

Antidote to Air Pollution

WE have only the government and its blinkered and stone-deaf environment ministry to blame for the extremely poor quality air we breathe in Dhaka City today. It has given rise to the question of livability in the national metropolis of the country. We wonder what has happened to the concept of collective responsibility in a cabinet system of government! The cabinet, led by PM Sheikh Hasina, seems clearly blame-worthy for the lack of will in demanding an explanation from the ministry of environment for its barren performance for long four years.

It is not political will of the consensual bi-partisan type we are talking about here; rather it has always been a matter for an administrative will to be brought to bear on the issue. Enforcement of fuel quality or vehicular emission standards has nothing to do whatsoever with political stand-off, polarisation, vitriol and moans and sighs over illusive dialogue. There could not be any mental block to the pursuit of the apolitical goal for safe air. But yes, the agenda on environmental pollution was not organisationally adopted as a plank of the major political parties as such. This is as ludicrous as it is outrageous, because here is a grotesque irony in the task being so close to the people's heart and perfectly doable as well but then which has been never approached with a mind to overcome the problem. Ranging from an apparent decision to ban the import of leaded fuel and two-stroke engines through that of setting up check-points to identify the offending transports to toying with the idea of having environmental courts, the charade goes on, no questions asked about the implementational status. We have often aired the view that if the numerous government or public sector vehicles which have been belching lethal monoxide were phased out this would have set the right tenor for the polluting vehicles in the private sector to be ordered off the streets.

The World Bank's country director Frederick Temple has added his voice to our cause. His analysis should stir the placid waters of governance. Regulations spawning new opportunities for corruption do prove unhelpful in our context. It may be a good idea, therefore, in accord with Temple's prescription that we bridge the huge differential between petrol and kerosene prices to discourage a brew of the two. But enforcement of fuel standards like that of road-worthiness of vehicles is a matter of rudimentary governance.

Our emphasis remains on making the environment ministry's work accountable. We want to see results not the waiting over lack of coordination.

Exam or a Hoax?

SEVERAL thousand examinees expelled, mass cheating and clashes at different centres in the first three days of the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations programme speak of anything but a healthy education environment. As it seems, examinations under the country's five education boards, both SSC and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC), have become nothing less than military manoeuvres with heavy deployment of law and order personnel at 'trouble zones', with even BDR jawans being called in at times. Evidently, gone are the days when teachers and local government officials were enough to conduct reasonably 'fair' examinations. In fact, police patrol is no longer adequate. While cheating in the examinations assumes mammoth proportions, police have opted to join the bandwagon, so said the Dhaka Education Board chairman at Sunday's meeting with the parliamentary committee on the education ministry. SSC and HSC examinations have truly become a hoax!

Primarily, the crisis — it is indeed one — is the concomitant result of years of enforcement failure, if not nurturing of this ethical aberration. The pity of it is, nowadays students demonstrate and go on rampage if not allowed to cheat. Many students, it appears, have deemed it as their 'lawful' right, understandable given the fact that so many cheats have been allowed to get away with it. The impact of such an arrangement is multi-dimensional. First, students who actually work hard and shun unfair means are not properly rewarded for their efforts, neither in grading nor upon graduation to working world. Second, beneficiaries of such a systemic failure go on to constitute a substantial section of the country's work force, thereby actually hampering national productivity. Last but not the least, mass cheating eventually leads to total disintegration of the education system with little respect for it in the public mind.

The Dhaka Education Board chairman was absolutely right when he said that the prevailing situation was scary. To restore sanity and solemnity to the examinations system, what we need is strict enforcement of the rules. With hundreds of thousands appearing at the SSC and HSC examinations every year, the task is indeed Herculean; however, once the tough tenor is set, aberrations will automatically decrease. In the long run, the policy-planners might start rethinking the examination system as such; there lies quite a few loopholes in it to be plugged.

Like Father Like Son?

