

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 underway 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-feet 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.

R AHAT 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

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.

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 Abdi for Dar and you have an identical story. Abdi, 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

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 racism 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.

Such myopic policies will further vitiate Indo-Pakistani 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.

Today, you can routinely describe anyone you don't like as an 'ISI agent'. The Union secretary, no less, used that language

bel for the CPI (ML)-Liberation group! It is ludicrous to link the CPI (ML) to the ISI. Its 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 policy-makers' 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.

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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

Sakyasen 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 fizzled 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.

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 Bannerjee to the Congress. They had informed her that Bannerjee 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 Bannerjee 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 took 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.

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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 West Bengal, do so by misleading people in Delhi. Surjeet visited Bannerjee'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.

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