

Where is the city in the manifestos?

If there is a political will, there will be a way out of perdition. But in a widely accepted culture of promises made and broken, rhetoric delivered over and over again, the fear is that it is the political will that takes the beating. Even then, why should we not dream of life in the city that is truly civilised and modern, and yet Bengali.

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

YOU know that when the merchandising of dreams and hopes, and fears, is in full swing the election is knocking on the door. And with that come a fusillade of manifestos and promises, and all of a sudden the fate and future of the country take unprecedented priority.

The two major parties of the country have put up reasoned plans for the future in their manifestos, from economy, governance, and security, and from controlling price, militancy and traffic, but there is very little reasoned proposal for something deeply vital: Dhaka city.

Sure, underground railway and IT parks have been mentioned in the manifestos of both the parties, but looking closely, neither makes us confident that the political parties understand the planetary phenomenon of cities, what makes cities function, and most importantly, how cities have become crucial in the development future of any country.

A hugely urban phenomenon has taken hold of the country -- but something that is largely spontaneous, uneven and unmapped. It should be obvious that

cities and towns are no longer minor players in the national framework; more and more people live in cities, and if they do not, they participate in their dynamic. The cities have become vigorous sites of human habitations, relationships and economies. As the Brazilian urbanist Jaime Lerner declared, cities are not problems, they are solutions. If cities are the battlegrounds of our anxieties, they are also the decisive sites of our imaginations and energies.

Any vision for Bangladesh will have to ponder on the emerging urban landscape, and not to see that as a crisis but as vast opportunities. Cities are not merely dire sites of institutional and social failures that need constant remedial attention; if properly oriented and organised, they can be economic, social, and cultural dynamos. For example, readymade garments, textiles, light manufacturing, and computer/information and medical outsourcing can be part of global industries in a far more energetic and productive way only if they are urbanistically organised.

While it is imperative to plan the urban landscape of the whole country, from the primary cities to the small towns, Dhaka

will continue to play a vital role in impacting places far and wide. In the absence of any solid tradition of civic urban culture, Dhaka city remains the sole model of urbanism in the country. It is ironic that every small town, every nook and corner in the mofussil, wishes to mimic the characteristics of a dysfunctional Dhaka. Buildings, groupings of buildings, roads, institutions and businesses, in the small towns are all beginning to look like some pale imitation of things Dhaka.

It is in that sense the future landscape of the country depends on what we make of Dhaka city, and that is where the most imaginative plans ought to occur. Cities require the boldest thinking, especially when our cities -- again Dhaka being the "role model" -- continue to exemplify the ignoble conditions of power failures, pollution, floods, malfunctioning infrastructures, and transportation nightmares.

The future of Dhaka city is the future of the country. But a "good" city is not an accidental outcome; it is envisioned, planned in a professional manner, and then implemented with meticulous dedication. The future of the city cannot be entrusted to bureaucrats and ministers, with dubious intentions and half-baked understandings, as has been the case all along. To bring real and effective changes to Dhaka, we need a political will, bold imagination, and a serious commitment to carry that out. And we do not see much hint of that in the manifestos.

It's not a fairy tale to say that the fate of a troubled city can be turned around. From the urban wizard of Curitiba Jaime Lerner, to a series of enlightened mayors of Istanbul, to the "city father" of Seoul, and to lesser known urban leaders in

