

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Fair elections, unfair governance!

Concern for physically challenged

Enabling environment needed

DESPITE the fact that 9 per cent of the population are physically challenged, the national budget allocates less than 0.5 per cent for their development. Even this pittance hardly reaches the beneficiaries at the right time at the right place.

The physically challenged people have also to come up against social barriers to their integration into the mainstream. This happens at educational institutions, workplaces, while at the service providing organisations under the public and private sectors, they are often discriminated against when they approach for any service.

Such attitude of the public towards the differently-able is somewhat deep-seated. This social barrier facing the physically challenged people's integration into the mainstream would necessitate a change in the people's attitude through awareness creation.

So far, public perception about the challenged was one of providing welfare or relief. Since they did not look physically perfect, those concerned about them gave emphasis on undertaking welfare-oriented programmes. Given the opportunity, they can contribute equally, if not more, than the otherwise normal members of society. To enable them to do so would require their empowerment.

The government will have to first enhance the status of the physically challenged. Policymakers in the government would need to frame laws and ensure that every national programme is designed in such a way that they are inclusive of the physically challenged. The yearly national budget itself should reflect the government's concern about them. The allowance they already get from the national budget should be increased in terms of amount as well as coverage.

At the same time, the overall environment of the educational institutions, workplaces and the service providing agencies has to be made physically challenged-friendly. The marketplaces, schools, colleges and universities should be provided with ramps and other facilities to ease their movement. Similar arrangements for them will have to be made in public transports.

While we need to undertake inclusive national development programmes to provide space for the physically challenged, it has also to address their poverty and gender-related aspects.

Muzaffer Ahmad's passing

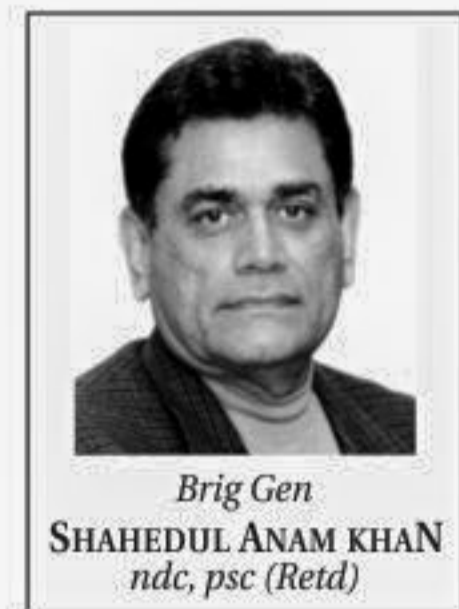
A voice of conscience falls silent

PROFESSOR Muzaffer Ahmad's passing leaves us all impoverished, for his was a voice of conscience for this country. In the manner of so many other eminent citizens deeply concerned about the present and future of this country, the now deceased scholar played a prominent role in organizing civil society in Bangladesh and seeing to it that the opinions of those who constituted this society were taken proper cognizance of. Indeed, it would be quite proper to suggest that Professor Muzaffer was the one man who understood clearly that when politics failed to address the concerns of the masses, it remained for broad society as a whole to step into the void and try making a difference.

In his lifetime and in his various roles --- as an academic, as an economist, as a social activist and as a political commentator --- Professor Muzaffer was able to persuade people into believing that resignation to mundane realities was not the answer to the issues that assailed a society every day. It was only when a sense of awareness developed or about the many contradictions in society and the surefire ways in which the contradictions could be handled that a nation could move into the future. That is the legacy, we can tell ourselves as Muzaffer Ahmad goes beyond the pale of the living, the former chairman of Transparency International Bangladesh has left for us to build on. His concern about the state of human rights, his reflections on the need for politics to rise above the parochial, his belief that the nation could not afford to stay divided along political lines and his faith in the ability of the political leadership to eventually find a way out of the woods for the nation were ideas that sustained him both in his private ruminations and in his public pronouncements.

Professor Muzaffer Ahmad had no dearth of detractors. Men of his kind sometimes arouse intense passion of the negative sort in those who do not share their beliefs. In the end, though, it is these men who survive the fire and fury caused by their intellectual approach to the issues. Muzaffer always stood taller than those who tried to make light of him.

