

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, January 15, 1999

Lead Poisoning and Suggested Actions

Thousands of children in this mega city of Dhaka are inhaling poisonous air which seriously retards their physical growth, tells on their intelligence and exposes them to other problems at later stages of life. This startling finding was released to the press by a group of scientists at a press conference held last Wednesday. The hazards of lead poison in the air have been known to many for quite some time now but in a very sketchy way. The findings from the blood samples — eight-times the WHO limit — of a few children have hit the nail on the head. The enormity of the problem and the intensity of the fallout of lead poisoning calls for immediate steps to be taken at the highest level of administration to save the future generations from mental and physical retardation.

In spite of repeated warnings by the newspapers about the dangers of lead poisoning and definite knowledge of the government about its future effects on the people, particularly the children, we have not seen any action so far from any quarters, particularly the Environment Ministry. We are perplexed at the inaction of the government.

To start with, the authorities must convert the government vehicles from the conventional fuel to LPG which is being done in Dhaka. But before that, steps must be taken to make their exhaust lead free. To handle this job efficiently half-a-dozen more conversion units may be installed besides the existing one and money misused in the name of maintenance of vehicles at government transport pools should be fruitfully utilised for this purpose. With proper awareness of public and private vehicle owners, automobiles that emit smoke beyond the permissible limit should be gradually withdrawn from roads and punitive measures like fines etc., could be introduced in the initial stages. Import of leaded fuel should be banned immediately and the Eastern Refinery should be balanced and modernised to produce and refine unleaded fuel which is the most vital factor for avoiding lead poisoning.

Another vexing problem will be to withdraw gradually the real menace to public health — the two-stroke three-wheelers trotting all over the country spitting venom. There are more than 40,000 of them in Dhaka city alone. Efforts have to be made by the ministry concerned to convert these machines into battery-operated ones as done in some cases in Kathmandu. If they can operate without gasoline in the hilly town they can easily run on the plains of our country. When the biggest manufacturers and exporters of this 'mobile deaths' will not use them in their own country then why should we buy them for our peril? These killing machines should be banned forthwith in the greater interest of the nation.

We very much hope and expect the government to launch a quick action-oriented response to stop the spread of the deadly poison. Otherwise we will be constrained to believe that the government does not care for the future — the children, our most precious possession — of this nation.

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Enlightened Togetherness and the Day of Festival

Friends and the near of kin, the neighbors who are not kin, wayfarers from outside join together in solidarity. In the transcendence of divinity and the glory of human dignity, the humblest and the noblest embrace each-other. They sit down on the same mat as equals and exchange views and opinion in transparent honesty for common good. Faith in divine exultedness is tempered with faith in human nearing by getting together and relating with each-other. That precisely is when the humankind celebrates in gratitude the trust that divine providence has given to them as a responsible tenant and trustee of life - not alone but in egalitarian unity with each-other.

THE first light of dawn unveils the shroud of darkness. Soft breeze rolls down the foliage in tender murmur. Birds in rainbow colour flutter and sing. Festival of life begins.

When is it that the human kind joins the celebration of living? Is it everyday? No. Everyday a human person is demobilized, fragmented and lonely - inert, as it were, in utter passivity. This atomization and isolation can only be enlarged through human relatedness and cooperative togetherness. The humanness of the species emerges through inter-subjectivity. The urge is for continuity by coming together, for belonging to a group, a community and even beyond to the human race as a whole.

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And standing in obedience to divine mercy we pray together. We pray for deliverance from miserly self-centeredness and egotistic apathy. We pray for emancipation from selfish cowardice, little vanities and unnecessary adornment. We pray for caring for each other, for sharing with each other so that happiness may smile on all of us. Only then the pristine splendor of lives with fulfillment and the glory of humanity bless a community, a group and thus the entire humankind.

That is what the Holy Book has revealed. Our Creator, the

Compassionate and the Merciful "commands justice and well-doing and generosity towards one's kinsfolk. He forbids what is shameful and all that flouts right dealing and cupidty too". Furthermore, the Lord reveals, "Deal kindly with your parents and your kinsfolk, with orphans and the poor, as well with the neighbors near your kins and the neighbors not your kins, with the companion beside you, with the wayfarer and those who are in your charge.... Do not let one group set another group to ridicule, who may be better folk than they. Do not decry one another or revile one another with name-calling.... Do not spy on one another nor engage in calumny against one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his own dead brother. Surely not." Or again: "Do not strut proudly on the earth. You cannot cleave the earth nor match the mountains in stature. (God) has no love for the conceited and the boastful, those who — being themselves niggardly — lay miserliness on other, concealing what God has generously put in their possession.... It is the servants of the all merciful Lord who go about the earth in modesty and who answer: Peace, when accosted by those who talk to them rudely. God's servants are those who do not bear false witness and when they encounter idle talk maintain an honorable demeanor" (Al-Quran).

