

Political psyche against upazila polls

Both the major political alliances say that upazila polls may "jeopardise" the ensuing general election. But I have doubts about this logic because the EC is now fully prepared for holding the upazila elections. Besides, the free and fair elections to the city corporations prove that both the CTG and the EC are sincere about meaningful elections. So it is clear that the actual political reason against upazila polls is something else.

M.A.S. MOLLA

ARTICLE 59 of the Bangladesh constitution guarantees the establishment of local elected bodies at various levels. But establishment of local bodies did not receive due attention of our governments until the early 1980s. The government of General Ershad upgraded British-created *thanas* (police stations) to *upazilas* (sub-districts), which started working in the new districts elevated from the earlier local administrative units -- the "sub-divisions."

The term *upazila* seems very logical because these are units under the districts, and the British "sub-division" became redundant. Although General Ershad's government cannot be adjudged democratic at all, it established *upazilas* having elected *upazila parishads* headed by a chairman

in 1983. The system, stabilised Ershad's self-declared presidency, and also worked for local people's emancipation in many ways.

Under a non-partisan caretaker government (CTG), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) came out victorious in the 1991 general election. This party did not like the *upazila* system and rolled back most of its people-oriented units, bringing back the *thanas* to "govern" local administration.

The next elected government of the Awami League (AL) went back to the name *upazila* and reinstated a few public services there, but did not establish an elected *upazila parishad*. The appointed *Thana Nirbahi Officer* (TNO) declared by BNP government was renamed *Upazila Nirbahi Officer* (UNO). The last BNP regime did not dare to switch back to renaming *upazila* as *thana*.

The present CTG rescued the

statecraft that was being sunk by the CTG of October, 2006. Although born under emergency, and failing in some ways economically, the present CTG could prove well its good intentions. This government is sincerely trying to establish elected local bodies, including the *upazilas*, that both of our big parties were reluctant to establish.

After the successful polls to four city corporations, the Election Commission (EC) has declared elections for about two-thirds of the 482 *upazilas* in October. But both the major political alliances are against *upazila* polls before the general election. Why are the parties against *upazila* polls before general elections?

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Besides, the free and fair elections to the city corporations prove that both the CTG and the EC are sincere about meaningful elections. So it is clear that the actual political reason against *upazila* polls is something else.

The BNP stand is clearly expressed in the statement issued by its present Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain. He said: "Despite widespread protest of the major political parties, the government is hatching a deep-rooted conspiracy to hold *upazila* polls to serve their narrow political interest, but people will resist this mala fide intention." What can be the "narrow political interest" or the "mala fide intention"? I find none. So their intentions might be mala fide, instead!

However, the other faction of BNP that seems more democratic, but is being defeated by the "charisma syndrome," expressed wisely just after the city corporation polls that "BNP has made a political mistake by not backing candidates in the local polls."

The same spokesman added: "People want democracy, they

want elections. That is why BNP should participate in all the elections." This is actually the feeling expressed by local BNP leaders. An example is a former JCD leader who said: "I am fully prepared to contest the *upazila* polls, and am taking preparation for upholding the party decision in this regard."

AL presidium member Abdur Razzak does not find "justification" in this government going ahead with *upazila* elections because his party is "pledge-bound to the nation to hold *upazila* elections within one or two months if it goes to power." But during its rule it could not prove such sincerity in establishing *upazila parishads*.

A local AL leader of Patukhali commented: "People, leaders and activists of the grassroots level are in favour of polls." Khairuzzaman Liton -- the mayor-elect of Rajshahi City Corporation -- also opined: "AL should participate in the local government polls on the basis of discussion with the government on relaxing the state of emergency." Then why are the central leaders still urging party men to resist the *upazila* polls, especially if held before the general election?



Why don't politicians want upazila election?

A BNP minister said a few years ago that there might have been a tug of war between the *upazila* chairman and the Member of Parliament (MP) elected from the area concerned. I suspect the same psyche is active also in AL central leaders; this indicates that neither of the two major parties is sincere about *upazila* election.

The other logic in AL politics, I

guess, is that if the *upazila* polls are held after the general election, they can in some way manipulate the local election in favour of the party. If the local leaders are defeated in general election they can be accommodated as *upazila* chairmen, if *upazila* election is held later.