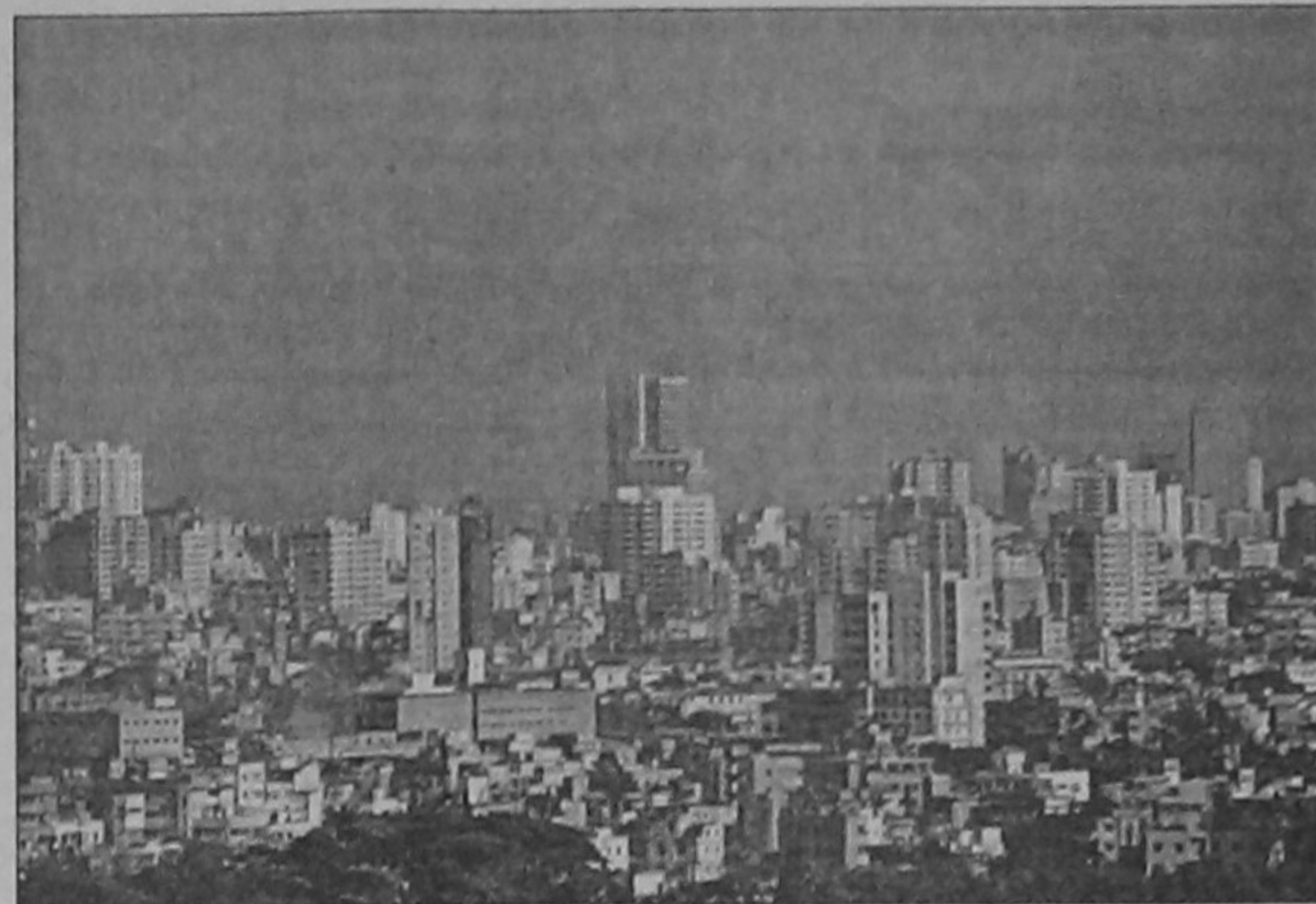
Bangkok or New Delhi, it seems that when a planning and professional commitment is combined with a political will for public good, magical things can happen to the city.

In South Korea, it appears that the road to the presidency leads from the mayorality of Seoul where one's mettle needs to be proven in undertaking major public projects. Lee Myung-bak, as mayor of Seoul, like his predecessor, undertook radical urban renovations by cleaning and reviving a historic canal, creating the Seoul Forest in the city, and taking down flyovers in order to create a non-disruptive urban landscape.

In Awami League's manifesto, there is only one paragraph directly related to Dhaka city: "In Dhaka, construction of metro tunnel, elevated rail and circular rail to remove traffic jams and to solve public transport problems will be studied forthwith in order to undertake a feasible project and will be implemented on a priority basis."

This is well and good only when the idea is integrated with an overall plan of the city. Where is that plan? Where is a plan that such a plan will be taken up? Piecemeal suggestion of a metro tunnel, for example, may only seem as sloganeering, especially when it may be an unjustifiable idea, and when there is no reference to the overall development of the city. How can we just think of transportation without knowing where we are going with it?

