

Don't pass the speedy trial bill in a hurry

We suggest a wide public debate on the issue

PLACING the speedy trial bill in the current session of parliament has undoubtedly raised a few pertinent questions. There has been an ordinance already promulgated and we understand the need for enacting such a law in present circumstances, but we wonder if the government had given it enough thought before introducing it? No one can deny that in the present judicial system, it takes years after years to dispose of a case, wasting precious time and money of all sides. We would definitely like to see an end of it, but not in a way that could only exacerbate the whole problem.

The opposition Awami League has termed it as 'black law' and Sheikh Hasina alleged that the government would mainly use the law to harass its political opponents. And here we ask -- can the government guarantee that the law would not be abused for political gains, and that only the real criminals, irrespective of their political affiliation would be tried under this law? How does the government plan to make sure that the innocents would not end up as victims under this law? Taking revenge by implicating and filing false cases against one's enemy is a common phenomenon in our country. And here we are not talking about petty crimes, we are talking about crimes like rape, murder and possession of illegal arms, explosives and narcotics for which a person, if proven guilty, would be severely punished. We wonder if within the very short period the investigating team would have enough scope to do their job thoroughly. And there lies our main concern that an innocent person may end up serving for life or even for many years without committing any crime worth the punishment.

The government has to realise that this law deals with common people's lives, it would have a direct effect on their lifestyle. Therefore we think that it should not be passed in a hurried manner. There should have been detailed discussions with the experts to weigh the pros and cons before it was even placed in the parliament. There is still scope for that by having a proper debate on the issue before it is passed by the House. Otherwise, instead of being congratulated for making efforts to curb crimes in the society, the government will be guilty of complicating the problem further.

Death of a father

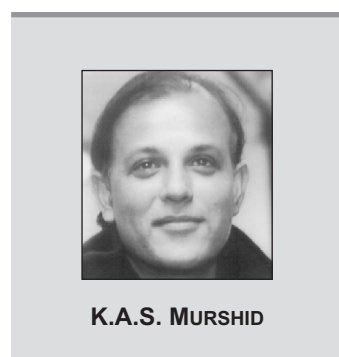
It points to a waning moral fabric

WHAT did Jahangir Alam do to deserve such a harrowing death? The 42-year-old father of two teenage girls and a toddling son stood up against five spoiled young men, who had been harassing the younger of his two daughters for about one and a half years and tried to shoo them away. Heckled to a momentary lapse of reason, he chased the teasers in a fit of rage. He did not know then that he would never come back home and that it was the last time he would react to his daughter being harassed by neighbourhood brats. Jahangir was smothered, hit with bricks and left in critical condition, just about 200 paces from his residence. He did not even make it to the hospital. With Jahangir gone, his daughters will be more vulnerable than ever to harassment by truant teenagers on their way to and back from school. His tragic end comes as a wake-up call for everyone to sit up and think hard about the decadent path our society has taken. The horrific death should prompt us into a collective introspection and analyse what has gone wrong in our society, a society where a teenage girl is subject to teasing and, sometimes, tugging by rowdy young men whenever she goes outdoors.

The two arrests the police have made in this connection should lead to unravelling of the entire episode and to punishment of the criminals. Hopefully, the lower courts, as they have done in the Bappi, Shihab, Mahima cases, will ensure expeditious dispensation of justice in this case, too. Exemplary punishments should be meted out to Jahangir's killers. However stringent the punishment is, the question now is whether it will deter such tragedy or whether it will make the neighbourhoods, the working places, the market places, the roads, the passenger transports, etc safe for teenage girls in particular and women in general. We have serious doubts.

Harassment of women has alarmingly gone up in recent times. Speedy dispensation of justice or stringent sentences in Mahima and Trisha murder cases does not seem to have had much of an impact on the hecklers. Strict law enforcement does not seem to have the answer to such an odious phenomenon any longer. Here, we are dealing with a social vice than a misdemeanour. Therefore, the resistance should come in the shape of a social movement. From the community leaders, the civil society exponents, the media down to the parents, everyone has to contribute to a mass sensitisation campaign.

A homogeneous nation?



