

Why Not Elitism, but of a Different Kind

A Boost for Dhaka-KL Ties

Foreign Minister A S M Mustafizur Rahman who flies to Kuala Lumpur today will, we hope, take the first opportunity of thanking the government and the people of Malaysia for the support they extended to Bangladesh on the Rohingya issue. Among member countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the government of Dr Mahathir bin Mohammad was the first — a few, in fact, showed a little hesitation — to take a strong position in favour of quick and safe repatriation of over two lakh Myanmar refugees who had fled to this country. An astute statesman and a friend of Bangladesh, Dr Mahathir understood the position correctly and acted accordingly. However, in this context, one must pay due credit to the Malaysian High Commission in Dhaka for the supportive role it played on this issue.

Since the repatriation of Rohingya refugees is yet to start, it is important for Mr Rahman to alert his counterpart, Abdullah Ahmed Badawi on the problems which may still lie ahead. In return, our Foreign Minister should gain an understanding of the Malaysian perception of the developments inside Myanmar, perhaps a potential member of ASEAN, once a democratically elected government takes office in Yangon.

As expected, there will be a full three-day discussion on bilateral matters between Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur, primarily focused on economic co-operation. Here, thanks to the hard work put in by our successive High Commissioners in Malaysia, a framework for co-operation already exists, with some understanding of priorities. But it lacks momentum. There are, in fact, issues, such as an increase in the employment in Malaysia of Bangladeshi workers and members of the professional classes, which should be discussed in details.

Since answers to some of these issues concern the private sector, the Foreign Minister should have the opportunity of holding a round of talks with Malaysian entrepreneurs and their representative trade bodies.

These talks should focus on a number of new possibilities which the last Malaysian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Tunku Nazifah binte Tunku Mohamed Rus had discussed with Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and later during an exclusive interview with this paper. They relate to prospects of Malaysian investment in Bangladesh and the establishment of joint ventures. The two are interlinked, although there are no reasons why Bangladeshis and Malaysians cannot together set up projects in third countries. In the changed political and economic climate in the region, Malaysia has other countries in mind for setting up new ventures, say, in garments and electronics, the areas in which this country has gained much experience. So, prospects of co-operation between Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur offer promises, but also challenges and competing claims. The visit of Mr Rahman to Kuala Lumpur should mark the start of a new process. But it will be up to our High Commission in Malaysia to carry it forward. As Mr Rahman had once explained to this paper, the Foreign Ministry is determined to make all our missions abroad more trade-oriented, with each embassy or high commission earning its way through economic co-operation, investments and joint ventures. Let our mission in Kuala Lumpur serve as a test case in this respect.

Beggary in New Light

Beggars make news, more often than not, with a negative slant. But on rare occasions, some beggars somewhere step into limelight because of their positive contribution to society or attempts to do so. When a beggar donates through a will his lifetime's savings to an institution of public service, we are pleasantly surprised by the man's magnanimity. But a motley collection of disciplined beggars looking for a way out of their wretched living is something wonderfully new. This exactly was the case with more than 500 beggars of Gaibandha. The story in brief is that the beggars of that upazila assembled to gherao the residence of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) and also held a rally demanding the provision for work in stead of alms. They lifted the gherao only after they had been assured of employment on the availability of government aid.

For the beggars of Gaibandha, it was a nice way of reminding the government — through its representative at the local level — of its duty to these most neglected, and perhaps despised, people. The other reminder concerns that not all are happy to be in this abject profession. Many of them surely might not be in the profession, if only they could help avoid it. That they are in it is partly explained by the society's failure to evolve a right type of mechanism to address the problem through employment generation and partly by their own failure.

The important thing is that the beggars are keen — if they have not resorted to pretension — on earning for themselves instead of being a drag on society. Their intention — if sincere — is indeed laudable. But mere praise would not be enough to match the gesture they have exhibited. It must be done in some concrete terms. The assurance of the UNO should somehow or other be complemented by practical measures. And Gaibandha just should be a starting point for a far greater programme aimed to gradually eradicate the ills of beggary.

That the problem of begging is directly related to the lack of employment opportunity and is also a reflection of unequal distribution of wealth is obvious. Even in a country with a strong economy, this is not an unheard-of phenomenon. Much depends on how far a society is caring and how strong its welfare programmes are. With a poor economy of the sort we have, there is little chance of doing away with begging — specially when the emphasis has been shifted on the individual initiatives and entrepreneurship. Have the beggars also taken a cue from the policy-makers well in advance?

