

Don't Use Religion in Politics

THIS is a shameful exploitation of religious sentiments, quite ironically as well by the two predominant figures in our national politics — Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina — who are supposed to set standards. The opposition leader opened the hatch. Reflecting a tougher mood against the government she put a sop on the pervasive expectation that the month of Ramadan might be kept free from hartal calls to allow people to concentrate on *Siam*. She suggested that 'if need be' hartal would be called during the month of abnegation and prayers. Drawing upon a historical reference she virtually said that if the battle of Badr could take place in the holy month of Ramadan what stops one from countenancing hartal in the same month. In other words, she is trying to arouse the sentiments of a *Jihad* or a religious war, as it were, among the people calling upon them to rally round her party's cause for toppling an elected government. Firstly, she is using religion to legitimise a hartal call; and secondly, she is so bent upon bringing down a duly constituted government, which has but so little left to its tenure anyway, that even the month of Ramadan need not be immune to hartal.

The Prime Minister, for her part, countered the opposition leader's argument by using religious sentiments with equal vehemence. She suggested that since the 'Kafirs' (religious heretics) had waged the battle of Badr during the month of Ramadan the opposition leader's agitational proposition for the same month amounted to a similar act of illegality.

We condemn this shameless playing on religious passions to gain politically over each other. On the practical level, this denigrates religion and politics — both in an equal measure.

On balance, the Prime Minister needs to overcome the pattern of dialogue offer and vitriol alternating in her political behaviourism towards the opposition. She makes an offer for talks to the opposition leader when faced with a prospect for hartal but invariably falls short of writing out a formal invitation to Begum Zia. And, when the latter does not respond positively to the PM's offer she spews out unprintable epithets against the opposition leader. This time the PM has tried to malign Begum Zia's alleged indifference to education by alluding to 'her SSC exam results.' This obnoxious political idiom kills a dialogue even before it is born. The PM either sounds sincere and genuine or draws a blank as she has been doing so far.

Death of a Legend

EVEN before the nation could overcome the bereavement at the loss of poetess Begum Sufia Kamal, death strikes again, this time to snatch away a star from our intellectual firmament. National Professor Abdur Razzak's demise robs the nation of an enormously gifted intellectual. His very presence was inspiring to people who knew him closely and even to those who met him only once in their lives. We take solace to our profound grief from the belief that the respect he enjoyed in his life-time has made him into a legend for the future.

Professor Razzak was a scholar *par excellence*, an unassuming, deeply committed seeker of knowledge. For him, pursuit of knowledge had been an all-pervasive passion. Driven by an insatiable urge to know more, he freely delved in different branches of wisdom developing insights that were so sparkingly his own. True, his attainment and assimilation of knowledge seldom found expression in black and white — he had very few publications to his name. Yet, the thirst with which he had gone about enhancing his scholastic ability by moving from one discipline to another must set a precedent for others in the academic world of Bangladesh. His towering yet quiet presence didn't dwarf his companions but stimulated them to go beyond their limits.

As a person, Professor Razzak was within himself, content with what he had. He was not worldly wise and never intended to be. He shunned the path of wealth and luxury to take up the life of an ascetic. Self-effacing, he had an incredibly disarming smile rooted in his inherent simplicity and profound love for people. His death leaves us poorer with an unfillable void.

Playing with Exams

THE degree examinees sat for their exams across the country in a state of total chaos on Sunday. Without playing the old record about the number of students expelled on the first day for cheating and about the hey-day enjoyed by many examinees in reproducing smuggled material on the scripts, it can be said that faulty and incorrect admit and registration cards created havoc at many examination centres. A large number of students received cards at the examination centres themselves with so many others having been given special numbers in place of admit cards on the telephonic instructions of the National University authorities. Complaints of erroneous admit cards being sent to many centres and admission of examinees to the centres without admit cards were common enough to escape notice. The confusion was compounded by an overlapping of papers which impelled the authorities to change the schedule for them.

The National University was established to reduce the load on Dhaka University. But in reality, as our recent experience shows, the important organisation is unable to cope with its specified responsibilities. The NU seems to be run in an amateurish manner. It seems that the whole idea of having an efficient examination authority in the form of NU is a casualty of the naive attitude of the authority. We believe this year's experience will be a good lesson for the NU bosses for their future course of action in making flawless examination arrangements.

