

Managing the Crisis in Development

Art and Culture

The Fifth Bangladesh Biennale Asian Art Exhibition got underway last Friday with 271 artists from 13 countries putting 439 objects of art on display at the Osmani Memorial Hall and the Shilpakala Academy auditorium. The Shilpakala Academy's success in maintaining and strengthening cultural interactions with other Asian countries is a welcome one and, hopefully, future biennales will be able to attract greater number of participants.

Art exhibitions of this kind can often drive home the message that the realms of culture have a quality of universality which cannot be compartmentalised through drawing of political borders. The world of fine arts, as much as literature, thrives on influences — by being influenced and by leaving its mark on others. Any attempt to "sanitise" one national culture against influence of others through censorship, bans etc., will ultimately lead to the utter impoverishment of the culture that is insulated. The continuation of the biennales is a healthy sign that we are well aware of the dangers posed by cultural xenophobia, and wish to continue and, hopefully, expand our field of cooperation with other countries, whether in Asia or elsewhere, in order to contribute to the development of universal human understanding and enrich our own culture.

The scenario, however, is not quite free of danger. Recently a government minister announced that imports of all foreign books that were not "compatible with our culture and heritage" would be banned. In the absence of any concrete official announcement on the subject, we are still unsure about the exact type of books the government intends to ban or indeed why. But what we can say with surety is that these kinds of policies are fraught with dangers that need to be resisted at the earliest possible moment. Banning books or other publications, other than those that deprave or incite hatred and violence, would have the singular and devastating effect of depriving our younger generation of knowledge, without which no culture could flourish and no country could hope to develop.

The culture of a nation must have the capability of renewal and enrichment through constant and ever-increasing infusion of ideas from other cultures. The art exhibition is one such way of blowing fresh breeze through the cultural environment. But if we do not allow access to other cultures for the majority of the people, then the whole idea of cooperation and interactions through staging of joint exhibitions will be for nothing.

We are also lacking in some essential structures to promote art in this country at present. Considering the volume of work that have already been produced by highly-talented local artists, and the number that are likely to be produced in the future, a National Art Gallery has now become imperative. There is already a plan for it, which is merely waiting for official approval. There is no reason why there should be any delay over this. Works of some of our masters such as Jaiul Abedin and Quamrul Hassan need a permanent home which would be accessible to the people easily. A national art gallery could provide such a place for permanent display of the masters' works, and also provide for better preservation of the works. Furthermore, existing exhibition facilities are wholly inadequate to meet the current requirement, let alone of the future. We should not regard such an art gallery as a luxury any longer since economic development without cultural flourishing would represent nothing short of a body without a soul.

A Thoughtful Gesture

The Prime Minister's decision to set aside a specific time every week, to meet with the members of the general public, is a commendable one. Given the bureaucratic web and the security shield that distances a leader from the ordinary citizens, the new arrangement will definitely help to improve the access of the common people to the most powerful office in the country.

For the common people to benefit from the PM's decision, her staff officers will have to ensure that the power brokers or the political touts are sifted out and only the 'genuine' interviewees get into that all important list, which is prepared on a first-come, first served basis.

As is evident from the sample of the first day's interviewees, those seeking an audience with the PM will be ones trying to redress personal grievances. If such be the case, queue before the PM's office could as well be never ending for there are just too many personal cases to handle.

There are two ways of looking at it. First, by providing a direct channel of communication with the highest executive officer of the country, the PM could ensure that she is better informed about how her administration is functioning. The fact that the common people have direct access to the PM itself can have a dramatic effect on the performance of our officials, knowing that a wilful wrongdoing can easily reach the ears of the highest executive. The other way of looking at it would be, how much can the PM do? Does she not run the risk of getting bogged down with too many specifics? And then, a more fundamental question naturally comes to the fore—is it really the way she would like to run things? Wouldn't she be better off trying to make the system more effective, rather than creating a situation which lends itself to instant decision-making, with all the dangers that come with it? Whatever may be the ultimate usefulness of this move, for the moment it appears to be a good one. Expanding this access to people who are unable to travel to Dhaka should also be considered. Writing letters is usually thought of as a fruitless task. A more organised and authentic system of responding to letters written by the common people to the head of the government, could add to this process of expanding access to the PM. A live phone-in question-answer session on the television could also be experimented with.

