

AL council session today

The expectations that the party should meet

THE national council of the Awami League, meeting in session today, is from many perspectives an encouraging happening. In the sixty years since its birth in 1949, the party has weathered many storms and defied many predictions to turn itself into a large, deep-rooted political organization in pre and post-1971 Bangladesh. Indeed, it is to the credit of the party that it played a leading role in transforming the political destiny of Bengalis through its spirited defence of their rights and eventually providing the nation with the leadership that would steer it to freedom. At this point of time, therefore, one recalls the strong political traditions that have been set through the role of the Awami League and the evolution it brought about in the public perception of politics as the art of the possible and the enlightening.

It is against such a background that the party goes into its council session today. Naturally, the expectations of the country will focus on the question of how much more of a contribution the AL can make to pluralist politics in the coming days. Obviously, in light of recent political developments in the country, those expectations will centre on the question of how much of intra-party democracy will come into the workings of the AL as a result of the council meeting. There can be no denying that for all its glorious past, the party is today in need of more openness that can only come about through involving the grassroots in its working. Indeed, the AL is today faced with the arduous job of transforming itself into a party of the future through bringing about the changes, within its structure, which can give it a modern face. That calls for an infusion of fresh blood in the party, of men and women honest enough and qualified enough and dedicated enough to understand the demands of the future without losing sight of the successes and failures of the past.

The council session is of particular significance as the Awami League happens to be in power through a massive popular endorsement of its programmes at the December 2008 elections. In effect, its victory was as much a triumph to savour as it was a challenge to tackle the manifold problems the nation is faced with today. Fundamentally, the challenge is to reassure the nation that it can provide quality leadership and governance to the country. That is a task which must necessarily begin through ensuring that its own house is kept in order. In these past six months, irritants like the unbridled activities of the Chhatra League and the Jubo League as well as rising crime have quite undermined the party's image. That has reinforced the impression in some quarters that while the AL has traditionally played an effective role in opposition, it has sometimes stumbled in office. The council meeting should, therefore, be an opportunity for soul-searching on the part of the party leadership.

On a final note, let us register our appreciation of the gesture the Awami League has made through inviting opposition leader Khaleda Zia to the council meeting. The gesture must be seen as an opportunity for breaking the ice. We feel that Begum Zia will have much to gain and little to lose from reciprocating the move.

Our cricket's moment of glory

The achievement must be maintained

OUR cricket is showing some signs of coming of age. The series win away from home against West Indies which came at Grenada on Tuesday is certainly the biggest achievement of our cricket to date. It has been a fine showing by a team coming constantly under criticism for their poor performance.

Even our Test status was questioned many times as the team developed the habit of losing Test matches in three or four days without putting up the slightest resistance. It appeared at one stage that the team had been over-promoted and was a kind of burden to Test cricket. The leading experts on the game were losing faith in our ability. But now we have learned to play for full five days. Though the opposition was a second-string West Indies side, but, do not forget, they are still West Indians! And, the victories have been very convincing.

The team's performance has improved dramatically with the change in captaincy. It only shows that in a game like cricket, leadership counts a lot. And what is also very much noticeable from the 2-0 series win is that when you have two or three class players in the team, they can pull you out of deep trouble. Look at the way Shakib Al Hassan batted in the second innings when the West Indian bowlers had almost demolished our top order. Shakib, as he proved many times in the past, is a cool customer having both the technique and flamboyance of a great batsman. He rebuilt the innings and finished it with a grand sixer, being ably supported by Rokibul Hasan, another upcoming youngster. And as a spinner also Shakib has been doing exceedingly well. And we should not miss the point that he was the stand-in captain, but never came under any pressure. We believe this young man will play a key role in elevating our cricket to a truly respectable position in future.

For Bangladesh cricket, the victory was absolutely necessary as local fans, whose patience seemed to be unlimited, were greatly frustrated after our early exit from the last T-20 World Cup. Now the players and organisers should feel a lot more confident, but under no circumstances should this confidence give way to complacency which will spoil whatever we have achieved in West Indies.

It is time to work hard and prove that the series victory was not a fluke. We wish the cricketers and organisers all the best.

A test of civilisation

So, this wasn't about right and wrong. This wasn't about truth and false. This was about weak and strong. The boy was tortured because he was weak. His family had no influence or means to push back the horror inflicted on him.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

A village court in Faridpur forced the father and uncle of a 15-year-old boy to pluck out his eyes as punishment for stealing a mobile phone. There was also a cash fine of 30,000 taka attached to that cruelty, which makes it even harder to calculate the price of the stolen good. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. What about two eyes for a mobile phone? The deafening sound of its dismal ring tone hasn't stopped since it made news.

