

Dhaka, Sunday, November 17, 1991

Rehabilitate Slum Dwellers

We have once again dealt with our slum dwellers as we usually do—evicting them from where they live, without any notice or a chance to prepare for the demolition so that they could save whatever little they possessed. The demolishing of the few slums has once again brought to the centre-stage a problem that we have been deliberately keeping in the sidelines. We knew that slums were springing up everywhere, taking over every speck of empty city land and spreading over onto the sidewalks and road corners. Seeing all this, knowing the consequences of all this to the health of the city, we really never planned as to how we will tackle the problem as and when we decide to.

According to recent findings there are about 1,125 slums in the greater Dhaka area, providing shelter — if only of sorts — to nearly one quarter of the population of the city. These people are not in these slums because they prefer the squalor of the city to their abodes in the villages. They are here as a result of the acute poverty in the rural areas, absence of any employment opportunity and also because they have been rendered destitute by flood, cyclone and river erosion. In one word, these slum dwellers are victims — of nature or of the economic forces — and when we evict them one fine morning without the least bit concern as to what will become of them, we are actually victimising the victim, all over again.

Most often we think of the slum dwellers as burden on the city. We think of them as parasitical elements and associate all negative elements and vices with them, such as crime, prostitution, extortion etc. We fail to grasp the fact that the informal sector, that keeps the city functioning, is totally run by those who live in the slums. Take for example, the rickshaw — and there are more than 1 lakh of them — without which urban transportation for the middle and the lower middle class would come to a stand still, is totally manned by them. Rickshaws provide employment to more than 2.5 lakh people, who in turn feed their families that average 6 members. And all of them live in the slums. In addition the city garbage collectors, domestic servants, street cleaners, low skilled mechanical workers, street vendors, daily wage workers, etc. all live in the slums providing valuable services for the urban dwellers.

The problems of the slums are not unique to Dhaka. Most of the metropolitan centres of Asia have large numbers of urban slums. However we in Bangladesh have had some very successful examples of slum improvement programmes, which needs to be replicated. Mention may be made of one that has been implemented by the Local Government Engineering Bureau. Funded by UNICEF, improvement programmes have been implemented in 62 slums in 16 urban locations. This programme has resulted into better health, higher education, greater income generation leading to a better life for these destitute people.

While we know that slums cannot be allowed to exist that grow right in the heart of the city, we cannot also force these people into being total destitutes. Before the government's demolition squad tears down the next slum, let us plan a little ahead, and see what can be done to relocate and rehabilitate them.

The Great Moulana

The nation today observes the fifteenth death anniversary of Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. This ancient nation hasn't quite seen the like of him either as a Moulana or as a leader of men. The founding father of two of the great political parties of Pakistan, Awami League and National Awami Party, which played pivotal roles in the democratic struggle within that monstrosity of a state and were ultimately instrumental in the emergence of sovereign Bangladesh, could very well be called the Red Moulana because of his life-long espousal of the cause of the underdog. But he was much more to the people of this region comprising the active eastern part of the subcontinent and not only Bangladesh than that epithet alone would mean.

The great things we owe to the great Moulana. His was the first voice raised in dissent in an impossibly fascist situation shot through and through with unreasoning communal frenzy. This was no isolated event of protest against irrational and unhealthy social and political goings-on. Dissent was his life and came in an idea of carefully orchestrated political denouncement leading to social and economic emancipation of the broad masses most of whom were the farmers and weavers — all so very close to his heart and life. His second great contribution, as such, naturally had to be the heralding of the politics of *daal-bhat* as against the tidal strength of the time of a sectarian, narrow, communal and theocracy-based ideology. He effected a sea-change in the temper of the time by first introducing and then through sheer force of a relentless missionary preaching the concept of *onno-bastra, shukha, shasthya, basosthan* — food-and-clothing, education, health and shelter — as the very base of political activity.

Moulana Bhashani's third great work relates directly to the genesis of Bangladesh. He was the first to bid good-bye to Pakistan politically and publicly at the great Kagmari cultural conference of 1957. Two years after that he initiated the anti-Ayub *gono obbhuthan* movement to materialise that good-bye into effective action.