To avert political intention of not establishing *upazila parishads*, or manipulating them

in some way, the CTG can arrange *upazila* polls to as many *upazilas* as possible before the general election.

For functional reforms, the general mass relies on the CTG until genuine politics is "restored" in our political arena.

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The lost songs

My village is not the only one in our country that has lost its traditional characteristics. An alien culture has invaded our society, and there is no longer anyone to support the traditional culture. The villages nowadays do not produce any bards. The day is not far away when Bangladesh's villages will be culturally dead.

NAZRUL ISLAM

RURAL Bangladesh turns emerald green during monsoons. This is not a new phenomenon, but I discovered it afresh when I visited my village last week. After a dull and sultry summer, life becomes vibrant again with the monsoons in every nook and cranny of the countryside. Almost all the villages in Bangladesh, and the houses, are surrounded by different trees, grasses, shrubs and bamboo clusters.

Another thing that I love about

this season is the pungent odour emitted from the wet jute while it dries in the sun. The serene beauty of nature cannot be enjoyed staying in the bustle of the city, in its concrete structures. One has to go to the quiet villages if one wants the real taste of the gift of nature. I seldom miss the enjoyment of the monsoons in my village -- and I will try to narrate to you why.

Water and waterlessness

There is a *beel* (water body) adjacent to our house. During this time of the year, rain and floodwater generally flood the *beel*, but this

year, the *beel* is yet to be filled due to inadequate rains. The insufficient rainfall is also hampering *aman* cultivation. Many farmers were seen tilling their land through artificial irrigation to plant *aman* seedlings. This is unusual, but probably a result of global warming, which is pushing farmers into more and more hardship.

Soaring price of fertiliser

A 50-kg bag of TSP is being sold at Tk.3,500 despite its retail price of Tk.1,400. Urea is supplied through dealers at retail prices, but the quantity supplied can meet only 30 to 40% of the requirement. At least 15 kg of urea should have to be applied per *bigha* (33 decimal) during the time of transplanting the seedlings. Only 5 kg has been allocated per *bigha* of land, though there is no dearth of urea in the black market, which sells it to farmers at two or three times the normal price.

Songs of Rupban Pala

It was around 8 in the evening -- I was gossiping with my brothers and cousins in our courtyard. Suddenly, sounds of *tabla* and *dhol* came from a neighbouring house, followed by melodious songs of the legendary folk drama (*jatra*) *Rupban*. Within a moment, I was

taken back to my childhood, when the *Rupban Pala* was very popular in rural areas. My father and some other drama enthusiasts had established an amateur group and staged *Rupban* and other popular folk dramas like *Sagar Bhasa*, *Beder Meye*, and *Alomoti Premkumar* in our village and neighbouring ones. Of them, *Rupban* was the most popular, staged repeatedly throughout the '60s and '70s. At that time male actors played the role of females.

The staging of the *jatra* at that time was not an easy task. There was strong opposition from orthodox religious groups and elders. Interestingly, most of the members of the group, including my father, were *madrasa* students. They used to rehearse during the lean season of the year, when there was not as much work in the field, and staged the *jatra* during winter. There was a unique unity among the group members, for they would work together and resolve problems with the villagers together.

There was a person named Shamsher, who was the head of the *dohar dal* (the chorus). He was a day-labourer and worked mostly in our farms year-round. But I never found him in a gloomy mood. I heard him say he could live a day or two without food but he couldn't survive a single day with a heavy heart. That was the common philosophy of the villagers back then.

I followed the music to the spot and the group greeted me. I thought the *Rupban Pala* would be staged again and rehearsal was

going on for that purpose. I was disappointed when I heard that today's generation was not interested in *jatra pala*, instead finding entertainment in Hindi cinemas, ever since satellite TV reached my village. Moreover, there was strong opposition from religious groups. Most of the pioneers of the previous *jatra* group had died, and some have become very old. A few, who were young at that time and are still alive, occasionally sit together and sing some of the songs for their own enjoyment. One of them -- Ayeuddin -- narrated the current situation of village entertainment to me.

