

Housing Policy for Village

About three and a half crore people, more than one-fourth of the country's total population, have no roof on their heads and 86 per cent of the houses villagers live in are of very poor quality and unhealthy. And of the total dwelling houses in the country 86.20 per cent are in villages. Just how dismal the housing situation is can be imagined by these figures alone worked out by a survey, many of the findings of which have been carried by a Bangla daily. All the findings, without exception, paint a gloomy picture of the state of future housing as well — unless some radical steps to reverse the process is taken. The increasing trend of rural migration to cities indicates that the whole country will be put to the severest of tests on the question of providing its people with the minimum decent housing condition.

Housing, though a fundamental human right, has not received the attention it should have from the government policy-makers and national planners. Years on end village people have been erecting houses with weak frames made of easily perishable materials. In the face of hostile nature, those are most vulnerable. When employment — gainful or other — is scarce and made further worse by the absence of a housing policy, the problem has accumulated to the point of bringing about a national catastrophe soon. Interrelated as employment, housing and living standard are, they have to be considered together for a solution to the problem.

The argument against a permanent housing policy, put forward so far, is that the housing is an unproductive sector. Apparently it is so. But a closer look into the problem is sure to give a different picture in that the colossal wastage suffered every year due to the use of low-standard materials for housing goes unaccounted. A durable shelter is not just a necessary condition for a reasonably healthy living but also provides the people with a mooring of life. That is essential for stopping the undesirable mass migration to cities. On the one hand, it makes the villages barren and, on the other, gives rise to slums and shanty towns in cities. Currently, only 7.6 per cent of the country's total land area is being used for housing. Compared to the size of the population, this is ridiculously low.

All this is an indication of an unbalanced growth of society, more so considering the preference for palatial housing in cities. The grim reality is that polarisation in society is taking place much faster than expected with the prospect of a social chaos of unprecedented order. To avoid this, the policy-makers should give serious thought to increasing the economic activity in villages at a tremendous pace — preferably in the area of small-scale agro based industries. Without strengthening the rural economy, the possibility of bringing to an end the exodus of village people is almost nil. Time is, however, fast running out for the planners who should already perceive in the problem a nightmarish vision. The key question is to raise the living standard of the people. Housing along with health, education and economy must undergo a change for the better for realisation of that objective. Since all the ingredients for housing, including land, are scarce in the country, a discreet use of them is most desirable. So, a housing policy aimed to help build stronger and better houses in villages should be in order.

National Heirlooms

A Danish national and a Bangladeshi are now being detained on charge of trying to smuggle out of the country antique articles worth about a crore Taka. We do not know how the valuation was done but we hope this was done by expert estimation. As the articles in question were not lorry-full heaps but pieces easily countable on the fingers, the century-old specimen of the fabulous Bengal craft must be of such real value as we rarely come by in the normal course of our life. We cannot help marvelling over the fact that till only a century back Bengal used to produce such things of beauty and value. Surrounded by crass tastelessness in everything — and absence of any touch of mastery in anything — it is very difficult to take in that fact.

And, contrarily, it is very easy to know for certain that what the Dane has been said to be up to exposes but the tip of an iceberg — a submerged mound of thievery involving who knows how many billions of Taka worth of national heirlooms. And this has been going on quite strongly for a very long time — one can set the beginning to Sultan Mahmud's 17 expeditions of plunder a thousand years back or to Nadir Shah's carrying away of the Takht-Taus or Peacock Throne some six years later, satisfying one's taste. But those royal loots can hardly compete in magnitude and mindlessness with what started happening after Clive of Plassey. Europe had then only just begun to wake up to the value of eastern antiquities which process got a great fillip through the birth of Egyptology, thanks to the Napoleonic Egyptian expedition. Attraction for subcontinental antiquities grew by leaps and bound, similarly, after Indological studies by William Jones, Horace Hayman Wilson and Scherebatskoi put the value of subcontinental achievements in culture and civilisation, arts and sciences almost at par with that of Egypt and Assyria-Babylonia. Plundering of objects having high historical and artistic value have been continuing ever since. For the first hundred years of this there was no stopping it even legally. Now that there is law against taking away by any means such national treasures — it cannot be said that the flow abroad has in anyway been effectively inhibited.