ELITISM is not a kind word in our country. Since the end of the British colonial rule in the sub-continent, the elite have been on the retreat with increasing political though not economic pressures from the left. It is true that the elite of the British India period were in a certain sense the agonising manifestation of feudalism which had no place in the post-second world war period of political independence and economic development. The time had come for a new type of elitism; but unfortunately the concept could only be discarded since it could not be dissociated from feudalism. The populist jargons geared to slogans of mass appeal — unrealistic but passionate; and, counter to development but sexy and sensational — became the order of the day.

Another significant drawback of the intellectual elite in all the countries of the sub-continent have been their profound liberal arts orientation. Poets and musicians of repute are acclaimed by the society but not the engineers, accountants or the scientists. The compensation is not the fact that they are paid well which on the other hand reflect their scarcity value since not many students prefer to study science and technology. The bias is in favour of literature, history or philosophy. Things have changed in

India with the coming of stream of the engineering graduates from several elite MIT type engineering institutes set up in the 1950s, but things are yet to change elsewhere in the sub-continent. In Pakistan, power attracts, and absolute power attracts absolutely. Hence the elite students join either the Army or the Civil Service where power, often brutal, bestows such honour and prestige that nothing else can count. In Bangladesh, on the other hand, poetry in particular and literature in general still holds the fatal attraction. The profusion of magazines and journals published from Dhaka testifies to the innate cravings of poet-Bengalis.

Not that the bright young people should not join the Army and the Civil Service or the finer delights of poetry and literature are harmful to the nations but the prevailing patterns are reflective of the norms that are followed and the values that are cherished by the societies; and, these are not conducive to economic growth or social modernisation.

Pacific Century

The 21st century has already been termed as the Pacific century. We have remained outside the rim of the growth miracle so far. South Asia holds the key to rename the next ten decades as the

Asia-Pacific (and not Pacific only) century. Our societal norms and the existing value structure must be changed very drastically — there are simply no alternatives; but how?

Our entrepreneurs are the lead agents of economic growth and they must through conscious efforts be enabled to emerge as the true elite of the countries. The best brains graduating from the colleges

being proposed here is much more comprehensive so that the most desirable and of course preferable alternative is created to counteract existing preference for government service or literary engagements. In addition, the primary objective of intensifying business growth and development holds the key not only to the future expectations of around 120 crore population of the sub-continent but finally to

WINDOW ON ASIA

Shahed Latif

should be encouraged by whatever means required to join the world of business. In our countries we offer no training to young entrepreneurs but training for business development should be the leading point of entry for the best among the graduating students. Thereafter direct assistance should be provided to establish business ventures, technology transfer, management support and even the wherewithals like buildings and machineries so that the entire effort is geared to promotion of economic growth, and growth only. Such programmes in the past have been thought in terms of self-employment schemes but what is

bring about a fundamental change of attitudes, of how we work and live in the ancient land mass between the Himalayas and the ocean.

A whole new culture for growth and development must be brought on-stream as fast as possible. I once spent a whole day browsing at several bookstores of Singapore. I did find all the books in the field of economics and business but failed to locate the collected works of T S Elliot; in fact there were hardly any poetry books. I also went to the Bot Mea at Dhaka on the 21st of February and found that it was all literature and nothing else. At a leading bookstore of Lahore the prominently dis-

played books were on ideology, religion and military science. If you take a look at the leading shop of Bangkok, the vast majority of the Thai publications relate to various technologies (for example, how to grow orchids or make artificial flowers for export), business management of self-taught accountancy. One can never find such books in Bangla either at Dhaka New Market or at College Street, Calcutta. The differences are very sharp and obvious; in south-east Asia the clear preference is private business and technology acquisition or skill development; but we in South Asia have remained student within the vaulted aspirations of our colonial and feudal past.

Teach-yourself Books

The SARC secretariat can undertake a useful project to acquire all such teach-yourself books on various skills and of business management and translate them into Hindi, Urdu and Bangla. Initially, the sales should be subsidised but bound to pick up in no time if deliberate promotion of business culture is considered by the Governments to be of foremost national priority.

Our attitude of counter-development is reflected everywhere. The hard working non-residents of Pakistan, India or Bangladesh are often objects of ridicule by the newspaper reading elite sitting next on

the flight to destinations in the middle-east. Cramped with electronic goods, toys and bright shirts, they are exploited by the customs inspectors and immigration clerks at the airports — never for once realising that these returnees account for the largest portion of our foreign exchange earnings which is vital to sustain the import growth that largely fulfils our middle-class aspirations.

