

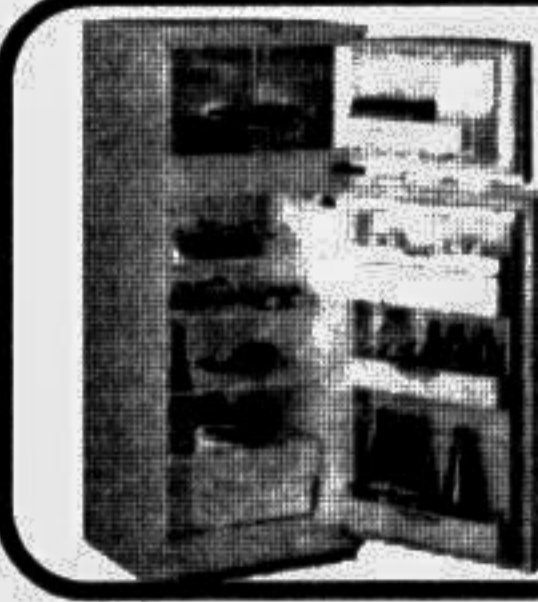


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When rickshaws rule the city streets

by Mir A Zaman



Clean air: Hartal suffocates, but the air smells good.

DEBATES on the rationale of country-wide general strike have been intense as usual and the arguments, both in favour and against, have been strewn with political clichés.

Before, during and after hartal hours, the government repeatedly accuses the opposition parties, as they always do, of acting against the greater interest of the country and thanks the people for spontaneously foiling the heinous ploy.

The opposition riposte, on the other hand, is no less tautological. The leaders harp on the same tune — failure of the government, autocratic attitude of the ruling party leaders, oppression on the opposition activists and so on. And, of course, they thank the people for their spontaneous support.

Ironically, the people the political leaders, both in government and opposition ranks, refer to do not include the ones in the lower rung of the social strata. As a result, success or failure of a hartal has been correlated to the number of automated vehicles plying the city streets, not the number of rickshaws or rickshaw vans.

Attendance at the government, semi-autonomous and autonomous enterprises has been taken into consideration, completely ignoring the number of rickshaw-pullers at work.

The end result of such an approach is, more often than not, misrepresentation of general indifference as spontaneous support or rejection to a political movement.

Hartal is, therefore, for most of the city-dwellers, who can afford a break from the jobs they do for living, just another vacation. For people, who earn their living day to day, it is just another period of uncertainty.

In recent times, the rickshaw-pullers in the capital and other major cities of the country have shown that they no

longer trust the politicians for their well-being. In the last edition of the country-wide hartal on Nov 9-11, the feeling was pronounced. At least, that is what the number of rickshaws plying the city streets suggested. They showed they could no longer rely on the political theories and theatrics.

Except a few hours in the first morning, the city streets were, more or less, in control of the rickshaw-pullers, not the political activists. Once the initial apprehension waned, they came out in numbers and the trickle in the early hartal hours became a smooth flow. The motive, although construed by some as 'spontaneous rejection' to the opposition movement, was simple — they had to earn their living.

The urge to earn a living for

— Star photo: Zahedul I Khan

puller, who had been on the streets almost throughout the first day of the Nov 9-11 hartal. Low income, he said, was because almost all the offices and market places were closed.

They enjoyed every moment of it. In them was a pervasive sense of freedom. They raced each other whenever they got a chance, teasing, singing and whistling aloud. They avoided the trouble spots and if any clashes erupted, they just sped off or pulled over at a safe distance and waited for the trouble to subside.

Some even squeezed some time out of their hectic schedule to sit back and watch youngsters playing cricket.

Cricket has become a regular feature in this edition of the hartal. While the national cricketers were playing against the touring West Indies A team, in Rajshahi on Nov 9 and at the Bangabandhu National Stadium on Nov 11, the little Sachin Tendulkars, Brian Laras, Mark Waugh, Saeed Anwar, Wasim Akram, Javagal Srinath, Shane Warnes, Saqlain Mushtaq had their own battles to win on the streets in almost every part of the capital. Joining them were a few grown-ups who had little care for the game in their teens.

A few bricks, placed one upon another, made the stumps, a bat and a ball, and the game was on. The enthusiastic cricketers even marked the boundaries with pebbles — prohibited for empty rickshaws.

Things started getting back to routine in the third afternoon, well before the hartal hours expired. Cars, buses, taxis, tempo, auto-rickshaws and other automatons came out. The spell of uneasy silence was snapped. Hooting and honking of buses and trucks once again took over. The relatively fresh air was replaced by a blanket of smoke and dust.

