

## Speak the electoral idiom

*Nothing else is relevant now*

THE date for a fresh national election looks all but set as a precursor to the dissolution of parliament and the take-over by a neutral caretaker government. Everything seems poised to happen prior to the expiry of the present government's term, essentially in keeping with the Opposition's demand for it. When such is the unfolding scenario of a fast approaching general election Begum Zia's statement, sitting in China, that the government quit immediately 'to save the country from ruination' has left us shell-shocked. It is patently irrelevant to the present context.

Begum Zia should now be entirely focused on the electoral agenda without allowing any agitational hang-up to distract her. We think certain rules of the game will have to be settled for the sake of free and fair polls in the light of experiences gathered through national elections of 1991 and 1996. In this context, BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan's 7-point demand for free and fair polls directed at the future caretaker government draws our attention. But these need considerable sharpening to have the desired impact. Besides, they will have to be circulated among the public to elicit their support.

Registration of political parties ought to be a vital component of the electoral reform strategy but this may not be forthcoming on such a short notice, even though it would be well worth a try. Secondly, the election tribunals need to dispose of disputes no later than perhaps within six months of taking them up. Then the anomaly about a candidate standing for election at more than two constituencies will have to be removed. Last but not the least, while the ceiling for campaign expenditure is raised realistically effective safeguard must also be in place to ensure fool-proof implementation of the expenditure limit. To this end, it will be of utmost importance that candidates specify their sources of funding, with amounts to be received under each category, to the Election Commission enabling the latter to tally the expenditure with the budget thus provided.

## Rivers ruined

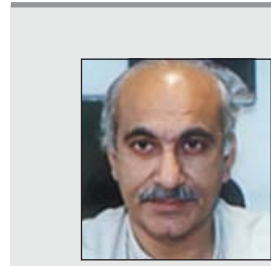
*Stop dumping of human waste*

ONCE again civil society leaders in tandem with grassroots people have raised their voice at the criminal indifference of authorities to rampant degradation of our environment. Sunday's Environment Rally at Trimohoni, confluence of the Balu, Debdholai and Narai near Nandipara at the outskirts of the city, voiced concern over indiscriminate dumping of sewage by the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority into these rivers. It's been a classical case of protector turned predator, the regulatory authority itself contributing to environment pollution. Who else knows better than the WASA people about the dire consequences of their mindless acts? Or, do they actually realise that they are exposing local people, especially the poor and the marginalised, to potentially fatal health hazards? Already there have been reports of fast spreading waterborne diseases in the area. Scarcity of potable water has assumed horrific proportions. At the same time, receding fish population has left a chunk of villagers on a mad hunt for alternative source of income. Overall, WASA's sewage management has posed a living nightmare for the people who live near the confluence.

As we see it, the problem boils down to inefficient waste management and underscores the dire need for infrastructural expansion of the WASA network. Although touted as the 17th megapolis in the world in terms of population, Dhaka ironically doesn't have an adequate on both qualitative and quantitative considerations sewerage system. In fact, only a small percentage of the Dhakaites is covered by the WASA network, the rest either have their own sanitation system or do without any permanent arrangement. On the other hand, in the absence of adequate treatment facilities, WASA dumps bulk of the human waste deposited in its network into natural water bodies like the Balu, Debdholai and Narai.

Unless the WASA sewerage network expands and is backed up by treatment plants, all talks of redressal would result in relocation of dumping sites, leaving the problem alive and growing. The authorities must, therefore, immediately assess the ground reality and do the needful.

## The ageing of India



M.J. AKBAR

EVER since Rajiv Gandhi made the eighteen-year-old into a voter in the general elections of 1989, there has been no majority government in Delhi. Are these two facts related?

Certainty in such matters is the virtue of an ass. But there is a growing feeling that there may be a link. The youngest band of voter defines himself or herself by rejecting the establishment, whatever it may be; this is the law of the first assertion. That group almost certainly tilted the balance against the Congress in 1989, preferring V.P. Singh; and since then has consistently led the way in mobilising against the Congress at the polling booth. In 1991, in the north, that voter went to the BJP fashioned by Lal Krishna Advani at his inspirational best in his Ram temple phase. It could have been predicted that achievement would become the death of inspiration; on December 6 Mr Advani got his temple but lost his young-temple vote. Since then the BJP has been refashioning itself, not without success, but the success has been one of intelligent strategy rather than passionate belief. The party has resolved this contradiction because it has been blessed by circumstance, but that is not a permanent resolution.

