

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'There is no problem to hold elections under the emergency'

Anisul Islam Mahmud, a former minister and lawmaker, now acting chairman of Jatiya Party was born in 1947 at Hathazari, Chittagong. Anisul bears a colourful academic life. He was a lecturer in Economics department of Dhaka University. As a Commonwealth scholar in 1972 he did his MA in Economics from Essex University, UK. In 1975 he was called to the Bar from Lincolns Inn, London. He was Lecturer in Economics at Hertfordshire University, UK from 1973-77. He was President of Bangladesh Cricket Control Board, Bangladesh Flying Club Ltd and Asian Cricket Control Board. Rashidul Hasan and Suranjith Deabnath took his exclusive interview.

Do you have any confusion over holding of the election on December 18?

I have no confusion in this regard. Some people are expressing concern due to certain situations. The caretaker government (CTG) is saying that election would not be credible if the two major political parties do not participate in the election and the two parties have taken this opportunity, threatening the government that they will not participate in the election if their demands are not met.

As a result, confusion has created in people's mind. But I believe, election must be held in due time.

Besides, the issue of re-demarcation of the parliamentary constituencies is deepening more the confusion. I ask the Election Commission (EC) to settle the issue immediately and declare the election schedule on their earlier announced date, November 2.

IFEC fails to declare the schedule, both the CTG and the EC will face lack of confidence among the countrymen, which will not be healthy for the CTG.

What are the basic logics behind your party's stand on the election to be held in the state of emergency?

There is no problem to hold the election under the emergency when there remains the probability of deteriorating law and order situation after lifting of the emergency. It's not right that people will not enjoy their fundamental right in the emergency. The emergency is an enabling law. I don't see any problem to hold election in emergency if all restrictions

relating to election are relaxed. We have the example of recent city corporation and municipal elections. We will have to consider people's safety, whether they can cast their votes without fear as well as neutrality of the election commission and the government. It would be worse if government and the election commission can not act neutrally and the voters are threatened to cast their votes to whom they may not like in a no-emergency atmosphere.

Do you think this year political parties will play the same 'blame game' and refuse the election result like previous occasions?

Political parties denied the last three parliament election results due to many reasons. Then ruling political parties recruited their own people and shuffled the administration before leaving power so that their interest could be retained easily.

But, this year, the present government has reshuffled the administration. Hope, political parties have received the lesson of 1/11 perfectly and will not refuse the results of the upcoming election. Besides, the government cannot hide if free and fair election is not held and vote is rigged.

What are the lessons for political parties from 1/11?

The main lesson from 1/11 is that a corrupted government cannot run the administration. Besides, nation cannot go perfectly with blemished constitutional bodies like EC, Anti Corruption Commission and Public Service Commission. Today these constitutional bodies turn a new face by changing few top officials. Most of the leaders

of the political parties wanted these changes.

How will you evaluate the caretaker government's activities in the last two years?

Many activities of the caretaker government have failed due to lack of their experience. The growth trend of our economy is halted, and society is yet to become free from corruption though some corrupt people were arrested.

There are opinions both in favour and against the caretaker government system. What is your opinion?

I think it should be repealed. It's a shame for the politicians. We, the politicians are saying that we are not able to perform the biggest political act. I think holding of the election is the biggest political act.

Why was JP forced to quit power in 1990?

Question of legitimacy was the main weak point for the JP government because we came to power through martial law. It is not true that JP had to quit power due to corruption. I admit some corruption was there in some sectors during our eight-year tenure. The corruption level during JP tenure was acceptable. But, corruption during BNP-Jamaat alliance government reached such a level which broke all the previous records.

Was not your party responsible for destroying the constitutional bodies?

JP had no contribution in destroying the constitutional bodies. For example, Justice Bazlur Haider Chowdhury gave judgment

against the eighth amendment of constitution. Later we made Bazlur chief justice in spite of his being only four months in job. We could avoid him from becoming chief justice easily but we did not do so.

Later, political government interfered in making chief justice for getting benefit in election. JP did not intervene in administration. JP was a weak political party though it was in power for eight years because we did not do politics of grabbing.

JP government did not make EC politicized. Yes we vote rigging did happen at local level in 1986. But we did not certainly interfere with EC activities and JP government did not rig votes in 1986 and other parliament elections.

