Dhaka, Thursday, November 28, 1991

Environment and Poverty

In Bangladesh we have seldom drawn the link between environment degradation and poverty. We talk about over-population, low per capita output, backward technology, limited land resource and low per acre yield, etc. But we have never before taken a much more broader view of things and linked our poverty to the question of environment degradation. This point was brought out in a workshop of women development workers organised by the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB) at BARD, Comilla. The one hundred and twentyone women workers from 51 districts, belonging to 66 NGOs, were categorical in their assertion that environmental degradation was the root cause of poverty in our country.

The dramatic changes in our weather pattern, the unseasonal floods and cyclones and the heavy rains —when we least expect it — are among the environmental changes that we still don't seem to relate to the fact that we have interfered too much with nature. To change it back to normal we alone may not be able to do much. However, there are numerous other types of changes in our environment that we can and must do something about to bring back to normal. Take for example the recent cause of so much human misery river erosion. One of the main causes of it is the cutting down of trees from the river banks which provide the strength to the soil to withstand the pressure of onrushing currents. The releasing of industrial wastes into our rivers is destroying our marine life and is causing deadly diseases to spread among a variety of fish which are consumed by us. Our ponds and landlocked water reservoirs are being overused, and because of lack of scientific maintenance, are losing their capacity to produce the variety and quantity of fish that we are used to get.

Production of many of our traditional fruits are on the decline. Absence of natural breeding grounds for fish, absence of birds and insects in large parts of our country have all been caused by human interference in the nature's way of doing things.

But all this must change. The ecology of Bangladesh — being a deltaic plain — is very delicately balanced. On this fragile playground of nature, 110 million of us are eking out our rudimentary existence. Our per acre density is perhaps the highest in the world. We have already denuded our land of the lush green forests that used to cover much of it. Some may say that we have already inflicted too much damage upon this fertile land of ours. Well, we are not that pessimistic. However, we must underscore the fact that the situation is extremely serious. Extreme poverty and widespread illiteracy make the situation even worse.

To prevent further environmental degradation, we must, at the very outset, launch a countrywide environmental education drive. We must spread the basic knowledge that human life is linked in a million ways to — and is dependent in a million ways upon — everything in nature. School curricula, at all levels, must include environmental topics. The mass media, especially the radio and the TV must broadcast, regularly, programmes that raise environmental consciousness.

Nature can be bountiful — as it so often is — if treated with knowledge and care. On the contrary it can take devastating revenge on the ignorant and the arrogant.

Ali Baba and 4,000 Thieves

Ali Baba stumbled on the jewels and those that tucked away that fantastic hoard — the forty merry thieves — in quite the way as it should be in tales that ride over the tides of time. Now there is news of four thousand abdicating thieves from Beijing which one hopefully longs to provide as sweet a thing as is associated with Ali Baba. After all China is one of the three great sources of tales matching in even measure Alif Laila Wa Laila and the Panchatantra-Hitopodesh cycle.

But that will take some time to cook. In the meantime we can very fruitfully speculate on the calamity of the great Shanghai city having thousands of thieves — surely unsurrendering ones should be at least ten times as numerous as the surrendering turn-coat angels — and the whole world believing that there was not even one thief in the whole of the billion-people China. China hasn't gone either for glasnost or for perestroika. But who can deny that the decade of 80s belonged to only one man — Gorbachev. And if China had been able to keep itself immune from the wave of glasnost, we would not have heard from China either of the arrest of lakhs of prostitutes or of four thousand Shanghai thieves surrendering. Glasnost, aggravated by a faultering perestroika has not been particularly good to the health of the entity that many of us once championed, namely, the Soviet Union. But the restrained and perhaps judicious use of openness in China promises to do a lot of good to China — as things appear at the moment.

But freedom knows no half-way house. And only a year's or even a decade's record does not speak dependably of how a nation's fate will shape as a result of going for radical changes or keeping away from that.

Mao had his days of being a revolutionary guru to the whole world — and those are past history even in China. Gorbachev appears to be well set to be in the news at least for the remaining years of this millennium. Even when he passes out as a newsmaker, there will be an oozing wounded Soviet Union — well it will not be gone altogether - and a planet supremely healed of manic superpower rivalry threatening it with annihilation to remind of his overwhelming impact on the course of mankind.

