

# Road-digging sores all over city anatomy

## Ruthless insensitivity to public good in monsoon

IN tolerance ranking, denizens of Dhaka are sure to top the global list. They have mendicant's patience like the Bangkok-dwellers had to have in the past while negotiating the congested traffic beelines in that Southeast Asian capital. Not so, anymore, for them. But for the Dhakaites, traffic anarchy is just one ordeal; there are many more taken to absurd lengths by those in charge that they have to put up with.

This capacity for surffrance that they show is often given the spin of a positive attribute called *resilience*. They have resilience alright in good measure, but no invincibility as such to disgust, which should not be lost on the government. Actually, the ordeals are real hardships suffered mutely out of a sense of resignation. In other cities, the authorities would have had to face open protests.

The case in point is endemic road-digging. By an odd combination of stars, the exercise has hardly ever been taken up in the dry season. But the DCC Mayor had proclaimed early into his tenure that this time excavation work would be avoided during the monsoons. Were we not relieved at the thought of being spared the annual nuisance! How naive we have been proven on that.

With road-digging going hammers and tong all around, right in the thick of the rainy season, we not-so-quickly decided to do a scooping investigation into the phenomenon. The resulting report on Wednesday has been startlingly revealing.

As long as 290 kilometres of the capital's roads are in for digging. On the back of 43 excavated points of the network left uncarpeted, Titas Gas, BTTB, WASA and DESA have sought permission from the DCC to dig roads at 100 more points. The DCC has okayed digging or would do so soon at the designated areas through what the mayor called 'one-stop service cell to coordinate road development works'.

What a coordination! In the first place, the exercise has been undertaken at the wrong time, namely, during the rainy season betraying a basic coordination lapse. The unlevelled among the dug up roads have exacerbated the pervasive water-logging in the city primarily caused by a very poor and outmoded drainage system. The onslaught is primarily on the medium-size and narrow inner city roads that serve as by-passes for diversion or dispersal of traffic away from the main thoroughfares. The concomitant traffic congestion, therefore, has reached horrific proportions. As if that was not enough, 100 more roads stretches are going to be excavated with predictably heightened levels of water-logging, poor sanitation and hindrances to public mobility and economic transactions in prospect.

The authorities try to take defense arguing that not all the projects are financed by government; most of them are undertaken on the strength of donor money pledges. The implication is that the untimely digging is linked to delayed disbursement from donors and multi-lateral agencies. The disconnect, we believe, represents planning and coordination failures.

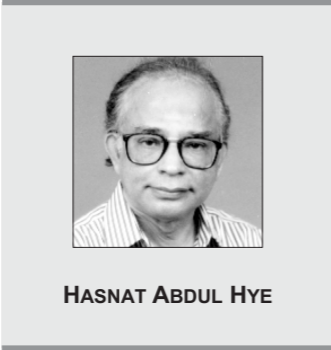
The planning debacle even goes deeper. Why have the roads to be cut up year after year; sometimes even within a span of few months? Isn't there any perspective plan? A free-for-all is the other name for corruption.

We demand a thorough investigation into these planning, administrative and management debacles that have had people frequently ask the question: who governs the city? Has it become the happy hunting ground for corrupt officials, engineers and contractors who are trading unabashedly on the miseries of the citizens?

We ask a hitherto unasked question: do the DCC engineers follow any building code while constructing the city roads? We raise this point for the simple reason that many of our highways are of world class while the metropolitan streets are evidently of a very poor standard. What roads are we using in the capital city, the gateway to Bangladesh!

As it is, our road network is only eight per cent of the total city area which is at least four to eight per cent below the world standard. That's why the traffic jam we face. And, if the roads go derelict by frequent excavations, space being a fixed factor, what a terrible state of affairs stares in the face of future city transportation!

# Analysing Blair



Prime Minister's life is not a bed of roses, even when he is Tony Blair of Great Britain. Both charisma and brilliance placed him at the helm of his nation's affairs. Since then ever-vigilant media and politically conscious public have kept his performance under scrutiny. There were a few hiccups, mostly on the domestic front, but he weathered them with panache and luck. His greatest crisis came before the Iraq war when he faced a hostile public and a parliament that looked askance at his pro-war policy. He came out with flying colours from that challenge, too. But the present crisis in which he finds himself over the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq is the worst that he has met. It may prove to be his nemesis.

