

A Disillusioned President

PRESIDENT Shahabuddin Ahmed has once again used harsh words to express his disillusionment about the country's education system, terming it as time-worn, cancerous and, above all, a total farce. The President has a penchant for speaking out harsh truths. We have always admired his moral uprightness and appreciated his forthright expression on different issues of national interest.

Over the years, this country has developed a strong base for education, particularly at higher levels. We also have no dearth of talented students. The President, in his exasperation, has found everything around him bleak and meaningless and cannot be blamed for his attitude after strings of disquieting events in the recent past at some of the country's highest educational institutions. We may not see eye to eye with him in some of his observations but we are surely in agreement with the main thrust of his speech at Notre Dame College on Thursday.

The President's lamentation for total absence of academic atmosphere is justified and so is his pointing of fingers at both teachers and students in this regard. The reasons he has set forth for all these ills are known to all but hardly has there been any steps in right earnest to cure these. This has become all the more difficult because of rampant politicisation and unabated lawlessness at times with official patronage. Teachers have made things no better, some of them allegedly indulging in moonlighting, skipping classes without reasons, patronising note books and encouraging private coaching.

These maladies have to be eradicated by all means for a better future for the nation. This is a very difficult task and the government alone will not be able to deliver. We should all take cue from the President's speech and come forward with renewed commitment and vigour to make our education system modern and atmosphere on campus healthy. It is imperative if we want to survive as a proud nation in the new millennium.

Obstetrics Department at DMCH Needs Care

IN a way, the Obstetrics Department at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), ill-equipped as it is to cope with the ever-increasing influx of to-be mothers in need of emergency care, is representative of the country's public health-care system, evidently inadequate to cater to the service-seekers' needs. Whereas the number of patients has steadily been on the rise over the years, hardly has there been any initiative from the government to enhance the 90-bed wing of the country's leading state-run hospital. Let alone qualitative improvement of service, there are not even enough beds for the patients. Often, most of them share beds while some sleep on the floor. What's more, the doctors "cannot give them food and medicine because the allocation is against 90 beds." Besides, there are no cots for the babies. On the whole, the situation there is simply not healthy for the patients, who are mostly from the poor and marginalised section of the city population thereby having no way of seeking special care at the private clinics and hospitals.

As the DMCH director has pointed out, the annual budget of Tk 3.5 crore is simply not enough for "delivering services at the 800-bed hospital". We would like to ask the health ministry, why has there not been any move to expand the obstetric wing? Does the ever-increasing number of patients seeking emergency service there put the accent on the need for more budgetary allocation?

According to a recent Unicef study, nearly 20,000 women die every year due to obstetric complications. One of the prime factors is delay in reaching medical facilities and receiving quality care. At the Obstetrics Department of the DMCH, the patients are seeking care, but, unfortunately, due to a gamut of constraints, they are not getting it. Space constraint in the face of increasing number of patients is understandable, but how would the ministry explain dearth of emergency surgical equipment? We hope the government would seriously pay attention to the DMCH woes, and also other state-run hospitals in the country, and do its best to improve quality of service there.

Twin Tragedies

DEATH of Saimun Iqbal and Rezauddin Ahmed, two Class Seven cadets of the Sylhet Cadet College who were reportedly crushed under a roller at the college ground after their routine physical exercise on Thursday morning, has given rise to a disquieting question: how safe are our children at the cadet colleges? Parents send their wards off to these expensive specialised institutions for better education, care, security and protection. In the case of these two boys, there were no care, no protection. Their premature death certainly strikes at the very roots of the popular perception about the country's cadet colleges; more so because it was gross negligence above anything else that had led to the tragic consequence. Maybe, the students are not as safe at the cadet colleges as they are generally perceived to be. Maybe, the time has come for the authorities to have a closer look at the way these institutions are being run.

The Sylhet Cadet College administration has definitely been prompt to order temporary suspension for the adjutant, a Major, and the physical instructor, a Havildar, on the charge of negligence in duty. However, in our views, the principal is no less responsible, for he is accountable for whatever goes on at the college.

