

## We need comprehensive police reform

*The first step is to stop using the police for political ends*

Our predominantly two-party governing scenario, the winner has almost exponentially fallen for a new-look police force, beaten into shape from 'a misshapen state' it was handed down by the losing party. Begum Zia's government has, therefore, predictably weeded out elements among the police officialdom who had allegedly enjoyed the blessings of the former Awami League government.

Set against this background, the speech Begum Zia delivered to senior police officials on Sunday as part of the Police Week observances acquired a special import. The Prime Minister made two points. On a numerical level, she wants to raise the strength of the police force by 5,000 men and women. This is highly welcome, because the 87,000-strong force is spread too thin for 130 million people. Their deployment on VIP duties and for keeping an eye on political or professional rallies and processions leave them with very little to address the primary agenda for crime control and enhancement of public safety.

The PM has pledged non-interference in police administration, meaning that in matters of law enforcement, the police will be free to act professionally in a completely non-partisan way. Having carried out a shuffle in the police administration to rid it of 'Awami sympathisers', the government's responsibility has increased that much more to be practising complete non-partisanship vis-a-vis the police force. In other words, the government undertakes not to repeat the AL story of partisan use of the police. It is absolutely imperative on the whole that the police act from a high moral ground with complete professional rectitude. In ensuring this the government has a fundamental role to play, the police coming next.

On the question of structurally strengthening the police force we are for a greater investment in this hitherto neglected area. With the population growing, crimes are galloping, but the investment in the police lag far behind those growth rates. The police force, to remain in the reckoning, should have enough transports, wireless sets, forensic equipment and a whole lot of other logistics. Its primitive weapons are a farce before the arms being held by criminals, terrorists and traffickers. But without imparting adequate motivation and training to police men and women, the increase in their numerical strength or their re-equipment will not be put to good use. That's why it is of paramount importance that comprehensive police reform is carried out to transform it into a force for democracy, human rights and modernity befitting the spirit of the new millennium.

## Government's timely decision

*Phasing out baby taxis must address both environmental and public transport issues*

The government has decided to phase out all two-stroke baby taxis which are the prime culprit in making Dhaka the most air-polluted and one of the more cancer inducing cities of the world. People have been crying out for a solution for decades but nothing has yet been done. Although most regimes promised action they backed off in the end. One waits to see how serious BNP is about this bit of policy making. However, it is a more complex problem than reducing polybags.

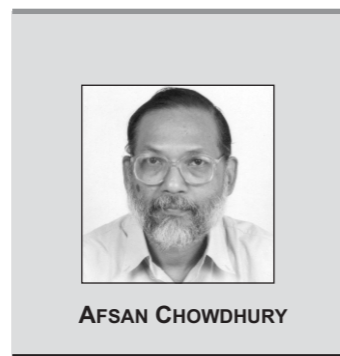
That two-stroke engines used by baby taxis have no future is well known. Experts have said that the structure of this contraption is such that palliative measures like converting engines and using less pollutant fuel will make little difference. One simply will have to do away with them to prevent pollution. Meanwhile, experts also say that they have to be taken off the roads with a strict deadline. Authorities have in the past gone a few steps but then retreated; hence, the concern.

However, taking smoke-belching baby taxis off the roads will certainly go a long way in solving the environment problem but it will leave the issue of urban mass transit and public transportation unresolved. Doing away with rickshaws has made the traffic problem less and the immediate limit on baby taxis will also improve the situation but public movement will require more attention.

The government will certainly have to ensure a mass transit system that is able to tackle the large commuter traffic be it through higher number of buses or circular railway systems. Since baby taxis cater to the middle class, this is also a politically sensitive issue. There has to be a viable option for them along with the phasing out of these vehicles.

All this means that a certain degree of urban planning is necessary or the resolution of one will lead to the creation of problem in another form. We therefore don't just cheer the decision but insist that it be implemented through a co-ordinated plan that has looked at all the sectors.

# Shahriar Kabir, Taslima Nasreen, Parubala and Simi's mother



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

**E**ACH age produces its own heroes and martyrs. Their faces become the mirror of their times. Their words, actions and deeds signify how the age and time treats its icons. Some of the icons that we talk about are heroes in one eye and a villain in another. And there are the few who belong to no eyes and rapidly disappear from the retina as memories click and change the endless relay of faces, damaged or demolished. If we can remember the martyr it's the famous one. If it's the injured warrior, it's still the famous one. If they are the unknown soldiers, we put them all together in a single wicker of flame. But we have no flames for the unknown warrior's mother.

