

SALUTATION TO ASIAN GREENS

The Fight to Save Nature for Our Survival

by Noazesh Ahmed

ASIA'S green crusaders are working in the field, lobbying and fighting against all odds to save the nature and environment. In a short time they are all well organized — singularly or in groups. Behind their success stories, lies their sincerity, dedication and hard work. 'I thought I could better use my writing ability for the cause of environment,' says Yasmin Arzuza, a Filipino journalist. So Yasmin left her lucrative job at an international news agency in Manila and roamed in the rugged Sulu Sea Islands. Her tragic stories on the destruction of the Tubbataha coral reef in the Sulu Sea led to closing down a number of commercial sea-weed farms within the protected Marine park. This was her first active work on environment. Then she went further and had set up Earth Station, a public education organization made up of writers, photographers and artists. This national outfit is presently working very effectively on the matters of environment in Philippines.

Gurmit Singh of Malaysia, an engineer by training, is busy in growing vegetables with his wife at their organic farm. Even with Malaysian high standard of living, he does not possess a car, fridge, or any air-cooling unit which are the source of CFC, a dangerous green house gas. Because Gurmit is very active in his crusade for protecting the environment, his campaign have pushed loggers from Endau-Rompin rainforests, stopped construction of two major dams and blocked a radioactive waste dump in Perak State. On World Environment Day 1978, Singh cycled 20 km through Kuala Lumpur's peak-hour traffic wearing a gas mask. At the end of the journey, he removed his mask and showed onlookers a black film of dust and grit — air pollution. Singh has set up two groups, one for research and training, the centre for Environmental Technology and Development (CETDEM) and the other for campaigning, writing, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia. The CETDEM has also set up a technology monitoring unit. Gurmit lives on small honorarium and his success lies on his basic honesty. Gurmit means what he says; he practices what he preaches. He is instrumental in setting up the Green Forum network for Asia and Pacific. It includes organizations in Sri Lanka, China, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Australia. 'Simple is beautiful, we should practice what we say. Then it works,' Gurmit told me when I met him at the Madi Irrigation project in the northern Malaysia. He was then leading a rally, 'Save our beautiful land.' I also saw him at his modest office in Kuala Lumpur. He said, 'What our common people want to see is an example.'

From Japan to India

Gurmit Singh is not alone in his crusade. Across Asia there is a growing brand of dedicated environmental activists. South Korean boycotted the products of the firms respon-

sible for chemical pollution in rivers, Hongkong has established a Green University recently and the construction of hydroelectric dam has become a sensitive issue in Thailand and Indonesia. All are the work of Asian greens in groups.

The green movement in Asia did not start all on a sudden. Many dedicated greens even started the movement while they were in college. Say in the case of Kuruda Yoichi of Japan. In his teens he observed the encroachment of developers in Tokyo suburbs and destruction of farm, trees and life-full stream. After graduating from Tokyo University, Kuruda single-handedly awakened Japan to the damage wrought by its hungers for tropical timber. He generated Japanese awareness against their big corporations responsible for the destruction of tropical forest in Papua New Guinea, Sarwak, Indonesia and Philippines. He has chosen a life long on personal sacrifices. His salary is meager, his life

style is simple — he carries his own chopstick so he would not need disposable wooden ones at restaurant.

A grass-root level activist, Kuruda's crusade to protect the Asian rain forest has a significant implication. Even the Japanese government has promised recently to increase the investment substantially to protect Asian environment. Hongkong's activist lawyer Linda Siddall says, 'It is survival, it is not a matter of looking at a few pretty birds and butterflies.'

The most celebrated green crusader is India's Murlidhar Devidas Amte (popularly known as Baba Amte). Among his many achievements, he has set up a lepers colony called Anadavan or forest of joy. There are about 2000 lepers and a large number of birds and animals on a 180 hectare of land. He started nursing lepers back in early fifties.

A Brahmin by birth, Amte loves nature and simple living. He abandoned a flourishing law business to serve the public. Baba Amte stood against the multimillion dollar Naramada Valley project for fearing the damage of environment on a huge area and uprooting a several hundred thousands poor tribal people.

Amte with tireless work generated public awareness and organized huge rallies outside parliament House in New Delhi against all large dam projects. Recently he threatened the government to lead a mass 'jal samadhi'. I have not come here on some suicidal impulse. But to cure this mental leprosy I am prepared to drown in the river. Baba traveled all over India with his disabled body and generated a solid public support against the construction of titanic Naramada and Godavari projects. The government and the major financier World Bank directed the Project Authority to improve the design for a better environment management and

adequate arrangement for resettlement of displaced tribals. Recently World Bank president Lewis Preston acknowledged the need for a 'fully responsible' new approach and promised remedial action. Ashish Kothari, a leading Naramada activist, said on the new World Bank Report: 'This is a revolutionary report that vindicates our stand.'

In Asia, public awareness on environment has increased exponentially over the last decade, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, India and Philippines. The crusaders have different approach — sometime they report with the government people, discuss with corporate heads and supply information to media. Usually armed with facts and organized to fight, they protest, boycott and sue. Beside the tactic, one thing is common to all successful green crusaders that is honesty integrity and simple living. In other words, they practice what they preach.

