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No alternative to democracy

When ancient Athenian invented democracy, they believed that ordinary people must have say in the government and rich oligarchs should not rule them by force. They were rightly concerned that oligarchy would ultimately lead to tyranny. The ancient Athenians realised tyranny is a kind of government that rules through fear. The symptoms of tyranny they identified are: A tyrant does not accept criticism; a tyrant does not listen to advice from those who don't agree with him; and a tyrant tries to prevent those who disagree with him from participating in politics.

Democracy, with its emphasis on freedom, is opposite to tyranny. The essence of Athenian freedom was the right of any citizen to speak in the Assembly of free citizens (parrhesia). This runs counter to one of the worst features of tyranny that bars outsiders from having a voice in governing. Although the Athenian way of giving all citizens the right to speak in the Assembly is not practicable in our complex world, the right of the ordinary citizens to be heard remains germane to this day. Parliaments offer the representatives the chance to voice the concerns of the ordinary citizens.

Unfortunately, on many occasions, parliaments have become a playground of politicians for their own partisan and personal interests. The freedom the Athenians wanted was not just release from bondage of tyranny, but the right to help decide their own destiny through active participation in government.

But without any channel to express public opinion, any form of government may degenerate into tyranny. Tyranny may come painlessly at first, bringing an end to disorder, and promising stability that people want. Many ordinary Athenians at first favoured the tyrant Pisistratus at a time of disorder. But their law-giver Solon had seen tyranny coming, and he warned the people about their complacency. But the Athenians welcomed Pisistratus and gave in to his promise of peace and stability. But the cost of tyranny was exorbitant and the Athenians later realised that order and stability without freedom was no answer and later they removed Pisistratus and his tyrannical sons.

Democracy remains the only way to stem tyranny of one-man rule. Democracy is now blossoming in every part of the world. However imperfect, democracy is the only way in which the ordinary people can express their views. Elections and daily participation of elected representatives is by far the most effective way to stem any oligarchy that might emerge. Bangladesh must return to democracy with some safeguards against political leaders from misusing public trust. A citizens' forum on the line of Athens Council may be formed to keep a watch on political leaders to prevent any misuse of power. A free press might also serve that role.

Mahmood Elahi
Ottawa, Canada

Dhaka and rickshaws

I find interesting the healthy discussion going on in this page of DS regarding ban on rickshaws put forward by Mr. Sikander and Mohammad Rahat.

I think it's not the 'humane' factor that stirs up the conscience of car-owners towards ban on rickshaws; rather it's the needed ease with which they along with other city dwellers wish to ply the roads of the capital. Nevertheless, the issue is crucial as well as complicated and warrants a holistic approach to be adopted.

Unlike capitals of developed countries, Dhaka has grown in a completely haphazard fashion. So it would not be politic to follow others blindly disregarding our own situation. It's a matter of neither going backwards/forward nor taking unpopular decisions. We have a legacy for which we have to painfully pay now. If we want to see rickshaws eliminated, we have to first fix the whole existing ramshackle road system of Dhaka. Until then, we can't but rely on rickshaws for short distance travel. So we better ponder over how we can make coexist motorised and non-motorised vehicles.

In his letter dated April 21, 2008, Mohammad Rahat mentioned that none of us is happy with rickshaws and these should be eliminated outright. I think it's not the rickshaws, but the policy that is being followed to permit them to ply the city roads that is making us unhappy.

I feel that eventually it's the majority of Dhaka's population, i.e.

middle and low class people, whose benefits matter most. Moreover, thinking of car-owners as being callous to the sufferings of commoners is wrong. Many car owners can realize the plight of people forced to jostle helplessly in the tiny space of inter-city buses.

Ahmad Ferdous Bin Alam
Department of CSE, DU

Bangladesh Studies

I am shocked and surprised by the decision taken by the British Council of Bangladesh and Edexcel International Examinations Body to debar Bangladeshi English Medium Students from participation and inclusion of Bangladesh Studies in GCE Ordinary Level Examinations. The only ground they try to advance is that the number of candidates is not enough. So it is not profitable for them. This debarment will deprive the English Medium Students' only way to enlighten themselves about Bangladesh—its precise history and salient geographical features.