The Awami League also ensures that there will be "housing for all" by 2015, which certainly is a commendable idea to begin with, but does not give any hint on what kind of housing, how it will be deliv-



Facelift needed.

ered and how it will first of all constitute a human settlement (for housing is not a numerical thing but a matter of creating communities).

The idea of "growth-centre centric village housing" in every union and upazila is also promising if considered in light of the older idea of "consolidated villages" in a larger region.

While the Awami League's proposals seem a bit more coherent and comprehensive, the 36-point BNP charter had only few lines about the city, something on easing traffic and an unclear reference to an IT village.

While it may be too late to bring the urban question in the electoral equation, it is still important to maintain a focus on the city when the election is over and the

winning party gets down to real business.

If there is a political will, there will be a way out of perdition. But in a widely accepted culture of promises made and broken, rhetoric delivered over and over again, the fear is that it is the political will that takes the beating. Even then, if the political parties have set us up on a dream time with promises of social justice, environmental protection, economic equality, good governance and human rights (until, as the cynics say, when one of them actually takes over power), why should we not dream of life in the city that is truly civilised and modern, and yet Bengali.

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Between ashes and hope

In 2001, militant Settlers aggressively intimidated Pahari voters to stay away from polls (resulting in shock victory of BNP's Wadud Bhuyan, now jailed on corruption). Moni Swapan Dewan, another 2001 victor, is a figure pilloried in speeches.



Will their dreams go up in smoke?

NAEEM MOHAIEEM

IN Dighinala, the lead Jumma (Pahari) speaker switches to Bangla after the initial Chakma greeting. As I film the crowd, I can see scattered Bengali faces. Later I ask one organiser if speaking Bangla is a way to appeal to Bengali voters. "Yes," he replies, "But don't forget, not all Paharis speak Chakma." Chakma, Marma and Tripura are the biggest presence at these meetings, but the official records show eleven different ethnic Jumma groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts.

In this last election week, jumping on the candidate's ramshackle jeep (with prodigious horse power on the up-slope) is the easiest way to get around. I had taken a ride with the vehicle belonging to Ujjal Sriti Chakma, independent candidate running with support of UPDF. As we move between locations, I note the language changing.

In Panchori, Pujgang, Logang, Matiranga, the speeches are in Chakma. In Dighinala in Bengali, but in Mohalchori, where there is a large Bengali population, the speeches are in Chakma again. This time, there are no Bengalis in the audience. Unlike Dighinala, which has an older Bengali population mixed in with recent "Settlers", Mohalchori has seen vast

amounts of Pahari land grabbed by Bengali settlers recently -- tensions run high, and Jumma candidates don't expect Bengali Settler votes. The Sajek that hit headlines after Pahari homes were burned, same equation.

After Shantu Larma signed the 1997 CHT Accord on behalf of JSS, their armed guerilla wing Shanti Bahini laid down arms. In "peacetime," a portion of the JSS broke away and formed UPDF. This new party rejected the CHT Accord, saying it fell far short of "self-rule," which had been a basic demand of the guerilla war. In 2008, the Election Commission refused registration to both UPDF and JSS on grounds they were "regional." A writ petition resulted in a stay order from the High Court, but it came too late to allow registration with EC. So the two largest Jumma political parties have put their support behind independent candidates.

The political speeches are focused on the key crisis for the Jumma people: implementation of the 1997 CHT Accord and an end to Bengali Settler land-grabbing. The settlers are sometimes referred to as "Onuprobeshkari" and Paharis frequently point to land alongside the road that was "a Pahari family, but the Settlers threw them out."

The cloud of fear and anger is thick, but even so there are some positives.

Dhiman Khisha, a candidate who withdrew his name in favor of a UPDF unity candidate, invoked Barack Obama ("America's kalo manush") in his speeches. Unlike the "Generation Obama" cheerleading, this seems the true lesson of November 2008. Why not a Pahari president? Why not a Hindu prime minister? Will it take forty years?

