

Distressing deluge aftermath

Can't we do something lasting and do it quickly?

UNDATION of the capital due to heavy rains is not an unusual occurrence. It happens almost every year with varying degrees, but the recent torrent that brought the city to a standstill, imposing great sufferings to the city dwellers, exposes our abject lack of capacity to deal with such an eventuality.

We are told that the system was overwhelmed because our sewerage is not capable of handling more than the routine rain runoff. And that is what begs the question. What may we ask is the 'routine' drainage capacity? We also notice the usual passing of the buck and shifting of responsibilities by different agencies to each other, like WASA blaming the City Corporation and the district administration, for all the woes caused by the heavy downpour. Rajuk must also take the blame for the unplanned, haphazard urbanization.

We agree that we had more than the usual rainfall over three days. But enough is enough. No longer can we put up with efforts of the agencies to hide behind excuses. We know that the canals have been occupied illegally, but whose job is it to see those freed from illegal occupation? We know that the drainage system is overwhelmed but some one should answer for the huge amount spent on storm sewerage every year with no improvement in the system. We are told of derelict canals and about the intention to reclaim 11 of them. But nothing tangible has come about.

The fact is that there is absence of long term planning, and coordination between the agencies in using whatever resources they have is lacking too. We see some flurry of activities during the wet season only to be discontinued when it is over. Such seasonal seriousness we can do well without.

There are several factors that have added to the problem. The bane of urbanisation is only too evident with a large portion of the catchment areas in and around Dhaka city filled up to make for high rise buildings. Also, apart from the canals that are supposed to allow the runoffs into the surrounding rivers having been encroached upon, those rivers too have been silted, obstructing natural flow outwards.

We suggest that the problem of water logging of the capital be addressed urgently. We feel that the current dispensation, with no political constraints to contend with, should utilise all its energy towards streamlining urban planning of Dhaka city, reclaiming and re-excavating the derelict canals as well dredging the surrounding rivers. After all, this is as important an issue, if not more, as many of those that the caretaker government is seized with at the moment.

A new president for India

Pratibha Patil has rich legacy to go by

THE election of Pratibha Patil as India's president brings to an end a rather exciting phase in the modern history of the country. Part of the excitement has to do with the fact that Ms. Patil is the first woman to occupy the office. But by far it is the other part of it, namely, the controversy that her candidacy gave rise to that cannot be ignored. The president-elect had been accused of committing quite a few irregularities, as reported in the Indian media, in her stints in earlier political positions, notably as governor of a state. But such accusations clearly did not move the ruling UPA, whose nominee she was. Ms. Patil was also seen as a Sonia Gandhi loyalist, which implied that she might turn out to be a pliant president.

All of that is now in the past. Pratibha Patil, in her seventies, has beaten octogenarian Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat to the top job. She will now be expected to uphold the stature and position of the office of head of state, a matter that acquires particular significance since she will replace the eminently respected A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. In his years in office, President Kalam exercised a moral authority that served as a reminder of the august traditions set by earlier Indian presidents. Names such as Rajendra Prasad, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussain and Shankar Dayal Sharma evoke a certain mystique associated with Rashtrapati Bhavan. It was this mystique that Dr. Kalam sought to uphold in the past five years, despite the reality that it was the BJP-led government which, to its credit, elected him to office. The new president will certainly be expected to emulate her worthy predecessors. She ought not to be seen as a latter-day Zail Singh. One hopes that Pratibha Patil, being only the second individual after V.V. Giri in 1969 to be elected to the presidency in a contested election, will prove worthy of her exalted position.

We congratulate the new president of India. All said and done, she can still make a difference in a country where women have made a niche for themselves. Indira Gandhi in the past and Mayawati and Vasundhara Raje in our times are some examples before her.

