

Development Agenda

At long last, independent academicians and experts associated with political parties have got down to some serious talking on the economic issues facing the country as well as in formulating their positions on how Bangladesh, under an elected government, should revitalise its development agenda in the shortest possible time.

It is probably more by coincidence than design that a three-day seminar, organised by the Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA) opened on Thursday, just when political parties gave the press some insight into their socio-economic agenda which would be incorporated into the election manifesto. Since the political parties had been preoccupied with nominating their candidates, it is understandable, but still a little unfortunate, that they are late in organising meetings and discussions on economic issues. This gap has now been partly filled by the BEA seminar. But we must hasten to add that public discussions or even closed door seminars organised by political parties on their economic policies must still take place, the sooner the better. The involvement of a cross section of educated public in these meetings is just as important as private discussions between leaders of political parties and recognised representatives of, say, trade and industry, which have been going on for past few days.

The seminar that opened on Thursday got off to a good start with an overview -- a grim report, as described by this newspaper -- of the economic scene, presented by Prof. Rehman Sobhan in his keynote address. The speech set the tone of the deliberation that followed, which was critical but fair. It may also have a bearing on the resolutions and recommendations which may be adopted at the concluding session today and which, we hope, will be carefully studied by all the major parties.

The speech by Prof. Sobhan, now the Adviser for Planning in the Interim Government focussed on the new perspective -- the post-Ershad perspective, as one may put it -- and urged the audience to look at the future priorities of the government that will take office after the February election. True, having described the inherent weaknesses of the economy, the Adviser pointed out that the successive post-liberation regimes, meaning AL and BNP governments, had been guilty of "acts of omission and commission" and that "the regime of the 1980s ...marks the extreme degeneration of the development order which had already been infected years ago." Prof Sobhan might well have asked leaders of the two major parties to take a fresh retrospective view of the economic policies of their own governments in the seventies, to see what mistakes were committed by the AL and BNP administrations and to ensure that they are not repeated in future. Such an exercise is important because no political party that is aspiring to be in power for the second time can set its future tasks without a reassessment of its past policies.

While this exercise is important, it must not get higher priority than the appreciation of the change in the scenario and the realisation that the next elected government should not take the people, both the educated elite and the masses, for granted. If the people today are wiser than in the seventies and the eighties, they are also somewhat more sceptical of politicians and, indeed, of governments. Perhaps this is what the Professor had in mind when he stressed that the political leadership in government and opposition must demonstrate clearly to the people their credibility to honour their promises and accept the same sacrifices as asked of the people.

We welcome this debate, in the hope it will eventually involve a cross section of our people not just in Dhaka but also in other cities and towns. It may not produce a national consensus on our economic policies -- consensus is always elusive in Bangladesh -- but it will generate new ideas for our development agenda for the nineties.

Trapped Bangladeshis

We are concerned about the safety of the civilian population in the war zone especially about the safety of our citizens now trapped there. According to a Star report about one lakh Bangladeshis are exposed to bombing and missile attacks by Iraq. About 500 of our countrymen in Baghdad face similar danger from air attacks of the US and the allies. So far, we have received no news of any Bangladeshi casualty.

Our Foreign Ministry informed us that Bangladeshi nationals in Saudi Arabia are being evacuated from the danger area to safer zones within the country, such as Jeddah, Makkah, Medina, Yanbu and Riyadh. We thank the Saudi authorities for taking this initiative. We are fully conscious of the huge logistical problem that the evacuation of 70,000 people can pose, and in this regard urge our government to extend maximum support to our Embassy in Saudi Arabia for this purpose. We had faced a similar crisis in the early stage of the Gulf crisis when a huge number of our citizens had to be flown back home in a hurry following the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq.

Our citizens living in the war area are already undergoing tremendous hardship. Let us make sure that we spare no efforts in mitigating their sufferings in whatever way we can.

The Foreign Office has opened a round-the-clock monitoring cell. We would like to believe that this cell is given the support and logistical backup that is necessary to handle such a situation. We hope that this cell will not only monitor the Gulf situation but also keep a 24-hour communication channel open between Dhaka and all our Embassies in the Gulf region and feed the press and the mass media with the latest information concerning the welfare of our citizens trapped in the war zone.

