

The Daily Star

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Lessons from Meherpur By-poll

THE Meherpur by-election has passed off leaving a big question-mark about the efficacy of such polls in a democracy. The turn-out was as low as below 30 per cent which means that in actual tally the winner's share fell lower than that figure allowing for the votes his opponent has captured. The question in this travesty of an election is: who does the elected MP represent? So, this has been a non-election, a non-event, for all practical purposes. And we should have no use for this type of polls in the future. We don't want it anymore.

When the go-it-alone policy in an election thus reduces it into a ritualistic farce, a host of moral and ethical questions start arising about the handling of the electoral process in which by-polls have become test-cases of democratic *bonafide*. Such lifeless elections can eat into the vitals of democracy which even otherwise is deeply troubled as everybody can see. So, let it not drift any further down the road.

The lesson for the government is loud and clear: you must do everything in your power to avoid such an eventuality in the future. We have a series of local body elections ahead us: the mayoral elections, the remainder of the UP elections and the upazilla elections being all on the cards. Setting aside the prospect of by-polls which is contingent upon vacation of a seat on account of death or resignation by a sitting MP, the upcoming local body elections are fast approaching challenges to respond to. They warrant that the government ensure active involvement of the opposition in that important electoral process. And, it is high time the ruling party went about this crucial business in earnest.

Since we are yet to see any serious initiative on the part of the government to engage the opposition in a dialogue to end the confrontational crisis, the pressure on the ruling party should be deemed to have increased that much more to act on a double-quick basis.

As for the opposition their track-record in terms of obduracy and intransigence seems to be on a rising curve all the time. Why must they still cling to the demand for the CEC's removal? What guarantee is there that if the present CEC is removed from office and another man replaces him, the opposition will not ask for the removal of the new incumbent as well if defeated in an election conducted by him? The whole idea is so repugnant to normal sensibilities of educated and democratically-minded people.

We don't see why the opposition should still act in desperation. In the sequel to their latest shift in agitational strategy to scale down the frequency and duration of hartals and to rally the people around burning issues of the day, they should feel confident about themselves to genuinely seek a path of peace with the ruling party. We urge the opposition to be realistic and come out with something that is achievable rather than setting impossible conditions for talks. Please give democracy a chance.

THE electricity crises is a long, continuing story. We were well off with surplus generation during the earlier part of the 1980s. It was a period of relatively poor industrial growth and demand did not exceed available supplies. Periods prior to late 1980s, were hey days of agency commission and electricity generation plants financed through easy money of donor countries and agencies. Please note that donors were no fools as well. They were only propping up their own manufacturing enterprises, if not dumping outdated models of generators not salable in the global competitive market.

Our powerful electricity bosses were happy since they might be receiving handsome cuts and no one was stupid enough to bother about cost to the country. Deals were clenched and lots of money made. That was it.

Without any embarrassment whatsoever, our bureaucrats and Ministers kept on insisting at all international forums that we were a least developed country — the king of the poor; we should get cheap money or very low interest funds, we were suffering; please help us. So the money came and generating plants were set up. We assumed that the begging bowl would not get empty and both electricity and commission incomes keep on coming.

Donors first got mad when they found that as much as 40 per cent of the electricity generated is lost and local bosses know very well how and where this loss can be accounted for but no one is prepared to touch the hot potato, popularly known as the systems loss. There was another significant development — privatisation. Power development does not call for donors' funds which were all tax-payers' money and private sector can invest in power generation while government transmission and distribution agents like PDB, REB and DESA can retail out the product (electricity) to consumers.

However, donors' money for the purpose can be made available if the systems loss is brought down to a reasonable level. It is true that a small part, say from 10 to 12 per cent of electricity generated is lost till it finally reaches the consumers, depending on the length and quality of transmission /distribution network. But major part of the loss, as much as 30 per cent in Bangladesh is not technical. Basically it is a case of massive theft and the government is incapable to apprehend the thieves within the organization responsible for illegal connections, under billing and even no billing. Today, government subsidy covers the system losses or else consumers are paying perhaps up to 30 per cent

more than they would have paid to a fully efficient system. The government subsidies may take many forms; for example, government-owned gas companies did not receive their payments and debt servicing for the huge investment funds have never been a part of any payment that PDB ever made to the government. In case of power purchase agreement with private power producers, regular payments would have to be made to them.