Within a few hours after the arrest of Shahriar Kabir, telephones were ringing. Dhaka's journalists were informed almost immediately. I got a call from Prof. Muntahir Mamun, Shahriar bhai's closest ally and a person who should get a Nobel Prize for loyalty to a friend. He was still at the airport then. I called Star who naturally knew about it and then the BBC who were also informed. Even before the rather messy arrest was organized the world had come to know about SK and his situation. By late night, e-mail protests were being filed in various rights and freedom networks. If the machinery of the government was moving to intern SK, the wheels of protest also moved almost simultaneously.

TASLIMA Nasreen was even more well known than Shahriar when

she was charged with a crime she probably had no idea whether she was committing or not. A woman endowed with much more courage of conviction than talent, she had opened the doors of resentment that haunted the souls of many Bangladeshi middle class women. She was an excellent columnist who spoke on issues rarely spoken before and most women who read her did believe she gave voice to their silences. She wrote poems, which weren't particularly great but very choicable and had a host of admirers, of her poetry and herself.

a time when both he and I, with some others -- I was a student then -- were involved in the release of political prisoners in the post AL era of 1976. At that time he was a serious anti-Awami League activist. In fact he was so intensely anti-AL that he once asked us to disband an all-party students committee against communalism, a spontaneous outfit that had grown overnight in the Dhaka University because Chhatra League was also a member of that. I still don't know when the process of change started but his last few years have been spent in the persona of a

case will end with justice. He has, as a street reporter, seen that delayed justice usually ends up denied. He knows every bit of the events that saw the death of the girl and the social forces that even now press upon the family. At least Simi's family has got some focus but for the Hindu families that either left the country or ran away or shiver in fear, there is no justice, and very little fair play. And this after being innocent of everything. He has seen the invisible victims and knows the meaning of helpless pain.

weren't interested in this news. All they wanted to know was about Taslima Nasreen. She was news but others weren't, not even journalists in jail. I remember arguing for half an hour and finally managed to send a voice dispatch that included reference to the arrested men of the media. That was the maximum I managed. I wanted to but couldn't say that everyone knew where TN was living in sanctuary. Which envoys were protecting her. Which government minister was in touch with her protectors and how much embarrassment BNP was facing

There should be no confusion that the Awami record on tolerance is terrible. The Tipu incident is an excellent example. One must ask if one's belief in freedom of expression is partisan or not. Simply put, -- Did you protest when Joyinal Hazari's men beat Tipu and others up?

-- Did you protest when Shahriar Kabir was interned and later charged?

If the answer is "yes" to both, you may claim to be non-partisan. Otherwise, one would say that your party's position influences and even decides your sense of freedom and outrage. This test applies to all.

I once got a call for an interview from an European news outlet on Taslima Nasreen. I asked what was my qualification for selection.

"We have investigated and found out that you are one of the few people in the media who knows all the ex-husbands of Taslima Nasreen well and has a broadcasting experience, too.

The logic of the media remains inscrutable.

SIMI'S mother walks into the thana. She wants to know why the people held responsible for her daughter's death are still roaming free. I don't know what the answer is. I don't know how the freedom business operates at their level. For the Hindu women raped and the families forced to run away, freedom has different layers of meaning. Protest on this has already stilled and it will soon be a forgotten episode. The number of forgotten Simis are many and even our readers are more keen to write on the intricacies of religious cannon than push for social justice.

A little bit of fame helps a lot when you are chasing justice or seeking protection. For the helpless, mostly suicide notes get noticed or a desperate race to another land.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

**Simi's mother walks into the thana. She wants to know why the people held responsible for her daughter's death are still roaming free. I don't know what the answer is. I don't know how the freedom business operates at their level. For the Hindu women raped and the families forced to run away, freedom has different layers of meaning. Protest on this has already stilled and it will soon be a forgotten episode.**

She enjoyed the attention of the international media, partly generated by her feminist pieces and confessional writings. Her fame was at a level perhaps never achieved by any in Bangla literature. The irony is that more people in the world know her name than they will ever hear of Rabi babu. She may not surely enjoy the same level of respect but she has served her cause brilliantly. Like Shahriar Kabir she had a strange ally in a political party called the BNP. Why this party chooses to create heroes that cause them international embarrassment escapes my limited logical capacity.