What better example can there be of an enhanced form of democracy practiced by communities through egalitarian People's Assembly (samity/samaj) or People's Council (Sabha)? This tradition in the sub-continent is ancient and is true for people of all religion, caste and creed. Referring to an institution called 'Samiti' representing generally the people of a village but sometimes large political entities too a hymn or sloka in the Rg. Veda chants,

May you walk together, speak together, may your minds together draw their knowledge.

May you build your destinies in knowledge together like the gods before us.

May your code word be the same, same your assembly same be your mind, your consciousness.

May your secrets be common, common the spirit of sacrifice for each other.

May your determination be united, united be ever and ever your hearts.

May your thinking as well be alike so that prosperity may together on you smile.

(Rg. Veda X.191 Atharva Veda VI. 64)

The word Samiti itself, and I



Do! Dare!
A Z M Obaidullah Khan

quote from Ambassador L. L. Mehrotra, itself means coming together. Generally, in the olden days, it meant the assembly of the entire village as a deliberative organ. The sessions of the assembly or Samiti reverberated with the idea of building the destinies in knowledge of the people together in search of common prosperity and happiness. The objective was to resolve issues affecting people's lives and well-being through open debate and discussion. Thus through open and free exchange of differing thoughts and perspectives within the Samiti a consensus would emerge and the basis of such consensus would be the two fundamentals of ethics and equity.

A refrain of similar consciousness is in the word 'Sammya' commonly translated as equality. It is that but it meant more for our ancestors coming together for stimulating debates in Samiti. It also meant unanimity among friends in search of common prosperity. In

fact it was thus that the village communities "endeavored to reach friendly consensus on issues dividing them through collective debate and discussion in the interest of common weal" (Mehrotra).

And what is the etymological derivation of the word 'Sabha'. The derivation as Jayrama, the ancient scholar of the Vedic lore explains is a follows: "It consists of two word 'Sa' i.e. together and 'bha' which is the verb for shining. Sabha is that which shines through common dharma or presence of good men.... The 'Sabha' generally was a People's Council with a lot of moral authority and political clout and often performing judicial functions". Or as the Jatakas in the 6th century B C puts it:

That is not a sabha where no good men are. One recalls the concept of 'Samaj' in Bengal of the past. It was and historically has been an egalitarian and democratic social formation and community governance, steeped in the ethics of goodness following the precepts of Holy Books for people from different religious followings.

The common thinking that democracy in modern days in our country is a gift from the West may not be entirely true. True, the contributions of the West in enriching the democratic style in the context of nation-states and in the wider context of regional communities are of immense value. But a close study of our heritage reveals that an enhanced form of popular democracy was institutionalized at the community, village or even multi-village level in our country at a much earlier and now forgotten time. True, the old 'samaj', Rabindranath Tagore spoke about is non-existent today. For example, I repeat once again which I quoted from Tagore last week in this very column: "If a community wants the state to perform its jobs, it will surely become idle and inefficient. This was never

the case in our society. We have gone through the reins of various alien kings, but the community never stopped to play its role. Never it allowed external interference for conducting its activities, big or small".

Unfortunately the scenario is different today. Autonomy of governance at the community-level is only incipient and that also in a hierarchical and an inequitable social order. There are disparities and distances between the aristocrats and the commoners, the rich and the poor, the upper class or caste and the lower one and most importantly between men and women. It is these inequities and artificial distinctions that to my mind have reinforced certain distortions, like those of fundamentalism, obscurantism or of fatalistic acceptance of such aberrations as pre-ordained. Hence, I believe is the wanton desecration of fundamental human values, of decadence and backwardness. The conceit and boastfulness of people in an illiberal social order are the biggest obstacles to egalitarian democratic practices. Self-interest and petty jealousies hinder the well-being of the collective. How can we celebrate the joy of living when the humankind in egotistic abandon flout the providential trusteeship on earth to be like "a garden set on a hill, receiving copious rain and yielding double fruitage (Al-Quran)"?

