

## TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

## 'Election will be held on time and there is no alternative to it'

Born in 1938 in Sirajganj, **Prof Talukder Maniruzzaman** got admission to Dhaka University to study political science after passing HSC from Jagannath College. He obtained honours degree in 1959 and master degree the next year. Going to Canada with a Commonwealth scholarship later, he obtained PhD degree in political science in 1966. He joined department of political science at Rajshahi University the same year. He joined Dhaka University in 1974 and taught political science till the end of his career in 2001. Prof Maniruzzaman has written nine books on politics and security including 'Military Withdrawal from the Politics', 'Security of Small States' and 'Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath'. **Shamim Ashraf** took the interview.

How much the country has advanced since 1/11?

It was first said that 1/11 was just the reflection of a political disaster. But now it is said that it was really done by armed forces with civilians' help. Sensing their defeat in the January 22 elections, Awami League in a way helped bring about the changes. AL might have thought they would benefit if army comes to power, but that didn't happen. However, few ideas have been thrown open which will continue to remain in politics, and politicians have got some realisation which will also remain.

After getting two-third majority, a party became reckless and made some lapses. We expect the lapses will be addressed after the election by whatever party comes to power. Politicians in some way see it as a journey back, but it was a period of experience and learning that'll help us in future. There is no big and visible result. The caretaker government has not been able to bring about major reforms either in politics or in society. But some factors have come up which will influence politics for the better.

Why do you think the government has failed?

They took too much on their plates though they neither had the time nor capability for those. There is fundamental lack of efficiency in the whole process of administration and rule by the

caretaker government. They didn't really understand the political culture of the country. Without realising that Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina represent two main political streams of the country, they thought the two could be removed from politics.

Earlier you said the reforms were imposed...

The provisions of one-third women members, electing leaders, and transparent financial dealings as in the RPO should be in political parties' election manifesto. If people support, parties will finalise those and make law accordingly. In an opposite picture, these are being imposed on people. Though political parties should have taken the lead instead of the EC, no party earlier moved willingly to do this. The AL earlier issued a 31-point reform move but didn't thrust it and the BNP didn't join in it. But the discussions over the past nine months at various levels will force the parties to do this now.

Has the government or the EC retreated from reforms?

The government or the EC cannot alone bring about the changes; political parties must cooperate. Once they have realised the reality of the value of politics and that political parties are a reality, they have started relaxing the procedure. Now they understand they at

least need to go hand in hand if success is to be achieved.

What could be the proper approach for reform?

The caretaker government attempted to teach the political parties some lessons on politics, which was wrong. Barrister Mainul Hossain (former law adviser) was the spokesman of it and it was what caused his fall. The political parties were needed to be taken into confidence and there should have been a rapprochement between them.

How do you see special laws, special courts and success of anti-corruption drive?

Formulating special laws and special courts has damaged the drive. It cannot be termed enforcement of rule of law. Rule of law is applying conventional laws and general court.

The approach to fight corruption by arresting and trying some high profile persons was not proper. The drive has thinned out due to arresting too many people, and many for nothing. Their fundamental rights were violated, and the whole drive created unnecessary hoax and propaganda. It is now proved that fighting corruption is a big challenge which cannot be done in a very simplistic manner. A long-term programme for social, political and administrative reforms is needed to

achieve this goal. The caretaker government neither had time nor the capability for this. They didn't even touch the administration.

How do you see the political situation at the moment?

Political parties and the EC are taking a cooperative approach, and everyone is now talking about compromise. This will facilitate smooth holding of election and transition of power.

Do you apprehend any violence during campaign or polls?

I don't, because people are very much involved in election mentally. This time there may not be any rigging because people are very aware and leaders have got a realisation.

How to ensure democracy in political parties?

Leaders need a genuine commitment to the process of starting democracy from the grassroots and consider people as source of power. Recall system, as in some parts of the US, can be introduced in the electoral law instead of 'No Vote'. If the candidate is proved not good for people, he can be called back and there should be repoll after passing half time of the tenure.

How do you see the EC's reform move, especially registration of political parties?

The process of parties' registration should have started much earlier.