Clean energy from fuel cell

The future prospects of fuel-cell technology appear limitless. These advances in fuel-cell development make "Hydrogen Economy" of tomorrow a distinct reality. We can now visualise hydrogen as the source of cheap and affordable source of clean energy for all our power needs. It will usher in a new era; the Hydrogen Era of clean environment, better health, and more power and energy to use as mankind deems fit. It is, in fact, a timely saving grace; to pull us out of unbridled environment pollution and global warming that must be contained; the sooner the better.

S. A. MANSOOR

GLOBAL warming is an unfortunate and dangerous by-product obtained from burning of hydrocarbon fuels. This phenomenon will ultimately lead to a dangerous increase in the earth's temperature, with no remedy in sight! The earth will get warmer day by day, ultimately melting the polar ice-caps. It has already started; with the disappearance of the polar permafrost and weakening of the

polar ice surface. The end result will lead to major temperature imbalances; with unpredictable weather swings, more violent storms, hurricanes, and flooding. The Northwest Passage; which in earlier times could not be crossed by ships, was sailed across in the year 2000; an ominous signal to note! Indications are that glaciers originating from polar ice caps will become a thing of the past, given the rapidly increasing hydrocarbon fuel burning.

We have to be aware of the dangers that lie ahead, and look into ways and means for producing clean and non-polluting energy. This is the challenge for this decade; to produce energy and power without emission of warming gases like carbon dioxide and methane. If we persist in carrying on with the existing ways of energy and power generation, it will lead to unbelievable environmental disaster! Present day research and development of fuel

sources indicate that the fuel-cell is a clean source of energy, and is a promising way out of the environmental impact of the greenhouse effect.

Fuel-cells are possibly the only way to contain the uncontrolled trend of global warming. The fuel-cell is similar to the popular electric batteries that we put in torches and the lead-acid batteries we use in cars. Fuel-cells also use chemicals to produce electricity; however, the similarity stops there! Unlike torchlight and car batteries, fuel-cells do not run down! The chemical needed for the fuel-cell is supplied constantly. This chemical is the familiar gas: Hydrogen.

To produce electricity from hydrogen, the fuel-cell uses a special catalyst. This induces the hydrogen ion to separate into proton and electron. Normally, an electrical field drives the proton (positively charged) to pass

through a thin membrane made from a special material. Meanwhile the electron (negatively charged) is attracted in another direction. The proton, after passing through the thin membrane, combines with oxygen molecules from the air to produce water. The electron, meanwhile, is channelled into an electric current. This is the power output of the fuel-cell! Like any battery, fuel-cell batteries also have no moving parts.

Usually, when an electric current passes through water, it splits the water into hydrogen and oxygen gases. The fuel cell does just the opposite. Here, the oxygen and hydrogen combine to produce electricity and water; and very pure water too! This action takes place without the need for high pressures or temperatures usually associated with generation of electric power!

Fuel-cells can replace petrol or diesel fuel in automobiles and other forms of transport. The fuel-cell driven electric motors will be the motorised vehicles of tomorrow! There will be no pollution and very little noise; just the hum of the electric motor, while the exhaust output will be pure water! Although it is conceptually simple, we need special material for the catalyst and the thin membrane for the chemical reaction to take place (described earlier). The production of these special materials, which will be durable and affordable, is the challenge for fuel-cell car developers today. Prototype cars are there, and we await the development of the material needed for a fail-safe and cheap fuel-cell battery for a mass-produced affordable car!

Fuel-cell battery operated cars will be much lighter than the conventional cars of today. There will

be a radical change in car design; starting from a lighter chassis. Gone will be the heavy and noisy car engine, axels, transmission, gear box, differentials, starter motor, and engine driven alternators charging the car battery! Fuel-cell driven cars will be lighter, quieter, simpler, roomier and more comfortable! A dream come true for any car owner! Prototypes have already been developed, and a number sold to rich Americans; who show them off proudly! It is the logical progression from the hybrid cars now being mass manufactured.