MORSHED Ali Khan of The Daily Star is a deeply distraught and emotionally harassed reporter. He ends up reporting the horrors that are inevitable in Bangladesh. He came back from Lalmojon in Barisal where Hindu women were raped and wrote the "Nakphul" story -- of helpless Parubalas and others. He was stunned by what he saw and took time to recover. He also did the background story on the Simi suicide case. He is often despondent as he describes the scene in the area where Simi perished. He is not convinced that in the end Simi's

THE media moves according to many compulsions and even those inside it don't understand them all. When Taslima Nasreen had become the famous person, an international news agency sent a photographer just to prepare a portfolio of hers. It was a smart move. We were then also under BNP rule. I was then attached to the BBC amongst other tasks. Ataus Samad bhai -- prime teacher to many of us -- was the points man and he would have to deal with some who were often more keen to see the fanatics that weren't there in such large numbers. At that time a number of journalists including Borhan Ahmed of Janakantha had been arrested under the same charges made against TN. The fanatics were really after them but there was not a word in the international media about their situation. The famous gets noticed, I learnt.

I was on the phone to an international news outlet trying to explain that others were in jail but they

because of the case. Nor could I say if BNP had done that after getting a major hiding in the Municipal polls and if it had planned to use the case to whip up anti-AL public sentiments. BNP gained very little from it all except an identity as an anti-women pro-Islamic fundamentalist lobby type political party. It was Jammal-e-Islami, wiped out in that Municipal poll, who were revived, who certainly should thank the global media for it.

SHAHRIYAR bhai's was an issue of freedom of expression. It is an issue of right to freedom. To charge someone for shooting a film on the plight of a victimized people and then tag it as "treason" may even get a verdict from the court but will always be denied by the cannons of morality and natural justice. BNP simply doesn't understand this. It almost seems that the best friend that the Awami League could have is the ruling party. They seem hell bent on doing everything that will make AL look better in comparison.

# Indo-Indo trade and transit through Bangladesh

## The moment of truth?

K.A.S. MURSHID AND  
SHAHK MONIRUZZAMAN

**A** country's geographical location is a crucial element of its external trade strategy. Thus countries like Singapore and Hong Kong cleverly exploited their locational advantage to emerge as major trading and financial centres. Bangladesh, too, has certain advantages that stem from its locational position. It sits astride two great economic zones of Asia, namely South Asia and East Asia. In addition it virtually separates the seven North-Eastern states of India (Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal) from the mainland, save for a very narrow and precarious connection over difficult terrain. Therefore, direct access of goods to and from Western to North-Eastern India overland through Bangladesh is, understandably, a key Indian objective.

There has been a lot of heated debate on whether Bangladesh should allow transit of Indian goods in one form or another over its territory. The last government, and especially its Commerce Minister tried hard to sell the idea but to no avail, in the face of stiff political resistance. We will not dwell here with the various arguments put forward by the different antagonists of transit but instead explore briefly what constraints and difficulties are likely to present themselves in implementing the latest proposal of 'back to back' LCs now on the table.

Recently the Government of Bangladesh has allowed a transport company to import Indian fruits and vegetables from one state through letters of credit (LC) and re-export those to other bordering states, crossing through Bangladesh territory in the process. This decision is likely to come into effect on an experimental basis. The mechanism of trade postulated seems very close to the concept of 'transshipment' that was put forward by the last government.

### Demand side issues

Transportation of Indian goods across Bangladesh to and from north-east India is very important for India given the precarious over-land communication system with the so-called Seven Sisters. The only route through the 'Chicken's Neck' of Siliguri is both difficult and hazardous.

The cultivable area in India's north-east is limited requiring large quantities of food and other agricultural commodities to be imported from the rest of the country. The industrial-manufacturing base is also thin so that there is also a large demand for manufactured goods as well. These agricultural and industrial products imported into the region from the rest of India constitute the potential demand for transportation overland through Bangladesh.

### Alternative routes by road

Benapole in Jessore, Rohanpur in Nawabganj, Hilli in Dinajpur and Banglabandh in Panchagar are the major land ports on Bangladesh's western border while Akhaura in Brahmanbaria and Tamabil in Sylhet are the land ports on the east that are likely to be used as entry and exit points for Indian goods. There are a total of eight possible routes that may be used for the purpose. Of these the most likely routes are Benapole to Tamabil and Benapole to Akhaura.

### Capacity and utilization of the possible routes

While in general existing road infrastructure appears adequate to accommodate increased traffic much of the excess capacity relates to night-time flows. Similarly, all the major routes go through Dhaka and as such has major implications for its already strained traffic conditions. There is little doubt therefore that the additional 'Indian traffic' will result in increased traffic jams, higher incidence of accidents and road breakdowns and will raise operation and maintenance costs of roads. It is very worrying to even contemplate the possibility that much of the increased traffic will have to pass through Dhaka. This

must be avoided.

