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## Thoughts on "hartal"

This refers to the DS Letters page of 02-Jan-04. I saw a letter by Mr Sayez "Against hartal". However, I think "hartal" has become a part of the genetic-code of the politicians of Bangladesh. So, instead of trying to get rid of it, let's look at the flip side of the coin. We can propose to all the political parties to fix Saturday as the "hartal day". As many schools and colleges are closed on that day in the first place, so we can minimise the disruption to the academic calendar. Also, until the time that we are able to take the two-stroke taxis and other unfit smoke-emitting vehicles off the road, hartal can serve the purpose of a "motorless" day.

How else would the atmospheres of cities like Dhaka and Chittagong get any respite?

**Chowdhury Naim Rahman**

*Khulshi, Chittagong*



Hartal on last Saturday.

## 31st celebrations

As I write this, the city's gone afire. At least a certain part of it has. The other part, the underprivileged section, would be glad of at least some sort of fire in this chilly night. It's 5 minutes to zero hour, and Hail the New Year. Though I stand in mortal danger from my partying friends when I say this, I see absolutely no use of these lavish, posh, dance-the-night-through parties, especially when they are held under the pretext of welcoming the new year. I won't be as archaic as my mom to say, what's the use of partying when you're one year closer to death? Morbid philosophy! But, on the other hand, there can be no reason for indulging in extremes, just because it's New Year, dude! You got to party, man? Spending Tk 2,000 for a night-long bash at Sheraton is just sheer waste of money.

Still, I'll grant that people who've money to roll in won't view it thus, and it's a matter of personal choice.

But, when my neighbour throws an all-night party by hiring a mike for people to blare in, that is when I can't keep my mouth shut. Right now, there's Chhaiyya Chhaiyya? streaming in through my window. A few minutes back it was You are my Sonia. Not only is the singing off-key, the whole act is just plain vulgar. Who wants to listen to tasteless Hindi hits at 3 in the morning?

**Nabila Idris**  
*Dhanmondi*

## Point of no return

Satire is enjoyable when written with tongue in cheek. J Alter (of the Economist) was entertaining with his bizarre hypo of some virtual prizes, which he names as The Law of Premature Predictions, and The Media Oscillation.

Let us apply the same (lightly enough) in Dhaka politics and national affairs. But first get rid of Washington's Iraqi bitchiness. President Bush's pre-Xmas coup in officially capturing Saddam is understandable—he was looking for the right timing. The trial of

Saddam is not going to be straight forward look what happened to Milo... the Balkan genocide leader with the number 200,000 (or two lakhs) on his neck. You can't do good to yourself trying to be good to others, specially when you are a politician of some calibre. Apply the same Alter principles on Blair of Downing Street, and the curtain comes down. The EU has to stand up to take a firm stand from its sitting position; while the UK decided long ago not to sit on the fence and watch the tamasha.

Let us come down to deshi stuff. Both the major political parties, the Awami League and the BNP are fast approaching the point of no return, in the fast changing world of politics, local or international. They have to take a major decision on the future role of the party; because at the point of no return there is no decisionist is too late.

The top leadership is under test on posterity. Old style politics will not sustain the parties on charismatic props. There is nothing called negative production. There are two sides: the survival of the party; and its public performance. There is no point in being obsessed with the former and neglecting the other. Sustainability is self-propelled; as is leadership. No props, no trimmings.

Today's leaders grab more than what they give voluntarily. Acts of sacrifice are very much visible; however indirect. Now the dissenters are at the very top of the society, and those grumbling cannot be ignored by the isolated and the insulated leaders. Another form of insulation is to be surrounded by rings of sycophants, who lack weight, anchoring, and direction. Sustainability at the top is daunting (as Saddam and Bush have realised). The people cannot be short-changed (although we have a lot of soiled GC notes in circulation).

These thoughts after the recent Victory Day exuberance follow naturally, realising the sad plight of the local political culture today. The point of concern is that whether the very foundation of politics needs to be replacit would be disastrous to build the

general election to do away with non-stop fighting and squabbles among the political leaders for power and to form a democratically elected government.

So far we have held as many as three general elections under three different caretaker governments. But all in vain. Political turmoil, tussle, din and bustle continue unabated as usual and the law and order situation in the country remains susceptible and deformed.

About the present and past state of affairs our eminent constitutional expert Dr. Kamal Hossain says, "The country is faced with a grave crisis as terrorism, extortion and corruption are rampant and the government has failed to check these like its predecessors."