The tragic incident certainly points at systemic inadequacy. Therefore, punitive measures for the responsible people aside, we would expect from the authorities effective administrative measures so that such a tragedy does not occur in future.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party: Quest for the "Vital Centre"?

by M. Rashiduzzaman

Khaleda's rallying cry for the immediate resignation of the Awami League government is not enough to make her party the "vital centre" for Bangladesh politics. Nor will it be a substitute for a strategy to convince that the BNP was the only realistic choice for those who did not support the Awami League. Hasina's "Blame-the-BNP-First" tactic is backfiring, and there is a perceptible erosion in the AL's popularity, but that does not give an automatic lift-off to the Khaleda-led opposition.

AT least one epigrammatic verdict on the BNP has been spinning for long — the party would die a catastrophic death once it was out of power! But the reality on the ground, so far, tells us otherwise! It's barely two decades that the BNP can weave its history, and it's not among the oldest parties in Bangladesh. The coup of 1975 brought a discontinuity in Bangladesh politics, and the interregnum could not continue indefinitely. By the summer of 1977, there was a groundswell for a coalition of the "democratic and nationalistic forces". Ex-chief minister of former East Pakistan Ataur Rahman Khan (then leader of the Jatiya League) appealed for such a platform to achieve a greater political unity, and that elder statesman's initiative was widely welcome. He also urged for an immediate return to a non-military rule and the election. Zia enjoyed a popular appeal but the BNP was not instantly created with a chorus of adulation. Actually, Zia's efforts for a new party had several fits and starts before it was born. His party building started as the Jatiyatabadi Ganatantrik Dal (JAGODAL) convened by Justice Abdul Sattar in February 1978 — it was a conglomerate of the dropouts from other parties, technocrats, and retired bureaucrats and military officers but factionalism and personality clashes mired the nascent organization.

Later in September 1978, the BNP replaced the old JAGODAL, and the new party presented itself as a broad-based nationalist forum. Zia did not join any of the pre-existing parties, either from the right or the left, at that time. Rather, he desired a new middle-of-the-road platform that believed in a mélange of Bengali consciousness and Muslim identity. Zia called it Bangladeshi nationalism, a larger but territorially defined and citizenship-based identity than the exclusive lingo-nationalism and secularism preached by the Awami League, and its cohorts. To do that, he had to open doors not only to the freedom fighters like him, the Bengali nationalists, but also more controversially, to those who were accused of opposing the 1971 armed struggle. His new organization's set of beliefs combined a more flexible nationalist paradigm with pragmatic leanings — they were

not logically stated political philosophies. To use a more recent buzzword, Zia possibly sought to establish the inclusive "vital centre", a mantra that President Clinton resurrected from the past in the first major policy speech in 1996 after winning the re-election for his second term. However, the critics call it the "dead centre". Zia was confident that a centrist party could aggregate the national interests better in the backdrop of a civil society still torn apart in the aftermath of the 1971 upheavals. The re-alignment of parties became the fresh trend that marked the restoration of political activities since the 1975 violent coup. The Awami League was slowly reemerging from its hiatus, but most Awami Leaguers were no longer comfortable in their BKSAL skin, and wanted to reinvent themselves. On the other hand, the rightwing forces were also resurfacing and regrouping.

Justice Sattar succeeded Zia after his assassination in an abortive coup in 1981, but his party faced a grim future. General Ershad took over power in March 1982 ousting President Justice Sattar, when the BNP's survival became the critical factor. The senior bureaucrats, ahead of time, knew Ershad's coup plan, and the diplomats were also aware of what was coming. But the BNP could do little to resist it. The intellectual community and the press did not raise hell about it. More significantly, the Awami League leaders tacitly welcomed the BNP, its main political challenger, being decimated by a martial law government. The period from 1982 to 1991 (until the election) was possibly the most difficult era for the BNP to fight in the front as well as the rear for its bare existence as a source of alternative political inclinations. For a while, the BNP looked like a ship being abandoned when some of its prominent members joined Ershad's new party (JPI).