We have two main tasks in the matter. The first in evidently to plug the drain not only through stringent preventive measures but also through vigorous campaigns to discover all such objects still at large in the society and put them all in their appropriate places — and keep an unswerving vigil on whatever comes out of the earth. The second task at hand is equally important, if not more. Every nation, big or small, is taking back its antique treasures from the troves of the imperialistic plunderers. Let Bangladesh exert herself forcefully enough to get back her national heirlooms from the markets and museums abroad.

THE parliament session, beginning today, Wednesday, brings to my mind the words Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan, has used following the army's induction in the troubled Sind. She has said that the battle of Sind is the battle of Pakistan, warning her countrymen that "there were moments in the history of nations when events start moving in the direction of disaster."

I believe that the battle of parliament is the battle of India. Political parties in our country too face the moment when their conduct — and action — can initiate a chain of events that may further emasculate the institution, which is already effete. Parliament has lost its credibility, not so much because of problems tormenting the country as because of disdain in dealing with them. Even when the issues are debated, the effort is to evade them, to score a point or to embarrass the opponent, not to appreciate their gravity. This has, indeed, damaged its image and effectiveness.

It was probably naive to imagine that the forces political parties had set into motion would have no impact on parliament. But one never thought that politics would be so trivialised. Parliament fails to rise to the occasion because national interests are subordinated to personal and party gains. It is fast losing its relevance in the context of problems facing the nation; its stature and sanctity is far less than before. Even if the institution stays, it may cease to matter if it continues to function the way it does now.

Watching the Lok Sabha sessions from the press gallery for the last 35 years and seeing the deterioration in the calibre and contribution of political parties and their leaders has

Indian Parliament Opens Today in a Mood of Inertia

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been an unhappy experience. Probably parliament had to reflect one day the loss of norms and values which has diminished the nation. But finding the forum being reduced to another arena of politics, intrigue and manipulation has been painful. The entire scene has changed for the worse.

The reason why the current session is crucial is the people's exasperation, which is reaching a culminating point. Disappointed over its non-performance, they increasingly feel that parliament is not the answer to their troubles. They are not one with the growing militancy, offering violent and desperate remedies. Nor have they yet abandoned the hope for betterment through democratic means. But what goes on the two Houses does not enthuse them either.

I can now predict the way the proceedings in the Lok Sabha will go. The ruling Congress party will be up in arms when it 'catches' the opposition on the wrong foot. It will be vice-versa when the Congress is in the dock. The Janata Dal and the Communists may say they will have no truck with the Bharatiya Janata Party. But all of them will be on the same side if they get an opportunity to cut the government to size.

Therefore, I do not understand the logic of the argu-

ment by some Janata Dal MPs in opposing the name of G G Swell for presidency. Should their party denounce him because the BJP has supported his candidature? Does he cease to be secular after the BJP backing? By the same logic, Mania Banerjee, minister of state for sports, should be abandoned because the BJP has supported the Congress (I) in its demand for a prove by

been doing, if it can divide the opponents. But it cannot command the respect, which it should in a parliamentary system of government.

When Indira Gandhi lost her majority after the split in the Congress in 1969, the communists stood by her because they, by and large, supported her policies. Even then she went to the polls in two years' time. It is difficult to imagine that the communists will sustain the government when the crunch comes because they have declared to fight tooth and nail against its economic policy, the government's showpiece.

The confidence in parliament will be in proportion to its ability to tackle the issues raised in the House. That the opposition may try to embarrass the government is nothing surprising in a democratic set-up. But if the treasury benches take umbrage and retaliate, as they did during the last session, parliament may go down still further in the eyes of people.

