

## The year of dashed hopes

*Intimation of a better future as well*

THE year 2003, which has just disappeared into the unfathomable vastness of time, witnessed events that are surely going to influence the future of the world in a very perceptible way.

At home, there has virtually been no change in politics, a vitally important area, since restoration of democracy back in 1991. That was a great achievement, but how long shall we rest on its laurels without translating it into democratic institutionalisation based on constructive political culture? The AL and the BNP have seen in it from being in power and also from the opposition, but they have done nothing to improve the quality of politics. To top it all, the law and order situation has deteriorated; corruption has hogged the most negative headlines; and we have plummeted on the world competitiveness index.

Then, there have been those unfulfilled promises; separation of the judiciary from the executive still eludes us; and so does the creation of an independent anti-corruption commission and the Ombudsman office.

Despite the pall of gloom that politics of confrontation and lawlessness have spread, credit goes to the farmers and entrepreneurs for the GDP growth of 5 plus points. Their performance is the mainstay of our hopes for the future.

Regionally, the signs of thawing relations between India and Pakistan have been a major development towards the end of the year raising the hope for a lessening of tension in South Asia.

On the international scene, the US, and its principal ally Britain, chose to carry forward the war on terrorism in a way that amounted to arrogant display of military might. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled and he has been captured since, but the war in Iraq has not come to an end. The WMD myth got progressively demolished in the absence of credible evidence.

The lack of statesmanship and vision on the world stage was perhaps never felt so acutely as has been the case in recent times. President Bush didn't bother to heed the voices of dissent, which actually represented the world conscience. The US policy also denied the role that the UN should have been given in Iraq.

Clearly, the war on terrorism has not been won. And, if anything, terrorism persists in a more threatening form, nullifying whatever justification President Bush had for waging the war on Iraq.

## A good move but hardly enough

*Comprehensive action plan still missing*

THE air we have been breathing in the metropolis has improved slightly. This is put down to disappearance of two-stroke three-wheelers. The ban on polybags has played a contributory role. Even though degradation of environment through land grabbing leading to tree-felling and constriction of river flows starkly continues, one can't overlook the intermittent attempts at improving air quality. The latest news to fall in this category of initiatives relates to a training programme for mechanics in the automobile workshops. Experts, local and foreign, will impart training to workshop people so that they are able to identify and correct emission problems. There are two limitations here: first, only government-enlisted workshops will be covered. Obviously for good reasons, but the high number of outfits not listed with the government will remain outside the pale. So, the emphasis must be laid on bringing all workshops under some registration discipline. Secondly, the workshops do not themselves have the equipment needed to train their mechanics in identifying the factors that cause emissions. Of course, under the Urban Transport Project training programme, gas analysers, smoke meters and engine tuners will be used as tools. But so long as the workshops themselves do not have the equipment base how can the knowledge dissemination process be sustained? Let's make sure they have it.

Two complementary steps must be taken for a turnaround in the pollution scene. First of all, there should be a no nonsense checking of vehicles for smoke emission in the street on a regular basis with punishment given to the culprits. Very importantly, the polluting transports of the state sector need to be phased out to set the right tenor for the private sector polluters.

DR. SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

MASUM was standing in the dusky evening with his rickshaw at the corner of East West University waiting for his next passenger. The hustle and bustle of the campus environment had died down somewhat and only a few rickshaws were roaming around looking for passengers. Seeing Masum, especially his age and physique, I was a bit hesitant to clamber aboard his rickshaw. But something inside me egged me on toward this diminutive, lanky, and timid child. I asked whether he'd take me to Gulshan-1 and he readily acquiesced. As usual, since the trip took about five minutes, I began to chat with him.

Masum was fourteen and studied up to class seven at a school somewhere in Mohakhali but gave up studies because "poshay na" (he cannot afford it). His father had passed away some time ago and he was left with a mother who had recently fallen ill. The task of feeding himself and his mother, naturally, fell on the little shoulders of this otherwise giant-at-heart, whose sole concern seemed to be to stand by his mother in her hour of need as she must have stood by him with all she had to offer when he needed her.