Ershad's martial law did not take long to meet a more organized resistance, but he knew

the deep antagonism between Hasina and Khaleda that he exploited to the hilt. The 1986 parliamentary election was crucial to Ershad to civilize his regime with his Jatiya Party (JP) that also had a centrist political posture. Ershad desperately wanted the opposition parties to participate in the election that he was so confident to win. Hasina contested that election while Khaleda abstained from it. Khaleda feared that Hasina's participation in that poll not only legitimized the continuation of Ershad's military-led civil government but also strengthened the BNP's new rival (JP). Hasina changed her tactic in 1988—both the BNP and the AL agreed to stay out of the new parliamentary election. But the old distrust between Khaleda and Hasina also resurfaced between 1988 and 1990—Hasina's tirade included the suspicion that Zia was behind the 1975 coup that killed her father and her family members. The AL campaigned that the BNP was an ally of the "anti-liberation" forces — such slashing attacks, however, peaked since 1995-96. Khaleda was convinced that it was a tactic of a larger AL strategy to discredit the BNP, and what it stood for. It was the pressure of the two respective student fronts of the AL and the BNP that eventually brought both Khaleda and Hasina together under one unifying slogan—oust Ershad!

Ershad's regime fell and the new election brought Khaleda to power in 1991 — it was a convincing proof that the BNP was very much alive! The victory came as a political windfall to the BNP because a deep disappointment to the AL whose leader Hasina took it as a personal humiliation. What was at the bottom of the BNP's victory in 1991? Was it because of the BNP's ability to forge an alliance for the political center? Was the BNP the "indispensable political alternative" in Bangladesh? Few assessments on the subject are objective. But I noticed some ambivalence towards the Awami

League among the adult generation that had been disappointed with the Awami League/BKSAL's ideological swing while it was in power. I remember a senior friend, just retired from the bureaucracy before the 1991 election who had narrated an insightful explanation on that BNP victory to me. He argued that the Awami League did not win back to power because it had failed in building a national consensus. He quietly but energetically campaigned for the BNP but never asked for its favour.

How far could this be objectively proved or disproved is a pertinent question but beyond the scope of this limited exercise. However, the voter turnout for the BNP and the AL is neck to neck, neither of the two main parties made spectacular gains in popular support since 1991. It does convey a message both to the AL and the BNP — the BNP has found a niche among the voters, and the AL, a much older organization with an undeniable historical contribution in 1971, cannot refute that reality. The 10 per cent who voted for the Islamic groups would not ordinarily cross over to the AL, but some of them could switch to the centrist groups to give them a victory. Both in 1991 and 1996, the religious minorities are known to have overwhelmingly voted for the AL. The BNP had possibly attracted the votes of the less partisan (and non-ideological) Bangladeshis that tilted its victory in 1991. Without such a base among the moderates, the BNP had little prospect of winning the second largest votes in 1996. But such "moderates" are not always predictable in their voting behaviour!

The unforgettable Awami League-led virulent campaign (1996-98) was a multi-pronged attack on Khaleda's government; it gradually escalated and orchestrated over a period of time. There was a group of senior bureaucrats whose political sympathy was with the Awami League. Needless to mention that bulk of the journalistic establishment was unfriendly to the BNP regime. In

fact, the BNP leaders themselves were partly responsible for their isolation — they did not seriously cultivate the journalists, the opinion leaders and the intellectuals while they were in power. The top BNP leaders were accused of being insensitive to fresh ideas, and there was no elder statesman to counsel them. They suffered from missed opportunities, indecision and strategic inaction that sometimes came close to amateurishness. They failed to articulate their centre and inclusionary political goals before the Awami League-led opposition overwhelmed them. Many of them underestimated the AL that executed a skillful shift from the left to the centre under Hasina's initiative. Meanwhile, the rightwing groups that helped the BNP to form the first cabinet also felt betrayed on several issues, and when the chips were down, they were no longer with Khaleda. Once the allegations of vote rigging in two by-elections were revealed, the media's feeding frenzy for the anti-BNP stories did not stop until Khaleda was forced to step down!

