

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, April 28, 2000

Chancellor's Call of Duty

TWO major institutions of higher learning in the country — Chittagong University and Shahjalal University of Science and Technology — have teetered at the edge of total collapse owing to severe jolts from long-drawn-out closures. The first one remained slammed shut for three months or so before reopening to a cry of resistance by the Shibrites whose stake seemed to lie in a long-term closure of the university. They would not have a shuttle train run to facilitate movement of the students to and from the campus; because, in their view, any normalisation of the situation has to be 'in their own terms' or it will be an anathema to them.

If the sanctity of an academic year, the purpose behind the existence of a university and the interest of the general students have been trampled under foot in the Chittagong University it is the Shahjalal University which presents the worst-case syndrome in all those respects. For more than six months has the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology remained in a charged-up state of nomenclature controversy led on a heavy diet of politicisation with the academic mandate of the university receiving not even lip-service.

The chain of events at Shahjalal University over the last six months is but a pointer to a new ramification in politics — not just in terms of campus politics but also national politics. So far our worries have been confined to gun-running between rival student organisations or their violent in-fights over retaining areas of control. But now the campuses ought to beware of the frustrations of national politics seeping in to be eased off via the controversies at the universities. They could care less about the careers of students or the future of education in the country.

Against this background we take hope from the latest turn of events pertaining to Shahjalal University. President Shahabuddin Ahmed, as the chancellor of the university, is rightfully concerned over the general students' hunger strike unto death launched from central Shaheed Minar on Wednesday last. We endorse the resolute feelings of the students expressed through their hunger-strike programme which is highly commendable for being a non-violent method of protestation as well. The teachers having announced their support to the students deserve our thanks too. That the general students and the teaching community stand rock-solid behind their demand for an early resumption of university classes is a matter of great satisfaction for us. This is an expression of solidarity for a good cause something of a rarity these days.

Most of all, we are thankful to the President for imploring the students to end the hunger strike on an assurance that he will personally take an initiative with the Prime Minister to resolve the crisis. In terms of the Constitution of the country, even as chancellor of the university the President has to act at the advice of the Prime Minister. So, his initiative will perforce be confined to the parameter of the prime ministerial advice. The President's hands being thus tied, and given the intractability of the situation which calls for intervention of the highest level, we think that the PM would be well-advised to do any of the following two things: either she urges the President as a neutral person to take a role in the light of his best judgment backing him up to the hilt, or if she regards the situation as politically too murky for a presidential involvement then she ought to make the move herself — seriously, determinedly and effectively. But act she must and their is not a day to waste. There has to be a proactive role from the top in resolving what we regard as the worst campus crisis to date. The eminent citizens' groups have offered a suggestions galore to help us end the impasse but none of these has been considered seriously by anyone in the government. The proof of this being in the continuation of the ordeal. It is time the placid waters were stirred to yield a solution or we court the extinction of a vitally important science and technology university into the new millennium.

Friday Mailbox

"Reforming the Electoral Process"

Sir, This is to lend support to the views expressed by Mr Mansoor Mamoon in his article published under the above heading in your esteemed daily on 22 April. The national election is likely to take place in the second quarter of the next year, if not earlier. The reform proposals enumerated by Mr Mamoon in his article are based on the recommendations made by FEMA, Election Commission and a large number of leading impartial intellectuals of our society. The Daily Star also has time and again strongly supported these reforms in our existing electoral system. Without implementing these reform measures, it will not be possible to prevent the pernicious rule of the three Cs (Cash, Crime, and Corruption) in our electoral process and hold a free, fair and acceptable election in the country. Paradoxically, none of the political parties has shown any interest in these reform proposals although all of them outwardly cry in support of creating an atmosphere where fair election is possible.

The major political parties, as they are now, do not appear to be in a mood to sit together for amending the Constitution and other laws governing the election or for enacting new laws necessary for implementing the recommended reform measures. Any appeal to them will be in vain. We do not see any light at the end of the tunnel and any indication that the present political impasse will be over soon. The only option left with us, perhaps, is to launch a vigorous campaign in order to create a strong public opinion in favour of the reform proposals. Without arousing the silent majority, it will not be possible to compel the political parties to come forward to implement the much-needed reforms. The onerous task of launching this campaign will have to be performed by the print media and the civil society as no political party or pressure group appears to be interested in reforming the electoral process so vitally necessary for continuation and strengthening of our fledgling democracy. It should be clearly understood that without implementing these reforms, the continuation of democracy will surely be at stake and time is running out.

