

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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Expectations, 1999

Floods in Bangladesh and China, Hurricane Mitch in Central America and earthquake in Afghanistan — the outgoing year has had quite an encounter with natural disasters in their 'unprecedented' manifestations. In the reckoning of the World Food Programme (WFP), however, it is the Bangladesh flood which stands out as the most devastating of calamities in 1998. Its unusually long duration made it the worst-of-the-century not just nationally for Bangladesh but on global scale too.

To rank high on the list of calamitous visitations may not be a matter of pride but what must be so is the wonderful feat of survival the people of Bangladesh recorded amidst a stupendous adversity. Their courage and fortitude, endurance and resilience, self-reliance and Robinson Crusoe-like invincible spirit stood them in good stead, in a scenario that was infinitely more challenging than anything they had known before by way of natural disasters. Marooned, distressed, unassisted for days on end with two-thirds of the country rapidly going under water, they stood their ground with fellow-feeling, ingenuity and forbearance. The floods in a way resurrected the mettle our people had shown during the Liberation War — minus, of course, the armed valour part of it. Our hats off to them as we draw up a balance sheet of the year gone by.

The Daily Star in due acknowledgment of and admiration for their manifest spirit of invincibility against stunning odds, has adjudged the people of Bangladesh as its Man Of The Year for 1998. What now remains for the government and political parties to do is to harness that inner strength of our people by throwing such challenges before them as they can readily identify themselves with and respond to with spontaneous vigour. Grassroots participation based on the proven assumption that it is the poor who hold the key to the alleviation of poverty will have to be ensured.

While our people came out of the last year's natural catastrophe with flying colours in terms of the human spirit, it is the economy that still looks misshapen after two and a half months since it took a tumble in the floods. There have been management and input or service delivery flaws.

The time-table set for VGF card distribution and disbursement of bank loans could not be maintained. Also, distribution of agricultural inputs and the start of the Food-for-Work programme were delayed.

The pace of agricultural revival has been extremely slow, industrial production has slumped, exports are down, foreign remittances are in the throes of uncertainty, revenue collection has dropped and inflation is up. The complacency that the effects of East and South East Asian financial turmoil will not catch up with us is wearing thin if the marked fall in export-earning is any indicator. A demand recession has set in globally. We need girding up the loins.

An investment-driven economic breakthrough looks like a far cry with indecision still marking the gas block allotments. The administrative, police, labour union, financial sector and student politics reform agenda remain on the back-burner as campus violence, bureaucratic inaccountability, police and labour excesses, loan default, scandalous business deals and extortionism rule the roost making a mockery of governance as a whole.

National politics is in total disarray. As a matter of fact, the hiatus between the ruling party and the opposition that had been growing until the other day through the confrontational brand of politics pursued by both sides has now become almost unbridgeable with a sharp polarisation occurring across the political divide. With an alliance between Ershad-led Jatiya party and the mainstream opposition BNP in sight, and AL leader Sheikh Hasina making no bones about her feelings there, the nation seems headed for a stormy and eventful political future.

This is the penultimate year to the new millennium. Let the top political leadership of the country start being statesmanly as distinguished from what has been a blind pursuit of partisanship across the board. That will inspire everyone to do his or her duty to the country. And, then we would be spared the embarrassment of being a total stranger to the 21st Century.

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The Year Ends with Political Polarisation Turning a Full Circle

By Mahfuz Anam

As it looks now, we are going into the New Year with gathering cloud in the political sky indicating great likelihood of severe storm. The fact that we cannot afford it — that it is suicidal — does not appear to affect either the thought or the actions of our political leaders.

The year has ended with political war drums beating loud. Unlike real life wars, the elements of surprise in this case has been dispensed with giving us time and date when the war is likely to begin after Ramadan. That is when the real action is set to begin regardless of how the people feel or what they want. War has been declared and so the political workers must fight and people must suffer. Who cares if we have not been asked?

