

BRAC's Non-formal Primary Education

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) gets this year's UNICEF Maurice Award for its outstanding contributions in delivering exemplary service to the poor, children and women, and its innovative ideas in health care and providing basic education, specially to girls.

BRAC's excellent performance in several areas have been recorded, yet it is the primary or basic education for which the organisation deserves special accolade. Indeed, its contribution to universal primary education is exemplary and needs to be emulated by others, including perhaps by the concerned government organ.

At a time when government efforts are failing to arrest the rise of illiteracy, this BRAC programme appears to be the right answer to the problem of drop-outs. That BRAC has proved itself equal to the task is evident from its detection of the problem at the grassroots level.

Against the backdrop of no new primary school coming up — the requirement of such schools is conservatively estimated at 200 annually to cope with the population growth — BRAC's programme for setting up more schools will certainly do a marvellous job for reducing the increasing army of the illiterate. What is still more important is the fact that the programme has proved highly cost-effective.

Science Writers' Prize

The Bangla Academy is going to institute a biennial science writers' prize styled "Halima Sharafuddin Biggan Purashkar." This is a happy decision on the part of the academy although their part in the institution of the prize in minimal — the funding of the prize money being done by the Kalinga Prize winning populariser of science, Dr Abdullah al-Muti Sharafuddin in memory of his parents.

It is granted that the cash amount is the last thing to add prestige to a prize. Administration of the prize or the true merit of the book so recognised is about the whole of what adds value to such a prize. Let Bangla Academy take pains to succeed in this although it has allowed a bloomer to creep in even before the institution of the prize.

There has been a marked emphasis on science education in the country. In spite of ceaseless exhortations from ministers etc we are not sure this being all to the good. The best of our young brains are being wasted in manning jobs needing only intermediate level knowledge and cleverness such as officers and run-of-the-mill teachers, the so-called technical people or if you want to glorify them — technocrats inclusive of the bases of the engineering and medical services.

Writers popularising science have a great role in healing this dangerous malaise. We hope that the new prize will encourage the shamefully narrow band of science writers to increase the size of their fold and the education system to conduct itself in a manner that would go on creating an ever-growing demand for such books as would inculcate into the young mind the scientific attitude.

Top Tiger Still Holds Sri Lanka to Ransom

Gamini Navaratne writes from Colombo

ONE man is holding Sri Lanka virtually to ransom. Velupillai Prabhakaran, 38-year-old supreme leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), is continuing the decade-old war for a separate Tamil homeland in the north-east of this island.

He has spurned all offers by both President Ranasinghe Premadasa and former president Juntas Jayewardene for a negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict involving the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority.

Prabhakaran has been quoted as saying: "If Jayewardene was a true Buddhist, I would not be carrying a gun."

Under his direction, the LTTE even defied the might of the Indian army, which sent more than 50,000 soldiers, styled as a peacekeeping force, to implement the Indo-Sri Lanka accord of 1987. The accord, signed by Jayewardene and the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, offered regional autonomy to the Tamils in lieu of a separate state.

Now Prabhaha, as he is popularly called, is wanted by India to be charged in connection with assassination of Gandhi in May 1991. Sri Lanka has agreed to his extradition.

Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, has been eluding security forces in Sri Lanka for more than a decade. Now he is wanted by India to be charged in connection with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991. Despite a massive hunt, Prabhaha, as he is popularly called, is continuing his violent struggle for a separate Tamil homeland.

which was requested by an Indian court in February. Where to find him? He is probably somewhere in the Jaffna peninsula, heartland of Tamil — and Tiger — country. But where?



VELUPILLAI PRABHAKARAN Wanted for planning Gandhi's assassination.

Velvettiturai, on the extreme north-west coast, is a possible hideout, supposedly in a heavily guarded underground bunker with five-star comforts. The government write no longer runs in the region, so the security forces dare not penetrate that part of Jaffna.

The LTTE supremo, a dapper well-built man, is rarely seen in public. Strong-willed and ruthless, he has eliminated most of his rivals for the Tamil leadership.

LTTE is also held responsible for the assassination in 1989 in Colombo of the moderate Tamil leader A. Amirthalingam and his deputy V. Yogeswaran.

So it is possible that he masterminded the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi as an Indian investigation team alleges. Gandhi at one time, like his mother Indira Gandhi, supported the LTTE and then turned against it.

India intervened when it seemed other powers "hostile" to it, particularly the United States and Pakistan, might interfere on behalf of the Sri Lanka Government to settle a problem that was fast getting out of hand and might pose a serious threat to its southern flank.

The Indian peacekeeping force withdrew in mid-1989. In two-and-a-half years it had

failed to disarm the Tigers and ensure civilian rule under the terms of the accord. Nearly 1,500 Indian troops were killed and double that number injured. The LTTE, too, suffered heavy casualties, but it has survived to carry on fighting Sri Lanka's security forces.