Charges will be higher since gas prices have to be promptly paid by private producers and their debt servicing is also included in the price at which they are willing to sell power to the government. Since 40 per cent is the systems loss, regularly paying customers must pay for the thieves as well.

Now the government as well as the commission earning private sector faced an enormous problem. The big bosses may lose the handsome profits for all the 'hard work'. What would happen to the electricity tariff? I have explained above. The party in power will find it difficult to face the mass agitation inevitably organized by the opposition and participated by other vested groups as well. Private sector agents of foreign manufacturers will lose their huge commission income and may be the huge private income due to the systems loss of the

Return to Primitive Glories

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Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

public enterprise will be under tremendous pressure. Now this is an impossible situation which no government of the vested groups and for the profit of the few and led by any political party whatsoever can tolerate.

There was no action. Government kept quiet and the power shortage kept on mounting. The five years, 1991 to 1996, was a period of lost opportunities. Government showed utter incapacity to cut down the systems loss and no easy money from donors could be arranged. The existing power stations got older. Add to it bad maintenance and electricity breakdown became more frequent.

Government could not decide if private power producers should be invited to build power stations on build, own and operate (BOO) basis. The price of indecision was enormous. Loadshedding became frequent. Strangely enough, government's response to the crisis was indeed funny since high officials

went on travel abroad ostensibly for the purpose of seeking direct foreign investment while manufacturing enterprises suffered from load shedding. First, direct foreign investments were necessary to develop the energy sector. Government could not decide if the monopoly of government in generation of power should be abandoned. There were pressure from the vested interests not to do so. Private profit always forces the negation of the public interest.

It is unfortunate that corruption is so rampant and all-pervasive in Bangladesh today. In 1996, there was a change in government and people hoped for new dynamism in the public sector. There were great deal of expectations that the electricity crisis would now be effectively dealt with since there are sufficient energy resources available within the country to meet all our needs. We always hope and hope for the best. Government started in right earnest and quickly decided to invite inde-

pendent power producers.

Monopoly of the government was abandoned. There were favourable response from the private sector. According to newspaper reports, the independent power producers will generate electricity within 10 months after getting the work order and pass it on to the government distribution network.

So everything looked so good. The new government should be able to eliminate loadshedding within two years after coming to power. It was done in the Philippines; so why not in Bangladesh? But we all waited in vain. Three ten-month periods have passed. Next month, the present government will complete three years and its gift to the nation will be enhanced loadshedding. It is true that the previous government failed miserably to generate even one single kilowatt hour of additional electricity. From even before the previous government came to power, there were not enough investment even to maintain the existing power plants.

So power failures further added to the deepening energy crisis. But there cannot be any excuse for many more than ten months given to power producers to even issue the work orders. There cannot be any excuse for the delay in case of Meghnaghat power plant which

alone can substantially eliminate the gap between demand and supply of electricity during peak hours. Why even the construction work has not started in case of Haripur and Baghabarighat power plants?

What is the delay? As a citizen of the country, I have no access to the answer. But I can generally understand that basically it is a question of how private motives can be harmonized with the public interest. It has to be harmonized since in this democratic country, our beloved Sonar Bangladesh, public interest is not of paramount importance.

With right connections and vital influence, public interest can be dashed to the ground in no time. People are of least importance. But it is only the people who will vote after every five years and decide on the fate of the government.

How the interest of the people can be sacrificed? Herein lies the beauty of decision making by the government and politics of the country. After all, only 14 per cent of the population enjoy the benefits of electricity. Let them not vote. Who cares? The rest 86 per cent of the population will decide the fate of the government. There has been a bumper crop after the flood and in spite of the prevailing drought. This is infinitely more important than the loadshedding. Also, the manufacturing sector is solving its own problem by importing generators tax free and energy cost is a very small component of the highly labour-intensive industries of the country.

So the problem basically is with the very small minority of electricity consumers who cannot afford generators. There is no need to bother about them by the party in power or the major opposition party. But I belong to this group. So does many readers of this column. We have to find a way to stop pining for what is not.

The way is to return to our primitive glories. Our grandfathers, even our fathers lived their entire life without any electricity. Lanterns were good enough to provide lights. All work and study used to be carried out without a 60 or 100 watt bulb.