Unfortunately, the role of Chief Election Commissioner,

T N Seshan has still reduced the common ground between the government and the opposition. This time he has messed up even indirect elections to the Rajya Sabha from Bihar, which is ruled by the Janata Dal. The Congress is backing him instead of making him quit, despite a motion of impeachment pending against him. Already the polls are being questioned because of the money and muscle power used. For the Central Election Commission to act in a partisan manner can reduce the exercise to a farce.

Seshan's role is bound to create uproarious scenes in parliament. But then there are other problems which are also messy. One of them is the 'scam', the Rs 8,000-crore bungling over the shares and government securities. The opposition looks like implicating some ministers. Both Home Minister S B Chavan and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh have said that no minister was involved. Their statement is surprising because the various inquiry agencies, including the CBI, have yet to complete their investigations. The exonerated will only heighten the opposition's suspicion and discourage the inquiry agencies from naming the ministers even when found guilty. There has also been hesita-

tion in conducting inquiries against certain foreign banks. The allegation is that some ministers, former ministers and top government officers, have their children or close relations working there. This may or may not be true but the government has yet to locate nearly Rs 3,000 crore, which is parked somewhere. The money, which has gone abroad, and what has been set off from Harshad Mehta, the key broker in the scandal, and others, does not add up to the amount lost is the scam.

Such situations can probably be avoided if there is a committee system, as is prevalent in America. Parliament, divided into specialised committees, will be able to hold in-depth discussions and also examine the various bills as well as problems more closely. Regular sessions are so rushed that there is no time for any serious study. Meetings of parliament consultative committees are like mini sessions, which are to no avail.

An interesting proposal was discussed in the Constituent Assembly to provide expert knowledge to parliament for consultation. A 'consultative council', purely advisory in character, was sought to be established, drawing members from the organisations of special interests. Maybe, the proposal should be revived.

What ultimately will, however, matter is not a committee or consultative body but the quality of men and women sitting in the two Houses. They are the ones who can retrieve parliament from the morass of inaction and sterile thinking in which it has got stuck. This again depends on those who control political parties. Can they rise above petty considerations? To quote Benazir Bhutto once again: "History does not forgive insincere and incompetent leadership."

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

The Central Bureau of Investigation into the attack on her in Calcutta.

When there is a contest, it has to be fought and the two sides have to muster the maximum support. This is what the Congress is doing. The opposition should realise that the Congress will always play one party against another and sit back to enjoy the fight among them as it has been doing in the past.

The ruling party is smug because it has managed the game of numbers, even though it does not enjoy a majority in the Lok Sabha. A minority government can manoeuvre to stay in power, as the Narasimha Rao government has

imagined that the communists will sustain the government when the crunch comes because they have declared to fight tooth and nail against its economic policy, the government's showpiece.