### Mode of transport

The only mode of transport currently being mooted is road transport. However, the government urgently needs to review alternative modes, especially the use of rail transport. The railways offer a number of features that makes this an attractive option. It is cheaper, environment-friendly and easier to monitor and supervise.

One of the principal concerns stemming from formal cross-border trade by road relates to problems of governance, including fraudulent letters of credit, false declaration of goods and commodities being shipped, incorrect specification of quantities and values, and so on. A good example of this was borne out by the large mismatch seen between Indian rice export figures (to Bangladesh) and Bangladeshi rice import figures (from India) in 1999-2000. It became evident that many commodities were in fact being imported from India under false declarations to take advantage of differential duties across commodities. A second serious problem relates to actual quantities imported. A BIDS-IFPRI study on the cross-border trade in rice showed that invariably, an extra 30-50 per cent of additional, undeclared amount of rice was brought in per truck consignment. This was difficult to check in part because of inadequate infrastructural facilities in the ports, especially due to the lack of weighing equipment. There is little reason to expect that the 'back-to-back' LCs by themselves, can easily overcome these problems.

The use of container rail services has the advantage that leakages in transit are likely to be small, and given bulk carriage of goods, mechanisms like independent PSI (pre-shipment inspection) and verification at the point of exit, becomes much more viable. Indeed, whatever mode is ultimately chosen, it will be essential to ensure independent inspection by different entities at entry and exit points. Without such a built-in mechanism,

widespread abuse of the system is assured.

### Financial benefits

Freight charges will accrue to companies engaged in the business and profits derived will be distributed among owners and operators. It appears that transport companies will be able to levy a 10 per cent value-addition charge over the actual cost of transport. This amount will be retained by the companies themselves. The additional transport business will benefit related economic activities including repair shops, banking and insurance houses.

### Public sector costs and benefits

It is not clear how the public exchequer will benefit directly from the arrangements made. On the other hand considerable public costs are going to be incurred on road maintenance while significant social and economic costs will also occur. Domestic freight users and passengers on the affected routes will find their costs go up (in terms of both time and money) while road safety matters will assume even graver dimensions. The government will need to negotiate a direct payment from the Indian Government so that these costs are adequately covered. The gains to India consists of savings in terms of freight charges and time, net of any transport subsidies provided by the government for its north-eastern trade. An estimate of these savings should be done (including the economic value of time) to determine the basis of the payment. India should be happy to share with Bangladesh at least 50 percent of the savings generated as a result of this cross-border trade arrangement.

### Some recommendations

**Construction of new roads:** If the Indian goods are transported from the western border points to the north-eastern border points of Bangladesh, all the routes, as things now stand, will involve movement through Dhaka city. The additional burden on an already beleaguered city will simply be intolerable. It will therefore be crucial to construct

adequate by-pass roads for the purpose.

**Pre and post -- shipment inspection:** It is vital to have pre and post shipment verification of items and quantities transported to prevent abuse. Infrastructure facilities at the border ports remain rudimentary and hostage to a non-transparent, complex and inefficient system. The GOB has to implement verification and inspection at entry and exit points to ensure that leakages have not occurred and contraband items are not being moved around. This may well prove to be the Achilles' heel of the system.

**Fixation of taxes and block payment from India:** The GOB has to determine the tax per unit of goods moved. In addition an annual bulk payment can be negotiated with India as a fair share of the 'consumer or government surplus' that will accrue to it. The private transport sector should be allowed to compete for the business freely, so that the freight charge applicable will be determined mainly by market forces. The government should levy an extra charge per unit to cover costs of road maintenance and development as well as costs needed to address adverse impacts of an environmental, social and economic nature. On top of that a reasonable share of the consumer surplus accruing to India should be negotiated as an annual side-payment based on traffic volumes.

### Specific recommendations

The authors strongly feel that the best option available to the country is to use the railways to transport Indian goods through back-to-back LCs, with proper arrangements for supervision, monitoring and control, including pre and post shipment inspection by different, independent entities.

In this context, infrastructure investments are sorely needed, especially in the areas of telecommunications, customs warehouse facilities, transshipment yards and roads, and for the rail ports, new rolling stock.

Some critical capital equipment needed are weighing machines,

wagons and engines for the rail-ways. Pilferage and labour problems have become endemic in the rail ports and needs to be urgently checked.

The complex formalities insisted upon by Customs provide much scope for rent-seeking, and needs to be simplified. That this can easily be done was again brought out by the simplified rice-import procedures introduced in 1999-2000, but later discontinued.

