

JU's Skin-saver

V C, Jahangirnagar University, Prof Alauddin Ahmed has struck up an extraordinary plan to wriggle out of the tender scandal that has sullied what little remains of the university's image in the public mind. He told The Daily Star that he was thinking of awarding the construction work for the 2.71 crore Arts Faculty Building to army contractors. This sounds as a desperate way out of the quagmire the university authorities find themselves in, the atmosphere having been rife with allegations that a certain faction of the ruling AL-backed BCL, known as the 'killer group', has been manipulating the tender process to expropriate the building contract. The Daily Star has found reasons to believe that the group led by 13 JU students, who were chargesheeted in the Ananda murder case, submitted all the three quotations that are on the table with all other aspirants simply threatened out of the bidding process.

Whenever we mess up things, whether in traffic-management or port-handling we seek army's specialised assistance to bail us out. In the particular case of Jahangirnagar University, the VC is apparently trying to counter the intimidating posture of the student group in question by the formidable presence of the army engineering corp people. In the process he is actually highlighting the failure of the university's decision-making process at various stages. Because the university's own procedures have become corrupt over time by routinely giving into the extortionist pressures of ruling party student groups that the latter's greed for money has crossed the critical threshold. It is common knowledge that student politics has been increasingly revolving around variegated bids to extort contracts, commission percentages and tolls.

Supposing the army contractors save the day for the authorities as far their present predicament goes; but with the vitiated atmosphere on the campus remaining intact how are the university authorities going to run the affairs in other areas in a fail-safe way? For instance, at every step pertaining to admission, registration, allotment of seats in the dormitories, to say nothing of other job works and purchases on maintenance and extension programmes, there can be interference from the money-minded student leaders. We have said it before and we say it again: the track-record of the JU leadership has seen one of shameless failures in upholding the best interests of the students and that of a high seat of learning. A surgical operation is needed there to exorcise the self-serving elements. JU being on a self-destructive course the need for some intervention in direly felt. We are perturbed by the silence of the education ministry in all this.

Welcome Turn in Rehab Tale

FINALLY, good sense seems to have dawned on the government. Under fire for turning the apparently 'noble' initiative of providing the sex-workers of Nimtali and Tanbazar brothels with a chance for normal living into 'ignoble' violation of their fundamental rights, it has eventually opted for what it should have at the very start of the 'rehabilitation' drive — exchanging views with the civil society on the issue. Although belated, the step surely opens up the avenue for the government to clarify its position on the matter as well as to take suggestions from the NGOs to make the whole exercise of rehabilitation smoother and effective.

At this point of time, there appears to be no dearth of congeniality between the government and 22 human rights organisations as far as working together to outline "an effective rehabilitation programme" is concerned. However, both sides must acknowledge the fact that they stand miles apart on the very definition of rehabilitation, thereby entertaining contrary views on how it should be pursued. The way the Department of Social Services has so far gone about the task — from evicting the brothel inmates to transferring a select group of them to state-run vagrant homes to trying to impose a regimented lifestyle on them — reflects an inclination towards precipitous and quick-fix solution. On the other hand, the human rights organisations have sought for, and rightly so, a transitional process of assimilating the prostitutes into the mainstream society. But their very perception of human rights appears rather conflicting, thereby posing a potent threat to the joint venture, so to speak. Nevertheless, in our view, the government initiative for a dialogue with the NGOs has opened up the opportunity for a noble objective to be realised without any hitch.

A Chargesheet

WE are unhappy because it is delayed, we are happy because it has been done at last. Better late than never. Twenty-two people have been chargesheeted in the infamous Liquor Poisoning case of Narsingdi in which around two hundred people lost their lives. The CID submitted the chargesheet to the Narsingdi Sadar Magistrate's Court Wednesday after about three months of investigations. But of these twenty-two, three are dead, nine have been arrested and the rest are absconding. A very interesting scenario indeed. There was an inquiry committee whose report led us nowhere so far the origin of this illegal and spurious liquor business is concerned.

