

A Sign of Sincerity

One of our pressing problems crying long for a true priority treatment is literacy or the overwhelming lack of it. We have been observing the performances in this matter of the successive governments ever since the British Raj's exit from the subcontinent in 1947. Before the British left literacy stood stuck at below 10 per cent. In the 45 years between then and now we have been able to raise the rate to 20 per cent at least — the claims beyond that being suspect in varying degrees. What a performance! If we can blame most of it to brown imperialism of the Pakistani brand, who held us truly free Bengalees from doing something effectively in the matter in the last 21 years of Bangladesh's sovereignty? Our performance in the post-independence period can be objectively described as amounting to adding a few crores of illiterate citizens to the society as against some lakhs of neo-literates. If we have been able to go to around 25 per cent in 45 years by what year of our lord shall we reach a hundred percent? More important than that, by what time we shall stop contributing to the number of illiterates?

An honest answer to these would call for two things. Sincerity and seriousness and, two, the wisdom and effectiveness of the modes by which illiteracy will be attacked. We know that when the successive governments cry hoarse over the issue, they mean well if they mean anything at all. But that hasn't proved enough to produce results. Sincerity and seriousness have no substitute and the successive governments, barring possibly the attempts in the first half-year or so after independence, have been found wanting in both.

As for the modes through which the literacy barrier has been sought to be breached, we have always urged upon the authorities that walking a hundred years' distance in, say, eight — the number of years by which this government too is saying they would make the nation universally literate — would require more radical, innovative and non-formal endeavours than the formal and conventional modes so far relied upon. On Saturday, Education Minister Jamiruddin Sircar revealed that the government had started on a 50-crore Taka 'Coordinated non-formal education programme' in 69 thanas of the country 'for spreading education'. We could appreciate in it the vindication of our championing the non-formal approach to the achievement of quick literacy on a massive scale and we felt happy and grateful. Instead the news, published on Sunday in The Daily Star, prompts many a doubt in our minds.

The 69 thanas would get an average of 72.46 lakh Taka for the programme. What would the money be spent on and in what a time-frame? How much of this would go to construction and remuneration and travelling costs and such other non-educational but nevertheless very formal heads? Is it at all possible for the epitome of formal organisation, such as a government in essence is, to go for non-formal and sustained efforts in such an all-involving thing as education?

How much is the government going to involve local talent and eagerness in the matter? If government is going to these thanas with good words supported by good caches of money — mostly to be spent on officials and party activists — the whole thing is foredoomed.

How many thanas we have? Close to 500. When are we going to cover all the thanas with this programme? Is it going to be a 10-year plan? The hunch is, government being after all only a government, the whole thing has been fabricated by very 'formal' people for the purpose of 'very formally' executing the non-formal thing, without involving the local social and cultural leadership.

One thing we welcome, however. There is an unmistakable sign in this that the government is groping its way towards an effective answer. It is a sign of sincerity and seriousness.

Women and Development

Next to Bangladesh, the Philippines may well prove that its women, in low-income groups, are dependable customers for a rural credit institution. They are proving to be as bankable as clients of the Grameen Bank, a success story of this country.

After some initial doubts expressed at a recent seminar about providing credit on easy terms to rural women in the Philippines, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has provided a loan of \$30 million to a NGO-Microcredit Project, an interest-free credit repayable over 35 years, with an annual service charge of only one per cent. It is designed to benefit nearly 60,000 low-income entrepreneurs whose projects may require modest capital, rely on low technology and local raw material. What's more, the project may raise the level of household incomes of participants by about 20 to 30 per cent and provide jobs for 130,000 people.

While one must congratulate ADB for supporting this extremely worthwhile project and hope that this would not be the last one of its kind to get the support of the Manila-based organisation, it is important to appreciate that the real success in the reduction of poverty level in a country like the Philippines or Bangladesh must involve women, preferably rural women in low-income groups, and that the job cannot be left to NGOs alone. The whole process of bringing in women in development, not as a marginal force but as a major player, must be an essential part of the development planning. As we have learnt from the experience of Grameen Bank and similar projects set up in other developing countries, lending money to women in carefully planned projects is no longer a losing game, like development itself. It is in this realisation that lies hope for a Third World country, whether it is Bangladesh or the Philippines.

Divergences Overshadow Politics in South India

I could see it coming, the Hindu-Muslim clash in Kerala. Some days before the incident, which took a toll of four, I was in Calicut and Trivandrum. Of all the persons, the Indian Muslim League leaders told me how the Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS), the two-year-old organisation, was trying to catch the imagination of Muslim youths by posing as the real answer to the Rashtriya Swyam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindu militancy in the state.

