

Concern over Satellite TV

Bangladesh may soon be sharing the growing concern of several other Asian countries over the possible impact of a deluge of television programmes beamed by satellite-based networks in the West, Japan and Hong Kong. This development, made possible by the rapid growth of electronic technology, should hardly come as a surprise. However, many developing countries, especially their governments, are taken aback by the fast increase in the TV stations out to capture the profitable world market as well as by the easy availability and relatively low cost of satellite dishes which enable viewers to watch these foreign programmes. As these dishes are getting smaller and more powerful, the authorities may soon fail to detect their use just as they are already unable to put up any technological barrier to stop these broadcasts.

Since, it is said, only a handful of households in Dhaka have installed the satellite dishes to watch foreign broadcasts, we may not feel any immediate concern over varied implications of this new phenomenon. But it is certainly not too early to study the matter and work out our possible options, in the light of experiences of other countries in the region.

Committed as we all are to free flow of information and unhindered dissemination of divergent opinions, whether they originate at home or abroad, Bangladesh should, as a matter of principle, treat a foreign broadcast, by television or radio, in the same way as it handles publications, local or foreign. In other words, there should be no censorship except in rare cases where a publication contains materials prejudicial to the security of the state or which tends to be offensive to moral, religious or cultural sensitivities of any section of our people. The problem here is, while the authorities can use such limited censorship, preferably through a court of law, in the case of print media, they are totally helpless in dealing with a foreign TV programme. It is possible for a government to take such unpopular — and, indeed, highly questionable — measures as making it illegal for any household to put up a satellite dish or levying a prohibitive duty on its use. But such measures are too negative to produce any lasting result.

The question is, what precisely are Asian governments — in some cases, unofficial media experts — worried about as far as these foreign TV programmes are concerned? There is little doubt that in many countries, officials see the political content of foreign TV news and commentaries as a potentially sensitive, if not a destabilising, factor. They may also regard these foreign stations which, in some countries, are seen almost round the clock, as a threat to their own government-controlled domestic networks. Independent experts in Asia would argue that governments in this region and elsewhere have little choice but to raise the level of performance of their domestic networks, especially in their news presentation and feature programme. For independent media experts, the added concern is, being highly commercialised operations, determined to penetrate millions of Asian homes, many of these networks would put out more cheap soap operas than quality programmes, often without showing due appreciation of religious or cultural sensitivities of different ethnic and religious groups. Here, one, perhaps the only one, answer lies in these networks evolving their code of ethics or guidelines, in consultations with experts from different regions, under the aegis of an organisation like UNESCO. These networks should be made conscious of the fact that the medium that new technology has placed in their hands should not be sacrificed for cheap profit, when it is capable of playing a positive role in our challenging world.

Justice Prevails

We are relieved that the Supreme Court of Ireland has just overturned the decision of a lower court, with the ruling that it was legal for a 14-year old girl to travel to Britain for an abortion she needs because she was allegedly raped by the father of one of her friends.

The earlier decision of the lower court — in fact, the High Court — that forbade the girl to terminate what is obviously an unwanted pregnancy abroad was rigidly based on the country's constitution which bans abortion. We do not know if there is any exception to this constitutional rule. Perhaps, there is none. However, the decision by the High Court was termed as outrageous by critics within the country while it raised an international outcry in which this paper had joined, in an editorial comment, as a clear case of violation of the Human Rights.

Most progressive politicians in Ireland, including Prime Minister Albert Reynolds, have welcomed the ruling by the Supreme Court, thus indirectly demonstrating their opposition to the constitutional prohibition of abortion.

However, the matter does not end here. In fact, the whole question of abortion in Ireland is once again reopened not only for a public debate but also for a possible referendum.

Being a Catholic country, Ireland maintains strong opposition to abortion on religious grounds. On the other hand, being a country with a low population growth, Ireland takes a firm position against modern family planning methods.

A referendum held on this issue in 1983 had reiterated support for the constitutional ban on abortion inside Ireland. But it was silent on the question of any travel out of the country for the purpose of ending an unwanted pregnancy. It is possible that Ireland may well decide to have another referendum or a revision of the constitution.

The point is, the status quo cannot just continue much longer. Ireland must modernise its attitude towards abortion so that the kind of decision taken by its High Court against a young girl's right to travel to Britain for the purpose of ending her pregnancy is not repeated again.