Closely on the heels of Narsingdi tragedy a number of people died from liquor poisoning caused by some so-called foreign brands. Despite paying a heavy price in human lives nothing has been done as yet to strike at the root of the malady. This is total inefficiency of the narcotic and drug administration department and the law enforcing agencies of the country. The entire business relating to rectified spirit import, use and distribution should be brought under the strict control and supervision of an appropriate authority. Easy access to these poisonous substances and their reckless use can spell greater dangers. Illegal liquor business can never thrive without the knowledge of law enforcing agencies and patronage from influential people. The government should clamp stricter supervision and introduce accountability immediately to avoid future tragedies.

Transshipment Should be Transparent

In a globalised regime Bangladesh needs to search for new avenues of resource generation to feed its development objectives. Transshipment could be one of those but let it face the tests of sound economic reasoning and political ramifications through experts' opinions on both sides of the fence.

THE political climate in the country seems to be covered with clouds. Of course, never it happened to be sunny nor a forecast to that end tends to be there. But, this time, a relatively thicker cloud seemingly appears over the political horizon. If we can recollect correctly, similar heat-waves swept over in 1996. At that time, the issues were transit and import of electricity from India. The government sources said that, the issues were products of several rounds of talks and negotiations carried out by earlier regimes. As could be known, not much progress took place on those fronts. However, nearly after two years opposition political parties are again parading streets enchanting slogan against the recent cabinet decision on the provision of transshipment facility to India. According to newspaper reports, the government, on principle, accepted the idea of providing facilities for movement of Indian goods through Bangladesh on conditions that the carriages and labour involved in transportation must be from Bangladesh. The preliminary judgement of the government seems to suggest immense economic gains in terms of revenue, employment generation and growth of infrastructural facilities and other services. Again, to counter the critics, the government tends to put forth the argument that the idea of transit or transshipment is not its 'brain-child' but a 'baby' of the past government which were involved in 1980 joint communiqué and later, BNP agreements. However, BNP reacted to this by referring to the agreement reached in 1973.

In the meantime, the opposition parties finished their first leg of protests through calling a 30-hour-long hartal.

The allegations that these parties tend to harp on include, among others, the fears that, (a) in the name of transshipment, the government is trying to provide 'corridors' to India; (b) the government is bowing down to a bilateral arrangement such as transshipment instead of a multilateral transit facility that could bring more security and economic gains for Bangladesh; (c) the idea of transshipment boils down to surrendering sovereignty to India and (d) the whole issue of transshipment could transform into transfixing Bangladesh's growth in the long-run. However, all of these skepticisms are said to be based on the supposedly 'big-brotherly' attitude of India to smaller countries including its unwillingness to provide such facilities to Nepal.

Our first reaction to the reactions on transshipment is that the idea is just on board to be supplemented by empirical exercise to arrive at net benefits and costs. The government has, reportedly, asked for experts to peep deep into the details of costs and benefits. Therefore, the issue could be said to be at the thought process stage. If grooming such ideas are offences, then we fail to understand as to why past regimes continued to hook Bangladesh on to such agreements with India. The argument that in the name of transshipment the government is providing corridors to India is a blatant lie, often being repeated to make it a

truth. It is also unfair to mislead people that way. Second, if transshipment facility (by road) given to India harbours threats of aggression then why not the same would occur in the case of air route or riverine transshipment already in existence? Third, the argument that transshipment facility tantamounts to surrendering sovereignty 'seems to contain a mere anti-India sentiment than national interest. This weapon of argu-

economist: "Shibboleths make you feel good. They are an alternative to the pain of hard thinking because, so many people repeat them, they offer a reassuring sense of community. But you must go beyond shibboleths."

