

The thrillseekers among us



NO STRINGS ATTACHED
AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

ADVENTUROUS is not the first word that pops into one's mind when thinking of us Bangladeshis. Hospitable? Yes. Warm? Yes. Resilient? Definitely yes. And laidback? Yes. But "adventurous"?

Perhaps we are getting the word wrong. How about "adrenaline junkie"? People who just love living on the edge, some of them engaging in extreme sports like surfing, paragliding, mountain climbing, tightrope walking between buildings without a safety net, you get the drift. Without trying to undermine their amazing feats, one does get the impression that these individuals get a kick out of having "near-death experiences" as frequently as possible. And here lies the similarity with the people of this country.

Take the classic jaywalker near a busy crossroad who couldn't give two hoots to the killer bus that lunges forward with all its might on the little human being who has the audacity to lift a puny hand and signal stop, even when the lights have gone green. What is most amazing is that in most cases, the vehicles, no matter how mighty, actually do stop, albeit screeching with disbelief and perhaps inflicting considerable bodily harm to the passengers within. It is as if the drivers behind those killer wheels become hypnotised by "The Hand" no matter how small and unimpressive.

There are also the "street surfers" who contort their bodies meandering through traffic in between buses, jumping on or jumping off those crazy vehicles while they are moving, dangling like jackfruits, half their bodies exposed to the carbon monoxide, dust and other speeding buses. These individuals are no less fearless than surfers and scuba divers—who have had limbs torn off by irritated sharks—for they risk the loss of limb every time they try their Houdini acts knowing full well the ruthlessness and sadistic streak of our dear bus/truck drivers.

Speaking of which, bus and truck drivers are perhaps the most intense adrenaline junkies: they may or may not know how to drive, have a driving licence, but who believe in the motto "To live is to always be on the



Are we really incurable thrillseekers or is there something inherently missing from our sense of logic regarding the probability of death under certain circumstances? PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

brink of death. "Reckless" is their middle name and risking the lives of their passengers or other fellow beings in other vehicles or on the highways is part of the thrill. With no deterrent in the form of stringent, enforced laws to hold them back, these are really the "killers on the road." Often operating under the influence of various narcotics including alcohol, they add to the thrill by taking, at the behest of their bosses, inhuman number of trips so that they are also abominably

sleep-deprived. The result is the death races that we see on the highways, creating the jaw-dropping statistics of casualties as a result of these daredevil acts gone wrong. But there are other daredevils who surf the streets in other ways. Let us not forget the swarms of motorcyclists and their friends and families. Apparently the first thing one needs to know when learning to drive a motorcycle is how to zigzag through the roads like a maniacal "hula hoop" enthusiast. Wearing a

helmet still seems to be optional despite the law that makes it mandatory. Mysteriously for some, this has been interpreted to mean either only the driver wearing a helmet or only the adults. Hence the many trips with Daddy wearing a helmet, sometimes Mommy too, though she insists on sitting side saddle—which of course is not risky at all (!)—and the two kids in between the parents plus baby in front with the fluorescent sunglasses, going totally helmet-less. Perhaps they are more

diehard adrenaline junkies than their parents whose IQ seems to drop to earthworm levels whenever they decide on these daring ventures, euphemistically called "family outing".

This is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to incorrigible thrillseekers. There are thousands of men, women and children of this country who voluntarily partake in activities that keep them inches away from sure death or disfigurement. There are those tiny boys who can stand, jump and dance on the roofs of speeding trains and buses. There are wiry young men dangling from ropes as they clean windows or paint walls of high-rises while those watching from inside the buildings have their hearts in their mouths. Others called construction workers balance themselves on thin slabs of cement as they hammer away or slather cement to hold bricks together. Yet others known as electricians risk thousands of volts striking them or dropping a few hundred feet into the concrete street while trying to fix the blasted transformer. Protective gear? What on earth is that? Definitely not something their employers worry about. After all, a death here or there is no big deal—nobody forced them to take this job right? Right. With poverty acting as the producer and greed the director, these nail-biting, heart-stopping circus acts never stop and are never out of thrilling moments with real-life deaths and injuries.