THERE are people in every free society who make news by their queer actions. But there are very few examples where the incidents that make news are almost identical in nature and that too scripted by two generations of the same family. Last year the father almost hijacked a bank in broad daylight in front of hundreds of people in the busy capital's commercial district of Motijheel. The drama continued for some days before a court ruling was obtained by one party to the contrary. But there was no end to speculation and a lot of interesting stories did their rounds about the lighter side of the serious episode. Hardly seven months have passed, the son seems to have followed in the footsteps of the 'illustrious' father and almost hijacked the Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industries, the apex body of businessmen and entrepreneurs in the important port city on Sunday. The incident gave rise to speculations and excitement in the business and political circles of Chittagong. Newspaper reports say that a senior vice-president of the organisation, whose directorship could have gone had there been an election, according to the rulers of the CCCI, seized the chair of the President temporarily, as the latter did not turn up in office sensing foul-play of the senior vice-president and his group. Once belonging to the same group the sr. vice-president thought it prudent to make his move in haste lest he missed the chance presented by troubled waters.

The incumbent president, overstaying due to legal tangles between two powerful groups, called the whole sordid affair 'immoral and illegal' claiming that no one can officiate during his presence in the city and sit on his chair. The temporary occupier of the chair finally gave up and made himself comfortable on a sofa in the same office. These two incidents indicate, more than sufficiently, that no high chair is safe from self-seeking mavericks. Can we term it also as an ideal example of the saying — 'like father like son'?

ONOTANTER Manosh Kanna, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has inflicted the ultimate insults on the nascent democratic body politk of Bangladesh. How? By projecting a negative attitude with regard to ensuring of an effective women's voice in the rule of the country during her hour-long televised face-to-face with the nation's programme. When a lady from audience asked the Prime Minister whether she considering the possibilities of increased reserved seats and direct election of women instead of present thirty seats indirectly elected for the Jatiyo Sangsad or not, the PM in her usual manner was, at first, evasive and then came out in full splendour. She acknowledged that the Cabinet has in principle approved the continuation of the present system and then blamed the Opposition for not cooperating with her government for necessary constitutional amendments in order to continue the existing arrangements.

She made it sound like as if continuation of the present system of indirectly elected thirty women reserved seats, which is to expire in year 2001, is the ultimate answer to women's political empowerment. As if enough has not been written and analysed about how ineffective the roles and activities of the female MPs from the reserved seats have been in promoting women's issues through their participation in the formulation and implementation of policies for women. As if the conscious citizens of this country are not aware about how the entire procedure, beginning from selection, nomination and election of these thirty female parliamentarians from the reserved seats highlight women's subordinate and dependency status and how they demonstrate that "women's travel from home to legislature following the patriarchal route" in effect "reestablish inequality in gender relations in the society" and how they are being used as instant vote bank by our gender biased political parties.

In reality, however, there is a growing realization that the system must be made effective that the leadership of this country is committed to ensure women's input into the system. We are aware that there is a need to create a critical mass at the national level. However, only increase in their numerical strength is not enough. Their potentials and efficacy

Why do the leadership fail to comprehend the insurmountable impediments — political, social and economic faced by women candidates and that without creating an environment it is extremely difficult for a dispossessed group to participate fully in the political process of the country?

must also be harnessed by making them responsible to their constituents rather than to the party stalwarts. The present system, in the given criteria, falls far short of such scenario. Interestingly, it seems that the PM is also aware of the shortcomings of the existing system otherwise she would not have, almost spontaneously responded that it was better to have something than nothing. Perhaps the Prime Minister and her advisors need to be told that there is another side of the coin and i.e. it is better to have nothing than having futile and meaningless substance especially if there is an ulterior motive behind it. I do not condone BNP's boycotting of the parliament but I am relieved that its absence would block the passage of constitutional amendment bills, which would have created another 'thirty sets of ornaments' for next one decade. What a shame that would have been for the nation. By default then BNP is helping our cause. We would rather have *shunno goal* than *useless gorus*. Actually the PM and her advisors could have done a better job, if they wanted to expose the opposition, besides demonstrating their genuine interest in democratization process. If the Cabinet had okayed in principle both increased number of women's seats and mode of direct election and requested BNP to at least attend one session in order to serve the national interest. Was she afraid that BNP would have done it? Most likely BNP also would not have agreed to such arrangement (all major political parties have a consensus on this issue) but PM's case would have been stronger and her claim to be a champion of furthering democratization in the country would have been vindicated.