Despite having enough time, the EC whiled it away. They were supposed to do it six months ago. When it is less than three months now, how the parties would hold their council, change their constitution and fulfil all the requirements? The procedure needs to be simplified: just two main conditions were enough for registration, holding regular councils in line with parties' own constitution, and ensuring transparent financial dealings. What have been achieved in two years including the voter list could be done in one year if things were started earlier seriously.

How to ensure transparent financial dealings of political parties?

Regular auditing of parties' funding and expenditure and publishing the accounts should be made a law. There can be provision there of independent auditors. Those who were in power in the past didn't do it because they didn't want to disclose the dealings.

How to make the parties shun confrontational politics?

Recent developments to some extent brought realisation to the leaders. We already notice some changes in their pronouncements. Both Khaleda and Hasina said they would do everything through democratic methods, and nothing will be done arbitrarily and thrust from above. AL remains far ahead in this.

There is a discussion about bringing Khaleda and Hasina to a table...

I don't think it's necessary. They should be completely free to participate in the election process. There should be a system in the electoral law for debate during the election period. They should face each other before the public where they will put their arguments on behalf of their parties.

The process needs to be initiated this year, even in small scale. However, we welcome if they sit and reach consensus that electoral issues should be political issues not personal issues. Agreement on not enforcing hartal and boycotting parliament also can be discussed and come in election manifesto.

What's your opinion about the so-called Minus-2 formula?

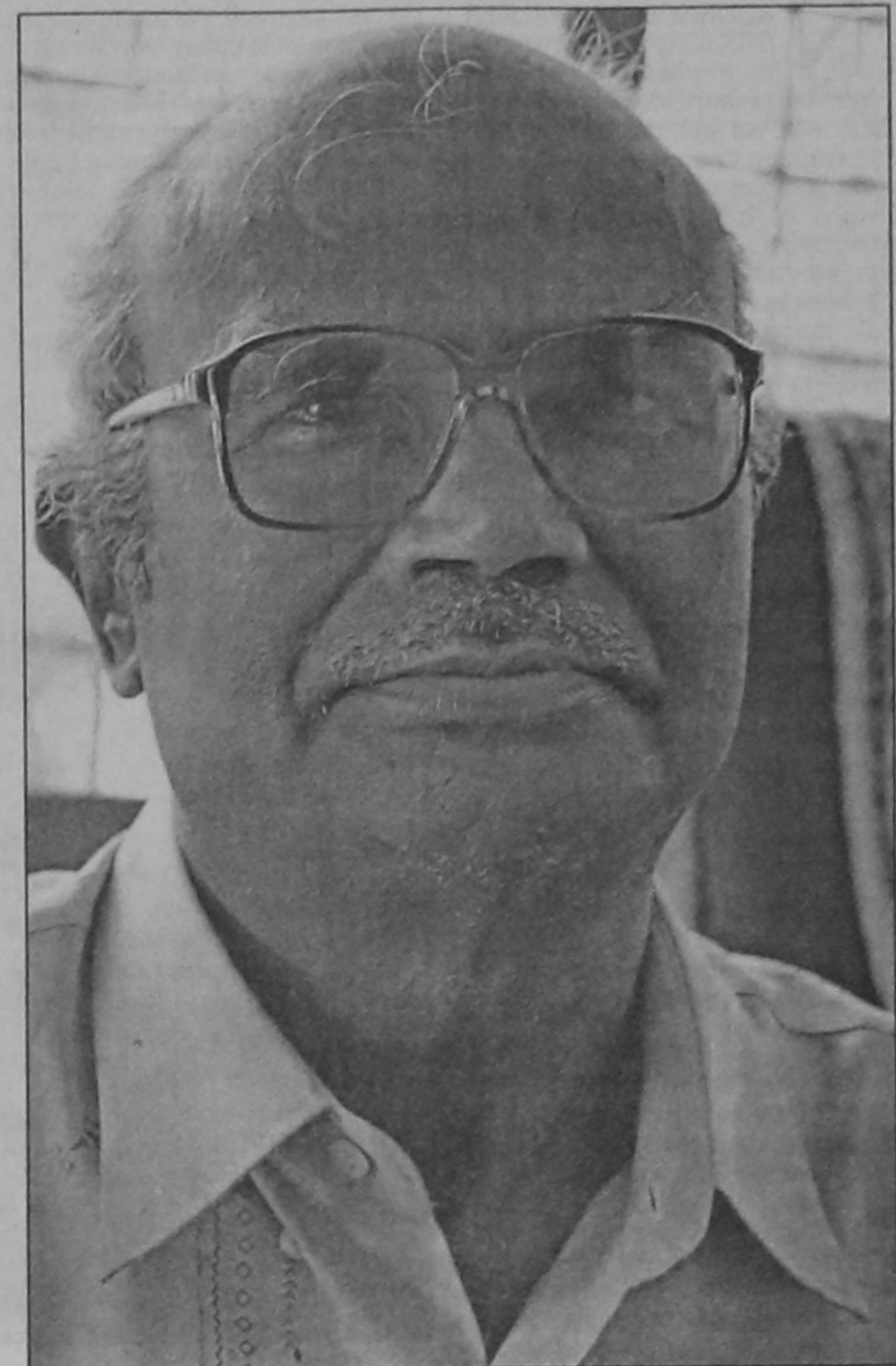
The formula was framed because the government didn't understand the political culture of the country. Two ladies represent two dominant theories and fundamental divisions of politics--Bangladeshi nationalism and Bangalee nationalism. They have become integral part of our political system and culture in that way. But the government failed to understand that. However, I think the criticism of their sticking to party position for years also has brought some lessons for them.