The most important reason for the BJP's success is the failure of the Congress. After Rajiv Gandhi the Congress found two leaders who may have had their functional uses for a party in decline but were incapable of adding a single vote. They did a good job of reducing the vote, however. Both Mr P.V. Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri

were particularly dead to the most energetic element of the electorate, that predictably unpredictable teenager and post-teenager. Many of the middle-aged leaders in the Congress replaced Kesri with Mrs Sonia Gandhi because they believed that she would energise the young to return to the party. They learnt very quickly that you cannot bring the youth vote back simply by looking younger than Mr Rao or Kesri (in itself not too difficult to do). You have to also communicate a vision. At the moment the Congress behaves and talks like a party that wants a future for itself,

the young who never left his side even when voters distanced themselves from him. It was the young who led the fight against the Emergency, and the political parties who reaped the windfall. In a sense that was the culmination of the mood of that age, and its success in 1977 was a vindication of all the movements that had exhausted the Sixties and the Seventies. I believe that the alienation of the young from Indian politics began with the disillusionment that followed 1977, when the Janata Party betrayed that profusion of hopes that spearheaded its ascension to power. Mrs

she loses to the Marxists again, her promise will sag. Five years is too long to wait in the life of the young; they are not so young at the end of it.

Some politicians blame the young themselves for this abdication, criticising the hamburger and the discotheque for their depoliticisation. This is disingenuous, and I am not even going to ask who put the hamburger in front of the young; maybe the cycles of history did. The more relevant fact is that political parties themselves have become non-ideological. The only party with a political agenda is

Bihar are pushing towards Delhi and Mumbai (once upon a time the destination was Kolkata); Delhi and Mumbai are their America. Delhi and Mumbai are searching for the Silicon Valley and Europe. This unhappiness translates into a negative vote against whoever is in power. Can young anger be decisive? By itself, no. But it is never by itself. There is always a current running against any ruling party; the young add high voltage to this current. More governments have been defeated since 1989 than any time before, even during the volatile late Sixties, both at the State and

only succeed in marginalising him. He has spent his whole life in politics being defeated by the Marxists; he cannot waste the rest of it being defeated by Mamata Banerjee.

The situation is worse for the Congress in Tamil Nadu. Jayalalitha has no use for Sonia Gandhi's party, not because of anything personal but because the Sonia Congress has melted away from the few patches in which it was visible. The story doing the rounds in Chennai is that when Pranab Mukherjee (again! Poor man...) met Jayalalitha to discuss an alliance she asked him to name five constituencies from where the Congress could put up a credible candidate, let alone win a seat. Pranab Mukherjee turns red with embarrassment fairly quickly. He was purple when he left Jayalalitha's home in Chennai. Jayalalitha is likely to shift home a little later this year, and move into the chief minister's residence.)

The Congress is comatose in Bihar. Even Jagannath Mishra will not touch the party. It is experiencing a mild upward bounce in Uttar Pradesh, but nothing that will take it higher than Mulayam Singh Yadav or the BJP. It will have to propped up by Mayawati to stay in the game, and that is tantamount to a health warning. In Gujarat the Congress leadership has mismanaged the earthquake aftermath thoroughly, sounding either naive or opportunist. Maharashtra it can forget in the near future. Maybe it will be 1977 once again and all the Congress MPs will come from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The BJP is no better off; and we will know after the UP elections whether it is any worse off or not. Which about sums it up. Both the BJP and the Congress are thinking laterally, in terms of states, and in the traditional political geometry of castes and constituencies and communities. Someone needs to take a closer look at the demographics of emerging India, which is reshaping itself along other lines. Youth is also a religion. Someone should have faith in it.



