

Flower is a Big Business

Developing Aquaculture

A wide range of issues related to the development of aquaculture were discussed recently at a workshop organised by several national and international research and aid agencies in Dhaka. The workshop concluded that a realistic national aquaculture development plan needed to be formulated, in order to increase production of fish and supply of protein.

The fish sector is of critical importance to this country since fish is a staple diet of the people of Bangladesh, which is also high in protein. Lack of protein is one of the major factors contributing to widespread malnutrition among the rural as well as urban population. Malnutrition is the single biggest reason why so many thousands of people, particularly children, die of such otherwise non-fatal diseases as pneumonia, diarrhoea etc. The four-digit death toll in September's flood in the north of the country would have been much lower, had the affected people not been sapped of strength through malnutrition, compounded by a wholly inadequate supply of emergency relief such as food, water and medicine.

Therefore the question of fish production is not only an academic or purely economic one. It is, in a very real sense, a matter of life and death. But considering the number of rivers, lakes and ponds that we have in this country, Bangladesh should really be a fish-exporting nation. Yet, people who live by rivers and lakes suffer from an acute lack of protein intake which should be alleviated by consumption of greater amount of fish. The paradox is not only tragic, it is downright obscene. We have the natural capacity to become one of the largest fish producing countries in the world, and meet the protein requirement of the people. The fact that we have not managed to do so is a demonstration of how we have failed to utilise available natural resources.

The workshop made a series of recommendations with the aim of turning aquaculture into a major industry, including more efficient use of existing production and marketing facilities. Utilisation of ponds and canals under local authority jurisdiction is now a must, with projects formulated to alleviate rural unemployment and poverty, rather than handing them over to absentee businessmen. Landlessness among the rural population and stagnation in rural economies are forcing an ever-increasing number of people to migrate to cities, particularly Dhaka, raising prospects of social tension, and deteriorating an already low standard of urban life. Fish farm projects under local authority or NGO supervision could reduce the migration by giving a moderate boost to rural economies.

Private sector entrepreneurs should also be encouraged to invest in aquaculture, with incentives given to those producing for the home market as well as the export market. In our rush to earn foreign exchange from fish, we must not lose sight of the fact that wealth from the rivers is primarily a national one, for which there is a great necessity at home. Like other staple food products, fish production should first meet the domestic requirement before being considered an exportable commodity.

Most crucially, however, utmost care must be taken at every level to preserve the natural balance of the local environment. No digging of new water preserves or building of barriers should be undertaken prior to a thorough investigation by competent authorities as to its possible impact on the surrounding environment. The question of environmental protection is particularly relevant to production of shrimp in the coastal areas where intrusion of saline water deep into the mainland can have devastating effect. Any new government plan for aquaculture development must have the environment as a special concern.

New Move on Kabul

The Soviet Union, which continues to have a major say on the future of Afghanistan, dramatically shifted its long-held position on Friday by suggesting that a transitional government could be formed in Kabul without President Najibullah having any role in it. So far there has not been any response either from the Kabul government or from the "moderate" Mujahideen groups, who admitted to being rather taken aback by the dramatic nature of the proposal. On the other hand, the more "hard-line" guerrilla groups based in Peshawar rejected the idea outright, preferring to topple the Watan Party of Najibullah from power altogether and replace it with an Islamic dispensation (with or without free elections? They did not say).

The role of Najibullah has long been a major bone of contention between the two warring camps, with the Mujahideen flatly refusing to have anything to do with him who had done more to consolidate the position of the left-wing Watan Party than any of his predecessors. Mujahideen leaders like the fundamentalist Gulbadin Hekmatyar who still hope for a military solution, still remain an obstacle to the peace process. These groups are undoubtedly hoping that, with the cut-off of Soviet military supplies from January 1, Kabul will no longer be able to prosecute the war as successfully as it has done so far. It is also suspected that the simultaneous US arms cut-off may not affect the Mujahideen as badly, as they will be able to rely on third parties such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for weapons and cash.

The situation therefore is not only uncertain, it is also highly dangerous. For one thing, it would be foolish to expect Najibullah to idly sit by and take a beating should the war continue. But more seriously, with the Mujahideen war-effort being directed by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Najibullah may be tempted to seek direct help from India. New Delhi may not be averse to the idea because the emergence of a fundamentalist Afghanistan dominated by Islamabad would be a serious blow to its geopolitical interests. Such a development would then greatly expand the scope of any future Indo-Pak conflict.