Yes we need elitism — the elitism of a different kind where productivity and inducements to growth are the key factors. For example, any entrepreneur who employs at least 50 workers in his own enterprise for a continuous period of say five to ten years should be treated as an elite instead of the publisher of a newspaper with effective circulation of only 1000 copies or the philosophy teacher adding to the educated unemployed of our countries.

The numerous small to medium scale entrepreneurs, say half a million of them in Bangladesh, each on the average employing 50 persons would create the newly industrialising country that we are all seeking; and these entrepreneurs must be the elite of that industrialising society of tomorrow — not the middle-class paper-pushers of today who must be left far behind — sleeping at the post.

One Million Heroin Junkies Infest Pakistan

Javed A Malik writes from Islamabad

Pakistan is known to produce and export drugs, mainly heroin. But with the number of heroin addicts alone growing to more than one million, people now realise it has become a country of users as well

Secombe, Field Advisor of the UNDCP.

These are obviously tall aims in a society where the literacy rate is only 30 per cent and drug barons are influential. The country lacks even basic information facilities about drugs. There are around 30 detoxification centres only and even these are not adequately staffed and equipped.

As a first step, pamphlets about drug abuse, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation are being prepared, to be distributed through government facilities and non-government organisations (NGOs).

In each of the four provinces, coordinators have been appointed to work as

contact persons for the project and keep liaison with the NGOs and government officials. The programme is being implemented in collaboration with the Pakistan Narcotics Control Board (PNCB).

An important component of the project is the training of teachers, who can then be used to increase the awareness of drug issues among the youth, the group most susceptible to drug abuse.

For one, it involves Pakistan's only distance education university, the Allama Iqbal Open University. It will formulate a course on drug abuse and prevention for student teachers.

Curriculum is also being developed for a drug-related course for student teachers in government's schools. A national workshop is also being established to specially cater for women groups and to deal with family issues related to drug abuse.

Regional Training Workshops will be organised in four provinces which will emphasise on the treatment of heroin addicts particularly. They will train "helpers" in treatment, rehabilitation, assessment, relapse prevention and after-care of addicts.

The helpers will be medical professionals, social workers and others such as the staff of NGOs. The materials for these workshops are ready and their schedule is being finalised.

"We want to associate NGOs in this project as much as possible, but the problem is that we do not have enough of them in the country, which can be trusted. There are only 10 to

15 of them which are working in the field of drug abuse, out of the hundreds formed and got registered by different people for their own personal aims and objectives," says Wayne F. Bazant, the Chief Technical Adviser of the project.

Two-men teams will be trained to provide drug abuse-related services. If successful, their number (now 11 teams) may be increased and used for training other people.

Their primary objective will be to provide basic information on how to treat addicts and to identify and refer them to rehabilitation centres. They will also provide support and after-care services. These teams will help communities organise special groups — such as parents of addicts, former addicts themselves and community leaders — to discuss drug-related problems and to find solutions for them.

— Depthnews Asia

Moscow's Baby Obstacle Course

Mother Russia relaxes its laws on foreign adoptions but sets up a difficult adoption process. Yet foreign would-be parents are lining up. Judi Buehrer reports from Moscow.

Russian press that foreigners were buying Russian children. Others in the media fanned the controversy with criticism of the Russian government for offering only 'defective' children to foreigners.

Diplomats say they know of no cases involving transactions of cash for kids. The Russian paper Komsomolskaya Pravda recently reported foreign adoption agencies charging up to US \$20,000.

But consular officers say agency fees are justifiable charges for medical tests, legal fees and transport costs for agents who identify and match adoptable children. Parents often spend up to US\$5,000 more in travel costs when they

pick up the children. There are other measures aimed at controlling adoptions: they must be arranged by foreign agencies — not through individuals, as in Romania — and must be coordinated by the Moscow Adoption Centre that was set up by the Ministry of Education last September.

Adoptive families are required to work with agencies that have representatives to identify adoptable children, help negotiate with local officials, interpret and prepare translations.

Also, adoptions must be approved by the adopting country's immigration agency, and the child must pass immigra-

tion health requirements. On the Russian side approvals are needed from the local orphanage director all the way through the Foreign Ministry.

A French consular official said some corruption had been evident last year "but things are getting better organised now".

Until the new system began, French families adopted children of Russian emigrants to France. The official said money did exchange hands in some cases, but no one disclosed amounts. "I like the new system," he said. "It will be more difficult but better".

But the centre has also been hit for asking for "assistance or compensation" and slowing the foreign adoption process. "I understand they face difficult situations but aid and adoptions must remain completely separate," a French diplomat said.

Lubov Selyavina, director of the Moscow Adoption Centre, admitted receiving gifts such as a fax machine and a com-

puter from foreign adoptive families, but stressed they were tokens of appreciation and not the result of solicitation.

