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R.P. SHAHA : A DREAM FULFILLED

by Rahat Fahmida

Bharateswari Homes and Kumudini Hospital are only two of a number of this great philanthropist's undertakings that their beneficiaries — the people of Bangladesh — are grateful for.

LEAVING the industrialised area near the capital city, Dhaka and travelling north, one is in for a sudden surprise. Passing through the lush rice and sugarcane fields, the stands of bamboo and reforested land, one comes upon a veritable city. Kumudini Complex, the fulfillment of the dream of Rai Bahadur Ranada Prasad Shaha, popularly known as R.P. Shaha rises to serve the poor and uneducated of the country.

The fast changing pattern of life in the East is nowhere more clearly visible than in this remote village, seated in the heart of Bangladesh, 30 miles away from the nearest railway station and 42 miles from Dhaka.

Ranada Prasad was born on the 15th of November 1896, of humble parents who could not give him a good upbringing. A child of promise, but neglected, he showed signs of wildness in his early years and was a terror to his neighbours.

But at the age of seven he lost his mother — an event that caused such a deep and lasting impression upon him that later in life he was determined to do all he could to improve conditions for the many women who lacked medical attention.

Terrified by his mother's groans, as she lay dying of tetanus having given birth to a dead child, he had, at the same time, to listen to her husband's family in an adjoining room making preparations for a second wife.

Confused and frightened, he became so unruly that it was felt undesirable to keep him in the village and he was quietly sent away to live with a maternal uncle. But he was not welcome there either and when at the age of fourteen, he ran away to Calcutta. He was considered a good riddance.

From the swamps of East Bengal to the 'City of Joy' — Calcutta here the career of Ranada Prasad grew more colourful. He joined a group of young revolutionaries who were planning to free the country from the British rule through violence. Ranada Prasad, constantly watched by the Police, was singled out as a trouble maker and several times taken into custody. From the first he sought a cause and purpose in life. But he also possessed a strong moral calibre that directed his energy and talents towards positive and humanitarian ends.

At the outbreak of World War I he enlisted in the Bengal Ambulance Corps and was sent to Mesopotamia (Iraq). There he did valuable ambulance work and under heavy enemy fire rescued the wounded and the dying. During the fateful days of the famous siege of Kut, he risked his life almost daily trying to procure fresh vegetables for the scurvy-ridden troops. On one occasion he fought his way through the flames of a burning field hospital station to rescue 20 disabled soldiers.

For his personal heroism he was awarded a commission in the newly founded Bengal Regiment, formed in recognition of the gallant services of the Bengal soldiers.

As a result of his war services Ranada Prasad's life took on a definite direction, a direction based on three main principles. The first was his determination to work for the good of his fellow men — particularly for the poor, the sick and the suffering. The second was to do this work for all the people of his country, men and women, regardless of their religious beliefs or political ideology in order to help them to be proud and healthy citizens of their own nation. His third aim, gained through his military experience, was to teach the values of discipline in the attainment of excellence. He believed that only through discipline, order and team work could a man achieve maximum benefit for his fellow men.

But despite all his dreams for building the great hospital and schools that had become the focus of his imagination, Ranada Prasad still had to face the practical aspects of raising the money to construct them.

His first civilian job was a junior position on the railway and when circumstances forced him to leave he was given a lump sum of money as compensation. With this capital he invested in a small business supplying domestic coal which, by sheer industry, increased in size rapidly. Within four years he had become a prominent coal merchant in Calcutta. By careful management he was then able to found another business — the Bengal River Service Company — a river transport.

At last Ranada Prasad was building up sufficient capital to

begin to think in practical terms of fulfilling his ambition. Nevertheless all business projects involve risks and the possibility of a crash. With this in mind he approached a large insurance company, who agreed, not only to reduce their charges on all goods carried by the River Services Company, in the knowledge that the proceeds were being accumulated for such a fine cause, but also to secure further business for the company.

In 1938 the foundation stone of a 20 bed hospital was laid, a dispensary having already been started. Construction also began on a residential girls' school for 200 girls of which the corner stone was also laid by his wife, in his home village of Mirzapur.

