

### Daylight Murder: Some Questions

Killing of a Pirojpur businessman Wednesday morning at his cousin's place in one of the capital's densely-populated neighbourhood simply refutes popular belief that life is secured within the comfortable confines of home. The way the murderers entered the house in Kalabagan and chopped Ripon to death not only speaks of an ominous rise of crime, but also unveils a disconcerting truth: criminals no longer fear the hands of law, let alone respect them. Police's failure to put criminals in the dock and judiciary's failure to put them behind bars have induced a devil-may-dare attitude in them. They seem to believe that they are above the law and they can get away with such murderous acts. Murder of Ripon is not a stray incident; it speaks of a system that is not working, reflects hollowness of the commitments of successive governments towards improvement of law and order situation, and, more importantly, suggests absence of protection for the law-abiding and tax-paying citizens. Even worse, it foretells more such ghastly incidents in future.

It is unfortunate that our politicians, of both ruling and opposition parties, largely resort to passionate rhetoric rather than activism on issues concerning people's welfare. Alarming increasing incidents of murder, rape, extortion and other terrorist acts have apparently failed to inspire in them the realisation that their claims of having improved law and order situation is far away from reality. The reality is people die on the streets, at working places, at parks, and even at homes in the hands of criminals, and if the government does not immediately act and direct their efforts towards strengthening the law-enforcing agencies, thereby ensuring better protection for the citizens, more will die.

Silver-lining in Wednesday's gory incident is the courage the lady of the house has shown in the situation. Sabiha Begum, who won the Police Award for Bravery after she had grabbed two muggers on the street, wounded and stopped one of the killers as he tried to escape. Her valour is indeed commendable, however, it also sends a wrong signal that people have to learn to protect themselves because they won't get it from police. Besides, not everyone has the courage of Sabiha and that's why we need an efficient police force.

The government should take Ripon's murder as an indicator of the law and order situation. Home Minister Mohammad Nasim has had expressed his determination to root out crime and terrorism from the society. We are yet to see any sign that endorses his sincerity but still, we earnestly hope that his commitment is not just sheer rhetoric.

### Implement Ban on Mines

Disconcerting news has come from Kosovo and Angola regarding laying of landmines as organisers try to put together a conference to chart the next course in imposing the world's first universal ban on the deadly device. The treaty known as 'Ottawa Convention' was drafted only in December 1997 and has already been signed by 135 countries and ratified by seventy-two of them which is a near-record in such a short time. But it does not have the blessings of the two superpowers — United States and Russia. The number of signatories and ratifiers duly demonstrate the anxiety and willingness of most of the UN members to denounce this deadly weapon that kills and injures an estimated twenty thousand people every year. Millions of landmines are scattered in more than sixty countries that include Angola and Mozambique in Africa and Afghanistan and Cambodia in Asia. In some countries the efforts to demine, like in Angola, have been 'seriously put into question' after the rebels and government reopened a civil war in December. Laying new mines would be a major topic at the first conference on the land mine treaty since it went into effect on March 1, Mozambique, which has an estimated 2 million land mines is hosting the conference.

But the organisers are appalled at the news of mining Kosovo and fears of renewed fighting in Afghanistan which is now being de-mined. A flare up may cause serious concern there. Mozambique's ambassador to the UN has rightly pointed out that 'while we celebrate the rapid entry into the force of the convention, let us be conscious of the fact that the value of convention rests in its accelerated and sustained implementation'. The late Princess Diana had worked ceaselessly to put a convention in place banning the use of landmines across the world. These buried killers have taken a huge toll of human lives over the years, crippled hundreds of thousands of innocent people and rendered millions of acres of land unfit for human habitation and food production. We strongly appeal to the United States and Russia to sign and ratify the convention, take the lead in de-mining the lands as long as it takes and make this world a better place to live in, at least for our future generations.