Air of Inevitability or Atmosphere of Resignation?

Till Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi are entrenched in their respective party, the Indian politics will not undergo any significant change. Even heat and dust will be missing in the next two years.

INDIAN politics has now an air of inevitability about it. The two main parties, the BJP and the Congress, have entrenched themselves. Between them they have some 300 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha. No third force or an alternative is on the horizon. Nor anybody worth noticing is talking about such a possibility. Even the communists, who at times propose a new front, have lost credibility after their support to the Congress.

Leaders of the two parties, Atal Behari Vajpayee of the BJP and Sonia Gandhi of the Congress, are also secure in their positions. There is no challenge to them from within or without. Indeed, the politics of both parties has come to revolve around them. Even dissenters within the two parties have come to accept the fact that there is no going away from them.

Not long ago, one heard rumblings in the BJP, the hard-liners pinpricking the liberals. After the elections even whispering has stopped because of the realisation that it was Vajpayee who won, not the party. Home Minister L K Advani goes out of the way these days to attribute the BJP victory to Vajpayee.

Had the hardliners still any say, Kalyan Singh would not have stepped down from the chief ministership of UP. It took RSS ideologue Govindacharya more than a month to discipline him after Vajpayee said that he must go. His supporters among the hardliners vainly tried against his

removal. Ultimately, Kalyan Singh announced that he would quit the moment the Prime Minister told him to do so. This was a belated effort to placate Vajpayee. Even the Congress, which shares the same premises with the old Hindu temple, should be vacated. He rounded his trip off with a trip to Mathura, another place where the mosque and the temple stand side by side. But no attention was paid to him or to his statement on the handing over of the mosque to the Hindus.

What he and the like of him in the BJP do not realise is that the claim on the mosques in Varanasi and Mathura does not evoke emotions. *Hindutva* does not sell any more. Were they to stir up things again in its name, they would find people unresponsive because, primarily, they do not like to mix religion with politics. Vajpayee himself has been trying to occupy the middle space which the Congress has been reluctantly

vacating due to the faulty politics it is following. Advani has realised this. He did not even try to save Kalyan Singh because the latter wanted to go back to the days of the *mandir*. Advani may, however, try to capture the BJP to have a place of influence by the time the question of Vajpayee's succession arises. From No 2 to No 1 position in the government is far more difficult than from the BJP's presidentship to Prime Ministership. There are already reports that Advani would like to succeed BJP president

split after him despite the underpinning of the RSS, its cadre and concept of *Hindutva*? The fear of split also haunts the Congress if ever Sonia Gandhi decides to step down. In fact, the party has a bigger problem: it cannot do with her and also without her. She is the centre where the divergent elements within the Congress meet. Without her, the party may split into two or three parts. At the same time, the party is going downward under her leadership. It appears that people still accept her as the

polls. It is her foreign origin. There is no questioning of her devotion or dedication to India. But the voters are not yet ready to make her the Prime Minister. The longer she takes in appreciating this point, the less are the chances of the Congress making any headway. The party has lost the government in Goa. Delhi is next in line. And there is no likelihood of the cyclone-devastated Orissa returning the Congress again in the Assembly election early next year because her visit to the state has made no impact. If the Congress loses in Bihar, her problems will only multiply.

Sonia Gandhi fails to appreciate another point of inevitability in Indian politics. People have stopped trusting one-party rule at the Centre. They want the government at New Delhi to reflect local sentiments, which they express through regional parties. The BJP has realised this. The government of 24 parties looks more of a jumble. But there is no other option at present. The BJP feels confident that the wider base does not give power to any single party to point at it the gun as the AIADMK did during the last BJP-led coalition regime.

How long will this position continue is not difficult to foresee. The Vajpayee government faces no danger for another two years or so. The situation may

change if it fails to perform by then. Once the BJP allies find out that people are turning their back on the government because of its failures they too may become restive and revolt. The National Democratic Alliance will begin to show cracks. Then the Kalyan Singh types will have more voice within the BJP as well.