Let his soul be at peace. And let his family find the courage



Brig Gen
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FOR the good part of the 20 years since democracy was resurrected in 1991 we have been occupied by one issue ... how the

elections would be held. In 1996 the political parties settled for a unique dispensation -- the caretaker system -- since, under the atmosphere of a severe deficit of trust between the two parties, there was no other alternative. There seems to be no alternative now either.

Although the protagonists have changed their respective positions on the issue, the matter remains to plague the political atmosphere of the country. And while we have had relatively fair elections since 1991, look at how the electorates have been treated, most unfairly, insofar as governance is concerned.

Rooting for the caretaker system, the BNP won't budge an inch, and the AL, having used the yet-to-be-finally written verdict on the 5th Amendment to bin the system, are busy singing its final requiem, having declared their firm commitment not to see the face of a dispensation that, objectively speaking, was a damning narrative of our political immaturity. And only very recently the prime minister has termed the system a demon.

What should we make of a party that demonises its own offspring as the PM has done? The CTG was fathered by AL, having undergone, as a party, tremendous travails, and having put the country and the people under even more hardship. The AL never tires of flaunting the fact that the CTG of 1/11 was the result of its agitation. What has happened for the AL to disown the child that has helped it to come to power with a resounding majority?

Perhaps the PM's comments have been compelled by the experiences of the days immediately following

the imposition of emergency in 2006, which, at the expense of drawing the wrath of the politicians, one has to say, was a welcome relief for the public who had been enduring a stifling atmosphere with no apparent deliverance from the situation brought about by the antagonism between the two parties. The party in power, BNP, was determined not to relinquish power at any cost and devised all sorts of things to retain it; and the opposition's desperation for power at any cost had brought the country to the threshold of a precipice.

1991, 1996, 2001?

The question is what good is an election if those that are preferred by the people to run the affairs of the state fail to deliver? It is difficult to find a correlation between free, fair and neutral election and good governance in our context. And it is good governance that we are interested in.

Citing examples of the past government and harping on its track record cannot justify the present government's actions or inactions or its failure to fulfill the electoral pledges so fulsomely announced in

down in good governance while so easily forgetting that we have had a democratic system that has been running longer than the two military regimes combined.

Several aspects that cause us worry are the political hostility that has made democracy dysfunctional, the state of law and order, and the rule of law that has been used to circumvent, if not thwart, justice, and of course corruption. All these combined have made good governance almost impossible. And these have been very well captured in the comments of the finance minister at a seminar last Saturday. Perhaps citing one example to highlight the situation in each of the issues would be enough to flag the point.

As for politics, when a people's representative uses his weapon to fend off the voters that had elected him with a big majority to the parliament, than there is everything to be worried about the state of politics in Bangladesh.

As for the rule of law, we have a situation of, "Show me the man and I'll show you the law." It has been almost 3 three and half months without a single lead in the journalist couple's murder coming to light, while it has taken only 22 days to establish that most of the 28 accused opposition leaders were involved in exploding the bomb in the secretariat. It doesn't speak much of the police when 28 people conduct the blast but no one was apprehended from the place of occurrence.

As for corruption, the major donor and development partners' stand on transparency and honesty belie the government's claim of its impeccability in this regard. And I do not think that even the home minister believes herself when she says that the state of law and order has been the best for many years.

Fair elections are not enough, we demand good governance too.

The writer is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

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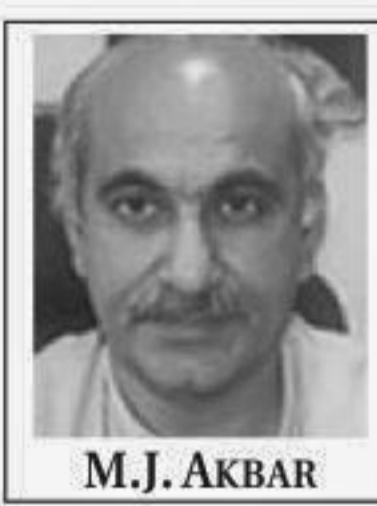


If what followed in the two years of the emergency was an aberration one wonders whether what followed after the elections of 2008 was any less, given the way things have turned out in the last three years, or those that followed the successful democratic elections of

its manifesto. Such arguments only reinforce popular view that there has been an incremental decline in the quality of governance. Interestingly, some politicians and scholars find the past military regimes convenient whipping boys for all the malfunctions and break-

BYLINE

Shahrukh Khan: The limits of destiny



M.J. AKBAR

MONEY is a strange aphrodisiac. It stiffens obstinacy and softens the brain, when the reverse might be far more useful.