We hypothesize that providing transshipment facility to India could bring larger economic gains. But those gains must be weighed against the potential political and economic losses. The issues to knock at could include, for example, lowering of duties for Bangladeshi commodities to enter into India, establishment of joint venture projects to feed the northern states of India etc. India should reciprocate with similar types of friendly gestures to wane the worries in the minds of a section of people in this country. In the meantime, seminars, dialogues and parliamentary debates could be welcome to make the transshipment issue more transparent. In globalised regime Bangladesh needs to search for new avenues of resource generation to feed its development objectives. Transshipment could be one of those but let it face the tests of sound economic reasoning and political ramifications through experts' opinions on both sides of the fence. One should, if one desires, protest the implementation of an idea but not the idea itself. Doubts are better than overconfidence because the former leads to investigation and investigation gives optimum results. Let slogan not kill hard-thinking on vital economic issues — Paul Samuelson warned us about long before. On the eve of entering into the 21st century, Bangladesh needs to use its policies for economic gains of the country at large, not merely politics for political gains of a particular party.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

ment was also applied in the case of CHT agreement and Ganges water treaty before and is being sharpened again to axe transshipment. Whenever, the question of bilateral arrangements with India comes to take place, (and if that involves Awami League), the question of sovereignty seems to soar high. Allow me to quote M Saifur Rahman — the former Finance Minister — who once deliberated on this sensitive aspect while commenting on the import of electricity from India: "... such deals are not endangering the sovereignty of the buyer and seller countries. Yet, only mention of such a deal with India to meet our short-term power shortage becomes such a politically charged issue that it is impossible to hold rational discussions on it." (The Daily Star, September 28, 1996). In other words, as far as economic relationship with India is concerned — more often than not — political slogans appear to displace hard thinking. To quote Paul Krugman, an outstanding

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

'Standard of Education at DU'

Sir, Our respected Senate members have expressed their concern over the declining standard of education at Dhaka University as reported in the DS on the 14th of July. It was reported that, a majority of academics have alleged that many teachers of DU were engaged in consultancy outside the university hampering their academic activities. Some of them also suggested that 'such teachers should be terminated from the university and sent to the schools'.

No doubt the teachers who are found to neglect their academic duties should be put into punitive actions. Many other academics, however, are not. I am all for accountability, not only for teachers but also for all publicly funded jobs. But if our respected senators say that external consultancy is the only reason for the decline in academic standards, I must say it is a very narrow-minded and deliberately misleading stance.

Let us just go back to the process of election of the senators completed recently. The whole process took more than two months. These elections were held in a staggering manner at 3-4 centres outside Dhaka followed by 3 days at Dhaka University itself. Nearly 30,000 registered DU graduate voted which was preceded by zealous registering of the graduates themselves by soliciting of teachers/volunteers of the existing 'political' groups within the university. Teachers involved in the electioneering were seen to be absent from departmental activities (except perhaps theoretical classes) for nearly entire period. The number of teachers involved in the above activities are probably more than those involved in consultancy activities. Apart from Senate elections, there are Dean elections, DU Teachers Association elections, DU Syndicate elections and Academic Council elections. In recent years, it has become almost a customary for the potential candidates vying for posts to these bodies to move from door to door not only in the various departments but also to residences of the teachers. I would like to ask our respected senators, don't you think that the above 'political' activities hamper the academic standard of DU as well?

I am not supporting consultancy. However it worries me that for their own convenience, the senators (particularly DU teachers) are putting up a narrow view of the ailing condition of DU.

It was also reported that many teachers were not giving the due share of their consultancy money to the university. I know of many teachers who have attracted foreign grants for research purposes. These grants usually are given in the name of DU and the university has been duly subtracting 10 per cent overhead charges. In the case of foreign-funded consultancies also I would expect that foreign agencies would recognise the DU as the administrative authority for the sake of transparency and accountability.

ity. Local consultancies may of course operate more through personal contacts. In any case, I am sure the administration can easily obtain the necessary information from respective departments and arrange to obtain overhead charges. I would also like to suggest here that consultancy per se does not necessarily detract one from academic activities because we can see that the Institute of Business Administration at DU has an excellent academic record despite the fact that most of the teachers of the IBA are engaged in consultancies.

The news also stated about a press release that a Senate session would be solely devoted to ways of upgrading the educational and research programmes of the university to meet international standard. This is commendable.

The teachers first need to identify the problems they are facing before a broader body can suggest steps for rectification. For instance, does the public know that there is incentive for DU teachers who become student advisors, house tutors, etc., but nothing for attracting research grants or establishing laboratories? All over the world there are positions of research associates/fellowships leading to Ph.D., but there's nothing as such at DU and other Bangladeshi universities.