The AL was just shy of an absolute majority in the 1996 election, and Hasina became the new Prime Minister with support from the smaller groups. But the BNP returned as the second largest party in the Sangshad. By emerging as the largest (parliamentary) opposition, the BNP has made it clear that the Bangladesh political landscape would not be dominated by one single party or by one political persuasion. More recently, the BNP has been able to lead the main opposition alliance against the ruling party but its central stance is not compromised. Khaleda seems to have overcome the trauma of the loss of power in 1996; she is confident and very much on the offensive. The present opposition tenure is a positive political therapy for the BNP that will enhance its institutional development. Hasina sharply reacts to Khaleda and her supporters because the BNP was the only competing party with a realistic chance of dislodging

the AL from power in future elections. But the old nagging between the intra-party factions and leaders is still alive inside the BNP. The BNP leaders wasted their time and energy in the Awami League initiated dispute over who did what in 1971. Khaleda is under pressure to agree to a seat-sharing arrangement among the partners of the opposition alliance. But the BNP is yet to clearly perceive who are its main constituents before it can focus on its political centre. Just blaming the 1996 debacle on the alleged vote rigging by the AL does not explain everything!

Khaleda's rallying cry for the immediate resignation of the Awami League government is not enough to make her party the "vital centre" for Bangladesh politics. Nor will it be a substitute for a strategy to convince that the BNP was the only realistic choice for those who did not support the Awami League. Hasina's "Blame-the-BNP-First" tactic is backfiring, and there is a perceptible erosion in the AL's popularity, but that does not give an automatic lift-off to the Khaleda-led opposition. The political arithmetic between the AL and the BNP-led opposition is not yet clear! People are interested to know more of the BNP's central tenet. They want to know what would the BNP do that are not only different but also even better than the present ruling party! Khaleda has to identify the new dynamics that will dominate the next election, and reposition her alliance accordingly.

Let's not forget — the centrist politics was not the Holy Grail of the Awami League, but it was able to snatch a victory by a tactical shift to a moderate position. While in power, the AL is yet to establish itself as an inclusive and coalescing forum that avoids denigration, polarization and confrontation. The BNP's future lies in finding a clearer governing philosophy that will sustain — it needs a more convincing centrist strategy that will outshine its main rivals. The BNP has to capture some higher ground — higher than the too familiar street politics. Finally, harkals may work as a tactic, but they cannot be a substitute for the "vision thing"!

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Can Commonwealth be More Effective?

What the Commonwealth really stands for? Does it exist just to keep the former British colonies in a common bond of fraternity? Is it only an "informal" club whose leaders meet once in two years only to exchange "hellos"?



Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

of military dictatorship in Nigeria raised a lot of dust, but the African nation is no more a problem since it has restored democracy. I had the occasion of being present as a journalist in that summit. The Nigeria issue had provided some life in the deliberations in the sense that the Commonwealth summits are otherwise very innocuous kind of occasions which seldom spawn much enthusiasm although the very gathering of galaxy of world leaders in itself is a major event.

In the Edinburgh summit — which is called Commonwealth heads of government meeting (CHOGM) — had an attraction in the form of presence of veteran and respected South African statesman Nelson Mandela. It is an irony, in a way, that he is not among the heads of government in the CHOGM in his own country since he voluntarily chose to retire from public life. This time, the CHOGM in Durban is missing another outstanding statesman — Dr. Mahatir Mohamad — the Malaysian prime minister, who is the longest serving democratically elected leader in Asia. He is supposed to stay away from the meeting because of impending national elections after he called snap polls.