He told me he had preserved the handwritten scripts of all the *jatra palas* they had staged. Of the *palas*, he informed me that the amateur group that first staged *Rupban* in the early '60s wrote the script while listening to the *pala* of a professional group. That handwritten script is now in his possession. I enjoyed the songs of the *Rupban Pala* for quite a while. The singers were not trained professionally and sometimes the lyrics and the pronunciations were wrong. But the way they presented the songs, full of compassion and warmth, was unique. Aye uncle also invited me to hear the local folk songs called *Dhua Gan*, written by the bards of our own village. He informed me that my father also composed a good number of songs during the '50s and '60s. Aye uncle has preserved all the scripts.

Bard's songs -- Dhua Gan

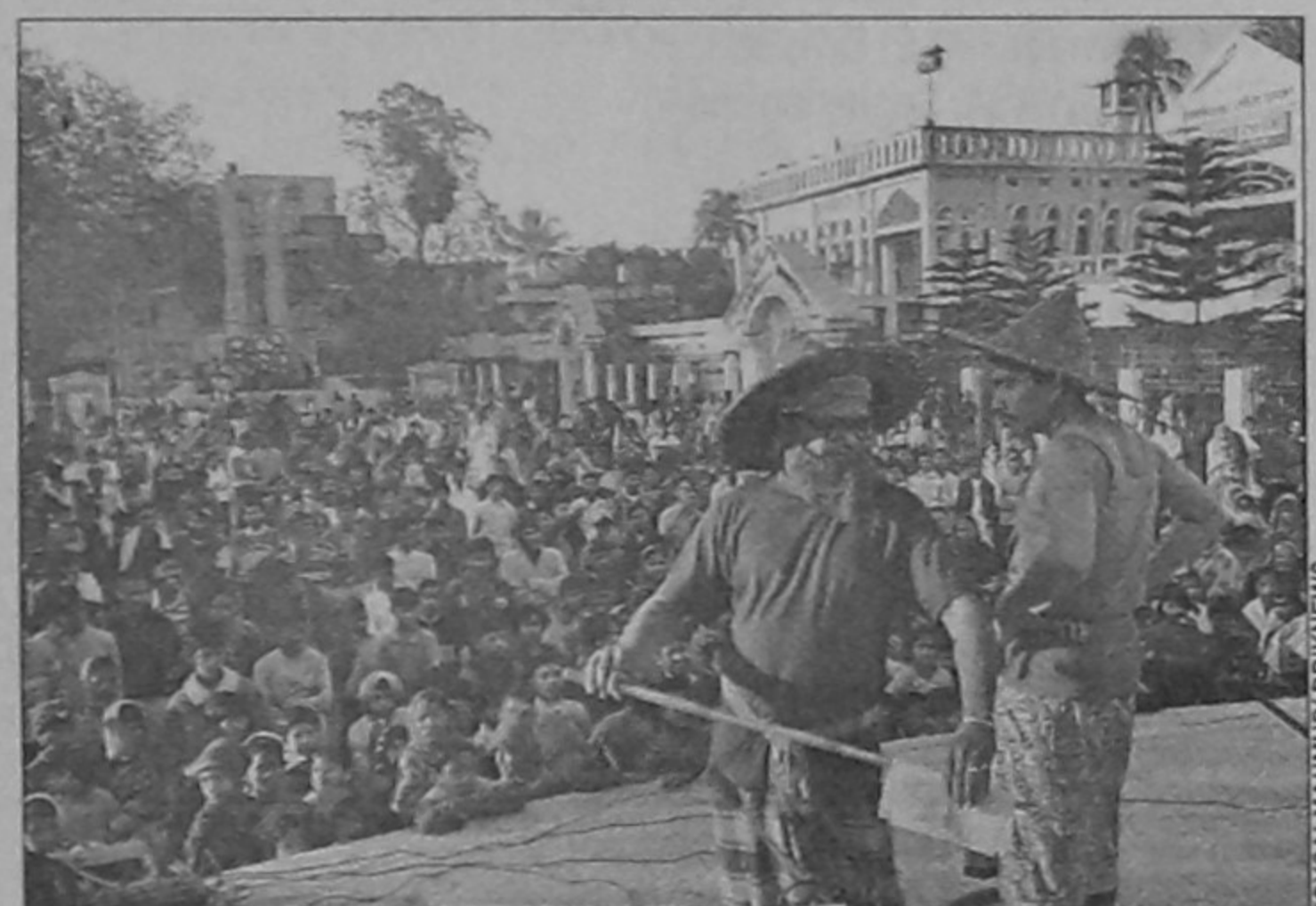
Like *bhatiyal* and *palligiti*, *dhua*

gan is a genre of folk song written and tuned by the village bards. In our area, the *dhua gan* was sung in a group while working in the field. It was also sung in leisure time. The main characteristic of *dhua gan* is that it is structured on questions and answers on a particular subject. One group will ask questions through the song while the other group answers. If there is only one group, it first sings the question and then the gives answer. Mostly religious issues of Muslims and Hindus, and contemporary subjects, were the contents of the *dhua gan*. Other times, the songs would describe special events, places or people. The words and the tunes of the songs were very melodious.

I was enthralled by the *dhua gan*, discovering afresh the treasure of talents of our village. Ayeuddin uncle lamented that the rural people had become much too materialistic and religiously fanatic. "Many do not see our singing in good sense. But look, everybody is watching vulgar Hindi cinemas and songs on their TVs. That does not hurt religion. It is simply ridiculous."

My village is not the only one in our country that has lost its traditional characteristics. An alien culture has invaded our society, and there is no longer anyone to support the traditional culture. The villages nowadays do not produce any bards. The day is not far away when Bangladesh's villages will be culturally dead.

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Folk art: On the way to extinction.

Spaces of despair

What are the causes of the paralysing traffic situation in Dhaka? The problems are inadequate infrastructure -- there are not enough roads and flyovers, too many rickshaws and pushcarts, inadequate number of public transportation, insufficient enforcement, and non-observance, of traffic rules. The roads are arenas of indiscipline; they are also spaces of despair.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

IT is hard not to be pessimistic about Bangladesh. Every now and then when a ray of sunshine tries to wash away the gloom, a patch of dark cloud appears on the horizon in no time. 1/11 brought a swath of sunshine; expectations were raised, and roadmaps were chalked out.