Then World War II broke



Bharateswari Homes.

out. The prices of building materials soared, and transport, when available at all, was several times more expensive than before. Ranada Prasad realised that he must now seek new avenues of income if he was to succeed with his original plans. He worked hard, with all the incentive of his

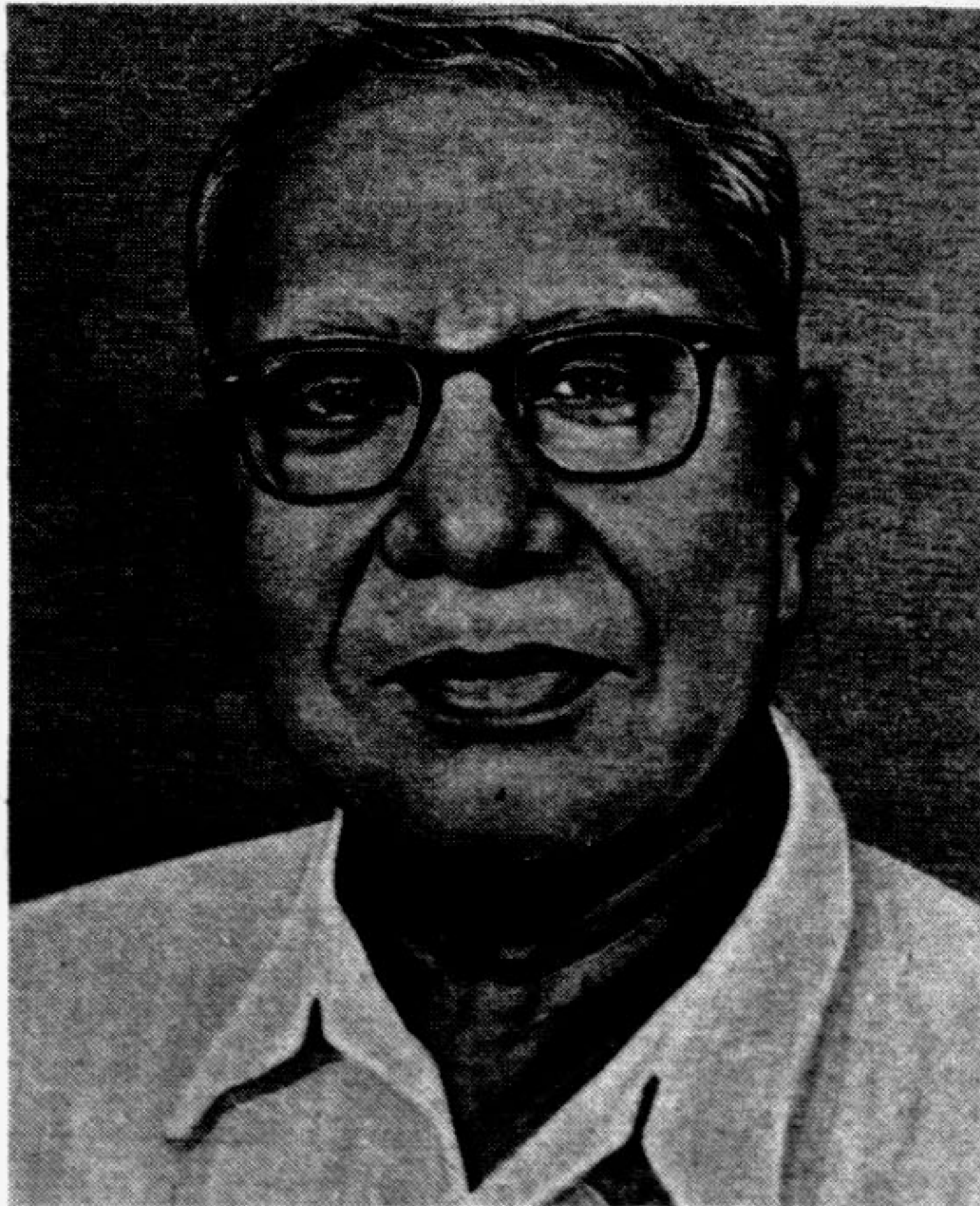
Ranada Prasad Shaha believed that only through discipline, order and team work could a man achieve maximum benefit for his fellow men The whole Bengal, particularly East, bears the eloquent testimony to the munificence of R.P. Shaha and his Trust.

purpose pressing upon him, as clearing agent, labour contractor and storing agent for the Government. He purchased from George Anderson the jute pressing business and the godowns for jute storage in Narayanganj. At the time this was the most prosperous enterprise of its kind in East Bengal.