A Concerned Teacher of DU

RAJUK's plot

Sir, The recent uproar regarding the allotment of RAJUK's plot has not yet subsided. Most of the plot allottees were known faces that caused this hue and cry. Unfortunately, only six affected persons were allotted plots at Uttara. This seems to be an injustice.

In the future, while allotting plots, RAJUK should satisfy the affected applicants first and then should go for open lottery. This will disperse all sorts of discontents among all and image of the present government will certainly improve.

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Why is India scared?

Sir, Why India is so scared of third party mediation in Kashmir issue? It seems that their hold on Kashmir is so weak that they are afraid any third party will use common sense to ask for the basic human rights of Kashmiri people. Being the largest democracy in the world, its illegal and immoral hold on Kashmir and human rights violation in the state belies India's image of Ganghian non-violence. After successful handling of 2 ks viz. Kosovo and Kurds, the third i.e. Kashmir should be solved by world opinion during President Clinton's tenure. Otherwise another 52 years will pass by in fruitless bilateral talks.

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Military might and economic domination

Sir, Global diplomacy is changing, compared to the empire era of physical occupation and subjugation till mid-20th century (end of WW II). Military power is a means to an end, not an end to a means.

What happened in Iraq and Kosovo (NATO military operation) are two recent examples. The military expenditure or the military investment has to be recovered in the spoils of the victory, either in kind or long-term cash return, otherwise a super-power like the USA would not spend a billion dollars in throwing away expensive missiles over Kosovo.

What was the game there? The Kosovo military operation was masterminded by the US with only one direct and close ally, the UK; while the EU had to tag along due to force of circumstances; holding NATO as hostage (on gun point!), and by-passing the UNSC.

What was at stake beside the genocide issue? Perhaps a US foothold or base in drying continental Europe (current base is in UK) to feed the Americans during the millennium. France and Germany do not like it one bit.

Economic bleeding is the style of the times, to gain or regain foreign markets. What would have been the scenario after nine years had there been no embargo on sale of Iraqi oil to the open market? None of that oil would have been sold to the US. The US is fuel and energy conscious, and would like to control the trade at global level (what is going on in Bangladesh?).

On the same analogy, Bangladesh is under the spotlight as the future US base in Asia, simply because there is no other suitable site. Already, indirect signs of application of strategies are visible to discerning eyes and ears (the visit of high ranking US military officials to Dhaka; and New Delhi and Islamabad (Kashmir conflict). The gas and electric power grids across Asia is another sign.

A Husnain
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Foaming leadership!

Sir, Now we have foaming leaders, belching fire and brimstone at the Opposition, who are also Bangladeshis and Bengalees (take your choice — the choice, strangely enough, is offered by the diversity of rich political leadership!).

We started the foaming game before liberation against alleged 'aliens' (not *maaitir* *manush*) who sought to usurp our rights and freedom. We are still hurling abuses and invectives at one another (at the local level) in a pious House trying to improve the nation for a cleaner skin; and have been labouring at it for three decades for the proper delivery; without success, even at the last foaming stage (what is the stage after foaming?).

The nation is struck at the foaming or formative stage, and our moral standard is being diluted and adulterated with foamy secretion from the adrenal gland, regardless of the over-flooding of the soil or the soul. How moral GDP is measured; and what is the moral growth rate at present? Of course there will be controver-

sies when the head tries to take over the heart.

Our tolerance is at zero level (is it a compliment or criticism?), unlike the new hi-tech zero-maintenance technology which means throw away and replace (without repairing). Our political resources are not that flourishing that we can ditch our mature political leaders whenever we (or 'they') feel like. They remain to service our liberties, come rain or shine.

We have refined the godfather culture, thrive on rent-seeking moral exercises; and have viciously shattered the nation into two segments of nasty bipolarisms, and swear in the name of moral foundations. Floor-crossing has become a beloved form of *qurbani* at the mundane level; and nibbling for land-grabbing is certainly not confined to the understandable dimensions of 6ft by 3ft.

