

## New Options for Tokyo

Winning more than half the seats in the Upper House, Japan's governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is in the process of regaining its majority of 252-member House whose control it had lost three years ago. If the trend continues, the LDP should gain clear hold over both the chambers of the Diet in three years from now when the other half of the Upper House would go for fresh election. The ruling party already holds a clear majority in the more powerful Lower House which will have its next polls in 18 months from now.

The situation must be gratifying for Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa whose task of gaining support from smaller parties in the Upper House has been made easier to push through the bill authorising the country to send its troops to UN-organised peace keeping missions. Being the worst loser in the last week's election, Socialists, the strongest critic of the bill, are hardly in a position to put up any major challenge against this controversial move.

However, it is hardly a totally satisfactory situation for the ruling party. The voter turnout, at about 47 per cent, was all-time low in the country's post-war history. It is said that while in this period of economic downturn, the electorate did not want to shake up the status quo, it still wanted to give a signal of dissatisfaction of the establishment by staying away from polling stations. The electorate was certainly being polite, but it did not want to hide its signals.

Another negative signal for the ruling party came in the form of voters' support for the Japan New Party, formed only a few months ago, by a member of LDP who defected from his parent organization. The New Party did not win any seats, but it made a strong showing in certain areas on a platform that criticised the bloated bureaucracy, corruption and financial scandals which have rocked the country. The chances of the New Party coming to power in the foreseeable future are virtually nil. However, up to a point, it may come to represent part of the conscience of the nation—at least the views of the minority—on important issues.

Being in a comfortable position in the Diet does not necessarily mean being in a comfortable world for Prime Minister Miyazawa. By US standard, the economic downturn is hardly alarming, with the economy still growing at the rate of three per cent, and unemployment and inflation seem to be well under control. However, the country faces awkward political questions. The country's relationship with Russia must be normalised through the signing of a peace treaty. However, there is no clear indication that President Boris Yeltsin who is due to visit Japan in September is all ready to return the disputed islands to his hosts. In fact, there are strong hints from the Russian parliament that on this issue, Moscow would like to take a tough line. Again, how difficult, if not tough, will be China on seeking an apology from the Japanese Emperor, who visits Beijing later this year, for his country's atrocities committed during the World War II? All these are tricky questions which defy easy answers. The scenario is part of coming to terms with the post-cold war era and facing up to questions which are uniquely Japan's own concern. There is little doubt that Tokyo is sincere in finding the right solutions to these problems—to the satisfaction of all concerned. One should, therefore, wish every success to Prime Minister Miyazawa in his efforts.

## Safe Highways a Must

In the early hours of Wednesday travellers to and from Dhaka were stuck up on the Dhamrai patch of the Dhaka-Aricha highway. Something was seriously wrong. Barricading the road, a group of fifty to sixty dacoits were cleaning up six passenger buses and six trucks of all valuables that could be carried easily. The traffic pile up was long but barring those twelve remaining vehicles were lucky in that the dacoits thought that they had already done a good day's job and it was time to melt away sparing the rest in the queue. Wise people. Police arrived after they had gone into safe hiding with Taka four lakh worth of loot. The beauty of the operation was—although the miscreants were armed to teeth, no one was reported to have been hurt by them. Credit perhaps should also go to the passengers and the crew of the vehicles, who very evidently, did not try to offer any resistance.

This is far from a novel crime. Although the frequency of such night bus raids do not warrant calling it a routine affair, reports of such operations do come in every month of the year ever since a radical increase in the volume of the national passenger and goods traffic made it imperative to go for the night services. Such services are standard in all the countries of the world. Bangladesh only caught up with the rest of the world mainly in the eighties. May be for the unfamiliarity of the night bus and mostly for the nagging regularity of dacoity on these, people are not yet taking very easily to night road journey thus unnecessarily putting pressure on the roads during the day time. Goods traffic does not have such choice and bulk of national movement of goods by road must be carried during night. These considerations make it a must that the highways be made perfectly proof against attacks such as the Dhamrai one.