EMBARRASSMENT should have nailed the Congress (I) to the spot after the disclosure that Bofors paid money to former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to clinch the deal. But the party, which has lost its conscience over the years, has refused to own the kickbacks. In fact, it has further tightened the lid over the worst example of corruption that India has seen at the highest level.

New Delhi could have used diplomatic pressure to get to the bottom. Instead, it has ensured that the Swedish government does not get involved in any probe, while the press and MPs in Sweden are demanding almost with one voice. Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt has already ruled out the disclosure of certain facts. In a press interview he has said, "There are a lot that can't be made public." The legal formalities are being gone over with no firm instructions to Gunnar Berg, the lawyer pursuing India's case.

The inquiry by the Central Bureau of India (CBI) has already been diluted by transferring K. Madhavan and M D Sharma, the two officers following the inquiry relentlessly. The new head of investigation team, R C Sharma, has the reputation of being pro-Rajiv Gandhi. One top CBI brass, who wants to remain unidentified, has his doubts about the outcome "in the fact of transfers of the two officers and repeated messages from political bosses to hush up everything."

Despite all this, the government of India may not be able to stop the facts from propping up here and there. The five-year-limit in Sweden for criminal action against those who give or accept bribe will be over by the end of this month. Anyone can then spill the beans, although Bofors has confidently said that "even its

Bofors : India's Watergate

The Government of India may not be able to stop the facts from propping up here and there. The five-year limit in Sweden for criminal action against those who give or accept bribe will be over by the end of this month. Anyone can then spill the beans...

retired hands would never dream of squealing. Even some of the trusted men may speak out now that Rajiv Gandhi is dead. For example, Win Chandra, Bofors' Indian agent, who has been languishing in Dubai for the last two years to escape arrest, may throw in the towel before long. He has made some notes which indicate his exasperation.

Rajiv Gandhi's involvement cannot be wished away. Even then the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) tried to whitewash the deal, there was one DMK MP, Abadi Aruna from Tamil Nadu, to point the accusing finger at Rajiv Gandhi. In his dissenting note, Aruna quoted chapter and verse to prove Rajiv's complicity and questioned the various conflicting statements and by the former prime minister.

The report by T N Chaturvedi, then Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), may not specifically have named Rajiv Gandhi but raised doubts about his office, with the needle of suspicion pointing at Rajiv Gandhi. Chaturvedi corroborated the allegation that middlemen were involved in the deal and that commission was received for buying what he described as an inferior gun.

It is apparent that everything relating to the deal in its last stages took place in the prime minister's office. Rajiv Gandhi created two channels: one, official and the other, known only to him and his office. Arun Singh, then state

minister for defence, was probably right in saying that the government specifically told Bofors that there should be no middleman and that the condition was accepted by the company. His reference was to the government channel. He was not aware of the second channel, which included AE Services, the British company. AE Services, which earned some 8.7 million as commission, came into the picture at the final stage and assured Bofors that the deal would be signed before the end of

ter by the defence minister's office (Rajiv Gandhi was defence minister) saying that both the guns were technically acceptable and the price of the guns and ammunition as well as the credit terms would be crucial factors in the final decision. The office of defence minister first did not admit the existence of the note. After a lot of prodding by Chaturvedi, it was admitted in November 1988 that "the aforesaid note was a brief submitted by this office to the prime minister."

admitted that he was told by S K Bhatnagar, then defence secretary, to change the note in which he had asked the government to threaten cancellation of the contract to force Bofors disclose the names of those who received the kickbacks. Significantly, Bhatnagar was appointed by the Rajiv Gandhi government as Sikim's governor.

Some top Congressmen feel that the fear of exposure weighed with Sonia Gandhi when she decided not to run from the Amethi Lok Sabha constituency from where her deceased husband was returned. If this is so, many in the party who do not want the dynasty to return, will see it that Rajiv Gandhi does not "escape the responsibility." (Defence Minister Sharad Pawar refused to reply questions in parliament on Bofors on the plea that the prime minister should handle them).