### Conclusion

For Bangladesh to agree to allow transit of Indian goods (in whatever manner) is a big concession both psychologically and politically. It is also the correct thing to do. South Asians and especially, Indians suffer from a highly developed atavistic mentality brought about by decades of Stalinist-type industrialization within a large, captive market. This gesture by Bangladesh will warrant reciprocation, and definitely within the six-month experimental period after its introduction. The trial period must be carefully monitored, preferably by an independent NGO or research body (like BIDS). This must also be the period when concerted negotiations are held with India to pursue the cause of free trade and regional cooperation, including resolution of the question of duty-free access to Indian markets and cooperation in enhancing regional energy security. Bangladesh has taken a bold first step forward to break out of the deadlock. It will now depend critically on India to reciprocate in kind and in spirit. Failure to reciprocate will deal a deathblow to regional cooperation in this part of the world and strengthen the hands of those who are convinced that India's only desire here is to stake out Bangladesh as a market rather than establish true economic interdependence.

Dr. K.A.S. Murshid is Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and Shaikh Moniruzzaman is Education Planning Specialist, ESTEEM, a component of DFID.

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

### BNP publishes white paper

There is no doubt that the white paper publication on the AL government is a bold step by the present government. I don't know whether it was included in their 100-days programme. If it was, it was indeed a wise decision and a praiseworthy task done by BNP.

Through this white paper, the entire nation as well as the world would be able to know the corruption AL committed misusing public exchequer. Publication of this white paper has proven that no one, no matter how powerful he/she is, is beyond justice.

However, ample evidence should be provided before accusing someone of corruption otherwise it will just appear as political revenge, which is totally unexpected and uncalled for.

**Khaled Hossain (Jewel)**  
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

### Stop using the minority

We appreciate our former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League's concern about the minorities. There are other political parties who are also concerned about the wellbeing of the minorities.

Since the general election we have been noticing Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League's concern about small incidences which may be common irrespective of religion. She has made such incidences a weapon to achieve her political gain at the cost of the minorities. Such cashing on minority is bound to be prejudiced to a political party in the eyes of other political parties.

We the Hindu community, therefore appeal to Sheikh Hasina and Awami League to let us live in peace without showing too much sympathy for us. After all we are living in this country for generations and we are

first Bangladeshi and then minority.  
**Swapan Kumar Bishwas**  
Moghbar, Dhaka

### Saifur Rahman's comments

If the Finance Minister is going to make irresponsible comments without a shred of evidence then he is the very antithesis of what sort of a man should be in charge of my country's finances.

How many times has Gordon Brown accused British companies of siphoning off funds?

Even if what the Finance Minister alleges, as a drowning man grasping at straws in the ruins of our finances, is true then this is because of excessive restrictions on private finances in Bangladesh.

If RMG units can survive, meet their BBLC liabilities, pay their salaries and still keep money abroad, which as any one remotely

aware of the state of the industry knows to be untrue, then more power to them.

It is about time we stopped tolerating our leaders' mindless blathering in pitiful exercises of headline grabbing.

**MA, Dhaka**

### Sheikh Hasina has no credibility

Sheikh Hasina has zero credibility. It was a farce of her to "address the nation". After humiliating President Shahabuddin Ahmad, she has lost whatever little respect one had for her. It is time the commanding members of the Awami League found a replacement for Sheikh Hasina and save the nation as well as their party from further embarrassment.

**AA, California, USA**

### Does God support Muslims ?



Low profile terrorist?

Almost 500 Muslims were killed by Osama when he attacked the WTC. And almost no reader of Daily Star expressed outrage when the letter writing spree at your paper began. All they have done is debate on hijab and other topics, which have nothing to do with everyday lives and the real crisis. It shows the moral bankruptcy of the Muslim world. Unable to produce a genius or an intellectual of acceptable quality, they dwell on the most banal issues. Their world goes no further than their bank account and their neighbourhood mosque where they are happy to listen to medieval rubbish told to them by an "Imam" or a "Taliban" who has taken the job after passing out from a madrassah where the curriculum was last reformed 500 years back. These Madrassah Muslims were

bragging about the invulnerability of their "Islam" when they took over Afghanistan. And now suddenly they are no longer so hot shot because "non-Muslim" West has put them on the run. Face the fact and perform. Can't use "God's will" as an excuse for a thousand years.

The world has changed and Laden is on the run. Take responsibility and have the courage to have an open mind. God's may have made Islam the best religion but he certainly doesn't seem to support it.

And will someone respond to the query a reader made about sanctioning the death of a Muslim by another, which Osama did and many Bangladeshi Muslims supported?

**Nasreen Mustafa Banani, Dhaka.**