Your party has already started distribution of nomination forms; don't you think that it will create confusion among the grand alliance?

Awami League is also doing the same. We are just distributing nomination forms; AL also asked its grassroots level leaders to send names of the leaders they like for contesting in the polls and they are sending names. It is a normal practice in any political party. The alliance leaders will select the candidates finally once the alliance is formed. Primarily, we have selected candidates in 300 constituencies. But once the alliance is formed, it would be considered as our party and our aim will be how to make the alliance winner. The alliance will give nomination to those candidates who have the maximum possibility to win in the election. In this case, will your party give

up the demand for getting 60 seats if you run short of competent candidates?

If our party fails to select such competent candidates, we will of course accept it then.

Do you think that EC's initiative will be able to bring changes in our political culture?

I will say that EC should give more attention to party's funding source. In our country, in most cases, corruption occurs through political party's financial source. When a minister demands money, he demands in the name of party's fund, not directly for his own purpose. So, there has to be a mechanism to restrict party's fund collection.

Though they (EC) have pointed out how much money a party will be able to collect from an individual, and so on, I think there should be online and other checks and balances that should be addressed.

What is the way to bring an end to the present political culture of disbelief and conflict?

I think the present political culture will change this time after getting lesson from 1/11. If not, then may be after another five years, but there must be a change because a country cannot run like this. What we had seen in the last five years of the BNP-led four-party alliance government? Our political rivals were destroying national institutions one after another and we saw rising of a fascist state.

Jatiya Party is now divided into four factions. Will your party take any initiative to reunification of the divided Jatiya Party ahead of the election?

Jatiya Party is not divided, there is only one Jatiya Party. Original Jatiya Party means HM Ershad led Jatiya Party. Anyone, who once left the party, can come back in the party if they are qualified and can contribute to the party, and the party Chairman and the standing committee are the authority to take decision in this regard. Anwar Hossain Monju led party is another party. There were leaders in BNP and AL who formed new political party leaving

their party but it does not mean that those parties (BNP and AL) are divided. I don't think that a party is divided if some of its leaders leave that party.

Do you think your post in the party as acting chairman is logical when party chairman is available?

It is our working arrangement and things are running in this way. And the post of acting chairman is not contradicted with the party's constitution. Party chairman can give some duties or responsibilities to him (acting chairman) if the chairman wants.

And you all know the post of acting chairman was created as a result of certain circumstances. It is not a big issue inside the party.