E M S Namboodiripad who, after retirement from the general secretaryship of the CPI (M), conducts classes in Trivandrum on communism is more categorical. He says that the Muslim youth has already gone towards the ISS. This may well be partially true. But the target of the ISS is not the RSS, it is the Muslim League, which has all the Muslim majority seats in the state assembly and parliament. The RSS-supported Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did not poll even five per cent of the votes in the state in the 1991 general elections.

Raising the bogey of Hindu communalism in Kerala may be calling the wolf. But it helps the ISS. It can describe itself as the spokesman of Muslims at a time when the Muslim League is taking in terms of secularism. The three-day seminar, which the Muslim League organised in Calicut recently to foster the principles of secularism among Muslim youths, was a strong indictment of politics of separatism. But the ISS feels that pure communal appeal has ears in a state where the topmost man in the ruling Congress party is 'soft' towards the BJP and where the Muslim League has forsaken its fundamental rhetoric.

Raising the bogey of Hindu communalism in Kerala helps ISS to describe itself as the spokesman of Muslim at a time when Muslim League is talking in terms of secularism. Politics in Tamil Nadu is not communalised; it is personalised and even defied. Allegations of corruption do not, however, daunt Jayalalitha from running an authoritarian administration. Politics in Andhra Pradesh has a different complexion. It is the caste which matters, not religions.

However, E K Nayanar, the former CPI (M) chief minister, is not taken in by this argument. He believes that the ISS and the Muslim League are 'two sides of the same coin.' He makes fun of those who even passively commend the League's efforts to join the mainstream. 'The ISS is the RSS of Muslims and the Muslim League is the BJP,' he says emphatically.

If this is true, it must be one of the best kept secrets. On the ground, both are fighting against each other hard and relentlessly. This is not true of the RSS and the BJP. They are inseparable. The BJP accepts the RSS as its mentor. The Muslim League has no understanding whatsoever with the ISS, much less the guru-chela relationship.

The BJP is worse off in Tamil Nadu, the state to which I crossed over. It polled merely 1.4 per cent of votes in the last election. Since 1952, the party has been able to send only one member to the state assembly. The maximum number of the Lok Sabha seats the BJP has contested so far in the state is eight out of 39. The Muslim organisations have done not better. The ISS convened some time back a meeting on the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The response was so poor that the ISS has not dared to hold any other meeting outside Kerala.

Politics in Tamil Nadu is not communalised; it is personalised and even defied. Chief Minister Jayalalitha herself believes that she is the

Joan O. Arc, and she creates the impression of fighting enemies, mostly imaginary to prove her indispensability. The stamp of hero-worship, which has come down from the days of M O Pamachandran, the late chief minister, has got so well embossed on the state that there is no demur.

What struck me in Madras was an array of Jayalalitha's life-size cut-outs at key places. Although she bashes the press all the time, her government runs full-page advertisements

ticks him off whenever he even hints at such an eventuality.

Moopanan's fear is that Karunanidhi's DMK which polled nearly 23 per cent of the vote in the last election, may provide an alternative. Strangely, Karunanidhi is so optimistic. He feels his image has been tarnished by 'unfounded charges'. Indeed, he still bears the scars of the allegations of the days when he was chief minister. Also his tacit support to the LTTE has

of-the-soil: T N Seshan, chief election commissioner; S Venkataraman, the Reserve Bank governor; S Rajagopalan, cabinet secretary; Geetha Krishnan, finance secretary; R Vasudevan, steel secretary; R Murari, president's secretary; N R Krishnan, industrial development secretary; and S Ramamurthy, chairman, board of direct taxes.

Till recently, India's prime position, that of presidentship, was also occupied by a Brahmin from Tamil Nadu, R Venkataraman. Jayalalitha showed personal interest in selecting a bungalow for him; the state finance minister was asked to vacate his house. Venkataraman's insistence on the government accommodation, when he has two houses in Madras, has distressed even his admirers. None questions his entitlement but his reminders to the nation to adhere to a value system had made many believe that he would occupy one of his own houses. Sarjeya Reddy went straight to Anantpur, his home town, after retirement. Rajendra Prasad, India's first president, moved from Rashtrapati Bhawan to the Sadaqat Ashram in Patna.