The Commonwealth summits — despite the innocent character — have own charm. I had also the occasion to be at

two other CHOGM in New Delhi in the early eighties and in Kuala Lumpur in the late eighties. Both the events were typical of the candidates that whoever is the Malaysian capital saw the contest for the post of new secretary general when the current outgoing chief executive of the organisation Chief Emeka was locked in a bitter election with former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser.

Going by Commonwealth tradition, only the name of the winner is announced after the balloting without mentioning the tally of the votes secured by the candidates. It is done to give the impression that whoever is chosen, it's by "consensus" even after votes. Host nation Malaysian prime minister had said that no one would know the difference of the votes between the two rivals because the winner is a "consensus" secretary general. This time too, there was a contest between the candidates of Bangladesh and New Zealand. Tavalu along with suspended Pakistan were not to take part in the voting and as such 52 nations were to vote.

tralia, Canada and New Zealand.

Obviously, the bulk of the members are from the third world and their welfare seems to be receiving increasing attention from the Commonwealth even though the services have so far been marginal and not substantial. Trade, investment and development is one of the key issues before the organisation and the leaders say they spare no efforts to forge co-operation in this direction. The Commonwealth pledges for a cohesive trade body. For South Asia, it launched a South Asian fund for investment and trade in the last summit aimed at helping the member-states from this region. There are other areas for Commonwealth

where it is seeking to help of each other in co-operative spirit. True, Commonwealth remains a largely ceremonial "informal club" for the mainly former British colonies. Despite the fight against the colonialism, many countries feel nostalgic about the common features that bind Commonwealth nations. The London-based secretariat is exploring newer areas for bringing the members-states in closer co-operative mechanism touching the core areas that would benefit the people. The progress and achievement are not noteworthy but not insignificant either. The quest for furthering the Commonwealth sentiments can inject new dimension and give it a more "visible profile" in the global scenario. There is nothing to gain from criticising the venture. After all, it delivers something which is better than having nothing.

OPINION

Dark Cloud on the Silver Lining?

Neelima Islam

As usual, Mr. Mahfuz Anam's "Dark cloud on silver lining" published in the 10 November issue of the Daily Star struck my conscience once more and tempted me to write a few words in tune with what has been said there.

If one looked at the headline just above the commentary, "PM repeats her offer for dialogue on all issues", it would not be unusual for a common human being to believe that our Honourable Prime Minister has all the good intention of resolving the present political crisis. But do all good intentions materialise if you do not give vent to them through your actions? Alas, if only all the preachers could practice what they preached, then the world would surely become a peaceful haven!

Learning about the happenings around, and reading a lot in the print media, we cannot help wondering how any educated, sensible and conscious person can live with the declining political values in our country? What is going on in each parliament session? Is this the way any member of the parliament should speak? It seems like a war of personal vengeance. No constructive discussion on the current issues, no concrete criticisms of the government's policies, no attempt to resolve the prevailing crisis! What are we gaining in the long run? Then why these expensive parliament sessions? We, the tax-payers, have every right to question the members of the parliament for their accountability.

It is the wise men's words, "Politics without principle is a deadly sin". But do our political leaders know the meaning of 'principle'? There is a difference does it make for them if the silver lining is overcast with dark clouds? Do they really care? Nevertheless, I am grateful to Mr. Anam for the occasional re-awakening of our

conscience by his relevant commentaries. I earnestly wish our political leaders would read them too and start doing some homework. And then we can see the seed of hope to see that the pen proves mightier than the sword in fighting this war for restoring healthy politics in our country.