Few would disagree that Tony Blair is a man of vision. He energised a moribund Labour Party and wrested power from the Conservative Party which had kept it at bay for more than fifteen years. He changed the ideology of his party and rebranded it with the enticing epithet "New Labour". He left no doubt that he had a vision for his party and for Great Britain. Following the ideal of the golden middle he devised an ideology which he called the Third Way. His goal was to see the country embrace best of both the worlds, Conservative's hard-headed pragmatism and Labour's social commitment.

When he came to power with a landslide victory over the Conservatives, Bill Clinton was in the White House in Washington. In Clinton's ideas and politics Blair found a close resemblance to his newfound ideology of the Third Way. As kind

dred spirits both were drawn to each other and established close rapport in both domestic policy and foreign affairs. After Bush Jr. came to power, it seemed that the special relationship that blossomed under Clinton would start to wane, both because of the ideology of the Republican Party and ultra-conservatism of Bush. It would be a formally correct working relationship but without much personal enthusiasm.

Blair belied the prognosis and became as close to Bush Jr. as he was with Bill Clinton. Given the differences in their personal traits, political ideology of their parties and the divisive issues facing them (farm subsidy, global warming etc.) it was a puzzle that the two leaders managed to find common ground to forge a close and special relationship. The unthinkable happened because both had their own reasons and compulsions. Bush wanted to have an ally who could mediate between America and the European Union, particularly over trade issues and occasionally over matters of security concerns in Europe. NAFTA was not enough of a bargaining counter to deal with the ever growing strength of EU. It would matter a great deal if a country like Great Britain became sympathetic, even helpful to America in its efforts to tide over the pin pricks in relation to EU. If nothing else, UK could have a sobering influence in the deliberations in Brussels both in the European Commission and in NATO.

For Blair the compulsion for continuing a close relationship with the USA also had its origin rooted in Europe. Great Britain was a member of EU and continues to be so, but it has refused to submerge its identity under the greater entity of

Europe. It knew very well when the first steps were taken for united Europe in late Fifties, in the form of European Coal and Steel Union and then in the form of a Common Customs Union, that in such an European enterprise her role would be overshadowed by France or even Germany in course of time. The problem with her was that she had lost an empire but was not yet cured of the imperial hangover. The choice before her was: Great Britain, standing alone or little England as a member of a bloc where it would be treated on the same footing as

Market became inevitable under the Treaty of Rome, Great Britain mulled over her predicament. At last, swallowing pride, she applied for membership.

But even after joining European Common Market UK zealously guarded her separate identity. The overriding objective seems to have been maintaining her sovereignty within the European arrangement so that she does not suffer decline in stature. That way economic and other benefits can be enjoyed while following its own policy in areas considered vital for the strategy of

tion regulation. When the majority of members of EU opted for a common currency, Great Britain decided to stay out. Since then it has kept the issue hanging in balance. Though the matter was to be decided through a referendum, no haste has been shown for this. It is not a question of shilly-shallying, but a case of deliberate postponement or even avoidance. Her thinking may be: if there is monetary integration, can political union be far behind? There would be nothing wrong with such an union if she could be *primus inter pares*. But France will not oblige her

Saddam. Colin Pawell in his impassioned speech in the Security Council produced documents and other evidences to prove that Iraq was hiding WMD.

Tony Blair supported Bush in his diplomatic campaign and later in the war against Iraq mainly on the grounds of WMD. He appealed to the members of the Parliament and to his people, also with great passion, on this basis. He, too, produced a dossier to prove that Saddam was in possession of WMD. In the chasm that emerged between America and Europe over the Iraq issue, particularly in respect of WMD, Blair sided with America without hesitation. Theirs was a stand united from beginning to the end: If Britain had opposed or even had remained neutral, her position would be that of one among many European countries. This was not acceptable to Britain as the continuing policy has been one of maintaining a separate role which gives her importance and greater weight in international affairs. This geo politic, rather than security concerns, have led Great Britain to blindly take America's side. Blair's decision to join America in the Iraq war may appear as irrational, but there was a method in the madness.