I asked how much he paid as joma (rickshaw rent). He replied "Tk.30 (50 cents) for half the day or Tk.50 for the full day". That day he had the rickshaw for the full day. When I asked how much he had made till then, he replied with a tired smile that he had Tk.10 after joma. He would try to get another Tk.30-40 and head home with two kilos of rice to share with his mother. And how did he feel about his present situation? "We are little people and very poor; feelings have no place in our lives" he volunteered.

Given the short distance from the university, I arrived at my destination and our brief conversation ended, although I wished that it would go on a bit more. I asked him how much I should pay, to which he replied "Apni ja diben" (whatever you please). I pressed

him once more "how much?" and he only smiled weakly, surrendering to my will and, hopefully, to my kindness. I had already made up my mind beforehand to do my good deed for the day, so I handed him a Tk.100 note and asked him to get something special for his mother (as many of us do for our mothers and because, at that moment, his mother symbolised the universal mother).

For a brief moment he seemed stunned, his face revealing a multi-

rate and diverse, and yet connected in many ways:

I thought of my children and thanked God for what they have, vowing not to complain for what they don't.

I thought of my ailing mother and how much she likes having us around, and I promised to be around her even more as she courageously battles the ravages of kidney failure.

I thought of the warm food awaiting me, while Masum's

ment organisations to shame for their failures in giving Masum his rightful share of life. But forming such groups would require an enlightened society with a philanthropic bent, something that is practiced by a mere few individuals across this country but missing on a wider scale for various reasons, both local and international. I can hear the taunt of those who have, for years, failed Masum singing to me "dream on!"

I thought of a recent meeting

met recently, urging a certain ministry to undertake several more studies to identify the poor and conduct related research so that more of his compatriots could come to this God-forsaken country and plunder more of the development aid that the tax-payer in his country willingly gives but does not know how it is being used. And if any of you want access to this research, which I doubt you'll have, check out the unkept stacks in the office floors of the development partners and the government

rice at the end of the day.

I thought of the corrupt politicians who have done so little for this country over the past 33 years, especially for Masum. Steeped in self-glory and self-aggrandisement, they continue to play their party games, subordinating the nation, and oblivious to the rising outrage emanating from the disenfranchised people they are supposed to lead. I wondered whether the really corrupt ones (there are many shades) would ever have to answer to the nation. But doubts fill me, because they don't move alone; they involve all who matter so that their house of cards is held together by the concrete of corruption.

I wondered when we would have true leaders and friends at all levels who would wipe the tears and lighten the burdens of the likes of Masum. Unfortunately, they are far away from this toiling child. They have never taken a rickshaw ride with him, seen his strenuous efforts, or heard his story.

Thank you Masum! You have deepened my power of introspection in that brief interlude and made me think of so many things. You have given me more meaning to my journey through life than many of my teachers as I still struggle with countless questions: who am I, why am I here, and what am I supposed to accomplish? I pray that those who can help you more, much more, would deepen their power of introspection and realise that theirs is a brief sojourn in this unjust world they have created and that the real Accountant awaits them when the journey is over: The balance sheet must balance! And if this realisation dawns, using their free will, I hope they'll enable God's grace to reach you through the dark corridors of their power, lust, and greed. This is my prayer for you for 2004. If it is answered, I certainly hope to see your glorious smile one day, football in hand and brightened by your lightened burden.

Dr. Syed Saad Andaleeb is Professor and Programme Chair of Marketing at the Sam and Irene Black School of Business, Pennsylvania State University at Erie, Editor of the Journal of Bangladesh Studies, and a Fulbright Scholar at East West University.