So are we really incurable thrillseekers or is there something inherently missing from our sense of logic regarding the probability of death under certain circumstances? Or else why would someone ride on a rickshaw carrying a huge mirror, peddling behind a truck carrying sharp and pointy iron rods in the middle of Airport Road? Or why would someone negotiate the barbed wire on the dividers to cross the road risking mutilation or a journey to the 'other side' instead of taking the more logical path over the footbridge? It could be boredom, it could be an affinity to taking shortcuts that has become part of our national culture. Or it could be a total disregard for common sense and value for one's own life or anyone else's for that matter.

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Who after Rahul?

Jockeying starts in Congress



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

POST-Rahul Gandhi's exit as Congress president, an intense power struggle has begun within the party to choose his successor amidst a raging debate over whether the mantle should fall on the shoulders of a young Turk or a veteran.

The generational leadership change debate was set off by veteran Congress leader and Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh who advocated a young leader to be the next party chief. Just a couple of days after Singh went public with his view, two key members of the party's GenNext leadership, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Milind Deora, quit their organisational posts. Both are considered Rahul loyalists. Wading into the debate was octogenarian leader Karan Singh who suggested an interim president in the run-up to fresh organisational elections and four working or vice presidents to usher in younger people in positions of authority in the party. Karan Singh's remark is being interpreted as rooting for a veteran leader as interim president.

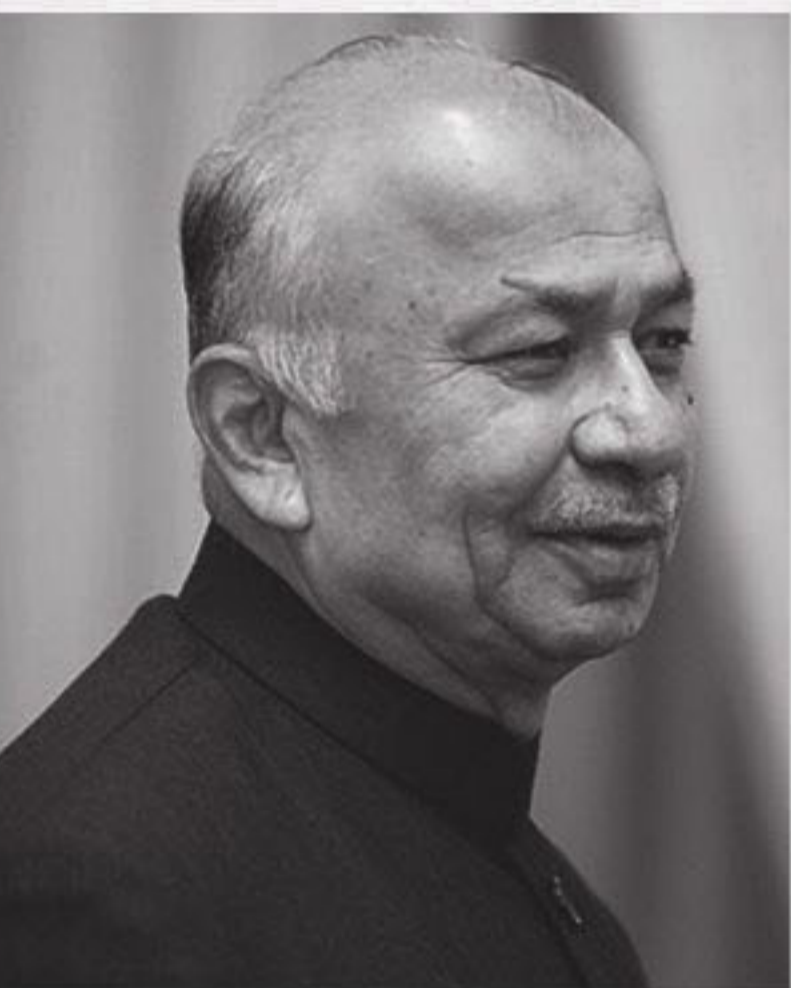
The timing of resignations of Scindia as party general secretary and Deora as president of the Mumbai unit of the Congress is important for two principal reasons: (i) it was soon

after Amarinder pitching for a young leader to succeed Rahul; and (ii) it was in the midst of reported efforts by a section within the Congress to pitchfork a veteran leader in the top organisational post. Among the veteran leaders whose names are doing the rounds as possible contenders for next party president are Dalit leaders Mallikarjun Kharge, Mukul Wasnik and Sushil Kumar Shinde.