Most English Medium Schools have never underscored the importance of this branch of learning and from now on there will be no room for reading or studying Bangladesh at secondary level in English Medium Schools.

A precise examination of the summery of the main topics, (as a course of study) reveals that Bangladesh Studies comprises two papers. Topics are divided as (1) History before the Mughals (2) Bengal in the Mughal Empire and under British rule (3) Partition (4) Undivided Pakistan

and struggle for the Independence and the Creation of Bangladesh and (5) Language Movement, economic disparity and our heritage and culture. The Second Paper contains briefly location, climate, rivers, soil, natural resources, agriculture, industries etc. Total marks for the two papers are 120 and questions are set with wide choices/options so that even average students can get through with an idea of their motherland's history and salient features of their country's ecology.

Last but not the least—unlike Bangladesh Studies, Pakistan Studies, Indian Studies etc. go on resolutely (in spite of difficulties). Taking into account that the subject has great worth, significance, influence and magnitude, let our younger generation learn and be enlightened on their motherland. I fervently appeal to the British Council and Edexcel to reconsider their decision and be more far-sighted.

Tajul Islam
Gulshan-1, Dhaka

Malnutrition

The majority of the population is passing through hard days. Most of them are not conscious about the importance of balanced diet for good health and longevity. Malnutrition usually stems from poverty and from ignorance of what should be the ideal diet.

The issue is grossly neglected in our context.

Abdur Razzaque
MSS & MPH
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Women and tourism

The affirmative role of tourism in women's empowerment can only be geared up if poverty reduction and the issue of women's dignity and role at workplace are addressed. These are among the issues in UNWTO's Action Plan to empower women through tourism, announced recently. The organisation is committed to playing an important role in economic empowerment of women in the tourism industry.

The Action Plan has to be considered as part of UNWTO's "triple commitment" objectives, in the framework of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism and in support of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

The percentage of women employed in the tourism sector is already comparatively high; the UNWTO's Action Plan will also let us improve the quality and conditions of women's employment in tourism, as well as create increased economic opportunities for self-employed women and micro-entrepreneurs. Bangladesh being one of UNWTO member states could be much benefited through this programme.

MS Islam
Tourism worker, Dhaka

Taxpayers

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) has recently established "one point service centre" to offer the taxpayers certain prompt services. One of the jobs of the said one point service centre is to issue T.I.N certificates within 2 working days of receiving application from the taxpayers. But it is seen that the one point service centre established at Zone-7, Dhaka office, is not providing such facilities, as prescribed in citizens' charter, also published by the NBR. The applicants have to wait for 20 to 30 days for such certificates. Moreover, hand written certificates are issued nowadays, though there are computers at every circle.

The honourable chairman of the NBR and the respective commissioners of Zone-7 are requested to look into it as an urgent matter, so that the purpose of establishing "one point service centre" could be served.

Aharasheed taxpayer
Topkhana Road, Dhaka

Pahela Baishakh

Pahela Baishakh is the biggest traditional festival for us. Bangla New Year is an indispensable part of our own culture, heritage, life-style and civilisation. When Pahela Baishakh comes I cannot express how pleased I am! It gives us a feeling of great pleasure.

All classes of people, especially the youths, came out on the roads wearing our traditional dresses to celebrate the day. Many take "panta bhat" with fried hilsa and sing 'Tagore's' 'Esho he Baishakh esho esho' welcoming the occasion.

AKM Emdadul Hoque
Department of English
Metropolitan University, Sylhet

Road accidents

Frequent road accidents in different places of the country have become a matter of great concern for all of us. These accidents yet again prove the inefficiency of our transport system.

The decision makers should look into the matter immediately and adopt both short long term measures to reduce the number of road accidents.

Asir Faisal
One-mail

Income tax law

I agree with the letter published on 17th April, 2008 entitled, "Income tax law" written by SMS Zaman, Member (ret'd), Taxes Administration, National Board of Revenue, Dhaka. I am a law student of 1st year and I don't know much about income tax laws.