# A new year's prayer for Masum

**Thank you Masum! You have deepened my power of introspection...and made me think of so many things. You have given me more meaning to my journey through life than many of my teachers...I pray that those who can help you more, much more, would deepen their power of introspection and realise that theirs is a brief sojourn in this unjust world they have created and that the real Accountant awaits them when the journey is over: The balance sheet must balance! And if this realisation dawns, using their free will, I hope they'll enable God's grace to reach you through the dark corridors of their power, lust, and greed. This is my prayer for you for 2004. If it is answered, I certainly hope to see your glorious smile one day, football in hand and brightened by your lightened burden.**

tude of emotions. I will never know what went through Masum's mind but I believe what I saw in his eyes was bewilderment, the disbelief of getting something way beyond anticipation, a grin of sheer gratitude, and a sense of untrammelled joy at what he must have already been thinking of doing with this little boon. Boon, did I say? That's what it appeared from his demeanor, although I'll never know. But the very next moment caught me by surprise as he went straight for my feet that I was only able to avert by sheer reflex action. My feet? For so little that to him was so much?

As I helped him up, a zillion emotions came from nowhere and overcame me. I wanted to say something to him but I couldn't as I felt a lump in my throat. So I gave him a smile and a nod and walked away. When I turned briefly after going some distance into the parking area, Masum was gone: his child-like face a memory. But in that brief interlude he had reached deep into my soul from where he dredged up many thoughts, dispa-

moster must have been waiting for her son to reach home: Food was not guaranteed though.

I thought of the daily struggles of countless other Masums, while vultures preyed on them relentlessly. Perhaps he has to pay the local thug or godfather a share of his day's earnings for being given the nod to pull a rickshaw -- part of that share, perhaps, going to the local politician who must raise party funds. Perhaps a policeman...NO, I pray!

I wondered if I would see him again so that I could give him more than what I gave him the other day. But the very next moment I thought of all the other Masums who needed help too. How was I to help so many of them? Perhaps we could form a group, a gigantic group, raise funds, and help the Masums enjoy their childhoods and stand on their feet like the Ryans and Joes in the west playing soccer and baseball to their heart's delight while Masum battled the odds. Perhaps with such a group we could put the politicians, the government officials, and develop-

ment organisations to shame for their failures in giving Masum his rightful share of life. But forming such groups would require an enlightened society with a philanthropic bent, something that is practiced by a mere few individuals across this country but missing on a wider scale for various reasons, both local and international. I can hear the taunt of those who have, for years, failed Masum singing to me "dream on!"

I thought of an expatriate consultant and his buddy-boss I

officials as they negotiate the next foreign trip, the extended study tour, or the expected consularities behind the study while Masum struggles on, his expectations barely sixty cents a day to sustain himself and his mother. I hope and pray that Masum does not fall sick because over 4,000 health care centres built for him have no medicines: The result of procurement policies of an international agency and the ineptitude of related others.

I thought of the government officials in various capacities, officious in their mannerisms, gruff in their demeanor, contorted in their communications, uncharitable with their time and influence, and hollow to the core, delivering little other than anguish and suffering to their fellow citizens while they compete with each other for the biggest office, the newest car, the latest computer, the most-featured cell-phone, and other facilities they are unworthy of while Masum wonders whether he will have the same rickshaw tomorrow and, ultimately, the needed

# A dismal walk and some hope

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

There are those who spend hundred thousand takas on a *lehenga* (a certain type of women's dress) or more on a diamond studded watch-band while millions are chronically malnourished to the extent that they will never be able to lead a normal life. Known once for its strong middle class with values of compassion and empathy for the masses, today the income gap between the 'haves and have nots' far exceeds those in highly discriminatory societies elsewhere.

Nazrul blended the diverse legacy of Bengali culture more comprehensively, more beautifully and more naturally than anyone else. He wrote Muslim devotional songs in one breadth and Hindu religious songs in the next. His creativity spanned the true breadth of our cultural heritage.

In its place today we have built a culturally divisive world so intellectually narrow that the Persian word 'Khoda' has to be replaced by the Arabic 'Allah' to call the Almighty, though most Muslim writers have used this word for centuries. Many of Iqbal's (the man who is credited with having 'Dreamt' of Pakistan) outstanding poems would be quite unreadable if we take away the word 'Khoda' from them.

Though it started much earlier, an aggressive and anti-intellectual tide is engulfing Bangladesh as never before. Open-minded discourse and the right to hold divergent and unpopular views are becoming nearly impossible because of rising intolerance for anything new or different. A vulgar and militant partisanship is permeating into our every discourse. Mindless tempering with our school textbooks is producing a confused younger generation devoid of any idea of how great his or her cultural and intellectual heritages are.

