

## Multi-storied Parking Lots

OVER the years, dearth of planning and law enforcement failure have had the traffic problem in the capital city snowball into a crisis. There have been plenty of ministerial-level meetings, seminars and symposia, reports and editorials in the news media on the issue; however, these, unfortunately, failed to produce any effective means to bring our transport system to an order. Participants at Saturday's roundtable on *Traffic Problems in Dhaka City* were unanimous on one observation — any one agency cannot possibly come up with an efficient and effective solution. The multidimensional problem requires multidisciplinary engagement for a redressal. The discussants also identified one key factor impeding smooth functioning of the city's traffic system, namely road encroachment.

The central issue here, aside from occupation by illegal structures and mobile vendors, is improper parking on both sides of the roads. More often than not, there is multiple parking on the busiest streets in the city, especially in the commercial area, resulting in constriction of the thoroughfares and thereby traffic jams for hours together. The car-owners cannot be solely blamed either; for, there is not enough parking space in these areas. Motijheel can be a prime example in this regard. Most of the establishments there do not have adequate parking arrangements. Basically, therefore, we are dealing with a no-headway situation here. Exhortations for proper parking do not wash because there is no parking lot around.

Multi-storied parking blocks could be an ideal solution under these taxing circumstances. The city fathers should build multi-storied buildings solely for parking purpose and then let the spaces out on a daily rental basis. If properly planned and managed, these parking blocks could be commercially lucrative with the promise of hefty revenue. Here, too, we need involvement of different stakeholders, primarily RAJUK, DCC and PWD. Once RAJUK identifies places to have multi-storied parking blocks erected upon, investors and developers could be easily talked into doing their bits.

Multi-storied parking lots, in our views, are the only option that we have. For a start, the city fathers should envisage building a few at Motijheel and, if proved successful, move on to other commercial centres in the city and elsewhere in the country.

## Allegation against Ministers

THE hullabaloo over an FIR filed before Motijheel Thana under the Public Safety Act by Supreme Court lawyer Golam Kibria against five ministers and a ruling party central leader is getting louder by the day. One only hopes that legalistic clarification being sought is not lost in the thicket of a ballistic political diatribe. The allegation against the ruling party top brass is that their act of leading a lathi-wielding procession on April 18 in the city 'against High Court judges' in connection with Bangabandhu murder case amounted to 'terrorising' people. So, it is something that ought to attract the provision of the PSA, according to the complainant.

The home minister who has been named in the FIR was quick to point out that this was politically motivated but he has 'ordered' an investigation into the accusation anyway. There were also suggestions to the effect that the opposition were trying to politically use the PSA which they could not have had any right to do because they were opposed to the public safety act from the beginning. However, the police have taken cognizance of the allegation and that is what matters.

The investigation that has presumably got under way into what the home minister terms as 'basis' of the case is seen by the detractors as a precursor to action under PSA if the charges are found baseless.

Without any prejudice to the outcome of the case, pray tell us, how is one to interpret a stick-carrying procession spearheaded by serving ministers except to call it intimidating, especially when High Court judges were said to be drawing the flak?

There is ample scope for looking at the episode as a political ruse being attempted by both sides. Depending upon how the investigations are motivated and carried out these could either prove to be farcical or substantial in terms of upholding the rule of law.

## Lack of Farsight

TO widen the 150-foot Kemal Ataturk Avenue at Banani, contractors of Dhaka City Corporation have started felling 15-year-old mahogany trees along the northern side of the thoroughfare. They have turned a deaf ear to the protestations of the residents and environmentalists. In the first place may we ask why of all the roads in the city the recently carpeted Kemal Ataturk Avenue had to receive the priority attention of the DCC which is to spend around eleven hundred crore taka under Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) being funded by the World Bank? There are a number of roads in the city which are in a worse condition and need immediate widening and mending. We have no mental barrier against improving the KA Avenue but it is almost carrying coal to Newcastle, at least at this stage. Like in many projects trees along this important road were planted without much thought given to its future expansion. Since, however, these trees were near the boundary walls of the residential plots on the northern side of the Avenue a provision for sidewalk could be made and trees saved from felling.