Following the spate of bail given to the likes of people who, in the eyes of many, belong in jail and, worse, election of some local leaders with dubious reputations in the recently concluded local body elections, some sections of the people are beginning to doubt the usefulness of democracy.

However, rather than holding on to the weather metaphor and feeling helpless in the face of vagaries of nature, it is time to persist on the roadmap to honesty and functionality. Pre 1/11 Bangladesh reached a new low of dysfunctionality, with a number of vital institutions of the government on the brink of collapse and degeneration.

The post-1/11 regime mounted a heroic effort at house-cleaning and charted a roadmap, part of

which was to hold credible elections on a sensible schedule. It is very likely that the roadmap of elections will be realised. The other roadmap -- somewhat vague yet more important in the minds of the silent majority -- a new political beginning, a politics of truth, fair play and justice may remain unrealisable.

In this sense, the metaphor of roads and the unbearable traffic jams provide an appropriate analogy. Does the paralysing traffic mirror the paralysis in politics which defeats attempted reforms?

Let's start with reforms that will bring smooth flow of traffic, something many believe is unrealisable. What are the causes of the paralysing traffic situation in Dhaka? The problems are inadequate infrastructure -- there are not enough roads and flyovers, too many rickshaws and pushcarts, inadequate number of public transportation, insufficient enforcement, and non-observance, of traffic rules. The roads are arenas of indiscipline; they are also spaces of despair.

The various users of the spaces of the roads view them differently. For hawkers and beggars on traffic intersections, and for some

unscrupulous law enforcers, roads are spaces of work; this is where they eke out a living.

While some go to work by means of road others hit the roads for work. Hawkers work on the roads, as do muggers. For the rickshaw pullers and push-cart men roads are parking spaces for their means of livelihood.

Are the crises on the road expressions of deeper crises in the politico-economy? The landless peasants and the unemployed of all sorts flock to the cities where rickshaw pulling becomes a readily available job.

The rickshaw industry could be one of the largest employers of labour in Dhaka. One of the key problems of traffic is the absence of clear rules, and very poor enforcement. A hard decision must be made on the presence of rickshaws.

If they are accepted as legitimate means of transportation they must come under the rules of traffic, the vehicles must be outfitted with headlights, the rickshaw pullers must be properly trained, they must be aware of the traffic rules, and bus and truck drivers must be subjected to all the traffic rules without exemption.



