

## This is unacceptable

### Minister for legalising extortion!

**S**HIPPING Minister Shahjahan Khan hogs headlines not for any development related news in his ministry but due to his startling, mind-boggling demands and comments. To begin with his latest antic, he has demanded before a parliamentary subcommittee that extortion be legalised in the transport sector. It is all too known how the rising fares have combined with stepped up extortionist activities to wreak havoc on the people.

But he thinks legalising tolls will stop corruption in the transport sector. So confident is he of his prescription he even charted a course of how the 'legal tolls' would be collected from buses, trucks, autorickshaws and labourers working in the sector. He wants working expenses of the trade unions to be garnered from extortion.

One can quite see that his identity as a minister and his credentials as a trade union leader have merged. In effect, the line between his being a cabinet minister with a given responsibility which allows no room for any conflict of interest to arise from any other hat he might have worn, stands blurred.

Clearly, he is in a denial mode as to the consequences of legitimising extortion in the transport sector. This can only open the flood-gate for corruption, extortion and rent-seeking in other sectors. Extortion which is another form of graft leads to marking up prices of services and goods across the board and therefore should be discouraged.

Not long ago, Shahjahan Khan emphasised that drivers be called 'service providers' and not 'killers'. True, so long as they drive competently and sensibly. The 'killer' label had been put on them following a series of road accidents including the one that took the lives of Tarek Masud and Mishuk Munir. He even bluntly suggested drivers had little use for education. This was in defence of a long list of names he had recommended for recruitment as drivers.

So there is a pattern to the minister's keeping his transport constituency in good humour even at the cost of public interest that he is oath-bound to serve.

## Save rivers from dying

### A river management body should be in place

**T**HE deteriorating condition of our rivers has ceased to be news to us. In fact, we have grown accustomed to rivers either dying or narrowing down due to encroachment and illegal filling compounded by dumping of industrial and other types of waste. All these are manmade interferences in the form of gross violation of the environmental laws. More than one-third of the country's rivers is fast drying up, taking a heavy toll on our environment and river communication system.

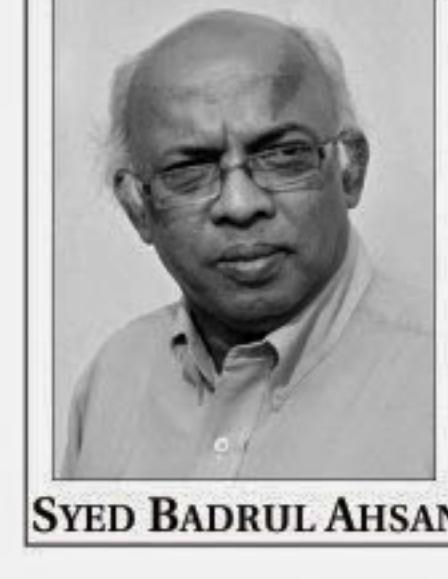
This dismal picture was given by the Water Resources Minister Ramesh Chandra Sen himself while he was replying to lawmakers' queries in parliament. Of the country's 310 rivers, no less than 97 have already lost navigability while the others are also facing serious threats from encroachment and grabbing. Quite alarmingly, 35,000 km of the country's waterways has shrunk to only 3,500 km.

The minister, however, highlighted only the natural factor of silt deposition in riverbeds, overlooking the manmade factors which are also responsible for constricting our water bodies, especially our rivers. As we know it, silt deposition is a natural process which happens when the currents of a river flowing downstream are reduced in velocity. With more and more rivers losing the flow of their currents, silt deposition has become a persistent problem, reducing the navigability of our rivers.

Obviously, this is one of the many factors that are responsible for the sorry state of our rivers and addressing it does not offer a comprehensive solution. What we really need in order to save our rivers is to form a unified, functional river authority that will supervise the overall management of our rivers. It can work in association with the Department of Environment to checkmate dumping of industrial waste into rivers and immediately stop encroachment and illegal grabbing of our rivers. It should also be in charge of dredging up the shallow riverbeds, which in itself is a huge task needing

## GROUND REALITIES

# A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and his brave team



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**A**.T.M. Shamsul Huda will be remembered for the high standards he set at the nation's Election Commission

in the five years he presided over it. When you reflect on the confidence with which he and his team went about setting the Commission back on track after all the disastrous experiments it had gone through before they took charge, you will be reminded of individuals like Justice Abdus Sattar and T.N. Seshan. Sattar remains the man who organised, with a degree of competence rarely matched, the first general elections in Pakistan in December 1970. It is another matter that those elections were eventually set aside by the very military junta which had come into office promising democracy for Pakistan. But there has never been any question of the integrity and efficiency that Justice Sattar brought into the office of chief election commissioner.