The opposition could have made Bofors an issue and mustered a serious challenge in the Lok Sabha to the Narasimha Rao government, particularly when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its ardent supporter, has demanded "full facts" on the deal. But the BJP support is not crucial after the farcical election in Punjab, where the Congress (I) has won 12 seats. The party has raised its strength to 261, including those belonging to its allies, in the House with an effective strength of 533. The government practically enjoys a majority and if need be it can manage a few more members.

Between the Lines

Kuldip Nayar

March 1986. And this was done. Apparently, AE Services was acting on behalf of Rajiv Gandhi.

In fact, the sequence of events relating to the gun are revealing. The Swedish Bofors and the French Sofma were the guns shortlisted from among many. It was made clear that the Bofors gun had 'proneness to defects' as compared to the Sofma, which has 'negligible defects.' Till September 1985, army headquarters was sure that Sofma was the best gun — on as many as six occasions between December 1982 and September 1985 preference for the Sofma was confirmed. And there was no change in the defence ministry intention to buy Sofma.

In January 1986, a note was submitted to the prime minister

It is significant that within one month of the submission of the note, in February 1986, the defence ministry, for the first time, categorised Bofors as having an edge over the Sofma gun. By then K. Sundarji had taken over as chief of the army staff. The prime minister's office conveyed on March 24, 1986, 'the approval of the prime minister as defence minister to award of the contracts.' Much was made by the Congress (I) then that the PMO said 'further directions' would be given separately and that the ministry did not wait for the instructions and signed the contract the same day. Who should wait for whom? On March 24, 1986 Rajiv Gandhi was the prime minister as well as defence minister. Sundarji, after retirement,

IN the Bangladesh context, the jute-based industries can be termed to have been passing through a very difficult stage. The recent decision of the government to convert a number of jute mills into textile mills shall testify to the abhorring situation. Specifically however, there are some more intriguing causes those will atone for the impending collapse of the jute industries sector in the country. They are, precisely unholy international undercurrents aided by vested local interests; accumulated effects of labour unrest; administrative weaknesses; large-scale dishonesty and anarchical situation within the management; total indifference to maintenance of machinery and equipment; scandals in raw jute procurement; unstable quality control; billing for wages of fake workers.

Other Deterrents: A recent FAO study revealed, inter alia, that though manufacture of synthetic bags may be less expensive in the short run, the apparent enthusiasm shall have receded if their lower re-use value, their lethal impact on environment and higher energy consumption to produce are taken into prior consideration. Despite the innate advantage of jute and keeping aside the invasion of synthetic materials, the FAO report identified some other factors which accounted for the decline of jute. Foreign exchange constraints in the developing countries, expanded use of bulk handling and synthetics and reduced demands for military purposes have been some of the deterrents.

Besides, restrictive conditions of market access, import tariffs, quotas, licensing arrangements have been identified to have been contributing

THE GOLDEN FIBRE - II

There's Hope in Despair

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

to the difficulty in expanding exports of jute to many developing importing countries.

Pragmatism

What is needed at this critical juncture is to handle the situation with unassailable pragmatism and farsightedness. It is indeed heartening to note that the present government has expressed intention to rationalize the performance of the jute mills. Such a programme shall necessitate evolving a process which shall involve all the entities like workers, bankers, owners and international development agencies. There has been also a growing realisation in the government that mere disinvesting sick public sector mills to the private sector without making them viable will not bring any salutary effect to the national economy. Finance Minister Saifur Rahman, in a recent press briefing stressed, inter alia, that there was urgent need for balancing, modernisation, rationalisation and evaluation (BMRE) of the units. This he thought were the essential preconditions to their effective disinvestment.

The proposed mechanism above, shall in my humble opinion, set the ball in the right direction. Such a pattern of disinvestment matches the one in erstwhile EPDC days. It is not yet too late to put ourselves in the right track again. But the decision makers in the government must keep in mind, and in their topmost consideration, that the disinvested mills must not go the hands of the "shopkeepers" or

What is needed is to handle the situation with unassailable pragmatism and farsightedness It is not yet too late to put ourselves in the right track again...

"veritable grocers" but to those who have had proven records of success in industrial management. Give them to cooperatives or conglomerates comprising, among others, noted industrialists, seasoned managers, technocrats and successful executives.