In 2001, militant Settlers aggressively intimidated Pahari voters to stay away from polls (resulting in shock victory of BNP's Wadud Bhuyan, now jailed on corruption). Moni Swapan Dewan, another 2001 victor, is a figure pilloried in speeches. Elected MP from BNP in 2001, he became CHT Affairs Minister and was completely powerless. "I won't be Moni Swapan Dewan," says Ujjal Sriti Chakma. The sentiment seems to be that neither AL nor BNP can deliver, only a regional Jumma party can.

Numbers matter. In Khagrachari there are 337,000 registered voters, of whom 190,000 are Jumma, 117,000 Bengali (out of whom 37,000 are Hindu) and 30,000 are security forces. The numbers add up to a Jumma candidates victory, but this year the Jumma vote will get split between multiple candidates. Add to that the still remaining possibility of voter intimidation, especially remote areas where neither the media nor observers will reach.

Whenever convoys leave main sadars, the mobile networks go off. When we return ten hours later, there are new disturbing news over SMS. Bandarban DC has burned posters of independent candidate because UPDF name was on it. Jumma activists arrested for giving out flyers.

This time, a record number of Paharis registered for voter ID cards. One speaker says: "When election comes, we used to get scared. But this election is different, do not be scared, do not stay away. Now we can take legal action if something happens."

But at a night meeting, I hear organisers complain: "How can we work, we are being threatened that our legs will be broken. If you lose, how will you protect us?" After 2001, violence against Jumma grew (just like anti-Hindu violence) and many fled to Dhaka and Chittagong. Now they are back, to vote. "The international community is very concerned about us, be brave." But when will the Bengali community be "very concerned"?

I'm thinking of the young Jumma woman, who waved as we left the convoy. "Deka hobe bizoye."

Yes, I hope you get Bizoy. For you. In our month of Bijoy. If not this time, soon.

Naeem Mohaiem has written about minorities for Ain o Salish Kendra annual report.

Vote for a change

At this crucial hour, the electorate will have to be resolute so that the immediate past corrupt cartels are not voted in again, and that the forces opting for change are given a look in to put in their performance.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

ELECTIONS 2008, the defining moment of the nation, is very much at our doorstep. Yes, finally the time has come for us to take a deep breath and make a solid vow so that we can make the most of the occasion. Had it been held two years back, its significance would not have been the same as the imminent one because of many factors, including qualitative change of our politics. Our politics must change and change for the better.

There is a perceived feeling that little qualitative change has taken place in the mindset of our political leaders. This statement is not altogether false. Despite this perception, I think that things will not be that smooth for the ones who are contemplating on doing whatever they wish once they win the elections. I am, however, sceptical of my conviction if the alliance that presented the nation with worst form of misgovernance during 2001-2006 comes back to power.

The spirit of 1/11 might have been diluted to a degree. There is, however, nothing to ascertain that 1/11 has left no impact whatsoever. One message of 1/11 that has established itself is that no quarter will be allowed to play ducks and drakes with the fate of the nation for long. This time around, however, the electorate will have to decide whether they will opt for change or stick with the stinking ones.

Some quarters are now saying that the countrymen had to suffer a lot during the two years of the caretaker government. They have, however, no remorse whatsoever for their misdeeds during 2001-2006, inarguably the most corrupt period of the country's history. It is really time for registering a strong rejoinder to such outrageous comments of the fallen leaders.

The same quarters are even trying to capitalise on the horrific scenes of October 28, 2006. Whatever happened on that fateful day is, of course, abominable. However, no one can deny the catalytic role of the then ruling coalition in leading the country to such a pass. Thus, trying to

dupe people by showing those awful scenes is nothing but deceiving the nation in the real sense of the term.

Admittedly, the nation's memory is too short, but the people cannot afford to forget Kamsat, and Fulbari. They also cannot forget the abysmal corruption, thousands of crores taka of investment for no electricity, abrupt rise of militancy, and killing of opposition political leaders.

Though the Anti-corruption Commission could not finish the outstanding job it started, the countrymen will definitely dig their own graves if they allow even a bit of leeway for the safe return of the big corruption suspects, including the then prince of corruption and his notorious followers.