Lucky for the boy, his eyes weren't exactly plucked out. The rest of the story stands as told. The father was coerced to hit his son in the eye with a twig or something, which left an abrasion on one eyeball. The boy has become blind in one eye. He is currently undergoing treatment in a hospital.

That takes care of half the worries about the boy. But what about those men, whose kangaroo court has put him through this ordeal? In effect, he has been subjected to triple injustice in one. He was going to lose his eyes, that also in the hands of his own father and, on top of it, pay in cash.

The Tupinamba tribe in South America practiced a similar brand of inordinate justice. When they captured an enemy, they forced him to consort with one of their women. Then they killed the enemy with his baby to increase the intensity of retribution.

What about that cabal of pervert men,

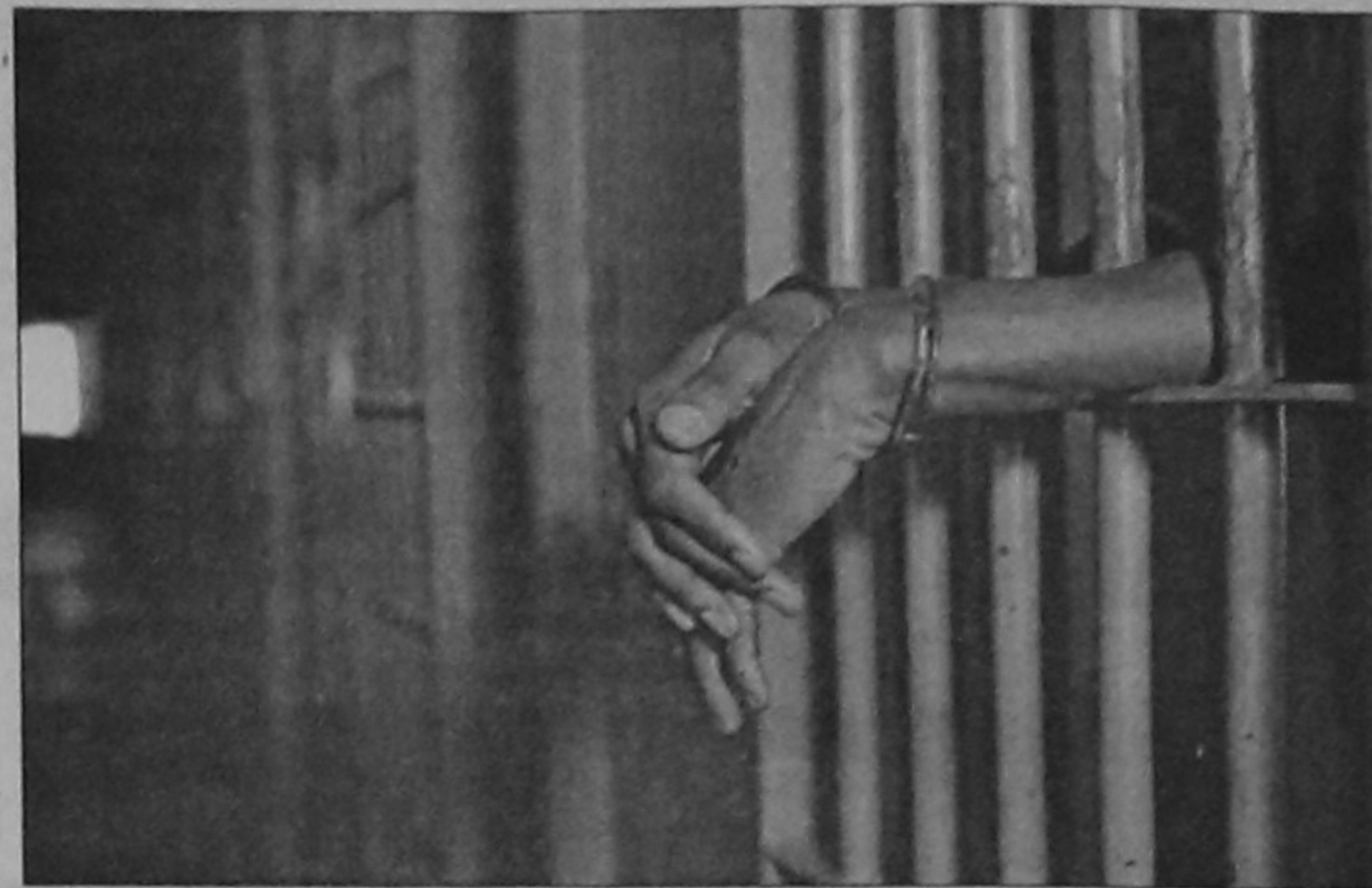
whose idea of justice is so twisted? It was one man whose mobile phone was stolen, and he carried with him the influential villagers to put together a ludicrous trial. The whole thing happened in front of a crowd, where not a single soul is known to have raised his or her voice in protest.