Yeltsin Takes a Huge Risk on the Market

O-GETTER Yeltsin marked his 100th day in office in November as the first democratically-elected President of the Russian Federation with two characteristic surprise

First, he launched a radical economic blueprint to rush Russia to the market by the autumn of 1992. Second, he outlawed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in his Russian Federation.

The first move immediately generated much heat. The plan envisaged, among other things

 Defreezing prices, wages and salaries. Privatisation of all smaller

and selected large-scale state enterprises. Abolition of restrictions on

all forms of external trade transactions, including barter and hard currency transfers. Abolition of import duties

on all forms of goods and services, as well as customs duties beginning in the new year. Abolition of the official.

tourist and other fixed exchange rates of the rouble and setting-up of foreign exchange bureaux to change the rouble at rates to be determined by the Central Bank of Russia. Thus Yeltsin is preparing

shock therapy, as well as assuming the role of a master surgeon ready to carry out a major surgical operation on the seriously ill Russian econ-He says he will take the

burden of responsibility for the success or failure of his programme and has asked parliament to give him extra powers to enable him take "vertical" control of the programme's implementation.

Leading Soviet economists, including the popular Nikolai Charles Quist Adade writes from St. Petersburg

Boris Yeltsin, the President of the Russian Federation, is planning the transition of the economy from state-control to the market. Under a radical economic programme the Russian Federation is to move towards a market economy by the end of 1992. Many Russians fear that rather than solving the economic problems the reforms may lead to massive unemployment and more economic hardships.

Shemelyev, say the one-year target set to complete the transition to a pluralistic, privatised, free-enterprise economy in Russia is over-ambitious. But Yeltsin and his team are optimistic. They refer to neighbouring Poland where, under Lech Welesa, transition to a market economy took less

market" as a result of the "horrendously inefficient and

monopolistic and corruptionridden" system are too many to

The old totalitarian structures are still intact and the of initiative of many Russians.

Senior Russians are scared of the "wrath" of the market which Communist propaganda taught them means mass unemployment, roof-top prices, spiralling and cyclical inflation, crime waves, and squalor and poverty for the

mass of the people. Former Soviet premiers Nikolai Ryzkov and Valentine Pavlov gave them a forestate of the "capitalist hell" when their haphazard and half-hearted market measures led to shrinking production and

falling living standards. Economists cite other impediments that will make

Yeltsin's journey to the market painful and slow. These in-

 Far too many items can be bought only on the levo (Russian for under-the-counter) or at the unofficial and illegal market because shop managers do not put even the premium on the shelf.

 Law makers and enforcers would go for a bribe rather than self-satisfaction.

· Dislocation in the supply network as one republic after another breaks away, taking control of its factories and resources. Many Russian factories and plants get supplies of either raw materials or halffinished or finished parts from other republics.

· Inter-ethnic, inter and intra-republic conflicts, which have also began to flare within the Russian Federation.

· Growing mafia and racket gangsterism enmeshed with the state bureaucratic machine that has replaced the now-defunct State Planning Committee and controls the economic mechanism through bribe and nepotism. Local administrators demand bribes of 100,000 rubles or the equivalent in hard cash before they register new private business.

Yeltsin's dilemma is exacerbated by the fact most new breed Russian state and private managers have little interest in earning hard cash abroad and in foreign travel.

To all this has to be added the mass of antiquated technology in factories, the inconvertibility of the rouble and lack of qualified and competent business managers, accountants and marketing techniques.

Will Yeltsin have the pa-

tience to contain the tide of possible strife as prices rise and wages go down? Not much, if the promptness with which he tried to crush the recent rebellion in the southern autonomous region of Chochent-Ingusheti is anything

to go by. To forestall national strife, Yeltsin plans huge increases in student stipends and pensions and other social benefits for

the under-privileged to eushion the pain. The 20 million Russians believed jobless after trimming the bloated bureaucraey and firing redundant workers are to be put on the dole. Sceptics

say the already broke Russian

government just does not have

the funds for this huge social Hardliners in the disbanded Communist Party say Yeltsin and his "turncoat" advisers are "Not really interested in solving the economic problems of Russia in the best interest of the masses", but "their endeavours are just meant to fill the shop shelves and adorn the republic with all that glitters from the metropoles of capital-

One member of the disgraced party who did not want to be identified said Now that Russia's new levels to have embraced the advice of their paymasters in the IMF and the World Bank, Russia will won be on the road of neocolomial disaster akin to the fate of African and other Third World countries."