Afghan guerillas should now seize the opportunity offered by Moscow and pursue the path of peace talks and transition to a more democratic state without further entertainment of wild and dangerous dreams. Continuation of the war cannot help the Afghan people, while escalation into an Indo-Pak face-off could have disastrous impact on the entire region.

LOWER can be big business. We used to find only some small hawkers selling garlands and bouquets in front of the Old High Court building gate of Dhaka. Now it has become a more visible business. Not only such small scale flower vendors are now widespread, visible at several street corners, there are also regular flower shops, air conditioned, with neatly displayed flowers in shelves. With economic growth as well as more organized production and marketing ventures, such retailers should become numerous throughout Dhaka as well as other urban areas of Bangladesh. Basic to this is sustainable long term trend of rising per capita income.

In countries where incomes are high, for example in the interlinked economy of the United States, Western Europe and Japan with a combined population of around one billion, enjoying an average US\$10,000 per capita gross national product, flower is big business for a long time. If one-tenth of one per cent of this income is devoted to purchase of fresh flowers, then the total market size is 10 billion dollars — almost half the GDP of Bangladesh today.

In fact world export of flowers, at present exceeds 10 billion dollars. Not only that, the growth rate of export is more than 10 per cent per annum so that by the turn of the century, the size of the total export market should be more than double of what it is now. If we can secure a six per cent share of that market by the year 2001, then the foreign exchange earning from flowers only is likely to be more than double of what the Bangladesh

working abroad, remitted back to the country during 1990-91 financial year.

The potentially large amount of dollars possible to earn by exporting flowers will contribute to sustainable long term trend of rising per capita income. Such high levels of earnings are feasible from other new, non-traditional exportable products and services as well. As a consequence, number of flower sellers would multiply in the shopping areas of Dhaka and elsewhere; regular wholesale markets should emerge where daily flower auctions will become a routine. Indeed flower is a big business. In size it can exceed jute within the next ten to fifteen years.

New Idea

The cautious bureaucrats, more commonly known as pragmatic decision makers in the upper echelons of the government, would respond to whatever has been stated so far with the remark that is a dream valid in theory but there are many slips between the cup and the lips; from myth to reality is like a distant mirage. This is because the idea is so very new and unknown that the official policy lines dare not veer from the beaten path of the poverty ridden reality.

In order to convince the skeptic, few practical examples from the world of reality would not be out of place. Garment exports were initiated by only one private company in the late seventies. Only within a decade, it has ex-

panded into a billion dollar export trade. Since orchid growing is part of agriculture, an example of dynamic growth from within the primary sector may be more appropriate. Wheat cultivation was practically unknown in early 1970s, so much so that in our first five year plan, the single most important plan objective of achieving food self-sufficiency did not include wheat. It was in terms of rice only. Yet before the end of the decade of 1970s, over a million tons of wheat was produced by farmers who had never before seen the growing of wheat.

control, standardization, timeliness of delivery, stable supply etc., are very critical considerations.

The first consideration ought to be what kind of flower should be grown. At present, the nascent flower market that has emerged in Dhaka consists mainly of one variety, Rajanigandha. It is in high demand by the local consumers but Rajanigandha, regardless of our love and deep attachment, is unknown in the international market place. It lasts a long time as cut flower which is an essential quality for export-flowers. But, it is

profit per unit of land. It is a high profit, high cost agriculture with heavy demand for labour. It is suited to conditions characterized by too few land and too many labour while the high cost is the reason why modern business enterprises should get deeply involved in orchid growing instead of traditional farming practices.

How orchid should be promoted? Role of Government assumes paramount importance in this respect. First, an orchid farm should be established for identification of suitable export varieties which are in high demand as well as for large-scale production of planting materials through tissue culture. Second, appropriate post-harvest technology for handling and package of flowers needs to be developed by the government farm; while marketing can be initiated through retail outlets, for example at Zia International Airport and trial shipments abroad, particularly to Amsterdam which is the nodal point of the world flower market. The regular BIMAN flight, Dhaka — Amsterdam, can be utilized for the purpose.

Once the system has been perfected in terms of our ability to employ modern technology for efficient business operation starting with the raising of seedlings of appropriate varieties of orchids and ending with the shipment abroad as air cargo, the promotional phase of the scheme will be completed. Even before the end of the initial incubation period, comprehensive train-

ing of prospective orchid growers should be initiated. The course may cover agronomic practices, tissue culture, post-harvest handling, export package etc. in order to create a new class of orchid technicians. Simultaneously, the business aspects of the trade need to be brought to the attention of the prospective investors.