There is a realisation in the party that the continued uncertainty over the top leadership for more than a month now is not helping the party in any way. But there is also recognition in the Congress that calling a CWC meeting without signs of a consensus on the new party chief would be more politically damaging for the party. The longer the race for the top leadership lasts, the deeper would be the sense of drift in the party.

Reflective of the tug-of-war in the party after Rahul's resignation, both Deora and Scindia said they decided to quit their posts after meeting the 49-year-old scion of the Gandhi clan. Importantly, both flagged the "accountability" yardstick cited by Rahul in his four-page letter in quitting. This is being seen as an attempt to put pressure on senior Congress leaders to resign from their organisational posts. Deora has gone on record saying he plans to shift to a new national role in the party but did not specify what it is. Scindia did not say anything on his future role.

Although Kharge and Shinde have emerged as frontrunners for Congress



Sushil Kumar Shinde

president's post, the Congress is also looking at the possibility of three young vice-presidents like Sachin Pilot, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Milind Deora. Many of Rahul's closest aides followed him in resigning from their organisational posts. Among them were Keshav Chand Yadav who quit as Indian Youth Congress chief while the party's Scheduled Caste Cell Chairman Nitin Raut also stepped down.

Most of the resignations the Congress witnessed are from the members of team Rahul Gandhi, be it party secretaries or a range of state chiefs he positioned in different regions. Within the party, there are already talks that the future



Mallikarjun Kharge

of Gandhi's associates and team members is uncertain. Interestingly, Rahul's sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who was inducted as party general secretary a few months before the parliamentary elections, is yet to quit her post.

Congress sources said while Wasnik, Kharge and Shinde have emerged as frontrunners for Congress president's post, the party is looking at the option of having one of the three young leaders like Sachin Pilot, Scindia and Deora for the top job. Pilot, 41, deputy chief minister of Rajasthan, led the party to victory in the assembly polls as the Rajasthan Pradesh Congress chief and has a lot of grassroots experience. Scindia,



Mukul Wasnik

48, is also seen as a dynamic leader. While Pilot and Scindia seem to be ahead of others in the young brigade, Deora, 42, could well turn out to be the dark horse.

Many commentators say that Rahul Gandhi's resignation has provided the Congress an opportunity to break out of the Gandhi dynasty's firm grip over the party and counter the criticism of politics of entitlement that passes on the mantle from generation to generation. But that is a reality not confined to the Gandhis alone. There are so many leaders in the party who have family links with the party. For instance, the fathers of Sachin Pilot, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Milind Deora

were leading Congress lights. Chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, Kamal Nath and Ashok Gehlot, recently introduced their sons in Congress politics and managed to make them party candidates in this year's parliamentary polls, an issue over which Rahul made no secret of his displeasure.

The success of the Congress efforts to have as its president a credible and stable leader from outside the Gandhi clan depends largely on what role and how much clout the clan will continue to hold in the party. The party is not unfamiliar to having a non-clan person as its head—PV Narasimha Rao was prime minister from 1991 to 1996 and Sitaram Kesri from 1997 to 1998. But neither lasted long and had to bow out in the face of constant resistance from those professing loyalty to the Gandhi family.

Will anyone from outside the party's first family who becomes the chief be overruled by the family or succeed in holding his or her own?