Neotism has been placed on a reverent pedestal by eroding soles in the corridors of power, seeking salvation of the materialistic kind, powered by capitalistic ambience. There are reasons for foaming at the mouth.

I have discontinued the use of shaving foam, perhaps because no brushing is possible. What is life without a brush or brushing? It has multiple uses, right from the head to the footwear, on self or on others. precaution needs to be taken in only one case — avoid close brushes. I have found that the best gift for a male is a badger hair shaving brush from Piccadilly. It lasts and lasts (I am using one for 22 years).

Now that foaming in the mouth has been officially recorded, it is time to plan foaming tactics with the errant CBAs, the tottering SOEs, the elusive terrorists, and the pestering toll collectors. This indigenous weapon is cheap, easily available, self-contained and self-manufactured, priceless (not necessarily to buy), and comes in individual styles: the ideal weapon for poor, underdeveloped countries. No foreign exchange is required, and the foreigners will keep away voluntarily (don't quote the foam Growth Rate).

I am out of practice generating foam without notice. It is an art to be cultivated for national and personal emergencies. Let us wait for the next demonstration from the hordes of imitators.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Our JS and democracy

Sir, When we watch and listen the diatribe, attack and counter-attack of some of our oversmart MPs, our become deafened with loud sounds of 'Yes' and 'No' and then finally we come across the ruling of the Speaker/Deputy Speakers in an identical manner. The similar fashion and tradition repeat again and again (three times) and we feel, enthralled and bewildered how wonderfully and superbly our *Jatiya Sangsad* is working at the cost of public money and at the cost of untold sufferings of the people!

We are neither the supporters of AL nor of BNP. We are simply the ordinary citizens of this poor country. But indeed we feel aggrieved by the performance and utterances of some of our MPs of both ruling and opposition parties.

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Art Buchwald's COLUMN

A Hometown Girl

THE news that Hillary Clinton will run for senator from New York has been greeted with fervour in her hometown of the Bronx.

Charlotte Canterleaver, a childhood companion of the First Lady, said: "It was always Hillary's dream to run for something above the Mason-Dixon line. I recall walking with her along the Hudson River when she said, 'Someday I will have my own staff and my own office in Washington, and everyone will have to address me as Madame Senator.'"

"One day, as we watched Niagara Falls, I told Hillary that I believed in her because she believed in the New York Yankees, and the New York Knicks, and the New York Rangers. Hillary was the first person I knew from Little Rock who wanted to take a bite out of the Big Apple."

In my search for Hillary's roots I went down to Greenwich Village where she had taken remedial courses at NYU about the Civil War.

The people in the neighbourhood were bubbling with excitement. "She's one of us," said Renata Hornstein, as she made a hero sandwich at her deli. "For a year we have tried get her to run for something, but the White House was always in her way. Now that doesn't seem as much a problem as it used to be."

Hillary Clinton's high school soccer coach said, "She was one of the best goalies I have ever known — determined, fast and smart. I remember once when Hillary asked me what she should do when she grew up, I said, 'Why don't you run for mayor of New York City?' And she said, 'I have my sights on higher things.'"

The big question in the Bronx was, will Bill Clinton campaign for Hillary now that she has announced?

The word on the street (Pennsylvania Avenue) is that the president is prepared to give New Yorkers anything they need if they elect his wife their senator.

Harold Ickes, who is running the campaign, said, "We're talking budget surpluses that will make even Wall Street's eyes boggle."

There is now talk of building the Clinton Library next to Grant's Tomb.

Originally the president's papers were going to be preserved in Arkansas, next to Bill Clinton's birthplace. But Hillary insisted that she owes it to her people to build the library in the state that has done so much for her.

She told Chelsea, as she looked across the East River from Queens, "Someday, my child, all of this will be yours."

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OPINION

The Vexed Question of Transit

Dr. K.A.S. Murshid

Mr. Saifur Rahman has raised some very sensible questions on the issue of granting transit facilities to India that ought to merit serious consideration. These relate principally to the state of our infrastructure, the likely loss of the potential North Eastern market and the impact on the environment. These have to be balanced against projected revenue earnings to the government and to private businesses (mainly in the chaotic and closed-shop world of the road transport sector).