Can we pave the way for revival of the architects of syndicate business and consequent human sufferings? Can we ensure comeback of the destroyers of various key institutions of the country, and even of the presidency, by turning those into party dens instead of abodes for hopes and aspirations of the common people?

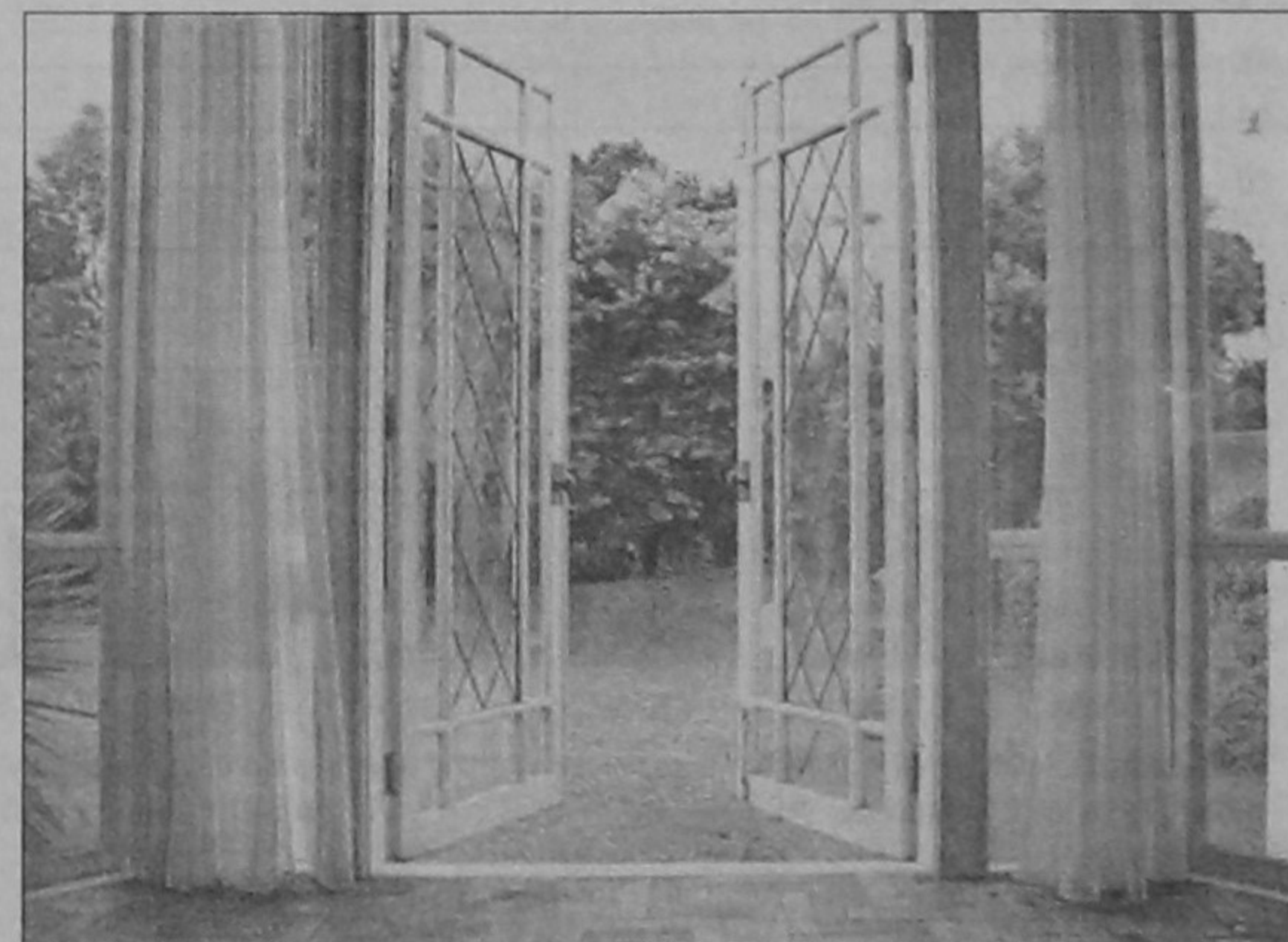
No, we just cannot allow them in again for the sake of the nation. Truly, our

patriotic armed forces salvaged the nation from an impending disaster, as well as the reckless plunderers, on 1/11. It will be, however, too much to expect them to intervene in running of state affairs every now and then. The people will now have to elect such people that the military can stay in barracks without worrying about developments outside.