Sher-e-Bangla builder of the Jukto Front together with Moulavi Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy he brought about the literal burial of the arch-reactionary Muslim League, counted Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as more than his own son although on not many an occasion they saw eye to eye politically.

As with all epic creations including epic lives — this supremely courageous man, given wholly to the collective weal of his people and a life of self-denial rivaling Gandhi's, also underwent a process of furling in his closing days. It is symbolic of the tragico-ironic elements of our left-oriented politics that among the pall-bearers of his fifteen-year-old memory there are more that have kept away from Bhashani's politics and less, even little, of those who have distinguished themselves as leading their lives for the society and have not debased themselves by running after bread and honey.

A MID torrents of an announcements from the international bodies, one talks of "social development." There is a good-hearted report on it from the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (my old buddies at ESCAP). They say that it needs to be increased a lot "if the proportion of the world's poor living in the region is to decrease from the current high of seven out of every ten."

Now, is this true? It sounds as if Asia still has the same old image — a pulsating mass of penurious people, their gaunt mass holding out begging bowls amid their hovels. Seven out of ten?

Well-travelled observers, who actually go through the towns and villages of Asia, don't get this impression — well, at least this one doesn't. Now, Africa is a different matter: in so many countries, there are chaos and dirt and despair galore, with harsh regimes and kiddies with flies all over their faces, in many parts of Latin America, too.

So let us have a fresh look at poverty. Just what is it? The poets and preachers have sung about the subject often. The Christian Saint Mark: "Ye have the poor always with you" — meaning that you should succour them. Hebrew writers in Deuteronomy: "For the poor

Poor in Pocket or in Spirit?

by Alan Chalkley

shall never cease out of the land" (that's right, someone always feels poor even in the richest of countries). Isaiah long ago condemned those who "grind the faces of the poor."

Even in more recent times, poverty was much on the minds of the great and good 18th century poets. Oliver Goldsmith was still writing that "laws grind the poor and rich men rule the law." Yet, at the same time, the rural poet Gray was writing of the "homely joys" among the "short and simple annals of the poor."

Perhaps there are happy poor and unhappy poor. Go to Calcutta, and wonder why the denizens of some districts do not beg, do not crumple into dirt and disease. Go to the poorest of villages in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand — how on earth can these folks smile, and offer hospitality, and mount the most joyous festivals on so many occasions?

Go even to London. You will find the same strange thing — happy slums in some areas, miserable ones in others. In New York, there are Spanish Harlem and Hell's Kitchens. Emerson, in his usual sober mood, wrote: "Poverty con-

sists in feeling poor." He also wrote: "Can anybody remember when times were not hard, and money was not scarce? Think about that phrase.... Yes, maybe poverty is all in the mind."

So when we measure "gross national product per capita" and "Gini coefficients of fair shares of income," like the

air? And does having fewer doctors mean we are ill more often? (Certainly having more lawyers seems to lead to more law cases!)

Perhaps you can get some idea of "feeling poor" by measuring hopes and disappointments. What chances have people got of having a better life?

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economists try to do, our measures are very coarse, indeed. Nor are "poverty levels" of much help. Each nation chooses a pretty arbitrary figure, for instance: "if you aren't getting three thousand spondulicks a year, you are poor."

We need some kind of "net national happiness per capita" — but I don't think the statisticians can help us there. They have tried to cobble together an "index of quality of life" on occasion, but who can decide on a uniform standard? How much luxury do we "need" for is it desire?, how much fresh

Take literacy rates. They are extraordinarily high in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Singapore and Japan, and lowest in the great arc of South Asia along Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The primary school enrollment figures match this split, too.

But what are Sri Lanka and the Philippines doing in the high-literacy lists? They are supposed to be "poorer" than the swinging Sinoids of Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. So mere reading skill does not help us in our search

for true poverty.

In any case, when we look at the literacy rates of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and much of Eastern Europe, those areas have a dimmer record than Asia.

Further education seems to be no guarantee of prosperity either — and certainly not of "happiness." Over a lot of the world, much university education seems to leave the students very poor in spirit, venting their misery on the streets.