**There is a powerful restlessness among the young that advertises their diminishing faith in our country's ability to catch up with the world that they see on their television screens. The underfed among them from the desolate small towns of Bihar are pushing towards Delhi and Mumbai (once upon a time the destination was Kolkata); Delhi and Mumbai are their America. Delhi and Mumbai are searching for the Silicon Valley and Europe. This unhappiness translates into a negative vote against whoever is in power. Can young anger be decisive? By itself, no. But it is never by itself. There is always a current running against any ruling party; the young add high voltage to this current.**

not for the voter, and not for the young. No political party in the country has an agenda for the young, which is why the young have no commitment towards any political party. There is a stale feale about India's political leadership. Even the comparatively younger leaders seem to have been around for too long, and aged beyond their age. The problem is about more than personalities. We are in a phase of politics bereft of ideology. In the Fifties the ideology of our national movement created the necessary commitment towards nationalism. When this palled a range of Marxist options, from a confused Indian socialism to virulent Maoism dominated the thinking of the young in the Sixties and Seventies. It was both intellectual and inspirational, irrespective of your choice within the range. Dr Ram Manohar Lohia's thesis competed with that of Mao Zedong, with options along the way. George Fernandes was a hero not only to the working class but also to

Indira Gandhi returned in 1980, but she was no longer the leader who had lifted politics into another stratosphere in 1970 and 1971. The young never went back to the Congress with any enthusiasm after that. For a brief while, Rajiv Gandhi caught their imagination, but that was all too brief. V.P. Singh and L.K. Advani replaced him, splitting the sentiment between Mandal and Mandir: by the end of 1993 both had dissipated, both meandering into conventional politics, each with its burden of sorrow. The young have wandered away from any political party, though not out of politics. The Marxists of Bengal are the only ones whose youth wing is not defunct, but they have not added significantly to such support. Those youngsters inclined towards political activity in Bengal are drifting towards Mamata Banerjee, a phase that will last till she fails to deliver, or her promise withers. One of the two will happen this year. If she wins, she will not be able to deliver. And if

the BJP, and its extremists want a sectarian India. The young may be susceptible to passion, but that is generally a temporary fascination. What holds them is ideas and ideology. Since there are no ideas, there is nothing to hold them. Not even jobs. Take a random check among the young, and ask what they really dream about. A passport, an airline ticket, and at the end of the rainbow a green card in the United States or a residential permit in some developed country. They dream of leaving India, and if they feel especially patriotic they suggest they could come back. But you should see the leap in the step as they board the plane outward, India, as they might put it in their jargon, is not a happening country.

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the Central levels.

There has not been single-party rule in Delhi since 1989. This reflects, on the one hand, the continuously shrinking base of the Congress and, on the other, the inability of the BJP to occupy all the space vacated by the Congress. No party is large enough to absorb and assimilate the contradictions that have arisen in the electoral politics of India. Opinion polls are calculating that Congress could reach up to 200 seats in the next general elections. But do not look only at statistics. Take a look also at Pranab Mukherjee's face. The little that was left of the Congress in Bengal is heading straight into the waiting arms of Mamata Banerjee and her friends in the National Democratic Alliance, including the BJP. When asked about the 'sacrifice' of principles in the alliance with the BJP, the leader of the departing forces, Saugata Roy asks plaintively how much more of his political life he will have to give over to principles that

## Who is afraid of Taliban ?

DR BADRUL KHAN  
*writes from Sydney*

REPORTS received in recent weeks suggest that Pakistan is hinting to its intent of halting the galloping power of Islamic fundamentalism, fast spreading across various prescient of power. This it wishes to achieve by initially putting a ban on raising funds for the 'holy war' by groups loyal to the liberation of Kashmir and to those supporting the Taliban in a country already torn apart by violence and communal intolerance. Countries in Central Asia share a similar mood of concern as the sound of Mullahs condemning the great Satan of the West keeps reverberating, raising possibility of skewing the new democratic and secular set-up just beginning to take shape. It also coincides with President Putin of Russia talking during his last visit to India on fighting Afghan based terrorism in five central Asian countries. With this chorus joins the US who see an insurmountable risk in a zealot Taliban movement spreading beyond its control. To prevent any continuum that ties Middle East, and Central Asia with South and South East Asia into an anti-US ideological alliance is by far the greatest foreign policy priority, President Bush would have in mind. Afghanistan, the largest supplier of illicit opium can potentially provide an unlimited war chest, one that could make real difference in this gathering storm when the battle for the heart and mind of the Muslims remains far from over. A merger of

drug and Islam is the last thing the West would fancy to see now.

