

Dhaka, Thursday, January 23, 1992

Closing the Gender Gap

The cabinet meeting on Tuesday at Uttara Gonobhaban in Natore took a number of important decisions which, if properly executed, would help the northern region to come out of its four-decade-old state of limbo. It also took a decision making school tuition for girls free up to the level of class eight. Under the on-going universal compulsory primary education project all students of the primary or up to class-five level are already exempt from paying tuition fees. The extra benefit to the girl students is designed to promote the cause of women's education. We had such a weighted tuition decision also at the fag end of the autocratic Ershad regime. But the welcome bias had its beginning way back in 1972 when girl students were exempt from paying money in the present projected manner. We have, as such, still to see that the design works although the successive governments' repeated commitment to the cause of women's education is a matter of gratification.

Spread of literacy among women is specially important for us on two counts. It will, first, surely have a big inhibiting impact on the rate of our population growth which must be reined in to around one per cent before the century is out — if we want to engage the development challenge meaningfully, that is. Secondly, a literate woman is a better and sure-fire bet against grooming illiterate children. The literacy challenge can best be met in the home rather than in the schools. The society has remained three-quarters illiterate in spite of having more literate males lording it over at the homes than would fit that national rate. If only more women were literate, the literacy profile would have been profoundly different without the government needing to pay a paise for it.

It is good that the successive governments are making it a matter of special care that women at least catch up with men in the various spheres of human development and socio-economic activity. This is but a dictate of democracy. Seeing that no one is discriminated against because of gender-difference and making positive efforts to rid the society of what can well be labelled as sexploitation — these twin goals, unrealised in the last ten thousand years amongst almost all of civilised mankind — will at last be within our reach with a gender-wise balanced rate of literacy and gainful employment.

Independently of the governmental protestations of appreciating these urgent points and backing that up with some going through the motions — the society's needs have been relentlessly tugging at the home-contained women to come out and take their place in what a man's world would only grudgingly let. And they are proving better workers in open competition with men — be it in the garments sector or in the constructions. They are proving more dependable borrowers from the Grameen Bank, making in almost all the cases the best use of the money borrowed. This undoubtedly shows that more women workers would not only ensure but also add pace to that all-important thing — development.

So far women have been coming out to 'man' rather 'unskilled' jobs in the garments factories or in roadbuilding. This has been occurring without any programmes. What now the government and the other agencies of channelising the society's powers must give their mind to is to add to this coming out phenomenon something that would help them to come up as well — namely literacy and education. Women must also soon be taking up managerial positions as a beginning to balance it all. That will be a good test for the intentions not only of the government but of the male population as a whole. If both mean to be fair and to have the interest of the nation uppermost in their minds — there is no earthly reason why decision-making and managerial positions will not start to be "womanned" soon enough.

Bugging the Phones

There is an outcry in Britain over a recent disclosure in The Times that officers at some police stations have tape-recorded confidential telephone conversations between lawyers and suspects. This is not only unethical, almost repulsive in a country which recoils at the very thought of any violation of human rights, but also in breach of the country's Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

The outcry which is led by Britain's Criminal Law Solicitors' Association is based on admissions by "officers at some police stations" in the City of London. But, as expected, the report is denied by a police commissioner. The denial has done little to soften the position of the Solicitors' Association which is now calling for an explanation from Home Secretary Kenneth Baker as well as an assurance that telephone conversations between solicitors and clients in police custody should be in the strictest privacy.

The disclosure demolishes one myth, that is, one should no longer say that opening private mails and bugging telephones remain the monopoly of some developing countries and of the last remaining socialist nations. This kind of invasion of privacy is known to have happened in the United States. But this is one of the rare occasions of such an incident taking place in Britain, except in cases involving suspects in the Northern Ireland conflict.

We, in the developing world, are perfectly familiar with such a practice as the 'police bugging' telephone conversations. Some years ago, in erstwhile East Pakistan, the Home Ministry was said to be tape-recording conversations of all the cabinet ministers, including its own, and all other prominent citizens. Whether the practice continues in one form or another, we do not know. In all probability, the invidious system still works, without much of a protest from any of our bodies concerned with human rights.