Many things contributed to the America's growing big and affluent in the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the more important of those was the securing of the highways against robbery—not only through provision of very harsh punishment but also through constant patrolling of the highways. Bangladesh is, in all respects, specially economic, in now a critical state. She must make it—take-off that is—in the next two decades or say good bye to the comity of civilized nations. One of the first priorities on the way to making it will be safe highways.

There has been an unprecedented leap in the crime rate of the nation. The highway situation must be taken quite differently from that and dealt with as such. Much more is at stake here than the authorities seem to appreciate.

# The Dominance of the Ascribed Status

THE dominance of the ascribed status is rampant all over South Asia, in fact further to the east as well. Particular families dominated the politics and Governments of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka for decades at a stretch, as such as three generations. In Nepal, the Kotrala family was in hibernation for quite sometime. Now they have staged a comeback with a loud bang. How long will this trend continue? Are the sons and daughters of the handful of families are waiting in the wings to play the lead roles in the political drama of the sub-continent? It is not unlikely since clamours are already so loud and clear for Priyanka.

Back home neither of the two topmost political leaders of the country—the Head of Government and the leader of the Opposition—had any proven political track record before they took up leadership roles in their respective parties. More because of their ascribed status, they are where they are today.

The dominance of the ascribed status is a feudal malaise, a hangover from the days gone-by which we carefully nurture and cherish, not only in politics but in other spheres of life as well. As a matter of fact, being the sons and daughters of so and so who was a Khan Bahadur or Nawab, title-holders of the British Raj, adds so much of prestige and

ascribed status that the individual concerned may be good for nothing with no achievement of his own—yet he will be reckoned as somebody. Such individual will be in a position to secure access to the highest quarters of the Government and move at ease through the corridors of power.

It is utterly surprising, but true that the descendants of former mighty landlords even after decades of absence from the country could come back, regain citizenship and win parliamentary elections. The days of the Zamindars are over for quite sometime now; yet our feudal bias remains strong and sturdy. We seem to be fascinated by the mirage of the blue blood.

This craving for status and prestige from our forefathers can assume ludicrous heights. I remember one of the Ministers introducing his own staff officer to the Prime Minister in 1972 first stated that whose son he was and then introduced him as the Deputy Secretary of his Ministry. The unimportant past seems to be more relevant than the operative present. Someone of very humble origin, simply because of merit and hard work can and do become successful professional. But he would tend to lack social recognition because he cannot say that he is the son of so and so who was an extremely hardworking farmer,

suffered and provided for his education and therefore he is a successful professional today. He will therefore tend to ignore rest of his family; his children would become unaware of their nearest kins; while the grand-children would acquire the ascribed status in full vigour of belonging to so and so family of a successful lawyer or doctor.

Bengali Muslims were one of the most downtrodden people of the sub-continent. Before the advent of Islam, our

which bestowed added prestige like that enjoyed by the Muslims from the west coming and settling down in Bengal. Also, Bengali Muslim families sought their brides from other provinces of British India in order to elevate their social status.

The prevalence of the ascribed status syndrome had resulted in the breeding of a deep-seated inferiority complex in our minds. People of Uttar Pradesh in India, the Punjab and the Pathans are

the true identity of the Bengali Muslims. The pride in our language and culture ultimately led to the emergence of Bangladesh. The true middle class is now gradually emerging who should proudly announce: 'Yes, my forefather was an ordinary farmer, and I struggled through, like Abraham Lincoln, from the mud huts to reach upto the luxury home that I now occupy in one of the best suburbs of the country.'

It is the spirit of hard work and merit that must prevail. Unfortunately the enduring dominance of the ascribed status even after two decades of independence is a serious constraint to our emancipation into the present day world of economic progress through industrialisation. Not the ascribed status but the achieved status that must rule our existence in our independent nationhood. We simply should not care about what we were in the past. We should only be concerned with what we can or should strive to achieve in the future as individuals, as a group, community or the nation.

The dominance of the ascribed status begins at the top. If the desired change must come, it should originate there. We have established parliamentary democracy where the elective process has the built-in capacity to develop the new leadership of tomorrow.