It takes a long time to rear a tree but no time to destroy it. If at all felling of these trees is necessary then we demand the DCC plant saplings immediately along the road to replenish the dwindling stock. The city planners in Rajuk or DCC must take into account these cogent points and try to avoid polluting environment in the name of development and expansion.

RAHAT Ali Dar is a talented photographer. Like his colleague, Mohammed Tanveer, executive director of the Journalists' Resource Centre in Lahore, he too is a Pakistani. Dar and Tanveer came to India to attend the fifth convention of the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy on April 6 to 8 in Bangalore.

Dar and Tanveer believe in India-Pakistan people-to-people friendship and reconciliation and have done much to promote it. Dar's remarkable photographs bring out the ironies and absurdities of India-Pakistan state-level hostility and its effects on ordinary people. Tanveer has done some excellent work to promote information exchange between Indian and Pakistani journalists.

People like Dar and Tanveer have strong convictions. It would surely have taken such convictions—and guts—to hold public demonstrations between May 14 and May 27, 1998, demanding that Pakistan must not explode nuclear weapons even after India had done so five times.

Dar and Tanveer were among the 130-odd Pakistanis who wanted to cross the Wagah border on foot on April 4 — like delegations did in 1996 and 1998. They were rudely refused permission. Their return journey via Delhi was worse. They were sent from pillar to post by hotels although their papers

were in order.

The reason? They are Pakistani citizens. Accommodating them would have meant endless police interrogation and trouble.

This incident is distressing for the petty and mean-spirited attitudes it shows. But it is neither isolated, nor confined to the treatment of Pakistanis, those "Others" from across the border.

The same thing is happening to our own Others. Substitute SNM Abdul for Dar and you have an identical story. Abdul, who happens to be a Muslim, is a veteran journalist born and brought up in India. He just cannot rent a house in South Delhi. The extent of upper class Hindu prejudice is such that even Rahul Jalali—a true-blue pandit, whose last name is linked to Kashmir's uniquely syncretic culture—is regularly shown the door.

This belies the much-parroted claim that India is one of the world's most tolerant and accommodating societies. The

## Growing Anti-Minority Bias

# The Myth of 'Tolerant' India

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

*Myopic policies will further vitiate Indo-Pakistan relations—which are already at their peacetime worst—and make war with Pakistan likelier. Already, there is talk of cancelling the Lahore bus and Samjhauta Express. This should alarm us.*

home truth is that educated, liberal, broad-minded middle class Muslims are being forced into ghettos by equally educated, but far-from-liberal, non-Muslims.

Until recently, especially after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, Sikhs found themselves similarly ostracised. Other ethnic groups that face discrimination in our cities

include Afghans (including those who are strongly anti-Taliban), Kashmiris, especially from the Valley, and people from our Northeast, and Africans. Even Tibetans, who have lived here for 45 years, and for whose refugee status the Indian government takes humanitarian credit, face systematic discrimination.

Such ostracism speaks of prejudice and hatred of the Other. Such prejudice has acquired acceptance among top functionaries of the state. The police in our cities don't even bat an eyelid while admitting that they especially target and

interrogate such Others. The harassment of hundreds of "suspects" (all Muslims) for the 1993 Bombay bomb blasts is a shameful story of communal prejudice. It parallels, on a horrendously magnified scale, the merciless beating up of Rodney King in California and the recent killing of Amadou Diallo, an African immigrant, by the New York police.

Such incidents cause a scandal in the US, but are usually swept under the carpet in India. What is common is the institutionalised racist or communal prejudice at work in both societies.

Two recent developments show that such institutionalisation has reached grotesque proportions in India. The first is a brutal attack on April 9 by the Delhi police on Jamia Millia Islamia students. The police entered the university's hostels, rounded up and beat up hundreds of students, vandalised a mosque, and branded all Muslims "ISI agents".

Our communalised police

thus cloaked their rank prejudice under the guise of defending "nationalism" against "subversives".

The second development is attacks by the Bajrang Dal on Christian institutions in Uttar Pradesh's Mathura and Agra districts. These attacks spring from a conscious strategy to terrorise the Christian community—as in the Dangs in Gujarat.

