

Politics of Absurdity

WE are constrained to say that when opposition leaders cannot think of any other way to make themselves felt they resort to hartal. Besides being a sign of bankruptcy this is short-cut oriented and, therefore, not pro-active in the real sense. It is definitely expedient and opportunistic. It is also a fake measure of success because people acquiesce in it out of sheer panic compounded by the planned ruling party resistance against hartal.

These are the epithets sadly getting showered on hartal these days in addition to the revulsion it has spawned in citizens for its patently undemocratic, imposing and anti-poor nature, let alone the irreparable economic losses it brings to the country and the extent to which it disorients people from minimal work ethics. For efficient organisations and people hartal breaks the work rhythm otherwise painstakingly revived during a respite between successive shut-downs. Hartal, a powerful instrument of principled politics of yesteryears jelling with the awesome majesty of the people under exceptional circumstances, has fallen on evil days. From an elevation it has degenerated into a public nuisance.

If the purpose of hartal was to create a public opinion on governance issues then this has recoiled on the callers by creating an adverse public opinion on their tendency to enforce shut-downs every now and then.

What are the publicly stated reasons for today's hartal which on top of its dawn-to-dusk duration fits into a four-day vacation with the Durga Puja and weekend holidays included in it? Today's hartal is to protest 'Indian aggression' along border and demand resignation of the government and announcement of fresh elections. If the opposition had argued their case in public meetings they had a much better chance of being sympathetically heard than by enforcing hartals which irked the people, making them unresponsive.

How dreadfully negative politics has become that the opposition has threatened the government with dire consequences should it unilaterally declare the upazilla election schedule but would not sit down with the ruling party to discuss the schedule either!

The Food We Eat

MORE than a month has passed since The Daily Star published an alarming report on adulterated food items causing serious health hazards to people, especially the children. The food items, mainly prepared with milk, flour and fruits and very popular with children, were tested by the Institute of Public Health (IPH) laboratories. Around 45 per cent of these were found 'adulterated.' The items also contained harmful preservatives and colouring agents risking hazards including death from food poisoning. These can impair normal functioning of the liver and the intestine. The Health Secretary said, "We cannot really hold anybody responsible for such an act due to loopholes in the existing laws." The question is: Why in spite of the mounting evidence of food adulteration provided by the IPH scientists the laws remain so deficient?

Perhaps the bosses sitting on the ivory towers do not realise the enormity and intensity of the whole situation. Why can't the government employ trained people to inspect and detect adulterated food stuffs and take action against the offenders? The IPH and the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution should be equipped logistically and legally to do their jobs. If there is no law, has there been any attempt by the Health Ministry to get new laws? Crores of taka are being spent every year in non-productive areas. Why can't some of it be diverted to more productive use? Unless the poisonous food items are out of the way the nation is going to pay a very high price in the form of unhealthy and unintelligent generations coming to lead it into the next millennium.

Trade Unions at EPZs

THE government's decision to allow trade unions to function at the export processing zones is noted with some concern by us. This is not to say however that we oppose the concept of trade unionism. We are, on the contrary, very much in favour of it and strongly believe that labour unions form an integral part of the democratic set-up. Our strong opposition is against the blatantly politicised and extremely criminalised version of trade unionism we have seen decimating the potential of different state-run enterprises and turning them into an elephantine burden on the government. Should there not be built-in safeguards, we are afraid, same tale will be retold about the EPZs as well.

Fortunately, the government appears to be aware of the pitfalls and has not rushed into amendment of relevant acts towards lifting restriction on trade unionism at the exclusive zone. What's more, it has sought to formulate certain rules and regulations to preclude deviant and be-devilled practice in the name of trade unionism. Planned visits of senior officials from the ministries of Labour and Employment, and Commerce and Industries to China and India where trade union is allowed in such export zones to facilitate formulation of the safeguards also speaks of sagacity. That the government has decided to slowly but surely settle the issue despite persistent pressure from the US authorities and potent risk of losing GSP facility certainly deserves some praise.