"We work very hard here and very poor," she said. "Our salaries are less than 600 rubles, and we don't have modern equipment." She said all cash donations are passed on to orphanages to help meet the children's needs.

The centre, funded solely by the government, now has data based on 200 children and prospective parents here and abroad.

Selyavina said most of the children identified as adoptable do not meet the requirements for foreign adoption. The ones who do, she said, are "not severely ill," with deformities ranging from cleft palates to missing limbs.

The adoptive parents say such defects are minor, and bear no stigma in the West as they do in Russia. And as one parent said: "We have the wherewithal to help this child, whereas if a Russian could or would adopt her, they could afford to help her."

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.

Need for English

Sir, With the help of other Australian surgeons and Bengali colleagues we are establishing a training programme in Dhaka in our surgical speciality.

A serious complication to teaching is the poor auditory English comprehension apparent both in staff and students. While a question can be put, sometimes with difficulty, very little of the reply is understood. This problem would be accentuated if foreign teachers had more accentual variation than our own.

The lack of English communicative skills in the tertiary campus is exacerbated by the geographic isolation of Bangladesh and not helped by having one TV station predominantly in Bengali; by contrast Calcutta has 'BBC Asia' station

which additionally gives English language lessons.

Some thirty years ago English was officially designated as the international language for science, medicine and dentistry etc. In the past ten years spoken English has become universal in all teaching exchanges. Indeed the beautiful Bengali language should be cherished and given every priority in respect to preservation and development, however it should have little privilege in the educational arena especially at tertiary level.

I would suggest that at a tertiary level an English teaching medium be mandatory; that is in lecture theatres, tutorials and even in private conversation while on campus. Some staff are the worst offenders and appear happy to perpetuate lack of change for

an easier life style. Private English classes should be considered where required but most gain is achieved by continual use.

To ignore this changing world pattern is to downgrade Bangladesh and the Bengali people — probably the very thing the staunch 'nationalist' would not want. Dr Barry Fitzpatrick, Principal Coordinator Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Training Programme in Dhaka.

Postal service

Sir, I would like to extend my profound thanks to the Bangladesh Post Office for responding to my letter containing some questions and suggestions pertaining to our postal service which was published in your column recently. Perhaps if all the government departments could respond to our letters in the manner the Postal Department did, we would have the opportunity to solve many of the problems prevailing in our various service sectors.

Meanwhile, the Area Postal Inspector and other postal employees who came to my residence, talked about various

limitations of the postal service. For instance, the number of postal employees, postmen in particular, is not proportionate to the population and the number of the increasing localities. Moreover, the provision of 'reserved postmen' was being withdrawn a few years back. A single postman has to cover a large area and when he becomes sick none is there to perform duty in his place. When a postman goes on leave, the authority deposes some inexperienced postal employee to perform the former's duties. In this system, irregularities in the mail delivery often arise.

About the delayed delivery of telephone bills, they said that the T&T despatches all the bills in a lot (say fifty thousand) at a time and only a few days before the due date of payment (normally 7th of each month). And it becomes impossible on the part of the postal authority to deliver all the bills in due time. One would not find any seal of the posting post office on the envelope of the telephone bill but there is always a seal of the delivering post office. As a result, the subscribers often blame

the delivering post office for late delivery of the bill. It is said that the T&T authority sends the bill to RMS. Perhaps, the T&T could despatch their ready bills in small lot (say one thousand) every day after 15th of each month.

Due to the shortage of postmen, the postman on duty has to work for even twelve hours a day. But there is no provision of drawing over-time. There are the physical problems of the postal service. There are no adequate number of franking machines, weighing machines, etc in the post offices. In some cases, the condition of the post-office building is too dilapidated. For instance, the building of the Mohammadpur Housing Estate Post Office needs immediate renovation.

We sincerely hope that the relevant authority will take appropriate measures to redress the difficulties of our postal service and thereby increase its credibility and effectiveness.

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

Violence in the USA

Sir, Power corrupts. Since the USA has apparently upgraded herself from a 'super power' to the 'supreme power' status following the collapse of the former USSR, it appears that the American train has gone off the track. The Middle East Peace Conference is not making any headway. White House is pleading for worldwide destruction of nuclear weapons but very recently the United States has conducted her second underground nuclear test of 1992.

The violence that broke out from Los Angeles and spread across USA is nothing but the result of the double standard policy of some American leaders.

People all over the world look towards White House for equality, peace, freedom and justice. We would request the present and the future leadership of the USA to kindly practise what they preach for the world.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203.