

Where Anti-immigrant Populism is Turning Nasty

Heenan Bhatti writes from Paris

Immigrants to France are frustrated at the lack of respect and lack of opportunity they find there. But their angry demonstrations are getting a response that is the opposite of what they want. The right-wing anti-immigrant party of Jean-Marie Le Pen is gaining strength and in the race for popularity, the mainstream parties are now echoing its views.

A Message for Moscow

Never before in the troubled history of the Soviet Union has any coup been followed by such confused and unpredictable developments as we see today, within less than a week of the unconstitutional removal of Mikhail Gorbachev from power. As time goes on, this scenario will probably get more confused and unpredictable, increasing the difficulties of the new junta in Kremlin — one can hardly call it a leadership — of bringing the situation under control, not to speak of restoring stability to the Soviet Union.

Part of the reason is obvious. The Soviet Union is no longer in 1964 when Nikita Khrushchev, a pioneer reformist, was ousted by the Brezhnev-Kosygin team. This is 1991 when all the countries in Eastern Europe, right at the doorstep of the Soviet Union, have discarded their one-party socialist rule in favour of democracy, market-oriented economy, individual freedom and the rule of law. True, hardly any of these changes had been introduced by Mr Gorbachev in his strifetorn country, with any measure of success. Many experts argue, with considerable justification, that the priorities went wrong and that, like China, he should have paid more immediate attention to creating the framework for the market-oriented economy to attract western assistance and investment and thus fill the stores — and the stomachs of his teeming millions — instead of taking one step after another in the restructuring of the political system, including such a controversial measure as expanding his own powers as the President of the Soviet Union. Again, there were more talks than actions, a charge voiced again and again by Boris Yeltsin against the deposed leader.

Yet, it cannot be denied that Mr Gorbachev has brought about a political awakening among his people which, a decade ago, would have been inconceivable in the Soviet Union or in any of the socialist states. True, it is this awakening that has triggered off the outcry for self-determination, even independence, in some of the republics, especially among the Baltic states.

It is this awakening, the most enduring legacy of the Gorbachev rule, that cannot be suppressed by Kremlin, no matter who occupies this seat of power — and for how long. Whether this awakening will eventually produce a Soviet version of "People's Power" remains to be seen. But there are grounds for optimism.

A number of statements and moves by the Acting President Gennady Yanayev, such as the withdrawal of his earlier order to attack the Russian Parliament, the stronghold of Mr Yeltsin, not to mention his claim that he thinks like Mr Gorbachev, suggest that he can see the writing on the wall. Whether others in the junta — or the army — can see it too is another matter.

At this stage, the international community, especially the industrial democracies, must maintain the pressure on Kremlin and increase it, if possible. In suspending on-going assistance or proposed ones to Moscow, several western powers, Australia and Japan have called for the return of Mr Gorbachev to his constitutional position, the demand voiced without any ambiguity by President George Bush. At a time when the denial of democratic rights of a people and the dismissal of an elected government in any country are no longer regarded as purely internal matters, the demand by the international community for the return of the deposed leader to power should not be seen as an interference in the Soviet Union's domestic politics. Besides, far too much, from global peace to disarmament, from success of the forthcoming Middle East conference to stability in the Eastern Europe, depend on what happens in Moscow. The world at large knows it. This message should be conveyed to Kremlin, loud and clear.

Above editorial was written a few hours before the news of the latest developments was received.

The Spreading Small Jute Fires

It first started in Netrakona. Now it has travelled to Rangpur. Angry and frustrated farmers are setting their jute crop on fire.

This is no new phenomenon. However, there sometimes is a gap for some years when the farmers tolerate selling their cash produce at prices that hardly cover the production cost. And then a time comes when prices offered are so low that some farmers, rather than obliging the middleman *faria* and surrender to his butchery, choose to burn down their stock of jute.

With changes taking place in Eastern Europe, the concept of 'market economy' is being banded about and put into practice even in the poorer parts of the third world where it was thought wise for the state to help protect the weaker sections of the population, specially small producers such as the small farmers and weavers.