With the most recent developments in Jatiya Party (JP) of former President Ershad and his determined announcement of becoming a part of the real opposition, our politics can be said to have come a full circle in the last decade. We started with AL, BNP, Jamaat and all the left parties coalescing together against JP. After the fall of JP it was the grouping of AL, Jamaat, the left parties and JP that fought against the government of BNP. Now that AL is in power the new polarisation is of BNP, Jamaat and JP against the government of AL. The left parties are yet to show where they stand. They are definitely not enamoured by the way the AL has governed so far but may not be ready to abandon it yet, especially if the AL gives them some importance. As if in a game each major party appears to get a chance to form the government (with the exception of Jamaat) while others by turn gang up against it to pull it down. The sad part is that the country's life is not a game and people's lives are not mere playthings.

The lesson of '98 appears to be that our leading political parties have no principles, no ideology, no set policy and no goal except ONE: Unite against the ruling party, which ever that may be, and do whatever is necessary to harass it, incapacitate it and finally topple it. There is no rule of the game except that 'we' must win and the 'other' must lose, and everything else must be made subservient to this ONE GOAL.

The tragedy of our recent politics appears to be the collapse of our anti-autocracy coalition following Ershad's defeat in the hands of a people united against nine years of misrule, nepotism, corruption, debauchery and lies. With the

fall of autocracy, and the smell of political power in the air, the grand coalition that brought Ershad to his knees disappeared and all our political parties went their separate ways. This by itself may not have been bad if the competition between our two leading parties — AL and BNP — remained within some broad principles. But it did not. Everything appeared to be justified to attain one's own goal, which was simply to capture political power. For this, shaking hands with the 'Devil' was not considered unjustified.

Our anti-Ershad democratic coalition was a grand achievement. It was the majesty of 'People Power' in display once again. The quasi-military dictatorship was humbled by the bare-footed soldiers of democracy. And look what magnificent rewards it brought to the nation — parliamentary form of government, free and fair elections, sovereign parliament and a free media. We looked set to move forward to build Bangladesh in the path of democracy.

The first betrayal of the grand anti-autocracy coalition took place when the 19-point programme of the Three Alliances was abandoned in the 1991 election by the major parties, especially by the BNP after it formed the first post-Ershad government. The 19-point programme was an agenda for action that every Alliance partner pledged to implement in the post-Ershad era. It was this programme that united the nation and galvanised a passive people into an active civic coalition that triggered the mass struggle forcing Ershad into handing over power. It was a democratic agenda whose implementation would have not only taken the nation forward but kept alive the unity against autocracy that was abandoned so quickly and tragically.

What followed after democracy was restored in '91, and how the Awami League, taken by surprise by its defeat in the election that followed, allied itself with JP and Jamaat to make the new government's life miserable is known to all.

In the post-'91 politics the ills of the autocratic era took a back seat to the attention given by the newly formed BNP government on the 'evils' of the post-liberation government of

Awami League. As the battle between BNP and AL became frontal and total everything else became secondary, even the fact that they have a common enemy, which is autocracy of the previous nine years.

It was widely felt that Awami League's return to power after long 21 years in the wilderness would usher in some new and positive elements in the politics of Bangladesh. To some degree it did. To the extent that the memories of Liberation War again found centre stage in our national discourse, our MuktiJoddhas received increased attention and our founding principles like secularism found state support, the AL appeared to fulfil the nation's aspiration. But this discourse on the liberation war was fatally flawed by its over concentration on Bangabandhu. The dedication of our supreme national leader only helped to create an unhealthy backlash, the future consequences of which may be quite unfortunate. Attention on secularism was compromised through unnecessary concessions to reactionary symbols. The Water Treaty and the Peace Accord in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are examples of the fresh and bold approaches for which the AL government must be given credit. Legislative initiatives like those on the local government, women representation at the Union Parishad level, moves to set up a Human Rights Commission, etc. were efforts in the right direction.