Private Companies

The business as currently organized in south-east Asia consist of private companies engaged in raising seedlings through tissue culture; collection of flowers from their own farms as well as farmers' cooperative; pretreatment and pre-cooling, packaging and then dispatch of air cargo on time for shipment. The same pattern could be followed in Bangladesh. With consistent technical as well as financial support from the Government, a sizeable business can be eventually developed. Compared to south-east Asia, our competitive advantage in the export trade are two: (i) labour cost would be less; and, (ii) the growing season is better because of the longer cool season. It is also important to note that the flight time to the major market centres of Europe is less than south-east Asia. Also as a low-income country, we are in a better position to exploit the preferential advantages in international trade, as appropriate.

From a nascent flower market to large-scale export marketing, from Rajanigandha to Orchids — that is the way we must proceed to develop flower into a multi-million dollar business by the turn of this century.

From LDC to NIC by Shahed Latif

If there are profitable opportunities, adequate initiatives and appropriate management, flowers can be grown for export, same way the cultivation of wheat had spread like a wild fire in the past. Bold new ventures, based on conviction backed up with sound analysis and support services are the cornerstones on which nations are built. We must seek those cornerstones and those who succeed are the founding fathers of a modern nation-state.

Flowers are for aesthetic value to satisfy the finer senses induced by refined tastes. But when flower is big business, flower cultivation, packaging, storage and marketing must reflect efficiency — not only refined taste. Particularly for export of flower, quality

notionously of one colour only. Flowers of export should be sturdy, long-lasting, full of varieties of colour with numerous shapes and sizes and should grow in abundance when the demand is very strong. During year end festivities, the Northern Hemisphere is snow-bound. Flowers are too few and grow in expensive hot houses. That is the time when flowers for export must be in full bloom in tropical Bangladesh.

Orchids

Orchids satisfy all the above criteria and therefore became the star performer in the international flower market. It is a multi-million dollar business in tropical south-east Asia. It ranks highest in terms of

Political Power Behind the Judge's Winning Smile

Cliff Hopkinson writes from Washington, D. C

THERE is no better illustration of the tragic impotence of much politics in the United States than the civilised and cynical drama staged on Washington's Capitol Hill beneath the crystal chandeliers and gilded ceiling of the Senate Caucus Room.

Clarence Thomas the nominee of President George Bush to fill the august position of Justice of the Supreme Court, seems unruffled as he listens to witnesses testifying for and against his suitability.

The 14 members of the Senate Judiciary Committee — all male, all white, and four of them millionaires — have already heard Judge Thomas tell movingly of his upbringing in poor Southern homes.

A long figure at a central table, Thomas is a chunky, bespectacled black man of 43, who has a sunny smile and wears a neatly tailored suit and white button-down shirt.

He has a deferential attitude to questions from the committee's Democrat members, who are an eight-strong majority and his natural opponents. His unflinching politeness confounds the questioners and there is frustration and tension in the air.

Thomas did not come along to the testing, but with a powerful back-up team that includes a former White House chief of staff. The team has coached the judge for the confirmation hearings and is part of a massive drive to ensure that he passes scrutiny and ascends to the most powerful body in the US legal system.

But there are those who have been deeply troubled by this possibility since Clarence Thomas's nomination began in controversy, when George Bush insisted that the judge's black skin had nothing to do with the choice, and nor had his views. It was simply that he was the best candidate.

Last year, Bush successfully nominated another conservative, Judge David Souter, to the Court. Now he wants yet another conservative to replace the ailing Justice Thurgood Marshall, a renowned, 83-year-old liberal and the only black Supreme Court justice ever appointed.



JUDGE CLARENCE THOMAS From poverty to power

As always, someone nominated for such a vital post stands immediately in a public searchlight.

Press and television have raked over Thomas's life and career, his speeches and writings, and much has been made of his apparent antipathy to abortion, to government-aided advancement of minorities, and his support of natural law — a supposedly God-given set of morals which some would put above the Constitution, and would use to narrow individual freedoms.

Liberals are in no doubt that Thomas is the latest player in the Republican game plan to roll back the great tide of liberal case law established since the Civil Rights Bill of 1973.

Confound his questioner as he might, Thomas did little to dispel the doubters' fears, although he did do everything to tighten his grip on the prize.

Questioned about his controversial views, he simply denied that they existed — or insisted that, where possibly they had once existed, they

Critics claim that Judge Clarence Thomas is simply part of the plan to roll back the tide of liberal case law in the United States since the Civil Rights Bill was passed in 1973. President George Bush insists he is simply the best man for the job, regardless of his controversial views and the fact that he is black. Meanwhile, Thomas is smiling all the way to the powerful position of Justice of the Supreme Court.

could never affect the impartiality of his judicial decisions.