THE system has in the distribution of electricity is highest in Bangladesh. Unless the situation improves, no substantial assistance to expand the power sector would be forthcoming. The recovery rates of industrial loans are marginal. In fact, many of these industries exist only as fictions. As a result, Bangladesh Shilpa Bank has been denied of resources by donor authorities. Unless loans are recovered, the future of industrial investment loans are indeed very bleak. The government current expenditures have now assumed mammoth proportions so that the entire public sector is badly suffering from utter incapacity to garner resources for development. The recent pay hikes have further complicated the situation. New donors assistance is at a standstill. The entire jute industry is running in the red. Financially the industry is so much at a loss that unless the trends are reversed, the industry might soon collapse. Tax collection has not improved while savings as a percentage of GDP is not only extremely low, it has declined further from the low levels of the past decades. Our development is totally at the mercy of the donor countries whose assistance has enabled us to live beyond our means.

Our incapacity to take care of ourselves seems total. Clearly we face perhaps the most acute crisis in development today. We need a package of immediate measures capable of dissipating the crisis in the short term so that the economy starts moving and pick up a reasonable rate of growth by the end of the next fiscal year, that is June 1993. This should give us solid two years, 24

months or 600 working days for reform and reorganisation. **First Emphasis** The first emphasis of the reform package ought to be decontrol, privatisation and progressive liberalisation. The biggest obstacle in this respect seems to be the entrenched interests of the organised labour in a country of too few jobs in the formal sectors of the economy, such strong vested interests are not at all surprising. But if workers are offered alternative income earning opportunities, the resistance to reorganisation is bound to be weakened. If the affected workers are offered liberal separation benefits in terms of provident fund accumulation, commutation of pension wherever it exists and lump sum payments in lieu of salary for a predetermined period of time not as cash compensation but for investment in a business or manufacturing enterprise together with liberal loan facilities, then a whole new class of entrepreneurs can be created within a short period of time. It does not matter if they are very small, micro-scale operators. They can also be induced to join hands with other recipients of such investment compensation to form enterprises with multiple ownership so that economic scale of operation is secured.

Such compensatory investment funds as equity backed up with investment loans need not be paid in cash. The funds should be earmarked to build housing for the enterprises under specific industrial estate development projects where all the utilities like electricity, gas, telephone, water etc., are fully provided. The retrained workers in groups are enabled to set up small to medium

scale manufacturing, trade or service enterprises. For example a group of former employees of PDB are assisted to set up a factory to manufacture electric switches and plugs. They are given factory space (flatted factory, 4 to 5 floors to economise on the use of urban land) as well as machineries and equipment of hire purchase, training and management support. If the compensation that they received are not adequate to cover the cost then partial rental arrangement may be adopted. As for example the factory space may be on rent while the compensation component is allocated for purchase of machineries

and equipment, as appropriate. Similarly groups of clerks and typists rendered surplus in the economic reorganisation can be assisted to set up computer data entry service enterprises and other groups likewise assisted to organise maintenance services for users of electricity, repair shops for electrical equipment, manufacture of spares etc. In fact with the expansion of the use of electricity there are numerous opportunities for trade, business and manufacturing, more so when public sector activities are privatised to the maximum extent possible. It is also not necessary that surplus PDB staff should stick to electricity related activities only. They may own buses and trucks or taxis for public service on a profitable basis or a group of them pull their resources together to start a brick field supplying bricks directly to the project on housing for the enterprises. Any income earning opportunity may be sought where the

compensation funds are useable as good investment with or without involving further assistance.