Sheikh Hasina also set up some new examples of parliamentary practice by attending most of its debates and introducing a PM's question hour which permitted the MPs to subject the Leader of the House to some direct questions. This again was not allowed its full play due to selection of questioners. AL government appeared to start well on the issue of granting autonomy to the state controlled media by setting up a broadcasting commission. But no sooner was the report finished it appeared to reverse its position and went on to use the state media for blatant propaganda as before.

Where however the AL government appears to have made the same blunder as the BNP, is in its treatment of the opposi-

tion. When BNP won in '91 it got almost the same percentage of popular vote as the AL — 30 per cent plus. In fact the AL share was higher by a fraction. Yet throughout its tenure BNP ignored this fact and treated AL as a spent force not to be taken seriously. AL's attitude towards BNP was even worse. Its standard reference to BNP was 'Vote Dacoit' (Party that stole votes) and its treatment to it was always confrontational. AL can claim that it invited all parties, including the BNP, to join its 'Oikamatter' (Government of National Consensus) but except for propaganda value it did not have any merit. It was more a call to join the government as junior coalition partner, rather than be a part of a government of consensus. As this writer had argued then, that if the offer of a consensus government was genuine, the ruling party could seriously consult the opposition members in all policy matters and thus make them a part of the governance process without formally making the BNP a part of the government.

There is ample evidence to justify BNP's claim that AL government has used the police to harass its workers in the district, thana and village levels. Widespread filing of court cases reduced the law enforcement process into a partisan weapon. AL's most unethical use of the parliamentary process was to allure two BNP MPs with ministerial posts. When, to every one's surprise, the Speaker declared that this did not constitute a floor-crossing which would result in the loss of membership in the Parliament, BNP lost whatever faith it had in the neutrality of the Speaker. From then on it became even less interested in the affairs of the House than it previously was.

The purpose of this brief recount of history is to remind readers how we defeated autocracy and the usurpers of people's power on the one hand and then how we ourselves created conditions for its return to public life. We fight each other, demigrate each other, make the public lose confidence and faith in each other, and finally we ourselves invite the previously discredited autocratic force into

our fold and legitimise it by making it a part of our camp. Just think. Both BNP and AL fought together for long nine years to defeat Ershad's JP. But no sooner BNP took power after '91 elections, AL allowed JP to form a part of its alliance against BNP. Not only that, AL made JP a partner in its government. Now, BNP is inviting JP to its camp to fight the AL. Politics make strange bedfellows, but ours seem to know no limit.

So the year ends with a new polarisation in our politics which places the AL on one side and BNP, Jamaat and JP on the other. If the left parties now abandon AL then the former's isolation will be complete. If politics, which has always been confrontational, comes down to the street level as has been promised by BNP and others, then we are likely to go, once again, into a cycle of harts and violence. If that happens, then once again our development agenda — industrial production, education, health care, child care, agricultural output, etc. — will all be overtaken by violent politics. This will further reduce our chances of attaining 7-8 per cent growth which is a must if we are to make any dent in our poverty situation. That appears to be the likeliest scenario at the moment.

As it looks now, we are going into the New Year with gathering cloud in the political sky indicating great likelihood of severe storm. The fact that we cannot afford it — that it is suicidal — does not appear to affect either the thought or the actions of our political leaders. So it appears that our only option is to brace ourselves for troubled times. The fact that our people have just emerged from the biggest calamity this century has had no impact on the decisions of our political parties. They are doing exactly as they wanted and decided to do, as part of their own strategy.

With this rather pessimistic political outlook for the New Year, we can only say how much more our poor and hungry people will have to suffer before our politicians decide that they have had enough, and allow the people some respite.

Changing Mindset and Creating Common Wisdom

Change, there has been. After the 1998 flood we have seen the inspiring endeavours of students, of different NGOs, of business people and local activists depicted on the TV screen along with hilsha fish being distributed by compassionate national figures. But even there the tradition of the aristocrats and the lower class — the Ashraf and the Atraf continues.