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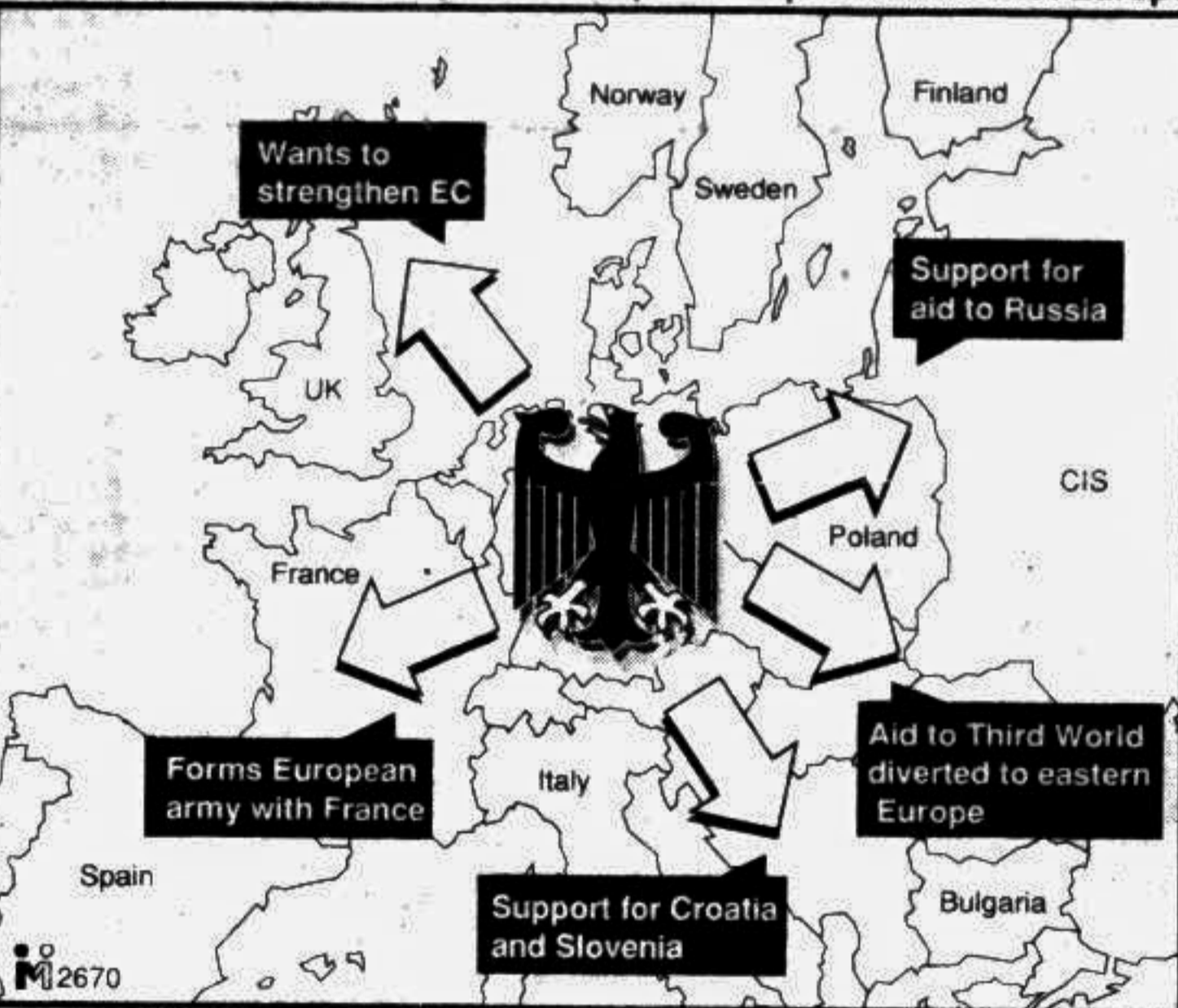
Economic Giant Flexes its Political Muscle

Manik Mehta writes from Bonn

Germany is asserting its foreign policy in the post-Cold War Europe. It was a driving force behind EC recognition of Croatia and Slovenia, and Bonn also played the senior partner in the creation of a Franco-German army. But Germany's preoccupation with Europe has led to cuts in its aid to the developing world.

German foreign policy

Unification makes Germany dominant power in post-communist Europe



Maastricht last December. There is also talk that Germany should be given a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council.

However, Genscher and his successor Klaus Kinkel have been resisting such calls, so as to allay the apprehensions of those who fear an all-too-powerful Germany.

Genscher, foreign minister for 18 years — the longest term in any democratic country — has been a driving force

behind the recent high-profile diplomacy.

The EC stand on the Yugoslavian conflict, for instance, spearheaded by Germany, did create apprehensions in the minds of some allies; Washington felt bypassed by Genscher's initiative in pushing through the hasty EC recognition of Slovenia and Croatia.

"German foreign policy makers face a dilemma ... they are damned if they take action on an issue ... they are damned

if they don't," says a German political scientist.