As earlier, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee's response was to exonerate the Bajrang Dal and endorse the UP chief minister's incredible claim that no communal motive was involved.

When the state's topmost functionaries practise such denial, they signal that wrong-doing won't be punished. Officialdom and the media take the cue and practise the same strategy of Denial (of facts). Deflection (of the burden of guilt), and Diversion (of attention).

Today, you can routinely describe anyone you don't like an "ISI agent". The Union home secretary, no less, used that la-

bel for the CPI (ML)-Liberation group! It is ludicrous to link the CPI (ML) to the ISI. It's cadres' sincerity and loyalty to the people is unquestionable. The ML has made a decisive break with the armed struggle strategy and is evolving into an open, largely parliamentary, party.

The fact that such allegations can be casually made without adducing evidence speaks not only of utter irresponsibility, but of our policymakers' desperate need to concoct conspiracies involving that Principal Other of Hindu communalism, Pakistan.

This attitude has been on display in India's dealings with Pakistan and its strategy to isolate it at Cartagena and Havana, undermining the whole rationale of the Non-Aligned Movement and South-South cooperation. Strident attacks on the Musharraf government can only further isolate moderate elements in Pakistan and drive that country towards fundamentalist positions.

Such myopic policies will further vitiate Indo-Pakistan relations—which are already at their peacetime worst—and make war with Pakistan likelier. Already, there is talk of cancelling the Lahore bus and Samjhauta Express. This should alarm us.

A war between India and Pakistan, even a conventional one, cannot be won. It must never be fought. Dialogue is the only way out.

## The Flop Show in West Bengal

Sakya Sen Mitra writes from Calcutta

THE whole episode can easily be termed as a flop show. The show that was termed as the Mahajot or the Grand Alliance between the Trinamul Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress. After an initial promise, the whole idea frittered out and turned into a damp squib. As a result, the CPIM and its other allies like the Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the CPI can once more breathe freely.

There are a number of reasons for the failure of the Mahajot to take off. And the first and foremost amongst them, is the Congress itself. Some of the senior Congress leaders of West Bengal had given the impression to the party boss Sonia Gandhi, that if the Alliance was formed, it would signal the return of Mamata Banerjee to the Congress. They had informed her that Banerjee would gladly break her relations with the BJP if she had an opportunity to tie up with the Congress. It was this important

piece of information, that prompted Sonia Gandhi, initially, to accept the proposal of the Mahajot.

However, when Banerjee refused to sever her ties with the BJP, Sonia Gandhi had no option but to retrace her step regarding the Grand Alliance. Moreover, had the tie up between the Congress and the BJP taken place in West Bengal it would have seriously hampered the credibility of the party in the states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan and a couple of other states. So she finally ordered the President of the West Bengal A.B.A. Gani Khan Choudhury not to join the Mahajot.

However, many political analysts feel, that the entire operation was once more planned by the former state unit President Somen Mitra to get back at some of his enemies within the party. Mitra had recently been denied a ticket to the Rajya Sabha by leaders like Choudhury and Priyaranjan Das-

munshi. This was his way of defacing these leaders. In other words, Mitra tried to prove to the party bosses in Delhi that those who run the Congress in West Bengal, so by misleading people in Delhi, Mitra, himself visited Banerjee's residence in Delhi once to have dinner with her. But since then refrained from making any comment about the Mahajot or from attending any further discussions between the three parties. The present situation leading out of the failure to form the Mahajot has harmed leaders like Gani Khan. Not only has he lost face, but has also lost a tremendous amount of political credibility. Such is the situation that the common man on the streets in West Bengal, have once more started calling the Congress as the 'B' team of the CPIM.

That indeed can be called a proper statement. Simply because, discussions between the All India General Secretary of the CPIM Harkishen Singh Sur-

jeet and Sonia Gandhi also affected the fate of the Mahajot.

Surjeet made it clear to Gandhi, that the CPIM would only support the Congress in their fight against the BJP in the states mentioned above only if her party stayed away from the BJP in West Bengal. As a result, the Congress leadership had no option but to cancel the plans of an Alliance with the Trinamul Congress who are close associates of the BJP.