Management Board: Barring those units which are taken by the potential bidders on 100 per cent down payment, others making 20-30 per cent should be under statutory compulsion to accommodate one senior officer from the Disinvestment Board or from the guaranteeing bank on the management board of the disinvested unit on full time basis. This representative of the government or of the bank will have to assume personal responsibility to monitor the progress in the overall context. His particular area shall be the financial aspect so that the repayment matrix set by the government is rigidly, meticulously and faithfully followed. He shall also send periodic report to the Disinvestment Board. Such a legally binding arrangement may help speedy recovery of government dues.

By our experience we have seen that one of the major snags in the industrial management has been an almost

perpetual intransigence of the work force with or without any reason.

Participative Management

The much talked about "productivity" often confused with the production capability of individual worker, becomes erratic and inconsistent with the plant capacity. Raising productivity therefore, in my opinion, presupposes a thorough, meaningful and cohesive wedding of all the factors of production, i.e. man, material and machinery. While man is the most vital but unpredictable element and the machine is just an instrument controlled by man, the former must ensure the production which the capacity of the machine permits. In the Bangladesh context, this man is a detached island, an almost mechanically driven entity having nothing to do with the management of the establishment. His interest is only in the part of his job, not in the entire perspective. His sense of belongingness veers only around his wage package. He does not see beyond. Every worker is thus a replica of one another doing his chore round the year. He is seized by a perpetual state of monotony and quite unknowingly he is trapped by an eerie spate of frustration.

The management on the other hand enjoys absolute prerogative on everything that concerns the mill. Seldom it takes into cognizance the potentials of individual workers at guiding the management on improving the overall performance of the unit. The essence of participative management lies here but never nurtured. Thus the distance between the workers and the management keeps on widening. Mutual mistrust breeds. On the other hand, if the principles of participative management are sincerely adhered to and total participation of all the workers, employees and management is ensured with an open mind, much of the turmoil in the industrial sector today could be neutralized. A look at the Japanese style of management may give us the pointer. Let them run on pure commercial basis with little or no central interference. There should also be a generous incentive package for the workers, employees and managers under a rational but comprehensive scheme.

Diversified Use

A recent workshop on "Jute and Bangladesh Ecology" made recommendation for diversified use of natural fibres like jute and kenaf against artificial fibres in order to contain environmental hazard. As a matter of fact, research on the prospects of diversified use of jute was undertaken about two decades ago. The end-result of such research was jute-a-jute-based fabric. Over the past several years jute has been sub-

jected to further transformation. Jute fibre board, pectex veneer board, jute plastic board etc. are some of the numerous items of jute origin. Amongst the latest finer fabrics made of jute are in large-scale use substituting woolen fabrics as well.

Jute has indeed tremendous prospects and possibilities. The unfortunate predicament in the jute sector can still be contained by pragmatic policy strategies. Jute's multipurpose use should be given topmost priority. This would necessitate: revamping of research activities; identification of high-yield varieties of jute seeds; development of low cost processing technologies; rousing public awareness of the manifold use of jute; large-scale publicity on jute and jute cuttings as raw materials for production of pulp and ultimate manufacture of all grades of papers.

The Last Word: Taking cue again from the December 23, 1991 issue of the Economic Times of Calcutta we shall have good reasons to be re-invigorated in our genuine endeavour to salvage the golden fibre. A global tender recently floated by the Syrian Government and participated, amongst others, by India, United States and Bangladesh saw a near tie between India and Bangladesh. In the words of the Calcutta paper "Bangladesh outsmarts India again to bag global tender", we shall have eloquent testimony that we are not yet run out of our potentials. It is indeed the will to do things when it is to be done that makes the difference.

(Concluded)

The writer, a management consultant, is now associated with a private sector jute industry.

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.

Democracy, consensus and development

Sir, During Pakistan days we lacked any constitution till 1956 and we were ruled by unelected people. Unfortunately in Pakistan there was no national election before 1985 but there had been provincial elections. The impact of the authoritarian rule in Pakistan was the 1962 constitution which was blown up in the mass upsurge of 1969 initiated by the students of Bangladesh. This resulted on the true and fair national election in 1970. But the transition to democracy was halted and, later, Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971.