The only choice left for Yeltsin is what he has opted for - radical and comprehensive reforms carried through with singleness of purpose. Tinkering with the old system as Ryzkov and Pavlov tried to do, would be fruttless.

Most Russians do not want to return to the old system anyway. The failed August coup proved that. But it Yeltsin's reforms do not yield quick results, the prospect of a second putsch cannot be ruled out. - GEMINI NEWS

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than a year. Critics contend that the obstacles "in the way to the

parasitic state bureaucratic,

Economic breakdown

be overcome in one year.

hangover of command-andadminister, or what is now termed "parasitic socialism," seems to have dulled the sense Although the majority are for market reforms - recent polls put the figure at 76 per cent few are ready to go into private business themselves or to be hired by private business.

components, TV's, radios he Soviet Economy: 1990 -10% Total output: Washing machines, textiles Oil, coal, chemical

Pacific Islanders Not after Full

are not seeking full independence.

In Guam, for example, the people want more autonomy within a relationship with the United States.

American officials feel that Pacific islanders should not call the US insensitive if, after talking with islands governments, the US makes decisions that run counter to what islanders want.

No, the islanders will not call the US insensitive. But they are going to start calling it what it is : colonialism.

And if the Bush administration keeps up its policy of might makes right, it could be surprised by the surfacing of more militant opponents in the islands.

The Bush administration's policy on self-determination for Pacific island-nations shows it is frustrating genuine self-determination in its own territories. But it will not hesitate to self-righteously bang, the drum for self-determination in the former Soviet republics now wanting indepen-

The United States has repeatedly and successfully choked off, by whatever means necessary, aspirations for independence in the Western

Micronesia's elected leaders established, in 1969, a special commission to negotiate a new political status with the United States. From the outset, island elected leaders on the future status commission were considering a range of alternatives to their UN Trustceship status, including independence.

Since Washington had been making all decisions of importance under its Trust Territory

Most Micronesians (Bc they in Palau or Guam or the Marshall Islands). Freedom from US 1982 plebiscite and thus the Marshall Islands). Giff Johnson writes from Majuro

administration, island leaders

were eager for more autonomy to take control of their nations - which had been ruled by outside powers since the 16th

As carly as 1972, wrote former US ambassador to the United Nations Donald Mcliency, "In a not too veiled threat ... the United States let the Micronesians know that the United States strategie requirements would not countenance independence."

In 1973, then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger directed the CIA to study "the possibility of exerting covert influence of free Association with only two choices on the ballot: the Compact or complete independence.

The US want along assuming that the voters would automatically endorse the Compact. But US officials had miscalculated. Protests flared up from land-owners at Kwajalein, the key US missile testing

And then most of the radiation-affected islands followed suit, saying that nuclear test compensation provided by the US was too limited. Suddenly it appeared that the Compact was headed for defeat and that

If the Bush administration keeps up its policy of might makes right, it could be surprised by the surfacing of more militant opponents in these Pacific

movement where necessary to support US strategic objec-

By 1975, the CIA began paying Micronesians to spy on their fellow leaders, and wiretapping conversations of the island negotiators at a crucial point in the political status talks. George Bush was head of the CIA when the CIA spying on Micronesians - who were exposed in 1976.

Later, after the Marshalls had broken off from the Feder ated states of Micronesia and Palau, President Amatakabua and his spokesman Tony de Brum engineered a brilliant manocuvre by gaining US State Department approval, in 1982, of a plebiscite on the Compact meant, according to the US plebiscite agreement with the Marshalls, independence for

The reaction of the Reagan-Bush administrations was swift. High level Pentagon official Noel Koch said bluntly: "Declaring independence simply isn't an available option to them" under international

Interior department confirmed the US's long standing policy against self-determination when he said the possibil ity of independence for the Marshalls was a "fundamental and radical departure" from "self-determination" policies the US has followed since it captured the Marshalls from

on key elements of the Microncsian independence

the Marshall Islands.

wards of America — was first

tried to forcibly evict women who play a trade known as "the oldest profession in the world" is one of many such incidents that have been staged by these The chief attorney for the self styled, self appointed guardians of morals of the society. Their operation is neither an outcome of any deep spirituality or real understand-

Japan in World War II.

