious attention to such impending phenomenon? The political parties, however, can take some credit in making our electioneering process effective and transparent. One has to admit that thanks to the vigilance of the media and monitoring of the two consecutive elections have been peaceful and without widespread rigging. Despite such achievement I remain skeptical about their bona fide intentions. I say this by their post-election track

record. Once in power the relevant party does very little to arrest the decay causes of our political system. Take the example of corruption. How much transparency is there to envisage bureaucratic and other political corruption? On the contrary, the political party in power demonstrates its 'inability' or rather 'unwillingness' to keep a lid on political and administrative corruption. It seems that they only use the electioneering to capture state machinery and manipulate the mechanisms of democracy to their advantage. The pursuit of power and make-quick-money seems to have taken over genuine democratic politics. The trend has been exacerbated due to skewed state/society relationship which has not yet been counterbalanced through private sector opportunities and accumulation of wealth and social mobility have remained firmly entrenched on getting and holding on to state power or at least have access to state. In such situation, holding onto political power becomes too lucrative that neither the voice and make our political party nor candidate is ready to accept defeat. As such in the context of zero-sum politics practiced by our political parties, it is surprising that the political arena has now become the breeding ground of intolerance, desperation, violence and fraudulence? In conclusion I would like to mention that these malaise of our political system have been pointed out on a number of occasions but not too frequently. Although rhetoric by the political parties are abundant about the 'smooth functioning' of our democratic order, it is about time that we the ordinary citizens raise our voice and make our political party candidate tired of this negative politics of our political parties. Let our voice and demand be felt that it is high time the process of accountability, transparency, and issue based politics take precedence over the politics of rhetoric and non-issues.