It happened in 1989. I was not in the country then. My younger colleague Dr. Ainun Nishat related the story to me. President of the country has called a meeting. Politicians, professionals, local leaders, journalists, bureaucrats and technocrats were invited, albeit selectively. Dr. Ainun Nishat a young professional of BUET, specialising in hydrology and water-resources, was also there. The subject, how to cope with periodic national disaster. The immediate context, the floods of 1988.

President gave his usual opening statement — upbeat and I am afraid a little self-aggrandizing. Then he opened up the subject for fair and free exchange from the floor.

Late Mr. Pratapuddin Sarker, a transport labour leader stood up. After the normal courtesies, he asked the President a few unerving questions. "Mr. President," he said, "I have seen on the television screen that you are distributing sarees and lungis to distressed women and men in the affected area. But why sarees and lungis?"

The President was taken aback. "Why not?" he asked. "Those unfortunate people do need some minimum clothing."

Late Mr. Sarker said, "Yes Sir, that is very true. But the flood has not swept away the only clothes they had, if any. They had no decent saree or lungi before the floods. They do not have it now. They will not have it tomorrow unless they have employment and income-earning opportunities to procure their minimum needs of food and clothing. Without providing for the same, when you dole out such gifts to the fortunate few, aren't you ridiculing their poverty? Aren't you denying their entitlement in the name of charity?"

camera was not there. Why should a minister dirty his hands by giving away little bags of goodies to miserable people when there is not public display of such noble gestures for the privileged people to watch in the comfort of their homes?"

A related question. "Every evening, when I watch the television, I see important pillars of the society doling out rice and bread, even hilsha fish to women and men who have no health and home. But I have never seen the struggle of the farm women and men-old, young and adolescent — depicted on the TV screen. They have lived with floods, fought against the elements and will continue to rebuild their sub-human lives when the water recedes. Their resilience and their solidarity — aren't those the bases of our pride in human nobility and human compassion?"

Continuing he said, "What does such mindset of our leadership and their obedient disciples in electronic media reflect? It reflects the colonial mentality. Well here we are, the kings and the pates. We dole out little charities to our subjects when they are starving and in misery. We open up gruel kitchens, so that they can scramble for some food, almost like throwing out chewed bones to street dogs."

Late Mr. Sarker gave another example of this gruel-kitchen mentality. "When the '88 flood was at its height, you Mr. President eloquently invited the distressed to go the gruel kitchen in the nearest relief-centre for food. But how can one who is surrounded by water on all sides and has no way to cross the turbulence, go to the centres in convenient locations where ministers and leaders can go by car or speed boat?"

In that context, I recall a case study done by Dr. Zafrullah and a few young people. A lower middle-class family was residing on the second storey of a house in the outskirts of Savar. The windows were griled and there were no stairs to go up to the roof. When the water-level was still low enough for the man in the house to go out by the main door in a boat, he went to buy some food and other essentials. By the time he came back water had submerged the door

and came up to the second floor. It was nearly impossible to break open the grill. Anyway, the people from far and near, particularly the young ones rescued the family. This story of the young peoples' social responsibility, of helping each other, of a communal ethos that cares and shares never attracted the attention of camera persons and reporters of TV or the radio.

Furthermore, those who are struggling to survive with the meager income of a lower middle class family still have clothes on their back. How can they be subjects of sensational news or a sophisticated documentary? News must focus on the royalties and their splendor, the poorest of the poor and their deprivation.

Now that the wind of democracy is breezing through in soft murmur, will not this slavish mentality change?

Change, there has been. After the 1998 flood we have seen the inspiring endeavours of students, of different NGOs, of business people and local

low beings in a glorious inter-subjectivity of human relatedness.

The story that I just related reminds me of a video-documentary made by Tarek and Catharine Masud. In a turbulent water-body a bare-bodied helmsman steers the boat. The boyati (folk singer) is singing a song — Jarigan — about life with nature, with rivers plants and the fragrance of alluvium soil. Young boys and girls and their parents are wading in the water sometimes swimming, with food in earthen jars, and drinking water in pitchers held high above their heads. A young boy is spreading the net for fish. In the homestead land, men are busy fixing up the bamboo pillars for holding up the roof over their heads. Some women are working in the yard for growing vegetables. This to me is the song of life, the song of freedom.