People, in need of some sort of transportation during the hartal hours, are more than happy to see the free flow of rickshaws. Their only complaint is against the fare the rickshaw-pullers demand. It is at least two taka more than usual per trip. It does not matter, though. One can hardly see a rickshaw without passengers during the hartal hours. Pressing needs force acceptance of such veiled 'extortion'.

The rickshaw-pullers, however, oppose the general view that they are earning a lot more than they usually do.

"I have earned less than a hundred taka, I usually earn more," said one rickshaw-

puller, who had been on the streets almost throughout the first day of the Nov 9-11 hartal. Low income, he said, was because almost all the offices and market places were closed.

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A HUSNAIN

Living with the Genders

MR Subject was bemoaning the virtual reality that he could not contact Miss Object, as the verb of life was missing. Since he was also weak in grammar, he could not compose the message to his gender friend. This is the communication gap in this IT age due to the new taboo of avoiding sexual discrimination in naming humans (Mrs, Miss, Ms) and functions (chair-person, not chairman, or chairwoman). He was also weak in the tenses (not nervous tension, but in grammar). When he wanted to tell 'her' (more than a person) something about the future (relationship), the past (tense) showed up at the wrong moments.

Now the NGOs have started using the strange term 'gender' in their X-files to denote women/females, and perhaps the male of the species. UN and foreign donor agency advertisements carry the sentence "Women are encouraged to apply", meaning it is not a discrimination against males. That a sexual term 'gender' foxed him, doubly, as he had experienced the battle of the hunter and the hunted long before the traditional common noun had gone out of vogue.

He went searching for a book on grammar, as there was none in the house (no student). So he bought a copy of Nesfield's grammar; the book he had hated during the school years decades ago. He had lost confidence in his current knowledge and usage of English; and had no idea which was the chapter on 'Gender' in the Bangla Grammar book, which he borrowed for a while in another's drawing room.

He was shy (and sly) to consult his wife on the gender issue, as she rarely conferred upon him the benefit of the doubt. So he sought the assistance of an NGO (Non-Grammar Official?) worker. It dawned upon him that the government was deeply moved (or did not move) by this modern, wonder 'gender issue', but was nonetheless had earmarked hundred crore taka on several hundred gender projects to place official emphasis on the 'empowerment' of our women; poor financially, but rich in the gender qualities, as God had originally designed her in the traditional mould of being complementary to men.

This word sent him back to the dictionary. He could not connect the meaning in the old dictionary. So he went to his 'litterateur' friend. He was advised that "Gender" and 'empowerment' were the new words of modern western democratic powers to impress upon the 'modern' poor countries about the 'human rights' of the 'human resources' (the economic rights were

subject to delay, it was officially hinted). Also the mod lib groups had to be assuaged. The NGOs found it easier to squeeze the donor agencies with these grey words used by the new generation. The illiterate majority in the underdeveloped countries were mysteriously impressed that something was happening to them or to their status as there were many visitors in the villages photographing the empowered gender, whatever it was.

Each decade sprouts new words, fashions, fads, fancies and styles. The fashion designers made millions of dollars by raising on lowering the hem of the skirt a couple of inches each year, transferring power from the brain to the lower levels (one gender only, mercifully). The power in the middle (of the mothering babies who swayed the cradle of civilization) was not appreciated.

The other day I asked an NGO gender (lady) executive why her wrists and throat were bare of ornament (women are more practical than men, and work harder, and are certainly not ornaments). She gave me a severe look and dismissed me as an old fossil. Why, I continued to tease her, had God made man and women differently when the mortal gender of the empowered species did not want it that way, and the globe was witnessing the battle of the genders in full public view.

The fingers of the two hands, when interlaced together, fit in a complementary way, the fingers of one hand going between the fingers of the other. In a bantering tone I suggested that her got herself transferred from the admin section in her office to the R&D section, where she would be dissecting only the neutral gender of pots and pans or handcraft. To deal with the common gender, she has to become a street politician (politician empowering the street). I do not know why, lately, she has been avoiding me. I have since been careful not to broach the gender issue with this charming lady.

A smoker friend (an endangered species) suddenly got a brilliant idea. He was keen to start an activists movement to change the gender of cigarettes from 'it' to 'her'. "Why?", I asked. "So that I could smoke her". "Are you thinking of the quip by Oscar Wilde 'life is a cigarette beginning with fire, and ending with ashes'?"

