

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'We want 100 reserved seats for women through direct election'

Women rights activist **Ayesha Khanam** was born in 1947. She did her honours and masters in Sociology from the Dhaka University in 1969 and 1970 respectively and worked as a research fellow at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies during 1977-1978. From 1965 to 1971 she was a student activist and worker. She actively participated in the Liberation War as a freedom fighter. Since 1972, she has been working with Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and is currently president of the organisation. She played an active role in ratification and implementation of CEDAW and in the South Asian Women Caucus. She regularly writes on women issues in periodicals and newspapers. **Shamim Ashraf** took the interview.

Do you see any uncertainty over the parliamentary polls?

I personally think elections will be held. The BNP's pressing for its demands has created uncertainty, which I think is not a responsible attitude. All the parties say the country's interest is greater than that of the party. At this moment when the country is struggling in the democratic process, only the interim government or the EC cannot rescue the country?

Do you think BNP's seven demands are logical?

I don't think so. Isn't it ridiculous to demand rescheduling of the polls to ensure that the Hajis can cast their votes. It's an obvious attempt to bag cheap popularity. It is they who are responsible for depriving the nation of an elected government for two years. It's not only irresponsible but also unacceptable behaviour.

How much has been done to meet the people's expectation for reforms of democratic institutions?

There are a few good achievements. The EC has prepared a voters list and trying its best to hold the election with all the parties. They also received some points positively on the women issue. Though we shouldn't have hoped for too much from an unelected government, the people had very high expectation from the caretaker government as the political governments did not fulfil public aspirations for a long time and there was a political vacuum. To do that we needed a totally independent government, but we didn't get one. Since the CTG is not going to contest in the election and doesn't have any political ambition, we expected it to pass some bills and reform institutions. Bowing down to the fundamentalists after announcing the Women Development Policy was a setback for the government. It couldn't show the courage to say no to a small group of people who violated emergency, even though the issues of resource and equal rights were not there in the policy. It's double standards, and is contrary to the promises the government had made earlier. We also welcomed separation of the judiciary.

Do you think the judiciary is performing independently?

We know separation doesn't mean independence. There is a question now among the people due to verdicts in different cases and granting of bails, as if there was some influence from above. We thought this government would be different from the others and would work for the interest of the nation. It's true that the government took on the Himalayan task of bringing qualitative change suddenly to a political leadership that doesn't have any accountability. But the CTG failed to apply any innovative process and rather tried to follow the politicians' formula, like giving way to some.

Will you give some examples?

They didn't need to concede in issues like the Women Development Policy. Why did they need to bow down, what was the danger? The CTG's soft dealing with Jamaat-e-Islami was also unnecessary. The government can't take firm stand against them because these quarters have enjoyed favour over the years.

Do you think the government could prioritise the issues?

The CTG was too ambitious at the beginning. It's true that corruption was pervasive and total plundering took place. But it's not realistic for the CTG to make the landscape of the anti-corruption drive so wide. As the charges could not be proved against many of the accused they're coming out from jail, and we fear they that situation may turn worse due to their reaction. The CTG needed to be very selective, focused and strategic, and to go after particular issues, persons and institutions.

What outcome do you see?

Some sort of surrender. Whether this surrender will let the drive go on depends on who wins in the election and whether they will play a responsible role in the coming days. Now the situation is that all the responsibilities are on the government, not the political parties. The people expected that those who were responsible for wrongdoing would have to pay for it; it is justice. But these wrongdoers are now trying to jeopardise everything. They should ask themselves what mistakes they had committed in the past. The people whose non-transparency and corruption are legendary are now saying

they are taking steps to rescue the countrymen. The people want to know who are responsible for the spread of fundamentalism and the rise of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and for helping in the bomb attacks.

Do you see this soul-searching?

I don't see any apologetic gesture by the parties whose actions led to the 1/11 changeover, causing a two-year break in democratic process. It is regrettable that they speak in an aggressive tone. In fact, we'll have to wait a generation or more to get leadership that will work to fulfil the people's expectations, and behave logically, rationally and soberly. You see that BNP even demanded scrapping of the amendments brought to the RPO. Why? Why don't they want discipline?

What role do the voters and citizens need to play to get such leadership?

People will have to sacrifice instead of seeking money, and support political vision and education instead of hooliganism. But nothing will happen until good candidates come out victorious. For that, we'll need to look at the electoral process. The politicians should have played the key role in it, but they could not take a stand beyond their party interest. All the parties who were in power should have worked to bring the war criminals to trial. But their position was strengthened through getting protection. A move is on to turn the whole state communal.

How is that?