Mamata Banerjee also had made a cardinal error of assessing the situation properly. She had hoped that a large section of the Congress would leave the party and join up with the Trinamul Congress. She had even discussed the matter with the Union Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani. The latter had stated that if a breakaway group from the Congress became a part of the Mahajot, this party had no objections. But once that did not happen, the BJP leadership also became apprehensive of the Mahajot.

Neither the Congress or the BJP wanted to lose ground in the national political scenario because of some gains in the state of West Bengal. Moreover, other senior leaders in the Trinamul Congress like Ajit Panja, Sudip Bandopadhyaya had reservations in accepting the Congress.

Both these leaders had been forced to part ways with the Congress because of the disrespectful attitude shown towards them by the then President Somen Mitra. These two leaders were averse at accepting the Mahajot for the simple reason that it would then endanger their position in the Trinamul Congress. These two leaders had been all through protesting against the very idea to form a Mahajot. It was their influence also which prevented the Grand Alliance from taking place.

In the end the scene that has emerged projects a lot of hope for the Left parties in West Bengal. The CPIM is joyous at the

failure of the Congress, the Trinamul Congress and the Bharatiya Janata party to form the Mahajot or the Grand Alliance in West Bengal. At the same time they are also relieved. The Chief Minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu, who has said, "It goes to show the political stature of these parties and their leaders. How can an Alliance take place, when the leaders themselves are not clear about their political locus standi. All this talk about an Alliance is nonsense. Only the Left parties can form an Alliance and we have shown it."

The CPIM party secretary Anil Biswas has said, "The three parties have leaders who make one statement in the morning and rectify them in the evening. So it is quite natural that they will not be able to form any Alliance. The subsequent events have proved that we will not have to worry about the Jot or Alliance any longer."

Ultimately, the Left or the CPIM has managed to weave out of a potentially dangerous political situation.

## OPINION

# Let's Create the Desired Atmosphere

by Kazi Alaiddin Ahmed

THE Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam's entreaties to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina early last month are yet to be responded to. His appeal to stall the Public Safety Act came out at such a time when Sheikh Hasina was already away on a tour to the United States of America. However, protocol would demand that her press section puts up the paper clipping on the lengthy article to the Prime Minister upon her return.

Meantime, we may have a look at the lead article. It was contended that a new law in the name of Public Safety Act was not at all necessary. Rather, some of the provisions of the existing CrPC could be suitably amended to meet the needs of the hour. Although not said, it may be added that anything new is usually apt to rouse public interest and when it comes to the sensitive area of legal proceedings, it is likely to invoke closer scrutiny. And when it is looked at from political point of view it is more sure to set off a loud, critical examination. In the case under review the new law, though specifically trained on to the terrorists, extortionists and the like, any political hue given to it could be simply preposterous. But that's how the new Public Safety Act has been taken by the opposition political parties, chiefly BNP and its allies. In this, even if we agree with Mr Mahfuz Anam when he suggests an amended CrPC could suffice, we have no assurance that in that event too, there wouldn't be similar clamour from the opposition. Actually, it wouldn't make any difference in whatever from the law was promulgated.

The principal bone of contention in the opposition camp and in a section of the legal profession has been the 'intention' of the government. They have the apprehension that the new law was intended for application against the opposition alone. This could be a natural fear at the first instance. In actual practice, however, things may appear to be different in as much as that it is being applied to everyone irrespective of his political application. Even those claiming to be members of the ruling party and its student, youth and labour wings are not apparently excepted. Yet the leaders of the opposition, particularly of BNP, keep on claiming that their 'activists' including their leaders, have been deliberate targets of the Public Safety Act in spite of their 'innocence'. In fact, such a thinking in the opposition camp is nothing unnatural. The real and imaginary hostility between the position and the opposition has mounted so high that it is hardly possible to shed the overcharged emotion even for a moment. For the opposition, it is an awful premonition that haunts everyone. Much of their concern about the so-called 'indiscriminate use' of the new law could be removed if the government could issue a white paper along with the list of the 'activists' both of the op-

position and of the position who have been hauled up on specific charges of terrorism, extortionism, etc having no connection with politics. The government also emphatically denies to have a single political prisoner in the jail. The dispute on the issue has practically no chance to be resolved because of the distrust seizing the opposition.