Mr. Zaman's opinion is that frequent amendments to the Act are not desirable. I think the point is valid. So, I agree with him that

before enacting the income tax laws, public opinion must be sought on some specific points.

Sadia Afsana Rima
University of Rajshahi

Bangabandhu

If you have gone through the dailies or watched in the TV news the chronology of what happened in March of 1971, from the first through 25th, under the title "the days of tumultuous March", you have again come to know who was that man whom the people of the then East Bengal, later East Pakistan, made their undisputed leader, who by virtue of his people's mandate led movement after movement against the state and government of Pakistan and sat across the table with the Pakistani Military Junta and Political Coterie and led marathon parleys in order to resolve the issues of future Pakistan on the basis of his Six-point, and who stood out to be the people's sole and supreme leader to hear from and obey, indeed as a king without the crown, and who drew the attention of the world press and the world leaders who saw in him the leader to make history. He was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

What an unfortunate nation we are! That great son of the soil, the greatest ever Bengalee, remains unsung by the State!

After the present army-backed regime took over, Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed made it clear on a few occasions that Bangabandhu would be given his due recognition of being the architect of this nation, virtually the father of the nation.

But what we watch in practice is different...

AH Dewan
Retired Govt. Officer
South Kafrul, Dhaka Cantt, Dhaka

Trial of war criminals

Are we really going to have our stalled general election by the month of December 2008?

Our war of independence sector commanders and many VIPs are constantly demanding the trial of war criminals/collaborators under the present caretaker government of Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed.

We wonder whether the general election or the trial of war criminals/collaborators would be held first. Is it possible to hold the general election on the one hand and trial of war criminals/collaborators on the other?

Would it not create chaos and confusion, law and order situation in the country with regard to candidature, selection and election of people who are interested in participating in the forthcoming general election 2008?

What system and procedures, legal aspects and time it would require to identify, accuse and prove and finally punish the war criminals/collaborators?

Of course those who are demanding the trial of war criminals/collaborators have to protect fundamental citizenship rights of the people of Bangladesh and also to ensure that there is no violation of human rights.

We are surprised why the sector commanders and many others did not initiate and pursue the trial of war criminals/collaborators under the former caretaker government of (i) Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed (ii) Justice Habibur Rahman (iii) Justice Latifur Rahman (iv) our present President Dr Iajuddin Ahmed who was the head of the caretaker government (Chief Adviser) for some time and also under the elected government of (v) former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and (vi) former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

We strongly feel that we should hold our scheduled general election in December 2008 without any complications, delay and wastage of time in the greater interest of the country.

We also feel that after the election the next government may decide and start the trial of the war criminals/collaborators.

All's well that ends well.

OH Kabir
Dhaka

Teachers and politics

I have just read the article by Md. Ataul Hoq on politics in DU with interest. I would like to express some of my views on this. I think that the involvement of teachers in political activities has been a thorny issue for a long time now.