But the process is being thwarted through the lack of a similar elective process within the two major political parties of the country. Like plants, leadership must grow and in that growth process, democratic election systems in every institutional sphere—parliament, political parties, local governments, co-operatives—are the primary means of sustenance.

The other side is the abundance of opportunities for self-development and reward for hard work. Stories of Bangladeshis, landing as penniless immigrants in UK and USA and then through sustained efforts becoming millionaires are not figments of imagination but amazing truth. Why others like them who could not make it to the States or UK should not enjoy similar opportunities back home?

But for this to happen, the dominance of the ascribed status must be deliberately curtailed through definite reform measures, education and democracy in every sphere of life. An elected sovereign Parliament does not automatically establish democracy. It is only the beginning of the journey on the path to progressive development when new leaders without any past family background should emerge to lead the nation, local institutions and most important, the proving corporate sector of the national economy.

## WINDOW ON ASIA

### Shahed Latif

forefathers were exploited and terribly suffered at the hands of the upper caste landlords. That is way Islam spread so rapidly in our part of the world. The suffering humanity craved for equality and justice. Therefore they embraced the religion where all men are absolutely equal before God.

The spirit of Islam was, however, rapidly eroded and severely tarnished—some Muslims became more "equal" than the others. The preachers followed by the carpet baggers coming from west of Bangladesh became the new Brahmins of Muslim Bengal, so much so that the educated Muslims even gave up the language and used to talk in Urdu

taller and of fairer complexion than us. In the past, such physical attributes used to bestow a privileged status regardless of the quality otherwise of those human beings. Many Bengali Muslims even now are proud to announce that their family origin are from Punjab or Peshawar and therefore they tend to establish certain unjustifiable superiority. If for any reason such family origin could be stretched further to the west—right upto the Middle-East, then the individual stands a even chance or success!

NEARLY two decades after communist North Vietnam defeated the United States, capitalism seems to have won the Vietnam War after all.

Its economy in shambles, Vietnam's communist rulers are adopting Western style free-market principles with a vengeance, but not all the effects are positive.

In June, Vietnamese newspapers announced the government had taken another giant leap towards freeing the economy by launching a plan to privatise loss-making state enterprises and establish a stock market to bring in more foreign investment.

The Hanoi newspaper, Vietnam News, reported that Vice Premier Phan Van Khai had already approved the decision to implement the plan which would accelerate free market reforms.

But all the wheeling and dealing has tainted the once staid and pristine socialist northern part of the country. And it has re-emerged with vigour in the once-capitalist south.

The warring north and south were reunited after communist North Vietnam

## Vietnam

# Did Capitalism Win the War?

Communist North Vietnam may have won the Vietnam War almost 20 years ago but capitalism—the economic system it defeated—has come back with a vengeance. Yuli Ismartono of IPS reports from Bangkok.

defeated the US-supported forces of South Vietnam in 1975.

Heavily influenced by Moscow, Vietnam remained true to its socialist ideology until changes taking place in the Soviet Union in the late 1980's prompted Hanoi to dismantle its command economy.

In 1987, it started allowing privately-owned businesses and foreign investments in the country to give its economy a kick-start.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union a year ago, Vietnam lost a vital source of aid and trade. Since then Hanoi has redoubled its efforts to integrate into the regional economy.

Despite a crippling US-led economic embargo, there has been a steady stream of Western and Asian companies taking advantage of the government's attractive incentives and cheap labour. "It's a golden

opportunity to jump in," says Ray Eaton, chairman of the Indochina Markets Committee of the American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand.

"Vietnam is the latest frontier," Various producers of consumer and industrial goods, bankers and oil companies exploring offshore deposits have set up shop. And so have the sure sign of an economic upswing—representatives of multinational advertising firms, which are all set to market and sell their clients' array of goodies.

Most businesses are located in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in the south, where infrastructure and experienced managerial personnel from past capitalist days are still available.

Some of the locals have caught on quickly and are already making extra money catering to the needs of new arrivals.

Ho Chi City is now teeming with local consultants who can translate complex regulations governing business in Vietnam or provide advice on the proper companies to do joint-ventures with.