The year 1990 ended for India against the backdrop of Hindu-Muslim riots of a scale unprecedented since the holocaust of 1947 on the eve of the partition of the sub-continent. What was alarming was that the riots engulfed areas which even during the worse period of the 1946-47 communal frenzy remained free from tensions between the two communities. In South India, Karnataka witnessed a spate of riots a few months ago, while Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh is yet to recover from the shock of killings of women and children that took place there in November-December, 1990.

The only saving grace was that areas which were notorious for such communal riots in the pre-partition era -- like Assam, Bihar and West Bengal in the eastern part of India -- had fortunately enough remained free till now of such widespread incidence of Hindu-Muslim riots. But given the volatile nature in Hindu-Muslim relations in the rest of India, one never knows how long these states will be able to maintain peace.

Since these recent riots cannot be dismissed as isolated instances of anti-social activities (which had often been the case in the past), and since they pose a serious challenge to the hitherto followed secular credentials of the Indian polity, it is necessary to go beyond the killings and examine the fundamental causes. Although the immediate causes might differ from one place to another, there is one common thread that is running through all of them. It is the rise of aggressive Hindu middle class psyche, which is provoking fear and resentment among Muslims and other minorities. The socio-economic background to this should be understood. There has been an increasing loss of credibility of the established political parties over the last few years. The Congress (I) under Rajiv Gandhi's leadership has deteriorated into a rudderless organization without any firm ideological base with its vari-

ous factions fighting among themselves in different states. Centrist parties like the Janata Dal have failed to provide an alternative as evident from the collapse of the erstwhile National Front government due to personal rivalries among power-hungry politicians. The leftists are confined only to West Bengal in the east and

Kerala in the south, and are yet to influence the course of national politics to a decisive extent. Into this ideological and organizational vacuum, the Hindu communal forces like the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), the RSS (Rashtriya Swang Suvchak Sangh) and the Shiv Sena have stepped in

to provide the vocal Hindu middle class society with a cause. They are building up a Hindu platform based upon the ideology of 'Hindutva' and the objective of establishing a rindu 'rastra' or state. They are seeking to rally the Hindus around a number of simplistic notions. First, they demand that since the Hindus form more than 80 per cent of the population, their religious values and rituals and tradition should get top priority in the determination of state policies. Secondly, the Indian state should give up its hitherto practised policy of providing special privileges for the religious minority communities and respecting their personal laws. They describe this policy as one of 'pseudo-secularism' that panders to the minorities. Thirdly, they point out that the Indian nation (which to them is synonymous with the majority Hindu community) is threatened by various minorities who are either seeking autonomy within the Indian Union or independence from it -- the Jharkhand demand for autonomy by the tribal people of eastern India, the Khalistani secessionism in Punjab, the agitation for independence in Kashmir, the Naga, Mizo, Manipuri tribal insurrections in the north-east. These agitations, according to them pose a challenge to the Hindu majority who therefore need to come together on a unified platform to assert their identity and superiority over the minorities.

Bereft of any serious ideal (like anti-imperialism in the past, nation building and development in the post-Independence years), the Hindu middle classes (particularly in central and western India) have found in the new-fangled politics of 'hindutva' a cause worth while to cultivate. Small traders and clerks in government and commercial establishments; professionals like lawyers, teachers, doctors, contractors and commission agents are the people who form the base of the Hindu communal forces. Economically, they have emerged as a major force taking advantage of the economic growth in India during the last few decades. They are now seeking a political ideology that would ensure their status, assert their identity and enable them to secure both the objectives through domination over the minority communities.

The aim of destroying the Babri masjid at Ajodhya, and establishing a temple there to commemorate the dubious birthplace of Rama (the Hindu communal claim that the site of the masjid was Rama's birthplace has been disputed by Indian historians and archaeologists) has become a symbolic manifestation of the aggressive Hindu ambition to establish hegemony over Indian society. In the course of the agitation for building the temple, Hindu processionists during the last few months had wrought havoc by attacking

Muslims, destroying their homes and carrying on highly inflammable propaganda against the minorities. This had provoked the minorities also to retaliate in some places.

Religious fundamentalist fanatics among the Muslims and Sikhs organized a procession in Old Delhi in November which led to the outbreak of riots in the walled city. Quite predictably, anti-social elements in both the majority and minority communities are taking advantage of the situation in looting and creating panic.