Needless to say that the close proximity the whole region has to Afghanistan is offering new zeal for forces committed to Islamic extremism. Boosted by much acclaimed "invincibility" with which they swept into power, the word Taliban is a shibboleth - one that electrifies insurgent mind or rings like an

as sacrosanct appear catchy, and can gain clential in those who dream of gaining power by riding on the back of the supernatural and the divine. It is as if the days of soporific and idling Islam are over and time to challenge the globe one more time.

Yet, beyond this anti-Taliban bandwagon marching all over the world, little do we pay attention to the role each of these countries

capable of helping Pakistan in salvaging its sagging economy. By allowing Pakistan gain control over the vital trade routes that connect Central Asian market, Taliban emerged into a confidante - a guardian who could bring peace into the region and allow America to look after the imperatives of global economy and politics. Channelled through Pakistan's Inter Services

fundamentalists with disdain, much of which had come in the form of an emotional reference made to their role at various stages of country's history. Yet, such disdain has never been translated into practical strategy for intervention. On the contrary, many have rather cashed in by crying wolf, idealistically referring to them as the only source of ills and how detrimental their

in the movement. Rulers have always used the spectre of Islamic Fundamentalism as a pretext to gain support of the intellectuals and progressive forces. Fearful of the prospect of a Fundamentalist victory and consequences it could potentially bring, the progressive part of Bangladeshi intellectuals has always been turned on by this call. Yet, little have they demanded from the party in power some of whose anti people deeds have only fuelled anger and diverted many into the den of the Fundamentalists. Islamic fundamentalism is not itself a problem. It has always been used both globally and locally as a tool to externalise blame and cover up one's lack of commitment to people and country. Till now the cat and mouse game is just political. Should it turn more violent and military in the wake of civil disturbances it would be a treat to see who takes what side. For people of course it will be far more difficult to pick up any difference between the forces of secular politics who reap people and country for their own pockets and the fundamentalist who use religion as an opium to sooth more confused and unruly minds. It is time now for those who claim to be the guardian of Bengali culture and tradition to reflect back and show some guts to the politicians who have lot of catching up to do in terms of their commitment and accountability.

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imminent threat. Calling for a global jihad, they spread their messages by idealising a closely individualised version of Sharia, one that would marshal support in individual countries in favour of Islamic rules. According to many political pundits, there are all signs to suggest that the epicentre of Islamic revolt is fast shifting from the citadels of Muslim Brotherhood to the soaring mountains and fearsome deserts of Kandahar and Hirat. Displaying contempt to modern life, Taliban have shown allegiance in its way to glory to a set of out-word conduct which men, women and girls must abide by. Thus, ban on women working; imposition on men to follow strict Islamic code; and verdict on music, photography and the treasures of ancient civilisations

now feeling threatened by Taliban had played in the past. Official version reads the genesis of its rise in a Madrassa in Singesar village of Kandahar where a blind-eyed former Mujahidin by the name Mohammed Omar, masterminded a revolt against the the excesses of the rival bands on the provincial highways, where looting and raping were common norms. Yet, it keeps silent on Pakistan, the role it played in transforming a haphazard group into a military and political power. Many studies suggest (William Maley, 1998), Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban) and confirm the involvement which Pakistan and America had in providing support to Taliban who initially appeared as a force

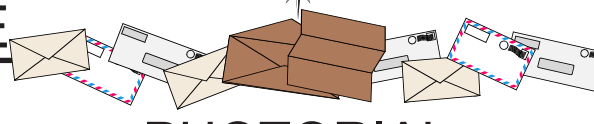
Intelligence (ISI) a network was developed with the CIA, the Saudi Intelligence (Headed by Prince Turki), Muslim brotherhood and the Saudi Tycoon Osama Bin Laden, now declared outlaw, operating from the 'Houses of Auxiliaries' (Bayt al-ansar). The strategy was to defeat the government and then bring the might of the opposing ethnic groups on to their knees. It apparently worked very well.