Civil servants and Communist Party cadres earning monthly salaries of about US \$50 have made overnight for-

tunes by renting their homes to foreigners for up to US \$6,000 a month.

"There has been an explosion in needs by foreign companies, creating a new class of nouveau riche," a Vietnamese journalist said.

But onerous bureaucratic red tape, unclear laws and an acute shortage of necessities required by foreign investors has enabled corruption of flourish alongside the business boom.

There are 'fixers' who for a fee will guide you to the right office to get your bill of lading countersigned, your proposals approved or a rare telephone line installed in your office.

The Hanoi Moi newspaper recently reported the arrest of the Ho Chi City customs director along with 10 other police officers for involvement in the smuggling of US \$1.6 million worth of gold and foreign cur-

rency, said to be Vietnam's biggest smuggling case.

There is a cabinet circular warning government officials against accepting gifts from foreign delegations. Said the memo: "The exchange of costly gifts at working sessions should be considered a negative act that should be eliminated in daily social life."

Foreign businessmen, however, insist that gift-giving remains an essential part of getting things done in Vietnam.

Lately, Hanoi has been more disturbed by the rise in pornography and prostitution in Vietnam that it believes is a result of the re-entry of capitalism into the country.

Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, addressing a conference on culture in Hanoi recently cautioned that with more foreign investment, trade and tourism coming in, Vietnam must preserve its traditions. "If not," he said, "the economic benefits will not make up for the cultural and social losses."

There are already fears that political dissent may break out soon because of the government's inability to control the negative effects of its economic reforms.

IT is said that money is the key that opens doors. Not so in Lebanon, I am told.

The Lebanese have to rely on *wausta* even for the most basic of services, like enrolling in a school, opening a business or even securing a simple permit to repair a house.

For without *wausta*, life would be extremely difficult for the Lebanese, especially those in Beirut and other big cities.

Simply put, *wausta* means "go-between," "arranger" or "influence." It means power and influence to get approval quickly and without question.

The ordinary citizen will spend weeks, sometimes months, merely to secure a bank loan, or enter a university. But a *wausta* helps facilitate matters.

A young woman named Rose, for example, had applied for enrolment at a school to complete her secondary edu-

## Lebanon: the Wausta Connection

by Arjuna

when it comes to education. "Education in this country is very competitive. Nearly every parent wants his child to be a teacher, doctor or even a lawyer. But the number of admittance to university is so limited. So, if you don't have a *wausta*, everything is an uphill battle to secure positive results," Jack said.

Then there is Jean who is in his final year at law school and has yet to go to a law class. "I know the right people," he boasts. He meant the *wausta* who fixed it that he didn't have to attend classes and still be a lawyer.

With the prolonged civil strife and its attendant instability and chaos, dependence on *wausta* has taken a new di-

mension. Nearly everyone seems to have contacts in various government departments and people have to deal with them first to attain their needs.

Fadi is a taxi-driver. But he drives around in a vehicle with forged number plates and fake registration papers. In the motor registry department, there are many people who would get you a fake driver's licence or a spurious taxi certificate for a fee. Their *wausta* services are offered unashamedly in the open right at the very noses of security agents.

It goes without saying that the *wausta* requires the payment of a bribe or—to use a more acceptable term—a gift.

in their lives if these influence peddlers don't exist.

According to officials I have talked to, one of the most corrupt organisations in the *wausta* system is the militia. This unit of government officers *wausta* services to their fighters very liberally to make them happy, or they won't fight. Consequently, the militia get more access to everything from jobs to services, something that spawned mass discrimination, inequality and corruption in all sectors of Lebanese society.

One member of the militia who did not have a home of his own contrived with his *wausta* to have one. And he happened to cast his covetous eye on his uncle's house.

Needless to say, he got it, never mind if his kin would have murdered him had the latter been connected with a more powerful *wausta*.

—Depthnews Asia.

## 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.

### BADC

Sir, A prominent Dhaka weekly in its recent feature on Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) stated that many countries, even after attaining self-sufficiency in food production, have continued to subsidise agriculture sector. Subsidy in agri-sector is reported to be 100% in Malaysia, 30% in each of India, Nepal and Indonesia. As far as my knowledge goes, the highly developed countries even provide subsidy in agri-sector for the sake of quality agro-products.