Add a bit of face recognition, which celebrities crave and idol-worshippers offer, and the cocktail becomes so heady it takes only a moment to explode in your face. Petulance is but a step away, since celebrities consider it injurious to their health to admit guilt. Not every superstar becomes victim of this syndrome, but few escape an occasional attack of mania.

I have met Shahrukh Khan twice, once recently; and perhaps fleetingly on a third occasion. That is certainly not evidence of proximity, let alone acquaintance. But the little I know confirmed the first impression. He is an extremely likeable and intelligent person.

His finest quality is a gentle sense of humour punctuated by sharp, even caustic observation. But he could laugh at the world without injuring relationships because he included himself in that world. He had neither the manner nor the conversation of a cloud-dweller; and if he sat on a pedestal, he made sure that his feet touched the ground from that lofty perch which lifted him from obscurity.

There will be many explanations

as to why he lost his temper at the Wankhede stadium. An important one could be stress. He is not young anymore; his first song on the screen was sung a quarter century ago, as any music channel on television will tell you -- those songs now appear among the oldies. Age is the abyss of dread for any actor who has promised the elixir of youth to his worshippers. The excruciating gymnastics required to hide age from the tell-tale muscle tone are pre-

and when the measure of your worth is controlled by an image that cannot be protected from decay, wisdom demands recognition of limits. That, alas, is easier written than done.

The hero of imagined space wafts on the cherubic celebration of adulation, even as he contends with private demons that become monstrous in those hours when an individual must remain with himself. Guilt has many dimensions.

The human being is never master of all he surveys, but he has been given the intellect to recognise that destiny has to pause at some destination.

cisely that, excruciating.

To camouflage age is a punishing business, and torture does not become any less searing merely because it is self-imposed. You have to whip your body to deny it its natural gravitational pull towards flab. When medieval Catholic monks flagellated themselves, they had at least the comfort of doing so in the cause of God. I cannot believe that money would mean anything anymore to a middle-class boy who has earned as much as Shahrukh did when he became a man; so the provocation can only be the ego, and that insane desire to remain atop a summit that is not merely above, but beyond, competition. Ambition is a legitimate virtue; without it, we would not have much progress. But when you are your own product,

Those who survive on the admiration of others bear the cross of how much love they have given to others, including their children. Both you and your children grow older at the same time; and at some point the intersection must come, when children depart to have their own children. Time shortens on both sides of the equation. The sceptical question in your child's eye reduces the glories of the world to an ephemeral mirage; and perhaps the temptation to win the child by an expression of power over a fawning world becomes irresistible.

Shahrukh's great predecessors searched for notional alchemists who could deliver them from demons. Sometimes the night passed in stupor, and the day in self-deception. Raj Kapoor, an

authentic genius, danced brilliantly while singing "Suno ji suno, hamari bhi suno" with Waheeda Rehman, but the puff around the cheeks had changed the face that had mesmerised both Nadira and India in Sree 420.

Dilip Kumar had generations at his command, but could not resist continuing long after he peaked in Mughal e Azam and Gunga Jumna. Dev Anand thought he could defeat time by hiding sagging skin with high collars and a scarf. Time had a harsh answer, mockery. Dev Anand should have treaded warily through the 1970s and never stepped into the 1980s, let alone the 21st century. There is nothing called evergreen. Wood merely takes a longer time to die.

The purpose of life must change for those who have crossed the middle of its finite span. Shahrukh Khan should live in memory as a symbol of joy, not of anger. I cannot believe that he can succumb to the arrogance of wealth. That would be a disappointment too far. The human being is never master of all he surveys, but he has been given the intellect to recognise that destiny has to pause at some destination.

Shahrukh Khan invented a persona that has given us extraordinary delight. The moment has come for him to reinvent himself.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 24

1915 World War I: Italy declares war on Austria-Hungary.

1940 Igor Sikorsky performs the first successful single-rotor helicopter flight.

1943 Holocaust: Josef Mengele becomes chief medical officer of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

1948 ArabIsraeli War: Egypt captures the Israeli kibbutz of Yad Mordechai, but the five-day effort gives Israeli forces time to prepare enough to stop the Egyptian advance a week later.

2000 Israeli troops withdraw from southern Lebanon after 22 years of occupation.

2002 Russia and the United States sign the Moscow Treaty.