The Indian T.N. Seshan, for a very large number of people in South Asia, remains the epitome of what a diligent, purposeful chief election commissioner ought to be. He was never one to be browbeaten into fear or doubt by anyone, least of all by politicians in office. What mattered for him was the purity of the elective process and he did a good job of ensuring that no hint of unfairness came to be associated with all the elections he oversaw during his term as chief election commissioner.

Our happiness today is that A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and his two colleagues have left behind the refreshing feeling that elections do not have to be stolen

to be won, that voters do not have to stay home from a sense of ennui because they know that their votes will be cast for them. You have to go back to where all such questions about the legitimacy of the electoral process began in Bangladesh, to a point where you have the notorious instance of the Justice Aziz-led Election Commission manufacturing voters out of nothing and spending tons of money on committing the felony. Again, there came with that bit of tinkering the huge probability of those holding political office returning to the same through elections that were anything but fair. Think here of the voting planned for January 22, 2007. Rigging, thoughts of it, dripped from the roof.

There is, of course, the terrible

*Therein Huda deserves our tribute. Therein Sakhawat Hussain and Sohul Hossain are deserving of our gratitude. Because of these three brave men, we are today better off, electorally speaking, than we were five years ago. Their successors must now convince us that they can build on this truth.*

Now that A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and his team are gone, it becomes possible for us to take a step back and observe the honesty and sense of purpose which they brought into the working of the Election Commission. Having come into office during the period of the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker administration, one that is under quite a cloud these days, Huda and his team were always suspect. There was the sordid tale of the caretaker attempt to promote a so-called minus two theory, through pushing Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia out of politics. There was too the very public manner of the formation of some political parties that gave off the whiff of government involvement in the process. Besides, the excesses of the government, backed as it was by the

then, Huda accomplished the job exceedingly well in December 2008. In an electoral exercise that was as fair as it was clean, he emerged, for all the battering he had been getting over the months, a heroic figure. His sense of duty was all. Nothing intimidated him. Not the politicians, not the myriad sceptics ready to pounce on him should he stumble somewhere.

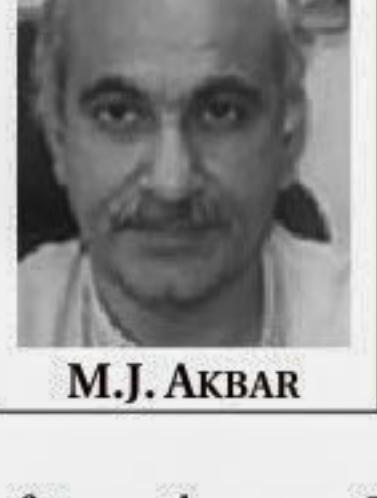
An individual in a responsible position needs a whole lot more than personal integrity. Huda's integrity was, and will be, beyond reproach. But a specific quality he brought into his integrity was to pass it on to all the election officials who would serve under him. His sense of self-esteem was huge, which he transferred to everyone at the Election Commission. It was leadership of a bold kind, stewardship that was infectious in its assertion. When you have a leader whose understanding of the choices before him is clear, when he knows that it is the collective weal of a nation he must channelise into the right direction, you know you cannot go wrong.

The Election Commission, through the general elections, through the by-elections, through the mayoralty elections, did not go wrong on A.T.M. Shamsul Huda's watch. Exercising our right to vote in line with our conscience is a truth Huda and his team have put back up on the high pedestal of governance.

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The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

## BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

# At the drop of a tear

**T**EARS are a fragile weapon in public life. Their success rate is so low that it is rarely wise to display them. People check what kind of tears they are. Sentiment can be a powerful virtue in mass mobilisation, but sentimentality never works. Tears of helplessness or regret invite scorn: the first is evidence of impotence, the second is proof of uselessness.

Law Minister Salman Khurshid committed double jeopardy when he tried to win Muslim sympathy during the current UP Assembly campaign by claiming that his leader Mrs. Sonia Gandhi cried when he showed her pictures of the Batla House incident more than three years ago, in which Delhi police shot down suspected terrorists. The dead young men were from east UP.