In the practice of democracy, the respect for human rights which include the maintenance of secrecy of postal mail or telephone conversations is just as important as upholding the Rule of Law, setting up a parliament or holding free and fair election. It is a pity that the point is often missed.

Pakistan this week launched a diplomatic offensive, with its Chief of Army Staff in Washington trying to persuade State Department and Pentagon that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear bomb, and that there was genuine need for military spare parts and F-16s.

Meanwhile, in Paris, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was trying to woo the Mitterrand Government to extract compensation for a promised nuclear reprocessing plant, a deal from which the French, under American pressure, had backed out.

Accompanied by his Air Chief, Mr Sharif was also carrying a shopping list and high on priority were submarines, radars, mine sweepers and the controversial Mirage 2000.

In the background is a heated debate all over Pakistan where voices are being raised demanding from the Sharif Government that there has to be serious rethinking where the country's foreign policy was concerned.

A strong ally of the US, Pakistan is feeling the pinch because the Bush Administration cannot certify to Senate that Pakistan does not have a nuclear device; all economic and military aid from the US has ceased.

Together with this are changes in the region specially, changing realities in Afghanistan and the emergence of the Central Asian re-

publics which are still suspicious about a 'fundamentalist' Pakistan.

The so called Indo-Jewish lobby has also not helped matters and the recent example was the outburst of American Senator Larry Pressler who during press conferences both at New Delhi and Islamabad accused Pakistan of possessing a nuclear device, identifying

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Pakistan with fundamentalism and carrying on terrorist activities inside Indian occupied Kashmir and Indian Punjab.

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The Americans issued statements assuring the Pakistan Government that Senator Pressler was speaking

THE N'BOMB ISSUE

Pakistan Launches Diplomatic Offensive against Suspicion

Mariana Baabar writes from Islamabad

In his personal capacity and in no way articulating the government view meanwhile.

Mr Sharif rebutted accusations that Pakistan was a fundamentalist state asserting that, "I don't know what fundamentalism is, either you are a Muslim or you are not one".

came home Gen Asif's meetings with top American officials appeared to have borne fruit.

The CIA chief Robert M Gates, while testifying to Senate had declared Pakistan free from possessing device thus enabling the Pakistan

Nawaz Sharif's success, more than anything else was the meeting of minds between Mr Sharif and President Mitterrand, in questions of vital international importance.

After Great Britain from which Pakistan has received great support on its stand on Kashmir, the Paris visit saw a specific expression of support for Pakistan's stand on

Kashmir and its proposal for a nuclear non-proliferation conference in South Asia.

Mr Sharif's visit came at a time when there had yet been no definite response from State Department regarding sale of military equipment.

France, a major arms supplier in the world market agreed to sell Pakistan three submarines, three radars, three minesweepers and 40 Mirage 2000.

The Mirages have created a

str in Islamabad where there is a lobby which feels that these French fighter jets are ill suited for its air force.

The whole package is expected to cost over two billion dollars and the coming session of parliament would see a heated debate of the country's priorities which encompass ambitious plans in the social sector being scrapped with military overspending.

However, the US influence was still evident in Paris where specially after the lessons of the Gulf war, the French still remain reluctant to supply a 900 megawatt nuclear reactor since Pakistan has not signed the NPT.

However Mr Sharif managed \$130 million as compensation.

For Pakistan this week, the larger issues were all linked with its nuclear policy which it strongly defends a peaceful one being developed for energy purposes.

Since the dismissal of the Bhutto Government nearly two years ago it is the President, Mr Ghulam Ishaq Khan, who is personally monitoring it.

So far despite extreme pressure from domestic and foreign lobbies, he has refused to compromise on Pakistan's nuclear policy.

In the past a heavy price was paid for an independent nuclear policy; it cost Zulfikar Ali Bhutto his life.

hold elections soon, in which the Russians cannot vote.

The attitude of ordinary Estonians towards Russians is clearly more negative than that of Latvians. Although no violent incidents between the two groups have been reported so far, Kollist predicted big difficulties for the future, when the isolated Russian community has to be integrated in Estonian society.