Bangladesh Case

In view of the Asian perspective, green movement in Bangladesh is still rudimentary and budding slowly. It was unfortunate that citizen groups could not make much headway after the great natural holocaust of 1991. Few women groups made an appeal to the citizen to save the cattle during the Korbani which occurred immediately after the catastrophe and donate them to the farmers of the affected areas where about 90 per cent of the animal was destroyed. No appeal was uttered by the government and even the National Parliament was silent. It is an irony that the government with a huge entourage went to the Earth Summit in Brazil this month to sign a treaty on biodiversity! Whereas in the country several lacs healthy cattle were sacrificed in a day. Per capita Bovine population in Bangladesh is very low among Asian countries. Moreover, our cattle

population is indigenous and diverse in genetic make-up. Should we not save the worthy gene pool of our scarce Bovine population?

Beside promoting country-wide massive tree plantation programme, the green activists in the country can take an opportunity to work in the following threshold action programme:

1. Generating public awareness about the value of trees and their immense destruction in the country and whenever an occasion arise where trees are chopped in the name of development, human chains in the style of Chipco movement in India, should be formed to protect the endangered trees

2. A movement should be initiated to convert the old Airport and the Dhaka Central Jail (if it is moved elsewhere) into greenery. Instead of turning these two places into concrete jungles, lush green canopy could revitalize the already blackened lungs of Dhaka metropolis.

It is heartening to see that the green movement is crystallizing in various forms in Bangladesh during recent months particularly in the event of Earth Summit. However, the green crusaders of the country should learn from Asian experience. They must be committed and should themselves practice the basic principles of saving the environment. Above all, the green crusaders should remember Gurmit Singh's warning: 'Double standard and hypocrisy is our main enemy.'

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Save nature for a better future.

Leftist Insurgency Runs Deep in Bihar

Prakash Chandra writes from New Delhi

Some 65,000 people, among the poorest in Bihar State, now belong to a communist 'liberated zone'

THE insurgency is so deep in Bihar State that communists claim police and district officials now obey their orders.

'That's the way we can co-exist,' says a senior representative of the under-ground Marxist Communist Centre (MCC). 'We can run the government and take care of the people. The police can take their salaries. We'll not harm them if they do not try to attack us.'

In some parts of Bihar, in north India, it is clear the MCC has usurped the powers of the government. Indeed, some 65,000 people, among the poorest in Bihar's Pratapur region, now live within a communist 'liberated zone.'

The communist claim their government has been very effective, offering all kinds of assistance to the poor who are given not only cash but also help in growing better crops. Each village, in fact, has its own underground judiciary and army.

Senior police officials acknowledge the existence of the 'liberated zone.' The communists claim Bihar is the only state in India where their influence is pervasive in villages.

'We have no option but to function at the will of the MCC,' says a junior police official. 'For the district administration is too weak to protect us.'

'We are totally helpless,' a senior district officer says. And a police superintendent admits that some of his constables are on the payroll of the MCC.

The communists run village committees which meet once a week, run an administrative machine and control the local red army. These village committees also form an informal court and settle local disputes. According to the local press, these committees collected in 1991 some 500,000 rupees (US\$17,860) in taxes from the Pratapur region alone.

Anyone betraying the trust of the MCC is threatened with execution. The village committees also keep a close watch over police movements, often receiving advance warning of police raids.

Senior officials in Delhi concede that the local police in Bihar is not well equipped to face the highly motivated insurgents who have emerged as local Robin Hoods who help desperately poor peasants.

In contrast, the MCC has access to generous funding. The apex body of this Maoist group is based in Calcutta and they provide the arms and funding whenever necessary.

There is the Naxalite movement of Andhra Pradesh State which is sympathetic to the MCC cause. This extremist communist group, described as the People's War Group, believes in the armed struggle to forward the communist cause. It has stirred insurgency in at least three districts of Andhra Pradesh, in South India.

The communists in Bihar have reportedly acquired the art of making bombs from the Naxalites. This insurgent group is also active in the northeastern states of Assam, Manipur and Mizoram and has been

known to cultivate friendship with hardcore communists in Burma as well.

Making the problem complicated in Bihar is the extreme poverty. A labourer is paid less than a rupee, for example, for making 100 plates made of leaves. This labourer earns, at most, 3 rupees (US\$0.11) a day.

Bihar is bounded north by Nepal, east by West Bengal State, south by Orissa, southwest by Madhya Pradesh and west by Uttar Pradesh. A principal producer of iron ore, Bihar is very rich in minerals with about 40 per cent of national production. Its industries include iron and steel, locomotives, oil refinery, machine tools, fertilisers electrical engineering, sugar and paper-milling, silk, explosives and cement.

But the social picture is altogether different. For example, the literacy rate is only 26.2 per cent. There are less than 300 hospitals serving the state's more than 70 million people.

And Bihar, which has often been described as an area of darkness, has a chaotic situation with no government in Patna, the capital, able to control private armies fighting each other to grab lands for their patrons.