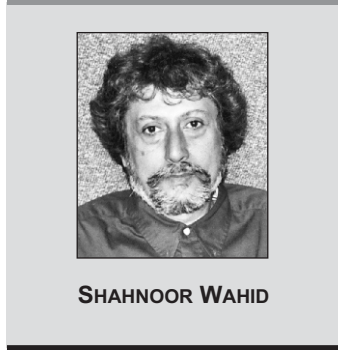
Beyond cars and other motor vehicles, fuel-cells can power the smallest to the largest machines. As usual, war machines take precedence; and the US Navy is possibly quietly designing fuel-cell powered surface and submerged naval vessels! Their debut will be far reaching; just

imagine a practically noiseless submarine!

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S A Mansoor is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Tajuddin Ahmad: The lonely warrior



SHAHNOOR WAHID

ON Monday, the 82nd birth anniversary of Tajuddin Ahmed came and went by without making much of a noise. Can we expect a grand celebration of his birth anniversary one day? Does he not deserve one? Is his memory fading away from our collective minds? Will our next generation remember him at all?

These are questions worth delving into, since laudable attempts are being made at the moment to recognise and restore the rightful place of great national leaders along with that of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the chief architect of Bangladesh.

In fact, the illustrious political career of Tajuddin and his contribution to the creation of Bangladesh will remain an inspiration for all freedom loving peoples of the world. But, unfortunately, the apathy and disrespect that has been shown to him since his assassination will go down as a nation's collective story of shame. And we must correct ourselves at the first available opportunity.

With such thoughts clouding the mind, one tends to get pensive thinking about this man of substance -- a lonely warrior, a true patriot, a Bengali by heart, an architect of Bangladesh. He was a thinker politician, a philosopher and a visionary. And at the same time he was capable of undertaking colos-

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

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sal responsibility and delivering the goods too. Who does not know how he shouldered the responsibility of steering the liberation war in 1971 on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and coming out victorious on December 16.

Tajuddin Ahmed's association with Bangabandhu goes back to the fifties. He was the constant companion of Bangabandhu. The latter never took a decision without the approval of the former. In fact, **Bangabandhu and Tajuddin were complementary to one another.**

They fought many a battle together to carry forward the ultimate agenda of obtaining the freedom of the Bengalees and creating a homeland for themselves.

Tajuddin Ahmed took the cue from Bangabandhu's March 7th speech, and prepared himself for any eventuality. Accordingly, after the crackdown on March 25 he immediately started his ground works for launching the war of liberation against the occupation force. He knew that the period of talking was over. It was time to trade bullet for a bullet. The amazing story of his organising the liberation war with more enemies around than friends has taken a legendary proportion by now. And yet the new generations know so little about this freedom fighter.

A short take on Tajuddin Ahmed from a biography

"Tajuddin Ahmad (1925 -- November 3, 1975) was a promi-

nent leader of the Awami League. In 1971, he successfully headed the government at Mujibnagar and was instrumental in forming the first government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh on April 10, 1971.

Tajuddin Ahmad obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree with honours in Economics from Dhaka University in 1953. He also obtained a law degree. As a student he was moved by the inequalities in society and became an activist and a social reformer. Tajuddin Ahmad also became active in the Muslim League and the Pakistan movement, and later organised the student wing of the Awami Muslim League in 1949. At this point in life he associated himself with Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Tajuddin Ahmad became involved as an active organiser of protests and other activities during the Language Movement of 1952. He was arrested by the police and was imprisoned for several months. After his release, he was elected to the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly in 1954, but was arrested following the dismissal of the A. K. Fazlul Huq-led government.

He was arrested again, following the imposition of martial law by Ayub Khan in 1958. Tajuddin Ahmed got deeply involved in the pro-democracy movements led by the Awami League and other political parties in the then East Pakistan. It was in 1966 that he organised

protests against the arrest of Bangabandhu on charges of sedition. He also took part in the round



table conference in Rawalpindi, convened by Ayub Khan to resolve the crisis between the government and the opposition parties.

