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## The rise of Manjur Alam

There are lessons to be learned from the Chittagong elections. It is not enough to suggest, as lawmaker Hasanul Haq Inu has done, that the mayoral vote signifies a return of religious fanatics, militants and razakars to national politics. That is too simplistic an assessment. There is surely much more to it than that.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

YOU cannot begin to speak of the Chittagong mayoral election without taking note of the contributions of those who have made its outcome possible. Much as a joint secretary general of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party would like to under-emphasise the role of the Election Commission in the conduct of the election, the unalterable truth is that Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda and his team have convinced the nation that, on their watch, the people of Bangladesh can be privy to free and fair elections. They did it in December 2008. And they have done it again, in Chittagong. These are men we need if democracy is really to dig deeper roots in this country.

That said, it goes to the credit of Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury that he and his team in the BNP have been able to initiate and conduct a campaign that was decent, issue-based and change-oriented and which never for a moment entertained anything that could remind people of below-the-belt tactics in their bid to defeat ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury. Mahmud Chowdhury has proved his indispensability to the BNP and will from here on be a major player in the way the party shapes its responses to the needs of the future. The BNP is in sore need of such soft-speaking men of the masses.

Now comes the manner in which Mohammad Manjurul Alam conducted his campaign. Mild-mannered, respectful to his rival and not at all drawn to the abrasive or the polemical, he projected the image of a man whose fresh approach to politics in the port city convinced people that after sixteen years change was necessary in the mayoral office. Alam's humility and endless expressions of respect for his opponent left voters and, overall, citizens across the country with a heightened sense of admiration for him. He should be able to build on this admiration, now translated into electoral support for him, and go forth not only to add to Mohiuddin Chowdhury's achievements but also leave his own positive stamp on life and society in Chittagong.

The moment is also opportune for an appreciation of the role played by the ruling party in the post-election situation. The prime minister, the Awami League general secretary and indeed the Awami League as a whole have gracefully accepted the defeat of their man in Chittagong. That augurs well for democracy. More to the point, there has been no sign at all of the ruling party intimidating voters into rooting for Mohiuddin Chowdhury, no suggestion at all that party cadres simply walked off with ballot boxes. The local government minister has promised to cooperate with the new mayor. When that moment of cooperation is here, it will be the nation that will turn out to have been the recipient of fresh new dividends.

In all objectivity, the Chittagong mayoral election points us all in the direction of good, purposeful politics slowly coming into play, assuming of course that the degree of sophistication and fairness demonstrated in the port city is maintained. Beyond that, the election points to everything negative the Awami League has done in these one and a half years since its return to power and to all the positive it might yet accomplish in the months leading up to the next phase of general elections. Let Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina be under no illusion that the defeat of Mohiuddin Chowdhury in Chittagong is a localised affair with little bearing on national politics. There is, after all, the record of the recent past to demonstrate the sliding fortunes of the Awami League. Its supporters have lost elections to lawyers' associations; it has not been doing well among university teachers' associations; its leading lights have generally been speaking more than they have been delivering. And it has not yet had a grip on its unruly young followers.

There is more. People all over the country have been getting restive over electricity, water and gas. The government's headstrong position on the question of the appointment of two judges has only added to the controversy around the two men. The attitude is not helping it at all. An administration which believes in ethics being the centerpiece of government would have withdrawn the nominations of such judges once a cloud came over their past. And then comes the matter of the systematic way in which the ruling party has been whittling away at the powers of the Anti-Corruption Commission. The ACC is one body, among a handful, which can make a difference through asserting its authority everywhere. But when it is the government which chooses to expand its sphere of authority, to the detriment of the ACC and other bodies like it, public support for it takes a clear dive.

There are lessons to be learned from the Chittagong elections. It is not enough to suggest, as lawmaker Hasanul Haq Inu has done, that the mayoral vote signifies a return of religious fanatics, militants and razakars to national politics. That is too simplistic an assessment. There is surely much more to it than that.

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## The things that could have saved Sohrab

In his own old and obtuse way, he loves you more than almost anyone can, just as you return that love, just as vehemently, in your younger and "irresponsible" manner. So, keep showing the love, and make sure you hide the hair-gel and the girlfriend. Happy Father's Day.