On abortion, considered a litmus test by liberal Americans, he refused to be drawn. Never, he professed, in all the years since the 1973 Roe-v-Wade decision, which gave women the right to abortion, did he hold an opinion on the matter.

This, observed commentator Charles Krauthammer in a disbelieving essay in the Washington Post, "probably makes him the only sentient adult in the country who doesn't."

Seventy questions on abortion over five days failed to budge the judge from his chosen line.

His inquisitors finally fell back defeated, fearful that their television audience (which means voters) might find any heavier attack inappropriate upon a black man — particularly one who, from the lowest beginnings, had won a place at Yale law school, had become an assistant attorney — general in the state of Missouri and, later, head of the nation's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

In short, despite the 30,000 pages of evidence gathered, much of which could have been employed potently against the nominee, they were reluctant to hump him down to a kill.

How could they, with impunity, slay such a prime embodiment of the American dream, a dream that recession had made, for most citizens, infinitely remote?

Here was proof of Bush's political savvy. Had Thomas been white, the story might have been much different.

As it was, Thomas defeated his opponents simply by

describing his rise from poverty origins in Pin Point, Georgia, catching "minnows in the creek and fiddler crabs in the marshes," then his move to Savannah, to one room in a tenement with a communal kitchen and, in the back yard, a bathroom that was "unworkable, unusable."

He would not forget, he said, that there was a time when you could be packed up and put on a chain gang for just standing on the corner."

This prime example of the American dream was not about to relinquish his chance of pre-eminence by making a single controversial admission. He has seen tomorrow, and the prospect pleases. Grandeur calls, candour falls.

The intensity of the nation's focus on these lengthy shenanigans cannot be explained solely by the belief that Thomas will further strengthen the Supreme Court's base in the conservative territory it has already occupied. It is more a product of the nation's political malaise.

A Republican president frustrates and is frustrated by a Democrat Congress. Aecting distrusted activities in domestic policy, he pursues the less fettered, pursuit of foreign affairs.

Legislators, watching votes, stonily abandon the dilemma of the country's massive budget deficit for fear of taking such unpopular and practical steps as raising taxes and further cutting spending.

The US is a nation in a recession that the government's optimistic forecasts have been unable to wish away, with millions unemployed and disadvantaged, where 30 per cent of the population have no health insurance, and where, according to government calculation,

one-third of children born into low-income families go hungry.

In this tender time, this stalemate, the Supreme Court is the one great organ of government not victim to impotence. It needs only a decision by the justices that the law must be interpreted less liberally and millions can find their lives altered, their freedoms reduced, their hardships intensified.

That is why 50 national organisations oppose Judge Thomas, bodies such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, the American Federation of Labour, the National Council of Churches and the National Organisations for Women. Such adversaries have given

evidence to the committee in an attempt to block his elevation.

Already, though, they suspect their cause is lost. For not only have canny tactics eroded opposition in the Judiciary Committee, the country also is divided and blacks are split evenly for and against Thomas.

Their dilemma is well summed up by a current cartoon in which Judge Thomas stands in the outside shoes of Thurgood Marshall.

"I say Marshall's shoes are half empty," observes one onlooker. His companion disagrees: "I say they're half full."

Justices of the Supreme Court often retain tenure until well into old age. Thus, no matter the size of foot print he leaves on judicial affairs, it now seems likely that, at 43, Clarence Thomas will, for the next 30 or 40 years, be involved in telling Americans how they must interpret their Constitution. — GEMINI NEWS

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OPINION Women and Jewelry

For a city of Dhaka's size and population, there are far more gold jewelry shops here than in any of the far more affluent cities of the West. This is because ladies of our country buy and wear more jewelry than their richer sisters in the West. The craving for gold is universal and is as old as history. In the past many expeditions were embarked upon in search of gold and also many wars were fought over this precious commodity.

The reason for the craving for gold in Bangladesh is cultural, traditional and also economic. In a society where women are treated as second class citizens and are dependent on their men folk for production, sustenance and even survival — gold, jewelry and precious stones are considered by many to be their only and ultimate security. For the same reason, gold ornaments become the major component of the dowry in weddings. Of course, there are also fashionable and wealthy women, adornment and impressing other women is a great concern or even an obsession with them (it can be safely said men hardly notice women's jewelry, unless he is a jeweller himself or when he has to pay for it). These women never have enough jewelry and they are the frequent visitors of the fancy, select and well known jewelry shops in the city.