By giving Jamaat political protection and including it in a political alliance. Could they win in more than three constituencies had they contested alone? By entering the BNP-led coalition, Jamaat has become stronger than BNP.

Can you detail what negative impact Jamaat had in policymaking?

All the policy intervention steps adopted during the 2001-2006 BNP-Jamaat alliance regime, especially those regarding women, were regressive. All positive aspects, like men-women parity in the Women Development Policy, were deleted. They also had a hand in changing the Education Policy and the administration, and in strengthening the JMB.

Do you think people will see an end to rejection of the election result, confrontational politics, and blame game after the next parliamentary polls?

The nation badly needs it. While the world leaders are now putting their heads together to find a solution to the world economic disaster, we can't afford any more political instability. We should take a lesson from Barack Obama's slogan for change and act accordingly. Everything should be resolved through negotiation, and the voters should give an indication for a new qualitative change through their votes. We want the parliament to function, and not remain ineffective round the year on trivial issues. The MPs may walk out, but must go back again and put their arguments there. They must attend the government's policymaking meetings, and parliamentary committees must function. These will ensure transparency and accountability of all. We'll have to change the violent and destructive political culture for realising our demands.

How do you see the victory of the same old candidates in the local elections?

The elections were fair. And it is the responsibility of the voters to elect unquestionable candidates. It is solely their right, no political party has anything

to do with it. That's why we need to see political parties' manifestos. It is only way to meet people's expectations, and the citizens have a crucial role to play in this regard.

Do you see any need for debates on parties' manifestos?

Definitely. We want to know what is in the election agenda of the two major electoral alliances. Before we vote for them, we want to know about their foreign policy, economic development plan, safety-net programs, what they will do in the Sidra-affected areas, etc.

Identify the failures of the CTG.

I want to first say that the CTG system itself is a failure of the political parties, it's an abnormal set-up -- and we can't expect too much from such a government. There's contradiction even among us -- we asked the CTG to do many things, but we later criticised it, saying that the CTG didn't have the mandate to do all these. Why would the CTG want to do the things that the parliament members didn't do over the years, why would it try to bring reforms in parties when political leaders themselves didn't want them?

Do you think the timing of parties' registration and RPO amendment was right?

No. It could be done much earlier when the government had people's support. Such complexities would not arise and there would be enough time for discussion. At the fag end of its tenure, the government and the EC have to meet the illogical demands of the parties'.

Why did it happen?

I don't know for sure, but I guess that some advisers misguided the CTG.

How much progress has been made in representation of women in the parliament?

Very, very little. After years of endeavour by a social action committee of women rights organisations, the government, political parties and other stakeholders now consider it as an issue in politics. The nomination of more women candidates, as done by Awami League this time, brings me hope. The party is now saying it would ensure 33 percent women representation by 2020. I think other parties will also do the same. The BNP and its allies are yet to declare their candidates. Though the political thinking of the left-leaning parties go with us, they have less popularity. But it'll be better for us if they nominate women candidates and contest in the election in an alliance.

Do the women organisations have any demand to the parties ahead of the elections?

It would be a very good beginning if 60 women MPs were elected in this parliament. Sheikh Hasina may think about nominating 30 women candidates from her party and the rest may come from the allies. More candidates will come out victorious if fewer party-affiliated candidates are chosen.

Are you going to propose any candidate to any party?

We've already prepared a list of about 60-80 and sent it to Sheikh Hasina. We'll also send the lists to other parties. We're also planning to list names of about 250-300 women who are brilliant in their fields for appointment in different fields. We'll send this list to the new elected government.

What about the reserved seats in the parliament?

We want 100 reserved seats for women, who will be elected through direct election. The EC will identify the constituencies. A voter will have two votes, one for the general seat and the other for electing a woman candidate. Other ways might also be developed if the constitution is amended in line with this demand. But it'll take more time.

What provisions have been made in the RPO regarding these issues?

They didn't do any exercises on it. The EC just specified ensuring 33 percent women representation in the party, and has used generalised ideas about the rest.



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Safe road or highway to death?

While such deaths might not affect the mightier matters of state, they certainly reflect the brazenness with which some unscrupulous owners and callous drivers feel they can run their trade, destroy innocent people's lives or subvert law and justice. In a country where life is so easily extinguished, there was a feeling of revulsion about the way all these precious lives were lost on our national highways.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

IN a country that stumbles upon calamity, mostly man-made, with unerring regularity and embraces disaster with disturbing stoicism, death's sting has long been blunted. Yet, once in a while, some deaths become a matter of more than personal grief to the bereaved family. It happened with the death of ten people as a result of a head-on collision between a passenger bus and an acid-laden truck. Mohammad Al Faysal, a final year student of Civil Engg. at BUET, and three others, succumbed to their burn injuries at different hospitals.