Critical Constraint

It may however be recognised that the lack of appropriate know how and skill is perhaps the most critical constraint that the target group would face in order to take advantage of the opportunities. Thus along with asset creation for the enterprises, training schemes are necessary. Very practical hands-on skill development covering both technical and management skills should also be made available at the very out-

set of the project implementation. But once the process is on-going, extension demonstration would provide the vital incentives to the intended beneficiaries of the enterprise development programme. Thus a new type of enterprise and entrepreneurs should emerge. The excess employees of the public sector entities, government departments and ministries as well as the retirees from the defence services can thereby be self-employed and in turn offer employment to the young aspirants seeking jobs as clerks and peons of the government.

Compensation Investment Fund

Thus let the Government create a public sector compensation investment fund to benefit the retrained employees and at the same time, vigorously support industrialization and business development. It would then be feasible to pursue privatisation and progressive liberalisation in a relentless manner. The strategy basically is to create investment entitlements for those who are affected by the reorganisation of the economy as a whole. The entitlements on the other hand support the liberalisation of the economy.

What we conspicuously lack today is modern businessmen and small to medium scale industrialists who work themselves and work hard to create new products and services.

Opportunities for such micro, small and medium scale manufacturing, service and other trade and business establishments are simply abundant. The critical information and knowledge is what are lacking in our very rural as

well as feudal environment. The enlarged employment opportunities particularly self-employment and business opportunities would definitely set the stage for massive disinvestment planned by the government. Simultaneously, government must seek direct foreign investment from large investors in particular for development of natural gas based petro-chemicals; exploration and exploitation of hydro-carbons, coal included, and other minerals like white clay, glass-sand, limestone recently discovered; telecommunication, transport, construction materials industry and basic steel as well as other metal manufacturing.

Trade Union Involvement

Within the next six months, not only the disinvestment policies should be initiated — the stability of the policies and the sustainability of the liberalisation programme must be firmly established. The task is first political and then economic. Trade union leaders must be involved and convinced that the programme within the next few years would lead to a high rate of industrialisation where small and medium scale enterprises play a leading role while large-scale foreign investment generate the linkage effect to further bolster the growth of the small and medium industries. Inevitably labour would benefit — it could not be otherwise.

The "Workers Investment Compensation Programme" is the answer to the lack of industrial peace. Labour unrest would be avoided and they would be drawn into the mainstream of development. This is the major answer to the labour unrest — the cause of the basic crisis in development today.

From LDC to NIC by Shahed Laif

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Government is struggling to create the Dhaka Electricity Supply Authority. Eventually the plan should be to privatise distributing of electricity while PDB would concentrate only on generation of electricity. The Telephone Shilpa Sangatha could not be privatised earlier due to workers resistance. On the other hand the privatisation would immediately bring

End to Sanctions may Trigger a Regional Economic Boom

Charles Rukuni writes from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Political reforms have led many countries to lift sanctions against Pretoria. As a result South Africa, already the strongest economy in the region, may now see further growth — a development which could lead to greater prosperity in the entire region. Prospects of a renewed South African economic growth are no longer fanning fears within frontline states that their economies will be ruled by Pretoria's dictates.



members are Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.) Still, size is not everything. Humphrey argues that Zimbabwe is slightly better at producing manufactured goods than South Africa, even though Harare's GDP is only \$5.6 billion. He notes that Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector makes up 31 per cent of the country's GDP, while that of South Africa constitutes only 25 per cent of its GDP. Makoni adds that although South Africa has more than twice the GDP of all 10 SADC countries combined, it faces many internal changes which may affect its economy. "When you start addressing the imbalances of apartheid between Johannesburg and Umtata, between Orange Free State and Dophutswana, you will find that there is not much of an economic power there. The resources are very limited." Even the African National Congress believes South Africa will not become the overpowering giant many observers have predicted because it will be too preoccupied with its own problems. Thabo Mbeki, the ANC secretary for foreign affairs, says that although South Africa might be the engine of economic growth in the region, its internal economic and social restructuring will prevent it from becoming southern Africa's saviour. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Gavin Rely of the powerful Anglo-American Corporation. "With the lifting of the veil of apartheid," he says, "it is rapidly becoming apparent that we share with our regional neighbours many of the same problems."