New dawn has given us courage. Flags of hope are fluttering in the wind.

In our veins the lighted streaks of red sun. Dark night will disappear. We go forward, we go forward, we shall never stop — never!

But now the unfortunate epilogue. BTV never agreed to film this documentary of ordinary people — their courage and their resilience.

Another recent example of the colonial mindset. I am sharing it with my readers in the hope that our leaders are informed about what a few of their underlings in the administrative machinery considers as showing reverence to the authority.

First, I must admire in unequivocal language, the handling of the recent long-standing floods by the government and all segments of civil society together. An elaborate and excellent monitoring mechanism was set up at the behest and personal supervision of the highest leadership. One morning the BBC correspondent wanted to prepare a television reportage on the mass of information charted on a daily basis in the operation room. She had to send the cassette by the British Airways flight that evening. When she arrived there, the whole room was in disarray. All the charts, graphs

and maps had been taken down from the walls and stored in a heap somewhere. The wall was being distempered, the floor and the room, spruced up. Why? Because the head of the government would come for an inspection visit. So the BBC correspondent came away disheartened. She could never send the cassette to BBC in London.

The moral of the story is obvious. Politics in Bengali is Rajnit. In this version, it is the Raj of the king and his/her subjects, the land-lord and tenants, the master and the servant. This nuance, unfortunately, is sometimes reflected in our governance, particularly at the level of the functionaries. I therefore, feel that instead of Rajniti, we should call it Lokniti. In a truly democratic governance, that is the appropriate parlance.

In the end, a different issue related to the floods. Ours is a land of flood-plains. One-third of it is generally inundated including the wetlands. Farmers, through generational experimentation have evolved deep-water rice or flood-recession rice varieties for those areas. Unfortunately, our scientists have not given much attention to that in their quest of high-yielding varieties. During high floods another 18-20 per cent of the protected land are breached. The loss is enormous as those are the high potential areas. But when we present our figures of loss to our partners in development, we provide an average of the entire 50 per cent of the land. Naturally our credibility is questioned.

Historical truth about inundated flood-plains and flooded lands are well known to our experts. The window for flash-floods in wetland area is normally April and May. High floods that visit us periodically happen between July and August, as happened in 1954, 1974, 1987, 1988 and 1998. The question is preparedness for both. We have lived with inundation and flood and we will continue to do so in future. Various measures like dredging of the rivers, rehabilitation of water-sheds etc., are necessary to mitigate disastrous loss. In that context, our main strength comes from our farmer-researchers and farmer experimenters. Is it not possible for our frontier science to coalesce with local knowledge and create common wisdom?

Friday Mailbox

Rajuk's bad habit

Sir, Rajuk's alleged plot not to refund deposits on applications for plots (of land for residence, DS 15.12.98) is in reference, and it may be added that usurping others' money is an old bad habit of Rajuk.

The 1986 Baridhara-Banani allotment scheme is still not finalised after 12 years and the deposits in lakhs of taka and dollars are not being refunded or interest paid on same, in case of approved but not allotted cases. The "government of Sheikh Hasina" is maintaining a golden silence!

Alif Zabr
Dhaka

"Freedom at Last?"

Sir, There was a front page photo news captioned as above on 22.12.98 of artist Kalidas Karmakar hugging 3-4 guest birds. The news read that the bird-lover had snatched these birds from a vendor vending in the "banned" item at the New Elephant Road of Dhaka city.

The very next day, on 23.12.98, a letter on the same subject written by Mr Karim M Jobal was published. The writer expressed his shock that Mr Karmakar snatched the birds from a poor vendor without paying him any price, i.e. Mr Karmakar did an injustice to the vendor. Mr Iqbal pleaded Mr Karmakar guilty also.