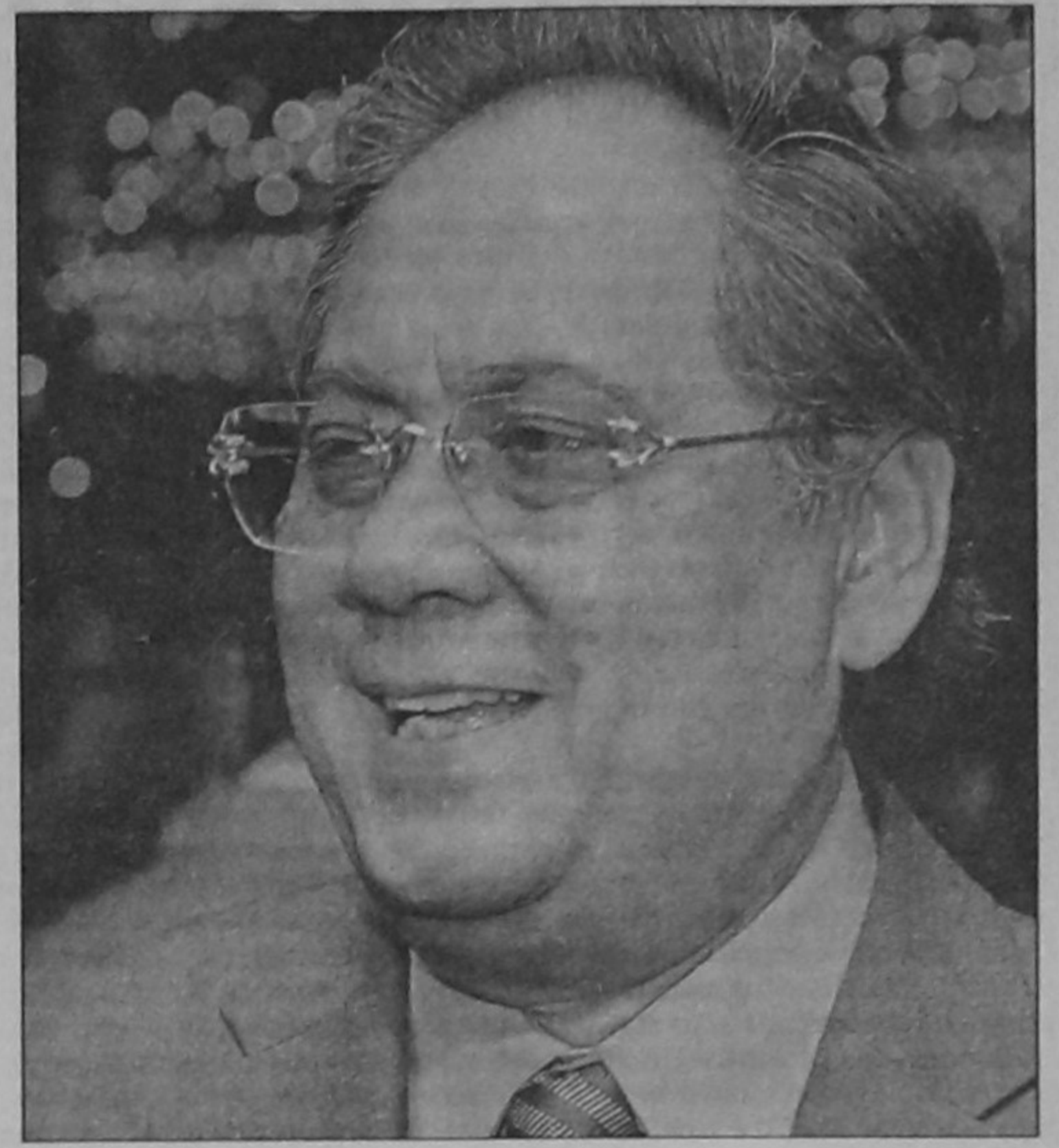
Do you think that JP might face difficulty to get expected result in the election due to Ershad's negative image?

I think Ershad's negative image only lies with some intellectuals. You ask the people, who formed upazila system? It is Mr Ershad who did this to empower people. He is termed as autocrat. But an autocratic ruler never empowers people of his country. Instead of centralizing, he decentralized the power.

Our civil society leaders do not want to see the real truth. Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU) election held twice during the nine years regime of Ershad. But no DUCSU election was held during the last 15 years of the democratic governments. We formulated national drugs policy, health policy, decentralized the judiciary. Those who smelled corruption in those steps are now behind bars themselves.

How will you explain the minus-two theory?

Minus theory is noting new in the political sector of our country. In 1990, when movement was raised against us, the demand was that Ershad should quit power and compete in the election. But when we handed over the power, they applied the minus theory. It (the election held in 1991) had to be minus Ershad. So, minus theory is



Anisul Islam Mahmud

nothing new in our country. Whoever may come here (in power of country), may try to minus...

Is there any possibility to form alliance with the BNP-led four-party alliance, if you fall to ally with the AL-led 14-party alliance?

No, we will not go for alliance with BNP. And it is our ideological stance. We cannot ally with that party who have destroyed national institutions like PSC. Keeping this in mind, I don't think we will form any kind of alliance with BNP.

Most of the components of the 14-party alliance are opposing Ershad's JP, how are you taking this matter?

I don't think that this information is right. There was a time when Inu (Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal president) opposed inclusion of Jatiya Party. But recently he has given statement that 14-party alliance will have to be formed including Ershad's JP. Only Menon bhui--and Dr Kamal--But Dr Kamal himself apologized after 1/11 for his involvement in the AL-

led grand alliance. Therefore, I don't see any reasons to make comment on his remark.

Do you think that the anti-corruption drive is on the right track?

No, the anti-corruption drive has to be transparent and neutral which was not as such during the caretaker government's anti-corruption drive. And the biggest problem was that we do not have the right people to do this. I think the future government will have to continue the anti-corruption drive. And I will say that resisting corruption is more important than drive against corruption and that is why we should formulate respective laws and create institutions through which corruption can be resisted.