K.A.S. MURSHID

OUR strength, we used to be reminded frequently, lay in our homogeneity in terms of language and ethnicity, as well as in the fact that we had no traditional landlord class or a hereditary aristocracy (implying an egalitarian social ethos). I must confess, however, that one no longer hears much discussion of these aspects of our strength. I wonder why?

There are only two or perhaps three plausible reasons for this: (a) it is self-evident that we have been able to forge a strong, united and egalitarian society so that this discourse has become irrelevant; (b) actually, our initial diagnosis was mistaken for we have since been able to unearth the existence of numerous 'ethnic' groups, factions and even a powerful 'aristocracy' that points to considerable heterogeneity and inequality; (c) or homogeneity in ethnicity and language is not necessarily of any great advantage for it is easy enough to generate factional differences, for exam-

ple, that can be just as disruptive. I haven't yet made up my mind about which particular explanation to root for. Nevertheless, let us look at some of the major socio-economic forces that we have been subject to in recent decades. First, political polarization, which began soon after liberation, has now reached its zenith -- so much so that every Bangladeshi now is required to be either pro-AL or pro-BNP/Jamaat. In other words, one's

saying that when *Benjamins* are in power their main function in life is to sniff out *Awamis* from wherever they are in a ruthless attempt to cleanse the political ground of any competition. When the *Awamis* are in power, their main objective is to pay back the *Benjamins* in kind (and cash). Secondly, we are witnessing an intense social stratification based on language (note the English medium -- Bangla medium debate in the pages of the DS), religion (those

respected for their industrial might and political acumen who, in a matter of a couple of decades have emerged from the ashes to forge little empires, curiously referred to as 'Groups of Companies'. With hindsight, this was not at all difficult for all it needed was political influence to obtain a large bank loan for a fictitious project which you then invested in basic symbols (house in Gulshan, several cars and a modest bank account abroad) and in land --

not belong to any of the exalted classes discussed above. For example, if you are a researcher or an 'intellectual', you could still hope to be an ambassador, a vice chancellor, a 'technocrat' minister, a bank chairman or even a bank loan defaulter -- although it is a bit late in the day to attempt to try the last named occupation. All you have to do is, as I have already said, play your cards well: visit the *mazars* of great men, be seen in the right

and do not have the distinction of being considered an 'intellectual', there is still hope. My advice to you would be to boldly go forth to assume the mantle of a *Benjami* or *Awami*, as the case may be (but make sure you change back quickly and decisively as soon as there is regime change); embark on a career of sycophancy, at first under the tutelage of your neighbourhood commissioner but climbing slowly into the good books of the MP; endear yourself by running small errands (run the Big Man's rival out of town, take over his protection racket and so on) or if all else fails, migrate. If your parents had foresight (and money), you have probably gone to an English medium school, in which case your English accent will be slightly different and your chances of joining the ranks of the white-collar migrant, distinctly higher. If this doesn't work, you can always join the blue-collar workers in the Middle East or South Korea where, unfortunately, your accent is unlikely to matter.

So let me go back to the question that I raised at the outset. Are we a homogeneous nation? Does it matter? To the first question, my response would be that we are much less homogeneous today than we ever imagined possible, e.g. in 1971. And yes, I believe, it does matter.

Dr K.A.S. Murshid is an Economist and Research Director, BIDS.

BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

Those who do not belong to any of the classes or factions and do not have the distinction of being considered an 'intellectual', there is still hope. My advice to you would be to boldly go forth to assume the mantle of a *Benjami* or *Awami*, as the case may be (but make sure you change back quickly and decisively as soon as there is regime change); embark on a career of sycophancy, at first under the tutelage of your neighbourhood commissioner but climbing slowly into the good books of the MP; endear yourself by running small errands (run the Big Man's rival out of town, take over his protection racket and so on) or if all else fails, migrate.