In 1970, Tajuddin Ahmed became a member of the National Assembly

of Pakistan. But his greater role in our national history was yet to be played, and he did not have to wait long. It came in the month of March, 1971, following the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by the Pakistan army, when the worst genocide in world history began on the soil of Bengal. Ahmad organised a government-in-exile, popularly known as the Mujibnagar government, to win his nation's freedom. Ahmad named the capital Mujibnagar, after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The oath-taking ceremony of the first government of

civilians and armed forces.

During this period, Ahmad had to face vehement intra-party strife led by Khandokar Mushtaq Ahmad, who conspired to harm the national struggle for independence through a failed attempt to form a confederacy with Pakistan. Among Ahmad's great diplomatic achievements were to win international support and recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation by the government of India and Soviet Union. After the independence of Bangladesh, Tajuddin Ahmad returned to Dhaka on December 22, 1971. In the subsequent cabinet formed under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ahmad was given charge of the ministries of finance and planning. He was also appointed member of the committee in charge of writing the Constitution of Bangladesh.

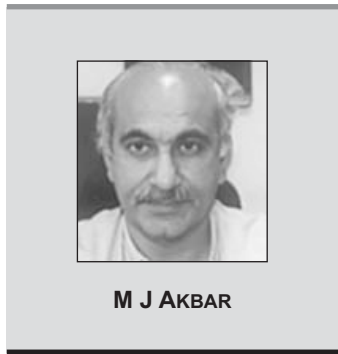
His assassination

When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assumed the title of president and banned other political parties in 1975, Ahmad opposed the forming of one party system known as Baksal. When Bangabandhu was assassinated on August 15, 1975, Ahmad was kept under house arrest on the very same day. Later, on August 22, he was arrested with other political leaders by the regime of the new president Khondaker Mustaq Ahmed and imprisoned at the Dhaka Central Jail.

On November 3, in what became infamously known as the "Jail killings," Ahmad along with Syed Nazrul Islam, A. H. M. Qamaruzzaman and Muhammad Mansur Ali were killed on the direct instruction of Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed. And, thus, a great son of the soil was smote down, and we say in the words of Shakespeare: "Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood."

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Tomorrow's agenda



M J AKBAR

YOU can argue with success but can you win the argument? An argument is a conversation about detail, and the more minor the nuance the finer the argument. Success is a heavy blanket that tends to shroud details. A happy result diffuses blemishes and paints a positive gloss on the reasons for victory.

But an election in a functioning, and even zealous, democracy is only a link in a chain that connects to the next poll, and only an honest analysis of the reasons will determine whether they become seeds of future fortune, or misfortune.

The elections for the President of India on July 19 had a limited electorate. Only legislators, either members of parliament or the assembly, could vote. No legislator voted for either Mrs. Pratibha Patil or Mr. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. Each person voted for himself or herself. Those who abstained were equally motivated by self-interest.

The result was determined early on, when the Congress softly dropped the message that the

BYLINE

I do not know what the Congress or the allies had against him, but he would have been an infinitely better choice. Pranab Mukherjee would have lent maturity and finesse to the highest office of the land. The UPA has selected an excellent candidate for vice-president in Hamid Ansari, a distinguished diplomat who will, unlike Mrs Patil, happily declare his assets. The shambles within the opposition is already deflecting the Congress from its own inadequacies.

defeat of its candidate would mean the collapse of the ruling alliance. For the allies, the risk was not worth any alternative game, for the very good reason that there was no alternative game.

Neither was heroism on the agenda of the non-Congress parties outside government, whether in the chipped NDA or the confused Third Front. They preferred any possible local gain to a national objective. Shiv Sena opted for sect instead of its traditional political alliance with the BJP, and its leader Balasaheb Thackeray was duly rewarded with a formal visit by the Congress chief minister of Maharashtra, who decided that this was not the right moment to consider whether Mr. Thackeray was communal or anti-Muslim.