By a deed of trust he assigned the entire profits of these enterprises to be utilised

in projects to benefit the poor under a Trust which later, in 1947, was registered as a non-profit private limited company under the name of the Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal Limited.

The whole of Bengal, particularly East Bengal, bears the eloquent testimony to the munificence of Ranada Prasad and his Trust. Besides a number of school and a college that have received substantial aid, a first grade college, named after his mother, Kumudini Girls' College in the country, was founded, run at enormous cost in Tangail, providing subsidised education to girls. Facilities were provided for both residential and non-residential students. The Trust bore the entire cost of purchasing an extensive plot of land and building a first grade college, named after Ranada Prasad's father, Debendra College, at Manikganj in the district of Dhaka. In addition to donations of more than 3 lakhs of rupees to the Red Cross Society when the Bengal famine broke out, the Trust took upon itself the great task of feeding the destitute and



Late Ranada Prasad Shaha, founder of Kumudini Complex.



Kumudini Handicrafts.

the hungry, and opened 250 free kitchens. These ran for four months, each kitchen feeding one thousand people a day.

For meeting the expenses of the Trust, funds are available from the business centres of the Trust in Narayanganj which is situated 10 miles from Dhaka and 52 miles from Kumudini complex. These include the seven jute presses, four in Khanpur and three in Sitalakhya. In addition to the income earned from the pressing of jute, further amounts are

realised from the rental charges levied for the storage of jute in the godowns. The monthly expenditure of the entire operation is, however, between 1.5 million and 2 million Taka (\$ 50,000 and \$ 66,667).

To supplement the Trust income, as well as the individual salaries of the shop employees in Narayanganj an overtime project has been undertaken by some of the men. They produce first quality baby scales for sale to various rural-based health projects in the

country. Considerable profit has been realised from these and the scales themselves have proved to be of great value to baby clinics throughout the country.

Kumudini Handicraft Center, a unit of KWT, is a new venture. Kumudini hopes to encourage the small cottage industries (weavers) in the surrounding areas of Narayanganj to supply the fabrics. These weavers are suffering



Kumudini Handicrafts.

because of the big textile industries which are coming up.

The activities of the Trust are concentrated. It now manages Kumudini Hospital (named after Ranada Prasad's mother) and Bharateswari Homes (named after his great-grandmother). All of these are institutions, financed directly by the Trust and never referred to as being 'charitable'. Ranada Prasad held strong views on 'charity'. He unrealised that to many people, charity meant giving what they didn't want or needed, or perhaps what they didn't like. He believed people were the products of their nation and that they had an obligation to help make their nation a better one. He believed that those who were fortunate enough to have gained more worldly goods than others were obligated to pay the less fortunate for this privilege. Giving to the poor, he considered, a responsibility and not an act of gracious patronisation. Therefore, his institutions were intended for the good of the nation. They were intended to serve the segment of society which was not benefiting from

the larger schemes of government, supplementing the overall plan of development.

Kumudini Hospital began in a small way, with 20 beds for women only, in 1944. It steadily grew and has become a 750 bed general hospital where patients can now receive obstetrical, gynaecological, medical and surgical care, as well as dental and eye treatment. Being a free institution the hospital caters almost exclusively for the poor people of this country who have no means of paying for their medical care, though no one would be deliberately turned away.

The Hospital is one of the few in the country offering up-to-date treatment for cancer. Radio treatment, chemotherapy and surgery are available, together with a doctor's care-

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was removed from the place where his heart and soul were. If he were ever to come back he would find that the present administration has followed in his footsteps and that the Trust is proud to have had its own School of Nursing since 1973.