M Hafizuddin Khan
Ex-controller and Auditor General

If only BB had dreamt of it...

Sir, While the West and most of the east Asian democratic nations have their respective constitutional mechanism to bring corrupt officials, including presidents and prime ministers, under criminal investigation and justice for their corrupt practices, there is nothing of the sort in Bangladesh. In those countries people, particularly the politicians in power think twice before indulging themselves in corrupt practices but in Bangladesh, due to absence of independent investigative branch, corrupt practices are wide spread.

President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore were interviewed under oath this week by federal investigators looking into the alleged abuses in the financing of their 1996 re-election campaign". (DS 23rd April, 2000.)

A few years back Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narasima Rao had to resign from the prime-ministerial post following the successful criminal investigation carried out against him by CBI for accepting illegal funds for his party. Even death did not spare the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi from corruption charges. Some time last

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The Elian Gonzalez Saga

If Elian was from any other country, he would have been sent home immediately after his rescue from the sea. Just because he is from Cuba and the Cuban-Americans have a strong lobbying group, they succeeded in using this small boy in their never-ending propaganda campaign against Fidel Castro. For the last several months, the news media in the US had been inundated with stories relating to this crisis.

left Cuba for the US aboard a motorboat. During the short journey from Cuba to Miami, the boat capsized with ten other passengers, drowned. Two days later, Elian was found alive clinging to an inner tube. After being rescued by two fishermen, Elian was released to his great uncle and other relatives in Miami.

The US Immigration and Naturalisation Service decided that Elian belongs with his father in Cuba and should be returned to him. Janet Reno, the US Attorney General, strongly supported their position. The Miami relatives of Elian, on the other hand, didn't want him to return to Cuba. With support from the Cuban and politically connected Cuban-Americans in Miami, they filed law suits in the court to keep Elian.

The boy's grandmothers travelled to the US to visit him and also lobby Washington to return him to his father in Cuba. However, legal wrangling by the Miami relatives prevented any solution to his case. Finally, Elian's father Juan Gonzalez came to Washington earlier this month to be reunited with his son.

However, the Miami relatives still wouldn't budge and failed to return the boy to his father. They would come up with new conditions everyday. The entire episode turned out to be an international circus with

Fidel Castro and Clinton weighing in with their respective views.

Given the intransigence of the Miami relatives, Janet Reno had no alternative but to order the federal agents to seize Elian from his Miami relatives in a pre-dawn operation.

The rescue — and that's what it was — of young Elian Gonzalez was made inevitable not by any hesitancy on the part of Attorney General Janet Reno's



Connecting the Dots
Dr. A. R. Choudhury

but by the intransigence of Elian's Miami relatives and their supporters. However controversial the rescue was, it succeeded in its necessary objective: reuniting Elian with his father — without any bloodshed. The boy had been the virtual captive of his Miami relatives for almost five months, and those who believe that more delay would have produced a negotiated settlement are guilty of wishful thinking. Reno bent over backward to satisfy the demands of the boy's Florida relatives. She did this because the Cuban expatriate community is politically pow-

erful; because she didn't want a replay of the Waco siege of 1993; because she is from Miami and believed she could negotiate with the people there. Of course, what she and the US government didn't realise is that prolonging the situation would worsen it.

Still, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how long she waited, no matter how much patience she showed, she was stifled by the Miami fam-

ily. Those who think she should have been ready to wait another five months seem to have forgotten the solemn warning of an eminent pediatrician who warned only a few days ago that Elian was "in a state of imminent danger to his physical and emotional well-being in a home that I consider to be psychologically abusive".

Moreover, the federal agents were more than justified in carrying weapons in their rescue mission. The atmosphere around the Gonzalez home in Miami was tense and growing more so. The relatives had frequently and explicitly warned

that they would never allow Elian to be taken by federal marshals. It would have been irresponsible to ignore that warning. And had the agents entered the home in broad daylight, with many more supporters on hand, who knows what danger awaited them, the child and the demonstrators? The only reason this episode has been blown out of proportion is because of the political connection of the Cuban-Americans in Miami. They have come to the US during the last several decades and have settled in Miami in a place that has come to be known as "Little Havana". They are well-known for their tremendous hate against Fidel Castro. Over the years, they have provided considerable assistance with money and manpower in their zeal to topple the Castro administration in Cuba.