Why can't we do that again? There was no running water. A deep well has plenty of water and one can have a really cool bath instead of the heated running water from a tap on a hot summer afternoon. There is also no need for gas in your kitchen. We should burn firewood instead as it is still done by 90 per cent of Bangladeshis living in villages.

So let us return to our old days — our days of primitive glories and lead a trouble free, uncomplicated and healthy life. We should be primitive — not modern. This is perhaps what the politicians are trying to tell us these days.

OPINION

In England Everyone is Equal, but Some are More Equal than Other

Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah writes from New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

My narratives spanned for the period 1930 through 1985. A nation does not become racist overnight. Similarly, a racist nation will not transform into an integrated and racially tolerant society in a short span of 10-15 years. We need to see an affirmative action plan in place in Great Britain.

TO say that England is free from racism is a self-denial to anyone from our part of the world who lived in England in the recent past. Unless someone's skin is as thick as rhinos, he or she is bound to experience first hand the cold touch of racism all over England. May be, the threshold of racism varies from person to person. The more obsequious the person is, the less likely that he or she will experience any racism.

In the last thirty years I have made countless trips to England. My brother lives in Portsmouth. He will easily pass for a Mediterranean fellow. He told me that he was not subjected to the indignity because of his skin tone and his almost-perfect English accent. But when I visited some of my nephews and nieces who happen to live in London proper, my God, the stories of racial discrimination that emanated from their lips were simply mind numbing.

Here are some personal stories. In 1975, I was a bachelor doing my postdoctoral fellowship at SUNY Stony Brook in Long Island. I was told by my professor that an English postdoc is coming to the lab very soon. The English chap just got married a week ago somewhere in Yorkshire. Housing situation was very tight in central Long Island and my research advisor was having a nightmare figuring out where to put the newly married couple when they arrive. Fortunately, I was sharing a big house with another professor (a French Canadian) who was also a bachelor. We had one extra bedroom in the house. I came to rescue my advisor. They English postdoc had no choice but to accept my courteous offer. After a week the English postdoc and his wife became very friendly with me. They were very fascinated with my collection of LPs mostly com-

sition by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Handel, Chopin, Brahms, etc. One evening as we were listening to some classical album, my English friend said, "You know Jaffor, you're not a typical Indian or Pakistani." I said, "Why do you say that?" His reply was — "Well, I never talked to any Indian before. But I have seen them everywhere in Bradford. You don't seem to be like them." He later admitted to me that he never befriended any Hindustani people.

I never blamed my newly found Yorkshire friend for his insensitivity towards our people who immigrated to England. The kids from countryside in England are shielded from immigrants simply because very few immigrants venture out to suburbia. However, it's an entirely different situation in London town. In cities ethnicity matters.

The ethnic groups were pitted against Cockneys in East London during the '60s. Also I would request anyone from Bangladesh or India to visit Heathrow Airport to sample a dose of racism.

In 1982, when I was returning from Dhaka I stopped in London to visit my brother. I was carrying my American passport. When the plane from Dhaka reached Heathrow airport, we were rounded up like the canines in a dog pound. The European Caucasian passengers were separated beforehand so that they would be spared from undue humiliation in the hands of airport security personnel. I holler to the lady in charge of keeping us on leash, "Madam, but I am carrying American Passport." Her eyes lit up. She said, "Show me your passport?" She glanced at my passport then she asked me to come out from the cordoned off area. She told another security officer to take me to the line where those white folks were standing for immigration check-

up. It was a humiliating experience for me, to say the least. I lived in the US from 1969 and I never had to go through such indignation in any US airport. And this is not a fabrication or lies.

Let me recount another encounter, this time with a Welsh in 1984 in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. The Welsh guy was a graduate student in Biochemistry, the same department I used to work as a research associate. He befriended me because our labs were nearby. One day he told me that he has no future in England. I was rather surprised to hear that. He told me that most Welsh are not well liked by the English people. I was shocked to hear such a remark. I shook my head in utter disbelief wondering if there is any hope for our countryman who came to various cities of England looking for a greener pasture. I personally know several Bangladeshis who after finishing terminal degrees simply pack up and headed towards America. If England was such a haven for immigrants then, why do they take the earliest flight to America?