Admittedly, our association with trade unionism, for the most part, has been disastrous. Once profitable public concerns — of which Adamjee Jute Mills Limited is a glaring example — have paid the price for trade unionism gone awry. Successive governments have pitifully dragged their feet on labour reform, an agenda that suffers increased relegation as years roll on. Inadequate and, at times ambiguous, provision in the law book has often led to malpractice. Our plea would be for the much-needed reform of the labour laws to be carried out without ado.

"CHOOSE your weapon. What would you like? A sword, a dagger or a lath? Thus you will end your dispute," softly but firmly the late Mr Akhtar Hamid Khan told the two students standing before him meekly, absolutely bereft and bewildered.

The time was somewhere in the middle of 1951. The place was Victoria College, Comilla. There was a heated debate among some students about the desirability of the Islamabad government's unofficial move to use Arabic script for writing Bengali.

Some of us were countering the arguments advanced by a section of students that introduction of the proposed method would help reinforce unity and fraternity of the people of the two wings of erstwhile Pakistan and should, therefore, be welcome.

We used to debate, quarrel and shout on issues in those days. Now, we find that in likewise situations, we fight, hurt and even kill one another. And we are told that

one has to accept evolution of the system with the passage of time. Anyway, the new Principal, Akhtar Hamid Khan, who was passing by, called us to his office.

A politically activist student and myself were brought forward as leaders of the two contending factions. As soon as the former heard the decision, he pondered for a moment and without a word left the premises with his followers. My friends and I also followed suit.

A towering figure, both physically and spiritually, Akhtar Hamid Khan, who passed away last week, demonstrated, in person and in the field, the revolutionary concept of self-help as the principal tool to effect phenomenal improvement in the life of the poor and rural people. Although he started his

Falling of a South Asian Star

A man of simple living and high thinking, this selfless and superb specimen of human being left an indelible mark in our history. Posterity will ever recall his outstanding contribution to the causes for alleviation of poverty in our region and beyond by upholding human dignity with courage and conviction.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

work programme in Avoys Aram, the present seat of the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development in Comilla and later continued in Orangi colony in Karachi, the precepts and practices of his policy have pervaded not only South Asia but the developing world as a whole. He never stopped at his words but proved its efficacy by deeds. The Victoria College episode was a pointer to substantiate that he, besides being

a man of principle, was also a man of action than words.

A member of the Indian Civil Service, he did not flinch an eyelid to give up the highly coveted job when he was convinced that he could render better service to the nation by extricating himself from the limited and egoistic perimeter of the prime Service, which had been introduced by the British colonial regime to consolidate

their interests and perpetuate their rule. The Service continued in its pristine glory even after the British had left.

Akhtar Hamid Khan sought freedom of action, got it and used it to suit his plan of action. His academic pursuit in Victoria College was short-lived. His concept and work found realism in his megalomaniac zeal and tireless efforts emanating from Comilla and made farmers' dream come true. He was not only the founder administrator of the Village Aid Programme but also the first Head of the BARD. His talent and work were partly appreciated and recognised by the receipt of the prestigious Magsaysay Award. Perhaps, he was the first among its South Asian recipients.

The initiative he had taken in Comilla received fruition in the internationally famed Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi. In Bangladesh also, founders of some of the major multi-dimensional non-governmental organisations practising *swasth* or self-help programmes and micro-credit system drew inspiration for their creation, at least to some extent, to the preaching and practices of this giant of a man.

A man of simple living and high thinking, this selfless and superb specimen of human being left an indelible mark in our history. Posterity will ever recall his outstanding contribution to the causes for alleviation of poverty in our region and beyond by upholding human dignity with courage and conviction. Today, we mourn his death at a ripe old age and pray for the salvation of his soul.

The author is a former ambassador and a regular columnist of The Daily Star.

Death of an Institution

by Dr Tanvir Ahmed Khan

Why did we not as a nation invite this great person, Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan, after Bangladesh came into being? Why did not the disciples of Dr Khan advise the then government to bring him back to Bangladesh? Did the decision-makers need that advice and could they not on their own make the assessment of Dr Khan's contribution? How could the whole establishment fail in this duty?

How insensitive could we be? Our position from BARD should have been to initiate forcefully this idea in the minds of the decision-makers in government that by giving Dr Khan the citizenship, we are only elevating us and not him. He was already elevated as an international figure since the Comilla model was synonymous to his name and internationally recognized.