Like Yasser Arafat leading the Palestinian struggle for liberation, Prabhaha is venerated by Tamil extremists but shunned by moderates who have no answer to his fire power.

Where he gets the money to carry on this long struggle remains a mystery. His movements could not have survived for so long without foreign support. Many believe that some non-governmental organisations from the West are the prime suspects, pumping in money ostensibly to save the

LTTE ideologue Anton Balasigham told the press in Jaffna recently that Prabhaha will never be caught alive. He said: "You know our tradition of suicide — swallowing a cyanide capsule hung around the neck of most Tigers.

Hundreds of Tigers have committed suicide when apprehended by the security forces rather than face interrogations under torture.

If Prabhaha is caught alive he could be forced to reveal the local and international ramifications of the LTTE organisation. This, however, is likely to be a forlorn hope.

— GEMINI NEWS

Tamils from "genocide" at Sinhalese hands.

If Prabhaha is ever captured the LTTE plans to block his extradition by tiling the International Court of Justice that Indian and Sri Lankan troops killed thousands of innocent Tamils while Prabhaha was fighting to protect them.

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— GEMINI NEWS

GAMINI NAVARATNE is a Sri Lankan journalist who runs Sandesa Press Agency in Colombo.

RP Guerilla Warfare Affects 5.4m Children

Claro Q Esoen writes from Manila

IN mid-February, 41 soldiers were ambushed by communist guerillas in a mountainous jungle in southern Philippines.

Except for the unusually high number of casualties (as well as those on the rebel side), skirmishes with communist rebels are common occurrences in the more than 20 years of insurgency in this country that has refused to fizzle out.

The ambush did come at a time when President Corason Aquino said the previous day that the communist insurgency has been beaten, this to the graduating class of the country's premier military academy. A few days later, Amnesty International released a report that summary executions of suspected communists continue.

But what caught the headlines most in the mid-February ambush was the gouging of the eyes and dismemberment of some of the dead soldiers — by guerillas as young as 11 to 15 years old. A country which has often turned a blind eye on the fact has re-discovered that children are combatants in the ongoing insurgency.

Indeed, the army chief-of-staff was reported to have said that since boys participated in the brutality, "armed boys" in insurgent areas will henceforth be treated as combatants.

According to former Health Secretary Alfredo Bengzon, about 4.5 million Filipino children have been affected by the insurgency since 1972. In 1988-90 alone, about 300 children died in insurgency-related incidents. Dr Bengzon, a member of the Peace Commission which has negotiated with the leftist National Democratic Front, says about 160,000 Filipinos, including women, have been affected by the insurgency. In 1988-90 700 were arrested and detained while 1,200 were subjected to physical or mental torture. The number of those suffering emotional trauma has yet to be determined.

Dr Bengzon was speaking

before a recent congress on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict. Participants estimated that 90-95 per cent of victims in the insurgency are civilians, mostly women and children.

They blame both the government and the insurgents. The National Democratic Front and the Communist Party of the Philippines have both engaged the civilian populace in a "people's war." The government in turn has adopted a "total war" approach involving armed militias and vigilante groups, and setting up of zoning and forced evacuations, and so on.

Worldwide, "the numbers are simply overwhelming," said Randy Salm of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution: 999,000 military and over 4.5 million civilian killed

As many as 200,000 children under 15 years old are active fighter in war and violent conflicts around the world... Often weapons will be modified and made shorter and lighter for use by children.

in current wars and violent conflicts. Refugees number over 12.5 million and displaced persons number over 24.5 million.

Mr Salm has done a study on wars and conflicts during 1990-91 in 31 countries, including Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, China (the 1990 civil and student strike), India, Indonesia (East Timor), Papua New Guinea, Philippines and Sri Lanka.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), there were 200,000 children under 15 years old who are active fighters in war and violent conflicts around the world. UNICEF states that civilian casualties have been 80 per cent of the total casualties in the 150 wars since 1945, including 20 million dead and 60 million wounded, mostly women and children.

Mr Salm's study includes civil strife, ethnic conflict, and civil and international wars with over 1,000 deaths. He cites studies showing that six

countries in 1989-90 had populations 10 per cent 1980 figures: El Salvador, Afghanistan, Chad, Angola, Laos and Cambodia. It is assumed this is due primarily to war since all six countries had intensive war and violence in the 1980s.

"Women and children do fight in wars," said Mr Salm. "One must also remember that military deaths of men over age 18 are usually parents with children. Also, children often see the combat take place, because it's so close to mom. The increase in the number of children diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder emphasises this."

Armed conflicts also spawn refugees, at least half of them children under 16 years old. His study has shown that in

child soldiers are as young as age 12. Children from age 5 are taught to shoot and hate the Russians although the Russians had pulled their troops out of the country in 1988.