Nothing represents the bankruptcy of our mind, the narrowness of our vision and anti-historical nature of our present political thrust than the anti-intellectual environment that is now throttling our creative potential. Sitting at his graveside I could not help wonder what Nazrul would have written in today's circumstances.

A walk across from Nazrul's mazar brought me face to face with Suhrawardy Uddayan, the place where Sheikh Mujib gave his historic 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, the venue of the surrender of the Pakistani army to the joint command which marked the military victory of our Liberation War. It is also the biggest and the best gathering place for families out for a sample of nature.

My heart sank at the derelict site of what was once the most beautiful open space in the city. Just as the state of Nazrul's graveyard reveals so much about us, so does the present condition of the Uddayan, which speak volumes about our present day political rivalry.

After assuming power Ziaur Rahman, in an effort to dilute its historic significance, built a children's park near the spot where Sheikh Mujib delivered his oratorical masterpiece. When Sheikh Hasina came to power she wanted to build a memorial tower (*Swadhinata Sthambha*) to restore the site's historical significance, no doubt with the added motivation of restoring her father's deserving glory. Now after recapturing power Khaleda Zia wants to destroy Hasina's efforts by sheer neglect. The result is one of Dhaka's most beautiful spots looks like a miniaturized jungle.

A slight walk southwards brings me to Dhaka University. In 1967 when I entered its economics department one could feel the simmering anti-Ayub movement in the air. The academic rigor, the cultural activism (Sangskriti Sangsad), the extra-curricular

programmes (debating) and of course the student politics made our University life most creative and challenging. Student politics for us was a learning experience-learning about society, about people, about development, about rights, about freedom, about cultural identity, about national independence, about equality and later about armed struggle. It was never about money, about tender business, about armed cadres. Politics was always an integral part of DU. But *politicisation* of the teachers, student and administration staff was not.

Mushrooming private Universities have turned higher education into a business while some public Universities have become den of corruption. The JU, CU, RU and National University are all under pressure of politics, and are suffering from lack of qualified teachers, requisite funds for research, proper academic atmosphere and a deteriorating student-teacher relations. The schism between private and public education now goes right from nursery class to the University, making the best of it available to the rich while nobody could care less for the middle and lower middle classes. We are not even mentioning the poor.

A look at the students dormitories bring to mind the barbaric attack on the students of Shamsunnahar Hall by the students of the ruling party and the fact that nothing was done even though an inquiry committee report headed by a highly respected judge clearly pointed out the culprits. The absurd situation of gun-fights to occupy student halls- reminiscent of scene from the American wild west- has now become a routine affair. So much for the rule of law.

As I walk pass the Atomic Energy Commission and Bangla Academy I can only imagine what these institutions could have given us if their potentials were not ham-

pered by unthinking government decisions, inappropriate appointments at the top and of course political interference in their work. In spite of all the impediments Bangla Academy has produced some sterling volumes and its Ekushey Mela, though getting increasingly directionless, remains a top attraction for a people hungry to participate in some constructive nation building activities.

The Curzon Hall, the seat of DU's science education and the old High Court building are testimonies of how callous we are about our historical buildings and beautification of our city. While hundreds of crores of takas are being spent on making, breaking and remaking perfectly usable road-dividers, our city mayor or urban planners have not spent a minute or a taka on restoring this jewel of an urban spot. It was, and can be, one of the most beautiful pedestrian walkways in the city. Taken together with the footpath of the Suhrawardy Uddayan, the new High Court premises on one direction and Shahid Minar, Salimullah Hall and the British Council on the other, this can be pedestrians dream come true in Dhaka.

A few minutes walk brings me near the secretariat, the principle seat of the government machinery. It is from here that the government works- or does not work, given what has been your particular experience. It is said that if you want to bury something under a procedural maze then send it to the secretariat.

My impression is not so bad. I think a lot does happen. But a lot more can be made to happen if our bureaucracy is given the right environment to operate within.