The fact is that the party in power and the party in opposition have always been busy accusing each other tooth and nail and digging grave for each other.

And we see no light at the end of the tunnel.

Now we hear that from March 2004 the Awami League is going to launch a nation wide campaign to oust the BNP government. We fail to understand how the Awami League would topple the elected government? We also do not know how it is so much confident of coming to power after the BNP?

We also hear about the surfacing of a third force. We wonder what this third force (a new political party?) is going to do. What is its history and antecedent? What is the grammar and composition of the third force?

Like division, sub-division and fragmentation of land, are not spawning political parties that

create division and disunity among our people?

The BNP being in power is the first force and the Awami League in opposition is the second force in the country.

How all of a sudden the third force (the new party) can come to power superseding the 2nd force (Awami League) and the 1st force (BNP) without any general elections in the country?

We would therefore most humbly advice the parents, exponents and the advocates of the third force not to give birth to any child or float a new political party.

We would rather highly appreciate, strongly support and fully cooperate with them (the third force) if it works as a messenger of peace, mediator and co-ordinator between the Awami League and the BNP to help arrive at a consensus of opinion on the following ten points:-

1. Status of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman.
2. Powers and functions of caretaker government.
3. Independence of the Election Commission.
4. Result of the general elections.
5. Attending Jatiya Sangsad.
6. Observing hartals, holding public meetings and rallies.
7. Combating terrorism, corruption, bribe, toll collection and smuggling.
8. Declaring assets and property of ministers, MPs and all political and employees' union leaders of the rank of president, secretary, joint secretary and executive member.
9. Independence of judiciary.

## A minaret for Baitul Mukarram

Due to high-rise buildings and the tower heights of Dhaka stadium flood lights, the cubical shaped national mosque, Baitul Mukarram, has totally lost its glory and grandeur.

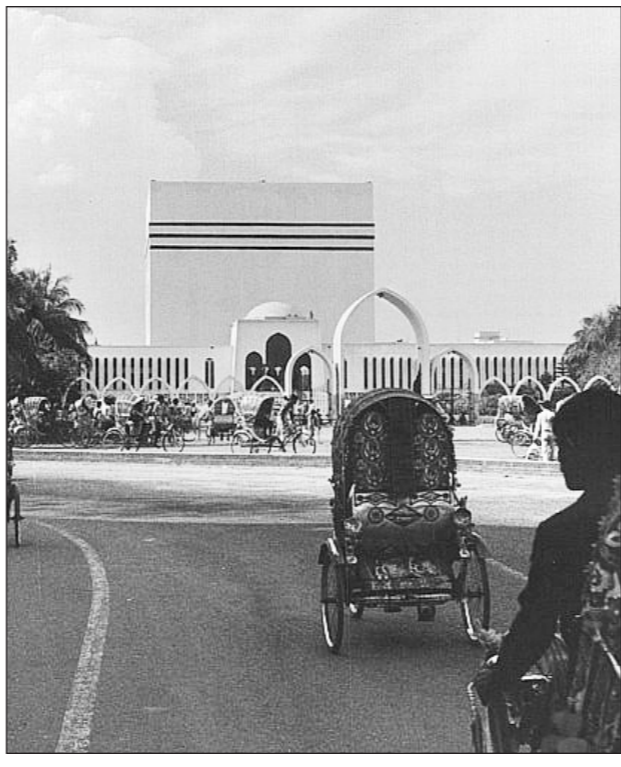
Basically, a mosque must have a minaret or at least a dome. Unfortunately, Baitul Mukarram is a mosque without any minaret or dome, although it is cubically shaped to imitate the Holy Kaba.

However, the grandeur of Kaba Sharif has been multiplied by its 8 majestic minarets. The minarets of the Sultan's Mosque in Turkey or Shah Faisal Mosque in Islamabad

touches the hearts of the Muslims because of their towering and majestic minarets. Our national mosque seems to be lost in the haze of high structures over shadowing its existence. To preserve its glory as well as to make it a symbolic central place of Dhaka, the national mosque needs at least one very high and majestic minaret which can be seen from far away.

It will also be a tourist attraction and pride of Dhaka city dwellers.

**Engineer Mohammad Alauddin**  
*BUET*



## Salma Sobhan

Salma Sobhan represents the model of first generation career woman who has inspired and motivated women and men to work selflessly and with humility.

She was my teacher at Dhaka University in 1981. The news of her sudden demise fills my heart with sorrow. Her presence in all areas of social development and her quiet, unassuming leadership will be greatly missed.