If this is true on a macro level, the rise of Taliban ideology in individual countries also suggests a similar track. Political Islam has always been a force in Bangladesh a country most of whose 150 million inhabitants are Muslims. Yet, conventional political parties and groups have always treated the

presence apparently were for Bangladesh. Others have joined forces with them and riding on their back has meant to be a real good chance to hang on to power. Yet, never have the threat waned. Like a golden goose fundamentalism has rewarded life dedicated to politics in many different ways - sometimes through clandestine deals and coalitions against political opponents; at other times, as political stunt, exploiting anti fundamentalist rhetoric and slaying them with empty words.

Any attraction to Islamic extremism in Bangladesh however stems more from the corruption and utter defiance of those in power to the rule of law, less from any proselytising power or potency one could find

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



### PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

#### Agricultural University

Many thanks to Mr M A S Molla for applauding the recent upgrading of our institute to a full university, the Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, by the government ('To The Editor', March 11th). We sincerely hope that the concerned higher authorities would complete all the bureaucratic formalities so that the new Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University could start its academic, research and extension activities.

I am thankful to Mr. Molla for mentioning my personal efforts. Yes, I have so far written nearly 5000 letters, articles, reports, ventilating and explaining our logic in favour of elevating the status of BAI. And I am indebted to all our national dailies and weeklies including daily The Daily Star for publishing my write-ups. We are of course grateful to the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for fulfilling our just demand, obviously in the greater interest of the nation.

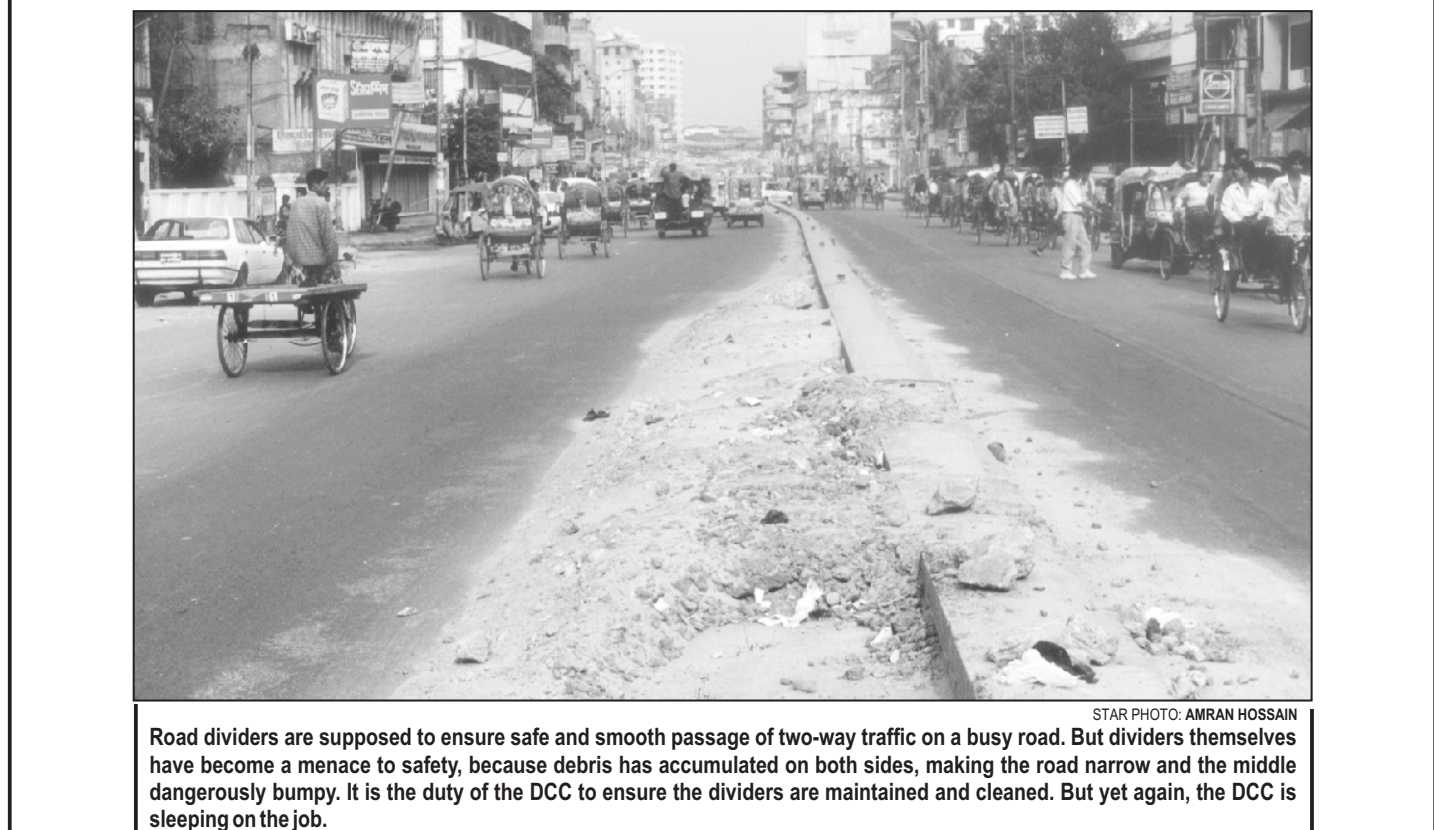
I would like to renew my request once again to the government to help us so that we can use the 'Chandrima Uddyan' as the field laboratory of the Forestry Department of the new Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University. And I fully endorse Mr. Molla's suggestion that no new space in the highly