In Burma, children as young

as age 11 fight with the Karen rebels against the government. They patrol and man the trenches. About 900 of the 5,000 man Karen army are under age 15.

In Cambodia, child soldiers with the Khmer Rouge in 1985-87 were as young as six or seven years old. The

government also used boys as well. As in Uganda and other countries, Cambodian children active in the military during the mid-1980s are having problems re-integrating into society because of their psychological indoctrination when conscripted.

—Depthnews Asia.

OPINION

A Tale of Two Decades: Costly Successes and Failures

Gholam Mohammad

Many things happened over the last twenty years. We emerged as a sovereign nation. No attempt was though made, upon liberation, to discover our national identity. We have been sharply differing both as individuals as well as in groups on matters of national importance.

In the meantime our poets composed volumes of verses, artists painted lots of visuals many of our senior bureaucrats matured for retirement, and the agreement with our neighbour on sharing the Ganges water expired. (The flow of water has continued none-the-less). People's sympathies for the families of the two slain Presidents were organised into the focal point of our national politics. For the first time, over the two decades, the 'opposition' agreed to sink their differences obstructing the revival of democracy (distorted or destroyed by them when in power). At that point of time, a strong surge of flowers was noticed in the markets to which, also, the people responded.

Incidence of traditional night burglaries almost disappeared yielding place to early morning hijacking at the dagger or gun point and, for that matter, instant assassination in the event of resistance increased by leaps and bounds. Bank dacoities in the broad daylight took place when and where convenient.

The sun still rose and the stars twinkled at night. Prices of the essentials maintained their up-beat. The country's economy, as a whole, nose-dived.

The politicians repeated all their phrases while speaking passionately on the Liberation War a good number of whom without participating or suffering in that war or openly negating it or working against its spirit in disguise. 'Patriotism' and many other words of the kind in the vocabulary, lost their relevance.

The intellectuals (intelligentsia) emerged at critical moments in groups playing second fiddle to the politicians of their choice, to which, of course, their fundamental rights remained un-questionable. They included junior teachers of the universities and also some seniors having little or no original works/publications to their credit during the period under discussion. The intelligent among them also lost no time in minting money from 'consultancy' by lending their names to available funding sources.

NGOs formed their own formidable group. They questioned the efficiency of the government on several issues and obtained full operational independence with their own set of priorities and policy options (for development trading).

Disappearance of non-violent thieves, values of life and withdrawal of air-conditioning facilities from the grand movie-halls looked like folk tales reminding us of the peaceful times we had not too long ago, when the processionists did not set private and public vehicles ablaze or reported to other forms of rampage.

The value pattern was different then. The people used to be generally simple and, by majority, honest. Their association with land and crops was emotional. They knew the fishes deep in the water. They loved their animals. Taste of rice, vegetables and fish corresponded to un-adulterated appetite.

Politicians and intelligentsia had existed during those times, too, but poets and plumbers never mixed up their jobs or responsibilities. The bulls knew exactly how best to till the fields.

There were large trees along the roads keeping the city cool. Birds flocked on them and chirped and people rested in their shade during the hot summer days.

Back from the war field, twenty years ago, we were bleeding from our hearts. Those besieged during the war in the country were also bleeding. This marked the watershed in our outlook. Changes occurred to us at that point of time as we were exposed, in our miseries and helplessness, to the world around. We knew not what happened to us.

The Japanese had bled absolutely white at the end of the Second World War, which in terms of dimensions, is difficult to measure up, and as such it does not compare with our nine months of liberation war. The Japanese had — to add insult to their injury — lost the war. As against them, we had returned victorious from the war field, to lose that war, unfortunately, in course of time, in inches. Reversely, the Japanese won inch by inch.

The Japanese refused to be anything except pure and simple Japanese. They insisted arrogantly on their own history, culture and traditions, carefully interpreting them with reference to the modern times. They deeply and for that matter, critically studied the western system including the technologies to relate them to their own ways of doing things. They worked hard, with a high sense of national pride, in which as a single major item on our national agenda, we lacked rather shamelessly.

Eventually, when the moment of glory was in sight, the Japanese had successfully completed the task of building up their own technologies on the ideas borrowed from the west which finally produced the best model so far, of culture-oriented cross fertilisation of technologies, superseding the original in terms of productivity and management.

On the other hand, we were overwhelmed by and lost in the technologies themselves. Our poets still wrote excellent poems, without utilising the history and culture as any fierce driving force to appeal to the sense of our national pride.