Do you still see uncertainty about election slated for Dec 18?

There is a feeling of uncertainty among people, which is the reflection of distrust on people who really guide the caretaker government. However, the voter list is done and there seems to be no hurdle to election, and I hope the election is going to be held in time. In fact, there is no alternative to it. People will not accept anything else. If anything else even takes place, that won't last.

How to keep away the corrupt elements from being elected?

It is unrealistic to expect totally clean candidates in politics. Like the city elections, many unclean candidates will also come out victorious in the parliamentary elections. However, the practice of nominating cadres and businessmen and buying votes would be reduced to some extent



because there is already a realisation among the policymakers. The 1/11 shake and discussions over the months have created an atmosphere for the start of clean politics. But we have to remember that change in politics comes slowly and incrementally. There'll be election but it will be wrong to hope we'll get absolute and perfect democracy after the election. The government said there'll be

emergency during elections... Emergency and free elections do not go together. Freedom of movement, speech, procession and assembly, which are the ingredients of free election, will remain curtailed during emergency. Since the existing law and order situation is good, what's the problem to withdraw emergency? If needed, the President can impose it locally for a temporary period.

## Streamlining the intelligence agencies



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**S**KEPTICS and concerned citizens may not be fully satisfied with the key institutional reforms started in right earnest by the present caretaker government. The expectations from the new order were high and thus dissatisfaction is not unlikely in an environment of unfulfilled aspirations. However, the present leadership has to be credited for at least initiating the long due reform efforts that may be carried to its desirable end by a truly representative government in the not-too-distant future.

With the above scenario in mind this writer would like to dwell upon the role and function of our intelligence agencies that without doubt are very sensitive organizations; and on account of its very secret nature few would like a free and frank discourse on its modus operandi. Present day security experts are, however, of the considered view that open discussion by competent and concerned persons may in fact rationalise the operations of such organization to the benefit of a democratic polity. One may look at recent events in Pakistan where the military has thought it fit to enlighten all lawmakers about the terror and religious extremism scenario.

One has to remember that intelligence bosses enjoy privileged access to the top political executive, the Prime Minister and the Home Minister. The agencies provide direction to police organizations in addition to providing political-analytical inputs to the ruling regimes. The agencies have undertaken strategic exercises during elections, and conduct election forecasts and analyses to oblige the party in power.