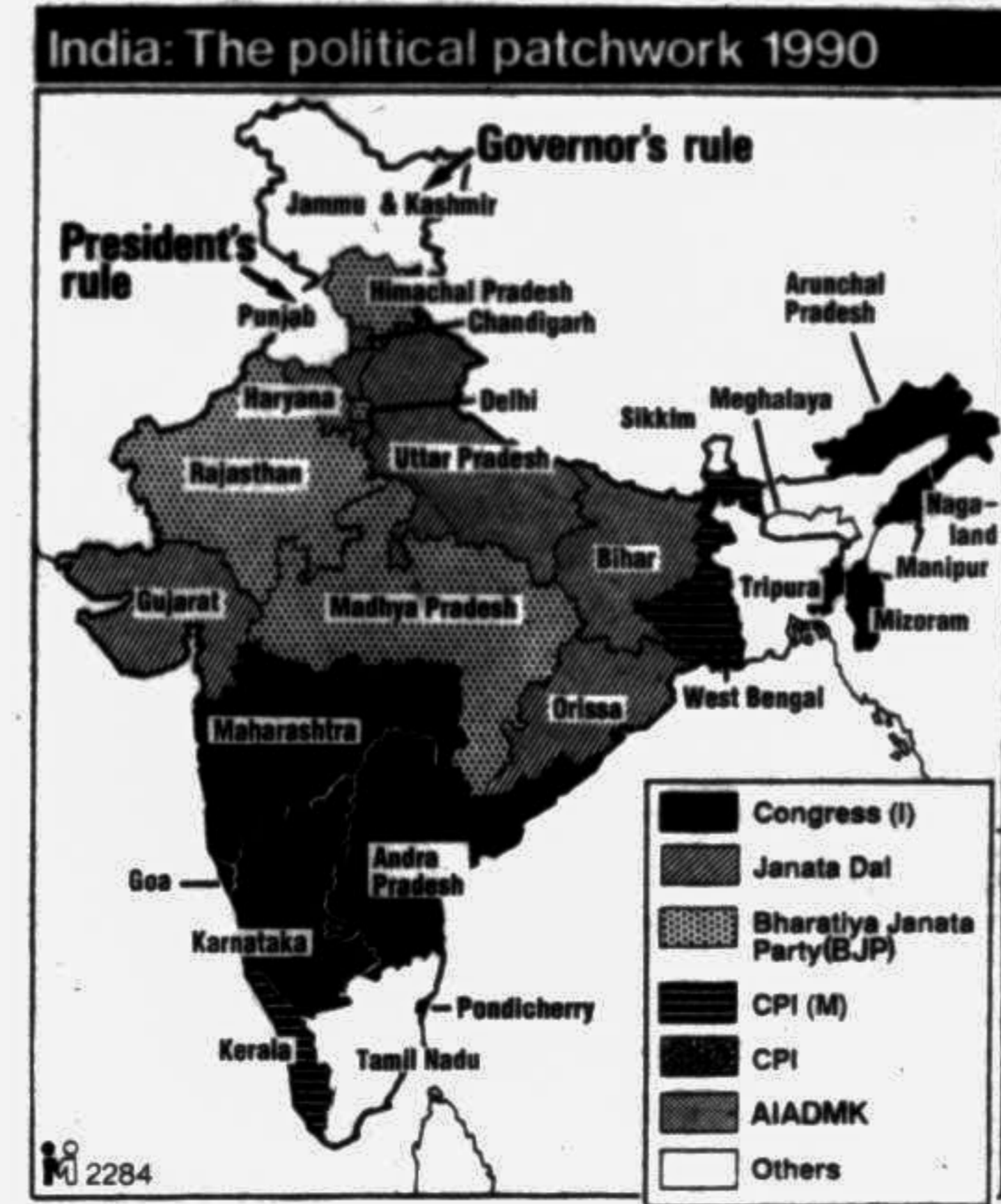
Chandra Shekhar's minority government at the Centre is practically a helpless witness to what is happening all over the country. The administration in some areas totally collapsed during the riots, with the police often behaving in a highly partisan manner in favour of one community or another. If the secular forces fail to reassert themselves in the coming months, Indian polity may undergo a tragic experience of retrogression to a communal divide. The socio-cultural tradition in the sub-continent had been marked by a co-existence of different religious beliefs and practices, by syncretic cults like the Bauls in Bengal which cut across religious and caste barriers, by the Bhakti and Sufi movements in the north which reached out for unity among various religious faiths, by the long history of Hindu-Muslim united struggles against British imperialism, by joint participation of both the communities in cultural and creative arts. One hopes that this tradition prevails over the aberrations that are tearing apart India's social and political fabric today.