Notwithstanding the impact of the Public Safety Act the incidences of crime punishable under the law continue to be there. Home Minister Mohammad Nasim appears to have been 'vigorously pursuing' his policy of 'total routing' of the criminals. In his latest directive to the police he had sought demolition of the innumerable unauthorised and illegal toll houses in operation on the highways and at the bus terminals across the country. Police went into action instantly but they are yet to ensure total security for the bus and other motorised vehicles against the hoodlums. More intriguing aspect in the matter has been the 'taken' business of police sergeants and traffic police. At it the Home Minister reacted very sharply and ordered the Inspector General of Police to dismiss such offenders instantly on report.

Turning back, at this point to Mr Mahfuz Anam's article, particularly to his observation on the dropping of the clause in the PSA which was intended to punish a policeman detected to

have falsely implicated any person. Taking his view to be authentic, I would also share it and say that the government must have given in to pressure from vested interest and thereby damaged its own credibility in the matter of application of PSA. It is indeed ridiculous on the part of the government to have displayed such weakness while expressing its firmness to punish all acts of terrorism, extortion etc.

Leaving the PSA and all the controversies over it in their place, one is bound to be terribly horrified at the ever compounding incidences of gruesome murders almost everyday in and around the metropolis. The perpetrators of these brutal acts seem to be absolutely undaunted. In most of the cases the police have no clue to haul up the devils. There is, however, a firm conviction in public mind that the police is capable of intercepting the mischief-mongers because they are ordinarily known to have full knowledge about the marauders in the jurisdiction of the respective police stations. A sort of close relationship between the two entities is the intriguing deterrent to such desirable action. On this point Mr Mahfuz Anam's observation would appear very tenable and would deserve positive consideration of the government.

About the easy bails of the criminals from the court the prosecutors often find it difficult to hold their grounds be-

cause of the inherent weaknesses in the charges framed by police. Besides, the cases contain in consistent sections of CrPC either by ignorance of the police officials of the sections relevant to the crime committed or included deliberately to benefit the offenders in the long run. On the top of all these, it is alleged that the police administration at the thana level, particularly in the metropolis area has been manned by comparatively inexperienced officials. Some of these officers are also reported to have bought their posting in the city police stations at very high stakes. Naturally, therefore, they would spend most of their time at planning the course that would ensure quicker recompense. It is also alleged that these are the ones who very often quietly keep on flouting the orders of the superior officers purposefully. As a result of such blissful dispensation the criminals have longer respite to pursue their hideous chore unabated.

The saddest part of the whole legal process has been the allegation levelled against the judiciary including the magistracy. The sacred seat of justice is alleged to have been defiled by a group of people who can be rightly adjudged unworthy of their positions. Even the Chief Justice, in a recent statement, had expressed his concern at such a situation in the judicial system of the country.

Taking all these together, vis-a-vis the alarming state in

the law and order area, living a normal life continues to be as uncertain as ever. Even dying a normal death is not certain. Almost everyday 2/3 murders are reported in the newspapers while the criminals are not arrested. Street snatchers are also reported to have been very active even though some of them, intercepted by the public at the place of occurrence, receive fatal injuries due to mass-beating. Here, the imposition of the 'controversial' Public Safety Act appears to have been of no consequence.

In such a dismal situation, it is time that instead of giving it political colour, all the political parties in the country sit together and formulate a comprehensive plan of action to contain all such acts of terrorism. If we assume that the opposition led by Begum Khaleda Zia returns to power after the next general election, she will also face a terrible situation by inheritance. So, wisdom would demand that she offered her help to the government in the matter for her own ultimate interest. We must remember that this is a perpetual legacy being carried forward since our days under Pakistani hegemony. Its ever compounding magnitude has been obviously all due to the lackadaisical manner of addressing it by all the past governments since December 16, 1972. Let us therefore hit at the root instead of engaging ourselves at mud-slinging on the Public Safety Act. Let us strive hard to eradicate the menace enabling ourselves scarf the new law once for all

## To the Editor ...

### Should all eggs be in one basket?

Sir, A letter published in this column, captioned 'MIG Menace', by A M R Chowdhury (DS-21 Apr) has rightly pointed out that jet fighter flying over densely populated area needed a re-thinking. Unless it deem necessary for our specific defense purpose, then fighter planes best suite if operated from their tactical sites. If a rifle held other than from the shoulder, the shooter is more likely to miss his target.