Traffic mess. A reflection of our politics.

From the past with broken windows and windshields (how they manage to avoid traffic police is a mystery). A letter writer to a Bengali daily complained that as his sick son was being wetted by rain in a windowless bus, the conductor asked him to get off the bus if he did not like it!

There are hardly any overhead bridges along the long airport road. How can people cross the road, except by raising their hands and risking their lives? Despite the

presence of overhead bridges in certain areas, many pedestrians take the easy way of crossing the road by raising their hands (as if they had magical powers) to stop the oncoming vehicles, and most drivers do comply.

There is solidarity in not following the rules, a sense of benign acceptance of such non-compliance of laws. Tolerance is the norm here. Law enforcement, on the contrary, often goes with zero-tolerance.

Most of the roads in Dhaka are unmarked; in the few places where there are lines and markers, the drivers often fail to take notice of such distractions. Road markings, like laws of the country, cannot be ignored and followed as one pleases.

For one who visits Dhaka at regular intervals the lack of discipline and the total disregard for road safety provide a window to the understanding of governance issues on Bangladesh. If laws are clearly stated and announced, and people are made aware of the laws and the punishment for failing to obey the laws, the traffic problem would be eased. It will also send a message loud and clear that laws are not optional.

In short, what Bangladesh needs to do in order to turn the spaces of despair into spaces of hope is mass education of the laws that people need to know, and the enforcement of those laws without exceptions, or favours.

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Why your expensive child is the biggest bargain on earth

IT costs the same to raise a child in any particular city as it does to buy a nice three-bedroom house in the same place, researchers have found.

Could it be so much?

Well, think about it: school fees, uniform, books, shoes, bus fees, music lessons, teacher bribes, new set of keys when junior flushes yours down the toilet, new suit when junior vomits over your tuxedo, new house when junior burns it down, new car when junior commandeers yours to drive himself and the other four-year-olds to Toys R Us, etc.

"Few of us bother to get out a calculator... if we did, the human race would have died out," Maureen Rice, a UK researcher who wrote a report called The Parent Trap, told reporters.

Boffins reckon raising a yuppie kid is roughly the same as buying a three-bedroom middle-class dwelling: HK \$5 million in Hong Kong, 250,000 pounds in London, and in a typical American city, about US\$350,000.

The difference is that when you spend that much on a property, you know about it. When you spend the same amount on junior, it disappears invisibly in tiny bills for Hello Kitty erasers.

Some parents argue that it's cheaper to have lots of kids, but I tried this argument at my local school, and they just laughed. There's no discount for bulk. Nor does it work at McDonald's.

So why do we have children? To answer that question, I worked out exactly how much a child costs from birth to university. It came to about US\$3 an hour. Now think what your child gives you for three bucks.

You get an excuse to build sandcastles on the beach.

You get someone to hold your hand every time you go out.

You get the most beautifully decorated fridge in the world.

You get a cast-iron excuse to watch The Jungle Book and The Lion King.

You get to acquire patience to a degree you never thought possible.

You get a reason to go to playgrounds, parks and Disneyland.

You get the world's funniest

comedian, in residence at your home, on call 24 hours a day.

You get a way to recapture the magic of Christmas and similar holidays.

Dad, you get to be the strongest, bravest, cleverest man in the world, a guy who can fix anything.

Mum, you get unimaginably large amounts of worship and adoration (just like your husband used to give you).

Both of you get an excuse to re-read bedtime stories like Narnia and Where the Wild Things Are.

You get an anger management course, absolutely free.

You get so much love that it fills your entire body and floods your eyes.

You both get a three hugs a day, which is 1,095 a year.

You get to vicariously experience all your "firsts" again: your first ice cream, your first play-date, your first plane ride, your first sight of an elephant.

You get to be God, making all the decisions.

You get a walking, talking doll that you can dress any way you like.

You get an excuse to splash out on a new camcorder.

You get an apoplectically enthusiastic greeting every time you come home from work.

You get to be "title sponsor" with naming rights.

You get a broken heart when they leave, but it's worth it.

More sentimental family stuff can be found at our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com.



Small in size, but not expense-wise.