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Secular Credentials Face Challenge in India

By Sumanta Banerjee

Since the recent riots cannot be dismissed as isolated instances of anti-social activities, and since they pose a serious challenge to the hitherto followed secular credentials of the Indian polity, it is necessary, to go beyond the killings and examine the fundamental causes.



Major will Change the Tone on Foreign Policy

by Derek Ingram

British foreign policy has suffered for years from rivalry between the Prime Minister's office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. One foreign secretary after another has been trapped in the crossfire and internationally the rivalry has sometimes created mayhem.

in Kuala Lumpur in October 1989, particularly from the sharp-tongued Australians.

Then he was caught in the crossfire when, without consulting him, Thatcher issued a statement distancing herself from what the meeting had agreed only an hour or two earlier. It is not the way he himself would have behaved. As one who has worked, albeit briefly, in Africa -- he was on the staff of the Standard Bank in Nigeria -- he has a feel for African problems and a reputation for holding strong views against any form of racism. This became evident when he was working as a local councillor in Lambeth before entering parliament in 1979.

Many of the right-wing Conservative MPs who helped propel John Major into Downing Street must have been thunderstruck when an hour or two after he took office the left-wing Labour member Ken Livingstone, one of Thatcher's political arch-enemies, roundly praised the new Prime Minister.

He did so because he had admired the young Major for what he had done in the Sixties to improve London slum housing and keep Tory racists at bay. Major was chairman of the housing committee of Lambeth Borough Council, London.

It is quite on the cards that, far from what is presently perceived, John Major will be seen in a few years time to have buried Thatcherism. The Right may have, as they say in Britain, bought a pup.

Little more than a year ago few people even in Britain had heard of John Major. He had come into the Thatcher Cabinet in 1987 as Chief Secretary to the Treasury after being a junior minister. It is a key job, but the holder is No. 2 to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, works in his shadow of the Chancellor and rarely attracts public attention.

Only in 1989 when Major unexpectedly became Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary in place of Sir Geoffrey Howe in a messy cabinet shuffle by Margaret Thatcher did he emerge into public view. Three months later he was back at the Treasury as the Chancellor -- the job that always thrusts a politician almost daily on to the front of the stage because his actions affect people's pockets.

Major barely had a chance to shine in the job because he inherited a deteriorating economic situation which he had little time to reverse. And now, suddenly, he is Prime Minister. For a man still seen more as a bank clerk than a politician he seems to have an

inbuilt surplus capacity.

John Major is tough, but he is not hard. The most harmful and persistent criticism of Thatcher throughout her 11 years in office was that she was uncaring. Although anecdotes were constantly related about her personal kindnesses to people, she was never able to destroy that image.

Major will look quite different both at home and abroad. In recent years British foreign policy has been bedevilled by continual tension between Number Ten and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the other side of the street. Thatcher and her chief foreign policy adviser Charles Powell, a former Foreign Office man, ran, in effect, a rival concern.

Foreign Secretaries Sir Geoffrey Howe and Douglas Hurd suffered as the men between. Neither Minister liked the Prime Minister's undiplomatic style and they were constantly having to pick up the pieces after she had come out with instant and often abrasive statements undoing months of diplomatic work in a matter of minutes.

None of this is likely to happen with John Major, nor will he introduce Charles Powell-like figures into his so-called kitchen cabinet. Hurd and Major are men from quite

different backgrounds but very much of the same way of thinking. On foreign policy they could be a winning team.

Two issues could make or break them both -- the Gulf and Europe. On the Gulf the policy will be unchanged but the style will be quite different. Thatcher enjoyed the kind of confrontational situation that has come about in the Gulf. Major will be just as firm, but much rather be involved in something else. He faces a testing challenge if a war leads to serious British casualties.

On Europe, style will be all. He has to deal with the ambivalence of the British who want to get closer to the Community and yet remain a people and a nation apart. The situation needs patience and skilful diplomacy, not bluster. Hurd and Major will bring that

Above all, at a time when the world is moving more firmly back towards multilateralism and away from the bilateralism that marked the Reagan-Thatcher years of the Eighties Major looks on the Tory side like the man for the moment.