Well, our jute-burning peasants are not quite victims of market economy forces let loose on a rampage. For the bulk of the money that is used in buying the growers' stock of jute comes from the state, which through various business channels percolate down to the *faria* level. They do practice a fierce practice of market economy by taxing to the utmost the holding power of the small farmer and pushing him to the point of suicide by offering absurd prices of say a hundred Taka for a maund of jute. This they do with capital supplied by institutions who are interested in seeing the grower get a fair price.

The small jute fires, as against big ones reported to by big houses to cheat insurance companies, are tragic manifestations of the farmer and jute cultivation being killed by public and state money. We can hardly do away with the services of the *faria* but a way must be found to restrict him in his nefarious game of holding the small farmer in hostage.

We have been pointing it out again and again that, as opposed to the growing unimportance with which jute is being treated for last so many years, it continues to be a cornerstone of our economy and still holds a golden key to our economic and even ecological recovery, provided all sectors of management and production conducted themselves with some restraint and wisdom. The small jute fires point to the fact that we are miserably failing in that.

We must improve our performance on the jute front.

IMMIGRATION has hit the top of the political agenda in France. There is rioting in immigrant areas and politicians from left and right are pandering to anti-immigrant opinion.

In June riots wracked Mantes-La-Jolie, a suburb which lies 30 miles west of Paris.

The troubles were fuelled by the death of a local youth, Hich Assieh, aged 18, while in police custody. He was beaten up by police then had a fatal asthma attack. In the turmoil, a stolen car ran down a policeman and another immigrant youth was shot dead while joy-riding. In Mantes-La-Jolie people don't just riot, they kill each other," said one local.

The troubles were on the Val Fourre estate, a centre for second and third generation immigrant youths. Their parents were attracted there by jobs in the Renault and Peugeot car plants. Now there is not enough work.

The estate was to have been a showpiece. Things did not work to plan. It holds half of Mantes 24,000 people but occupies only 20 per cent of the town's land. It is a cramped "ghetto" whose main occupants are North Africans and Portuguese.

Dashed hopes and a lack of opportunity are what Harlem Desir, of the anti-racist group "SOS-Racism", sees as the causes for the trouble.

He says: "In these neighbourhoods there is 30-40 per

cent unemployment and no prospects, no social status and no money. It is a powder-keg of frustration waiting to be lit."

The troubles have focused public attention once again on the immigration question. Riots in other parts of France last year, in particular the south part of the town of Lyon, are still fresh in their memories.

France has about 5 million immigrants, about seven per cent of the population. Opinion polls show French people feel increasingly distressed by the 'immigration problem'. In one, 45 per cent were said to dislike immigrants. In another, 70 per cent said there were too many Arabs in France.

There is a growing intolerance of people who are 'different', whether they are travelling in the country or are coloured," said Mouloud Aounit, general secretary of the oldest anti-racist group, Movement against Racism and For Friendship Between People (MRAP).

It is a mood politicians have been quick to embrace and enhance. Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the extreme right-

wing Front National (FN) has peddled his anti-immigrant propaganda with resounding success for a party of its size.

The far right and the anti-immigrant voice "came of age" in 1983 when the FN won a by-election in Dreux and gained a seat in the National Assembly. The FN was supported by nearly 30 per cent of voters in 1988 in Marseilles on the southern coast, a landing point for many immigrants.

Politicians nearer the centre of the political spectrum are also picking up on the anti-immigrant feeling. Jacques Chirac, mayor of Paris and a leading light in the Gaullist tradition, played the race card with his recent reference to "smelly immigrants".

The polls have not let him down. Le Pen accused him of stealing his political agenda, and in a way he may be a victim of his own success.

Left reaction to the issue, through controversial French Prime Minister Edith Cresson, has been seen as a complete turnaround.

At the time of the riots in Mantes-La-Jolie, she was pushing for more spending on

re-development in the suburbs, recognising the deep frustration of immigrant youth in the area.

Now, she is advocating the use of charter planes to remove illegal immigrants. This proposal provokes the infamous images of 1986 when "illegal" immigrants, many of whom turned out to be legal, were led on to charter planes in chains on orders from the government of the day.

Cresson has split the left with congratulations coming, rather embarrassingly, from the right and especially from Le Pen.

This ambiguous position adopted by the left is typical government of any party. "They go with the tide. When it suits them they expel immigrants or help them," said Aounit.