### Books for Better Tomorrow

Popular decisions are often not the best at the political level. So was yesterday's observance of the World Book and Copyright Day. The occasion carried more meaning, for it coincided with the death anniversaries of William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes. The thoughtfulness of Unesco for initiating this symbolic day in 1995 merits appreciation. The idea was to celebrate book, to talk about it, to raise awareness of it, not only as an instrument of knowledge, a medium of learning, an invitation to dream, and an essential means of communicating thoughts, but also as a precious and dear object, a companion for life.

The spectre of Information Technology revolution and the visual media these days, however, may have deterred demand for books from rising to some extent. Yet, the Day was a reminder that "books and written words" are more important than ever, not because they are competing new technologies, but because they are an indispensable complementary to the latter.

At the global level, it is a way of bringing peoples, communities, and individuals closer and thus promoting the culture of tolerance and peace. And at home, importance of the exercise is called for in enhancing both learning and pleasure. More importantly, emphasis on the need for total literacy, and for that matter "education", should not be a byword of the old cliché of beginning with a bang and ending with a whimper.

The slant of reading habit is apparently taking a back seat, while we are walking on the thin line between "seriousness" and "superficiality." We must come out of this concavity. And we can accomplish this by making books more appealing and accessible to the people. For books ensure a better tomorrow for them.

# Microcredit and Women's Empowerment

Despite the surge of NGO activities in recent years, they still tend to embrace only a negligible portion of the needy. The government has to have a large network of credit programme for the rural poor women to increase their economic solvency and enhance their empowerment.

SINCE the beginning of the microcredit programmes that mobilise and organise women at the grassroots levels and provide access to supportive services, the issue of women's empowerment started to constitute the cornerstone of any discussions on planned interventions for poverty alleviation. Following the footsteps of the Grameen Bank's minimalist credit strategy, a number of NGOs in Bangladesh (e.g. BRAC, ASA) have been targeting rural women hitherto been subjected to socio-economic subjugation of different types. The unique aspect of such a strategy is not its financial intermediation of credit for the poor but also its social intermediation. Needless to mention here, perhaps, is the fact that the viability of the former intermediation is ensured by the latter intermediation.

Great debate tends to persist as to whether provisions of credit for the poor women could change the social equations in which this sub-set of the population live in villages. The proponents of the thesis go to argue that targeted credit can be used as a mechanism for enhancing poorer women's existing socio-economic conditions and thereby altering the relations between gender and class, to the benefit of the weaker parties. However, on the other side of the fence, critics tend to say that while marginal increase in income and assets can enhance well-being and economic

security, the increase could be too little to affect the pervasively entrenched political and economic relations.

Ruhul Amin, Stan Becker and myself attempted to explore the relationship between poor women's participation in microcredit programmes and their empowerment by using empirical data from rural Bangladesh (The Journal of Developing Areas, winter 1998, vol 32, No 2, Pages 221-236). This has been done by examining quantitative data collected from a representative sample of the female loanees as well as qualitative data from selected female loanees in five NGOs from rural Bangladesh. The authors compared NGO credit members from an NGO programme area with non-members from a non-programme area with respect to women's empowerment to examine whether or not variation in empowerment could be explained by the variation in memberships. Similarly, non-members of NGO programme areas were compared with non-members from non-programme areas in order to look at the diffusion effect of NGO credit membership on women's empowerment among non-members.

Few hypotheses were set for the above-mentioned study. First, it was hypothesised that

participation in credit and credit-related activities leads to greater empowerment of the members compared to non-credit members and second, the duration of credit membership is positively associated with women's empowerment. One should, however, note here that such empowerment injected by the programme could vary across regions depending on

three components and measured separately in order to arrive at a better understanding of their underlying factors and their relationship to women's empowerment. These separate indices are the *intersepe consultation index*, *individual autonomy index* and *authority index*. The three options were given different weights — "generally" was assigned a value of

programmes — by providing control over material resources — should raise women's prestige and status in the eyes of husbands and thereby promote intersepe consultation.