'Round Table'

Sir, The Daily Star Media Round Table was a magnificent achievement, the significance of which should not be underrated.

played by your daily should be an example to those professionally involved in political life but not interested in 'exploiting the ignorant. As your editorial of 21st November rightly points out, 'a

The political maturity dis-

needed — and provided for a demonstration of 'a commonality of views The round Table Conference indicates that the political parties should be offered more such opportunities by the more competent sec-

proper environment was

rhetoric. They might learn that they can do themselves a great deal to good.

tions of the electorate to

emerge from behind their

S. Alam Rashid DOHS Kurmitola, Dhaka.

DU exams : A suggestion

Str. Due to various political and internal problems the dates of the Dhaka University examinations are invariably postponed or cancelled. This

causes undue hardship to the students. It also gives the impression in public mind that the university is not a place fit for serious study. Very often we, the general students of the university, are subjected to taunts and have to encounter embarrassing questions on the prevailing atmosphere in the university.

However, the session jams which are mainly caused by the postponement of the examinations, can well be avoided by holding the exams during the unscheduled closures. I am confident that the general students would not object to this proposal and would be more than eager to get the exams over with.

I would request the administration to seriously consider this suggestion and help alleviate one of the major problems of the university.

Depttof I. R., DU.

Sharmeen

Garment industry

Sir, I understand from alle-

gations of certain person associated with a reputed garment industry that might be a vested quarter is conspiring to destroy the garment business in Bangladesh and transfer this 'prospect' to some neighbouring countries - on the ground

of workers' unrest. If this is true, imagine the situation many garment workers will be out of occupation and the existing unemployment problem will further worsen.

May, I, therefore, request the government to urgently look deep into the matter of our garment industry and solve the problems of the workers on an emergency basis to save this profiteering industry from ruin. The garment industry owners have already experienced heavy loss due to the political instability during the past autocratic regime. If these industries fail to export their products within the stipulated time, no international buyer will accept any consignment, rather they will move to those countries which can supply their order as per commit-

ment. Meanwhile, I would request our social and political leaders to be a little more patriotic. Let us think for our country and poor people as well. Let for sometime we forget our narrow differences and petty interests. This is time for thinking and working unitedly for our own existence and betterment.

M. Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

OPINION

- Depthnews Asia

The writer is Editor, Mar-

In our society there are

many people who perceive

morality. It is their belief that

social and moral behaviour

should be guided and even

controlled by the narrow doc-

trines they espouse and any

deviation from their percep-

tion and ideas of social be-

haviour is a condemnable act

and should be severely pun-

ished. Unfortunately, for the

society, these people who have

little compassion and charity

in their heart and understand-

ing of the prevailing social,

economic and even human

conditions, bring only misery

to people who already exist in

absolute and inescapable

poverty, and sub-human living

industrial town near Dhaka

where large groups of people

ing of religious tenets, nor a

moral, ethical or righteous act.

There is not a trace of kind-

ness, understanding or even

interest and tries to under-

stand the circumstances under

which these poor souls fell in

the trap of the "oldest profes-

sion" - it will become sadly ev-

ident that these poor girls are

not criminals but their real

victims of the inequities and

injustices of the society. Also,

it is not for fun and games they

have entered the profession,

but, only after they have been

plundered of even the most

basic and fundamental rights of

a normal and decent life and

livelihood. The truth and real-

ity might be the people who

are being entertained and also

possibly making a profit from

the labours and toils of these

people are some, 'leaders' of

the community and their co-

horts who show a pious face to

the world — and conduct

themselves less than humanly

can be understood if someone

takes a dispassionate look at

the reality of life here. One

does not have to have a train-

ing in economics, sociology,

nutrition or demography to

understand the extent of de-

privation that prevail in the

country. the people who spout

morality and ideology from the

pulpit and political platform

and the others who conduct

and attend national and inter-

national seminars should con-

sider the facts and stark reality

behind hard statistics pre-

The depth of the problem

in all other activities in life.