"For instance, Mitterand said immigrants should have the vote back in 1981, but they still don't. There is no political courage or principles when it comes to immigrants. They are a football kicked around by public opinion," he added.

Many Algerians who came to France following the war of

independence in 1962 now have children who consider France their home. Like other North Africans, they are becoming more and more cosmopolitan. But in many ways they experience the same discrimination their parents did.

The first "race" deaths occurred in 1961 when Algerians and others took to the streets to protest against a curfew. French police fired machine-guns and clubbed people to death, according to eye-witnesses. There were 600 dead or missing and thousands injured.

In the last 30 years, changes to basic rights have been minimal. Many immigrants are subjected to identity checks. Others who are allowed to take French citizenship do not, and many who do refuse to vote.

As well, a plethora of laws allows systematic deportations. One law campaigners have tried to get repealed allows deportation of any immigrant who has been in jail.

The campaign organisation is called la double peine (double sentence). Immigrants were given the right to organise only 10 years ago. Lydia

Urendes said: "We are demanding equal rights for everyone. It is our country and we are here to stay. Our needs must be recognised and catered for."

The treatment of the Harkis — Algerians who fought on the side of the French in the Algerian War — is particularly hypocritical.

Despised by their own people and fearing retribution, they were forced to move to France. They settled in communities in the south, mainly in camps in and around the town of Narbonne near the Spanish border.

Recently, the "sons" of the Harkis have begun to demonstrate, asking the authorities for greater action on housing and job opportunities.

Aounit said: "It is an irony that the Harkis are rioting for the same reasons as the youth in Mantes-La-Jolie. It shows up successive French governments for their lack of will in dealing fairly with immigrant issues, even those who fought for them in the war."

Many expect further troubles as most of France goes on its annual August holiday.

Says Harlem Desir: "Urban unrest is something like wildcat strikes before unions were recognised and there was no negotiation. It is because the conflict cannot be expressed normally and through civic means that it ends up in an explosion." — GEMINI NEWS

Heenan Bhatti writes for The Voice, the biggest selling black newspaper in England.

CONFRONTED with an uncertain future because of a reduced US Presence in Asia, the tiny island republic of Singapore is seeking a bigger role in world affairs largely to guarantee its own security.

For the last three years, the rich city state has been a quiet but ubiquitous presence in various United Nations peace-keeping operations around the world while trying to bolster its standing among small states which are members of the United Nations.

By committing men and finances to international peace-keeping operations, analysts say Singapore is buying a form of guarantee that the world community will not stand idly by if its security is threatened.