political stance (real or imagined) today appears to be the major element of one's identity. We may well be witnessing, Ladies and Gentlemen, the rise of two new quasi-ethnic groups in Bangladesh -- the *Awamis* and the *Benjamins*, distinguishable by their vocabulary (e.g. *Allah Hafez* vs *Khoda Hafez*), dress code (Mujib coat vs 'suit-coat') and strict endogamy. (I am told that when marriages are arranged these days the political orientation of the spouse or his/her family is explicitly taken into account). It goes without

who pray once a year vs. those who pray more than once a year), education (those who send their children abroad to study -- India is not considered 'abroad' in this context -- vs. those who do not), and class (i.e. whether you come from the Looocracy, the Groupocracy or the Tootocracy). While 'Looocracy' and 'Tootocracy' -- both with a formidable presence in Bangladesh -- need no introduction, the 'Groupocrats' perhaps need to be identified more clearly. These are the real Brahmins of our society, honoured and

lots and lots of it, and preferably in the name of your wife or even your dog.

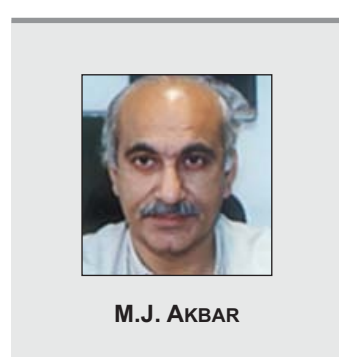
There is another budding aristocracy that is all set to emerge -- this time in rural Bangladesh. I refer to the rise of the new labour aristocracy consisting of the Migrant Worker recently returned from the Middle East or East Asia.

Where do the rest of us fit in? It all depends on how you play your cards. For example, you could still do pretty well for yourself if you make the right moves, even if you do

company and in the correct dress code, use the correct language, praise the reigning dynasty publicly, and issue frequent press statements. God willing, this formula should be fool proof. There is only one thing however, that you MUST NOT do: DO NOT provide even the faintest clue of having an independent, impartial and objective mind. In fact it would be best if you did not even own up to having a mind at all.

For the rest of you -- i.e. those who do not belong to any of the above named classes or factions

Of human bondage



M.J. AKBAR

ATAL Behari Vajpayee is not a Hindu, says the self-appointed guardian of Hinduism, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, vice president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. He is a *manavvadi*, explains the vice president. The statement says nothing about Mr Vajpayee. It does however say a great deal about Acharya Giriraj Kishore.

He must be the first Hindu with any reputation to believe that a humanist cannot be a Hindu. All religions have a supernatural aspect, which involves faith in an afterlife; and a natural one, which guides the worldly behaviour of the faithful. In that sense the defining tenets of Christianity are love and sacrifice, for that is what Jesus represented. Equality before one Allah, justice and charity are, similarly, the key facts of Islam. If Hinduism has a defining message, then it is humanism. There is space in its philosophy for everyone, which is one reason why India is a home to every single religion in the world. Anyone who has been persecuted anywhere else, whether Parsee in Muslim Iran or Jew in Christian Europe, has found an undisturbed haven in India. This remained true even when men distorted the philosophy of Hinduism and introduced the inequities of caste: the attitude of Hinduism to other faiths continued to be liberal. Hinduism is synonymous with humanism. That is its essence and its great liberating

quality. Acharya Giriraj Kishore may however, and perhaps inadvertently, have defined his problem. In a very real sense the struggle within the Hindutva Parivar is about the definition of Hinduism. For the Kishores and the Praveen Togadias, Hinduism is about imposition. For the Vajpayees it is precisely about what Kishore found objectionable: *manavvadi*, or humanism. What is the difference between what

others who may not agree with you, and have the perfect right not to agree. Perhaps the worst form of religious fundamentalism occurred in Spain and Portugal during the Inquisition when some 25 per cent of the population, consisting of Muslims and Jews, was either driven out of the country or forcibly converted to Christianity. The Kishores and Togadias want to change Hinduism into a militant, aggressive, invasive movement that

served a party all his life. He has no real constituency in the BJP. His forte is his acceptability to the electorate, which brings us to the second paradox: it is precisely because he is, intellectually and emotionally, a humanist that he receives the support from Indian voters that he gets. It is so often forgotten by the hard ideologues of the Parivar that India is a secular nation not because India's Muslims and Christians want it to remain secular, but because by

tians, smirked at liberals, taunted the "respectable" and will win an election. How perfect can you get?