Will you tell us about JP's manifesto?

We are about to complete this. Some of the highlights of the manifesto are--we will speak for provincial system and proportional representation in the parliament.

Impeaching the vested interests



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

PEOPLE want to know what is happening in Bangladesh. What is the nature of our current situation? Is it just an aberration - a passing phase, a cyclical disorder or does it have far deeper implications? Do we have a crisis of the state or simply the pangs of transition from non-elected dispensation to democracy? Some would like to believe that the coming general election will solve all problems relating to political instability, militancy and the deprivation of a large chunk of our population living below the poverty line.

The skeptics would say that despite changes elsewhere including our neighbourhood what has not changed in our country is the basic composition and mindset of

STRAIGHT LINE

The sad reality is that our establishment sustained itself mostly through brute force, fear, coercion and corruption. Despite having democratic identity our system has sought support of discredited politicians and in some cases people having criminal record. To go about political business, that is conducting affairs of state with such people rules have been bent and relaxed that in effect led to a culture of loot and plunder.

the ruling classes, archaic mode of governance and their stranglehold on the levers of power, and in large measure the base of their authority is the coercive power of the State. Some see a conflict between status quo and change, with ruling classes, wanting to perpetuate their rule and others desirous of change in order to improve.

There is no doubt that effectively organized political party that does the correct mass mobilization becomes the real nemesis of vested interests. Unfortunately, that has not happened in our case. Our ruling class (political inclusive) turned out to be a very selfish formidable group due to establishment support in terms of money, jobs, promotions and guarantee of protection from accountability. We have amongst us privileged people who have made enormous amounts

of money in doubtful ways without any questions asked.

A pertinent question is, if we have an 'over-developed' state and weak civil society groups; also if there has developed a coterie of people whose interests lay in authoritarian rule. Is our political class averse to mass mobilization because they are scared of real people's power? It may, therefore, be the time to think of impeaching our system. The system is like the proverbial dog in the village well. It will not be cleaned if we take out a few pots of water. We may have to throw out the dog itself.

On a point of illustration, one may take a look at our electoral system and find that major political parties are at best personalized institutions. Some of them have been converted into family dynasties where the mantle is passed or

intended to be passed from one generation to another. Even when internal elections are held, they are not significant as the top leadership remains the same. The other parties also suffer from similar incapacitation with no party member daring to challenge the word of the leader, no internal debates, and no merit-based upward movement from the junior rungs of the ladder to the top echelons. The political parties do not have active think-tanks that would venture to find solutions to problems like sustainable growth, social development, housing, health and education.

Our national level elected representatives, that is, the members of parliament, once elected are conspicuous by their absence from their constituencies. Instead of maintaining an active presence in their area, they are often found in

Dhaka. In many constituencies there are virtual family fiefdoms that resist any change that may threaten the power base of the coterie interests. These people and groups are the supporters of the status quo because that ensures their permanent hold on power with attendant pelf and privilege.

On another front of the judiciary and administration of criminal justice, one would come across lofty and noble utterances about rule of law and independence of judiciary. These are, without any trace of doubt, very commendable. However, we do not see meaningful efforts for the reform of the entire judicial system that can address the ailments standing in the way of the process of delivery of justice. There are important issues like the appointment process of judges, the

so-called fixing of cases, satisfying the staff at many steps, the abnormal delays in trial and the affordability of seeking justice by the poor under the present system, that demand urgent attention.

The present situation of the lower courts with reference to the incapability of the judges to dispose of cases, the conditions in which they are forced to work, paucity of staff and furniture, portrays a very disquieting scenario. Reportedly, millions of dollar has been spent on justice sector reform, but the question is, what is the achievement? On law enforcement dimension, there is the much discussed UNDP sponsored police reform but even after three years of work, the new Police Ordinance, a necessity by all means, cannot see the light of the day.

A pragmatic appreciation of our socio-economic scene would be that while things at government level are deteriorating or stagnating, at societal level there is a yearning for change. There is a realization that Bangladesh is our country and we have to do positive work to improve. Unfortunately, there is still a disconnect between the state and the society. It would appear that the state with all its power, mandate and resources is not aware of the ground reality: how people react and per-

ceive things, what are people's needs and priorities. People on the other hand are in the process of losing faith and confidence in government's ability and sincerity to deliver.