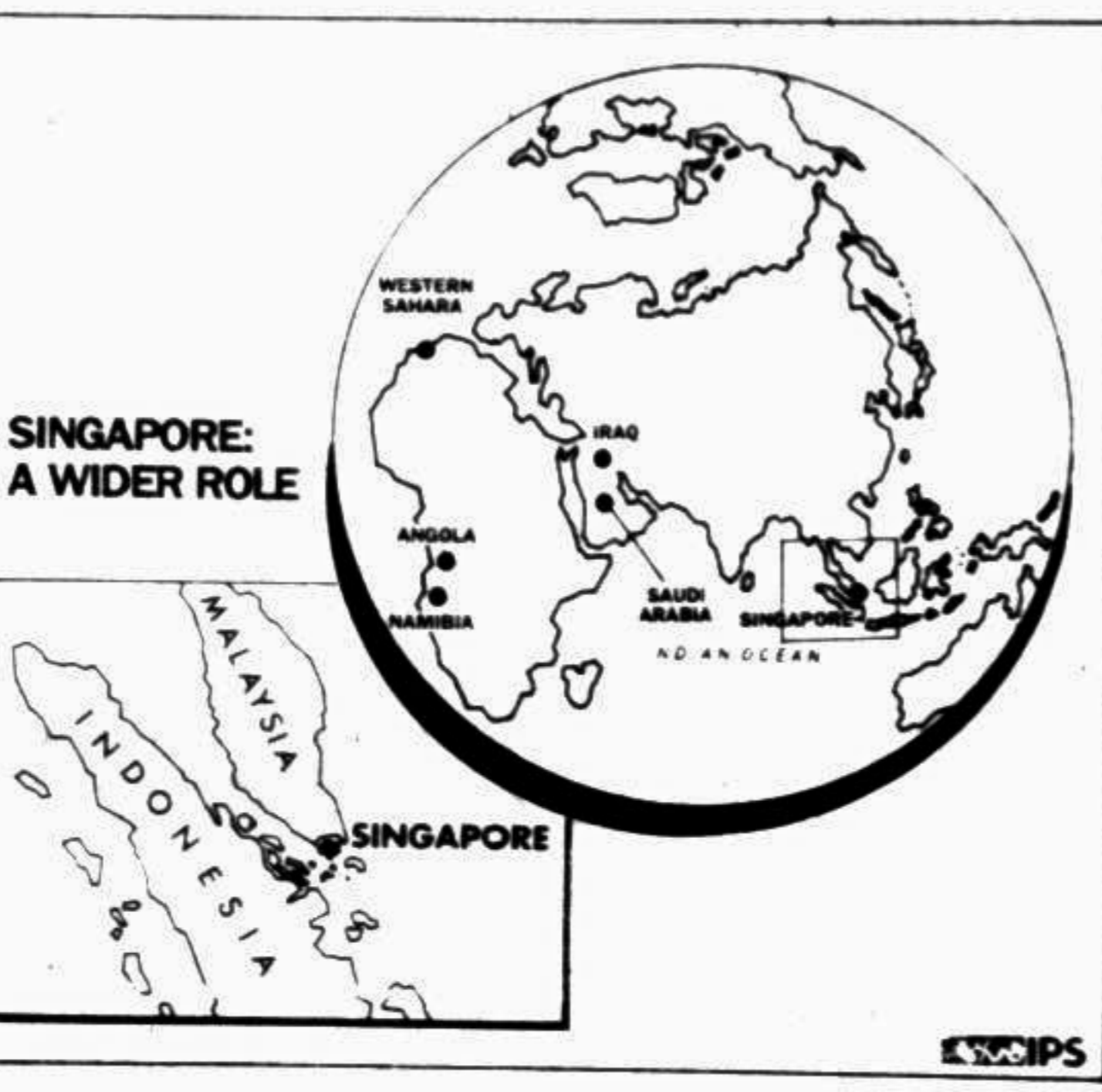
"The more successfully a small state utilises its resources and taps its external sources of power, the greater the chances of its survival and influence," said Bilveer Singh, lecturer in political science at the University of Singapore.

Singapore's higher profile is also a reflection of the feeling in its ruling party that the country must overcome its image in the world community that "it would never put in a dollar without getting two out."

Singapore has witnessed an economic miracle since its independence from Britain and breakaway from the Malaysian federation in 1965. Today, its 2.7 million people enjoy the highest standard of living in Asia after Japan.

Singapore: The Best Defence

The tiny but rich city-state buys future security by helping where it can in international peace-keeping operations. Surya Ganghadharan of IPS reports from Singapore.



"We must stop asking what concrete benefits we can get out of all these activities and start asking how as a responsible member of the international community, we can contribute," said a member of parliament from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). It was in Namibia that Singapore's activist international policy first broke new ground. In April 1988, a contingent of 21 policemen drawn from a special task force were deployed in the former South

African colony as part of the UN transitional assistance group.

Over a period of two years, Singaporean police were part of an international team that helped to organise elections that saw Namibia's first freely elected government come to power.

There have been other missions since then. During the Gulf war, Singapore sent an armed forces medical team to Saudi Arabia. Its transport planes helped evacuate stranded Sri Lankans from Jordan.

In April this year, seven Singaporean military officers joined the UN Iraq-Kuwait observation mission to help police the demilitarise zone.

In August, seven Singaporean military observers are joining UN mission in Western Sahara to supervise a ceasefire and an eventual referendum. By November, 10 police officers will be sent to assist in the process. The Western Sahara, formerly a Spanish colony

taken over by Morocco, has seen a bitter war for independence waged by the Polisario Front. The people of Western Sahara will be voting on the issue of autonomy for the territory.

Also in August, eight Singaporean military observers are joining a UN verification mission to monitor the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. They will form a 350-member team drawn from 15 other UN member countries.