Clashes between private armies, run by various com-

munities and the communists as well, are well known and have been going on for years. The private armies have their own uniforms. They are paid and trained by leaders of local castes which justify their actions by saying the Patna government cannot help them protect their lands and families.

The upper castes have a private army called the Sunlight Sena which is targeting its guns at the MCC. In 1991, the Sunlight Sena massacred 10 supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in Malbaria village. Police claimed it was in retaliation for the killing of two Sunlight Sena members.

But reliable reports say the landlords are just wreaking vengeance on labourers who support the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). The labourers were able to

force landlords to pay them fair wages. Humiliated landlords, in turn, vowed to teach a lesson to the labourers and unleashed the Sunlight Sena.

The MCC's red army has issued death warrants to 22 Sunlight Sena members. It has also asked 17 landlords of Pratapur to surrender their land for distribution among the landless.

But the landlords are in no mood to give and would rather die fighting. Which only sets the stage for another battle.

— Depthnews Asia.

Cuba Should Reform from within

As many as 11 left-wing political parties of the country have formed a committee to lend support — both moral and material — to Cuba. Eversince the Soviet Union disintegrated and the newly emerged Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) parted ways, Cuba has been in deep trouble because of the total stoppage of the generous aid flow from that source. The continued US hostility has made the matter worse for Cuba.

Against such a backdrop, it is only natural that people soft towards socialist movement should now more strongly feel for a small country that withstood so much challenges thrown before it by the most powerful country of the world. It is, therefore, quite understandable that the left parties of this country, notwithstanding the geographical distance and their small means, should come forward in support of Cuba which three decades ago became a symbol of hope for the poor developing countries. Also understandable is the fact that the US for its negative policy towards Havana should come under attack.

On both these counts, the leftists have been quite vociferous and are now organising to match their eloquence with practical deeds. Moral support indeed has a token value and at times serves quite handsomely. But in a crisis of Cuba's order, how far it will be of help remains very much a question. About the ability to muster enough material support in a country where millions languish in deep poverty, the less said the better.

The truth, to our mind, is that the answer to Cuba's problems lies within Cuba. Delegation of extended power to Cuba's president Fidel Castro and the refusal to allow multi-party politics in that country are not going to help the cause. Sugar and tobacco, the country's economic mainstay, have been facing the most hostile global market. Even though it has opted for considerable light-belt, Cuba's chance for an economic revival — with virtually no other natural resources to fall back upon — is remote. In a changing global economic system, Cuba hardly stands any prospect of coping even with the less developed countries in trades and industrial ventures.

This points inexorably to the fact that Cuba must change from within. Political and economic reforms should be its main agenda. It should, first of all, allow multi-party politics i.e. politics of dissent. Where records of human rights are not the world's best, it is time people had enjoyed full freedom of speech and opinion. Even hardline communist countries like Albania and Mongolia, not to speak of the East European countries, have found virtues in economic and political reforms. Cuba may have no choice but to open up to the world. But before doing this, it should change internally as much as is required for opening its door to the world.

To the Editor...

Black-gold of Cox's Bazar

Sir, No progress has been made as yet with regard to exploitation and commercial utilisation of the valuable mineral deposits found in Cox's Bazar two to three decades ago.

The valuable minerals, 'black-gold', found in some coastal areas of Bangladesh contain monazite, zirconium, ilmenite and rutile etc. Monazite and zirconium are radioactive. Ilmenite is used in paper, steel and paint industry.

Zircon is used in nuclear fuel, paper industry, high temperature refractories, ceramics and the likes. Rutile is used in manufacturing colour TV sets, gas plants and also as reactor fuels.

I have written a number of letters in the 'Letters to the Editor' column, and several newspapers and periodicals came out with their editorial comments on the subject but

unfortunately our Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources has always been maintaining silence on the matter.

The Prime Minister had formed a committee on the 'black-gold' of Cox's Bazar vide Prime Minister's Secretariat letter No. PRAMS/Secretary/91/740 dated 11-8-1991, but what is the progress of work and what where is the report of the committee?

Our Prime Minister has repeatedly asserted that her government is an accountable one and her government would always welcome constructive and helpful suggestion. We would request the government to kindly clarify its stand on the valuable minerals 'black-gold' of Cox's Bazar. We would also like to suggest the government to handover the utilisation of the minerals to the private sector if, for one reason or other, the government cannot use the minerals.

It may be mentioned here that in a couple of years the valuable minerals found in Cox's Bazar may be lost for ever

which of course, would be a great loss for a poor country like ours.

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Toxic metals

Sir, A prominent Dhaka weekly in its June 26 issue reported that about three thousand metric tons of toxic heavy metals, mixed into fertilizer, have arrived Chittagong port recently from the United States. The company which made the shipment is stated to have gone bankrupt.

We draw the attention of the relevant authorities to the above mentioned news and would strongly urge them to take immediate action so that the environmentally hazardous heavy metals might not be used in Bangladesh. It may be indicated here that one such shipment to Australia has been impounded.

Zahidul Haque
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