The university campus grew violent. Guns and other weapons replaced the reading and writing materials. The students, by and large, went berserk. Colour TVs and VCRs made their inroads into the majority of houses. Book stalls virtually vanished and a mushroom growth of video libraries

was noticed. Cans of beers were emptied by youngsters possessing 'a lot of money'. And they pulled special foreign tobacco —

The so-called intellectuals, on their part, shifted their focus from the history and culture to the dynasty-oriented politics on the streets. The authors sought a ban on the import of books of poems and fictions and journals (for their own trade secrets?).

The leaders advocated the cause of the down-trodden, whose lot worsened with the prices of essentials touching new heights. We still find ourselves in the Gulf War situation when, viewed from the standpoint, price hike of fuel was taken as a temporary emergency measure.

Technologies have remained original, being related to our conditions except necessary 'tropicalisation' of the equipment and machinery which in turn obtained our consent, by implication for 'tropicalisation' (de-construct?) of our history, culture and tradition!

During the period, the societies have remained closed at the middle point, while the top and the bottom opened quietly. In the societies, therefore, conflicts were noticeable with, among others, an attempt to move on the top, but falling right down to the bottom having, in the process, lost the original middle point. Sex and violence accompanied the imports whose volumes increased progressively each year.

Finally an institutional shape to the parliamentary form of democracy has been given with an unprecedented national consensus.

People's fundamental rights have been restored, except their right to survive, which calls Shaheed Nur Hossain as an important reference. He had painted his body with slogans for easy identification in the massive procession at the 'Zero Point' in the city. He opted for an honourable death, which raises a series of doubts on the survival issue for the ordinary mortals, once the political leaders succeed in capturing the citadel of power. In their 'success' situation, the poets, plumbers are politicians and not sure of exactly what they are doing.

The sun shall still rise sending this time possibly its ultra-violet rays penetrating the so long protective ozone layers over our socio-political scenario which has seemingly lost its density in all these years.

Opposing processions are on the street again, but this time with such vital issue as allowed to remain unresolved over the two decades. However, this is democracy.

As mentioned, the meteoric surge of flowers and powerful movement of democracy though simultaneous, were, in actual effect, co-incidental with lots of ultimate similarities, each none-the-less having its own separate perspective during the period.

Now, we have, at the end of these two decades, both flowers and democracy — certainly not for decorative or propaganda reasons. Should we see through to our exact identity?

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.

Fire hazards

Sir, On the afternoon of March 9, an extensive fire had occurred in a slum of Postogola Islambag, devouring around 300 houses and rendering about 1000 people homeless. Five persons were reported dead on the spot, and five more were reported to be in a critical condition. The fiery "Falgoon" sun abetted the extensive damages. In view of the narrow approach road it took 11 fire brigade units three hours to contain the fire.

Fifteen months from now (27 December '90 to be precise) a massive fire had occurred in Saraka Garments Factory at Mirpur claiming several lives. The case received extensive media coverage, but the voices died down soon. On an average nearly 1000 fire incidents are entered in the records of the different fire stations in the city in a year.

There is rapid spread of slums and these have narrow accesses, with the result that five brigade units cannot enter those places. Public warning system is also absent. Furthermore, the high rise buildings are also coming up, and fire fighting appliances are simply not there. The government offices are also in

flammable places, but these are hardly provided with fire extinguishers.

In all the cases stated above remedial actions are needed early for reducing the incidence of fire in the city.

Shahabuddin Mahtab Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Need for Cleanliness

Sir, I would like to draw your attention to the limitation of public toilets in the city. There are thousands of people milling around the capital but they hardly know where to ease themselves when the time comes. Even when you go to public places you often find the toilets locked as it is after office hours. As a result you find people urinating against public buildings and private homes. This adds to the deterioration of health and hygiene of the city.

The spitting on the roads is also another bad habit which our people have which adds to the dirt and grime, filth and squalor. The throwing of household garbage hither and thither instead of the fixed rubbish bins assigned by the authorities also contribute to the untidiness

and rampant unhealthiness. The servants sent to throw the garbage, dump it in the nearest possible place instead of taking the effort to goto the cemented bins.

With the coming rainy season the already menacing flies and mosquitoes will create further unhealthy situations. The gathering pools of water will be perfect place for the breeding grounds of grubs.

I wish the authorities would take stronger measures to keep our city clean.

GDH, Banani, Dhaka.

Newspaper holiday

Sir, The forthcoming festival holidays will take us to the dark ages when there used to be no newspapers. But we cannot ask you and your co-workers, being normal human beings (apologies if not agreed) to work while we enjoy.

Have you ever considered an alternative? To maintain a skeleton staff and come out with brief issues of the paper during the holidays, keeping the price same. During the 5-6 day holidays the readers are so suffocated that if papers are available even in 'black market' there are many who wouldn't mind to stretch the budget.

A point in favour of this suggestion is that we are sometimes obliged to pay a little extra when a bulky supplement on a completely irrelevant subject (to sections of readers) is thrust on us.

M A Haq West Rajabazar, Dhaka