Ranada Prasad Shaha was convinced that each person educated in any way in the institutions which he founded had a mandate to share this light of learning. Each, no matter what life style is followed, must kindle this same light and help it to spread throughout the world. Indeed, many of its graduates, who go on to college and university, choose to return to Bharateswari Homes to give their time and energy to the great cause of educating women in the country. They contribute to the creation of a more open-minded society by taking positions as heads of excellent educational institutions, as doctors, as heads of commercial enterprises, in public service.

Bharateswari Homes, the third institution of the Kumudini Complex, is a higher secondary school for 1,200 students which is fully accredited by the Government. Students come to the school from all parts of Bangladesh and from every level of society. Various activities help the students to develop a personal undertaking and appreciation for manual labour. They share in the responsibilities of maintaining clean premises. By turn they assist in the preparation of their meals. Store keeping for the entire complex is their own responsibility. Their contacts with the patients in the hospital nearby help them to a greater understanding for the poor and the sick of their country. Above all, the excellent academic education which they receive under the guidance of a fine staff gives them a justifiable sense of confidence in themselves and in their abilities and potential. The students can also see that, in these disciplined institutions, the hopes of the Founder are being fulfilled and that, through the standards of excellence that are set, they are being given the means of becoming responsible and productive members of their society.

Once a simple and obscure village of uneducated people, Mirzapur has now become one of the most work of one of its own, R.P. Shaha. On 7th of May, 1971 at 11.30 pm he along with his 27 years old son Bhabani Prasad Shaha, then his helping hand, was taken by the Pakistan Army from his head office in Narayanganj. Nothing is known of their whereabouts. Nevertheless his dream continues to grow under leadership of his family members, as he has left behind his daughters — Ms. Bijoya Ali, and Ms. Joya Pati, assisted by an able and devoted staff. His dream expands in the same spirit of service of the people.

The great structures of the hospital and the schools stand as living monuments, to him, a simple man who maintained for himself and his family, a small corrugated roofed house in the village of Mirzapur. He made no separate provisions for them. He believed that they, too, must be self-made. And so like him, they work towards the fulfillment of the dream of serving the helpless of the country to become stronger physically, mentally and spiritually in order to be proud builders of this great nation.

Everything You Wanted to Know About the Economy, But Were Too Busy to Ask

By Sabir Mustafa

THEY are calling the present-day economics of the West 'service-oriented' economics, meaning the industrial era has now been taken over by the leisure age. The biggest headache in the northern hemisphere now is what to do with their leisure time.

But where are we in Bangladesh? This is supposed to be an overwhelmingly agricultural economy, since the bulk of the population is engaged in growing and selling crops, with manufacturing making up less than 10 per cent of gdp or gross domestic product (official figure, not mine).

But there is more to this country than meets the eye. Dhaka city, which is the nerve-centre of the country's economy — it has to be, since it is just about the only place where anything called 'economic activity' gets done — is full of indications of a thriving service economy.

Shops, restaurants, and other post-manufacturing services are pretty well fighting with one another for a place to stand by the road side. Private schools, other 'educational' institutions with funny names like Model Academy (often named after some Arabian king or other, though one cannot understand why, as there are plenty of kings in our own history to choose from), private clinics and a plethora of other medical services, newspapers (hundreds of them), multi-storey apartment blocks. There is so much of it that

we can be certain of one thing: Dhaka residents are most unlikely to face 'want' of anything at any given point in time. Provided people can pay for it, of course, which is the case with everything anyway.

Even the oldest service-oriented profession, prostitution, is thriving in more parts of the city than is good for our social health. But let us not bring morality into this, since the market position of that particular profession has always been a perfect reflection of the age-old rule of supply and demand (when Adam Smith talked about the Invisible Hand, he really was talking about pimps). The only thing people have not managed to agree upon is which reacts to which — does the supply exist because there is a demand or vice-versa?

It would seem to the naked eye that our economy has already grown along contemporary Western lines. Only problem is, we seem to have skipped two vital stages of the Western industrial process — heavy manufacturing and light-consumer manufacturing.

Some would even say we have deftly side-stepped another crucial phase: post-feudal, pre-industrial agriculture, because many people are a little confused as to what the exact characteristics of our rural economy is. The question then naturally arises, where are we really?

The optimists would say, we are everywhere, because we have successfully achieved bits and pieces of every conceivable

stage of economic development all at the same time.