Can it be that these noisy teenagers, who figure so large on our television news screens, have been pushed beyond their level of competence — a kind of "Peter's Principle" in the hallowed halls of academe? How come the dream of high qualifications and fat jobs turns to ashes and Molotov cocktails?

Some societies still make a virtue of turning positively to poverty. The Hindu *sadhu* wears rags, the Buddhist monk has the minimum wardrobe and begs his diurnal diet. But the pursuit of poverty among the earlier Christians, with their hermitages and cave-dwellers, has largely faded — Christian monks and nuns may live simply, but most dwell in

fine buildings.

The hippies of America were a strange phenomenon, and a passing one. They were not the poor like the previous generation — the hoboes and bums of the 1930s depression years. They were middle-class dropouts, play-acting a version of penance, like the medieval flagellants. Almost without exception, ten years later they put on business suits and smart arty wear, to return to the comforts of the bourgeoisie.....

Most of us can always do "comfortably off" on who are a little poverty stint ourselves. We can go on religious retreats, become short-term monks, eat sparingly and turn to mild punishments and prayers. But are we not playing, too?

If so, don't we mock real poverty in a shameful manner. There is one grand old lady, born in Yugoslavia and sent to Calcutta to serve the truly poor until death. She has stayed on the job for a long lifetime. For her, the poor are always with her.

Alas, I cannot match Sister Theresa. Can you? May the ESCAP experts find "social development" which matches hers. But, alas, that looks like a losing game. Alongside her, all our spirits seem shabby. Poor, in fact. — *Depthnews* Asia

Suu Kyi : Stark Violation of Human Rights

by Ahmad Mujtahid

ON July 10, this year she was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European parliament and she became the first recipient of this prestigious prize from Asia. Barely less than one hundred days after, on October 14, she was honoured with the Nobel Prize for Peace. She is the only person and of course the only lady in the whole world who has been honoured with two prestigious prizes in the same year within a span of less than 100 days and that too at a time when she has been serving her five years detention term under State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC), the brute Military Junta of Burma. So long she was only the darling of her own people and now she has become a household name across the continents by her own right. She is Aung San Suu Kyi, a small and lean and thin daughter of Burma.

From the day Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1991 she has become a phenomenon, and the world nations seem to have awakened from deep slumber and have been forced to turn their eyes to the happenings in Burma. This has been demonstrated by the mild-natured Secretary General of the United Nations with his even milder request to the SLORC leadership to set Suu Kyi free. The President of Poland Mr. Walesa and British Prime Minister John Major reportedly asked their ambassadors to convey personally their congratulations to Suu Kyi. But the SLORC leadership did not even bother to consider their request to meet Suu let alone disclose them where she was

and how she was doing. In Human Rights Commission was not allowed to meet Suu nor her whereabouts disclosed. It is being suspected that she has been moved away from her residence to an undisclosed destination for confinement. Since all attempts at establishing any contact with her has rudely been turned down by the military junta it is apprehended all over the world that she might either be seriously ill or she is already dead! The apprehension is not unfounded since twice before her arrest the Junta's men

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tried to kill her. While she was campaigning in Danubyu on April 5, this year, an army captain ordered six soldiers to load and aim their rifles at her but she was lucky and an army Major stepped forward and countermanded the order and thereby prevented the assassination.

When the democratic world opinion is awake to the realities of Burma, Bangladesh for some mysterious and inexplicable reasons is yet to officially speak a word on the happenings in Burma, against the confinement of Suu Kyi, against the inhuman atrocities meted out to the 'Rohingyas'. I am not sure if our foreign policy towards the neighbours is in any way influenced by any friendly country/countries having closer relations both with Dhaka and Rangoon. If our friends continue to influence our foreign policy towards our

neighbours, our neighbours when they have their turn might as well decide their foreign policy to suit their needs. We must bear in mind that foreign policy reflects Government's character.