What has crippled our public administration is the overriding politicisation that is now taking place. There has always been an extent of political influence in the secretariat but following the "Janatar Mancha" episode it has

gone totally out of control.

BNP is justified in considering it as an Awami League inspired revolt back in '96 in which public servants had no business to participate. However in order to prevent such a thing from re-occurring BNP has gone totally over board and has made political consideration a prime pre-requisite for appointments, transfers and extension of service to key posts. The resultant politicisation of the bureaucracy is threatening the very existence of public service as we know it.

There cannot be any question about the need for an efficient, motivated and committed police force if we want to make any improvement in our law and order and governance. Crimes, violence and threat to normal living have never been so frequent and extensive as now. Yet practically nothing save making a special unit- has been done to improve the overall police service. One cannot emphasize enough the need to invest more resources in our law enforcement agencies. They suffer from a lack of motivation, commitment, training, equipment and social recognition. We need to revise their pay scale and make it realistic. Most of all government of the day must stop using police for opposition bashing and narrow partisan goals like protecting its own criminals.

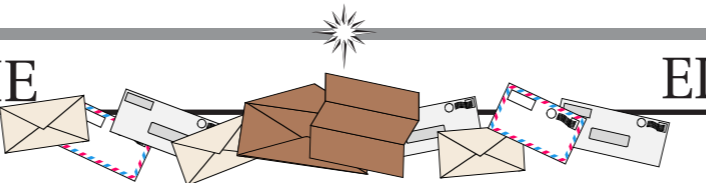
My last stretch of walk brings me to the Paltan Maidan, the place for public rallies that is most intricately linked with almost all our political events. The historic Paltan was a majestic vast open space parts of which successive military regimes gave away to build sporting facilities, thinking that politics will disappear with the disappearance of the Maidan. Today's Paltan is a pathetic relic of the old just as today's politics is only a disappointing, distorted and destructive shadow of the pro-people politics that Paltan Maidan is a witness to. If there is a single factor that can be

identified as holding Bangladesh back, a factor that permeates into everything else and one which like a virus is infecting all other institutions, groups, professions and social classes is our DESTRUCTIVE POLITICS. The BNP and the AL, both of whom have been on either side of the government-meaning in power and in opposition- seem to have learnt nothing. Their confrontational politics has led to cadre based violent politics where gun totting activists dominate the show and not experienced political workers.

We want to conclude this dismal walk with a snap shot from a Daily Star event that took place last November. Our annual Award ceremony for the highest achievers in the internationally conducted "O" and "A" examinations had a boy from Green Herald School who got the highest marks in English world-wide. Imagine a Bangladeshi student, not a native English speaker, studying in a Dhaka based school out performs his fellow students from all over the world, including native English speakers. There was another girl from a school in Chittagong who got record marks in mathematics world-wide. There are similarly bright students in the Bangla medium schools who perform brilliantly when they go for higher studies abroad.

We welcome the New Year by pinning our hopes on these and other students. We reinforce our faith in the ordinary Bangladeshis, in our younger generation, in our creative entrepreneurs, in our innovative community leaders, in our highly successful NGOs, and in our determined women leaders who are fighting tremendous battles at the grassroots level. All of them collectively and independently, will surely take our nation to a level of success, if they are given a chance. The question is, will our politicians give them that chance?

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



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### HBFC, or a loan shark?

I am a retired government servant, and have built a house in a residential area. I took Tk 25 lakh as loan from the House Building Finance Corporation (HBFC) to construct the house. Needless to say, I also spent all my savings in the project. I felt quite lucky to get the loan sanctioned without much hassle. But I had to start repayment even before the construction was complete. Since 1999, I have paid Tk 10 lakh and 93 thousand in instalments. Yet, the statement issued by the HBFC in July 2003 showed Tk 28 lakh still unpaid. On query, I am shown a complex calculation where interests are added on daily basis at a rate of 15 per cent. It appeared even interest was charged on pre-calculated interests. Perhaps, Kabuliwallas and Mahajans of bygone days would

feel ashamed to see what the HBFC is doing. It may be mentioned here that the rent I earn from the building is much less than the instalment I am to deposit every month.