What that tells us is scary. It tells us that we are living in two different centuries. Our cities are shining with the splendor of modern age, but the villages are submerged in the seething muck of medieval rage. An eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth is the idea of vengeance. Justice is altogether a different concept. It administers deserved punishment to the offender, not the punishment desired by the aggrieved.

For stealing, the boy should have gone to prison. At most he could be given a thrashing to see if he confessed to the wrongdoing. His family could be compelled to return the object or pay for it. If nothing worked, he could have been handed over to police.

But what happened to this boy is a form of feudal excess, where the strong took advantage of the weak. Not unlikely that many amongst those who conducted the trial could be guilty of even more outrageous transgressions. If property is theft as Proudhon famously said, we don't know if the stolen phone was bought with stolen money.

Hence it seems we are living in two different worlds. In one world, the thieves thrive and they steal from coun-



Does the punishment fit the crime?

try budget. But nobody dares looking them in the eye, not to speak of laying hands on them. In another world, eyes are gouged out for stealing a paltry gadget.

In one world, men and women are promiscuous, but nobody does anything to them. In another world, they are given lashes, accused of adultery and fornication. I am not talking about two different planets. I am talking about the cities and the villages within the sovereign bounds of a single country.

So, this wasn't about right and wrong. This wasn't about truth and false. This was about weak and strong. The boy was tortured because he was weak. His family had no influence or means to push back the horror inflicted on him.

I don't know if there was a student amongst the onlookers, or a teacher, a holy man or anyone with wakeful conscience. I don't know if there was anybody who felt sorry, whose fist clenched

The lonely warrior

Mokammel could not have come up with a better title for his film. Nihshongo means lonely and Tajuddin indeed was a lonely warrior in the War of Liberation. Not many lonely warriors won a war. Tajuddin did.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

ON the 84th birth anniversary of Tajuddin Ahmed one tends to become contemplative. There are so many reasons to do so. Whenever we think of Tajuddin the mind tracks backward to the tumultuous days of 1971, when death stalked every Bengali every minute; when the air of Bengal was filled with the burnt smell of gunpowder, when vultures circled low in the sky and when Bangladeshis had to run across the borders to take refuge in India for fear of their lives.

The bloodthirsty Pakistani occupation

forces were on a rampage to save their flag through murder, rape and arson, thereby scripting the worst genocide of the century. Some wayward local collaborators had joined in their desperation to rescue Pakistan from the mud pit in Bengal.

The nation needed a leader in the absence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The nation found one in Tajuddin Ahmed. He and his compatriots took up the most venerable mission of driving out the occupying marauders and hoist the flag of Bangladesh on the soil.

It was a mission fraught with intrigue and danger in every step of the way but

Tajuddin was not to be daunted by those. He knew how to neutralise the small minds that were out to undermine his works. He organised a daredevil fighting force called Freedom Fighters (FF) with students, farmers and workers and created history. The Bengalis fondly called this lungi-wearing fighters "Muki Bahini" and gave them shelter and food whenever they came to their village.

In the international front, he had to handle big powers like the USA and China on one hand and India and Russia on the other. Not many leaders would have been able to sustain the pull from the two sides. One had to have a level head and thank God Tajuddin carried one on his shoulders. One cannot but admire the fact that he kept his cool until achieving the ultimate objective -- emergence of Bangladesh.

On the 84th birth anniversary, this year, I remembered Tanvir Mokammel's short film on Tajuddin Ahmed "Nihshongo

Sharothee" which I saw last year. I feel young people of today should see the film to learn about the contribution of this great politician in the making of Bangladesh. The one-hour film says a lot about seemingly unknown works of the first prime minister of Bangladesh who had taken hold of the hull of a nascent administration against all odds.