I remember in 1996 when I left for the USA, she spoke to me and said that she regretted the years she had spent abroad and that when she had come back it was too late for her to be involved in anything in a meaningful way. She wished she had started earlier and hoped for me that I would not make the same mistake. Salma Apa did start late but once she did, her vision, zeal, knowledge and leadership quality did not take long to leave a mark and build up generations of inspired workers and institutions. Ain-o-Shalish Kendra is just one example. Salma Apa was a pioneer, a leader, a social thinker far ahead of her time.



Late Salma Sobhan

Let society remember her contributions and her values while remembering the warm and unpretentious person behind the great achievements.

**Naeela K. Sattar**

*A former student and co-worker of Salma Sobhan from Amherst, MA*

## 10. Decentralisation of power.

Where there is a will there is a way. Where there is no vision, the people perish.

**OH Kabir**  
*Wari, Dhaka-1203*

## Lahore Resolution

The movement for the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims of British India was initiated by a Resolution known as the Lahore Resolution in the session of All India Muslim League in 1940.

The Resolution was drafted and moved by Abul Kashem Fazlul Haque, the then chief minister of undivided Bengal and in recognition of his services rendered to the Muslims of the sub continent, citizens of Lahore honoured him with the title of Sher-e-Bangla.

It is most unfortunate that in a programme on 25th December 2003 shown in the Pakistan television giving the background and synopsis of the Lahore Resolution, they simply did not mention the name of Fazlul Haque.

We protest this deliberate and calculated omission and the typical anti-Bengali sentiment of the Pakistani authorities that they simply tried to suppress history of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. It seems even after creation of a sovereign and independent Bangladesh, the mentality of Pakistanis remains the same.

It is Bengal that was the only province having a Muslim League government and the rest of the Muslim majority provinces had Congress governments. As Lord Mount Batten, the then Viceroy of British India, once remarked to Mr Jinnah, "Bengal is the only trump card in your hand". But it is a sad augury that the worst possible treatment was meted out to the then East Pakistan.

The Pakistan High Commission in Bangladesh should take note of this outrageous act of showing disrespect to the great leader of undivided India. The Pakistan television should apologise for the gross omission.

**SM Khalid Chowdhury**

*Former Member of Executive Council of Pakistan Students Federation United Kingdom*

## Ten resolutions

Here is my list of top ten resolutions for the new year for the convenience of our political leaders.

- Put an end to the outdated confrontational political style.

- Politics must be based on dialogue and discussion.

- Involve people, specially the middle class educated youth, in every sphere of development work and grassroots activities.

- Humbleness.

- Magnanimity and graciousness on the part of the role-models of our younger generation.

- Talk substantively about the real issues facing the country.

- Less involvement in shallow political squabbling contrived to create political chaos.

- Ensure security of people.

- Create the right environment for investment and ordinary people to work.

- Ensure hygiene and cleanliness standards in the cities.

**K. Siddique**  
*Uttara*

## "A dismal walk and some hope"

I have the following comments on the DS commentary "A Dismal Walk and Some Hope" of Jan 1, 2004. It is easy to judge history by hindsight and then draw conclusions. What is important is not to be hasty. In fact reading this piece, I felt that the editor had decided what to write and then took the walk.

This does not mean what he wrote is untrue. Nazrul's tomb is neglected; the Uddyan is a jungle, etc. But the reasons for such neglect are not so simple. Like, how did he come up with the conclusion that President Zia planned the Shishu Park for reasons as he has subscribed? Or that Swadhinata Stambha is in neglect because Prime Minister Khaleda Zia wants it that way? The editor's conclusion that there is a serious anti-intellectual movement underway in Bangladesh is also hasty. There are also many reasons that are not that easily discernible for the intolerance. We must look at the historical facts objectively and be cautious in relating these for drawing conclusions. We need to reflect upon events of 1971 dispassionately. We won a liberation war that was largely unplanned. We turned our conservative Muslim society overnight into a secular and so-called progressive state on winning independence. I still remember how the state owned BTV started airing messages from Dr.

Ahmed Sharif, for intellectual freedom and secularism, in place of readings from the Holy Koran in the early days of our independence.

The activities of these so-called intellectuals who equated the independence of Bangladesh with freedom to open the floodgates of a Calcutta-based culture hurt deeply the sentiments of a large section of our people.

The point I am making is that given that the trend in the 1970s and even later, the move towards religion is logical. Yes, there is intolerance now but this is a response to the initiatives seen in the early days of our independence when in the name of intellectual freedom and secularism, attempts were made to neglect our religion. What is happening here is Marxian (and Hegelian) logic of thesis and anti-thesis leading to a synthesis being played in the larger canvas of statehood.