He has ridden into power largely on the backs of Right wing of his party, which had no real candidate among the three leaders on offer. The signs are that the Right is going to be quite disappointed with what it has got. -OEMINI NEWS

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WHAT OTHERS SAY

Civilians Won't be the Target

The first days of a war will almost certainly be dominated by intense allied air activity, to gain air superiority over the battlefield and to suppress Iraq's defenses. For all the loose talk in the West about the prospect of allied air forces "flattening Baghdad," nothing of the sort will take place. Bombs both aimed and off-target will hit vital government installations, and some civilians will certainly be killed. But no systematic effort will be made to terrorize or inflict casualties on the Iraqi civilian population, because such strikes would damage the moral basis on which this war would be fought.

Max Hastings, commenting in The Daily Telegraph (London).

Then Deal With Cambodia

How many foreign ministers are going to give Cambodia a thought when World War III may be unfolding in the Gulf? Clearly, none. Once the conflagration in Arabia -- if there is one -- is extinguished, the United Nations should impatiently stamp out brush-fires that have been allowed to smoke and crackle far too long: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Liberia -- and, above all, Cambodia.

The trouble with bringing about a peace settlement in Cambodia is that nobody there wants one -- nobody who counts, that is. The cannon fodder, 8 million ordinary Cambodians, have never been asked if they approve of endless fighting, destruction, poverty, hunger and ignorance. Their helplessness demands that the community of nations impose a settlement. Where human rights are callously ignored, peoples who routinely enjoy them have a duty to interfere.

This can be done by denying brutish regimes what they want -- it's usually guns -- and refusing to accept what little they have to sell. In a word, sanctions. Thailand would have a crucial policing role.

-Asiaweek (Hong Kong).

Gorbachev's Tiananmen

In terms of global geopolitics, the case of Lithuania might seem insignificant. What makes the latest developments in that small Baltic republic so unfortunate for Mikhail Gorbachev, however, is that the blatant annexation of Kuwait by Iraq last August has heightened the sentiments of the Western world against heavy-handed actions, such as applied by Moscow in the past few days.

-The Jakarta Post.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Market prices report

Sir, I wish The Daily Star all success and shall look forward to the views on the daily international and local news.

May I respectfully suggest that when reporting on the international commodity prices as you have done on page 8 on the inaugural day please give the daily prices on the following metals: Gold, platinum, silver, copper, zinc, lead and nickel and in soft commodities -- sugar, co-flee, cocoa, cotton, wheat, corn and soybean

oil. The futures 'market exchange' quote spot and 3 months prices for daily publication. These would suffice.

For international week-ends you can give a brief market report in each commodity. Weekly reports may be given on Malaysian palm oil, rubber, jute and tea. Tea auctions are held in London on Mondays and Tuesdays and reports are available in the F.T. on the following day.

Merrily Lynch is perhaps the largest international company dealing in many different spheres of trading activity. The publication of

their daily and weekly reports would suffice as these are internationally acceptable.

Once again my very good wishes to all of you.

Sadri Ispahani
M.M. Ispahani Ltd.

Gardening as a hobby

Sir, My favourite pastime is gardening. Luckily the house in which I am living at present has a sizeable space in front. I decided to utilise it in the best way I could, and it's nothing better than gardening. There is a small shop near my place which sells seeds, and I bought some seeds and plants of variety.

I admit it is tough preparing the beds, clearing weeds but at the same time it's a lot of fun. I was as excited as a teenager trying a hand at anything new. Every morning was the beginning of a new and

a challenging day. It took about a month for me to plan my small garden. Finally things were ready and I was awaiting the results. My joy knew no bounds the day I first saw a bud in one of my rose plants. My days of hard work were producing results!

I must say gardening is much satisfying a hobby. One gets the result within a short time. It is a great feeling to walk through a garden grown by your own hands! It's an aesthetic world of yours to take resort from the anarchy around.

So I would advise those who have a space in front or back of their house or on the rooftop, not to have any second thought. It is worth doing.

Rashida Akhter
Malibagh Choudhury Para
Dhaka

Hire-purchase system

Sir, The hire-purchase system is very convenient and easy way to procure things. Many countries have such a system in vogue, but unfortunately a poor country like ours where it could be very useful, does not have it as such. Recently, though we see that such a method has been started by one or two companies for sewing machines, refrigerators, T.V. etc.

More commodities need to be covered under such a system. It would be nice to have furnitures, even cars on hire-purchase.

Will the concerned entrepreneurs please take a note of it and make availability of things easier for us?

Md. Monir Hossain
Badda
Dhaka