It has been our unfortunate experience to witness that far from being confined to the proper intelligence role, over-zealous bosses became almost a confidante of the chief executive, adept at every task entrusted to

them. There are events to believe the truly political role of the crucial intelligence organ of our State. The important lesson to be learnt is that politicization or lack of impartiality and objectivity in intelligence reporting can distort the policy process and thus damage the credibility and political legitimacy of the State. Is it not time that we know if our intelligence organs enjoy the benefit of a legal framework and a well-honed charter of duties? The political leadership has to perhaps decide whether they and the country stand to benefit if intelligence agencies are made to function in a political manner.

Facts, admittedly, are disconcerting. Intelligence apparently faltered when father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with most of his immediate family members and other near relations were murdered in the most gruesome manner. Similarly, intelligence could not prevent the tragic assassination of President Ziaur Rahman, the liberation war hero.

We had the unfortunate experience of witnessing a very sensitive intelligence organization working principally for the whims and caprices of a virtual dictator and using public funds for creating and destabilizing political parties, political horse-trading and shadowing people on personal and flimsy grounds in mid to late eighties. No wonder in such a scenario the professional efficiency was sacrificed and public servants turned into personal servants with the attendant ignominy.

The mission and strategy of our intelligence organizations had not been stable at least insofar as the domestic threat perception is concerned. It invariably changes with the change of a political government. Differing political agenda often tend to cloud the pragmatic understanding of our real national interests.

The broad function of main-

taining public order for ensuring internal security is closely associated with the task of collecting and collating intelligence in the interest of the state. In reality, in our situation, the interests of the state often get diluted and mixed up with the interests of the government of the day. The situation is marked by an unfortunate lack of understanding and appreciation of the requirements of the state and the government in a democratic and pluralist society like ours.

The unpleasant truth is that intelligence agencies maintain file and shadow the leaders and workers of pronouncedly constitutional politics-oriented parties belonging to the opposition who are recognized partners in the business of politics. At some point of time when such opposition party comes to power, there is an uneasy relationship between the political masters and the agencies. In such a scenario, professionalism becomes the worst casualty, sense of direction is lost and the organization dips into a lackadaisical environment and interests of the state take a back seat giving greater space to partisan considerations. It needs to be kept in mind that the values of a democratic polity are universal and as such demand unconditional adherence to it.

The national agency is expected to be able to effectively serve national interests if directed appropriately by the political authority. If they (agency) have to remain preoccupied with largely inconsequential partisan matters to the detriment of national interest, then we will not be able to manage the crisis situation, not to speak of forestalling the tragedies of recent times. We have been criticizing the agencies very loudly without, however, appreciating the impediments to the growth of an apolitical professional organization. Time has come when we must have the honesty to call a

spade a spade and realize that the governments will change hands but not the state.

In Bangladesh today, we are passing through a sad time when doubts are being expressed publicly about the efficacy and honesty of some vital organs of the state whose functions can neither be arrogated to others nor be privatized. The compounding tragedy is that such criticisms by leaders of our society cannot be summarily dismissed. It would not be prudent to treat a disease by denying its very existence. At the same time we cannot give in to the cynics by agreeing to endure what apparently cannot be cured. We can definitely overcome the impasse by dint of political goodwill and foresight if we admit that the damage caused during the yesteryears have to be repaired and the safety and security of the people will receive unbiased attention. Let us be forewarned that progress in the damage repairing will be slow but if we can muster enough courage to initiate the process and avoid being myopic, our future generations would be the proud citizens of a healthy polity. Our politicians have to take the lead. They have to rise to the occasion.

What may or may not be done to counteract the malevolence of the extremists concerns every right-thinking Bangladeshi but equally, if not more significant, is what kept the state apparatus in a deep slumber while the extremists carried on virtually undisturbed. There is a creeping suspicion that there never was a dispassionate appreciation of the real threat scenario. In other words, there was no effort to pinpoint the threats posed to our democratic polity and by extension to our independent national existence. These questions should bother us because patriotic citizens of the People's Republic of Bangladesh must know that.

Like the responses to other

## STRAIGHT LINE

Our intelligence organization needs to work under pragmatic political leadership and if properly and professionally steered, it does not threaten our liberties. If we operate by the book, we will be adequately informed of the perils which face us. If we do not know the designs of the so-called extremists, then we could well be isolated and our liberties, too, could be in jeopardy.

within the establishment.