There are two principal reasons why Modi will win. He satiated a very powerful thirst for violent revenge across a wide belt of Hindu opinion after the infamous incident at Godhra. The violence was left to the urban Hindu lumpen but it had the implicit support of those who would never be seen on the street but were nevertheless pleased that the

midterm American elections.) Shankar Singh Vaghela has tried to defeat Modi not by arguing that Modi is fundamentally wrong, but by saying he can be a sophisticated version of Modi. If it is a question of only electing another Modi, why settle for the fake when the real one is available? Sardar Patel is the icon of both parties. I am certain that the Sardar would be absolutely horrified at both the BJP and the Congress, the first for claiming him when he was never a believer in Hindutva; and the second for telling voters that he is really their man, and if the Congress could allow closet-Hindutva five decades ago it can do so again. I wonder how many posters the Indian National Congress has sent out in this election campaign with the face of Jawaharlal Nehru; or even of the most famous Gujarati of all, Mahatma Gandhi. This has been a me-too campaign; not a you-are-wrong campaign.

Will a Modi victory change the future of Indian politics, as is being trumpeted, a bit pompously? Better men than Modi have tried to change the future of Indian politics, and discovered that Indian politics has changed their future instead. Let us cite just one example. Can the Modi-Togadia tune play in Uttar Pradesh? They could try it, but it will cost the party its alliance with the Dalit chief minister Mayawati. The Dalit is no friend of violent extremism. In Bihar, such politics will reconsolidate the demographic alliance that keeps the ineffective and irresponsible government of Laloo Yadav in power.

The BJP is the engine of a national train now; and the key question of a national party is not what wins a state, but what preserves a nation. Arson might provide passing pleasure in politics. But to build anything it needs the values and culture of a *manavvadi*. The BJP will continue to need Vajpayee more than Vajpayee needs the BJP.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

The extremists of the Parivar have formally given up on Atal Behari Vajpayee. This is evident. It is equally evident that the Prime Minister has given up on them... The BJP is the engine of a national train now; and the key question of a national party is not what wins a state, but what preserves a nation. Arson might provide passing pleasure in politics. But to build anything it needs the values and culture of a *manavvadi*. The BJP will continue to need Vajpayee more than Vajpayee needs the BJP.

we call, perhaps for want of another word in the English language, secularism, and communalism? Secularism is inclusive. Communalism is invasive. Belief and the practice of faith is not communalism. Muslims are celebrating the holy month of Ramadan now with fasting and prayer. A Muslim who fasts does not become communal. A Sikh who wears a turban or a Hindu who wears puja marks on his forehead does not become communal. But when a Muslim begins to impose fasting on those who are not required by their faith to do so, then he becomes communal. This is the distortion in for instance Saudi society (I deliberately call it Saudi society rather than Arabian society, for the two are quite different) that makes the regime there quasi-funda-mentalist. This was what we saw in Punjab in 1983 when the pressure of fundamentalists forced the closure of cigarette and liquor shops so that neither Sikh nor Hindu might be able to smoke. This is forcing your mores upon

forces all other communities into a submissive status. They also believe that they have found the man who will convert their passion into a political movement: Narendra Modi. The extremists of the Parivar have formally given up on Atal Behari Vajpayee. This is evident. It is equally evident that the Prime Minister has given up on them. He knows he cannot change them; they know they cannot change him. Both also know that their response must be calibrated by other realities. Vajpayee is not so naïve as to believe that he can eliminate them from the broad coalition that constitutes the Hindutva Parivar. He will deal with them the best way he can even as he pursues his own agenda in power. If the militants thought that they could replace Vajpayee as Prime Minister, then they were excessively foolish even by the standards of a restricted average IQ. Vajpayee's strength is a trifle paradoxical for a man who has