So let us pray together. Let us pray for the comfort of mercy, that only gives and never receives, for all our individual agonies and insignificant hopes. Let us recite together the hymn for ascension from just 'having' to 'being'. It is impossible to translate the prayer by Tagore to the Supreme Power. So I end chanting the hymn in Bengali:

সকলকে ঐক্যে কলিবে সকল, শোন শোন পিতা
কর কামে কামে শোনা পানে পানে মম্বর বারতা।
হুজা বাশা পদে রক্ষিবে কলিবে সমাই ভাবনা
যা কিছ পদে যাবারো হুজা না মনে সাধনা।
কী হবে পতি বিপত্তি পতি কোবা আছে
তোমারে দাও অশা পুত্রি এসে কাছে।

N-Tests by India and Pakistan Could Dismantle Arms Control Regime

Aziz Haniffa writes from Washington

"If countries are perceived to derive certain benefits from ignoring such fundamental global norms, the risk could grow that others will either follow suit or seek various forms of compensation for continued participation in the regime."

THE United Nations' pointman for disarmament has warned that the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan could lead to the unravelling of global arms control norms.

Jayantha Dhanapala, Under Secretary General for Disarmament Affairs, said external dangers to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), like the tests by India and Pakistan, "are real" and pose threats to the global norms of non-proliferation and disarmament.

primarily through their potential. Taking a swipe at Russia and China for their respective assistance to India and Pakistan, Dhanapala declared: "The fact that certain NPT parties are engaging in civil nuclear cooperation in South Asia without any requirement for full-scope IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards may -- over time -- unleash commercial pressures to abandon that responsible global standard."

However, he noted that South Asia was not the only re-

gion in which nuclear weapons have been acquired or detonated in the name of disarmament and world peace. He recalled the declaration by U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson who, on August 6, 1946 -- the day of the Hiroshima bombing -- spoke of how "every effort is being bent towards assuring that this weapon and the new field of science that stands behind it will be employed wisely in the interests of the security of peace-loving nations and the well-being of the world."

Dhanapala also pointed to

the statement by President Charles De Gaulle after the first French nuclear test on February 13, 1960. De Gaulle had declared that the detonation would place France at "an even better position to further its action towards the conclusion of agreements among the atomic powers with a view to achieving nuclear disarmament."

China was not immune to such declarations either, Dhanapala noted. He recalled how Beijing's leaders, who had long condemned nuclear weapons as a "paper tiger," after

their nuclear test on October 16, 1964, spoke of how China was developing them "not because we believe in the omnipotence of nuclear weapons" but "to break the monopoly" of the nuclear powers.

Thus, he said, statements from South Asia about the value of nuclear weapons for purposes of both deterrence and disarmament, about how each new nuclear nation can be trusted, about how all the new weapons are products of native genius, were nothing new.

But he asserted that the

Friday Mailbox

Sadarghat menace

Sir, Sadarghat happens to be the most important gateway to our capital city. More than 70 per cent of our people travel through this busy river terminus. But as we pass through this area, we are shocked to find lack of minimum civic sense. There are open littered garbage everywhere. The terminal building wears dirty look with smelling toilets. The traffic from Bahadur Shah Park to the Terminal is simply chaotic. The streets as well as the footpaths are occupied by the hawkers. The pontoon is also occupied by hawkers and beggars.

The building should be provided with more sitting arrangement and also be properly illuminated. The terminal building should be restricted to beggars. The hawkers/vendors should be prohibited from using the pontoon. Traffic should be properly maintained. The authority concerned should take necessary steps to make Sadarghat a place worth using.

While visiting our neighbouring countries we find that the waterfronts are provided with walkways and sitting arrangements and serves as an evening retreat. The authority should work hard to restore the glory of Sadarghat, particularly the Buckland Badh area.

Rafia Mariam Ahmed
6, Mymensingh Road, Banglamotor
Dhaka

"Of Banners and Festoons"

Sir, I agree with the views expressed by Anika Mariam Ahmed in her letter "Of Banners and Festoons" published in the DS on 1st January 99.

These banners are indiscriminately hung throughout the city for months and have made the city look dirty. The nailing of such banners to trees deprives us of the beauty of the avenues. Such banners and festoons around the road islands also cause hazard to normal traffic.

Neighbouring cities like Bangkok and Singapore serve as an eye opener for us. In those places, the city streets are much wider and greener because of the absence of such dirty banners and festoons.

Authority concerned must take necessary measures to remove these banners. All they need is a pair of scissors and a ladder and the will to keep the city clean.