It is now a simple case of coordination: just amalgamate the post-feudal aspects of agriculture with consumer-oriented light industries, and the service sector with manufacturing that is a little heavier than garments (we have truly skipped really heavy manufacturing, because it is much easier to build boats than capsize than ocean-going ships that don't). With that done, the economy will then reveal itself as a true Tiger, ready to take on the world.

The world? No, that comes later. First, our Tiger has to take on the dreaded Black Market Economy which, according to some opinion, may be as large as the white economy.

Now, the whole point of one sector of the economy being black is that it is not taxed. So, if smuggled Indian sarrees were taxed tomorrow, they would not be smuggled goods anymore, and therefore not part of the black economy.

But exactly why untaxed economic activity is called 'black' is still a mystery. After all, some of the legal affairs going on at present can hardly be called lilywhite either.

For instance, we keep paying surcharges for a bridge that may or may not get built. We keep paying for a bridge to be built in our country, knowing fully well that the decision to build it or not will be taken by somebody else thousands of miles away from Sirajganj. Worse, if the bridge does fi-

nally get built, we may find that the river had got so bored with all the hanging around that it had decided to change course and started flowing through a different district altogether. What would happen to our surcharges then? Refund? Not a chance. This is white economy.

The black economy is strong because it cannot afford to mess around (and therefore does not). It supplies only what it can sell. In fact, it only supplies anything because it will sell. And it constantly runs the risk of getting nabbed all the time. Now, what is exactly this 'black economy'?

Untaxed and undocumented income all sorts, including all the money whose source is obviously a mystery, come under this category. Unearned income? Or expenditure not commensurate with known (taxed) source of income? That would cover, let's say, rather a large chunk of the transaction going on at any given time, would it not?

At one end of the scale, we have the semi-literate, unenlightened office peon taking five takas to pass on a message, while at the other, we have the highly-educated and cultured pillar of society gracefully accepting five lakh takas for doing something that was his job anyway.

Both are black, but we judge the peon's five takas as an un-speakable sin, a disgusting piece of bribe, while the top guy's five lakh is just 'goodwill' money, a thank-you gift.

Who knows what the total annual turnover of all the little paan-biri stalls dotted along roads all over Bangladesh is? It must be pretty enormous, as must be the total earnings of all the rickshawallahs put together. The police recently said there might be as many as 400,000 rickshaws in metropolitan Dhaka alone. If we take 50 takas to be the average daily earning of a rickshaw, then the annual income of the Dhaka rickshaw community stands at a staggering 730 crore takas!

But the income tax people never see any of it, because taken individually, 1,500 takas per month is not even taxable. All these money, and those earned by cigarette-sellers, the paan seller and all the street hawkers up and down the country do not figure in our gdp. But they are not exactly jet black, more like grey, because the police never comes and beats up anyone for selling paans.

But one day, when all the World Bank-IMF conditions have been implemented and the Ministry of Finance has been transferred from Dhaka to Geneva, all these will come under the taxnet and become blazing white.

So much for optimism. The pessimists have a slightly different view because their answer to the question 'where are we' is even more simple: nowhere. Not here-there-and-everywhere as in the optimistic version, but absolutely

nowhere. They point to: **Corruption:** Even in the early '70s, only Iblis could possibly even think of taking bribes; today, not even imams can be safely regarded as being free of the disease. Things have gone so far that soon it will not be possible to cross the road without bribing all the rickshawallahs parked on the Zebra crossing.

The nationalised sector: Once they were inefficient. Today they are inefficient.

Nationalised industries that have been privatised: Once they were running inefficiently. Today they are closed very efficiently.

The private sector: Twenty years ago, there was virtually none. Today there is virtually none. What we have is a hodge-podge of importers, indentors, contractors, middle-men and state-financed small manufacturing and banks that look suspiciously like first cousins of BCCI.

Agriculture: Good news here, rice production is UPI. Bad news here too, the government is asking everyone to switch to potato. Another good news here, there is more mobility in rural areas. Bad news is the farmers are moving because they have become landless.

With that kind of idea of the economy embedded in their psyche, it is little wonder the pessimists are quite pessimistic. See page 10