far the greater percentage of India's Hindus want the nation to remain secular. Minorities cannot determine the political culture of a nation. It is the majority that keeps India secular. The challenge before the extremists of the Hindutva Parivar is to change the mind of this majority. They do not believe that Vajpayee will help them in their mission. They are also getting convinced that L.K. Advani will not either. They once thought he was a wolf in wolf's clothing. They are now beginning to feel that Advani is a sheep in sheep's clothing. Both Vajpayee and Advani, in their view, irrespective of their cosmetic differences, or perhaps deliberate differences (good-cop-bad-cop is traditional strategy), remain in the conventional mould of Indian politics, which still believes in persuasion rather than coercion. They want a hardliner ready to draw his lines in crimson. Their hero is Narendra Modi, who has indulged in havoc, demonised Muslims, threatened Chris-

muslims were being taught "a well-deserved lesson" for having overreached themselves. The insidious propaganda against Muslims, labelling them "filth" that needs to be cleansed from the Indian body politic may not have any effect most of the time, but seemed terribly credible in the post-Godhra moment. The electorate will thank Modi with one victory. It will be only one. Such emotional support tends to be ephemeral, and in fact the temporary hero could invite a severe negative reaction three months down the line, but in the interim the victory will excite the hardliners into delirium and conviction that this is the way to keep both the secular and the "pseudo-secular" out of power. Ironically, when the Kishores and Togadias think of "pseudo-secular" they think of Vajpayee and Advani. The second reason why Modi will win is because of a mistake made by the Congress. When a party runs out of conviction and ideas it chases the opponent. (The Democrats did this against George Bush in the

Lest we forget

Begum Sufia Kamal

A grandson remembers on her third death anniversary

MAHMUD HOSSAIN MURAD

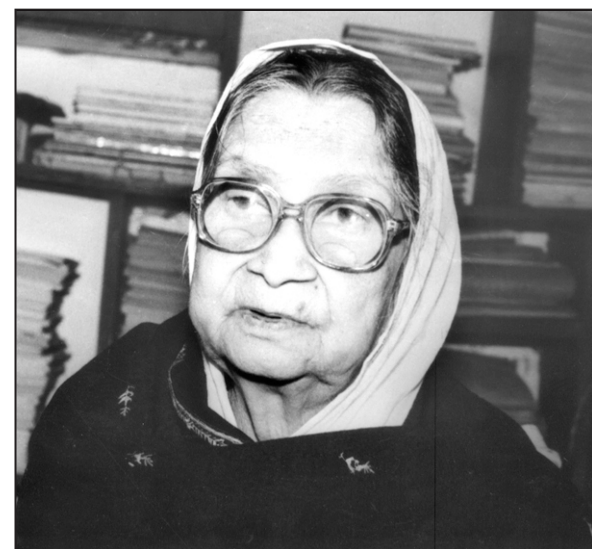
TO the nation it was the demise of the upholder of the collective conscience of the society, a poetess and a humanist. But to me, she was *nanu*, a devoted wife, a caring mother, a loving grandmother and an awesome individual to her great grandchildren, the youngest of whom spanned a gap of seven decades.

Many an achievement is attributed to her. To me she was the best cook ever -- preparing the tastiest of *Ilish pulao*, *shajna dal*, *fish korma* and many more. She was the unknown musician who could play soulful *ragas* late at night on her *esraj* (which she probably discontinued after the sad and violent demise of her son in 1962). She was a healer, praying and giving out "cinnamon and honey" to ease the asthmatic problems of many.

She was a small person of great courage, who had to bear the weight of a series of personal bereavements. She met widowhood in her teens in the demise of her first husband Syed Nehal Hossain, the tragic death at a very young age of her second son Shoaib Kamal in 1962, followed by the shocking death of her eldest son-in-law Abdul Quahhar Choudhury in 1971 and the passing away of her second husband Kamaluddin Ahmad Khan in 1977. Through all this she maintained her usual composure and calm dignity that helped to ease the loss of pain amongst all around her.

In her simple, loving ways she endeared herself to all those who came in contact with her. All her life she continued to do what she did best, voicing her concerns for all the wrongdoings in the society and asking for it to be righted.

Tragedies bring forth people together and in her passing away this was epitomised in an extra ordinary way that day by the number of people and organisations that arrived to pay their homage to her at "Shajher Maya" on Road No. 32 Dhanmandi,



Begum Sufia Kamal (1911-1999)

at the *Shaheed Minar*, her *Janaza* and her final resting place at the Azimpur Graveyard.