The results show that the NGO credit members are ahead of the nonmembers in all three indices of empowerment irrespective of nonmembers' residence in programme areas or nonprogramme areas. Moreover, the nonmembers within NGO programme areas show a higher level of empowerment on the *intersepe* and *authority* indices than do the nonmembers within the comparison areas. Overall, it is evident that part of the higher autonomy and authority indices in the NGO programme areas in contrast to the comparison areas is accounted for by the contribution of both NGO credit members and nonmembers in the NGO programme areas. Being empowered by their new sources of financial income and related credit-group supports, female recipients of NGO credits may have asserted their autonomy and authority vis-a-vis their husbands' restrictions and dominance in related household affairs.

The results further indicate that education, housetype, yearly income etc tend to be positively associated with au-

tonomy and authority indices. Also positively associated are duration of NGO membership and non-agricultural occupations. The implications of all these findings is that NGO credit programmes in rural Bangladesh are not only likely to bring about rapid economic improvement in the situation of women but also their empowerment. The NGO credit members are reported to be more confident, assertive, intelligent, self-reliant and conscious of their rights.

While NGOs are doing a good job, it would perhaps, be too much to expect that the NGOs could make all rural women resourceful and empowered. The government should help NGOs to grow faster but at the same time, the government itself should continue to carry out its poverty alleviation programmes especially through BRDB and other organs. Despite the surge of NGO activities in recent years, they still tend to embrace only a negligible portion of the needy. The government has to have a large network of credit programme for the rural poor women to increase their economic solvency and enhance their empowerment. Only emancipation of the women from the clutches of the age-old bondage could free the society from the ills that it faces in the journey towards progress. The complementary role of NGOs and government can take care of the problem, we suppose.



### Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

particular region's historical socio-cultural norms and practices. However, before the findings start to flow one could ask as to whether or not the empowerment issue was addressed earlier in some other studies. The authors would like to answer in the affirmative but with a note that these were beset with conceptual and methodological problems. Besides, reliance on small samples from localised areas also delimited their generalisation on a wider scale.

The concept of women's empowerment has been split into

1, "never" a value of 0 and "occasionally" a value 0.5.

Microcredit should help poor women in three ways. First, by providing independent sources of income outside home, microcredit tends to reduce economic dependency of the women on husbands and thus help enhance autonomy. Second, the same independent sources of income together with their exposure to new sets of ideas, values and social support should make these women more assertive of their rights. And finally, micro credit pro-

## How does India Get a Stable Government?

People do not want frequent elections or frequent changes in the government. They want stability. If it does not come about, the very change in democratic governments, which evokes praise all over the world, may threaten the very fabric of democracy.

IF the motion in the Lok Sabha had been to seek a vote of confidence in Atal Behari Vajpayee alone, he would have made it to the winning line. Even the weight of the BJP turned out to be light. But the other baggage he carried was uncomfortably heavy.

The luggage consisted of three main pieces. One was K Advani, who brought fundamentalism to the affairs of Home Ministry. Even during the confidence motion debate, he proudly recalled how a former British envoy in Islamabad told him that peace between India and Pakistan would be brokered when the BJP came to power in New Delhi. What Advani tried to convey was that the Islamic Pakistan regarded the BJP as the representative of the Hindu-majority India.

The second piece of luggage was Murlidhar Joshi, who equated Hinduism with nationalism. He polluted the secular ethos of education by distorting history and appointing the RSS-oriented men at positions to guide the culture and literary activities in the country. His other distinction was that he had a series of booklets, titled Sanskrit Gyan, giving the RSS perspective of Indian history and culture, distributed in the 6,000 odd Saraswati Shiksha Mandirs, the Vidya Bharati-run schools.

Yashwant Sinha was the third odd piece of Vajpayee's luggage. He, as his dismissed adviser Guruswamy alleged, took such decisions in the Finance Ministry as benefited the selected elements in the corpo-

rate world, not India. The facts and figures he quoted about the country's development were only a figment of imagination. So said former finance minister Manmohan Singh, former defence minister Mulayam Singh Yadav and a few others. Sinha's budget exempted the RSS and Vishva Hindu Parishad from taxation.