Now that WMD has become difficult to find both Blair and Bush are being accused of prevarication, even indulging in downright falsehood. Bush Jr. will come out of this criticism unscathed because in American politics lying and cheating are not seen as great failures in character of leaders as long as a war has been won and the employment rate is high. In Great Britain both the people and politicians still set a great store by morality and probity in politics. After all, it belongs to the old world where some verities of life are forever. The demand for an independent enquiry into the WMD allegations will become implacable marking the beginning of the end of Blair. It would be a sad legacy for a man of great ability and vigour.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

## IN MY VIEW

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Ireland or Portugal. This explains why she at first tried to form a counter bloc with seven countries under the European Free Trade Association parallel to the French initiated European bloc of six countries. For a while Europe was literally at Sixes and Sevens. When this strategy failed and European Common

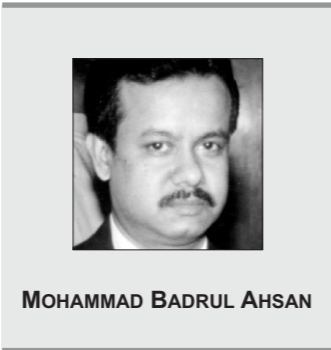


equal but separate. Following this strategy it withdrew from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism which would have led to closer monetary integration through the European Monetary Union. Likewise, she did not adopt the social protocol binding common labour laws and stuck to her own immigra-

with that position. After all, Great Britain is a late comer and is seen as a spoiler.

America had more compelling reasons to attack Iraq and occupy it than Great Britain. The neo-conservatives representing the Jewish lobby had planned the war long before Bush Jr. came to White House. He balked at the idea for a while. September 11 changed his mind and he decided for regime change to remove potential threat of terrorists and to control Iraqi oil. America's campaign against Iraq was launched with Bush's 'axis of evil' speech. But it was too general and abstract. Bush and his minions formulated different justifications for different constituencies. For home constituency it was shown as part of the war against terrorism which made it easy to win over domestic support. For Iraqis the war was projected as a move to liberate them from the tyrannical rule of Saddam. In the UN, the argument was based on Iraq's refusal to get rid of WMD. When America bypassed the UN and invaded Iraq without giving time to UN inspectors, the reason given was clear and present danger because of WMD possessed by

# When a great nation has lied



THOSE amongst us, who are old enough to know, will know that in 1989, a US State Department official named Francis Fukuyama thought history was coming to an end. He worried that the end of history was going to be a sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism would be gone. Instead economic calculations, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands would rule the world.

Thanks to George Bush and his monumental bluff, history has a chance to last longer. When the US Congress passed a resolution last year authorising him to go to war in Iraq, it talked about the grave threat the United States faced from Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and his links to al-Qaeda. If anything, these two main pillars of the resolution have been proven to be nothing but bogus. History, like a wronged man, will not quit until it has been avenged.

The Washington Post reported this week that what the Defence Intelligence Agency analysts claimed last September were largely in the subjunctives. They said that Iraq probably possessed "chemical agent in chemical munitions" and "bulk chemical stockpiles, primarily containing precursors, but that also could consist of some mustard agent and VX," a deadly nerve agent. The politicians chose the best part of the DIA report and used it to serve their cause.

According to many, it was Dick Cheney, the US vice-president, who masterminded everything, and

and found eight days later.

The truth is Lynch apparently was never stabbed. She may not have even had much of a chance to put up a fight. When her unit came under attack, her vehicle went off the road and she suffered several broken bones. She was taken to a Baghdad hospital where the Iraqi doctors treated her. Not a surprise, because truth is the first victim in any war. Chemical Ali, who was rumoured to be dead and buried during the war, is now said to be alive and hiding in Iraq.

The question that haunts the

lie in order to justify one's mischief, then that should rarify everything decent into the air. Every time there is a criticism of the war in Iraq, it's not always the anti-American sentiment, but the perceived moral gap that bothers the mind.

No matter how many ways we look at it, that moral gap comes across as hypocrisy. It's not the mismatch between word and action that is so much the issue here. People make promises and they don't always live up to those promises. But this particular hypocrisy has the stench of decadence, the

Frankly, a crisis is often the opportunity when greatness rises to its occasion. The American society, the pinnacle of the Western civilisation, has failed to seize that opportunity after 9/11. Instead it has behaved like a wounded beast blinded by pain. It forgot Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Chile, El Salvador, the countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Latin America, where its soldiers killed and destroyed in the name of democratic order. It forgot that for greatness one must destroy as well as build, suffer as well as inflict, and

going to fight the occupation, and the world will revile at the increasing realisation that a superpower had not behaved within its dignity. There will be a new struggle ensuing from this conflict, when, once again, people will be willing to risk their lives for a purely abstract goal. Once again, a new ideological struggle will begin that would call forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism.

If anything, the telling of lies by the highest nation has clearly marked a crisis. It has marked that crisis for the Western civilisation when all things sublime has been reduced to ridicule. Every civilisation has seasons of life. It has birth, growth, periods of vigour, decline and death. The lives of people in a given time make a generation, generations taken together make a civilisation and civilisations are the building blocks of eternity. This is how the finite creates the infinite, the limited begets the unlimited and the ephemeral produces the eternal.