The visuals of the protagonist attending meetings and processions, working in the solitude of his humble office room, talking to the freedom fighters in the war fronts would generate interest in the minds of the young people to know more about him. Mokammel could not have come up with a better title for his film. Nihshongo means lonely and Tajuddin indeed was a lonely warrior in the War of Liberation. Not many lonely warriors won a war. Tajuddin did.

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Bringing a smile to Bengal's Muslims

Muslims would be making a grievous generational mistake if they turned AMU into the sole answer to their educational needs. Education has to be community-specific, and the principal objective must be quality at the school level. That is what will make Muslims capable of finding a place in Presidency or St Xavier's.

M J AKBAR

THE most communal punishment you can inflict upon any community is to deny it an education. Ignorance is the other face of poverty. No one is illiterate by choice. Which child would bleed her fingers rolling a *beedi* in preference to a classroom?

Finance minister Pranab Mukherjee's provision of Rs 25 crores for an Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) affiliate at Murshidabad in Bengal is only too little, and not too late. You can only get a degree college with such money. But one college is a million times better than none.

Two objections have been raised in Bengal: that AMU is too much of a Muslim, and not enough of a university. AMU is, today, about as Muslim as St Stephen's College is Christian. AMU graduates do not emerge flaunting special degrees in "Islamic fundamentalism." You could check this out with our Vice President, Hamid Ansari, who was both a student and vice chancellor. It doesn't seem to me that he was either a member of, or pre-

sided over a secret society of Indian Taliban, during his days at AMU.

If the 1940s are going to be dragged into the debate, then why restrict ourselves to that turbulent decade? Do we really want to revisit the acrimonious debates about the admissions policy of Calcutta University before the 1940s?

Should one travel fast forward? When we were students in Presidency between 1967 and 1970, a Muslim could not get a place in its Hindu hostel for the simple reason that the hostel was reserved for Hindus. One does not recall any major media campaign urging reform at the time.

Reform came because Indians wanted it, not because media wanted it. A substantial, if quiet, Indian achievement is that we have retained the best from our past and jettisoned, without any fuss, the worst. Compare this with a certain neighbour, which tends to invest in the worst and deny the best of its history and culture. Indians are sensible heirs. Just as other institutions have moved away from a certain pre-Partition ethos, so has AMU.

Destroying the good in the name of the best is an old tactic of the artful saboteur. It is perfectly true that AMU's academic quality has deteriorated, but it remains a far sight better than the proliferating private money-churners that pretend to offer an education.

Thirst has outstripped supply, and mercenaries are filling the gap. Those who can least afford expensive education end up paying the most. If there is hunger for an AMU in Murshidabad today, it is because through two decades of Congress raj, three decades of Marxist domination and one decade of intermediate confusion, no one did anything to assuage this hunger.

AMU does have serious problems that demand urgent redress: there is no reason why any quality Indian university should slip towards a lower common denominator. Its administration is, at this moment, a scandal fuelled by sectarian politics at which Delhi is adept.

If AMU is required to create affiliated units then it must possess the administrative ability and academic quality needed, otherwise it will be cheating the very Muslims it claims to serve. Rather than lifting its affiliates, the children could drag down the mother even further.

There is a potential paradox in play as well. Many colleges in Aligarh city and Uttar Pradesh have demanded affiliation to AMU, but it has been resisted in order to prevent any dilution of AMU's minority character. This minority status has, in any case, been transferred to a gray area through an amendment passed by

Parliament in 1981. Doubt seems to suit both judges and politicians.

Muslims would be making a grievous generational mistake if they turned AMU into the sole answer to their educational needs. Education has to be community-specific, and the principal objective must be quality at the school level. That is what will make Muslims capable of finding a place in Presidency or St Xavier's.

The Sachar Committee's statistics tell many a revealing story about Bengal. The state's literacy rate is 68.6%; among its Muslims, the figure drops to 57.5%. The urban situation is better; the figures travel up to 81% and 66%. What is truly encouraging, however, is the quantum leap taken in school enrolment.

By 2004-05, 82.8% of Muslim children between the ages of 6 and 14 were in school, as compared to the state average of 85.7%. Here is the evidence, if any is required, of the growing conviction that education is the only route to a better future. But what happens after that?

The percentage of Muslims who completed middle school in 2001 was 26%. Those who finished the next level and became eligible for college were a mere 11.9%. Some improvement will definitely have occurred since 2001, but the pattern is evident. The higher you go, the less education you get.

That is why the Rs 25 crore Aligarh Muslim University affiliate at Murshidabad is not too late, although it remains too little.

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