If the handling of the Yugoslavian civil war generated criticism of Germany, Bonn's passive support to the West against Iraq during the Gulf crisis angered many Western politicians for what was described as "inaction."

However, the term "Genscherism," considered an irritant in Washington, is now accepted in the US as a synonym for European integration and a European security identity.

This acceptance has come about because my perceptions proved to be correct. Consequently, we have today a much stronger concurrence in German-American policies than had been the case in the past," Genscher said in a recent interview.

"NATO will remain an important security instrument in the backdrop of new internal changes. The creation of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, as an offer to the states of central and eastern Europe and the former USSR, is the best testimony for NATO's peaceful and stabilising function."

Germany wants to create an effective system for safeguarding peace — under the framework to the West European Union (WEU), NATO, and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCF). This would constitute

the main security objective of foreign policy.

Maastricht underlined the necessity of a European defence identity and confirmed the WEU as joint instrument of the future European defence policy.

The Germans taken this further by creating a joint Franco-German army as the core of the "Euro-Corps" which would, later, be open to all the WEU states. Germany has emphasised, apparently to allay North American fears, that WEU and NATO would complement each other.

Genscher believes that security should not be defined strictly in narrow military terms. "It also includes social, economic and ecological stability. The problems of the former Soviet Union, for instance, cannot be solved by military means," he says.

"This must be linked with the process of democratisation with economic development and the creation of social justice. The security concept must also include the protection of natural resources and safety of nuclear power stations. I see a big danger in limiting the security concept to military aspects," Genscher warned.

Critics of foreign policy have charged that Bonn has been ignoring the developing world. They say that Germany's policies towards the Third World, which feels "neglected"

as a result of Germany's preoccupation with unification and eastern Europe, have increasingly shown less concern.

Aid to developing countries has been cut. India, which has been the largest recipient, will only receive about \$220 million this year — a comedown from more than \$250 million in 1991.

African countries, hard hit by declining revenues from exports, rising import prices, natural disasters and political uncertainties have been vocal about Bonn's indifference.

German President Richard von Weizsaecker has warned against ignoring the Third World. "While we may be burdened by our preoccupation with the East, it would be morally and politically wrong to ignore the poorer countries of the world," he said recently.

But foreign policy is conditioned by domestic pressures and it is expedient for politicians to cut development assistance rather than attract the wrath of the electorate, which tends to oppose paying any extra bills.

Genscher's critics say he was hardly interested in Third World affairs. Kinkel appears to be different. Addressing a recent gathering of African ambassadors in Bonn, he assured them of German interest in Third World affairs. But, Kinkel said, Germany would espouse issues such as respecting human rights, environmental protection, and the democratisation of political systems in the developing world. — GEMINI NEWS

MANIK MEHTA, born in India, has lived in Germany for more than 20 years. He writes regularly on German and international affairs.

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.

Why should I plant a tree?

Sir In this, the 30th letter since January 1991, under the above heading, please permit me to quote excerpts from an article entitled "Can Eucalyptus be appropriate for poor farmers?" which appeared in APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY, Vol. 19, No. 1, June 1992.

"Two factors have enabled these tribals (tree farmers) to avoid dependence on intermediaries and to sell directly to buyers. One is that buyers come directly to their villages. The other is that no permits are required in Gujarat for the felling or transit of Eucalyptus.

"In Indian States where permits are required, farmers (especially poor ones) usually have difficulty in obtaining them, because of bureaucratic hassles and corruption. They are obliged, therefore, to sell to middlemen who can work the system and who charge extortionate amounts for these

specialized services, offering producers far less than the market price for their trees. Thus the controls advocated by the environmentalist lobby and Govt. officials to prevent excessive or premature felling of trees are self-defeating. They encourage the exploitation of poor (or law abiding) farmers who want to sell their trees, and discourage the planting of further trees."