The legitimate purpose of intelligence should be to anticipate developments that may imperil national interests so as to enable appropriate action with the imperative that any effort to equate national interest with party interest should be guarded against. Once the purpose is known, the chances of non-observance of fairness and objectivity in intelligence collection will be reduced. Constant vigilance against misuse will be needed as intelligence activities are carried on in secrecy.

The catch-all definition of 'national security' should not be used as a cover to hide a multitude of abuses. It should exclude activities that in effect mean denial of human rights and basic freedoms. The vague and antiquated formulations of colonial days relating to intelligence function should be replaced by:

i. clear and firm guidelines on the limits to the organization's authority;

ii. the area of its coverage;

iii. the manner of functioning;

iv. the permissible methods;

v. laying standards for the evaluation of the credibility of its sources of information;

vi. measures for enforcing accountability to the executive and legislature;

vii. means of controlling and overseeing the operations.

A detailed and precisely honed charter for the intelligence organ in consonance with the spirit of the constitution needs to be worked out.

Our intelligence organization needs to work under pragmatic political leadership and if properly and professionally steered, it does not threaten our liberties.

If we operate by the book, we will be adequately informed of the perils which face us. If we do not know the designs of the so-called extremists, then we could well be isolated and our liberties, too, could be in jeopardy. Therefore, we must be ready to deal with all aspects of the not-very-visible war of the extremists with all its ramifications and fronts, supported by external resources. The last thing we can afford to do now is to put our intelligence in chains. Its protective and informative role is indispensable in time of unique and continuing violence.

The purpose for which intelligence has to be collected has to be clearly spelt. The same should not be to sub-serve the interests of a political party or an individual or to blackmail or control the opponents of the political party in power or hostile elements

with the establishment.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.

## A new face of urban transport

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA writes from New Delhi

**T**HE picture of a sweat-soaked rickety man pedalling away cycle rickshaw may be a thing of the past in India which has unveiled a state-of-the-art solar-powered version of one of the most popular modes of public transport in the sub-continent.

The "soleckshaw," as the solar-powered rickshaw is called, is a motorised cycle rickshaw that can be pedalled normally or run on a 36-volt solar battery.

Developed by the government-owned Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), prototypes are being tried on some of the most congested roads of the Indian capital at Chandni Chowk locality criss crossed by a maze of narrow and winding lanes and bylanes, choked with all sorts of vehicles and pedestrians.

The soleckshaw is expected to provide a solution to India's quest for pollution-free traffic and an escape for back-breaking human toil in rains, under blistering sun and biting cold.

Pedalling is not necessary but if one wants one can do that to run the soleckshaw which is already being touted as the poor man's Nano, the world's cheapest car at 2500 US Dollars.

Your journey on solar powered rickshaws will be given the additional facilities of listening to FM radios and powerpoints for charging mobile phones.

The soleckshaw has a maximum speed of 15 kilometres per hour and can accommodate up to

three persons and a fully-charged solar battery will power the three wheels of the rickshaw.

Hailing the soleckshaw, India's Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal, who is a member of Parliament from Delhi, said "there is a need for urban transport which is comfortable and affordable for the underprivileged. The Soleckshaws will be their Nano."

Soleckshaw is being projected as the new face of urban transport for short distance rides to schools and nearby metro rail stations from home.

Launching the soleckshaw at Chandni Chowk, Delhi chief minister Sheila Dikshit said "it is a sturdy mode of transport which is functioning on clean energy. We will discuss with the police on where all it can ply and for how much distance."

Sibal expressed the hope that the corporate sector will step in to manufacture these rickshaws for their low pricing and environment-friendly technology.

He suggested soleckshaw be used near the Taj Mahal and other monuments on the ground that their carbon footprints zero.

It is expected that the rickshaw-puller will be able to earn more than Rs 4000 a month and these rickshaws which cost Rs 7,000 the same as the old ones.

Director General of CSIR Samir K Brahmachari said advanced versions of soleckshaws will have better aesthetics and a speed of 15 kmph and will be ready for a full-fledged launch before the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010.