I asked my political advisor whether the country had a political gender problem. He thought it wise not to commit himself, as any change of floor would confront him with a leader of the same gender. But he hinted that there could be an empowerment problem.



The accused Imtiaz Husain (left) and Rakibur Rahman, DSE chairmen past and present at court.



— Star photo: Anisur Rahman

Scamsters in the dock, granted bail

By Staff Correspondent

A court yesterday granted bail to 11 persons accused in the 1996 stock market scam cases.

The Dhaka District and Sessions Judge had earlier summoned 17 accused in seven cases.

Those who failed to appear before the court yesterday were asked to appear on January 5 next year.

The next hearing has been fixed for January 25 and 26.

The accused who appeared before the court are: former DSE chairman Imtiaz Hossain and

of Imtiaz Hossain & Co, Runa Alam of SES companies, Rizwan Bin Farouq and MKM Mohiuddin of First Capital Securities, MG Azam Chowdhury, M Shahidullah and Prof Mahabub Ahmed of Securities Consultants Ltd, Ahmed Iqbal Hassan of HMMS Financial Consultancy & Services and AS Shahidul Haq Bulbul, M Rakibur Rahman (DSE chairman) and Abu Tayeb of Chittagong Cement Clinker.

Those who did not appear are: Sabet Siddique of SES companies, Hemayet Uddin Ahmed, Mustaq Ahmed Sadek, Syed Mahabub Hossain and Sharif Ataur Rahman of HMMS Financial Consultancy & Services and Md Nurunnabi of Rupon Oil.

Syed Rezaur Rahman, Syed Hyder Ali and DR AKM ALI represented the prosecution while the defence by Abdul Malek, Khandaker Mahub Hossain, Rokunuddin Mahmud, Hassan Arif, among others.

Three other scam cases against Beximco Pharma, Shineeupukur Holdings and Doha Securities, earlier sent to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court for completion of formalities, were also sent to the District and Sessions Judge yesterday. Hearing of these cases will begin on November 30.

The High Court stayed five other cases after they were moved for quashment.

The capital market watchdog, SEC, on April 2, 1997 filed 15 cases against 42 persons on the basis of a probe committee report.

Where have the doctors gone?

By Naimul Haq

Nine-year-old Shamim comes to Dhaka Medical College Hospital's emergency wing in a critical condition with his private organ dressed for ward.

His mother Nazma requests everyone she sees in the crowded lobby to help take her son to the emergency medical officer (EMO) but none responds.

Shamim remains unattended for four precious minutes, lying on a worn-out stretcher while his mother anxiously waits for the doctor to see his son.

It was 1:31 p.m. on Wednesday.

"Go inside the room (EMO's room) and request the doctor to come and see your son," a hospital staff advised Nazma.

She followed his advice and then rushed to collect the ticket for patient.

Shamim, who could not urinate since Friday, was groaning in pain. Earlier he was taken to Joydepur hospital in Kapasia, Gazipur. Doctors there referred him to DMCH saying he needed to be operated upon immediately.

The only on-duty EMO at DMCH Dr Mozammel Haq attended him 14 minutes after he was brought there.

Many more critically injured patients failed to draw attention of the only on duty EMO between 12:10 and 1:45 on Wednesday. "My colleague Dr Jalil had to rush home as his mother had died last night. Dr Wadud who was to replace him was away in one of the wards saying he will be back soon," Dr Mozammel Haq told this correspondent.

Admitting that he is unable to cope with the rush of patients, Dr Haq said, "I cannot attend all the patients. Sometimes, I simply sign the documents (papers for admission into the hospital through emergency wing) to avoid trouble."

Dr M Haq added that on an average he had to attend four patients a minute. With the existing facilities at the emergency section "we are compelled to do so."

When contacted, DMCH Director Col Badrul Munir said, "When one (EMO) is absent or needs emergency leave, we deputise a doctor from another ward to work in the emergency department."

"It is true that our EMOs are sometimes unable to cope with the rush. But it is not our fault. Originally, the number of EMOs designated for emergency department was two. The population of the city was far less than that now. Today about one crore people live in the city. But the number of EMOs has not been increased over decades."

The director also added that since Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital has raised the charge for OPD tickets and other charges, and since there has been no new government hospital to provide medicare at a rate as cheap as DMCH, the burden on the hospital has multiplied. "Naturally our doctors are not able to see patients properly."

Petrobangla in slow-go over PSC monitoring

By Sharier Khan

Petrobangla is going slow over strengthening the Production Sharing Contract (PSC) monitoring although it is aware of the negative consequences of the poor monitoring system now sources said.