Those of us, who are old enough to feel, will feel that the crisis has deepened in our hearts. How can we distinguish an advanced nation, which has lied in order to go to war, from a matured man, who befriends a child with candies and then molests her? How can we distinguish an empire where might was right from a democracy where the rights and freedom of a weaker nation has been crushed by the military prowess of a stronger one? As history moves from finite to infinite, limited to unlimited and ephemeral to eternal, hope it would not quit before it has given us an answer.

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## CROSS TALK

A great nation has lied, and the only way to understand it is to take it within the context of time. It has lied out of conceit, the sure sign of arrogance, which leads to decadence and by that sin has fallen many empires. The Iraqis have suffered this time, and the only way to understand that is also to take it within the context of time. Their country has been occupied, which is the sure sign of an ordeal they are going to endure. But that is where history will get a jumpstart.

eclectically packaged the half-baked truth that justified the attack on Iraq. Cheney orchestrated the exaggeration of facts, influenced intelligence agencies, the media, military strategists and manipulated the system to create the ground for the war and gamer support for it.

Two weeks ago, The Washington Post retraced one of its stories and found that much of it was false. The capture and rescue of Jessica Lynch was in the earnest tradition of the conspiracy to fabricate truth. The whole world was told that she had been shot and stabbed by the Iraqis, that she had gone down while fiercely fighting the enemy until she was taken a prisoner, hospitalised,

imagination is why has a great nation lied. Iraq wasn't a neighbour of the United States and by no means posed a threat to its security. It hasn't been found connected with al-Qaeda network to take any blame for the attack on the Twin Towers. There is no stockpile of armaments that could jeopardise regional or global security. Why has the USA gone through such an elaborate manufacturing of truth in order to occupy Iraq?

Perhaps, the answer is as good as anybody's guess. But that doesn't matter, because the rationale isn't always rational. The fact is one cannot but discern a discrepancy in the American behaviour. If it's fair to

metastasis of despair that occurs when a civilisation loses its vigour, when its energy wanes and dies, when a civilisation reaches its final hours.

The most advanced nation in the world has resorted to old tricks. It bluffed, cheated, and lowered its standards, which created moral outrage all over the world. In turn, that outrage created a terrible void when all things lost relevance, when the sanctity of the right and the perfidy of the wrong were confounded in the questionable conduct of an otherwise respectable nation. More than anything, the dishonesty of the most democratic government on earth has created a crisis of civilisation.

tolerate as well as terminate. It forgot that democracy is about tolerance, whereas the empire always strikes back.

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# How do we treat our minorities?

## Time for some honest answers

TARIQ ALI

A month or so ago, I was in Kurigram and talking to an NGO worker. She was young and pretty and although the ostentatious *sindur* was not there on her *sinthi*, the white *sankha* on her hand told me that she was married. She proudly told me that she is considered to be the best worker in her office, and I could see that she possessed those ingredients of management that set leaders apart from the others. The reason she had started this conversation, it turned out, was that she was asking for my opinion over a dilemma that she was going through. She was, in reality echoing the anguished question that has rankled the minds of Hindus all over Bangladesh since 1992. "Dada, we are still young and now is the appropriate time to make the choice of whether to go over to India or not. Will we be able to live here, in Bangladesh?"

She had not asked me the question that would normally occupy the mind of a young person, out to make her presence felt in the world. She had not asked whether she will one day make it to the top of the office she worked in, or how she could help her husband in turning around

the family business or whether they could one day become the pivotal players in the Kurigram social circuit. "We are being given subtle messages that our neighbours would be happy to buy my husband's property in the town. There is pressure as well from our relatives in West Dinajpur to cross over and settle there," she said.

I remembered that as a sequel to the Babri Masjid demolition, when there was widespread violence on the Hindu community here, the same anguished question was raised at a Conference of the Rabin-drasangeet Sammilan Parishad in Dhaka. One of the responses, from an intellectual of the country was a tearful appeal from the stage. He concluded that in a Bangladesh bathed with the combined blood of its Hindu and Muslim children, things were bound to get better and that they should stick it out for just a little more time. The appeal was so passionately and intensely made that it induced sympathetic tears in many of those who were in the auditorium. Ten years later, tears welled up in the eyes of this *dada* as well, as he faced that same question from this young and beautiful woman. Even if she was able to ignore the "gentle"

This is the brutal reality for one significant chunk of the Bangladesh population; the denial of rights that the state had promised him or her in 1971. The time has come for the majority community to face this issue squarely and honestly... The story of the minorities in South Asia has been a sad one. But can we not show the way in Bangladesh?

suggestion of selling her home-stead, would she not, ten years from today, still be strapped to her desk as a programme officer, as she watched the entire retinue of her Muslim colleagues, one after the other, bypass her -- yes, even in an NGO setting, let alone the government?