Had Vajpayee jettisoned all the three pieces of baggage even a few days earlier, he would have won. Still he evoked sympathy. The opposition singled him out for praise. His performance in the last two months stood out in the otherwise prosaic 13-month rule because he had begun to assert himself. The portion of the budget, which got wide acclaim, was based on Vajpayee's suggestions. If only he had got rid of Advani, Joshi and Sinha!

Reliable quarters say that had Vajpayee survived the confidence motion, he would have dropped from his cabinet two out of the three. Were he to push them into the background even now, the future of Vajpayee and the BJP would be better and brighter. Should he do it? This has been Vajpayee's dilemma. His actions suggest his sensitivity to the pulls that a pluralistic society like India demands. But his odd observation that the RSS is his 'soul' betrays the double thinking. Which is the real Vajpayee, the one who says

publicly in Lahore that he accepts the partition of the Indian subcontinent or the one who stands in knickers before the chief of the RSS, an organisation which propagates the concept of *Akhind Bharat* (the reunited India)?

But Vajpayee alone is not uncomfortable. The combination, which defeated the Vajpayee coalition, too has some odd pieces of baggage. It just

show. A Pakistani professor was in the capital when the Vajpayee government fell. She said she was impressed by the peace and normalcy that prevailed in the wake of the one-way defeat. Indeed, the democratic demeanor that India has developed on the change of governments is commendable. People see it all on the television. Even the wildest imagination does not go to the extent of

which announced it would abstain from voting and later changed its mind, said after the government's defeat that there might be changes in the BJP-run UP. Such happenings naturally create instability. There have been six governments in the past 10 years. Out of which only one, headed by Narasimha Rao, completed its five-year term. What work could they have done when none survived even for a year? The Vajpayee government lasted the longest, 13 months.

This is bad enough. But the worse is its effect on the people. They are developing an attitude of disgust towards politicians. It does not matter to them who comes or who goes. They find no difference between the outgoing government and the incoming one. The climate of resignation does not suggest the emergence of a viable, purposeful government. People have to assert themselves. In the absence of it, there will always be permutations and combinations among political parties, to whom nothing seems to matter except power and greed.

The, fresh elections may be the only way out of the fluid situation, although practically every MP is against the polls. But India has gone over the exercise three times in the last four years. Even if there were polls once again, the outcome would not be very different except that

the Congress would be No. 1 party and the BJP, No 2. No party would look like winning more than 200 seats in a house of 546. It will be again a similar type of rag-tag coalition. Another Jayalalitha, another Mayawati, another opportunity for corrupt politicians. How will the scene be drastically different from that of today?

Still the bigger question is: how does India get a stable government? People keenly want it. Economic development too has come to be linked with political stability. For example, between the time Jayalalitha withdrew her support to the Vajpayee government till the confidence motion was voted, the shares lost Rs 40,000 crore in price. Some changes in the political system are a must. Many attempts have been made in the past to have a consensus on electoral reforms. But no concrete formula has emerged. The situation is more desperate than before.

People expect a government to rule for the full tenure of five years. One suggestion made by Information Minister Pramod Mahajan is that the removal of a Prime Minister should be on the basis of a two-thirds majority. If the proposal is to be accepted, the election of the Prime Minister should be on the basis of a two-thirds majority. People do not want frequent elections or frequent changes in the government. They want stability. If it does not come about, the very change in democratic governments, which evokes praise all over the world, may threaten the very fabric of democracy.

### BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

managed to cross the winning line because, like a panting runner, it made it to the tape in a finishing burst to throw out the government. But soon after it looked as if it lacked stamina. It was a dispersed lot rather than a group that stayed together till it won.

The scene witnessed after the Vajpayee government's defeat showed how personal ambitions were suppressed for a while, only for a while. Did the fight against communalism bring them together or the chance to make the government? In any case, it was a big

military takeover, something common in the region.