At the United Nations, Singapore has led smaller countries in urging a more equitable assessment of contributions to the world body.

For obvious reasons, Singapore has been more active within the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) which groups it with Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines. Singapore has consistently

called for expanding the network of economic linkages in the region which range from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to 'growth triangles' linking its economy with those of Malaysia and Indonesia.

Recently, Foreign Minister Wong Kan Sen called for the expansion of ASEAN dialogues with major trading partners to include China, the Soviet Union and India. Wong also hinted to the Indochina states that if they liberalised their economies they will be included in this network.

For Singapore, these economic linkages form the cornerstone of its security.

"Over the long term, the security of South-east Asia and the Asia-Pacific can best be served by having an engagement of all powers, old and small, if necessary in overlapping and multiple security and political frameworks," said Wong.

Reflecting concerns in the region over threats that Japan would take over the vacuum left by the United States, Wong has proposed a "comprehensive and frank dialogue" on security between Japan and its Asian neighbours.

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.

Weekly holiday

Sir, I fully endorse the proposal of Mr. J. Taher for declaration of two days weekly holiday as appeared in your esteemed daily (letter) on 12/08/91.

Weekly holiday on Friday seems to be insignificant as Friday is the Jumma prayer day (weekly special prayer day). It is not possible to go out for any private work except making weekly routine purchase. Jumma prayer finishes at around 2.00 PM. After returning from Jumma prayer and having lunch, one finds that the long awaited weekly holiday has passed and seems to be wasted. Routinely thus one's life becomes monotonous and accumulates tiredness, fatigue and dissatisfaction. This, in no way, is good for building a nation.

Like other developed countries, VAT (Value Added Tax) has been imposed on various items for the benefit of the nation. The people of developed countries paying VAT, also enjoy two days weekly holidays. They find adequate time for rest and traveling and thus prepare themselves for next week's work. When they join office after enjoying two days weekly holiday, they work with a fresh mind, energy and dedication. In comparison to that, we join office with grave heart, dissatisfaction and physical illness. In no way can this bring prosperity to the nation.

Manpower is a great asset and resource of a country, and this cannot be ignored. This great resource should be utilized properly for building a

nation. Since we have excess manpower in our country and a lot of unemployment, it will be better to cut down the number of working hours and create more employment opportunities for the unemployed persons.

Many will agree with my opinion that declaration of two days weekly holiday will create new enthusiasm among the mass which will help them work with efficiency and dedication.

Mr. Taher's proposal for declaration of two days weekly holidays on Friday and Saturday is appropriate and timely. We urge our democratic government to consider this matter as a national priority.

S. K. Zaman
Mirpur, Dhaka-1216

"Beast inspects man"

Sir, The letter under the above caption appearing in your esteemed daily of August 14 makes an interesting reading. The correspondent has lamented his luggage being sniffed at, at Los Angeles Airport, by a dog — one belonging to police detective unit. He has raised allegation against West of 'dehumanising' human society by allowing such an exercise of "beast" (I would love to call animal) inspecting people. May I add, since the dawn of human civilisation animals proved themselves of immense help for man's very survival, — and on many an occasion it saved his life at the cost of its own. History is replete

with examples of dogs and horses displaying valour, loyalty in peace and at war. On the other hand, we seldom know of record where man as a group has come to the aid of hapless animals in their distress. Man is blessed with the prolific faculty of judgment and superb intelligence, though unfortunately, animals have beaten them, time and again, in matters of sacrifice, loyalty, love and devotion. When the "little mutt" sniffs the correspondent's luggage it does help us with what ever ability it has been gifted with, then it does so at its mentor's behest. In this backdrop, we find man gifted as he is with much superior brain, perpetrating senseless cruelty, hatching conspiracy, even proving ungrateful to the hands that fed them. These "dehumanising" traits are stranger to animals. In spite of everything, our little friends have not escaped human debasement. Recent stories in the Newsweek depicting grisly episodes of butchered ponies in the Continental shops strung up from hooks, and skinned dogs (dubbed man's best friend) for sale in China speak of man already dehumanised. Animals have never been known to contribute to dehumanise human society, — it has, on the other hand, by its friendly service brought in to a sharp reprimand how by bending a superb gift man has dehumanised himself over the ages.