There are a large number of issues and trade-offs that need to be carefully scrutinized: the question of road vs. rail/waterways; the principles of fixing the rates/surcharges/taxes to be applied; customs' inspection of goods, etc.

There is also much to be said for the view that transit concessions must be used to drive as hard a bargain as we possibly can. There is a strong perception (and in my opinion, entirely justified) that the Indians have been less than generous in their dealings with us on a number of fronts: market access for our goods, transit facilities to Nepal and Bhutan to the

Chittagong port, access to our enclaves, and so on. Thus the plea for a public debate is certainly appropriate.

It is indeed heartening to note that Mr. Tofail Ahmed, the Industry's Minister appears to concur. However, the quality of debate depends critically on the quality of information that is available. It is imperative therefore to allow MPs, politicians and researchers access to the basic information on which the government has based its decision. If it is the case that no adequate hard data or careful assessment of options and alternatives (which may well be the case).

I would urge the government to immediately initiate steps to remedy the situation. We cannot afford to base such critical decisions on notions, impressions and rhetoric no matter how good these sound.

My plea is simple: let us know if you have done your homework if you haven't done so yet. PLEASE do not waste any more time. In the meantime, I await the public debate already announced.

The author is the Research Director of BIDS.

The Rehabilitation Masquerade

Ahsan Chowdhury

Champa and Batashi, the innocent victims of the "rehabilitation masquerade" (Mistake Indeed, Daily Star, July 29, 99) are unlikely to be aware of the central position held by the 18th century aristocratic diversion known as masquerade in feminist thinking. But their mistaken deportation is a burning proof that life precedes theory and not vice versa. Let's try to find out if the motif of the masquerade can help us theorize this muddled situation.

The moralists of 18th century England found the masquerade to be an insidious threat to the social hierarchy which privileged and rabidly defended the hierarchical oppositions like pure/impure, matrons/whores, so on and so forth. The masquerade created a temporary liminal space where these oppositions were blurred, the aristocratic woman dressed herself as a whore; the sophisticated lord bedecked himself as a pimp. There was such rigidity in the dress codes and speech codes that a lady of noble birth could easily take up the identity of a tavern wench by slight alterations in dress, speech, and gait.

In other words, those privileged oppositions were not impregnable after all, and they collapsed most conspicuously in the liminal space of the Masquerade. No wonder that we find Henry Fielding, the novelist, raising the question in *The Masquerade, A Poem*: "For men women turn — why then? May women not be changed men?" and goes on to ask: "how from another woman? Do you strumpet masqued disguise?"

We could put the same question to the sagacious perpetrators of this outrageous rehabilitation masquerade. How does one distinguish between a

Batashi who is a non-prostitute and one who is? Admittedly Batashi did manage to identify herself; she pointed out vociferously that either her brother is a chairman or her father is one. At any rate, it let her off the hook for the time-being. Her narrative of identity is inscribed in the book of the patriarchal system, which privileges binary oppositions like purewoman/prostitute. Significantly enough, the reporter asked the "unmistakable" prostitutes whether they knew Batashi and Champa. The negative answer lets them off the hook. They are not an entry in the text of the non-women.

Our identities are interchangeable with the stories we tell about ourselves. A fortunate Batashi can be rescued from the rehabilitation and concentration camps because she has not been disconnected from the patriarchal narrative of identity. But those who are now undergoing rape and mutilation in this so-called camp had their stories too. Their only fault is that they have lost these stories and cannot build one of their own which is free from exploitation.

I urge the Prime Minister, who never fails to touch our hearts whenever he retells the tragic story of her family, and who has built a new story of herself by becoming a statesperson from a housewife, to stop this "masquerade of rehabilitation" immediately. Such inhuman containment of the "marginal" and the "other" never succeeded in bringing about positive results. We only have to recall what happened during our own war of liberation or the recent events in Kosovo to return to our senses.

The writer is a Fulbright researcher at Virginia Commonwealth University, USA.