The problem with the Congress is a bit different. It does not have any leader of stature except Sonia Gandhi. Like Indira Gandhi, she too has cut leaders within the party to size. She forced Sharad Pawar and P A Sangma to quit because they could challenge her. She may one day realise, if she has not already done so, that the Congress cannot make the government under her leadership. Once that happens, she may make a categorical announcement that she will not want to be India's Prime Minister.

But it looks as if she would like to nominate her son, Rahul, her successor as Indira Gandhi had done in the case of Rajiv Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi's daughter Priyanka took to politics like a duck to water. But she has through Congress spokesmen announced that Priyanka would not join politics.

Till Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi are entrenched in their respective party, the Indian politics will not undergo any significant change. Even heat and dust will be missing in the next two years. That is why there is an air of inevitability in the country. Or, is it an atmosphere of resignation?

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Kushabhai Thakre, who ends his second tenure in May.

Advani is moving closer to the organisation for another reason. The unstable conditions within the Ram Prakash Gupta ministry in UP may necessitate a mid-term poll, probably along with election in Bihar in March. Advani is in charge of elections in the BJP and he wants the party in his grip. This does not, however, in any way affect the position of Vajpayee, who is considered 'must' for the party. In fact, the BJP's biggest dilemma is: After Vajpayee who? Will the party

Congress president. When it comes to her heading the government, they seem to be dragging their feet.

The Anthony Committee looking into the causes for the Congress reverses dares not pinpoint this. No doubt, factions within the party have contributed to the defeat of many Congress candidates. The real reason is that she does not sell beyond a point. The Congress leaders know this. But they are afraid to say so to her face.

It is not dynastic politics, which scared the electorate at

OPINION

Political Actions: Agony and Ecstasy

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

could he be convinced of the story presenting dramatic act of chivalry on the part of Mr Sadek Hossain Khoka, MP on a policeman when he himself was dangerously bleeding. Mr Nasim was seemingly unable to measure the degree of Khoka's physical strength. A few days earlier it was Khoka who threw an open challenge to the stalker Home Minister to face him without police guard! It was practically an invitation to a free hand duel.

However, the government expressed, apparently a genuine intention to get an unbiased picture about the whole incident on one hand through instituting an enquiry and on the

informed the press that three rubber bullets were removed from Khoka's wounds and that one more was still there awaiting removal. He also firmly challenged all those having reservation about the story that if his statement could be disproved by anyone he would instantly withdraw himself from the present anti-government movement. We are yet to know if anybody in the government is willing to accept the challenge but we are certainly pleased to watch the gesture of goodwill displayed by Mr Nasim to Mr Sadek Hossain Khoka when the former visited ailing Khoka in

ing extremely 'private and personal' life of the two leaders. This is indeed an awful phenomenon seizing ignominiously our moral fabric and hence must be unequivocally deprecated. The current spat has been attributed to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who was reported to have made some objectionable remarks on the personal life of BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia on the floor of Jatiya Sangsad.

By-election in a Tangil constituency has been completed amid bomb blasts and BDR firing at four of the 82 polling

fused to oblige party directive to withdraw. There is, however, no such dispute in respect of Awami League candidate Dr Alauddin for the by-election in a Rajshahi constituency. In fact, Dr Alauddin was an Awami Leaguer originally but having failed to get party nomination in 1996 election he joined BNP and was elected. Both Swapan and Dr Alauddin were later inducted in the cabinet as Deputy Minister and Minister of State respectively, apparently of their own volition. BNP fought a legal battle in the Supreme Court and later in the Election Commission sitting as a tribunal. Their seats in the Jatiya Sangsad were even-

by-elections. However, the two factions of Jatiya Party viz Ershad's and Mizan Chowdhury's have filed nominations along with a number of independent candidates at each polling station.

Frantic efforts are now on to raise a tempest in the overall political firmament of the country. BNP-led opposition has made a renewed pledge to unseat the government. To this end programmes of frequent hartal besides intermittent mass demonstration on the street and public meetings (yet to be on a single platform) are being held to up beat the rhythm. The expected momentum is, however, not in sight to precipitate an immediate crisis. Prime Minister Hasina had already offered to discuss on any and all issues with Begum Zia. But the BNP chairperson has turned down the offer reiterating her demand on Hasina to step down and also to give a mid-term election under a caretaker government. She foresees this to be happening by January 2000 A.D. under a compelling situation but her confidence to come back to power in such mid-term election is perhaps yet to attain reasonable credibility.