This is probably the only impressive part of the democracy. Maybe, we are democratic till the polls. Then the operators take over. That may be the reason why money and politics have come to be inseparably linked. When this happens, every dog has its price.

It was no different this time. Political parties on the fringe were on sale. The going rate of an MP was Rs 6 crore. In certain cases there was an indication of reward. For example, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP),

## Peace Deal Fails in Afghanistan

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

The deal had four elements: (a) broad-based government comprising all the major ethnic communities, (b) holding of an election, (c) release of prisoners from each other's custody and (d) ceasefire. The proposed meeting would have dealt with these matters.

LAST month (14th March) the Taliban and its opponent Northern Alliance met in Turkmenistan's capital Ashkhabad and agreed to share government power in all branches — executive, judiciary and legislative. The peace deal was brokered by the United Nations and behind the scenes Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran worked with the UN. The deal brought hope not only for the Afghan people but also for the neighbours and the international community. It was decided that after Eid ul Azha the two parties would meet in Afghanistan to finalise the details of the peace deal. The talks would have embraced as to how the two parties would share power.

It is now reported that the Taliban would not meet the Northern Alliance and regretably fighting broke out between them in northern Afghanistan. It appears that they are back where they started. The UN and the neighbouring countries are disappointed to see this negative development.

The deal had four elements: (a) broad-based government comprising all the major ethnic communities, (b) holding of an election, (c) release of prisoners from each other's custody and (d) ceasefire. The proposed meeting would have dealt with these matters. When the peace deal was agreed, many political analysts took the view that the deal was unusual in the fact that both parties did not agree to the cessation of hostilities, i.e. ceasefire. How is it that a peace deal is agreed upon without a ceasefire? This fact puzzled every

one. This could be interpreted to imply that neither parties were genuinely interested in peace and both of them took time to re-coup themselves to continue their fight.

It is reported that the Taliban demanded unified command of the armed forces under its control which the commander of the Northern Alliance Ahmed Shah Massoud could not agree to. Furthermore the Taliban wanted their version of Islamic state while the Northern Alliance did not wish to go along with the Taliban. The Northern Alliance wanted a constitutional system where the basic rights of men and women would be equal and respected.

The Taliban control almost 80 per cent of the territory and the remaining 20 per cent of the land is under the occupation of the Northern Alliance. It appears that the Taliban would not wish to share power unless their control over other ethnic groups is maintained. Afghanistan is a multi-racial country with Pakhtoon, Tajik, Turkmen, Hazari and Uzbek ethnic groups. They speak their own separate languages (official languages are Pashtu and Dari/Persian) and are divided into Sunnis and Shi'ites, although the Sunnis constitute about 73 per cent. The Sunni Taliban belong to the Pakhtoon ethnic group which dominate eastern Afghanistan. In fact their headquarters is lo-

cated in Kandahar, a city in the east.

It appears that the Taliban wish to continue their fight against the Northern Alliance to control the rest of the territory. The very fact that they could not defeat their opponents for the last three years demonstrates that the fight will not end soon. It will only bring further misery to the 17 million people in Afghanistan who live in dire poverty. It seems paradoxical that the Taliban continue the fight in the name of Islam which professes unreservedly peace and compassion.

Iran is concerned by the predominant Taliban's anti-Shi'ite rhetoric and the death of 11 Iranian nationals last August while capturing the city of Mazar-I-Sharif brought the two countries to the brink of a war. The Taliban are being criticised by the Central Asian Republics for introducing an orthodox Islamic regime which put restrictions on the rights of women in the country. Many international bodies including the UN and the European Union expressed deep concern for human rights abuses by the Taliban.

Another matter of concern is that the Taliban is reported to have allowed poppy cultivation in the country. Iran is gravely affected with the drug trafficking from Afghanistan. The European Union is concerned because almost all the drugs reach to Europe from

Afghanistan.

The Taliban are yet to be recognised by the UN and other countries. Although the Taliban occupy 80 per cent of the territory, it is considered as a pariah regime by the international community and the government in exile of Burhanuddin Rabbani (of which Ahmed Shah Massoud is the Defence Minister) represents the country in the UN.