They are very vocal and work as a solid voting bloc. As a result, US politicians, specifically Republicans, are seen falling over one another in pandering to this group and winning political points from this drama. If Elian was from any other country, he would have been sent home immediately after his rescue from the sea. Just because he is from Cuba and the Cuban-Americans have a strong lobbying group, they succeeded in using this small boy in their never-ending propaganda campaign against Fidel Castro. For the last sev-

eral months, the news media in the US had been inundated with stories relating to this crisis. In the absence of any other worthy news story, the media had been milking this story for what it's worth. It seems that the saturation point has finally been crossed. There is a rising uproar against the overkill by the media. Now that some sort of action has been taken, hopefully, newspaper readers and TV audiences will be spared of any more coverage of this issue.

However, it doesn't seem that the story will die down soon. Republican leaders in the Congress have criticised the decision to forcibly remove Elian from his Miami relative's home and have scheduled congressional hearings on the raid. Their presumed presidential candidate, George W. Bush, has sensed an opening in capturing the Cuban-American votes in the next election and has come out in favour of the Miami relatives and the Cuban-Americans. In opinion polls conducted immediately after the raid, the American public has overwhelmingly come out in support of the Government action. Al Gore, with his finger in the wind, has sensed the public approval of Clinton's handling of the situation and has maintained his silence. Although he had earlier expressed his view that the boy should be given asylum in America.

Whatever the end result of this crisis is, Elian has undergone more grief and sacrifice than any boy should have to undergo. Like all boys and girls, he is entitled to grow up in a loving home under the care of those who love him. Now, at last, he may have a chance to do that.

An Offender and a Gentleman

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

Not that, a gentleman does not lose his cool or deviate from his composure. But to torture an eight-year-old child and send her to her death requires brutality that cannot be explained by any standard deviation.

A lady-like housewife in Hatirpool has been accused of brutally torturing and killing an eight-year-old servant girl. The police have arrested this woman along with her gentleman-like husband who must have been an accomplice to the crime, if not by the way of killing that little girl but by the way of dumping her body in the dustbin and trying to cover up. This is only a recent example of a growing trend when apparently civilised men and women shock us with their capacity for gruesome brutality, a company headed by an engineer is said to have cooked up its book. In another instance, a young woman of a respectable family fled to Bangkok, while her husband and father conducted search in the country fearing that she was missing. Where does one draw the line between civilised conduct and misdeemeanor? How

does one separate the raunchy minds and the righteousness kinds? How does one distinguish between an offender and a gentleman?

The protagonists of many Shakespearean plays were gentlemen. Claudio, a young gentleman in *Measure for Measure*, revealed that his fear of death was stronger than his sense of family honour. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio who came to Padua and transformed a woman with vicious temper into an obedient wife. A Venetian gentleman named Roderigo conspired against Othello and was killed off by his co-conspirator. The setting shifts from the civilised city to the forest, paralleling the characters' change in behaviour, when Proteus and Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* created love entanglements with two women. What profile of a gentleman is distilled through these concourse of characters? If cowards, conspirators and clumsy suitors all fit the bill, then what is the definition of a gentleman?

In common terms, a gentleman is a civilised, educated, sensitive and well-mannered man of good family, breeding, or social position. In earlier

times, a man above the rank of yeoman was known as a gentleman. Often, a gentleman was someone who had independent income and did not have to work for a living. It is also an honorific term for the members of a certain association. For example, a male member of the US Congress is addressed as a gentleman.

Who is a gentleman then and why his reputation? Robert Mugabe once said in an interview with *Sunday Times* that cricket civilised people and he wanted everyone to play cricket in Zimbabwe so that it would become a nation of gentleman. When South African cricketer Hansie Cronje was accused of taking money for match fixing in 2000, *Time* magazine reported that he had soiled the image of the Gentleman's Game. Evelyn Waugh writes in *Decline and Fall* that one is expected to become a schoolmaster, because that is what most of the gentleman would do. These days, gentleman would hardly choose teaching in a school as a profession. Again, Edmund Burke argued in a letter to William Smith that a king might be a nobleman but he could not make a gentleman. In our times, much to his dismay, Burke would find that those who rule the country de-

side, who are the gentleman by bestowing them honour and position.