Foot Note: Naming of a national institution after a living person, more so, after one who is heading the government is, in my personal opinion, a worst form of perversion engineered here for ulterior interest to curry favour with the potential benefactor. Naming of a departmental facility at BKSP after Sheikh Hasina is a pointer. Will she kindly take care of such a far reaching, vicious game?

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other, appointing a 3-member medical team ostensibly to assess the extent of the injury sustained by the BNP leaders and also to ensure proper medical treatment to the MP primarily and others. BNP leadership had already turned down the proposed intervention by the government as an 'eye wash'.

Whatever it was, most of the dailies gave description of the incident in their respective issues on November 09, 1999. Some even quoted a number of doctors, including the one attending Sadek Hossain Khoka in South Asian Hospital and the remarks attributed to Professor Matur Rahman, Senior Consultant in BIRDEM. The first one practically avoided a direct reply to the press reporters on the magnitude of the injury sustained by Khoka while the BIRDEM Consultant plainly said that Khoka's injury was nothing serious. He had dressed the bruises and advised re-dressing after 2/3 days. According to him there was no necessity to go for surgery in such cases.

However, the BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiya

BIRDEM hospital on November 16, 1999.

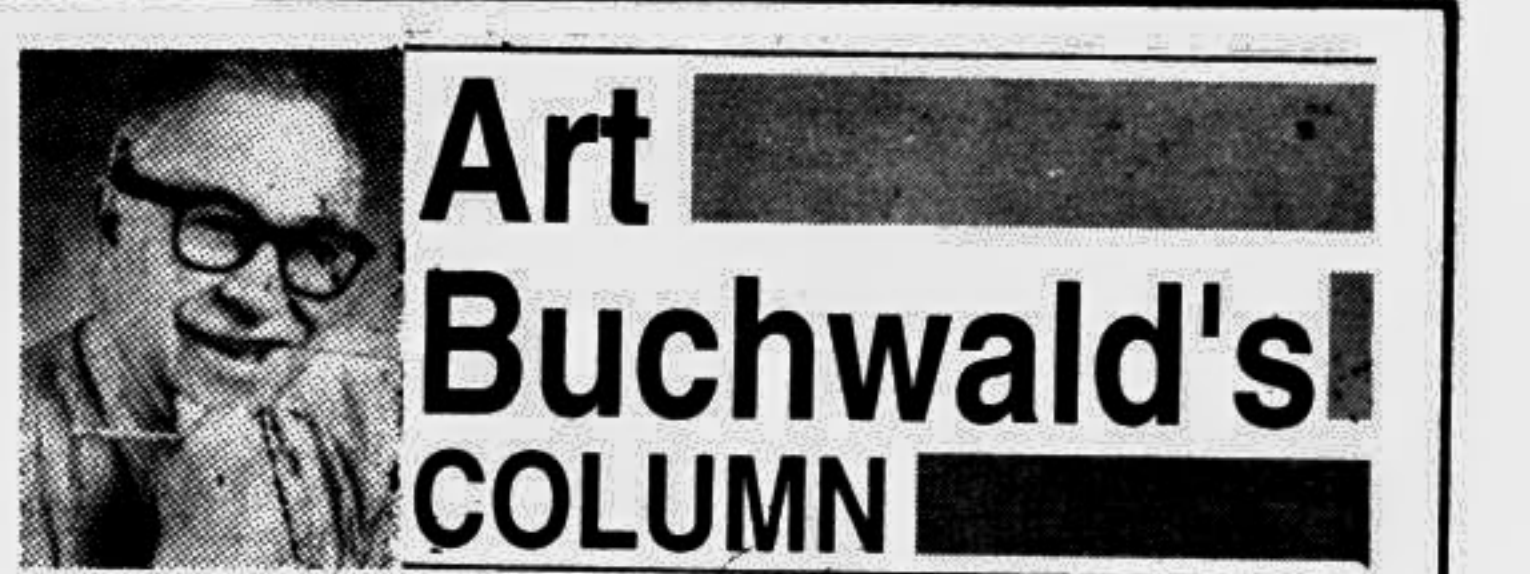
Khoka's and others' confinement in hospital beds haven't however made any difference to the overall anti-government movement of the opposition. We have had a day-long hartal on November 16 and another on November 25. Meantime Begum Zia had asked the educational institutions to complete their examinations by November 24, at the latest.