Another partner of the BJP, Mamata Banerjee, decided that she did not need to alienate any Bengali Muslim sympathy by voting for Shekhawat. With friends such as these, the BJP could hardly hope for fervour from possible bedfellows.

Chandra Babu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh and Mulayam Singh Yadav

in Uttar Pradesh are anxious for Muslim support in the next election. Why would they risk the future, and a probable alliance with the Left, for a present that was at best uncertain? The cause was lost before the election was lost.

Neither character nor ideology, or what passes for ideology, made any difference to this limited electorate of legislators. The BJP believed that it could make corruption a decisive difference which would sway legislators.

Corruption is an issue with the man on the street, who is forced to give bribes in order to survive. It cannot be much of an issue among those more accustomed to taking money rather than giving it. At least one of the voters, a member of parliament, took a break from jail, his residence since his arrest for kidnapping and murder.

The Congress made much out of the fact that their candidate would be the first woman to become president. But Mrs. Pratibha Patil is going to Rashtrapati Bhavan by accident rather than by design. Hers was the last name on a long list that was

discussed among the UPA partners at much length. Women's liberation would have been far better served if her name had been at the top of the list rather than at the bottom. A fluke cannot be converted into an ideological virtue.

All the problems of last-minute selection were immediately apparent. Even minimal due diligence would have disclosed a rather awkward proximity to political and fiscal improprieties that are easily hidden under a distant carpet in a small town, but can hardly escape the glare of a searchlight that is thrown on a presidential candidate's track record.

Mrs. Patil's exotic habits extend to an optimistic conversation with a dead guru, but that may be less of a problem in a country where no respectable politician would be seen without his astrologer. In fact, there may be politicians searching for the dead guru now, after her spectacular rise from anonymity to president.

The only question now is whether she carries such a spirited view of destiny into the office that she will

inhabit next week. The outgoing president, Abdul Kalam, was an apolitical bachelor-rocket scientist who created a formidable constituency among children by promising them an India that would rise to the leadership of the world in the 21st century. Mrs. Pratibha Patil will be more representative of today's political class: holier than thou in public and shadier than thou in private.

Elections to the office of prime minister and Parliament are about power. Elections to the office of president are about dignity. That is an office that has been, more or less, preserved from the fetid whiff of politics ever since Dr. Rajendra Prasad became the first President of the Republic of India. The new incumbent of Rashtrapati Bhavan brings with her a bit of malodorous baggage that will need some urgent spring-cleaning to prevent the odour from spreading.

The new president will get the palace, but the loser could get the sympathy of the ordinary voter, who did not elect the President of India this week, but will certainly elect (or not) the electors of the president very soon. A Catch 22 lurking around the corner if the Congress does not take pre-emptive action.

President Kalam has now made it virtually a part of the president's duties to interact freely around the country, and meet children. I do hope that President Patil refrains from theorising about the barbaric Mughals, and how they forced Indian women to wear veil for self-

protection.

The Congress is making a mistake when it compares Mrs Patil to her opponent. The comparison that should worry the party is between Mrs. Patil and the candidate that the Congress could have had. Home minister Shivraj Patil was the public frontrunner for weeks.

I do not know what the Congress or the allies had against him, but he would have been an infinitely better choice. Pranab Mukherjee would have lent maturity and finesse to the highest office of the land. The UPA has selected an excellent candidate for vice-president in Hamid Ansari, a distinguished diplomat who will, unlike Mrs Patil, happily declare his assets.

The shambles within the opposition is already deflecting the Congress from its own inadequacies. There is a mood of mini-euphoria, and a feeling that the election for the Rashtrapati Bhavan is the prelude for re-election to prime minister's house. General elections will be fought on a different territory, under different rules among different voters.

A victory on Raisina Hill is no substitute for defeat in Uttar Pradesh. The agenda for today's friendships, for example with Mayawati, is exhausted with this victory.

Next year's agenda is a different one: who will dominate the next Parliament. All bets are open.

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