Guessing game aside what is sad about the whole thing is to helplessly watch our leadership's inability to understand that ensuring women's effective representation at every decision-making level is to fundamentally deal with a question of democracy and broadening its base. If a country is serious about deepening its democracy it must have to deal with women's empowerment because for its effectiveness and success the full spectrum groups—major as well as the subgroups must be

brought into the system. Democracy's success and failure depend on the roles played by these subgroups of which women constitute the majority. It must kept in mind that democracy as an ideal and principle is inclusive and any system, which practices exclusiveness, is not a democracy. The constant struggle by the marginalized groups over the right to be in rule of the country and their inclusion through accommodation, which make the system just and equitable. A system, which believes in exclusion, is anything but democracy. Inclusion of women who constitute fifty per cent of the population but remain at the periphery of the system with no access to power, resources, education health and equal opportunity, thus, form the very heart and soul of a democratic

national governments have come together to bring the issue of women's democratic rights to the fore. The Beijing Platform for Action defined two strategic objectives concerning women's participation in power and decision-making ensuring that women have equal access to and full participation in the structures of power and decision-making, and increasing women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. The Commonwealth is also urging its member countries to achieve a target of no less than 30 per cent of women in decision-making by the year 2005. The communiqué of the 1999 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting referred to gender equality as 'an essential component of human equality and basic human rights.' Various strategies have now been

adopted by its member countries around the world as part of a pledge to work with 'renewed vigor' for 'democracy.' Increasing women's effective representation in the legislature is, thus, a significant thrust and impetus in making women's voices heard in the management of the affairs of the country. The results have been quite hopeful.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) after re-examining the number of women in national decision-making noted encouraging trends in most countries within its fold. It is also noted that in comparison to 1995, 25 of 46 Commonwealth countries analyzed in January 2000 demonstrate upward trend in the percentage of women parliamentarians in their Parliament but five have neither increased or decreased their percentage, and 16 out of 46 Commonwealth countries have experienced a percentage decrease (Women in Commonwealth Parliaments). Needless to say that Bangladesh is one of those five and perhaps would soon fall into the category where the percentage is on

the decrease. Interestingly, Bangladesh is a signatory to all the international conventions and promise bound to take steps to bring women into the decision-making process of the country including in its top most national fora. It is also supposed to remain sensitive to the urging of the Commonwealth in the regard. But even after thirty years of independence women's voice has remained muted and stifled in the pivotal forum of our parliamentary democracy despite having 'dual' representation and successive government's claims in having improved 11 per cent women's share in the national legislature. Their peripheral positions in the Cabinet, absence as Presiding Officers, which have enormous impacts on the external perception of women in the Parliament, and cosmetic presence in the Parliamentary committee system apply sum up the reality that persist under the façade of women's political empowerment.

The Bangladeshi women leaders and academicians have repeated pointed out the causes of such malaise but to no avail. They have been persistence, especially since the 'democracy' movement that was instrumental in overthrowing the autocratic regime of Ershad, in their demands for being directly elected at the highest level of decision-making. Such positive scenario was feasible had there been a total commitment on the part of the political leadership of the country. And had the political parties, in this context, been totally committed.

Unfortunately the fact of the matter is that our self-seeking politicians have been using the state apparatus for self-aggrandizement only without paying any heed to women and democracy as their political agenda. Unlike the political parties of a number of developed and developing countries who have adopted policies that enhanced women's candidacy winnable and numerically better, the ones in Bangladesh have been blissfully happy with their male dominated party structure and a women's front as fifth wheel of the party having no say either in the formulation of the party manifesto or



PANORAMA
Dilara Choudhury

order. But despite their claims on democracy through national liberation movement, mass struggle, women's movement and their voices being heard during the popular upsurges of the oppressed people and claims to power by the underprivileged, their rightful demands have always been pushed aside once struggle was over. As a result, as correctly argued by the feminist theorists, that women as a group, whose identities are based on gender rather than simply being individuals, have been in reality unable to enjoy the freedom and equality so eloquently prophesied by the exponents of such an order and been debarrd in taking their destiny in their own hands. Obviously, in most countries democratic order remained a mere ritual than anything substantive.