Khurshid was trying to send multiple signals simultaneously with this purported claim, not least of them being his personal proximity with the leader. It just might have worked if Mrs. Sonia Gandhi had been leader of the opposition during the Batla House encounter. Instead, this lachrymose recollection backfired spectacularly. Instead of being the answer to a dilemma that has troubled Congress since it happened, it awakened fresh and self-defeating questions.

If Mrs. Gandhi was so moved by pictures of dead young Muslims, what did she do about it? She was not a helpless politician. The home minister of India and the chief minister of Delhi

belonged to her party in 2008. Why did she not take any action against them if she thought they were wrong, and the killings were an act of police excess? Was Mrs. Gandhi merely shedding crocodile tears? Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has successfully maintained a distance from government on controversies like this. Khurshid's faux pas has inadvertently carried the blame to her desk. Khurshid claims he briefed her. He showed her photographs which presumably blew the police version apart, inducing tears. She cried. And then? Three years of nothing.

We cannot blame Khurshid for addressing the subject, even if he chose to overdo it. The memory of the Batla House encounter has been troubling UP Muslims, and has clearly affected its electoral attitude. No politician touches a controversy unless compelled to. But the memory of Batla House was far more fresh during the general elections of 2009. Why was it absent from the electoral agenda

more havoc than perhaps any Indian leader. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has fashioned her political image in her mother-in-law's cast.

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*If Mrs. Sonia Gandhi was so moved by pictures of dead young Muslims, what did she do about it? She was not a helpless politician. Why did she not take any action against them if she thought they were wrong, and the killings were an act of police excess? Was Mrs. Gandhi merely shedding crocodile tears?*

Mrs. Gandhi clearly understood the inherent contradictions immediately, and authorised the Congress general secretary in charge of Uttar Pradesh, Digvijay Singh, to dismiss Khurshid's story as fanciful. Perhaps she was also embarrassed by an implicit stereotype to which women are subjected: women are expected to be teary. Mrs. Gandhi does not see herself as a gushy person. Would any colleague of Mrs. Indira Gandhi have ever suggested that she wept profusely after any incident, and Mrs. Gandhi saw

then? The Congress soared from a measly 22 Assembly victories in 2007 to a stunning 22 Lok Sabha seats in 2009 largely because of Muslim support in UP. This means a virtual quadrupling of Assembly seats: you have to win over 80 Assembly segments to get 22 MPs. More proof, here, of the maturity of the Indian electorate. It does not rush to judgement at the frantic pace of a politician in search of brownie points or a press desperate for screaming headlines.

UP Muslims had empathy for Mrs.

Sonia Gandhi, because they did not consider her complicit in the destruction of the Babri mosque. Her credibility bought her time. But they have watched with increasing dismay as the Congress government permitted Home Minister P. Chidambaram to justify the Batla House incident as legitimate without even the grace of an independent enquiry. Muslims are tired of sops dangled before an election, which then mysteriously disappear once the vote is in.

Rahul Gandhi's optimism about Uttar Pradesh rests almost entirely on a repeat endorsement of the Congress by the Muslim voter. He has played every card of image and identity politics, including lengthening his beard when calling upon clerics. All this may be amusing, but it is not a substitute for substance. No one knows what the results will be; secrecy is the privilege of the voter, just as speculation is the day job of the pundit. But this just might be an election in which the worth of a candidate could be more important than the weight of a party.

The only leader, at least in my knowledge, who used a teardrop effectively was the great Kashmiri giant Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, when he came under sudden pressure in the last days of the 1977 Kashmir campaign. Eyes moist during his last rally in Srinagar, he reminded his people of his lifelong sacrifice and commitment. He won by a landslide. But his eyes never went moist a second time.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today and Headlines Today*.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 15

590

Khosrau II is crowned king of Persia.

1906

The British Labour Party is organised.

1946

ENIAC, the first electronic general-purpose computer, is formally dedicated at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

1989

Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan: The Soviet Union officially announces that all of its troops have left Afghanistan.

2001

First draft of the complete human genome is published in *Nature*.

2003

Protests against the Iraq war take place in over 600 cities worldwide. It is estimated that between 8 million to 30 million people participate, making this the largest peace demonstration in history.