Daniel Defoe clearly distinguished a gentleman from a scholar, calling the latter a mere bookcase who understands everybody but is understood by none. But etymologically, the word gentleman arose out of old Roman word *gentilis*, meaning 'one of a recognised gens or stock'. Thus recognizability was a fundamental attribute of a gentleman. In the ancient days, this recognizability could come from such professions as exercise of arms, the management of his estate and, in England, service in the local administration as sheriff, coroner or justice or at Westminster as knight of the shire. It is mostly from their close connection with the parallel institutions of chivalry that the gentleman was distinguished from the bourgeois or the yeoman by their heraldic status as a bearer of coat-of-arms.

A growing insensitivity is observed from the 14th century onwards on the moral qualities, which the gentleman should possess and exercise. He must be brave, loyal to his leader or his friends, kindly to those beneath him, and courteous to all. Thus the gentleman

would be soon identified as someone who is of cultivated stock, distinguished from others by self-restraint and a certain quietness or mildness in his demeanor. With the revival of learning in Italy, intellectual refinement and some acquaintance with literature, music, architecture and painting, would be added to the attributes of the gentleman.

Has the gentleman transformed in the 20th century? Yes, the nouveau gentleman and the nouveau riche have become indistinguishable in our culture where the affluent can afford education and refined taste as earnestly as the educated and the refined would seek affluence. While business and politics dominate the social scene, refinement is a matter of style not substance. A well-dressed man is not necessarily a well-mannered man, although he might give an impression that he is of cultivated stock. Again, an educated man does not hesitate to adopt unseemly ways to further his interests, abandoning the decorum of his learning and the dignity of his knowledge.

Not that, a gentleman does not lose his cool or deviate from his composure. But to torture an

eight-year-old child and send her to her death requires brutality that cannot be explained by any standard deviation. In the same manner, when government officials resort to corruption, or university teachers are accused of making advances at female students, it shows that somewhere in the density of excess, the gentleman has lost his parameters of moderation. *Marquis de Sade* was a nobleman who never found those parameters and spent 27 years of his life in jail without being recognised as a gentleman.

Chaucer had identified those parameters in the 14th century. He wrote that a gentleman kept his good name by careful husbandry, mental culture, the regular discharge of public duty and the regular exercise of the four virtues of chivalry: truthfulness, courage, independence and a strict regard for the rights of the less fortunate. Thus the gentleman is the moral equinox of human instincts, an equilibrium between saintliness and savagery.

Last Tuesday, a sub-inspector of police and a former member of the police force was man-handled for snatching. It was an example of how we are getting increasingly confused between an offender and a gentleman. Former British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin once said that the intelligent was to intelligentsia what a gentleman was to a gent. How that happens what we need to understand in order to restore the equilibrium in our society.

OPINION

Balancing History and Politics

A Husnain

The recent goodwill visit of Mahatma Gandhi's grandson Rajmohan Gandhi and his wife to Dhaka (strangely enough, sponsored by a European NGO) appears to have rightly set into motion a train of thoughts in the local circles ("Rajmohan Gandhi and the Equation of History" by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan in *The Daily Star*, April 21). The three nations are still smarting under the backlash of history and political instability, without any glimmer of hope in the decade of the new millennium.

The history and politics in the Indian subcontinent passed through turbulent times during the latter half of the 20th century; first due to the Partition of

British India in 1947, and later due to the breakup of Pakistan, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The stability cycle is still beyond the horizon, after 200 years of colonialism.

From the development point of view, this scattering of historical bases was traumatic, compared to the progress other emerging nations had shown in the other regions of the world during the five intervening decades, judging by the economic indices. Volatile politics is compounded by high density of population, with the majority hovering around the poverty line. Even in the regions where there is homogeneity in the society, such as Bangladesh, the

solutions and stability are no nearer, with more energy dispersed on local ideological issues.

All the three nations have erosion in their foundations, which have to be corrected by the local contemporary leaders. Many of the factors and problems have a commonality in approach which invites a common purview; despite the limitations of history and politics as problem-solving tools. Both are traditional cages, depending on the location of the observer.