Noman Ali
Nowratan Colony, Baily Road
Dhaka

Ifar and sehri time

Sir, On January 2, 1999, Ifar was announced at 5:27 pm and according to the weather bulletin, the sun-set at 5:23 pm on that day, that means Ifar should be 4 minutes after the sun-set.

But in the case of Sehri, the latest time fixed for Sehri was 5:17 am on that day, though, the sun-rise time was 6:42 am according to the weather report.

We all know that the timing of both Ifar and Sehri is determined by the setting and rising of the sun. When that is the case, why should we sit for Ifar after 4 minutes after the sun-set but has to stop taking Sehri 1 hr 25 minutes before the sun-rise! I don't really understand this time-fixing.

M Abul Mohsin
40, Siddheswari Rd
Dhaka-1217

Hybrid rice

Sir, Our scientists have started a hue and cry when the government allowed to import some limited quantity of hybrid rice seed by private traders. They are now claiming to find out some suitable hybrid rice varieties by the year 2000. But why didn't they think over the issue much earlier when the country's food situation was taking a serious shape due to pressure of population, squeezing of arable land (13 decimal per head) and multiple natural calamities? Of course, I was the first person to write on this subject a few months back opposing such import of hybrid seed. But when all other hybrid seeds like water melon, wheat, maize and vegetables are imported in large scales and accepted by the farmers with satisfactory results, there was no reason to oppose hybrid rice cultivation. I would like to justify the introduction of hybrid rice in our country.

1) It is the latest technology for increasing the yield of

rice which is practiced by the rice growers of some countries with satisfactory results. They are also importing hybrid seeds from the countries where these are evolved by the rice breeders.

2) I was in doubt about our scientist's efforts in developing hybrid rice varieties as it involves huge expenditure as well as experienced manpower. It is a continuous process. Can a poor country like ours afford to bear such expenditure?

3) There is also doubt in maintaining such hybrid varieties properly by our scientists. They developed one hybrid variety of water melon called Padma but could not maintain it which is now an obsolete variety.

4) None of F1 (hybrid vigour) variety is permanent. After every 2-3 years, most of the hybrid varieties become obsolete. So our scientists should not be worried about importing such small quantity of hybrid rice seed for trial cultivation. Farmers will automatically reject it when they will not get the desirable yield out of it.

5) A good number of Indian varieties of HYV like *Sarna*, *Rama*, *Paizam*, and *Bhajan* are in large scale cultivation by farmers of northern districts. There is no adverse effect in the soil condition due to cultivation of these varieties.

6) Our soil is already depleted due to lack of proper fertiliser management and extensive cultivation. So apprehension of further soil depletion due to cultivation of hybrid rice is baseless.

M A Jalil
372/B Khilgaon Dhaka

High-rise questions

Sir, The recent report in the DS on the proliferation of high-rise buildings, apartments and shopping centres in Dhaka has pointed an accusing fingers to several grey areas of this (black?) industry in this poor country, where the income disparity between the top and bottom is increasing fast. "Easy come, easy go" is the characteristic of black money. If bank loan defaulters can get a role in running the country, then what is left for the honest experts to do?

Apart from that, there is a maddening boom in the construction of additional floors on existing old and unsuitable buildings used as flats for residential purposes. My neighbour (in Mohammadpur) is going two floors up towards heaven, and the din for 15 hours a day should be broadcast through the satellite channels to tell the world how noisily Bangladesh is developing.

How the architectural approvals had been sanctioned in doubtful cases (most cases are doubtful) is a mystery, and the authorities are silent on the issue in that their attention is never drawn to these types of flagrant breach of rules and regulations, affecting the society, the neighbours and the additional traffic flow around the surrounding areas. The money market has more severe traffic jam than that on the vehicular roads.

The absence of good governance can be spotted even by the laymen.

Therefore shifting the official focus on 'development' activities appears to be hypocritical, when routine matters cannot be handled by the 'popular' administration (we are supposed to use the word 'popular' as much as possible, but in polarised manner). The public propaganda machine cannot identify the head from the tail (we are asking for spotlight on topical issues), to improve the sagging image of the benign authority. Who are playing proxy in the government departments?

Dhaka should be careful not to imitate Bangkok blind-ly, and later face the same fate as happened in the ASEAN and the Asian tiger countries, that is, the eagerness to speed ahead with the structure in the absence of proper infrastructure. This is the observable trend both in the public and the private sectors.