She has also declared that hartals and other agitational programme would be there even in the holy month of Ramadan. Making such announcement, she had likened the programme in Ramadan with the holy battle of Badr led by prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) against the infidels! She couldn't perhaps imagine how much she would have ridiculed herself making such an outrageous comparison. Anyway, her wisdom permitted such utterance and so she did.

For sometimes now we are coming across most stale and vituperative statements being exchanged between the position and the opposition, all featur-

centres, voting in those four centres was immediately suspended but from the results of the 78 polling centres Showkat Momen Shahjahan was shown to have won by over 15 thousand votes. The former Awami League MP in this constituency Abdul Kader Siddiqui Bir Urtam and now an independent candidate was defeated. Mr Siddiqui has rejected the result alleging massive rigging by the Awami League candidate Showkat. The four polling centres where the election commission has suspended voting would have a little over 13 thousand voters and if on re-polling Siddiqui bagged the entire votes he would not win. In any case, it is for him now to lodge formal protest with the election tribunal with enough proof to reverse the result already announced.

Away at Sirajganj the Awami League worker Chayan contesting in the ensuing by-election there as an independent candidate while the party nomination was given to Swapan, has been expelled from Awami League for having re-



Art Buchwald's COLUMN

The New Thanksgiving

WHAT I miss the most around Thanksgiving time are the Norman Rockwell covers on the Saturday Evening Post. Let's face it — the Norman Rockwell Family at Thanksgiving is gone. They have been replaced by the 1999 Non-Nuclear Family.

In the Norman Rockwell Family there was the mother, the father, grandpa and grandma, and the little tykes, all standing what a real American holiday was all about.

But alas, the Norman Rockwell Family has disappeared and been replaced by the Non-Nuclear Family. Here is how it is shaping up.

The Bomeisters are having the dinner, but Gerald Soda (the 11-year-old son of Mrs. Edna Bomeister, who is divorced from Gerald's father, Jim Soda) has to go to his father's home in Nantucket.

Ed Bomeister intended to bring his widowed mother from Seattle, but she now has a boyfriend and will spend the holiday with his family. Edna Bomeister's mother, who lives in Sun City, Arizona, couldn't come because she was unable to get a frequent flyer airplane ticket.

At the last moment, Bomeister's brother, Bubbie said he had just busted up with his wife and would like to come to Ed's for Thanksgiving. Edna thought she was being taken advantage of, but there was nothing she could do, as Bubbie had not only lost his wife but had just been downsized at the warehouse by Wal-Mart.

If everyone had kept to their schedule, there wouldn't have been a problem, but things started to unravel when young Gerald Soda's plane to Nantucket was cancelled. Mr. Soda was furious and said he was going to take Mrs. Bomeister to court as she had violated the court decree.

Mrs. Bomeister couldn't get a final count so she ordered a turkey and a ham. This was barely enough after she found out that Ed's boss was coming with his new girlfriend.

I keep wondering how Norman Rockwell would paint this Thanksgiving dinner. I am certain everyone wouldn't be smiling at the turkey.

His famous cover of the Thanksgiving family still sells. People want to remember what a real family gathering was all about. I know Norman would have gotten a frequent flyer ticket for Ed's mother-in-law. Also, Mrs. Bomeister would have made her own stuffing instead of buying it at the store.

Ed's brother would be in the picture with his wife after their reconciliation.

Little Gerald would not have to go to Nantucket because in Norman Rockwell's world there would be no divorce decrees that would make him go somewhere else on the holiday.

Norman would present the Bomeisters as a happy, functional family, ready to dig in to the turkey and sweet potatoes.

It's a Thanksgiving without glitches and as warm and tasty as the holiday itself. It is no wonder that now in American households, where everyone is at the table, the older generation says to the younger one, 'You should have been there.'