Our politicians have not yet reacted to this tentative goodwill visit from a neighbouring country, keeping in view the regional approach to development. Unfortunately a third

factor is impeding progress in the right direction in the region now called South Asia, namely the influence of religion, which cannot be treated as a separate issue by the mediators. The approach of the rich, industrialised societies is different in outlook, as the poverty line recedes from the perspective, (note the highly charged summit of WB/IMF held recently in Washington, and the G-77 met in Havana).

Apart from the contingent distractions to which the Administrations and the political parties are subjected to in the newly developing countries, the degree and kind of statesmanship and leadership required

are lacking, to be able to generate enough momentum get out of the vicious circle (the Kashmir issue is one example). Foreign assistance and advice have a marginal role in this national-building process — the national energy must come from within. Political stamina is lacking. Fissiparous insomnia cannot provide ready-made solutions.

The there is the third trap of poverty-fatigue, strengthened by corruption and breakdown of law and order, and the general degeneration of moral ethics. These are formidable challenges for an LDC; which require leadership of a level above the least-developed category. When this critical mass is generated?

Whither Asian Values?

Andaz

It is stimulating to read in the papers about Asian minds the missing over Asian values (since the 1990s when the artificial Cold War collapsed), and the resulting interfacing problem with the oblique imposition of Western cultures and values through Mammonic pressure. The recent visit of the US President to South Asia was one of the many exercises cropping in the Asian regions with deals for global cultural partnerships, whatever it might mean.

These displacement pressures are more economic thrusts than cultural exuberance (on either side). Neither poverty nor pockets of affluence can anchor cultural nuances, especially in this information age, when the images and the focus are shifting constantly. The new and young generations are acting as the flag bearers of fashions and styles in the export and import 'business', egged on by fashion houses bent

on exploiting the incremental changes as practised in the stock exchange markets. Without tides in the money market, the investment business will not flourish (note what happened to hi-tech IT Nasdaq indices in the USA, due only to microsoft pressure!).

Today modern cultural values are for exploitation (read 'sale'), by the political pundits and vested vendor groups; and any patriotic feeling is purely incidental. When money becomes a symbol and unit of culture, the majority (of the world's population) at the poverty levels have neither any say in the issue nor have any sustainable capability to take part in equitable dialogues. The others, higher up the economic scale, cannot represent the grassroots, if culture is presumed to have any root at all. Synthetic olive branches look more enticing, as the world

beauty contests have transitory allure.

The role of individualism in cultural flowering is a debatable question at the global village level. Analysis and synthesis have their places in any society. High GDPs encourage aloofness, and steer away from the cohesion provided by a society depending on family values. Singapore desperately tried to introduce the Confucius principles of family unity and harmony, but today the well-off spinsters outnumber the eligible bachelors in this micro state of affluence, reeking with mere shopping culture. What is left in life after all the procurements and acquisitions which money can buy? None is willing to draft a list of things to discard. The millionaire US widowers travel several times round the world on the cash accrued from the interest on the capital under hold (the principal amount invested remaining

intact in the banks).

Culture is related to happiness and contentment, and desires in life have to slow down at one stage, for pausing to stand and stare, and ponder a bit on the Creator's master plan for flooding this Earth with sibilings like us. The more the desire, the more the wants, and it creates more than the One World concept propagated by the politicians. Ultimately who are the custodians in a society, both in the North and in the South; and who the arbitrators and the commission agents? The divine harmony has to flow even through the materialistic culture.

Culture is sensitive to the Heisenberg Theory: the moment it is noticed, it is disturbed. Folk cultures flourish because it is unnoticed like the air we breathe, and as a child grows up in a family. Is the flower aware of its effect on humans? Is a tree

aware that it is giving away flower, fruit, and shade free of charge, with no thought of investment return? Then the question arises what is the effect when culture and values are commercialised, however indirectly. There appears to be no point in holding art auctions which fetch millions for a painting or an act of human creation; the philosophy has to be cultivated that money cannot buy something priceless.

Developing nations, with developed cultures have a message for the economically developed countries, where original cultures migrated from the East centuries earlier. The cultural communication gap has to be reduced, with exchange of values, and not by filling the gaps with dollars. This is a crude way of expressing the impact of cultural nuances — the assignments is left for better scribes.