"Most of the Russians live in areas where the neighbours are also Russians. Their children play with other Russian children and go to Russian schools. Fellow workers at the factories are Russians and they only watch Russian TV shows from Leningrad and Moscow," he said.

In Lithuania, the biggest Baltic country, the nationality problem is less severe. Out of a 3.7 million population, only 340,000 are Russians. There are also 260,000 Poles and 110,000 people of other nationalities.

Lithuania accepted a new citizenship law in 1989, well before actual independence, basically giving citizenship to the whole population.

But alleged discrimination of Poles and anti-Polish measures have already led to complaints from Poland. There have been talks between Poland and Lithuania, where President Vytautas Landsbergis denounced the Polish attitude as a sign of "expansionism and nationalism".

Baltics : Divided by Citizenship Fights

The newly independent Baltic republics are being torn apart by the sensitive nationality problem, involving Russians and other minority populations. Jorma T. Mattila of IPS reports from Riga, Latvia.



into power in the new parliament, by limiting participation in the forthcoming elections to those who will be citizens in July," said Zhdanok. But the conflict is in essence about property, she stated.

Privatisation of state property has just begun, and radical nationalists want to prevent Russians and other minorities from getting a share of state

properties.

"We know that municipalities already have an unofficial order to give buildings and office space only to companies led by ethnic Latvians," said Zhdanok. A national law already says that joint stock companies can only be set up by citizens, while 60 percent of all stock has to be in the hands of citizens.

Human Rights Now Taught in Philippine Classrooms

Diana G Mendoza writes from Manila

JUST how far teachers can go to assert their rights is an issue which continues to exercise Filipinos albeit the debate is less heated now that the entire country prepares itself for the national elections in 1992.

The debate peaked when public school teachers walked out of their classrooms in September 1990 to demand, among other things, the immediate payment of their delayed salary differentials and the immediate passage of a draft law providing for an increase in their basic pay and setting a ceiling to the country's foreign debt payments in order to have more funds for social services.

As a result of the mass action, the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) dismissed or suspended close to 3,000 of the protesting teachers. Others were threatened with similar action for defying the Department's return-to-work order.

Administrative charges — including gross misconduct, gross neglect of duty, gross violation of civil service law or rules and office regulations, refusal to perform official duty,

gross insubordination, conduct prejudicial to the interest of service and absence without leave — were filed against the teachers.

The government's response to the teachers' protest was the toughest since the teachers took to mass actions to air their grievances and demand rights and benefits.

Many of the striking teachers have since been exonerated but many are also unable to resume their work as the government is adamant in imposing whatever disciplinary action has been decided for them.

Charges and countercharges had been filed in court and late in 1991 a hunger strike which lasted several days was staged by the protesting teachers to get government officials, specifically President Corazon C Aquino, to dialogue with them.

The case appears to be close to a settlement as both government and the teachers have reached agreements on the terms for the grant of presidential clemency. Some of the teachers may get their old jobs back while others will be helped by the Civil Service Commission (CSC) to find em-

ployment in other government offices.

Throughout the protracted mass action, teachers stressed that they were simply asserting their rights and claiming benefits which were due them. Froilan Bacungan, a lawyer for the teachers, said the national government violated three basic rights of the protesters by dismissing or suspending them from their jobs. These

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are the right to due process, right to security of tenure and a right to assemble peaceably for the redress of grievances.

Another lawyer for the teachers, Narciso Albarracin, said, "The teachers are asking President Aquino to be true to her word that she has restored democracy, so she should respect the constitutional rights of public school teachers."

It is a position shared by others. But there are also those who felt that the teachers have gone too far by abandoning

their jobs and even setting a bad example to their charges on how to seek redress for grievances.

Interestingly, the growing militancy of teachers, which appears to be a development unwelcomed by the government, coincides with a growing interest on human rights in Philippine schools.

After a slow start in 1985, the teaching of human rights

has progressed dramatically since President Aquino came into power. From off-campus symposia and fora, human rights issues have moved to educational institutions which are taking steps to incorporate the subject in many academic areas.

Human rights education appears to be perceived by educators as a vital instrument for imparting present realities to student and how to handle them.