In many social functions, especially in the wedding ceremonies of the rich and powerful — it becomes not only a fashion show but also an exhibition of exquisite (and often gaudy) jewelry flaunted by the painted and perfumed guests. On occasions like these, it is hard to imagine that we are living in the poorest of the poor country of the world.

The objective of this writing is not to criticize or condemn a tradition of long standing, but, to bring out certain economic realities of an impoverished nation. Although, there is no statistics available, it can be said with confidence that a considerable portion of the as-

sets held by the middle and upper income group people are in gold and ornaments. This may be fine for an individual or a family, but, collectively it does not bode well for the country or the economy. It takes out and diverts a significant if not a major source of investment capital out of capital market and productive utilization. The unnecessary and unusual demand for gold also fuels the fire of smuggling, reportedly the biggest "business" and anti-social activity in the country.

In a country where resource is scarce and specially investment capital is meager at best — it is unfortunate to tie up capital source into non-productive and essentially luxury items like jewelry which has low utility value except to give some sense of security to their owners or to be worn occasionally to exhibit the wealth of the owners or to add to the beauty of the wearers it that is possible.

Unfortunately, this sense of security may be wrongly placed in the Bangladesh context, where unscrupulous business people adulterate low value food items like milk, cooking oil or even life saving medicine — it will be great naive to expect gold merchants and jewelers selling their wares which they claim to be 22 carat gold is really 22 carat gold and is not 10 or 12 carats or even less, specially, when there is no government agency or a bureau of standards which authenticates such claims and provides some kind of guarantee, assurance or certificate of authenticity.

So, it is entirely possible that ladies who are so keen and eager to increase their hoard of gold and ornaments whether to increase their store house of security or enlarge their stock of adornments — are really in a fool's paradise as their hoards might be worth much, much less than what they deem it to be.

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To the Editor...

Checks on educational "fashions"

Sir, It is expected that the new government is examining closely the state of the education in the country. The prevailing illnesses are well known and publicized. What the citizens expect is a well-kept monitoring system (at all levels), and after reviewing the current checks and balances mechanisms, to revise the same as necessary, and enforce it strictly; providing sufficient deterrents to the violators. Some examples follow.

1) The commercialization of education: It has become a thriving business, with expensive English-medium schools, mushrooming of tutorial institutes, Private tutorships (for individuals or groups of students), and other easy money-making schemes in the name of better education and coaching. Only the rich or well-to-do can afford such business facilities. Some agency has to enforce the quality controls, to ensure value for money spent. This business is booming due

session jams, and low percentage of passes in the formal examinations.

2) The morale, dedication, motivation, and frustration of the teachers: In previous generations, teaching was a dedicated profession. At present, many educated persons take up teaching not as a permanent career, but marking time to hop to more lucrative careers. This attitude could have spilled over to the tendencies noted in the previous paragraph.

3) The low percentage of passes in the examinations; resulting in huge national loss every year in man-hours and money: If the vast majority fail, how are the unfit "examinees" allowed to sit for the examination? Somebody is not doing his job properly.

4) The great disparity between primary education in the rural areas, and the expensive English medium KGs in the large cities: (Also the prescribing of expensive foreign-printed books, and charging of high monthly fees by English-medium education is

so popular, then why leave the whole responsibility to the private sector? Is 100 per cent commercialization good for education? There may be a clear-cut policy on this issue.

A Mawaz Dhaka

No junket

Sir, Our attention was drawn to your second editorial of September 27. This reminds us of the pledges made by the political parties, off and on, to build up corruption-free administration and exploitation-free society. How these could be established in Bangladesh if wastage of public funds continue unabated? If, on the other hand, the political ideologies take root in the soil of Bangladesh we would be one of the most fortunate nations. But who will start the process? Surely, it is the party in power which can make it with the unreserved support of the opposition.

It would never be enough to set examples of honesty and sincerity like President Ziaur Rahman, but it would also be

necessary to remove the material causes of corruption as well as exploitation from the society. President Zia, instead of penicning on foreign tours used to make it business-like by taking brilliant students and professionals with him.

So far as the administrative machinery is concerned we may say that if government can provide housing to the government servants on retirement, more than 50% of corruption would vanish. It is not at all difficult if a housing deduction like other deductions from salary of an incumbent is made over his service life for utilisation in building flats etc. Besides, the separable funds from the deduction of Benevolent Fund and Group Insurance can also be made available for this purpose.

If sound development process begins ensuring near full employment the tendency of exploitation would vapour out. A determined government with the ungrudging support of opposition can do a lot.

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