The days of 1971 saw Dr Khan leaving East Pakistan for better or for worse. Maybe he saved himself as he would fall into a lot of confusion and his life could have been endangered. He was a six-footer and many Bengalis fair-skinned and tall were misinterpreted to be non-Bengalis and faced a bitter exit from this world. Dr Khan was a non-Bengali but in his heart he was more than a Bengali.

I remember him stating in "My Troubled Life", an autobiographical essay by the author at the University of Peshawar, Pakistan on April 24, 1983, that Tagore and Nazrul used the same language and their poems moved the Bengalis, Muslims and Hindus alike. He himself read the Bengali masters with the help of teachers and dictionaries. He stated that although Tagore did not stir him as Iqbal did, he decided that it was his shortcoming and not Tagore's. He resigned from the Indian Civil Service in 1944 after ten years of service, as this was not to be his cup of tea. He had disagreement with the colonial rulers on their attitudes related to the deplorable Bengal famine of 1943. Nearly three million people died.

Being an action-oriented person, he could only resort to doing something positive which would be limited had he been in the civil service. He had been involved in a plethora of activities: from living as a labourer and an apprentice locksmith to being the Principal of Comilla College for eight years from 1950. In 1958 he went to the Michigan State University for special orientation in rural development. In 1959 he became the first Director of the Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) Academy for Rural Development (BARD) at Comilla where he worked till 1971. He was awarded the Magsaysay Award, Republic of Philippines (1963) and honorary Doctor of Law Degree, Michigan State University (1964). He had been a Visiting Professor at the University of Lund, Sweden, at the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, at the Harvard University and Oxford University.



One would find him cycling to the villages to meet the farmers to understand what they were up to. As the founder of the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, he had a positive mindset and absolutely no artificiality, which reflected in his activities that a traditional bureaucrat would not do.

All his protégés were the cream of the then CSP cadre. They could not emulate him when they became the incumbents of the Academy. None could lead the way of their mentor and resorted to the traditional straightjacket bureaucratic mannerisms. They only tended to replicate what their immediate predecessors did. A bungalow at the top of a hill was their abode for the time they were there, with a full-time chauffeur driven car, orderlies at their beck and call and other perks and privileges.

After the mentor left (1971) his achievements were diluted. The four pillars of the Comilla model, so wonderfully nurtured under Dr Khan's tutelage and kept by him under the fold of the cabinet division of the government, were dismantled with haste. The decision-makers found it relevant to send the pillars of the model to not so significant ministries so that an eventual dilution could take

place. Whether this was done knowingly or unknowingly is not understood fully. The disciples can answer this question better. But that it did a lot of harm than good is not very difficult to endorse.

Why did we not as a nation invite this great person after Bangladesh came into being? Why did not the disciples of Dr Khan advise the post-liberation government to bring him back to Bangladesh? Did the decision-makers need that advice and could they not on their own make the assessment about Dr Khan's contribution? How could the whole establishment fail in this duty? Shouldn't have Dr Khan been invited to carry on with the activities that he was pursuing in such right earnest? What did the successive governments do? In 1978 and 1979, he was invited for seven months as an Adviser to develop the Rural Development Academy at Bogra along the Comilla model. Why was he not requested to stay back and continue with his activities at BARD?

BARD is an international institution and could have flourished even better under Dr Khan's able leadership. Nowadays, if you ask a sixteen-year old about BARD, there is a big question mark on his/her face.

You ask them if they know Dr Khan and you will see another big question mark. What did Dr Khan do to deserve this? Would BARD be what it is today if Dr Khan were here to pilot it to the direction that this institution deserves to be in?

The cooperatives are a misnomer today. In many published articles, one would even find statements that the cooperatives are synonymous to fraud. Dr Khan presented a dynamic model. With his presence, many a tenet of the model would have seen changes with the changing scenario in the economy of Bangladesh. These changes would be influenced by the tide of market economy supplanting the welfare economics that was being pursued in the sixties.

The Green Revolution was being used to stop the country from going into the folds of the Red Revolution. The sixties saw a jump in the production of cereals nearly twelve-folds using the package of miracle seed-water-fertilizer-insecticide technology. The thrust was to feed the population so that they did not get the time to think about social action.

