

## The bus plunge tragedy

*Another reflection of blasé attitude to highway safety*

ANY unnatural death diminishes humanity but when fatalities are claimed in a drove by a highway accident that was basically preventable, the sense of grief and loss is all the more pronounced. A bus from Khulna, bound for Barisal, was carrying passengers almost treble its capacity, disaster-prone by that one single factor. But more was lying in wait. As it took the rundown diversion road in Madaripur the driver lost control getting one of the vehicle's front wheels stuck in a crater-like pothole. The next thing was a plunge upside down killing 15 and injuring 50, many of whom seriously.

Short stretches of diversion roads are booby traps. They have overshot many a deadline for a closer as the highway repairs themselves procrastinate. The bus overloaded and speeding the driver naturally could have very little control over his vehicle, and to top it off there was the rundown diversion road to negotiate. So all odds were stacked against the passengers.

Reckless driving of overloaded vehicles even in precarious road condition is a criminal offence, no doubt. But is it the transport operator who is to be blamed alone? Actually, leaving them to their devices is no less culpable an offence on the part of host of authorities. They include BRTA, transport owners, various unions and associations, road or diversion engineers and contractors and, above all, those who are supposed to be there to enforce highway safety rules viz. highway patrols conspicuous by their virtual absence.

Basically, human lives are undervalued as long as they don't belong to our near and dear ones. That is where the approach to highway safety goes wrong. When Buet put annual death toll at 12,000 and those injured at 35,000 due to accidents, going by number of police FIRs for 2011 it was only 836. The transport ministry's figure differs from those of Buet. As we get our figures right for an appropriate mitigation strategy to be evolved focused on prevention, let's go all-out for a mass awareness programme to sensitise people about their own responsibility in avoiding risks on roads.

## Fake question paper selling bust

*Recurrence of the malady worrisome*

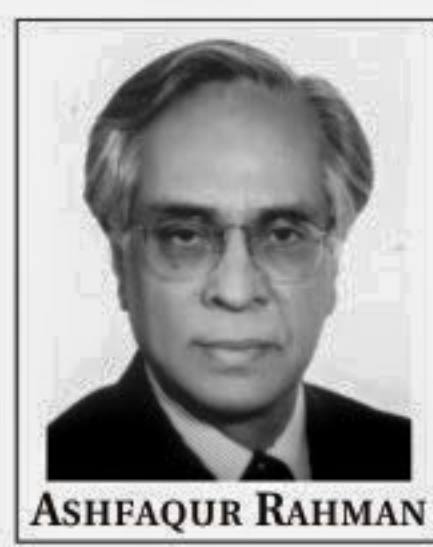
IT was with relief that we read the news that police busted a racket for selling fake question papers to candidates for recruitment to the post of assistant teachers in government primary schools. The incident took place in four north-western districts including Kurigram and Gaibandha. We thank the law enforcers because of their prompt action to save candidates from being cheated.

However, we are quite familiar with news of irregularities in various public examinations, including genuine leakage of questions which is more serious than revelation of fake questions.

Masterminds behind these corrupt practices most of the time manage to get away. In the last couple of years, allegations of negligence in university admission tests have also surfaced in media. Scores of admission-seeking students are still suffering due to alleged anomalies in test questions.

Corruption and negligence in conducting important public examinations only allow for inept candidates to step in as public officials, thus impeding recruitment of the qualified ones. We wonder how an appointee, recruited through such unfair means, will deliver his services with efficiency and integrity.

Therefore, all authorities concerned with recruitment of personnel should take full proof measures to ensure the sanctity and integrity of recruitment test. Although we have been made aware of PSC's innovative approach to conducting transparent and fair exams, incidents of leakage have yet to stop. As for university authorities, an effective action plan is also expected from the university authorities to pre-empt any blunder in admission test



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

THE chief minister of Paschimbanga (West Bengal) is a feisty lady called Mamata Banerjee. Born in 1960 she

recorded her year of birth officially as 1955, in order to be able to appear in the secondary examination.

Her political career began in the early seventies, and she rose from the rank of general secretary of the state Mohila Congress (1976) to be elected the chief minister of one of the important states of India (2011). But she did not use a Congress ticket to contest the state election. In 1998, she came out of Congress and established her own party -- Trinamool Congress.