From being an issue associ-

ated primarily with the so-called leftist elements in society, human rights have since been recognised as a legitimate concern and an important subject for students to learn.

For the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), an organisation founded by the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP), human rights' newly acquired academic status meant bringing its information and education activities to campuses.

TFDP was asked by both the Department of Education, Culture and Sports and the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) to help in the preparation of education materials. The Task Force was asked by both state and private colleges and universities to organise human rights seminars through various campus organisations.

It was a task for which the Task Force had been adequately prepared as it has been spreading the human rights message for the past 17 years in its efforts to ensure that political detainees under the deposed Marcos regime were

treated well.

Eventually, human rights become a separate subject in some institutions for higher learning such as the University of the Philippines. In others, human rights have been integrated into the curriculum. The government has accredited human rights as a three-unit subject in a masteral course.

More schools have taken an interest in the issue by holding seminars and symposia, offering it as an additional subject, or integrating it into other subjects. The course is also now being taught in public elementary and high schools although the topic is integrated into other subjects as it "should be treated lightly when taught to younger students," academicians say.

Although there does not seem to be any indication that the growing militancy of public school teachers and the increased attention paid to the issue of human rights in the academe are directly linked, it is interesting to note that teachers, together with students and professionals, are among the primary targets of TFDP's activities.

— Depthnews Asia

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

The police and some questions

Sir, I happened to be out on shopping with one of my sons on Friday, 10th January, around 12.00 noon on Elephant Road. All of a sudden we heard an announcement from a patrolling tempo, carrying some policemen, urging the shopkeepers to shut down the shops, and the traffic to clear from the road, as a procession, bearing dead body of a student

would shortly parade through the road. Further more, they said that any damage would be done to the vehicles or shops, the police would not be responsible. The same announcement was made repeatedly over microphone advising all to comply with what had been said for their own safety.

At this unusual announcement the shopkeepers as well as the buyers felt quite unsafe, perplexed and panicky. As the

shutters started to come down, drivers and owners of vehicles began to hurry towards a safer place. I too, left the spot at once.

In the light of the above, the questions automatically arise in the minds of the citizens: 1) Did the police ever take any responsibility for the damages done to public and private properties in the past? 2) Can the law enforcing agencies, in reality, provide us any security? Will they rise to the occasion to prove their necessity in the interest of the society? 3) Does it make any sense in maintaining this department at the cost of the public money when they cannot serve the purpose they are employed for?

The things said above echo the growing helplessness and

insecurity of the general people. We expect some effective responses from the authority entrusted with the safety and security of the people.

Jerome Sarkar
Dhaka

Domestic servants

Sir, My hearty thanks go to Ms Ismat Ara for her letter captioned "Domestic servants" which appeared in The Daily Star on January 9. For it dwelt on a subject of considerable significance.

The experiences depicted in the letter synchronizes those faced by me in as much as I am the mother of two babies and have the fortune of being a headmistress in a kinder garden. I am sure there may be many others who have the same episode to tell.

Sister Ara has rightly said that as and when a raw chap has been taught much of the job, he/she leaves for a better prospect elsewhere.

Is there really none who can give us an effective remedy to this problem?

Nazma Naser
Mirpur, Dhaka.

Lonely in a city

Sir, Following the track of Ms. Ayesha in Jan 10 issue of your newspaper (letter), I like to give a hand in her greatly described isolation in which she plunged. Without identifying any of my links, I express my sympathy for her. But, from my point of view, anyone can have the utmost capability to make his own way out. If she is amused to consider herself a loner, obviously it's her own

wish. She might have a different nature separating her from others and that is perhaps not matching with her friends. To Ms Ayesha, I want to say, don't be misled by 'misdeeds' of others, better think for the best and you will see everything coming your way. Anything can happen in a cosmopolitan city. Here, someone may pretend to be something. Frankly, like you, I am also craving for a company. Though I am just a lad now and turn 20 on 23rd January, sometimes I consider my surroundings too silly for me and dream that never come true. I know I have nothing to lose or gain, still, I shall be highly pleased if you communicate through my mailing address.

Ned
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