Except for a statement issued very recently by the BNP vice chairman the silence of the ruling party on the happenings of Burma and on the unlawful confinement of Suu Kyi has naturally started casting doubt as to whether it at all has any respect for the people

parliament Sheikh Hasina at least had the courtesy to congratulate Suu Kyi after she won the Nobel Prize and demanded her release. By doing this, however, she has made amends of her failure to demand the same for Suu Kyi before she won the Nobel. Recently she again demanded her release and appealed to the world community to put pressure on SLORC. But she too failed to take up the issue in the parliament.

The role of other political

started taking Suu Kyi a little seriously after she has been awarded the Prize.

In an earlier article in this page this writer warned that the SLORC wants to gradually kill Suu in her solitary confinement and urged our political parties and intellectuals to condemn what was happening in Burma, to demand the release of Suu and to appeal to the world community to save the life of Suu Kyi. Now the international community has become concerned about her safety. There is even rising suspicion that she is already

nately an important issue and should be taken up with the authorities in Rangoon with all seriousness.

However, the Foreign Ministry may like to remember that the solution to the Rohingya problem like other minority issues in Burma can only be found by a democratic government and as such the whole issue is inextricably linked up with the setting up of a democratic government in Rangoon.

Our Foreign Minister's visit is taking place at a time when the whole world is concerned about the safety and security of Suu Kyi. We would like to hope that our Foreign Minister, who is one of the top leaders of our democratic government, would take up the issue of Suu Kyi also, besides Rohingya, with the SLORC leaders on behalf of the democratic forces of Bangladesh. It may be bitter for the SLORC, yet as a representative of a democratic government installed by pulling down an autocratic regime might impress upon them that for our own national interest we cannot remain a silent observer to what is happening in Burma.

dead! We do not know. Because the SLORC has moved her to an undisclosed place and nobody is allowed to contact her.

The Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is the general secretary of the National League for Democracy but she is not even a member of the Pyithu Hluttaw (National Assembly) as she was arrested before the election and was denied the right to participate in the election of May 1990. Why then the SLORC is afraid to release her?

Our Foreign Minister plans to visit Rangoon on Nov 21 to discuss the 'Rohingya' issue. Rohingya is one of the Burmese ethnic minority communities, like 'Karen', who are consistently being persecuted by the military rulers of Burma. As a result, thousands of 'Rohingyas' have crossed into Bangladesh. This is def-

Afghanistan : War without End

Although Moscow and Washington have finally agreed to stop arming the combatants in the Afghan civil war, there is little promise that the 12-year-old conflict will end soon, says Steve Le Vine of IPS from Kabul.

will end soon.

At least one million Afghans, or one-fifth of the population, have already died in the war. And whether for war or vengeance, the two sides could sustain the fighting for at least two years beyond the January 1 arms cut-off, consuming the mountains of weapons they stockpiled in the last decade.

The United States recently rewarded Mujahidin participation in the Gulf War with a batch of captured Iraqi weapons — Soviet T-62 tanks, anti-aircraft cannon and heavy artillery guns. Meanwhile, Moscow has stepped up its weapons flights to Kabul to reinforce government caches.

At the Red Cross hospital, few patients believe they can do more than hope the fighting will end in January.

Mohammed Ghaus' stomach is wrapped in bandages. A nurse says he arrived three months ago, near death after a shell exploded as he walked to

the mosque.

"I'll be happy if the war ends," Ghaus says of the superpower cut-off. "But I don't know if it will. I don't know if our local Mujahidin commander will order fighting to be stopped."

With winter these doubts intensify the anxieties of Kabul's two million people. Before the 1978 Marxist revolution, the city earned US\$40 to 50 million a year from flocks of young tourists from Europe and another US\$125 million in remittances from Afghans working overseas.

Now, 13 years after the capital was isolated from the out-

side world, there is no respite from a daily round of hunger, violence and claustrophobic frustration.

Winter is always a time of shortages and sub-zero temperatures in Kabul, a central Asian crossroads where Stalinist buildings stand among traditional mud houses, engraved archways and blue domes. But now, with food and fuel from Moscow dwindling, talk in Kabul centres on fear of the most Spartan winter ever.