By dint of hard work and personal convictions she agitated against the communist government that ruled Paschimbanga for 34 years. The government by then had become fossilised. It was a gerontocracy of leaders who were afraid of change. There was economic stagnation and rise in unemployment. The demographics of Paschimbanga was ultimately the undoing of the communists. The growing numbers of the young, finding fewer jobs, revolted. Mamata, with her relative youth and a simmering anger, stepped in and collected their votes and showed the government the door.

On assuming power as chief minister in 2011 she started with a bang. In the first 90 days she took some astonishing populist steps.

First, Mamata signed a tripartite agreement on Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, in Darjeeling. This was the end of a festering instability that had intended to establish an autonomous territory for the Gorkhas, a fierce, warlike community in north Bengal. It was signed among the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), the Paschimbanga state and the central government of India.

The other initiative Mamata took was to present a development package for Maoist dominated Jangal Mahal in south Bengal.

On the economic front she took steps to set up a Land Bank and form a core committee on industrialization, and focused her attention on education, health, family welfare and information technology. She seemed to be pushing ahead to transform the state

economy. But she was peeved with the central government for failing to meet her state's fiscal needs.

In her just published memoirs called My unforgettable memoirs, Mamata portrays herself as a no-nonsense individual who lives a Spartan life. When she went as a delegate to the United Nations in New York, she went shopping to bring back gifts for her nieces with the \$100 she had saved. She mistook chap sticks for lipsticks as she had never put on make-up and bought them, to the disappointment of the recipients.

angered the people and the government of Bangladesh because it was one of the substantive agreements expected to be initiated in Dhaka.

When in Dhaka, the Indian delegation had also signed with Bangladesh, an agreement on the exchange of enclaves in each other's territories as well as on adversely possessed lands. But Mamata fumed and raged. She has since been seeking a review of these understandings.

Of late, she is also challenging the agreement signed in 1996 with Bangladesh on sharing the waters of

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In New York, she surprised the cleaning lady in her hotel room when the maid found a saucepan in the bathroom. Mamata was using this to draw water from the taps for her bath. Mamata Banerjee was just being Mamta Banerjee!

But the chief minister has now evolved to be a political maverick in her dealings with the Indian central government as well as the government of Bangladesh. She also seems to be ignorant about geography.

In January this year, when she addressed a meeting of industry captains on "Bengal leads -2012," she said that "Bangladesh is on the border of Pakistan" (reported in the Deccan Herald, February 22). In the same event she is reported to have said that, as chief minister, she represented 1.2 billion people of West Bengal. Such statements coming from such a responsible person makes one wonder whether she is aware of her position.

Affectionately known in Paschimbanga as "didi" (elder sister) she embarrassed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last September when, at the eleventh hour, she refused to accompany him and the chief ministers of four north eastern states of India on an official visit to Dhaka. She had already vetoed the central government proposal to share the waters of the Teesta river with Bangladesh on an equal basis. The Indian prime minister relented and deferred the signing of the Teesta accord. This, of course,

the Ganges river. The thirty-year treaty ends in 2016. She wants it to be revisited before the validity expires.

Suddenly, she has also discovered that two sluice gates at the Farraka barrage, which regulates the flow of the Ganges, were damaged. As a result, according to her, Bangladesh is getting more than its "apportioned" share of water. She has complained in writing to the central government and also met Prime Minister Manmohan on the matter last week. The prime minister has asked for an investigation as to how the sluice gates were damaged in the first place.

So what is it that makes the central government in India pay obeisance to this cantankerous lady?

Under the Indian constitution, the states must be consulted and their agreement obtained before any treaty which affects the interest of those states is signed with an external power. That is well and good. But in the case of the aborted Teesta accord, the state of Paschimbanga was duly consulted. But Mamata reneged at the last moment.

There is more to this than meets the eye. There is an electoral mathematics that Mamata has already calculated. On his own, Prime Minister Manmohan does not command enough seats in parliament to form a government. He has to rely on the crucial 19 seats that belong to Mamata's Trinamool congress to prop up his government.

So if an angry Mamata withholds her

support, the coalition government at the centre will fall. The prime minister knows this too well and therefore has to politically kowtow to her. Mamata is also looking at her voters, and does not want any deal with Bangladesh that affects their interest in any way. That would revive the hopes of the defeated leftist parties in the state who may wedge in.

Mamata's Trinamool Congress is also fighting elections in Uttar Pradesh, Goa and Manipur. She is hopeful of garnering more support from these states and capturing more seats in the parliament. She thinks that the wheel of fortune will continue to turn in her favour.