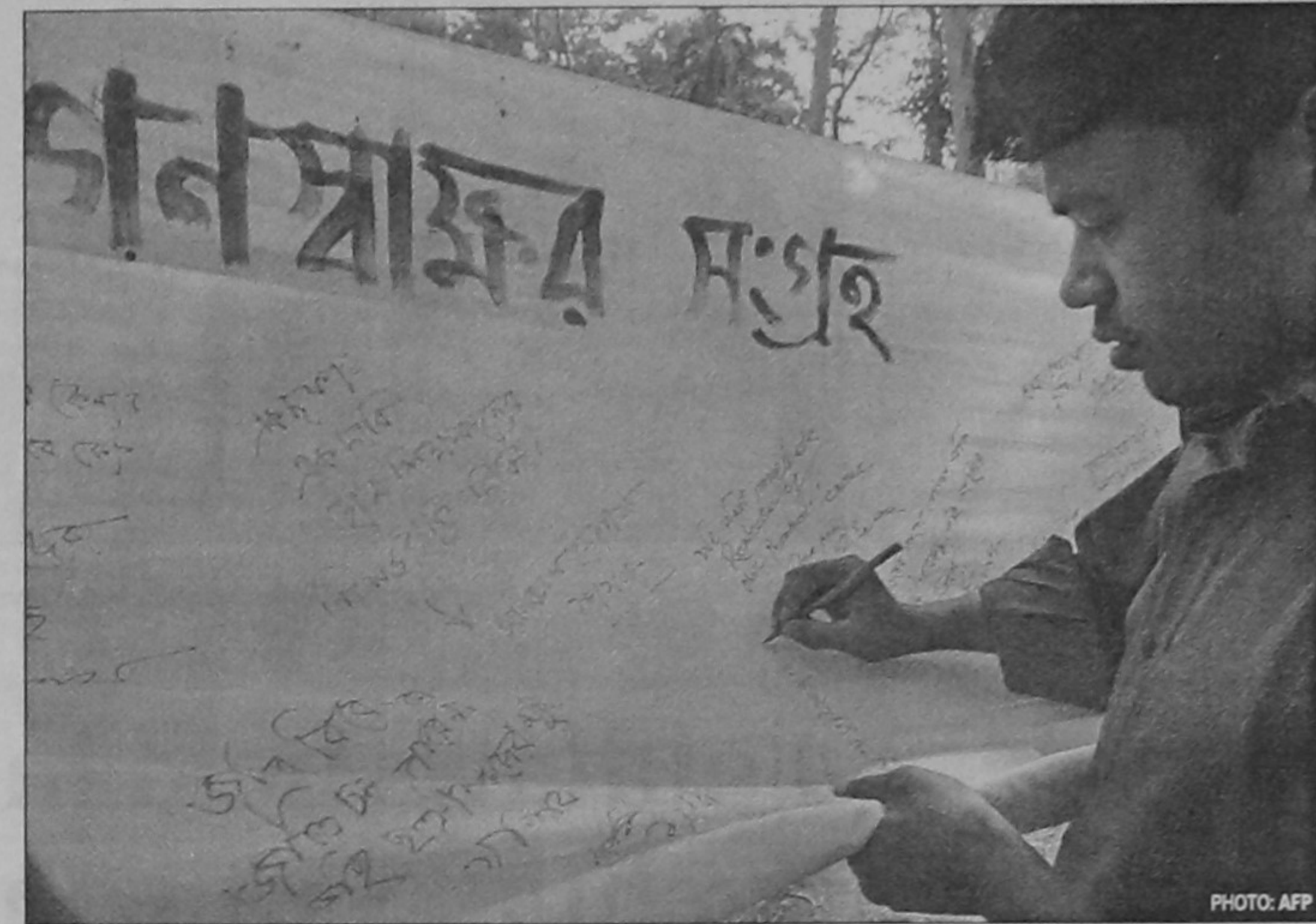
Some teachers, although not the majority, have been involved in politics not only in public universities but also in different government colleges of the country. This has been legitimised since the creation of Bangladesh, mainly after the 1972 higher education ordinance act came into effect. DU and most other general education based public universities were influenced by this. I agree with Mr. Hoq's view that teachers should not get involved in politics. However, this should also apply to the people in other professions as well. While I will not try to give any excuse for some teachers getting involved in politics, I believe the issue deserves careful examination. First, it is important to find out why some teachers are doing politics. My experience of being an ex-Faculty of DU suggests that by being successful in politics a teacher can get various benefits from the university and perhaps, most importantly, can get various prestigious positions both within and out-

side the university. I believe this applies to non-academic public servants as well where politics plays an important part in one's promotion, transfers etc. So, the teachers alone should not be blamed. I believe that for the public universities to regain their lost glory their funding needs to be increased significantly so that these institutions can improve their currently pathetic financial position.

It is an established fact that the public universities have serious financial constraints regarding infrastructure and academic development, including upgrading of scientific equipment and library facilities.