IRSH ZAKER

JUNE 20 has always been a special day in my life on account of it, being my parents' marriage anniversary. The day is even more significant this year because it is their thirty-fifth such occasion. Way to go Zakers -- you have produced two wonderful children of whom I am sure you're mighty proud (I know I almost am!).

June 20 also happens to be Father's Day this year, making it a special day for dads in fifty-five countries around the world including Bangladesh. My mom is convinced that this is a conspiracy perpetrated by her worse half to get a larger share of the limelight on the occasion of their joint jubilee.

On this special occasion, I begged the editors at *The Daily Star* to give me the opportunity to write about the most exasperating relationship in a man's life, that of father and son (unless of course the man is a Liverpool or England fan, in which case the paternal relationship comes a close second in the exasperation scale.)

Thankfully the DS editors acquiesced to my endless letters and late night phone calls; amazing what a little bit of badgering can help accomplish!

After extensive research I discovered that the father and son relationship has been

around pretty much since the beginning of humankind, regardless of whether one subscribes to creationist or evolutionist interpretations of human origin.

The relationship has also been symbiotically frustrating since the very beginning. With each side driving the other insane for several millennia. Clearly, this is not a situation that can be allowed to persist for the sake of world peace, and the sustained perpetuation of our species.

Therefore, with 34 years of experience informing me, I have ventured to propose certain measures for sons around the world to adopt to help limit the number of hairs pulled out on either side of the father-son divide.

I would have liked to have done the same exercise for fathers, but my experience in that regard is nil, and we all know how smoothly our begetters accept advice from those who were born after Rabindranath Tagore. So here goes:

Fathers become old approximately around the same time that you hit puberty. So please research old people on Wikipedia, and deal with them accordingly. The reaction to puberty varies widely between any two generations, and the mode of reaction is a very sensitive topic.

So whatever way you choose to express your newly acquired power, make sure that your

father does not know about it. If you need to buy hair-gel, steal the money if you have to, but for the sake of all that is good, do not ask your father for it. Something as innocuous as hair-gel will inform your geriatric progenitor that you have truly gone over to the dark side, and any and all actions thereafter will be seen as proof of your close, personal friendship with Darth Vader.

Fathers never had girlfriends until they met your mother, and you should behave the same way. Of course, you are not expected to go through the best years of your life without female acquaintances, but they should be just that, acquaintances. At least, as far as your father is concerned.

Don't be fooled by Shashi Kapoor's ecstasy in the film "Bobby," when he found out that his son was in love. These things only happen in Hindi movies. In reality, the best son for a father is pretty much the one that gives no sign of ever wanting to engage in any form of intimacy with any being, living or dead, except the house pet.

You will never be as good a son to your father as your father was to his so just give up on that. Instead, should you accomplish something that might be considered worthy in your father's estimation, follow it up with: "But nothing like what you could have done for your dad, dad."

Or better yet, start every conversation with: "Of course I could never be as good a son to you as you were to your dad, dad." (Note: tone of voice should not betray any hint of sarcasm. Keep some glycerine handy for heightened emotional effect).

After a certain age (eighteen for most sons) just say yes to everything your dad says or tells you to do. After that do what you think is best.

Once, your dad gets used to you saying yes, he is unlikely to follow up on your actual actions.

Regardless of what your father says in terms of not caring about what you do in life, just so long as you do it well, he does and always will want you to be a doctor or an engineer.

So even if you own the three largest garments factories in the world by the time you are forty, and are providing livelihoods for six million impoverished women, you shall remain a disappointment. You will still have to listen to things like: "Sigh, what a great son your Dr. Salauddin Uncle's son Dr. Salauddin Jr. has turned out to be."

Do not try to convince your father about the worth of your achievements. It will not work. Instead, have sporadic conversations about the latest achievements in medical science, or engineering. Better yet, brandish an oncology book or two as your preferred reading. This will keep the hope alive that one day you shall be a doctor/engineer, and give immense peace to your father, and consequently to yourself.

And finally,

Love your dad. My favourite nephew lost his father a week ago, and it really brought home the reality of a fatherless life for me. We may get angry, frustrated, and downright stark raving mad by what they do and say, but at the end of the day, dad is dad.

In his own old and obtuse way, he loves you more than almost anyone can, just as you return that love, just as vehemently, in your younger and "irresponsible" manner. So, keep showing the love, and make sure you hide the hair-gel and the girlfriend. Happy Father's Day.