The Taliban want respectability and recognition

from international community and unless the Taliban resolves their conflicts with their opponents, the Taliban government will not be recognised. There is a view that unless Saudi Arabia and Pakistan bring strong pressure on the Taliban to share power with the Northern Alliance, peace will not prevail in the country. After all Afghanistan is a landlocked country and its fuel and other basic necessities are being routed through Pakistan. If

Pakistan closes the border the economy of the Taliban regime will be severely disrupted.

The conflict could easily widen engulfing Iran, the Central Asian Republics and in turn Russia. The situation in Afghanistan can be compared to a time-bomb which could explode any time. Let us hope that the Taliban can come up with better informed responses to the peace initiative of the United Nations. This writer would argue that the Taliban should realise that Afghanistan needs a multi-ethnic government for peace and stability in the country.

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### OPINION

## "Wise Words in Political Wilderness"

H Rashid

In observance of 17th April 'Mujibnagar Day' the Ministry of Cultural Affairs arranged a discussion meeting at Osmani Memorial Hall where our President spoke as chief guest. I hope many of us either listened to the President's speech live or went through the same in newspapers published on April 18, 1999. So, it is not desirable to repeat his speech, that might cause impatience to our readers and listeners.

I dare to hold the pen in hand not to write another commentary but to thank Mr Mahfuz Anam, the editor of The Daily Star for courageous "COMMENTARY" he wrote based on the speech of the President of the country. As a citizen, I felt obliged to thank such a brave journalist for his commentary that embedded with sharp words and comments. It is really a very difficult task for me to present something in writing because I am neither a journalist nor a writer. I am simply a reader and a voter.

Mr Anam gave his commentary the title "Wise Words in Political Wilderness" and it was a very befitting title. The title was so conspicuous that it could easily attract my attention in the morning of April 18, when I took The Daily Star in hand to scan the news headlines. The commentary title dragged me first to go through its contents with great interest and deep attention. What Mr Anam has

said in his commentary will remain intact in the minds of the people of the country.

It is hoped that many of us have gone through the commentary so it is also not necessary to repeat. But I wish to quote only one sentence. He wrote: *He (the President) literally tore the mask of HYPOCRISY from the face of our political leaders.* With this I also wish to quote a single sentence from the speech of our President. The President said: *"It must be remembered that the people are the source of all power and it can't be possible to sail through election all the time by misleading, deceiving or bluffing them."*

It is believed and hoped that our political leaders of both opposition and treasury bench have gone through the whole speech of the President and the commentary of Mahfuz Anam with care and attention and have pondered on it. Is there any political leader who would dare to stand on his feet to say that our President has lied or Mahfuz Anam has made wrong commentary? If any leader comes up, we, the common people, are ready to have a dais to make a debate on this.

No one can say that our President has lied or Mahfuz Anam has lied or the people's conscience and he has rightly and timely reflected the people's conscience

and concern in the matters of national interest. To ignore the nation's conscience is a deadly and suicidal war.

So, in terms of President's speech our political leaders are 'misleaders' deceivers and bluffers. Would our political leaders get back to their senses after listening to the President's advice? Let us hope that our political leaders would abide by the advice of the President and would behave as responsible, rational, pragmatic and transparent to regain their lost image and credibility by their actions and not by their rhetoric and stand by the people when and where they need them. Let us hope, our leaders will start from right now without losing any more time, exhibiting sincerity in performing their social, political and national duties and responsibilities.

Let us all say in chorus in words of Mahfuz Anam "Pay heed to the wise man while there is still time". Otherwise, we all, including our next generations, will have to be destined to suffer for all the time to come. Let us not make our hard earned and beloved homeland a hell, let us make it a heaven. Some of us may think that our children will not be staying and studying in this country. But we will gain nothing out of it. Our children will leave this beloved homeland (forever) for which we fought a valiant fight and shed a sea of blood!