Besides, the government has not yet made any economic analysis of the existing PSCs and their corresponding Gas Purchase Sales Agreements (GPSA) to calculate how Bangladesh would gain from the PSCs.

While the foreign companies are exploring oil and gas, the government does not have any plan on tapping those. When Sangu started supplying gas to the national grid, Petrobangla did not have any plan to use it. Sangu gas is also much costlier than that of Petrobangla.

"As a result, there is a lot of confusion in the government regarding use of the new gas finds. As the gas supplied under PSCs are costlier than that locally produced, some quarters in the government suggest gas export as a solution," said an official. "Some people just forgot why we have invited foreign companies to invest in the energy sector."

Poor PSC monitoring in the past had caused a lot of trouble, but the authorities seem to have taken no lesson from that, the sources pointed out.

Weak monitoring was responsible for the Scimitar scam in the late 80s in the Surma basin. Such monitoring was partly blamed for the June 1997 explosion at Magurchara gas field where US company Occidental was conducting exploration. The same year, Petrobangla came to know that British company Cairn had silently increased its approved budget for Sangu gasfield.

It was found recently that Rexwood-Oklad which as a joint venture had signed a PSC with the government in January 1997 did not reveal vital information to Petrobangla about its ownership for long.

Rexwood-Oklad had merged into Okland only and the US company has secretly signed an agreement with Irish oil company Tullow oil for "technical partnership" in blocks 17 and 18. But Petrobangla is yet to take any action.

Sources said although the Tullow chief claimed that Tullow signed a technical partnership deal with Okland, the Irish company was actually providing all the operational costs of Okland in Bangladesh. Okland's financial condition was not good mark while Tullow was involved in too many operations in the sub-continent.

Cairn was also asked to explain couple of months ago why it did not inform the government about its partnership with Shell in blocks 15 and 16.

The British company was also blamed for using an inappropriate rig in drilling an exploratory well in Sonadia where it had to abandon drilling due to unexpected high pressure. However, sources said that Petrobangla should have had intervened earlier and avoided the negative developments in Sonadia.

The problem of poor PSC monitoring worsened this year with the departure of Petrobangla officials from the monitoring wing -- Petroleum Concessions Division (PCD). To oversee the manpower crisis in PCD, Petrobangla deputed a number of officials from BAPEX. But the shortage of experts is still there.

Petrobangla had floated a tender to hire foreign consultants to assist the PCD in its monitoring activities. But due to the tough criterion put by it, none of the bidders qualified. Petrobangla is yet to decide on this issue.

The Second Round Block Bidding would allow PSCs on eight to 10 more blocks in the next three years, sources said.

"Even if the government recruits new people and hires so-called foreign consultants right now, we can not expect Energy Ministry or Petrobangla to efficiently monitor so many foreign companies by that time," said a Petrobangla official.

The concept of PSC is relatively a new one in the world. In Bangladesh, the first PSCs were signed in 1974 but those did not yield desired results.

Another PSC was signed in late 80s with a dubious foreign company SCIMITAR to explore and develop the so-called Haripur oil field. This one ended up in an international litigation in which Bangladesh won by proving that Scimitar was involved in forging Petrobangla's documents to sell a Bangladeshi block to an American company.

According to the final report of Public Enquiry Commission on Haripur Petroleum Agreement, headed by Dr Kamal Hossain, the Scimitar case is the prime example of corruption through PSC. The report identified a number of business and political leaders linked with Scimitar.

An effective PSC was signed between Bangladesh and Occidental in 1994. Two PSCs with Occidental followed it the following year. In late 1996, two more PSCs were signed with US companies UMC and Rexwood Okland.

Sources pointed out that Rexwood Okland signed PSCs without submitting proper documents. It also went for technical partnership with Tullow Oil late last year without informing Petrobangla as per PSC terms.

In June 1997, Occidental's operation in Magurchara ended up in an explosion due to negligence of both the American company and Petrobangla which is a partner and regulatory authority for all oil companies as per PSC terms.

In late 1997, Petrobangla detected a huge budget hike by Cairn for Sangu development. This, again, could take place because of Petrobangla's inability to check such activities of foreign companies in time. A series of other anomalies have been detected in other activities of Cairn, which tends to manipulate project costs taking advantage of Petrobangla's weakness, sources said.

Scientists search for clues to Ganges flow

By M Anwarul Haq

India and Bangladesh have begun a joint scientific study to find out the reasons for less lean season flow of Ganges waters than that stipulated in the water sharing accord.