This is not a story cooked up to provoke a controversy. This is the brutal reality for one significant chunk of the Bangladesh population; the denial of rights that the state had promised him or her in 1971. The time has come for the majority community to face this issue squarely and honestly.

This young lady in Kurigram could thank her lucky stars that she was not Shilpi Chakraborty. For Shilpi, a 14-year-old student in a village school in Arua upazila of Manikganj, the time clock reminding her that she did not belong here, had

already started ticking. Their neighbour had claimed a part of her father's property. The father, in turn, had brought the Thana Amin who measured the land and confirmed that the land was theirs and placed demarcating pillars in the presence of the village elders. A few days later, the pillars were found missing but under the stern stare of that 'eternal guilt', Shilpi's father did not dare raise a voice. On the night of April 26, she was sleeping between her mother and father. The neighbour's son and seven or eight other accomplices forced open the door, tied the father to a tree, dragged the mother outside and then four of them gang-raped her. When they left at dawn, they did not of course, forget to defile the whatever excuse of a shiv-mandir that stood in the premises. When we saw her in her spartan but spotlessly clean room, her head was drawn down in shame

and she was answering in monosyllables. All that her mother wanted us to do was to arrange for some sort of a marriage for her because *lajja* would never again let her take the two km walk to school. Her father was devastated, because like the daughter, his own prestige as the village priest had been destroyed.

Not that there has never been resistance. On the outskirts of Faridpur live a community of Adivasis, (from Central India, they say) who had settled here seven or eight generations ago and who were officially allocated a large tract of land. That land happens to be prime property today, as the Faridpur-Khulna highway runs right through this land. These people live on the fringes of the society, the men doing menial labour and the wives, foraging the forest for firewood. Of late, some of them were beginning to get themselves educated, and one man

in particular, Bhagya, was emerging as the leader of the community. (Reminds me of Alfred Soren, the leader of the Santhals, who was burnt to death under similar circumstances, in Naogaon). Around the beginning of May a girl student of the community was harassed on her way to school, and Bhagya protested. That set one event following the other, and on the afternoon of May 7, a large number of people invaded the community, beat up the women cooking their meal of the day, kicked away their rice pots (according to them, the supreme insult and in a few cases disrobed the women down to their skins. Twenty-six houses were damaged, their property looted, some homes totally demolished and one home burnt to ashes. Two mandirs were razed to the ground and the deities in them defiled. As for the expletives hurled at them, they took no notice

of them. The Adivasis, however, unlike their Bengali co-religionists who have been cowered into accepting everything lying down, decided to fight it out and the community as a whole took up the issue. Perhaps, it was the Adivasi resilience that worked in them. We wait to see if they get justice.

The news of Bibharani Singha, has received wide coverage in the vernacular press. She was studying in the second year in the Bangabandhu College at Chitalmari and was abducted by an employee of a photocopying shop -- in this instance, a member of her own community -- and it is rumoured that after a day or two she had conceded to marry him. However, by the time her father could trace her, the lover-boy had lost his ownership rights to some other people in Bagerhat, close to the powers that be in today's Bangladesh. When she was finally recovered from Khulna, around the beginning of May, she had been repeatedly raped, burnt all over with cigarette butts when she resisted and numerous slashes were made on her body with a sharp knife. She and her father had to sign a written statement to the effect that

nothing had happened and they would not seek redress. Consequently, no one -- not even the father -- dared to talk to us about the incident or name the culprits. We enquired with the OC of Bagerhat Thana why he had dithered in accepting a police case and why it was not recorded as rape. The master thespian tried to wriggle out of the situation by telling us that the victim herself had refused to take a medical examination.

I shall not talk about Mridul Rakshit, who was forced to live incognito in Dhaka for the last five years because he was under the threat of being killed. It was his young son, who finally paid that price, on his behalf, around the beginning of April. Mridul Rakshit now has no one to bequeath his Chittagong property to and no reason to safeguard it. Thus has been removed the last obstacle to selling his property and going where a section of the majority community wants all Hindus to go. The story of the minorities in South Asia has been a sad one. But can we not show the way in Bangladesh?

Tariq Ali is a businessman.