The article details the impact of small tree farms growing Eucalyptus in an arid area of Gujarat, India. The Forest Act 1927, which has paralysed all tree planting in Bangladesh in the private sector was very much the same in India, but which has already been drastically modified or totally discarded there in the light of present day realities and requirements. Same is in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan where prizes totalling millions of rupees are awarded to private foresters with startling results.

I am extremely grateful to

Mr M Anwarul Afzal for his kind sentiments of rewarding me for my efforts, as expressed in one of his recent letters to the editor. The sight of my thousands of trees in an otherwise barren landscape, is a reward enough, but if the authorities pay any heed to his request then leaving me alone to manage my plantation myself, and to let me harvest my trees without hindrance, would be more than any reward they could think of. Of course, I have to start filling up more 'forms' to claim my 'reward', then please forget it.

Today is the 1st July and the usual Annual Tree Planting Week will kick off with strenuous activity. The macro, the mini and the micro will line up with saplings to be video-taped getting their hands into honest soil, while statistics will be spouted by flunkeys of saplings planted, millions spent and acres covered. Within months, all will be forgotten and perhaps, 5% of the plants will have survived. Those planted in the files will survive 100%.

Extensive coverage on TV exhorts all to plant trees and amongst the benefits detailed, is this gem which only pours salt into my wounds. "A tree is the most profitable 'fixed deposit' and can give you a substantial income in due course." Indeed it is and it can, but

having planted nearly 100,000 trees/plants on 30 degraded acres over the last 12 years with my own money, I now find, after applying nearly two years ago, to harvest just a small mature portion, that all this time, I have been working for the insensitive, the unreasonable, the inefficient and the corrupt and their legions of touts. I can tell you what I will not be doing 1-7 July — I will not be planting one single blessed tree — and I have 100,000 reasons for not doing so.

S Sikander Ahmed Chittagong

Money for work

Sir, Government has taken a laudable step in abolishing the rationing system. That has saved the exchequer crores of Taka which is now available for development. Another field where corruption and pilferage is allegedly rampant is food for works programme — out of the food allotted for the purpose hardly 20% is utilised; rest goes down the drain due to corruption allegedly, of dealing officials and or Union Council chairman and members.

Hence the best course would be to sell the food available for the purpose by public auction and works programme in rural areas may be under-

taken with the sale proceeds by inviting tenders. This is likely to give much better result and will prevent lot of 'system loss'.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantonment.

VAT and indentors

Sir, With effect from July 1, 1992 VAT has been imposed on the earnings of the indentors. As advised by the NBR the indentors had to be registered with the respective VAT Circles. Unfortunately the VAT Circles could not as yet give any guidelines for the assessment.

The Hon'ble Finance Minister at the time of announcement of the Annual Budget for the year 1991-92 under which the VAT was introduced mentioned the system as modern and scientific one. Moreover, it was also pointed out that under the system double taxation could be avoided. In fact the manufacturing sector has been benefited with the introduction of VAT system as any amount of VAT paid on raw materials are deducted from the amount of VAT assessed on the finished product. But absence of any clear-cut guidelines from NBR or respective VAT Circles, the indentors are in confusion regarding the assessment of VAT on their in-

come. Their income is sought to be taxed twice in contradiction to the Hon'ble Finance Minister's statement.

The indentors derive their income from commissions paid by the foreign suppliers for their services in obtaining the orders for them. This amount is included in the value of goods sold and payment for which are made mostly through letters of credit. And at the time of clearance of consignments from the ports/airports/customs warehouses VAT at the rate of 15% are assessed and realised on the basis of respective invoice values, which is inclusive of the amount of commission payable to the indentors. It is felt that the contradiction is quite apparent.

Will the Chairman, NBR and Ministry of Finance be kind enough to advise their comments and issue clear-cut guidance in the matter. We are sure this will be helpful to all concerned to clear confusions. Absence of such clear-cut guidelines may benefit only some corrupt officials to whom ignorant people are good prey and can be squeezed as and when necessary. This does not work out beneficial to the nation.

N Islam Mottifheal Commercial Area, Dhaka