With the death of Faysal, a promising student of BUET, who would have been the only support for his ailing old parents and the whole family, all such hopes have been dashed to the ground. The nation went numb with shock, horror and pain as it came to know about this disaster. It is not that death by accident has never happened before, but in a media-driven world private distress of such ghastly nature is often catapulted into the public arena.

While such deaths might not affect the mightier matters of state, they certainly reflect the brazenness with which some unscrupulous owners and callous drivers feel they can run their trade, destroy innocent people's lives or subvert law and justice. In a country where life is so easily extinguished, there was a feeling of revulsion about the way all these precious lives were lost on our national highways. Sensible citizenry would at once agree with Dr. Samanta Lal, project director of the burn unit at DMCH where Faysal met his end after battling for life for 10 days. Dr

Lal questioned: "What type of country is this that innocent people have to pay with their lives in this way?"

Much to everybody's shock and dismay, even after such ghastly incidents of deaths on our national highways with such alarming frequency, no organisation is talking about these issues. Nobody is questioning who was carrying these drums of acid so callously. People's concern is that if those trading in acid and lethal and corrosive substances are so unregulated, this kind of accident could happen with increasing frequency.

The probe team formed after the accident has made its findings public. The team discovered that the truck was carrying the chemicals improperly. As per the law, "acid should be transported in such a way that even if the vehicle carrying it turns turtle, the containers should neither break nor acids should leak under any circumstances. Moreover, the truck or wagon carrying acids should bear a sign on every visible part of its body inscribed in bold red letters, 'Danger, contains highly inflammable acid.'"

In absence of any such inscription written on the body of the truck, the accident and resultant deaths were the result of negligence by the traders and the driver of the vehicle, and dereliction of duty by the law enforcement agency who are supposed to keep close vigil on the movement of acids. Given the fact that national highway police can sense the type of goods trucks are carrying and are empowered to challenge and stop such movements of goods or containers in the vehicle, their inaction and indifference have given rise to many questions. People

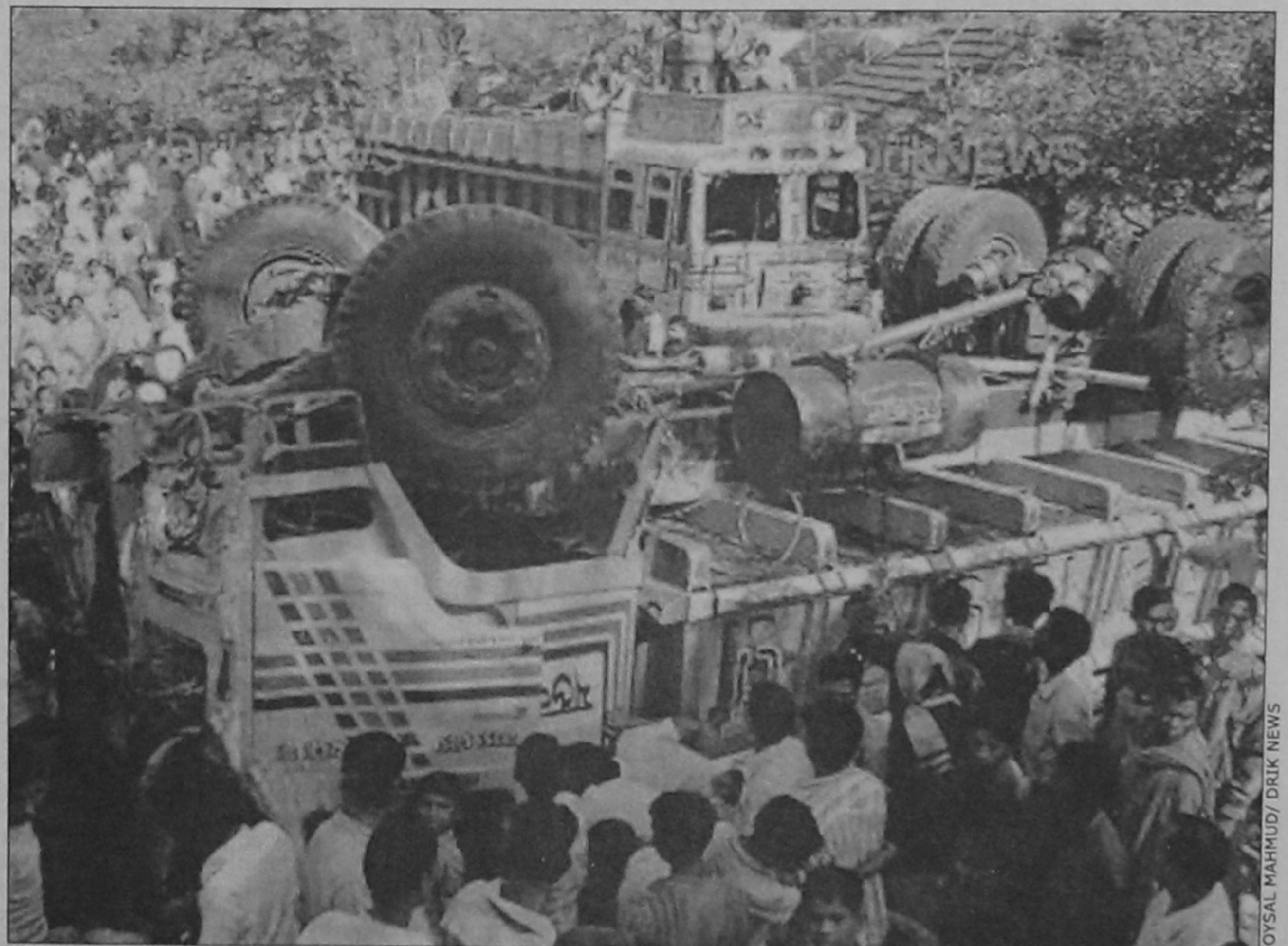
believe that with vehicle fitness, overloading and speed control remaining unchecked or compromised because of some deals with the highway police or law enforcement agencies, frequency of accidents has increased enormously.