My mentor Professor Gunsalus told me a fascinating tale of racism at work in seat of higher learning. In 1950s professor Gregorio Weber, an Argentine, was at University of Sheffield doing his postdoctoral fellowship. He was a smart bio-physicist. When a faculty position was opened at the university, Dr. Weber was conspicuously by-passed for a mediocre local English. Dr. Weber, who was white but he had a strong Spanish accent. And that was his liability! Professor Gunsalus hired young Weber and brought him to Illinois. Young Weber blossomed into a towering figure in Fluorescence Spectroscopy. Now these are big people in sciences. Professor Weber became a member to the

prestigious National Academy of Sciences in the US. Dr. Gunsalus himself was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and his lab produced one Nobel Laureate in chemistry. These are credible people and trust me there is meat to this story.

If some unctuous person would come forward and say that he or she had not been subjected to racism in England in the last decade or so, am I supposed to believe him? By Jove, no!

I will end my narratives by citing one more example that happened before my time. This is the little story of a big guy in Astrophysics. His name is Subramanyan Chandrasekhar, the man from Madras. Professor Subramanyan Chandrasekhar also suffered similar indignation in the hands of Cambridge don in 1930. He was bypassed for a faculty position in Astrophysics at Cambridge. Fortunately, America came to the rescue. University of Chicago offered Dr. S. Chandrasekhar a faculty position in Physics department in 1937. In 1983, when professor Chandrasekhar did receive the Nobel Prize in Physics, his alma mater was the first one to take the credit for this prestigious award to Professor Chandrasekhar. But Professor Chandrasekhar snapped back with his wry humour. He openly gave credit to University of Chicago for receiving the coveted prize.

My narratives spanned for the period 1930 through 1985. A nation does not become racist overnight. Similarly, a racist nation will not transform into an integrated and racially tolerant society in a short span of 10-15 years. We need to see an affirmative action plan in place in Great Britain. Perhaps some quota system for minorities in seat of higher learning will be welcomed. Better yet, there

should be a commission who could oversee the implementation of affirmative action and who could also assess the progress of such benevolent programme. Unless these policies are implemented in Great Britain, all these hollow talks from English politicians will not mean much to the racially discriminated minorities.

Americans are consciously trying to put an end to racism. They have coined a new term — "Erasmus" — that means Erase Racism. To eradicate racism from a given society we need to have a clear vision. America conceived that vision in the '60s after the famous speech by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. In Washington, D.C.

I am yet to hear such a visionary speech from any British politician or civic leader. Instead what we hear is mere lip-service from the establishment.

What I envisioned for Great Britain is the following — the minorities in Great Britain will flourish in urban areas while the English middle class and gentry will move towards suburbs and countryside. Things will remain pretty much the same. Some sporadic bombing from time to time, lip-service from the politicians, and occasional editorials in liberal British news dailies. That is all.

English author George Eric Arthur Blair (1903-1950) who is better known as George Orwell wrote some imaginative fiction attacking totalitarianism in a mythical land. He too was concerned with social justice in his country. I borrow the line from his famous book *Animal Farm* (1945) where he said — "all animals are equal in the farm but some are more equal than the others." I think Orwell's oracle aptly describes the prevalent mood in Britain in this age of computer and artificial intelligence.

Friday Mailbox

Sceptical

Sir, A news item about a police dog squad recovering 106 bottles of phensidyl and 28 people being arrested from city slum was published in many newspapers on May 1 '99. We wonder what would have happened if the dog squad detected heroin and other costly drugs instead of phensidyl, would that had been disclosed too? We have doubts about that.

May be in many instances the dog squad will be a help to the police to accumulate huge wealth. The murder of source Jalal by DB police when he demanded his share from the money derived by selling the heroin seized by them have made us really sceptical.

Nur Jahan Chittagong

A gesture of goodwill, indeed

Sir, Recently a change appears to have been introduced in the number of national holidays to be observed officially, with the inclusion of Buddha Purnima, which was observed on April 29, 1999.

This is a gesture of goodwill to the community of Buddhists who are Bangladeshi nationals. It is all the more significant when the regime's official attitude towards the past disturbances in the CHT is taken into consideration. This appears to be the first time that Buddha Purnima has been observed as a full national holiday.