There is a feeling amongst a section of the party that whoever will be chosen may be someone who would keep the top post warm for any member of the Gandhi family to return to occupy the chair at a later stage. It is absolutely clear that the Gandhi family will continue to loom large over the party in the time to come. What is not quite clear is to what extent.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

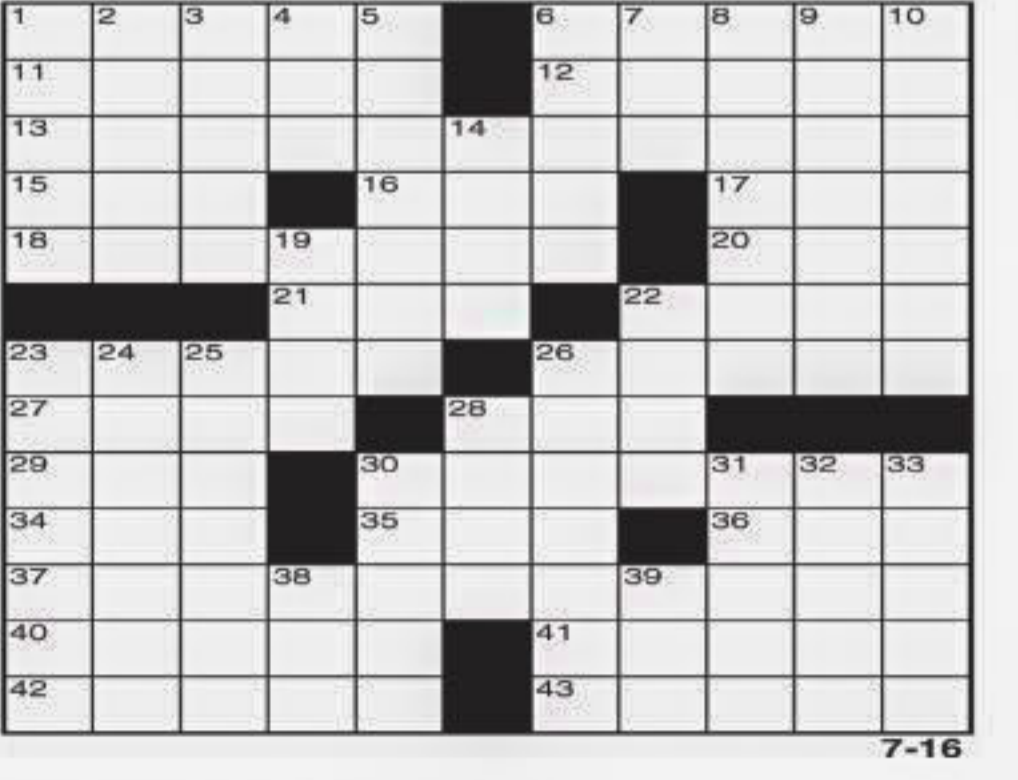


JULY 12, 1957
Surgeon General links smoking and lung cancer

The U.S. surgeon general, Leroy E. Burney, reported that there was a direct link between smoking and lung cancer.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 30 Country separators | 8 Wakes up |
| 1 Trolley sound | 34 Buddy | 9 Most needy |
| 6 Square or circle | 35 Long, long time | 10 Infinite |
| 11 Severity | 36 Cheering cry | 14 Sty cry |
| 12 Composer | 37 Depressed | 19 Neckline shapes |
| Copland | 40 Staff symbols | 22 Patch up |
| 13 Cheerful | 41 Stair part | 23 Grouser's forte |
| 15 Ready to go | 42 Say "hi" to | 24 Franklin's First Lady |
| 16 By way of | 43 Sung drama | 25 Take the wind out of |
| 17 Online address | | 26 Sign with a team, perhaps |
| 18 Impede | DOWN | 28 Chow |
| 20 Look upon | 1 Like fresh celery | 30 Monster |
| 21 Caribou's cousin | 2 Cruise ship | 31 Make blank |
| 22 Clutter | 3 Banded quartz | 32 Indy entrant |
| 23 Hands over | 4 Groggery | 33 Sister of He-Man |
| 26 Exams | 5 Begs shamelessly | 38 Hive dweller |
| 27 Pub pints | 6 Egypt's Anwar | 39 Mouth part |
| 28 Merriment | 7 Deli meat | |
| 29 Game caller | | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B L A S T A J A R
R O G U E L A B E L
A R E N A T R A C E
C A N C I A N E T
E X T R A C R E D I T
E K E L O V E
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P E T P I N A C E
E L I Z A S A T A N
L O C A L U P E N D
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