Indeed new forms of democracy, more intensive and engaging have been called for. Women's participation became a part and parcel of such discourse. And worldwide women's movements, commitment by the international organizations as well as by the respec-

order. But despite their claims on democracy through national liberation movement, mass struggle, women's movement and their voices being heard during the popular upsurges of the oppressed people and claims to power by the underprivileged, their rightful demands have always been pushed aside once struggle was over. As a result, as correctly argued by the feminist theorists, that women as a group, whose identities are based on gender rather than simply being individuals, have been in reality unable to enjoy the freedom and equality so eloquently prophesied by the exponents of such an order and been debarrd in taking their destiny in their own hands. Obviously, in most countries democratic order remained a mere ritual than anything substantive.

Verdict Against Hindutva: Bihar's Blow to BJP

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

By vetoing the BJP's sectarian agenda, the non-BJP parties have a lot to gain. If they succumb to the BJP—on Constitution review, saffron education, the Bomb, increased defence spending and right-wing economic policies, as in the Budget — they will get marginalised.

IF the BJP had thought it would exploit disenchantment with 'jungle raj' and romp to victory in alliance with the Samata and JD(U) in Bihar, while making handsome gains in the Orissa and Haryana assemblies, it must feel disappointed. It could not even repeat its latest Lok Sabha performance in the three states.

The Bihar verdict may mark a turning point, signifying the BJP's further decline and growing divergences within the NDA. There was a vote swing of nearly 10 per cent against the NDA in Bihar. This halved its seat-winning performance within four months. In Orissa and Haryana, the BJP has become a mere junior — and dispensable — partner of its allies. In Orissa, it did poorly despite an incredibly favourable arithmetic and the Congress's appalling performance and mishandling of the cyclone aftermath. The NDA ran a charged campaign in all three states, roping in high-profile stars and Central ministers, including its supposed trump card, Mr Vaj-

payee. But the card failed. In Bihar, the failure was especially glaring. Mr Laloo Yadav, tainted by misgovernance and the fodder scam, and without allies, was clearly vulnerable.

By contrast, the BJP with its upper-caste base, the Samata with its Kurnis, and the JD(U) with its Dalits and Yadavs, made a formidable coalition.

The NDA seemed all set to win the anti-Laloo war it launched two years ago. Its hope of dislodging him, if not through President's rule, then by the ballot, was reinforced by numerous polls which gave RJD 60 seats.

But Mr Yadav bounced back with 123 seats. The NDA offered no alternative to 'jungle raj'. Mr Yadav not only managed to

retain his 26 to 28 per cent vote base; he even gained support from a section of Dalits, led up by Mr Ram Bilas Paswan's capitulation to Hindutva.

The NDA paid the price in Bihar for the BJP's Hindutva. The Muslim masses punished it for supporting the BJP's agenda to saffronise education and review the Constitution. Muslims chose the secular but corrupt RJD, voting against the communal, and only slightly less corrupt, NDA.

Another factor worked in Laloo's favour. This was backing from the 'most backward classes' (MBCs) who felt he has given them a voice, although little by way of development. An estimated 60 per cent of the Dalit-MBC vote went to the RJD.

Here is the verdict's true significance. The BJP regarded Bihar as the last bastion of 'Mandalism' or OBC politics of self-respect. It tentatively hoped to lay Mandal to rest, and thus gain long-term dominance in the Gangetic plains. That hope took a beating in Uttar Pradesh three months ago with the expulsion of Mr Kalyan Singh and breaking up of the BJP's OBC base. Today, it stands all but dashed.

Mandal has not run out of steam—certainly not in the backward hinterlands of U.P. and Bihar, where there are no roads, where schools and health centres rarely work, caste discrimination is rampant, and social mobility nonexistent. Low-caste self-assertion is all-important there.

The BJP nurtured yet another hope: of marginalising its regional allies. The party pays lip-service to coalition politics. But it is ideologically uncomfortable with it. It has a strong national identity based on homogeneity and uniformity. That identity is a Hindutva trademark: 'one nation, one people, one race'. The latest verdict is a strong rebuff to it.

An even greater rebuff would be the formation of an RJD-led

government in Patna, which the NDA is desperately trying to prevent by playing the 'dissident' Nitish Kumar card. The situation is fluid but favours the RJD. The CPI(M) see the RJD as a hostile force. Three hundred of their supporters were massacred under its rule. They cannot easily back it.