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To the Editor...

Image of JU

Sir, This refers of an article written by Abdul Bayes titled *Restoring JU's Tarnished Image* in the DS of November 21. We congratulate the writer for his timely opinion. We urge the schools, colleges and universities to adopt the following measures to remove further deadlocks in our educational institutions.

- 1) Identify the teachers who encourage students in negative ways.
- 2) Select students who really want education.
- 3) Discourage political leaders to interfere in educational institutions.
- 4) If all teachers and students unify, then on one can create problems.

We request the writer to call a meeting with the VCs, principals and headmasters.

M Ali
Dhaka

"A Pleasant Surprise"

Sir, The editorial titled 'A Pleasant Surprise' on the 18th November, 1999 suggests a new trend of politics that must be appreciated by all of us. Muhammad Nasim, the Home Minister, is a decent person with compassion and sympathy for others. His noble gesture to Sadek Hossain Khoka, when under treatment at BIRDEM for his injury, was the normal practice of healthy politics. Let us hope that Nasim's decency and courtesy should not be assessed as a sign of weakness in the current political confrontation between the two major political parties.

It is a pity that we always judge everything in the negative way. This must stop once and

for all. We have got everything in the country — a good number of honest men and women, and economic resources. What is needed most is love for the country and its people.

Abul Ashraf Noor
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People's expectations

Sir, The politicians of the country need to aim at continuing democratic process. We shall have to create a new era in development of democracy and democratic values.

The people in Bangladesh are not lagging compared to others of other countries in terms of merit and wisdom. There is no reason to be disappointed. We have a lot of natural resources for the development of our country. We urge the government and the opposition to work unitedly to fulfill people's expectation.

Nargis Parvin
Masampur, Sirajganj

Fate of our School Students

Sir, In view of the Ramadan which starts from the second week of December, all primary and secondary schools have been trying hard to complete the annual examination earlier. But how will the children will go to schools and appear for the exams amidst frequent hartals? Fixing dates to hold exams caused enough problems. Rescheduling due to hartals between exams adds to the suffering.

Hartal is now part of our life

but the students are suffering too much. Students are the future hope of our nation and they should grow up as worthy and useful citizens. To ensure proper environment for education, the political parties must possess commitment. We are asking the political parties to decide the fate of our students.

Abu Gursel Siddiqui
AB Bank Ltd, Station Road,
Chittagong.

Spend it for the poor

Sir, It has been reported that when our Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad informed the press that the government has changed the venue of NAM Summit Conference from Centre from Osmani Uddyan to Chandrima Uddyan, one journalist instantly quipped, 'Good sense has prevailed upon the government.'

Better late than never. In the face of people's opposition and people's demand our government has long last given up its adamant decision to construct the conference centre at Osmani Uddyan.

But we would appreciate it most if the huge amount of money is spent for the construction of houses for the homeless and evicted slum dwellers instead of an extravagant and ostentatious NAM Centre for the foreign guests and delegates in a poor country like ours. Even if we do have to build the NAM Centre, I propose that it is done with our own resources rather than with loans from the Chinese government.

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street
Wari, Dhaka-1203.

Over-bridge at Shonir Akhra

Sir, Now-a-days it has become very risky to cross/move along the Dhaka-Chittagong highway particularly near Shonir Akhra/Zia Sharaf/Mukti Sharani as heavy traffic jam always persists. Passers-by, businessmen, office-goers, school going children including old people have to use the road. Almost everyday accidents of some sort occurs and valuable lives are lost.

There are many educational institutions including a university and bazzars are situated on both sides of the highway. Before the road diversion was introduced, accidents were more frequent but in absence of an overbridge, chances of accidents are still there. Moreover, very often, on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway buses, cars, trucks loaded with passengers and perishable goods remain stranded for hours together thereby increasing the sufferings of far flung travellers as well as damaging the goods.

In the backdrop of such a situation, the people of the area draw the kind attention of the Roads and Highways Department and other concerned authorities to kindly look into the matter with a sense of urgency to construct an over-bridge/underground tunnel near Shonir Akhra under Demra Police Station.

Md Ghulam Mottuiddin
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