"And we face many of the same challenges: a fast growing population, rapid urbanisation, the extension of social services, the challenge of job

creation, Aids and the alleviation of poverty, to mention but a few." Apartheid has been the justification for, or cause of, states of emergencies in Zambia and Zimbabwe, prolonged civil wars in Mozambique and Angola and general economic failure in the region.

A post-apartheid South Africa will certainly not solve the problems of Pretoria's neighbours. But the new situation will expose their true economic plight, eliminating South African destabilisation as a scapegoat for their poor performance. — GEMINI NEWS

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OPINION

Prostitutes and Social Justice

Md Atiqul Karim

We are appalled to witness an abortive attempt made by the activists of UnIslamic Activities Resistance Committee (UAR) to evict an estimated 7,000 prostitutes from Tanbazar and Tanbazar brothers in Narayanjan. As a sequel to such incident, at least 20 people were hurt in clashes, and 18 others arrested as reports came in. The situation was still alarming with the deployment of huge contingent of police personnel at all the entry points of the said areas.

Whatever the background of "eviction" is, perhaps the first of its kind in such dimension, both the positive and negative aspects of it should not be lost sight of.

Everyone will obviously agree that prostitution can never be treated as a socially agreeable profession for survival. There are two reasons among others. Firstly, frequent visit to brothels can eat into the vitals of the younger generation. Secondly, apart from spreading venereal diseases, anti-social activities or crimes may also arise sharply due to uncontrolled drug-abuse in and around brothels.

Very often pimps or agents of prostitutes are found enticing youths to perpetrate crimes of serious nature in terms of monetary gains. Consequently, an impartial and neutral survey will amply reveal that 'motive' behind some sensational murders or even political killings are orchestrated from brothels and slums. In this context, steps to eradicate prostitution may be considered very much logical by people reeling under acute social insecurity or safety.

On the other hand, any hectoric move to abolish brothels cannot be supported either. In other words, eviction without a proper rehabilitation scheme will pose a grater problem for city dwellers as well as prostitutes themselves. Environment specialists and social thinkers hold the view that if brothels are closed right now, the problem of environment pollution will undoubtedly be created. At the moment it is not felt much for prostitutes are confined to some specific localities beyond which they can't usually move.

The protest rallies of prostitutes however, ended in successful culmination of a commotion so as to restore their rights. The Social Welfare Ministry should, therefore, take immediate steps to create a good number of income generating projects for these helpless girls to offer them a better life, at least.

To the Editor

Change of attitude

Sir, I feel the urge to write this letter as I find that a particular appearance of some "sensational" events have become recurrent. On the Daily Star of October 24, the front page picture of two groups of marching students reminds us the scene from the movie "West Side Story" where we see the "Jets" marching to confront the "Sharks". Some months ago the photograph of clashes between two groups of students (with some dead bodies in inset) was published with headline on the front page of an English daily whereas on the same paper we saw the exhilarating news of

"Primary education to become compulsory from the end of the year" only at a small corner on the back page. While writing this letter I see even on October 28 issues front page headline "2 killed in DU gun-battle" with photograph of dead students. Is it really necessary, on the advent of 21st century, to print 'hot' news with photographs of "the good" people advancing to punish and crush "the bad" ones from red light territory while "the ugly" reader asks himself the question "are we receding to the dark days instead of moving forward towards the new century?"

Since we have now returned to democracy and that there is no reason anymore to "dramatize" or "sensationalize" the events, don't you think we should look at things in a different and objective way and at a positive angle and publish all good, healthy and moral-raising news on the front page and all so-called agitating "sensational" events on other pages? Let us all change our whole attitude towards life and get rid of old demoralizing habits.

the subscribers a good telephone service. But T&T in Narayanjan is giving a deplorable telephone service. Hundreds of telephones in Narayanjan remain out of order. There are many from which subscribers cannot phone but outside calls come while some remain dead.

Sometimes bills are much higher than they should be. Even if a phone is dead for several months, the bill would come to the subscriber with call charge, and the phone will not be made usable until the 'whole money' is paid.

An Observer Chittagong. Narayanjan telephones Sir, T&T Board has been set up in Bangladesh to give

Fayezur Rahman South Masdar, Narayanjan