polluted capital city should be destroyed for any sake whatsoever. In order to ensure clean air and a pollution free environment in Dhaka, we have to increase our green spaces.

**M Zahidul Haque**  
*Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka.*

#### Share market reporting

As a reader from a mofussil area I am not satisfied with your coverage of share markets. Your reporting covers bank-wise profits but as a humble shareholder I would be more interested in information on a return on investments. For instance, various banks such as United Commercial, National, City, Pubali and Rupali bank, raised share capital 12-17 years ago but what has been the return in the form of dividend in cash or stock dividend? Financial analysis would enable investors to get to know the actual status of their investment. I would request you to look at the last ten years in respect of annual cash dividend and stock dividend declared by these banks. Simple clerical figures of profits, or bank financial statistics are not good enough for investors particularly in mofussil areas.



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

**Clean up the dividers**  
Road dividers are supposed to ensure safe and smooth passage of two-way traffic on a busy road. But dividers themselves have become a menace to safety, because debris has accumulated on both sides, making the road narrow and the middle dangerously bumpy. It is the duty of the DCC to ensure the dividers are maintained and cleaned. But yet again, the DCC is sleeping on the job.

**Mahbubur Rahman**  
*Bagerhat.*

#### Paying dearly

I feel sorry for the employees of the Rajshahi City Corporation who lost their job because they were selling deer (March 11th, Back page). According to your report, the Rajshahi zoo physician and supervisor were suspended for their alleged involvement in the sale of spotted deer that was later siezed from Gabtali cattle market in Dhaka.

While big bosses are stealing lakhs, the small guys have been punished. It is well known to every one that in Khulna area deer meat is freely available. If you know the source you can taste it if you like. In my view, the best thing would be for the government to distribute deer generally so that people could rear them like goats or cows. There will be no scarcity of deer then.

**Concerned**  
*Via email*

#### Medical malpractice

Reference the letter on medical malpractice (March 11th) the writer has said that the media and much of the public believe and promote the concept that surgical complications are caused solely by 'bad doctors'. I would rather say that problems are caused solely by the bad attitude of

doctors. Patients should not always be expected to passively receive service determined by the providers alone.

I appreciate the writer's suggestion to establish a professional committee to oversee the conduct of the medical profession. The objective of the committee should be to improve the health of patients, ensure that doctors respond to patients' expectations and make provisions for financial protection against the cost of ill health.

By patients' expectation what I mean is that patients should be treated with dignity. Doctors should spend some time trying to alleviate patients' anxiety. After all health service is a kind of service for humanity. Providing financial protection means avoiding irrational diagnostic methods. As a doctor, I know human biology creates variability, boundaries are sometime indistinct and subject to change. But my personal comment is that doctors are so busy making money they don't bother to keep abreast of progress in the rest of the world. I would like to ask health professionals to search through the Internet and learn about global advancements in medical science, in their respective fields.

**Dr. Lailun Nahar**  
*Dhaka*