The study by a 'Joint Scientific Team' is expected to be completed in two years. It will suggest ways to remove causes of the shortfall of Ganges water.

The study was commissioned following observations by Bangladesh that there was "low flow" and shortfall of water during the dry season in 1997, a year after the 30-year Indo-Bangladesh water accord was signed.

A meeting of the 'Joint Scientific Team' was held in Dhaka on November 15 and 16 as per the terms of reference laid down in an earlier meeting held at Siliguri in August.

A nine-member Bangladesh team headed by A K M Shamsul Haq, Chairman of the Water Development Board met eight Indian officials led by S C Chitkala, member of the Indian Central Water Commission at the two-day meet.

The Joint Scientific Team will look into discrepancies in figures and recommend measures for removing the causes of lesser flow of water during the crucial lean period from March to May. Dry season normally begins from January 1 and ends with the lean period on May 31.

The officials agreed that as part of the scientific study they would require to undertake field visits at both the upper and lower reaches of the Ganges.

They also agreed that there was a difference in the quantum of discharge of Ganges water. Figures on discharge of water at Farakka on the Indian side and Hardinge point in the Bangladesh side were found to be "unreconciled or different".

It was also felt that "special wells" should be installed at various points of the Ganges river to observe the height of water. Such wells could also show the difference between the level of ground water and river water, sources said. The Scientific Team will draw on expertise from a wealth of qualified persons and study all aspects of engineering.

Officials of the two countries agreed to begin immediate exchange of available data after which they intend to start bilateral observation of discharge of water.

The Joint Scientific Team has been set up at the pursuance of Bangladesh, according to Khalilur Rahman, Chairman of the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), Bangladesh.

During the 1997 dry season Bangladesh conveyed its concern to Indian water resources ministry that "there was continued low flow pattern" — much below the agreed level stipulated in the water treaty — since March.

Later in April in the same year, at a senior official-level meet in Dhaka, Bangladesh informed that the figures available from the four monitoring sites at Farakka point, Farakka feeder canal, navigation lock and Hardinge bridge point on several of the 10-day cycles showed "a significant drop" in the availability of water on the Bangladesh side. Indian officials had said that due to slow melting of ice on the Himalayas, withdrawal of water in the upper reaches and less rainfall (that year), water could not be released as per the accord.

The decision to set up a joint scientific team was accepted in principle at the last ministerial level JRC meeting held in Dhaka in July, 1997.

A communique issued at the end of the JRC meeting had said, "It was decided to undertake joint scientific studies in accordance with the terms of reference which have been jointly finalised by the technical teams of the two countries."

Bangladesh received its stipulated share of Ganges water during the last lean period from March to May, local experts had said. "Favourable weather conditions were the main main reasons, they had said.

National water experts however feel that it is important to identify and remove the impediments in the upper reaches of the Ganges on the Indian side to ensure the stipulated supply of water as per the 30-year agreement to enable Bangladesh embark on its long term water management policy.

Check up designation of Kalilur Rahman, Prismatic well.

The customs surveillance team at 2ia International Airport seized 430 tolas of gold from three foreign passengers early yesterday, reports UNB.

Sources said the team challenged three Pakistani nationals as they tried to get out of the airport through the green channel at about 5 am and recovered the gold bars worth about Tk 24 lakh.

Police accused of murder

By Staff Correspondent

Arab Ali's father, a caretaker of the Prime Minister's Secretariat, has accused Tejgaon police of torturing his son to death, DMCH sources quoting him yesterday as saying.

Ali, 14, a student of class eight of Tejkunipara High School in the city, was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where he succumbed to injuries Wednesday night.

Earlier, police said Ali and two of his accomplices were beaten by a mob while they tried to flee after snatching a gold chain of a rickshaw passenger at Monipuri Para on Tuesday.

An FIR in this regard was lodged with Tejgaon thana on Tuesday.

Hiron Khan, Ali's father, talking to medical correspondents while collecting his son's body from DMCH morgue yesterday denied the allegations made by police and alleged that brutality of police resulted in the death of his son.

"I gave Tk 200 to Ali Tuesday at around 11 am and asked him to buy some household things from the nearby Kamilata grocery market."

"Ali left home but he did not return. Marjuja, a grocer of the market, informed me at around 2:30 pm that police had picked up Ali," Khan said.

The boy was tortured mercilessly by the police and later taken to the DMCH, he claimed.

When contacted last night, the DC (west) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police denied the allegations of the boy's father. He stuck to the version given earlier by police regarding Ali's death.