I now feel, that even today, in the heart of Bangladesh there probably stirs the soul of Begum Sufia Kamal asking for true patriotism in our politics, rule of law in all walks of life, security and a decent life for all.

Mahmud Hossain Murad is the second son of Begum Sufia Kamal's eldest daughter Amena Quahhar.

OPINION

Traffic mismanagement in Dhaka streets

MOHAMMED NAWAZISH

HERCULES cleansed the infamous filthy stables of Augeas by diverting river Alpheus to flow through them. Gone are the days of mythical heroes and modern day complications are odd enough to scare off even the most powerful of ancient gods. The dangerous and confused traffic pattern in Dhaka streets has been the centre of hot discourse for well over a decade. I would not say that the core issue has not been addressed at all, but, what I see and believe like any other Dhaka dweller is the plain truth that no perceptible improvement has yet been observed anywhere on streets. The concerned authorities are not sitting cross-fingered, they are trying to devise ways to arrest the deteriorating situation, they are experimenting with newer traffic regulations, they are more agile in nabbing offenders. Some mid and long term programmes deserve mention. Number of rickshaws and vans has to be drastically cut down, separate lanes will be provided for slow moving carriages, flyovers are being commissioned before long, highway by-passes are under

construction, large-bodied vehicles are being disciplined. Close cooperation among the city corporation, communication ministry and the traffic constabulary is a must and no internal bickering should be allowed to creep up to obstruct implementation of schemes. It is the net result that will speak of the will and endeavour.

Before going for the longer versions of schemes I feel the house has to be set to order first. A look at the streets and chaotic traffic all around makes one think and rethink over the possible rots that have been vitiating the situation and making things irreversible. I train my eyes on five major areas of concern. To begin, is it not absolutely necessary that we provide reasonably good roads to motorists and human pullers and pushers to allow them move smoothly without repeated halts and sharp swerves right and left? Presently Dhaka streets are pitiable stretches of potholes and breaches, and added to it are the long and nasty trenches and holes dug by utility service providers. Traffic relates to roads and roads need to be traffic worthy. This is the primary prerequisite which our streets do not fulfill. Road markings come next. It is said a picture is worth a thousand words. Bold

and clear markings on roads and road fringes give out strong warning to the drivers that they have to follow certain regulations. This acts as powerful preventive medicine for the recalcitrant drivers of both mechanized and manually driven vehicles. You find no markings on Dhaka roads and the few discoloured, cranked disfigured mounted markings that appear haphazardly on footpath and road islands seem to announce feverishly more of their impending doom than a promising life. Nobody cares to look at these miserable fixtures. This aspect of traffic management has to be taken care of.

Fleeting time has robbed us of our memory from when the electric street signals had stopped regulating the flow of traffic and gradually withered into eternal slumber. Today their ghostly structures stand entombed in dust and dirt and the new generation drivers are simply unaware of automatic signal device vis-a-vis traffic movement. I fail to see if it will ever be possible to revive a time-oriented signal culture that matches the needs of the age in line with our neighbours in South Asia. It is time we decided if we go for the manual signal device depending

on the weary and erratic police constables or the electronic one that actually survived in this country for quite some years before being thrown aside. The decision has to be prompt and positive.

It has been noticed about fifty per cent of rickshaws on move do not have any passenger on board. They wander aimlessly in search of passengers creating severe bottleneck in streets. Rickshaws should not be allowed to ply on roads without passengers. They should have their designated parking lot.

Uniformed officials in charge of traffic management should be good educators and guide. They should persistently try to enlighten drivers on rules and regulations of traffic movement and related legal formalities and be patient and good listeners. Their typified role as enforcing agent of traffic discipline brings no qualitative change among the clients especially where most of the hired drivers are illiterate with less than average IQ. The attitudinal shift requires adequate training and support and in time these people, if dedicated to their redesigned functions, can succeed in creating a far better traffic environment than what we find today.

Mohammed Nawazish is a retired civil servant.