But even less can support the NDA. Both Constitutional practice and numbers favour the RJD combine. The Governor will have to invite the RJD-CPM front (with 125 seats) if the Congress (23) agrees to back it. The Congress has limited options. It too performed poorly in the elections. Now it has no choice but to temper its ambitions and forget re-creating the glory of one-party dominance.

The Congress too needs coalitions. Above all, it needs a well-focused strategy based centrally on principled opposition to Hindutva. The Congress has taken on the RSS. This is welcome. It must now, logically, keep the NDA out of power in Bihar.

The NDA has emerged with changed internal power balances. Its non-BJP components have gained in political weight. In recent weeks, they vetoed the

raising of food and petroleum prices. They also oppose Gujarat's decision on the RSS. These 'secular' allies could become more assertive.

At the same time, internal differences within the BJP are likely to sharpen. Mr L.K. Advani and Mr K.N. Govindacharya will come under attack from party rivals for the Bihar fiasco. Mr Govindacharya says the BJP will emphasise its 'distinct (read, communal) identity'. Such views are bound to be opposed internally.

This too favours the NDA's 'secular' parties. They can prove they are self-respecting political partners, not poodles, to use Mr Jaipal Reddy's phrase. They must recognise that public opinion is turning against hardcore Hindutva.

February 25 saw an impressive mobilisation of the intelligentsia against the saffronisation of education. More than 2,000 leading scholars demonstrated in the Capital—the biggest such mobilisation since the Babri demolition.

By vetoing the BJP's sectarian agenda, the non-BJP parties have a lot to gain. If they succumb to the BJP—on Constitution review, saffron education, the Bomb, increased defence spending and right-wing economic policies, as in the Budget — they will get marginalised.

The BJP is a hegemonic party which preys upon its partners — as with the Ram Rajya Parishad in the past, and the Janata Dal in Gujarat recently. Its NDA allies have a simple choice: Resist or Perish.

To the Editor...

Facing hartals

Sir, It is rather bemusing to find the ruling party workers (some hired, paid, rented?) staging 'elaborate' (for the TV camera, the way the shots are edited) 'peace processions' whenever the opposition alliance resort to hartals. One question for BTv: what is the evidence that the street shots of 'normal' traffic were taken on hartal days? Cameras can be made to lie, specially in this digital age. What purpose does it serve, and for whose benefit these peace marches are put on?

The mentality of the political parties are well known to the experienced and exploited voters of Sonar Bangla. Sham shows are damned shows (from any quarter), and forced hartals are to be condemned, but the right is there fundamentally, so long these are peaceful and voluntary.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Hazari lashes out again

Sir, On 22 February 2000, in the evening session of BBC's Bengali service, an interview of AL MP Joyanal Abedin Hazari, was broadcast. I just could not believe what Mr Hazari said during the interview. He said if in the future any woman goes out on the night of 31st December he will personally take actions against her. When pointed out that many women leaders of our country go out after midnight to Shahid Minar, will Mr Hazari bar them as well from going there? Mr Hazari's reply was, according to Bengali and Islamic culture everyone could go out but he does not think it to be right for the Muslim to celebrate Christian festival and that is the reason why he was threatening the women with

dire consequences. What Mr Hazari had said was really preposterous. In our country, in every sphere of life we follow the Gregorian Calendar. The three very important days - 21st February, 26th March and 16th December are celebrated according to Gregorian calendar and not Bengali or Hijri year. Then what is the harm if we celebrate the New Year on the night of 31st December?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Cattle lick

Sir, Cattle lick is not yet familiar in Bangladesh but in Holland, Denmark and other developed countries, it is widely used in dairy farms. This cattle lick contains about eight minerals that is required for the cattle's proper growth and reproduction. These minerals are - phosphorous, calcium, iron, sulfur, copper, iodine, cobalt and sodium.