Food is short in the bazaar, petrol rare and the prices of both soaring. Soldiers are running a black-market in fuel at triple the price charged just two months ago.

Education Deptt

Sir, As per government rule a government servant has to proceed on leave preparatory to retirement (LPR) at least one day before he attains the fifty-seventh year of his age. During the period of LPR for one year he draws full pay and allowances for the first six months and half pay and allowances for the remaining six months depending on the leave available to him. After the expiry of LPR, he retires. This practice has been in vogue for a pretty long time in accordance with the provision of section 7 of the Manual, "Public Servants Retirement Act, 1974."

But to the utter disappointment and dismay of a good many retired government

servants of the Education Department the pension applications have been sent back to Education Directorate by the Ministry of Education vide letter No. Sec. XIV/7-24/91/261-Edn. dated 17.07.91 and letter No. Sec. XIV/7-18/91/294-Edn. dated 14.9.91 with the remarks that according to "relevant section" (?) of the Public Servants Retirement Act, 1974 there is no scope for adding the period of LPR to the qualifying service of a retired government servant in the matter of grant of pension and gratuity.

In this connection I would like to draw the attention of the Ministry of Education to its letter No. Sec. 4/2-1/88/339-Edn. dated 29.3.88 addressed to the Director-General,

Secondary and Higher Education, Dhaka, in which it was stated that as per section 7 of Public Servants Retirement Act, 1974, and rule 292 of BSR, Volume I the leave preparatory to retirement is countable as qualifying service towards pension. The letter further asked to take necessary action in the matter.

Consequently, the Education Directorate, Dhaka, endorsed the letter of the Ministry of Education to all its subordinate offices for information and guidance vide its letter No. 8220/1500/G.A. dated 7.4.88. A large number of employees of the Education Department have already enjoyed the benefits of pension and gratuity on the strength of the above letter.

Probably a few officers of the Ministry of Education have failed to understand clearly the provision of section 7 of Public Servants Retirement Act, 1974 and have, therefore, returned the pension papers of nearly twelve or thirteen retired officers of the Education Department.

I would, therefore, request the Ministry of Education to shun negative attitude in the matter of interpretation of pension rules and adopt altruistic measure in respect of grant of pension and gratuity to the concerned retired personnel without causing further delay and financial loss to them.

Rafiqul Islam
Azimpur, Dhaka.

Bangalee's world record

Sir, At long last Bangladesh has made it to Guinness Book. No guess, it is in the discipline of physiology — the Tallest Man on earth!

While the average height of Bangalees is a little over five feet, this gifted towering physique measures above 8-1/2 feet (4th tallest on record) and is growing. This outstanding height overshadows the Bangladeshis' image of the Lilliputians.

What could be more interesting than a skyscraping human structure that stuns all eyes and storms all brains and has always been a serious subject in medical science? This hyper-growth gains ground into novel approaches to

Hekmatyar.

Some of the feeling of repression, though, is an inevitable result of being confined to the capital by the violence just outside. Many university students say they have never left Kabul.

Talk of the old days is an unrivalled way to relax even the tensest Afghan. A hotel clerk reminisced about weekends spent fox and dove hunting in eastern Logar province.

And a bookeller spoke wistfully of pre-war summer Fridays, when thousands of Kabulis travelled west to Paghman province to picnic by Kargha Lake.

But in the end Afghans remember all the guns the superpowers have left behind and know that even when the war finishes, fighting will go on for a long, long time.

"It was wrong to wait until January to cut-off the weapons," said Abdullah Zozai, a Kabul car parts dealer. "These are brothers who are fighting. Maybe these brothers will keep killing each other forever."

researches leading to cure, if a disease, or to human benefits, if a possibility.

At present the medical methods of treating this abnormality have been widespread ranging between gland control and bone surgery. Genetic engineering has yet to develop an effective device for retarding the skeleton's growth. The likelihood rests with cell manipulation as one of infinite odds.

As for a least developed country like Bangladesh, this world renowned figure happens to be one of her least-expected-assets that ought to keep her newsworthy for some time to come like her periodic natural calamities.

M. Rahman
Zila School Road, Mymensingh.