In Bangladesh both the supposedly democratic government and less than democratic dispensation, while derailing the political process and suppressing all dissent have not been able to solve the problems of common people. The unsatisfactory state of civic services and law and order are a pointer. Elsewhere in the world authoritarian and repressive regimes have succeeded in raising living standards and maintain law and order with a firm grip. The cases of Malaysia and Singapore come to mind where one party rule for over 30 years allowed limited political activity and muzzled all opposition, but produced an economic miracle in the lifetime of a generation.

In India political stability has been brought about and the system has provided accommodation to differing groups. Our double jeopardy lies in the reality that our democratic setup could neither provide desired political stability nor could improve living standards and provide security. The establishment still controls all levers of power and has huge resources at its disposal.

It appears that our oligarchic system proves to be effective only for a limited period and can achieve limited objectives because it suffers from two inherent weaknesses of lack of legitimacy and the unfortunate disconnection between the ruling class and the civil society.

The sad reality is that our establishment sustained itself mostly through brute force, fear, coercion and corruption. Despite having democratic identity our system has sought support of discredited politicians and in some cases people having criminal record. To go about political business, that is conducting affairs of state with such people rules have been bent and relaxed that in effect led to a culture of loot and plunder.

The State's writ has to be effective in a redefined role where protecting status quo from all challenges shall not be its prime activity. The government machinery should not be used to keep the rival claimants to power in check. Our ruling class has to rise above narrow self or institutional interests. Pressure must be exerted on the rulers to make them accountable on a continuing basis.

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How long will the children suffer neglect and apathy?



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

GRIM accounts of brutality on two minor street boys stealing fruit from the seller's shop in the city market that ultimately led to their death have touched the cord of the citizenry. Frozen with hunger and wandering aimlessly in the market area, an eight-year-old street boy's eyes were drawn to some red apples in the fruit seller's shop which perhaps he has never tasted before. He could not resist himself and from picking one and started running to safety. But the fruit seller could not afford the loss, chased the boy and ultimately caught him and started beating him up. At one stage he hit the boy's head with a brick. Profusely bleeding, the boy fell unconscious. This time the fruit seller ran to safety and some passers by took the boy to a hospital where the doctor declared him dead. Hardly the citizenry could forget

BITTER TRUTH

Society or the affluent section hardly tries to think about these unfortunate kids till before the moment they are beside their cars at the road intersection and asking them to buy some flowers or popcorns from them. True most of our poor children live in a state of violence, persecution and rejection and forced labour. In this sad setting the only escape for many is drugs and other anti-social activities.

such a grisly murder of a young boy for stealing an apple, they heard with shock and pain in just within a month one more horrific story of a ten year old boy meeting such a fatal end for stealing some dates from a fruit shop in the capital. In this case some crazy passers by joined the fruit seller and gave the boy such a fatal thrashing that he succumbed to his wounds after being shifted to hospital.

All these horrific incidents happen in a country at a time when we talk glibly about our children, the future of the country, in seminars and meetings and make lofty promises to ensure their rights in the society. Undeniably true, children hailing from the poorest section of the society have forgotten the very day they were born that this country with all its resources belongs to them. Starkly true, under normal situation, even an educated and sensibly person, if he is hungry for a day, would find it difficult not to yield to such temptation around

him. Yet, if a hungry street boy or a domestic help shows such misdemeanor, he is made to pay for it, first undergoing physical abuses and in extreme cases with his life.

While other countries talk about the need to invest in their youth, much of Bangladesh has converted its youth force into a pernicious capital investment: too many children are doing some most dreadful jobs. In a host of factories and work-houses till this day even after promulgation of the 'Repression against Women and Children Act' in early 1995, employing the tender aged boys and girls in hazardous jobs still continues. In a host of such work places, it is children who dip the matchsticks into phosphorous, mix the gunpowder for fire crackers and roll 'bidas' and cigars labour and work the metal stamping machines.