However, the editorial in the 11 November issue of the Daily Star, "PM insults Herself" deserves the best works of appreciation for the author. It is indeed a disgrace for us, belonging to the same species, to think how venomous we can be, even for the most trivial reason; how pitifully we can brandish our own image and how disgustingly we expose our incivility! It was so unbecoming of the Prime Minister to hurl such indecent remarks about the Leader of the Opposition. We, the common womenfolk always tend to join the line whenever our common sense feels the sting. Any repression, injustice, insult or oppression on women triggers off our anger. Because we feel the attack on our self-esteem. Well then, the difference is so clear.... one has to respect this "self-esteem". Possess begets respect as every other attribute. This very incident has compelled us to believe that our Honourable Prime Minister is devoid of self-esteem. Heading towards the 3rd Millennium, how can the Head of a Government be a woman comment. 'No decent woman stays at the hotel'. What does she do when she goes abroad. What do other woman professionals do when they go abroad on prestigious assignments? What kind of remark was that? It is a matter of regret that the Members of Parliament waste time on extremely personal remarks at the cost of our expense. After all, do they ever think that we, as tax-payers have all the right to seek accountability for each session that turns out a waste?

Death of a policeman

Sir, Ahad Parvez, a valiant police sergeant, died fighting a gang of miscreants in Motijheel last week and left behind an example of courage and devotion to duty, now widely believed to be a rarity among the police of our country.

The tragic incident amply demonstrates the lurid state of present day law and order situation of the country and how even at the centre of the capital city anyone is likely to fall victim to terrorism. It is hard to believe that police do not know anything about the criminals operating in that area. We demand that those criminals be ferreted out and punished.

However, it appears to be a mystery why two other armed policemen present at the spot remained silent spectators while an unarmed sergeant alone chased, fought and was murdered.

We mourn the death of this brave policeman and reasonably expect the government to value and recognise the supreme sacrifice he made. The government should at least ensure that his departure does not spell disaster for the unfortunate family.

M A Khandakar
Uttara, Dhaka

What is the logic behind it?

Sir, I was going to see an ailing friend of mine at the CMH. The security personnel stopped me at the Cantonment Gate and told me that I cannot take my yellow-plated car inside. They were very polite, but firm. They advised me to park the car somewhere by the roadside and walk or take a rickshaw inside.

"But why don't you search the car and take down its number and other particulars." I request them equally politely. They were not interested.

"We have nothing against you or your driver Sir, but our orders are not to allow any yellow-plated vehicles inside the Cantonment."

"But it is only people who can commit an offense or a crime. The vehicle, by itself, cannot do anything wrong," I implore them.

Everyday hundreds of buses, cars, baby-taxis, rickshaws are allowed to enter the Cantonment. Anyone, even a foreigner, can enter there. Then why should a car be prevented only because it is yellow plated? Lots of Bangladeshis — employees in foreign missions, local professionals working with international agencies and various world-bodies ride yellow-plated vehicles. They probably are entering the Cantonment

area for some reason or other everyday. But only when they ride their office vehicles, they become suspects. I have made it a point to ensure that even the army-chief is aware of this strange restriction. But nothing happened so far. I haven't found any logic in this false sense of security.

A Z M Abdul Ali
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Chemical factory in residential area

Sir, Lately the building next to ours has been emitting foul chemical smells on and off during the day. A medicine company has its office there for many years, but without any signboard. Storage of raw chemicals and its processing are prohibited or restricted under the existing laws. Since ours is a residential area, would anyone please take note?

A Resident
Dhaka

Is 'mineral science' a part of agriculture?

Sir, We are glad to learn through press that the 9-member committee — headed by Islamic University VC Kaes Uddin

Ahmed — which was constituted by the government to formulate the course curriculum for the newly established Science and Technology Universities has recently submitted its report. In the report, the committee has recommended opening of 5 academic faculties in each of the Science and Technology University, viz 1. School of Physical Science 2. School of Life Science 3. School of Agriculture and Mineral Science 4. School of Social Science and 5. School of Applied Science and Technologies.

However, it is not clear to us why 'Mineral Science' has been incorporated in the School of Agriculture which in our opinion is inappropriate and unjustified. Because Agriculture is a wide-ranging subject and art of farming which include crop production, livestock, and poultry raising, fish culture and foresting while mineralogy is another science of minerals.

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Dhaka