What the regulatory agencies are doing, assuming that the perspective planning concepts and strategies were correct? If latter be the case, then some *ghapla* (it means *squall* or situation normal, all fumbled up) exists somewhere. In fact it is *ghapla* everywhere, like a merry-go-round. That is the beauty of a fashion trend: it makes one blind, to keep up with the Joneses.

Any official comment?

Abif Zahr
Dhaka

The Night of Honour

by Kazi Aulad Hossain

In this holy month of Ramadan, we must take fullest advantage of this Sura through "Zikrillah" which means remembrance of Allah and, special prayers and recitation of the Holy Qur-an for long hours during the night of power/Honour for Almighty Allah's forgiveness and also for our salvation.

If you ask me about flowers I will say roses, the queen of flowers, and if you ask me about man then I will say that our holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be on him), is the greatest of all men of all times, again, if you ask me about the Holy Qur-an then I will say it is the greatest of all Books and, in the language of a world renowned translator and commentator, "there is no Book in this world in whose service so much talent, so much labour, and so much money and time have been expended as has been the case with the Qur-an." And if you ask me about nights then I will of course say Laila-tul-Qadar, the night of power/Honour is the greatest and noblest of all nights.

There are three very important holy nights which are especially observed by the Muslims all over the world with due solemnity with a view to seeking, Benign Allah's forgiveness and for salvation. The nights are: Laila-tul-Miraj, Laila-tul-Barat, and Laila-tul-Qadar. As has been indicated above, Laila-tul-Qadar has, however, a unique position. "Laila-tul-Qadar" means Night of Honour. There is a separate Sura enti-

titled "Sura Qadar" in which Almighty Allah has Himself declared in clear terms the greatness, nobility and importance of this very important Night.

In this context we may therefore, refer to all the 5 Ayats of Sura Qadar of the Holy Quran as indicated below:

1. We have indeed revealed this (Message) in the Night of Honour.

2. And what will explain to thee what the Night of Honour is?

3. The Night of Honour is better than

A thousand months 6218

4. Therein come down The angels and the Spirit By Allah's Permission, On every errand;

5. Peace!..... This Until the rise of Morn

With regard to thousand 6218 Ayat 3 of the aforesaid Sura and see the commentation of a renowned translator of the Holy Qur-an as indicated below: 6218... "A thousand" must be taken in an indefinite sense as denoting a very long period of time. Cf. notes 3632 and 3634 to xxiii-4,5 and note 5678 to Lxx4. This does not refer to our ideas of time, but "to timeless Time".

One moment of enlightenment under God's Light is better than thousands of months or years of animal life, and such a moment converts the night of darkness into a period of spiritual glory.

It may be stated here in this connection that there is a reference of Laila-tul Miraj in the Holy Qur-an which relates to our holy Prophet's (SM) matchless journey and momentous meeting with lord Creator and as regards Laila-tul Barat it may be said that we observe it in accordance with the Prophet's (SM) instructions. But so far Laila-tul Qadar is concerned, Benign Allah has revealed a separate Sura (Sura Qadar-97) and specially eulogized its greatness, nobility and grandeur.

So, in this holy month of Ramadan, we must take fullest advantage of this Sura through "Zikrillah" which means remembrance of Allah and, special prayers and recitation of the Holy Qur-an for long hours during the night of power/Honour for Almighty Allah's forgiveness and also for our salvation. Let us observe this sacred Night in a befitting manner.



five tests by India and the six by Pakistan last May "amount to eleven steps backward in history -- they symbolise a retreat by the rulers of a significant fraction of humanity from a collective global effort to devalue and delegitimise nuclear weapons" and they come at a time when so many compelling human needs in this region remain unfulfilled."

According to Dhanapala, nuclear weapons "do not level North-South disparities." He said "only economic development and reform of the international economic system can do that."

Taking yet another dig at New Delhi and Islamabad, Dhanapala said, "The prospect of nuclear war also does little to inspire investor confidence in any region of the globe. Nor do such weapons automatically confer great power status, or electoral popularity." "Nuclear weapons are not the proverbial 'great equaliser' -- they are instead the 'great destabiliser,'" he said.

— India Abroad News Service



tial demonstration effect.

In an address to the Seventh Lankan Ambassador to the U.S. who presided over the permanent extension of the NPT five years ago, acknowledged that while "this is admittedly a hypothetical danger," it "nevertheless deserves to be taken seriously." "It is a danger that applies to the goals of both non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament," he said.

Dhanapala said other such external threats "include criticisms of the NPT by non-parties which are preventing it from achieving full universality."