However, if the congress party to which the prime minister belongs, and is also fighting the elections, has its predictions correct, it might add 22 seats in the parliament at Delhi. Manmohan would then not be at the mercy of Mamata. He may as well then make her irrelevant.

The spat between Congress and the Trinamool Congress has spurred Mamata to convert Trinamool from a patchwork party to a party with all-India ambitions. She is advertising it as a new, clean, pro-people organisation. At the core it is, therefore, a tussle over India's political space. The Congress-Trinamool alliance now is more of an exercise in electoral arithmetic, rather than one based on a common policy vision.

But the electoral alliance is also cemented on certain reciprocal benefits. Mamata does need Manmohan to fund Paschimbanga's mammoth development plans, while the centre needs Trinamool support in the coming budget session.

So, as Mamata remains on a warpath with Congress to spread her wings all over India, how does it impact Bangladesh? Some of our vital interests are indeed being subverted. We are getting the lashing of the tail from the internal feud without the pat on our back, which was expected.

Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina had taken some bold initiatives in 2010 at considerable political risk to carve out a regime of mutual trust that would engage India to build a prosperous region. That dream, for the moment, seems partly shattered. We may have to wait sometime more before Mamata is tamed.

The writer is a former Ambassador and a regular commentator on contemporary issues. E-mail: ashfaq303@gmail.com

# Asian nation states: The necessity of introspection

PHAR KIM BENG

FOR several decades already, Western scholars and academics have been discussing the origins of nation states.

Just how did they come about? The question is valid. First of all, unlike other polities, nation states make a full claim on the use of violence.

Secondly, nation states insist on collecting taxes even when the service rendered is poor. Thirdly, nation states, to this day, cannot overcome their avaricious appetite for land, markets, profit and power.

The late Mancur Olson, an economist who made his name at the University of Maryland, had a very interesting theory to account for all of these questions. According to Olson, human societies began as roving units. Some went on to become sedentary entities. This was achieved as they began tilling fields and rearing sustainable livestock.

However, while animal husbandry and agriculture formed the backbone of the basic economy, security was not assured. In fact, it was under the perennial threat of external attacks; especially by marauding hunter-gatherers and natural predators. The former would pillage and plunder at the expense of others.

Nevertheless, it would eventually dawn on the attackers that the more

such acts of extraction occurred, the more they would lose as communities began to better defend themselves.

Thus, the robber barons would progressively find themselves having less to reap; especially if the frequency of their attacks increased. Olson believes that nation states began at this point.

Instead of stealing and robbing indefinitely, the perpetrators decided to offer security and protection in

done in the name of building the state -- is avoided.

Sadly, there are two distinct disadvantages to ignoring the past, no matter how unsavoury. First, when one's historical consciousness is tweaked, there is almost zero appreciation of the importance of accountability. As such, egregious transgressions are likely to happen again, albeit in other forms. And, they do. Corruption, constitu-

tion is sublimated too. It makes the people less conscious -- if at all -- of their national warts. Invariably, they become more self righteous and assertive in pressing their claims, without realising that others are threatened by these one-dimensional pursuits.

The history of how the nation state emerged is critical. Without at least a semblance of theoretical account, nation states quickly suffer from selective amnesia. They inflate their claims to make them appear stronger and better; as is the case in the conflict over the Preah Vihear temple complex between Thailand and Cambodia.

Come what may, there is a need for Asian governments and scholars to revisit their past; no matter how painful and insidious. Only when they realise their previous transgressions -- with the attendant effort to build a better future -- will nation states be gradually purged of their original sins. Barring this contrite act, a nation state will remain arrogant, especially if it is anchored in an ethno-nationalist ideology. And, as their power grows, their arrogance can make them blind to their own flaws.

The writer is Director, Trans-Asia Centre at the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, Kuala Lumpur.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 26

- 1815** Napoleon Bonaparte escapes from Elba.
- 1909** Kinemacolor, the first successful color motion picture process, is first shown to the general public at the Palace Theatre in London.
- 1971** U.N. Secretary General U Thant signs United Nations proclamation of the vernal equinox as Earth Day.
- 1980** Egypt and Israel establish full diplomatic relations.
- 1991** Gulf War: United States Army forces capture the town of Al Busayyah.
- 1992** Nagorno-Karabakh War: Khojaly Massacre: Armenian armed forces open fire on Azeri civilians at a military post outside the town of Khojaly leaving hundreds dead.