M.G. Mustafa,
Elephant Road, Dhaka.

Streamlining

Sir, It was quite shocking to read in a weekly that 'special security' had to be provided for the Finance Minister of our country; his fault being trying to bring discipline and some order in our chaotic economic

and financial situation. Like the traffic of Dhaka city the economy and finance of this country has been in total chaos and confusion. Isn't it time we have had some sort of streamlining of the system? For just a few the whole nation is becoming retarded. What we need is a few more Mr Salfur Rahmans. What we need is bold, strong and adamant leaders, not just so called politicians.

After long years we are at last marching towards the long cherished goal of democracy that the martyrs and great freedom fighter fought for and dreamt of. Let us march forward and not backward anymore. The government shall be answerable to us and not we to the government, but for the good of all we must extend our support to the government, not be just critical for the sake of criticising. The politics of violence and destruction has to stop. We must not be held hostage by any corrupt political, business and bureaucratic 'cartel' and their bunch of hoodlums and mastans.

A Choudhury,
Nakhalpara.

Letters to the editor

Sir, Daily a lot of letters are being published in different newspapers. These all are of great importance. Some times these are on national crisis and some times these call for immediate action by the government. But so far, what I do remember, no one came up with a bold sense, to face these letters. Are these letters kept in any file for reference use? If not, then when these will be done? If there's no hope of any government response then I would request the newspaper authorities to close down their letter column's for good.

Iqbal Ali Khan,
Shantinagar, Dhaka.

OPINION Of Haves and Have-nots

Victoria R

It is often said that the "haves" exploit the "have nots". It works on the sympathy of human beings and perhaps one even feels good having said so. It is supposed to be a popular theme and quite a fashionable way of expressing one's concern. And it has been this way for decades even after the abolition of the Zamindari system. A new group of offenders have been added to the list and they are the "businessmen" and the "salaried people" — those who are supposed to have a little, or more, to spare for the little luxuries in life.

It has plagued men for some time to note that no one ever points out the "have nots" exploiting those who are better off. Maybe it is because the "haves" do not get together and shout back — perhaps for fear of being scoffed at. Or maybe it is because it's much simpler to take up the cause of the "have nots" since we all sympathise with them. I am sure that at some point of time in our lives, whether we admit it or not, we have all tried, in some way or other, to help the poorer sections of our society to help themselves.

But alas! How many times have we succeeded? One who gives has got to remain the giver and the one who receives can feel satisfied in the belief that it is his right always to receive. There is neither shame in it nor guilt. These are qualities that do not enter into the scheme of things. It is a great pity that a very large chunk of our people seem to have lost their sense of dignity.

Let us think of the beggars. Can anyone in their right mind give them even a coin? I used to always find a taka for the blind but now I clench my fists when they swarm around. It's not only that — one doesn't like being cheated. Yet there are people who genuinely need our help — but how does one know who they are? Sure enough, they are the ones

being deprived — or is the word "exploited"?

However, since I started with exploitation — let's confine our thoughts just to that. Recently, one Ranir Ma came to work for me. I really didn't need anyone then but I thought that perhaps a woman in the kitchen would be peaceful and nice to have in the long run. She was engaged at a salary of four hundred taka per month on top of food and board. This she readily agreed to since it aspired that she got less at her last place of employment. Every month her son would come and stay for a couple of days, obviously to collect her salary. Ranir Ma's son spends the day selling peanuts and her husband also works for a living. It transpired that he also had another wife. Whether this other wife was also working or not is not clear to me. To cut a long story short — after staying with us for a period of four to five months, Ranir Ma went on leave for ten days. Apart from her salary she had "bagged" two new saris (she had joined us before the month of Ramzan), one slightly used, but durable, petticoat and two new blouses. She never came back, but she will, — of that I am sure. She will come to me or to someone else and she will do the same thing again and again — when she is in need of some extra cash or new clothes or whatever. So I wonder "who is it that was exploited and by whom?"

The point I am trying to make is that, if there is a genuine need on both sides it can be met harmoniously and honestly by, and for the benefit of, both the parties involved. The only human quality required is honesty. In this case, and in many others, it is the "haves" who have been exploited by the "have nots" which fact, somehow, no one seems to take into account.