In order to make a lick: all these elements are combined together in a brick form. This brick looks as an ordinary brick. However, it is not as hard as an ordinary brick. This brick is very much helpful for the cattle as they could get their mineral nourishment from it. These mineral bricks have number of benefit as it increases milk and meat production and control parasites. It also controls and corrects reproduction cycle of cows. It increases appetite, improves body structure of the cattle and helps giving birth to healthy calves. Cattle lick is not a substitute of fodder. For best result, the cattle should be fed with adequate fodder along with the lick. Per cattle, normally 12/14 bricks per day are considered sufficient although it may vary in different condition. I have made a few such cattle

licks by collecting ingredients from local market. To make a half-kg lick, it cost me taka 30. Each brick can be used for 2/3 months for a single animal. Hence it is not costly; any ordinary farmer can afford it. The aforementioned minerals can also be fed by making a mixture with the minerals. But a mineral brick is much better than average mineral mixture. Furthermore, it is more effective, easy to handle and cheaper.

If these cattle lick is introduced in our country, it can play an important role to our livestock sector. The authority concerned may kindly think over this.

Md Mizanur Rahman
North Agrabad Chittagong

Postal services on Saturdays

Sir, At present, some large and/or busy post offices in Dhaka city are kept open on Saturdays. In view of the higher demand for postal services in the larger residential areas due to infiltration of more offices and business centres, it is proposed that the post offices within the metropolitan area may be kept open at least for half a day on Saturdays. If not, the night post offices may be kept open. Also the delivery of mail should be for six days a week, if not seven (formerly *dak* was delivered twice a day).

In fact the whole concept of 6-day working week may be seriously reviewed, to meet popular public demand (without increasing the average weekly working hours). How the country will develop fast with two off days a week? The essential services must be working (including the banks). There is no point in getting 'popular' the wrong way.

A Husain
Dhaka

OPINION

The Level of Governance

Alif Zabr

Till the next general elections, the level of governance will continue to suffer, and remain cribbed, cabined and confined, due to sustained confrontational politics, which is intensifying rather than diminishing. The latest controversial act is the passage of the PSA-2000, which has been condemned both politically and otherwise. The non-transparency of public representation is an elusive case, both for the players and the outside observers.

Running the government may be confined to maintenance level, and to some minimum ad hoc actions in the essential services. The civil service will rest on routine chores, and the planning exercises will not rise above the routine reminder and review levels. There may be more opening ceremonies for claiming post-mortem credit, but no increase during this transitional period, due to lack of motivation at the other end. The general objective of the governors at this stage would be to keep the system going with minimum expenditure of time, energy and money. This pattern of sluggishness is universal.

The political parties would be more interested in consoli-

dating their positions for the coming formal onslaught on the right to govern, or be relegated to the level of the official Opposition, which appears to have no social status in this rising society. It is difficult to settle down in a limelight, and perform without distraction.

There is a style for doing some specific activities. Propaganda and publicity are required before the decision-making stage (for public awareness), and after the end of the commission. The intervening period is one of silence, and quiet efficiency. Our governance is so noisy, day after day. It is more satanic tugs than divine discontent, embedded in the human species. One cannot easily escape one's DNA/RNA programming code. Developing countries have a formidable task in hand: how to change the patterns of thinking and approach. The rest are nuts and bolts — technology.

That is the problem in the LDCs: the lack of respect for assigned public responsibilities. Welding power is a glamorous preoccupation, and overuse of it is an exciting challenge, defying control at any stage. The victims are the lowly and the honest.

There is a lot of horizontal displacement in a rising and changing society, when the vertical ascension is formally curbed. But there must be movements in a dynamic society. Impatience tempts towards diversionary paths; and intolerance reappears in the form of nagging tongues. The noise level is higher, and the silence of efficiency is disturbed. Entropy rises, and remains high for decades, till the growth rate reaches the take-off point. It is an elusive chase of the hare and the hounds.

Success attracts the flies of entrepreneurship; and the resulting epidemics are characteristically familiar: leading with the bank-loan-defaulters non-procession. Desires have wants, and the more the desires, the more the want — wanting in moral standard. The syndrome of systems loss is familiar, and the greatest systems loss comes from fissiparous dissipations.

The top leadership has to be flexible. This period is extended indefinitely, during all regimes, to provide walking space for the toddlers of democracy. In the tropics it is hot and humid, hence air-conditioning of political stances is inevitable. That is the problem: where is the natural fresh air and ventilation?