In its 22 years of existence as an independent nation, Bangladesh has a history of only eight years of constitutional rule. During more than half of the time span the constitution was suspended and the country was under Martial Law. The absence of a tradition

of spontaneous democratic political institutions, from local self-government to national level, was a great deal responsible for Martial Law. Socio-economic conditions in Bangladesh do not permit her to have the luxury of a laboratory of constitutional experiments. Yet we at heavy cost and sacrifice have been experimenting it since 1947.

At the present moment our armed forces have displayed a great deal of sensibility by lending institutional support to the transition and standing by the wishes of the people. Now an opportunity for national revival knocks at the door. Economic emancipation is equally vital like the basic elements of the rule of law, its enforcement through a well-knit structure of a civil and judicial administration. The cry for a revolutionary change bears in the ultimate analysis no weightage when 86 per cent of the country's budget is financed with foreign aid and loan and 60 per cent or more of it goes back to the donor countries mainly in the

absence of our performance in exports, technology, trade and commerce, managerial and administrative know-how. As a result, the benefits do not trickle down to the lower level and fail to benefit the national economy. Now to improve the economy and to minimise the dependence on aids and loans, a national consensus in this regard is a must. Politicians have to have the spontaneous joint role in this regard. Students' continuous compulsory training and participation, for a part of the year, in the industries, crop fields, defence etc. Will undoubtedly facilitate developing a healthy and spontaneous socio-economic-political-military situation in the country. It would enrich their knowledge and skill so as to train the future leadership.

Md. Anwarul Afsar Rannagar Naogaoor

"Export or perish"

Sir, "Export or Perish" was the slogan coined by the late Sir Stafford Cripps, the then Chancellor of the British Exchequer, soon after World War II (1939-45). The war weary Britons got so fed up of this incessant propaganda, that they called polite mini-hartal with the counter slogan "Export Cripps".

For us Bangladeshis, it is time to consider borrowing this slogan, and start hammering it into all types of brains, with the Opposition being given the honour of leading the parade or pageant (not hartal). Like anti-missiles, and anti-missiles, some patriotic parties may launch various forms of anti-hartal movements, covering, for example, the following areas: (i) "Export or Perish", (ii) "Increase Production & Earn Bonus", (iii) "Work Half a Day Extra on Holidays", (iv) "Work Overtime Free Twice a Week".

We are shy of displaying our patriotism in concrete, visible, and productive ways. Instead, we are eager to point out our own problems -- and others' shortcomings.

The country has bigger problems. Nobody is willing to lend a helping hand--voluntarily. We want more pay for less work; and talk more for doing nothing.

Our manpower is our greatest asset, only if we could channel the combined energy (as some developing countries did). But our society is still in the "jatra" or melodrama stage--empty drums sound much. We cannot work silently. We are the noise-makers. Noise is neither signal nor information; therefore useless energy. We believe in rouse and douse--that is how we misuse our energy, remembering that this

scarce energy itself has low-caloric value.

The chicken-and-egg question is: we start at the top, or at the bottom? We are topless, and bottomless, and without any golden mean. What is left for us, and for export?

A Mauvaz Dhaka

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

Sir, A new book on Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (Some Personal Glimpses) by Prof Shamsul Haque Shaidi was launched in a publication ceremony on 14th Feb.

National Professor and a former Foreign Minister, Shamsul Haque, among other things, expressed the opinion that, "this admirably written and beautifully printed book may also serve to the promotion of good neighbourly relations between India and Bangladesh through knowing the neighbour's great leader, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad."

More or less the same sentiment has been expressed by the Prime Minister of India, P V Narasimha Rao, in a personal letter to the author: "I am pleased to receive a copy of your book on Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. It is a thoughtful and timely publication on one of the greatest sons of modern

India. I am particularly pleased to note the regard in which Maulana Azad is held by the intellectuals like you in Bangladesh."

We hope, this book will be widely read also in India and materialise the noble sentiment expressed by our National Professor and the Prime Minister of India.

(Principal) Azizullah Armanitola, Dhaka.

Academic discipline

Sir, The situation in our educational institutions is yet to become fully congenial for running smooth academic activities. I think, the only way to resolve the campus crisis is through reaching a common understanding between all the national political fronts including the ruling party over the issues of academic discipline and administration. What is ethically right should be treated as right by all the quarters irrespective of political differences. And each quarter has to come forward to restore academic discipline on the campus with true and strong initiatives.

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