Such was this model. Dr Khan believed in action-research and that is why he felt the need for the collection of primary information by himself. He would go in a bicycle to the villages so that the farmers did not feel intimidated that 'Shaheb' has come to their house. He wanted to understand and inculcated in others this philosophy to depend on more primary feedback than secondary. If one has to present the findings, it better be from his own perception rather than borrowing from someone else.

During my stay at BARD for twenty months, I had a better grounding in the affairs of this institution. There are lots of positive things that I experienced. There are only a few negative ones, which I believe shouldn't have been there had Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan been present.

I remember being the chairperson of the publication committee, many good papers were presented for publication and all of them had to undergo a sieving process. One such work was my Ph.D thesis. At the outset, let me state it was not published for extra-academic considerations.

A mentor of mine later cautioned me, that a thesis, which reflected on the activities of the public and private sector on rural poor programmes, should not go unnoticed. The thesis

was sent to a reviewer to assess its marketability. The response was interesting.

It stated that the thesis criticized BRDB's (Bangladesh Rural Development Board) two-tier cooperative as sterile. It went on to say that while discussing the usefulness of BRDB's role in RPP the lumping of some responses as 'rubbish' is an aspersions on BRDB. It questioned, can BARD itself (the original innovator of BRDB's two-tier cooperatives) publish the thesis? Can BARD maintain a working relationship with BRDB after publishing the thesis? It continued in its remarks stating that the analysis seemed to show the necessity of complementarity between Government and NGOs. But in actual analysis, it criticized BRDB (a government agency), eulogized NGOs and suggested mobilizing NGOs for RPP. Can BARD focus this idea?

BARD, in no way, should keep these issues under the cover, as it is a research organization that is supposed to make objective analysis. In no way should BARD patronize BRDB and vice versa, otherwise it will be self-defeating.

I stated further that there is no room for emotions in research. The statements from the Mission Report pointed out the recognition of Paulo Freire and the departure from the 2-tier model. The Nordic donors had funded that Mission. Their official position on these issues remains that. Of course, others can question their position (or findings) based on their subjective arguments. The question is not placing these quotations would be tantamount to showing one's weakness. I continued further stating that one should think positively that 91 per cent of the respondents had thought that BRDB's role in RPP was positive. My hands are tied and I can't change the negative comments as the respondents stated it to be so. I can't manipulate data.

If the working relationship had come to that level where one is not self-critical and cannot receive criticism, I can only pity that relationship. Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan, if I were not mistaken, would not have even raised an eyebrow because by so doing one would reflect their myopic perspective.

I never met Dr. Khan. I only read about him and heard a lot of anecdotal statements from individuals who had had the opportunity to brush shoulders with him and observe him from very close quarters. How I wish I could be one of them. I was planning to go to Karachi this July with the specific intention of meeting Dr. Khan. I had a hunch that I won't be able to meet him but I kept it to myself. Now it will remain a wish.

The author is a former Director of BARD.

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.

The Netherlands Embassy Clarifies

Sir, In The Daily Star of 11 October, 1999 you wrote an editorial on the proposed Waste Management project that has recently been approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC). Although the Royal Netherlands Embassy is pleased by the fact that you share its opinion regarding the importance of a project that would address the unfavourable state of waste management in Dhaka, I would like to rectify a misunderstanding that seems to be prevailing regarding the financing modalities of the envisaged undertaking.

Directly after the Embassy was informed of the project idea, it communicated to all parties involved that the Netherlands Government was willing to appraise any proposal that would be in line with the criteria as stated by its Environment and Economic Self-sufficiency Programme (MILEV). Consequently, a project proposal was presented to us which included a Dutch component (to be supplied and implemented by a Dutch company)

and a Bangladeshi component (to be executed by the Dhaka City Corporation). The MILEV-criteria clearly state that financing, dependent upon approval in the Netherlands of the project, could be done up to a maximum of 50 per cent of the Dutch component. Additional funding would have to be sought for the other half of that component and for the whole of the Bangladeshi component. For reasons not known to me, the ECNEC only approved 50 per cent of the total project budget, which fell well short of the needed funds.