Irsh Zaker is an actor and advertising executive (co-incidentally the same professions as his father).

## For a face in that empty space

We should have sign-boards and posters of why a father is needed in my life. We should have discussions and debates on why fathers are allowed to get away with ruining my life and livelihood. We should have seminars and conferences on why there is an empty space in my art work today, a space that should be for the face of my father.

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

DEAR Father: Today is father's day and it would have been nice if I had actually known you. Today is the day we celebrate your existence, love and support, of which I am yet to experience. I wish I could have painted a picture of us holding hands at school today. But how to paint a picture of a person I have never seen? Today is father's day, a joyous day, but there are only tears and anger flooding through my mind.

Do you know who I am? I am the thousands of children you bore without any sense of responsibility. I am a statistic, the brown dirty face that sells the flowers, fruits and newspapers to the educated, the wealthy.

I sometimes look through the windows of the hundreds of cars that pass me by and see a father playing with his child. I stop to wonder if that man in all his morals and white shirt and suit is my father. At the same time, I wonder if my mother's story is right about my father being a rickshaw-puller who just left us one fine day to go back to his first wife in the village.

If you have not left me in dire poverty, you have left me in dire shame. I have no identity because you never gave me one. I don't know your name. I don't know where to find you. I can't even sit for my board examination or pay bills or have a medical certificate without your name. Where am I to get a name that I don't know? I am not sure why, but for some reason I am the fault of your inabilities and cruelties. I am the bastard, I am the nameless, originless being.

I sometimes wonder if leaving me for good was the best you did for me.

There are those of you with all your class, your money and education who will have me as a decoration piece, as your perfect additions to your perfect life. I am raised by ayahs who are more of a parent to me than either you or my mother.

You are content at having all the women in your life take care of me, raise me, fend for me. You will allow your mother to demean my mother's ability to be a parent. You will allow her to torment, dictate and in many cases, torture my mother and never stand up for the woman who is your wife and the mother of

your children. If you aren't striking my mother, I am bound to get the belt or the shoe at some point from you.

I am your legitimate heir. I am more of a testament to your manhood, to your ability to procreate.

If I am a boy, I may be ensured some basic nutrition and care. Maybe even an education. I will be encouraged to take up a trade or profession. If I am a girl, there is no guarantee if you and your family will let me live long enough after birth to open my eyes for the first time. If I am not dumped in a garbage truck or left at an orphanage, I will always be a burden to you -- one day my marriage will overshadow all my interests, desires, wishes and hopes.

And this is of fathers who own me, who want me.

While the society is obsessed with how mothers care for their children, the role of fathers in our lives is brought down to a minimum. If I am of a poor family, I should be content and happy with the fact that you, my father, do not abandon me, bring home some income (even if the majority of it is spent on bangla mod and gambling), and allow me to go to the local non-formal school.

If I am from a middle/upper-class family, there should be no complaints against you -- the father who feeds me, educates me, shelters me. The few slaps and overall distance should be overlooked. Confining me in your "safe" bhadrak aspirations to be a doctor or engineer should not be challenged because you are looking out for my interest.

Then there are those of you who truly wanted me. You wanted to have me and in

many a case, it did not matter to you if you gave birth to me or not. You are the type of father who loves being a baba. You are my protector and provider till I am 12, my antagonist during adolescence, and my best friend during the difficult adulthood.

You teach me to love, to cry, to read poetry, to play football, to sing, to love the first rain of monsoon, read me stories, encouraged my mischief but are stern when I go out of bounds. Rich or poor, you sacrifice whatever you can for my happiness.

You teach me to respect my elders and love those younger. You teach me to never judge by people's class, race, gender, creed, but by their deeds. You are the man I run to when my heart is broken and my dreams are shattered. Those of us who are fortunate to have a father like you, sometimes forget that you truly are one in a million.

While we promulgate how mothers should breast-feed, we should demand for our fathers to give birth to us only if they are willing to be responsible for us. We should have sign-boards and posters of why a father is needed in my life. We should have discussions and debates on why fathers are allowed to get away with ruining my life and livelihood. We should have seminars and conferences on why there is an empty space in my art work today, a space that should be for the face of my father.

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