Meanwhile, it is a matter of great regret that the government is planning to cease the operation of BADC as a government controlled sales and service organization in the country's agriculture sector. The BADC, since its inception, has been contributing effectively in the development of agriculture by supplying seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, irrigation equipments etc. to the

farmers at subsidized price.

It is gathered that the donor agencies are reluctant to continue subsidies in our agri-sector. But we have to convince them that without subsidy, agriculture of this poor country will experience more loss and drawbacks under the present economic condition of the farming community.

We sincerely hope that all concerned will consider the case of BADC with due attention and sympathy.

M Zahidul Haque  
Assistant Professor,  
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### Tickets for bus fare

Sir, In the past, the bus conductors used to give tickets of denominations equivalent to fare paid, to the passengers wherever they went. Those days are gone. These days the conductors do not issue tickets. They raise bus fare day by

day without any forceful protest from the travelling people... yet they do not issue tickets.

Now that the bus conductors do not issue tickets, there is no way of assessing the revenue collected, the taxable income of the bus owners.

People allege that the bus owners demand a certain amount of money from the bus conductors and the bus drivers for a day's ride. Hence, the conductors hurry to push inside as many passengers as can be accommodable inside that mobile cage like the chickens in a coop. Thus they earn money without any account.

It is further alleged that the police extort money from the bus conductors and the bus drivers for overloading and other reasons. The transport workers thus "sanctify" their earned money by appeasing the police. Reportedly, this illicit transactions give the transport workers an "extra power" to exert on the travelling people. It is indeed a grave allegation!

From the above scenario, it is clear that: 1) the bus drivers and the conductors can charge any fare from the passengers; 2) there is no record of fares charged; 3) income from a trip is not appropriately assessable;

4) overloading is a common feature; 5) travellers suffer on two counts—financially and physically; and also 6) corruption gets a free ride.

Therefore, we would request the concerned authorities to re-introduce tickets for fares for travelling by buses and enforce it strictly to banish the above discrepancies.

Hubert Francis Sarkar  
Singola, Dhaka

### No room for complacency

Sir, I feel inclined to quote: "Good, Better, Best Never Let it Rest; Till your Good is Better And your Better—Best"

I read the poem quite decades past, and suddenly remembered when the other day, I heard our Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia stating that in population activities our dear Bangladesh has acquired the third position among six countries, making a spectacular progress in the matter. Begum Zia very rightly said that there was no room for complacency and the efforts should be made to run on with a view to achieving further success so that the prime objective of keeping the population growth under effective

control, which is so vitally needed for the very existence of our state, is realised.

In fact 'work and hard work' is the only thing needed for achieving success in the nation building activities and there is no short cut alternative available to that end.

Strong determination for carrying on with one's job and establishing the process of accountability is very much a necessity in every sphere of work and life and it is earnestly hoped that the present democratic government shall make every endeavour to ensure its applicability.

M Ibne Gias  
Massey, Dhaka.

### Social change

Sir, Any change should be initiated from micro-level. By the term 'micro-level', I mean the smallest possible 'actor' within a broader system. If society is a broader system requiring change, then the process of change should be started from the individual level.

There have been several hierarchies underlying the broader system called society: family, clan, community, lead-

ing to society. If any change is initiated from the micro-level and if the process of change succeeds, it last long.

For instance, Islam as a tool of social transformation started change from this micro-level.

Individuals had been indoctrinated to Islam and once anybody was indoctrinated, he/she was ready to sacrifice even his/her life for the cause of Islam. Thus, within the existing social structure, a new social force generated which broadened in space and dimension leading to transition of the then Arabian social system and establishing a new one where people lived in comparative peace.

Relating Bangladesh's present social system to this idea, I would like to emphasize upon the need of human resources development. We have long been mistaking to mobilize our meagre resources in the areas deserving priority. Unless the decision-makers take a bold step only to develop the people from micro-level, disregarding the corrosive sectors, the long-cherished goal of national development is bound to remain a far cry.

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