Once our earlier regime had directed the Defense Department to shift its air operation base away from Dhaka, but later they shelved that in ZIA. This year, we learned from ISPR that airforce is operating sophisticated MIG-29s also from ZIA. And AN-32s fly from ZIA as well. As a matter of layman's defense strategy, all eggs must not be in one basket. Whereas, here, we are following the other way, even in complex

defense matters. However, if at needed location(s) no airfield is available for MIG-29s, then can't we make one and name it as Sk. Mujib Airforce Base, like those named: Andrews / Clark / Patterson Airforce Bases in USA? This will not only ensure a proper home for MIG-29s, but will also create a milestone that our PM has given right attention to modernising the airforce and built an establishment before naming it!

A Star Gazer  
Dhaka

### Conversion to CNG

Sir, I am amused at the statement of our Finance Minister in a recent round table on Eco-friendly Budget where he wondered how the difference between 2-stroke and 4-stroke engines for three-wheelers can be determined. It will not be very difficult as there is only one company in the world,

which is producing this engine for Bangladesh market only. And in their own country, 2-stroke engines are banned. In addition, any casual inspection will show whether they are 2 or 4-stroke engine. On the other hand, how do the customs authority determine the number of cylinders in the cars for assessment purpose now?

The minister's other statement regarding conversion of the 2-stroke engines to run on CNG thereby reducing pollution is even more absurd, as it will not change the quantity of emission we breathe since the two-stroke engines are run by mixing lubricating oil with petrol, and the major pollutant is unburnt lubricants which will continue to pollute the air. In addition some major change in the engine design will be required to pump only lubricants into the cylinder instead of petrol.

If according to the minister, the government is serious about conversion of motor vehicles to

CNG, he should start the process at his own house and get all the government vehicles including his own changed to CNG and make it mandatory for all government vehicle purchase, and for all buses in metropolitan area.

Will he do that?

Emran A Beg  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

### Garbage bin

Sir, A couple of months back there was a news item in different dailies on garbage bins placed in many road-side strategic points which needed replacement for the older ones that were worn out and corroded. The same news indicated that a huge amount of forex was spent for each of them for meeting their high cost and transportation from India. Surprisingly, those bins were hardly in use for a year or so and DMC was planning to import more for the replacement of the unusable ones.

It was very difficult to convince myself that a heavy material of the bin could be corroded only after such a short period of use. Braving the stinking environment of the place where an emptied bin was placed, I walked up to it one day. I was wondering whether the bin was made of a thin material or it is a hard material but not being cleaned and maintained. I mean washed regularly. On examining the bin, I found my second assumption was true. I presume the bin was never washed as layer after layer of rotting garbage remained stuck to the body of the bin specially the inner corners and joints where from garbage cannot be dislodged easily and these are the spots where most of the corrosion takes place. I suppose had the bin been washed after emptying the garbage regularly the corrosion would not have occurred and the stench of rotten old garbage would not have polluted the atmosphere and made the passersby's life miserable. And at the end DMC

could have saved a huge amount of money as well.

Syed Wajidullah  
Dhaka

### More taxi stands

Sir, The administration is not taxi-minded, although larger number of taxicabs can be seen on the roads, put up by several companies. What is needed more are many taxi stands in each area/locality, for quick and easy availability of taxis.

The government always lags behind in providing the infrastructural and facilitator services in almost all the sectors (top-heavy, centralised bureaucracy). Many cannot call a taxi by telephone, as all do not have telephone — and why should they? Come out and hail a taxi, or go to the nearest stand. The unauthorised parking spaces must be evacuated and left free — it is not a big hi-tech job!

Alif Zabr  
Dhaka.