Reportedly, the overwhelming majority of our current electorate belongs to the new generation. They are very much in the swim and well aware of the contemporary happenings in the country. I have a strong conviction that they will not make a mistake in exercising their right to vote. People might even opt for no vote, which is indeed a wholesome addition. Caution, however, must be taken so that the most corrupt cannot benefit from this protest.

At this crucial hour, the electorate will have to be resolute so that the immediate past corrupt cartels are not voted in again, and that the forces opting for change are given a look in to put in their performance. If this golden opportunity is lost, no one and nothing missed during 2001-2006 will remain intact in the hands of the old predators. Let us keep our fingers crossed so that we can make it on the Election Day and move toward a shining Bangladesh.

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The door to a better future is open.

Why Brits in India are given buckets

NURY VITTACHI

WARNING: the following posting is extremely controversial and may result in rioting, looting of embassies, or international tension between nuclear powers. Or it just may make you feel hungry.

Whatever. You have been warned. First, many thanks to all the readers who wrote to me about curry. Clearly this is a subject of the utmost importance, unlike trivialities such as the world financial crisis or global warming.

West-east versions of curry have a long history, readers said. "English curry, a yellow-brown gloopy substance eked

out with raisins and sugar, was on my grammar school menu in 1953," wrote Neil Thomson from Australia. And Jane Austen mentions curry in Mansfield Park, first published in 1812, he added.

But the saddest letter came from curry-loving British tourist Sam Yeung who visited India last year. "It was amazing. There was almost nothing on the menu in any restaurant that I recognised. No balti curries, no chicken tikka masala, and not one of the waiters knew what a vindaloo was," he said.

I can see that the time has come to tell the whole truth.

None of the popular international

curries are from India.

Those "Indian curry houses" that you see in every town in Britain are not Indian at all. The vast majority of them (in 1998 it was 85 per cent) are Bangladeshi. Staff come from a specific district of Bangladesh. Sylhet in the northeast of that country actually specialises in breeding British curry house waiters.

Another myth: Vindaloo is a super-hot Indian curry.

Fact: Vindaloo is not Indian. It's Portuguese. Sailors from that country arrived at the Indian city of Goa with a pork dish called vinha d'alhos, which means wine and garlic stew. The natives,

filled with pity for people living on bland European food, fixed the recipe and shortened vinha d'alhos to vindaloo.

The Portuguese agreed that the revised version was way better than the original and spread it around the world.

But it wasn't good enough for India. Even today, asking for vindaloo outside Goa produces a diagonal head-sway, which is an Indian body-language for: "I don't know what you're talking about, idiot foreigner."

Myth three: The top Indian curry dish is chicken tikka masala.

Fact: It's not Indian at all, but from Glasgow in Scotland. A drunken

Scotsman ordered chicken tikka (a dry dish) instead of chicken curry (a wet dish) and demanded that curry sauce be poured over it.

Brits particularly like an Indian dish called balti.

But there's no such food in India. Bangladeshi restaurateurs in the British city of Birmingham started serving food in tiny iron woks so they could serve less and charge more. Having no word for wok, they called it balti (bucket) curry. Believing this to be an exotic import, UK diners went crazy for it.

The result is that vast numbers of British tourists go to India and have the

following conversation.

"I'd like a balti curry please."

"You want a bucket curry?"

"A balti curry."

"Yes sir. Would you like your bucket on the bone or off the bone? Mild, medium or hot?"

Several readers said their families discovered authentic curry thanks to products from an Indian goods export firm called Sharwoods.

Actually, Sharwood's products come from the north of England and the company was started by a man named Jim.

You may now riot.

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