If one truly takes a human

human feelings in their acts.

The recent incidents in an

condition.

of independence.

shall Islands Journal.

Trapped in the Oldest Profession

Naz Shafinaz

themselves as leaders of the unmatched anywhere except possibly in sub-Sharan Africa. community and guardians of Bangladesh, a small land

mass, is home to over 115 million people and even after two decades of vigorous family planning the population is still growing at the rate of 2.7% per year. Over 60% of the people are landless and without any applicable skill or trade except the ability to push a cow with a few crude and primitive agricultural implements, the literacy rate is 25%. About 55% of the population are children under 15 and this figure has remained static for two decades. Of these children, less than 10% are in any sort of school - this means every year millions of children enter the work force or are

forced to do so without any skill whatsoever. The average calorie requirement for an adult male is 2600 calories — available in Bangladesh for an adult male is 1500 calories and even less for women and children, the dict is generally poor in protein and many essential minerals and vitamins. Over 50% of the children suffer from severe malnutrition. Diarrhoea, parasites and night blindness is common amongst rural children. Over 80% of the people have no access to even rudi-

mentary health care.

Over 60% of the people do not have adequate housing, sanitation or pure drinking water. The most common sight in rural areas and city slums is of hundreds of children running around dressed in rags or no clothes at all - with bloated stomach, runny nose and emaciated bodies. If after a heavy downpour one of our city slickers and moral leaders will take the trouble of visiting one of the city slums, he will find an almost indescribable scene of squalor of a foot deep of mud, sewage, dirt and grime amidst which men, women, children, chickens and other assorted animals are co-existing and trying to make a go at

To escape rural poverty and starvation, floods of men and women are washed away to urban areas every year after being dislodged from their health and home, in search of living and when even the men folk do not have a marketable skill except to drive a rickshaw or become a porter in a bazar, it is too much to expect that women and girls will find suitable employment. With a backdrop like this, it should not surprise or shock anyone if some of these women become a prey and fall victim to the oldest trade in the world — not for fun but for the sheer necessity of survival and to keep

sented here. Even if given 10% body and soul together. error factor in these figures It is too easy to exhort and the brutal reality of life here is spout morality when one has a

full belly. Gandhi asked a rhetorical question in the early stage of his political movement: How would God appear to a man who had no food or water for three days and nights? He answered his own question by saying that God would appear to the starving man in a bowl of rice or a port of water. The situation has not changed, human beings have not changed and instinct for survival remains as strong as

One of the definitions of prostitution in the dictionary is " base or unworthy use, as of talent or ability." By this definition there are worse types of prostitution in our society and all around us. Even a casual observer can easily identify these activities if he wants to find the truth and have the sincerity and honesty or even the courage to call a spade a spade.

By the same definition, there are countless people in our society, well educated, well fed, well dressed and respected members of the community, in all spheres of activities, what they are doing is much worse as holding privileges they abuse their positions to enrich themselves or increase their power or sphere of influence without regard to what harm it may cause to others in the community.

To may, taking of bribes, black marketing, adulterating food items or medicines, harassing people with false cases cause more harm, are more insidious and have more pervasive and harmful effect in the society than prostitution. Many legal minds in the West term prostitution as victimless crime. The other types of antisocial activities mentioned are worse than prostitution and not certainly victimless crimes —and the injury is much more severe and affects whole communities and the nation.

If the moral leaders of our society are so indignant at some of the social ills - they may be urged to widen their horizon and the sphere and field of activity and include arcas where gross abuse and corruption take place. they are urged to inveigh against organizations where there is 40% systems loss or offices from where false or fabricated bills are set for calls not made or "gheroa" or made citizens arrest of people wearing neat white uniforms at airports rob travellers, specially poor illitcrate labourers of hard earned money or belongings with veiled threats of confiscation of their belongings.

It would be only fair to expect if our "moral leaders" have been able to identify one type of crime or criminals they should be able to identify the others; and if they can do it and act on it - I say to them :more power to you and congratulations for a deed well