The problem in Bangladesh is not Islam or intellectual intolerance. It is our elites, that include journalists, civil servants, businessmen, politicians and yes, intellectuals. We all speak of the lehengas; yet attend marriages where these are demonstrated disgustingly. If you ask me why Nazrul's tomb is dirty and Surhawardy Uddyan a jungle (incidentally for generations of 60s and 50s and before it is Race Course Maiden!), the simple answer would be these are so because we have the most closed and regressive elite system in the world where the elites demonstrate an unmistakable characteristic—hypocrisy.

**Shahjahan Ahmed**

*House No 47  
Road No 14A  
Dhanmandi R/A*

## Negativism at its worst

The two major political parties are playing an interesting game, perhaps not that interesting for those on the sidelines.

The ruling party is unhappy because the Awami League is boycotting parliament. Well-founded grumbling, isn't it? But the same party is not ready to see the leader of the opposition in a state mourning for the dead peacekeepers. What is going on? And where shall it end?

**A citizen**  
*Dhaka*

## Missing pages of history

Parts of history remain buried in obscure archives and record rooms. Many of the long abandoned documents contain priceless information on history, culture, economy, administrative and social system of the age they relate to and overtly or covertly sketch the role of top personalities who steered the affairs of the country and society. Unfortunately, these murky storehouses and racks have seldom been systematically explored to pick out and analyse the gems of papers and documents.

There have been occasional efforts by historians and social scientists to leaf through the dirty and often rotten heaps of papers in order to cull facts to build their selected data base, but there ends the act of exploration, if any. During my long tenure in a government job, I occasionally came across very old documents and papers that contained highly interesting information on a variety of aspects of life in ages we left far behind. I noticed in an Order Book of the year 1862 that a visiting British officer finding a Babu to be a perpetual latecomer fined him Annas two as token pun-

ishment.

Recently, I came upon an absorbing article titled 'Capitol Discovery' by Philip Kopper published in June 2003 issue of the distinguished Smithsonian Magazine. It describes the remarkable discovery of a large bound ledger from a dark subbasement storeroom of the US Capitol by a sheer stroke of luck. During November 2002, the storeroom beneath the main stairs was about to be demolished to accommodate escalators to be installed for the newly constructed visitors' chamber. This hastened the officials to move to save some records stashed in the dank stair room for an unknown number of years. And here they discovered the gem of documents a large dusty and withering volume bound in cloth and leather bearing gilded title 'Senators Compensation and Mileage'. The entries cover the period from 1790 to 1881. Since then the volume passed through the hands of experts and the Library of Congress for scanning and scrutiny and finally it reached the National Archives' conservation laboratory. A digital facsimile of the ledger would soon

appear on the Senate Website.

As the title suggests, the ledger contains the long-lost official payroll and expense statements for the Senate's first 90 years. The details of every dollar paid to senators in wages and travel reimbursements are meticulously recorded. The rag-paper pages are covered with notes and entries in ornate script with column after column of numbers and names within neat rules. It is awe-inspiring to see live signatures of approving officials that included personalities like Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr and John Adams. The book was introduced by the First Secretary of the Senate at the first session of the 2nd Congress, October 24th, 1791.

The early entries relate to 26 senate members representing 13 states, then the number rose to 76 from 38 states. Senators were paid \$6 per day when the legislature was in session. Travel was reimbursed at 30 cents a mile for up to 20 miles a day. It is interesting to note that two centuries later he senators are reimbursed at only 6 cents more a mile for road trips. The ledger also

reveals that Congress raised a senator's pay in 1816 from the \$6 per diem to \$1,500 a year. Today a senator earns \$154,700 a year and \$165 a day when travelling. There was also the provision of paid sick leave. One Mr. Richard Potts from Maryland was paid \$49 more for his pains as he was detained on the road by sickness.

Records show that every senator paid 5 per cent 'war tax' on salaries during the Civil War. It also shows that the senate deliberated on and consented to the appointment of President John Adams' entire cabinet in a single day in March 1801. It appears from a letter of the Comptroller of the Treasury to the Secretary of the Senate that the Senate had claimed too many expenses in 1832 and thus owed \$5,845.20. Many more revealing facts about the financial system and administration of the US government during the nascent years of its existence will creep up on the experts go on 'to unlock all its myriad secrets'.

**Mohammed Nawazish**  
*Retired Civil servant  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka 1205*