According to Mr Iqbal if Mr Karmakar were an honest man he would do better by paying the vendor for the birds and by releasing them in public right there at the Elephant Road.

I would like to appreciate both the bird-lovers. The first lover artist Karmakar made a news by taking the birds from a vendor and at last freed them at large if he released the birds "right there at Elephant Road," only the nearby people would have been encouraged to do so. The readers including Mr Iqbal and I could not even know of the matter. The second lover Mr Iqbal raised the question of 'human rights' of the vendor along with the 'animal rights' of the birds which is a very welcome gesture from a Bangladeshi!

M A S Molla
Dhaka
Zoological Society of Bangladesh

Of banners and festoons

Sir, Dhaka was once famous for its muslim silk and the city was thus known as the 'City of Silk'. Later, hundreds of mosques cropped in and around the city and Dhaka was named as the 'City of Mosques'. Still later, flashy cars, mosquito nets and beggars introduced Dhaka to the outside world perhaps as the City of Cars, Mosquitoes and Beggars. How ever, today, with all the thousands of old, worn out, tattered, festoons and banners, Dhaka can proudly boast itself as the 'City of Banners and Festoons'!

The banners include those of pre-cadet coaching, herbal skin care, beauty parlour, community centres, restaurants, invitation to public meetings and what not. These banners have of late given the city an ugly look. In some cases, even the sky is not visible. This is all the more obvious in Sadar Ghat, New Market, Gausia, Green Road and Shantiganj, to name a few. It will be highly appreciated if the city fathers take immediate necessary action prohibiting this unnecessary display of such banners and festoons.

To stop this menace all they need is a pair of scissors and a ladder and the will to keep the city clean. Lastly, there should be a clear policy regarding the display of banners and festoons.

Anika Mariam Ahmed
Mymensingh Road, Banglamotor
Dhaka-1000

Strike mania

Sir, We are practising democracy for some seven years. So we are quite conscious of our social and political rights and demands, and also know the way how these demands are to be fulfilled. 'Calling strike' is such a policy of which success appears hundred percent. And we call strike being instigated by some political leaders without thinking of its justification. We even get heedless to enormous loss of GDP resulting from such strikes.

This strike mania has affected our doctors too. The recent strike observed by the intern doctors caused untold suffering to the patients. Doctors have every right to their fundamental needs like medicare. But they had to return home without any treatment.

Is this humanity? Here the government also has shown irresponsibility in serving the people.

I think, the nation's conscience too is undergoing a long-term 'strike'.

Arun Kumar Biswas
Dept of English, DU

Free in the free market?

Sir, Our markets are flooded with foreign goods (especially consumer items of least residual value), and the political parties otherwise uproarious even for a trifling matter do not clamour at all or effectively in this regard. I feel it's time the DS launches a continued movement against such unrestricted import of goods (for the sake of free market) without which we can live happily and healthy and save our recently-invading imported-variety of keeping at par with the developed nations. The free-economy theories are posing a great threat to our economy and less developed consumer products industry.

I am afraid if such trend is allowed to progress further then all our industries are bound to shut down.

A F Rahman
Dhaka

Plight of tenants

Sir, We would like to seek your help to uphold the interest of the tenants and in particular the retired persons who live in the rented houses or apartments in the capital city. It is noticed that most of them have become the victims of the house/apartment-owners whims in respect of the yearly enhancement of house rent without any legal support.

Therefore, we earnestly request the Rent Control Department to look into the matter and help them to provide the guidelines to fix up the house rent as per the rules. We wish that the copy of the 'deed of agreement' in the form of the governmental proforma on payment of Tk 50 each were made available for use prior to the hiring of the house or apartment as a tenant from the house/apartment's owner in the deed of agreement for 2 or 5 or 10 years depending on the tenant's liking with the house-owners and apartment builders as deed of agreement.

If this term is made as a condition in the deed of agreement, it would certainly help increase government revenues and save the retired persons as tenants from harassment.

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Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.