In most highway disasters it has become evident that human factors like truck owner or trader's indifference and greed, as much as the truck or bus driver's incompetence and tendency to flout highway rules, have heightened the scale of such tragedies.

A series of fatal road accidents took place at a time when the IGP along with other high-ups in the police administration unveiled the pilot project at Dhaka under the aegis of the "Special Road Safety Programme" on November 8. With about 4000 deaths caused by road accidents every year, as the IGP revealed while speaking at a rally organised on this occasion at Sayedabad bus terminal, the country's road safety record is abysmal.

More shockingly, the number of people getting crippled for life and becoming a burden either for the family or the society at large is staggering, and the loss to the exchequer is about Tk.4000 crore annually. Compensation and enquiries are small consolation to persons who have lost their near and dear ones, or to a country that has witnessed some terrible disasters in the recent past. With the death of Mainuddin (49), his family consisting of four members, three of them minors, is in total distress.

With road widening programs and road safety measures hard to come by, people traveling by bus or trucks laden with goods ranging from food grains to chemicals to explosives meet disastrous accidents, and hundreds are killed in the most shocking and painful manner. Ironically, with high-ups in the administration constantly devising ways and means to avert accidents and ensure road safety measures, people are dying on the roads with no effective check and control by the highway police. Despite the fact that the country lurched from one disaster to another, whether in the road sector or river routes, all these deaths and disasters could hardly wake up the past gov-



How many deaths must the people suffer before this stops?

ernments, or even jolt the present administration to take action.

Hardly had people overcome the shock and trauma of the road disaster at Comilla, another chilling news came from North Bengal, where a Chapainawabganj-bound truck laden with imported fruits ploughed into a roadside grocery shop cum tea stall near Dhobra Bazar under Shibganj upazila, killing 10 persons on the spot and injuring 20 others.

Ironically true, workshops and seminars held so frequently come out with safety policy guidelines that are hardly implemented on the road. In a country where the police administration at the lower rungs is singularly known for sloth and lax attitude, high-ups in the adminis-

tration must make sudden checks on the national highways, and must deal with the recalcitrant highway police and violators of road safety norms. Most drivers have a tendency to flout road safety rules like speed limit, overtaking, and overloading because they want to meet the commercial needs of the bus and truck owners.

The problem isn't one of resources, but of leadership, motivation and political will, and because these were appallingly missing the country has been gripped by disasters one after another. Unfortunately, the human mind has its limits. It will find it impossible to accept the abominable and criminal negligence of the burning alive of scores of traveling public on the national highways. With

memories of the recent disastrous accidents hurting sensible citizenry, every man, woman, and child in the country has been united as rarely before by a collective sense of revulsion. The country cannot betray itself.

Unfortunately, as the scale of tragedies -- both man-made and natural -- increased during the last few years, so did our apathy, both before and after the accident. All these accidents were mostly preventable. Yet, we never learned our lessons. Sensible citizens can now only hope that it is less than enough, that it will shake the administration and the concerned agency out of their stupor.

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