The point to make here is that the Netherlands Government, contrary to what is mentioned in the DS, has not failed to deliver upon promises. As the Royal Netherlands Embassy has only an advisory role in the process, the Embassy was never in a position to make promises. However, as the Netherlands Government has agreed to be one of the prime environmental concerns for Dhaka, the Embassy has been continuously facilitating the process towards reaching a proposal that could be processed under MILEV. Currently, the

Embassy is still looking forward to receive such a proposal which it will forward to the concerned authorities in the Netherlands.

I hope that the above-stated remarks have helped to dissolve the misunderstanding regarding the matter.

Dick C B den Haas
Ambassador

Governance

Sir, The blackouts have returned in my area, and the price of electricity has gone up once again by five paise per unit after a mere three months. The former is lingering, and the latter are incremental inflictions through electric performance of the powers that be.

The suppliers or vendors of this commodity and service, namely electricity, do not have the courtesy to help the self-biting consumers with media campaign on how to prepare the current bills which need complex calculations, with hidden or transparent clauses. And what is this 15 per cent VAT on part or whole of the bill (as per media reports), in addition to, or within the 0.15 per cent tax or levy on government duty we have been paying so far? Tutorial teams may undertake house to house trips to teach us how they can earn more.

Where power, energy and gas are concerned, there are leaks of different kinds, due, it is alleged in the media circles, to manipulations with the PSCs

(not the august Public Service Commission).

Anyway we are practising for the next quarter by raising in electricity rates by reducing the monthly electric power used at home through centralisation (decentralisation needs more bulbs), and blacking out different rooms and other areas under no-occupancy conditions. Such austerity exercises are not apparent in the public sector, who are emptying the banks to meet revenue expenditure (press reports). Request VAT-free undertaker services, as value is not added during permanent farewells.

A Husnain
Dhaka

Who is a better human?

Sir, It was just after dusk, the date was February 8, 1999. This was the day of a harrowing experience of my life that I am least likely to forget. The experience I was not accompanied by a quick-thinking young man and a group of photo-journalists who, while performing their professional duty, took up the responsibility of trying to dissuade brick-batting hoodlums from harming the passing transports and travelling passengers.

On the day I was travelling towards Baitul Mukarram in a friend's car with a young man of my neighbourhood. I was en-

grossed in a deep thought. Suddenly, I was dislodged from my thought and brought to the reality of my surroundings. There were sounds of falling of hard substances on the roof-top and hitting on the car. Bewildered, I was trying to understand the source of what was going on. A couple of hundred yards away, there was a 'moshal-michil' approaching our direction. It was a preparatory evening of BNP procession.

At that moment my companion forced me to lower my head and he put his body on me to cover me. No sooner my head was brought down there was a loud cracking sound of the rear glass shield and falling of a heavy material by my feet. Later, we discovered it to be a large piece of a nine-inch brick. Before it fell on the car floor, it hit the shoulder of my companion. If the young man did not do what he did, the piece of brick would have smashed my head. The driver was frantically trying to get into the side lane. Before he was able to enter the lane, another large piece of brick one crashed in to the right side of the driver's head coming through the open window.

On gaining a level of consciousness, I saw a couple of photo-journalists, stretching their hands, were imploring the brick-batters not to throw anything towards the passing vehicles and passers-by. I was later told by our driver that the viciousness of the attackers was considerably contained by the photo-journalists' effort who seemed not to care about their

own safety.

It's worth mentioning here that the driver was injured in his right ear zone. He had to be taken to the hospital, first, for X-ray, and medication and next day for CT Scanning. Luckily, he did not receive any internal injury. Had it been so he would have been bed-ridden for a long time. And obviously would have lost his only source of income-driving, and live in utter misery with his wife and two little children.

Would then the pro-hartal and anti-hartal leaders taken the responsibility of this devastated family?

Syed Waliullah
Dhaka

Politics of power

Sir, While the politicians are after wealth and power, democracy in our country is at stake.

We are desperately in need of a new leadership to overcome this crisis as things are going from bad to worse in all spheres of our national life. Unless a new leadership is born, the concept of Golden Bangladesh will never be a reality. Since newspapers portray people's rights, we look forward to seeing the fruits of hardworking journalists to create a new environment for the rise of a new leadership.

It is the need of the hour.

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