The present government is pressuring private banks to reduce interest rates. Many banks are offering loans for different purposes at a much lesser rate. But the fully government owned HBFC is charging at a most exorbitant rate and causing miseries to people like me.

I would request the finance minister to please look into the HBFC affairs with a little touch of humanity, otherwise loaners like us will face total ruin.

M Sanaul Haq  
Uttara, Dhaka

### Good news for people under dictators

America has occupied Iraq by brute military force. It is unnecessary to go into the details of America's false pretexts for occupation of Iraq. But it is really hard to forget the memories of wanton destruction of houses, buildings, industrial installations, schools, power houses etc. Even killing of innocent people including women, children by mistake and use of cluster bombs, by mistake too, are difficult to erase from our minds. The Americans are continuing killing of Iraqi people because they are not receiving the American troops with garlands.

The Americans very recently killed 15 Afghan children in their homes by mistake. The Americans are killing Iraqi police by friendly fires. Maybe, we are yet to understand the democratic western free world and their theories. When Israeli troops kill Palestinian peo-

ple and destroy their homes deep into their territory on the excuse of security and self defence, they are neither aggressors nor terrorists. The Palestinian people have no gunships or arms of mass destruction. They sacrifice their lives to protest illegal occupation, killings and destruction of their homes they are terrorists and suicide bombers! The Americans and Israelis have the right to kill anyone anywhere for self-defence and by mistake because they are democratic this simple truth we do not understand!

The Americans and their collaborators (they call it a coalition force) are now fighting among themselves to rebuild Iraq over who will get the major share of the Iraq booty. President Bush has destroyed Iraqi installations by using his country's taxpayers' money, so the companies of his country have the right to get the work

of reconstruction. After all, the American people have paid for the destruction of Iraq so they should get the benefit of reconstruction to make profit out of their investments.

However, there is one good news for the third world countries with hidden natural wealth. Allow your leaders to be a western-prescribed dictator. If he can earn the western media coverage and prove himself defiant to the western leaders, especially the American president, then your country have the chance to be the focal point. The American president would have the opportunity to invade and occupy your country, destroy everything you have at present and then rebuild your country anew. Your hidden wealth would be brought to light and exported to meet the bills of reconstruction for years to come. You would be educated, have democracy run by the leaders chosen by the occupying

power. You would have good food, western lifestyle, education and your brain washed!

M Hossain  
Chairman Bari, Gazipur

### Libya's surrender to US-UK

Libya announces it would give up all the weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), together with Nuclear weapons and long range ballistic missile programmes. This is indeed a good news for the US-UK-Israeli trio and so is for the rest of the world.

If Libya's abandoning of WMD brings peace to the world, then Israel's abandoning will surely bring heaven to this earth. Does the US-UK axis have enough courage to urge Israel to scrap its WMD as well? If Israel follows Libya's suit,

only then peace will prevail in the Middle East. We hope, the west realises this, the sooner, the better.

Aminul Islam  
4<sup>th</sup> year, Economics  
Dhaka University.

### DCC reshaping road islands and dividers

On the one hand, innumerable roads and streets, lanes and by-lanes are damaged, cracked and full of pot holes, the roadside drains are stagnated with dirty and noxious water breeding mosquitoes, the manholes are lying without covers and tons of garbage are piled up in many places in the city.

On the other hand, in the name of development work, beautification of the city and control of road traffic, the DCC is digging and destroying costly metal and carpeted roads demol-

ishing, reshaping road islands and road dividers again and again with taxpayers' public money. The DCC is also whimsically erecting steel frame boundary railings on the footpaths.

Were not the steel frame costly boundary railings, erected a few years ago, destroyed and uprooted by the members of the public holding rallies and processions?

Is it not true that the space inside the steel frame boundary railing of the footpath is being illegally occupied and used by extortionists and miscreants for toll collection from the poor hawkers and vendors obstructing the movement of the pedestrians?

Would the authorities concerned stop the wastage of tax payers' money by the DCC?

OH Kabir  
6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka 1203