There are still thousands of children now in the country eking out a living under oppressive situations in other vocations like carpet mak-

ing to tannery to transport sector to loaders in bus stops, launch ghat and railway stations either to support themselves or their families. The number of children doing such odd jobs as splitting stones for the construction workers or picking trash from the streets or packing groceries or working as hotel boys outnumber those withdrawn from the garments sector.

Hashem, a 12 year old boy hailing from Nilphamari had high hopes in life. He read up to class four in a primary school in his area. Even his day labourer father wanted to educate him to a certain level within his means. But with the death of his father in a road accident, all his hopes dashed to ground. Finding no meaningful job to stay alive in their native village, his mother along with her two other kids came to Dhaka. Hashem now works in a hotel in the Dhaka stadium market on a monthly pay of Tk. 900 with free food and lodging. He now supports his mother and two other

siblings.

Grim accounts of poor girls under 18 being taken away by some women's syndicate dealing in sex trade from impoverished families in rural areas with enticement of providing jobs with handsome salaries and then selling them to hotels and fake guest houses are pouring in. For such girls across the country, fear is a constant companion and rape is a stranger they have to confront at every corner, on any road, even in a public place, at any hour. Report carried by a Bangla daily in the recent past (Janakantha August 9) indicated that a school girl at Gaibandha town was raped by a 'fake pir' in the area and critically injured she is now under treatment in the sadar hospital.

Four women traffickers arrested in the recent past from Mohammadpur area belonging to a women's syndicate confessed to the police that they had rented some flats in different areas of the city and

ran this dastardly business. The victims, after they were recovered, narrated the harrowing tales of their capture, enticement and engagement in sex trade.

The condition of the children lacking support of the family or parents beggars description. They wander in the streets of big cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna often surviving by begging, ferrying household consumer goods, and most shockingly peddling drugs these days, a recent thriving business operated by some drug lords keeping themselves away from public eyes. To our utter dismay, these unpretentious minor boys, without food and job were lured to this clandestine drug business with offer of big money.

Although articles 17, 18 and 19 of the Constitution of the Republic guarantee equal opportunities in education, social and economic benefits for all segments of the society, the reality is a shocking episode of apathy, neglect and discrimination. The city's garbage dumps are home to many of them. These rubbish pickers spend their days sifting through the mountains of smelly refuse, looking for recyclable objects. True, children make the best scavengers, they can scurry more easily among piles of garbage. But how can the administration and the society face the cruel fact that God's best creation, only because they were born poor or

with no father or mother to support them in the most formative years of their lives, are destined to end up in garbage dumps and cardboard shanties?

Society or the affluent section hardly tries to think about these unfortunate kids till before the moment they are beside their cars at the road intersection and asking them to buy some flowers or popcorns from them. True most of our poor children live in a state of violence, persecution and rejection and forced labour. In this sad setting the only escape for many is drugs and other anti-social activities. A survey made by the social scientists in recent times suggest that most of the young offenders these days are found to hail from extremely poor families, raised in streets or slums without proper care or guidance from parents. A big number of offenders are also from the middle and upper classes, perhaps the products of broken homes.

Psychologists are concerned about the growing nature of cruelty among juveniles as is evident from recent incidents of some killings in the country. They do not show any repentance even after committing violent crimes and sometimes even kill the victim to hide evidence of their crime.

The state must intervene in such a critical period of national life. Like the former Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who visited 21 states

in the first year of his presidency and met about two lakh school students every starting from slum schools to public schools to illuminate their mind, our next elected Prime Minister, next President and MPs might do something worthwhile to steer the nation clear of the calamity that has befallen.

But the stark fact at the moment is that more than 50 million of school age, 60% of them girls, have not yet stepped into the classroom despite some efforts by the past governments and NGOs. People believe that the programme of spreading literacy in the country could get some momentum by vigorously introducing food for schooling in the villages. As Rasheda K. Chowdhury, Adviser in charge of primary, mass education, women and children affairs and cultural ministry said, while inaugurating a campaign titled 'Amar Odhikar' in the city on October 25 last, 'About one crore and ninety lakh children wait in vain for the mid day meal.'

The whole nation joins with the sponsors of the campaign in calling upon the next elected government to adopt effective measures to set up one primary school in each village with one teacher for forty students and a guaranteed mid day meal for each student in an effort to meet the constitutional obligation.

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