It is needless to say that they are lagging behind in terms of various academic facilities compared to the developed world, not to mention the developed world. It is not only the responsibility of the government but also of the universities concerned to improve various academic facilities. The universities should generate more income, so that they can achieve these goals.

Haider Mannan, PhD
Faculty, Monash University, Australia



E-mail service for students

E-mail is the latest invention in the communications system. It helps all classes of people. The students are much benefited by e-mail. But in Bangladesh this facility hasn't reached all the students due to shortage of computers. If the e-mail facilities can be given to all the students, they will be immensely benefited by it.

SM Najmul Haque Emon
Santahar (Chabagan), Bogra

NGOs and land

In the mid-70s, the government in order to facilitate the healthy functional growth of the NGOs at national level allotted land to a number of organisations in Mirpur area of the city to build up their infrastructure facilities. The Ministry of Social Welfare incurred the cost of the land out of its revenue funds.

Some of the NGOs have successfully used the land for building up the infrastructures needed for their programme operation with grants from the government under ADP financing and have expanded their service coverage.

However, all are not equally good in their endeavours.

The matter deserves a closer look.
Abu Musa Miah
Lalbagh, Dhaka

Sylhet station

Sylhet railway station remains what it was. People still don't get proper service from staffs working there. Sometimes even ten days earlier passengers don't get tickets. It is a mystery that all chair tickets are sold within a few hours after the sale starts!

Sylhet-Chittagong is one of the longest routes. So, it should be comfortable but we have to face many problems on that route. The service is very bad.

The railway authorities should address the problems that the passengers are facing at Sylhet railway station.

Chowdhury Ashraf Karim
One-mail

Army's role in politics

The only surviving military rulers in Myanmar and Pakistan are in trouble. This is an object lesson for all the countries in the region.

We are very proud of our Army. They have gained reputation for their commendable services to the UN. They fought the liberation war

and gave leadership to our valiant freedom fighters to liberate the country. They rescue people during natural calamities like floods and cyclones that frequent Bangladesh. Their latest big contribution is saving the country from the brink of collapse on one-eleven.

They should help the government to hold a free, fair and credible election. If the expected election is held by Dec 2008 and power is handed over to the genuinely elected representatives, it will be a big achievement.

Shafiqul Islam
One-mail

Motorcycles on footpaths

People going out for a walk to Raman Park in the evening are often bothered by motorcycles moving along the footpaths around the place! The motorcyclists don't look repentant, they push through the evening walkers without showing the slightest regard for traffic rules!

The traffic managers should ensure that no motorised vehicle uses the footpaths meant for pedestrians. That's too simple to have been overlooked!

Asufferer, Dhaka

Golden fibre

My daughter Aishi, a student of class four, was reading a paragraph on jute. "Jute is the golden fibre of Bangladesh", she went on reading for her exams. In our student days we used to read the same sentence and there had been reasons to believe it at that time but it is still true these days?

We had Adamjee, the biggest jute mills in the world and many other jute mills. But due to huge losses, we had to close down many mills.

During the first term of Begum Khaleda Zia, the then Industries Minister Mr. Zahir Uddin

Khan informed us of the government's plan on diversification of jute. We were happy to hear that, especially the use of green jute plants in making pulp for manufacturing paper. But there has been no progress on the matter since then.

If loss is the reason behind winding up of jute mills, we cannot raise any objection. But when we hear the news that new jute mills are being set up in India, we are confused.

Harun-or-Rashid
Sobhanbag, Dhaka

Election Commission



Do you believe that an Election Commission which is directly involved in political game and behaves like a "Super Political Party" can and will deliver the promised election? At least, I cannot believe that. Time is approaching very fast to ask for their exit, some political parties are already asking for it.

The people have sufficient reasons to compare the pre 1/11 days with the current period of the government. The pre 1/11 period was better than the current one, as mentioned by many, in terms of economic, social and political development achieved so far, despite widespread charges of corruption against the pre 1/11 government. Similarly, the people will soon compare the previous EC and the current EC in view of their performance record so far. This does not look better, and even worse in some cases like developing a super political party image to run the affairs of the commission.

A reader
One-mail