Further implications can be pointed out by the experts on national policy. It is necessary to keep the people briefed on new policies through proper analytical studies; so that there is no communication gap and room for misunderstanding, allowing scope for misguided propaganda by some of the vested interests.

An Observer Dhaka

A holiday-happy nation!

Sir, We Bangladeshis are very fond of holidays, and shirk work on the slightest pretext, regardless of the amount of money in the pocket. Recently (April 29) a new official holiday was added, namely the Buddha Purnima, which was previously a denominational or sectional or optional holiday (for a particular section of the community). This holiday is sandwiched every year between two other existing holidays, Moharrum, and May Day. Every year these three holidays will fall within a span of seven days. The 2-day weekly day-offs may come at one end or in the middle (as it did this year). So we may lose five days in a week! And nobody seems to be bothered about this indirect national calamity! The loss is 'invisible', but piles up. Our policy makers have forgotten to analyse national issues?

Can Bangladesh, a poor emerging nation afford so many official holidays in a year, and keep up with the development growth rate target of 7-8 per cent per annum (5 per cent is not enough)?

The cabinet may like to review the policy on the maximum total number of official holidays permissible in a calendar year, and opt for a minimum number; with the option of sectional and optional holidays.

Secondly we must work for 6 or 5 1/2 days in a working week, to be able to live in tune in the global village. We should not be religiously sentimental about official holidays, as Islam, the last perfected religion, is a practical one, with minimum rituals, and lot of flexibility (ibadat is 24-hour involuntary exercise). Two-hour break on working Fridays is enough, as in other Muslim countries. Praying is no excuse for not working.

There is a difference even when the total man-hours per week is the same for a 5-day or a 1 1/2-day working week. It is time the leaders became pragmatic in outlook and shunned cheap ways to remain popular. The problem is with the quality of leadership, and not with the followers. Impractical politics

is a compromise, which may not be in public interest.

Alif Zabr Dhaka

BUET: Bangladesh University of Extra-ordinary Time-loss!

Sir, We, the students of BUET are getting extremely frustrated. As a student of BUET, I am ashamed of the proceedings that led the recent 'unwanted vacation'. But at the same time I want to ask some questions.

It is true that a few of the students have committed condemnable acts. But it is also true that most of the students did not join them or supported their way of expressing their demands. Then why punish the innocent ones? Why should not we be able to finish our exams timely? Was it our responsibility to resist those who were engaged with the misdeeds? I can take care so that I don't indulge myself in any kind of misdeed. But what others are doing I can't look after that; can I?

When the students were evacuating the halls as per the authority's notice, there was dissatisfaction on their faces. Dissatisfaction of not being able to appear at the examination timely. Everybody would prefer to finish his or her examination first and then enjoy the World Cup Cricket with a tense-free mind. Nobody wanted this to happen. But the hard truth is that there were some mishaps, and logical or not we the innocent ones will have to suffer for that.

We urge our respected teachers: "Don't let our dreams be shattered. Please ensure us a smooth student life. Please start our examination immediately."

A Student BUET, Dhaka

Voters' Identity Cards

Sir, Is the Election Commission moving in the right direction? Most of the time the Commission makes promises, pledges and commitments one after another and claims that the Commission is dutiful, sincere and conscientious.

We however feel that the Election Commission is beset with inefficiency and negligence in duties.

Not to speak about making of voters' identity cards the Election Commission has not been able to make an up-to-date and correct voters' list since the general elections of 1991.

While preparing the voters' list the Election Commission enumerators did neither supply a receipt nor a duplicate copy of the list to the enlisted voters with their necessary particulars. As a result many mistakes and omissions have been made in the voters' list. Many genuine voters were omitted from the voters' list. Moreover when a genuine voter approached the Election Commission for correction inclusion of his/her particular name in the voters' list the Election Commission turned a deaf ear to them.

Now again when the occasion of taking photograph of the genuine voters has come, there is no clear mention of the place, date and time of photography. Some voters who have been photographed have not been issued with any kind of receipt. It is apprehended that when the time for distribution of identity card would come many voters would be deprived of their identity cards on the plea that they (the genuine voters) have no proof that they have been photographed. In this connection it may also be mentioned here that many voters who went to the photography centre were not photographed by the Election Commission on the excuse that their names were missing from the voters' list.

Now whose fault is it? The genuine voter or the Election Commission?

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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.