Politics in Andhra Pradesh, another southern state which I visited, has a different complexion. It is the caste which matters, not religion. The BJP polled 8.8 per cent of the vote in the last election, most of it in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad, where the communal riot in November-

December, 1990, helped the party. The Majlis-ul-Muslimin (MIM) is confined to Hyderabad; Elsewhere, it supports the Congress.

The state government, run by the Congress, has a poor record of administration. There is not a day, when one or the other allegation of corruption is not aired against the administration. And the files are said to be accumulating all the time at the chief minister's table. Infighting in the party has further damaged the government's image. Although Chenna Reddy, former chief minister, is the governor in distant Rajasthan, he continues to be active behind the scenes. Only a few days ago he held a meeting in Delhi with the dissidents, much to the embarrassment of Narasimha Rao.

N T Rama Rao, former chief minister, has not gained in proportion to what the Congress has lost because he still gives the impression of running his party, the Telugu Desam, as one-man show or one-family show. Yet, there is none to fill the vacuum created by the increasing unpopularity of the government. Its only asset is that the Congress government at the centre is headed by an Andhrate, Narasimha Rao.

I did not go to Karnataka when I came to know that Ramakrishna Hegde, former chief minister, was acting in a film. It speaks volumes about politics in the state. But it is the only place in the south where the BJP had some showing in the last election, securing 28.8 per cent of the vote. The party has come to emerge as an alternative to the Congress. This is contrary to the prevailing climate in the south.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

in newspapers to laud her achievements which, according to her rival, M Karunanidhi, include 'acquiring government lands at a low price.' Allegations of corruption do not, however, daunt her from running an authoritarian administration. And she does not suppress some of her deepest prejudices and instincts.

The Congress party is her 'B' team. Thanks to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's dependence on her party's support in parliament, the Congress is not taking roots in the state. Party chief G K Moopanan does not like it and left to him, he would go it alone to step in when Jayalalitha is rejected by the people. But Narasimha Rao

neither been forgiven nor forgotten.

As regards the LTTE, it once evoked as much sympathy in Tamil Nadu as Bangladesh liberation movement did in West Bengal in 1971. The LTTE is now treated as a pariah. Its waning influence is still visible in the coastal area between Point Calimere and Rameshwaram but the Tamil opinion on the whole is against it. A caste leader, Mohandas, has been protesting against the ban on the LTTE. But his purpose is to get prominence and to gather his flock of backwards.

Once anti-Brahmin to the core, the state now takes pride in flaunting that top positions in the central government are held by its eight Brahmin sons-

Enter Patten — Governor Minus Helmet and Plumes

Frances Kelly writes from Hong Kong

In the British tradition of decolonisation, followed in such places as Rhodesia, the new — and probably last — governor of Hong Kong is not a career diplomat but a politician. Former Tory party chairman Chris Patten (takes over on July 9) faces a daunting task — preparing for the hand-over of the colony to China in 1997. The transfer is unlikely to be smooth. Gemini News Service reports on the challenges Patten faces.



GOVERNOR PATTEN Ticky days ahead

plagued with uncertainty. In spite of its gleaming office towers and designer shops, a vibrant economy and a stock exchange constantly setting new records, Hong Kong is troubled by a rising crime rate, soaring inflation, an unrelenting brain drain and a fraying and worrying relationship with China.

Although Patten led the British Conservative Party to

victory in the April general election, he lost his own parliamentary seat (Bath). Major, seeking to put in a politician rather than a career diplomat, chose Patten as the last governor.

In accepting the post Patten pledged his determination 'to stand up for the interests of the people of Hong Kong.' But Beijing is already taking steps to try to keep Patten in his place. Just days before he arrived, China warned him not to make any major political changes in the territory.

A signed commentary issued by the semi-official Hong Kong China News Agency warned Patten against appointing liberal legislators, who are demanding increased democracy in Hong Kong, to his Executive Council.

China has branded the liberals, under acerbic lawyer and human rights activist Martin Lee, leader of the United Democrats of Hong Kong, as 'subversives.'

Lee is demanding an increase in the number of directly elected seats in the Legislative Council. His party won 16 of 18 directly elected seats last October in Hong

Kong's first ever free elections.

Under the Basic Law, China's post-1997 constitution for Hong Kong, only 20 of the council's 60 seats will be open to direct election by 1995. The United Democrats want a majority of directly elected members on the council by the time Hong Kong returns to Chinese rule.

Calls for greater democracy in Hong Kong have aggravated already tense relations between Britain and China. The latest row flared in mid-June when Beijing insisted it should be consulted on appointments to Hong Kong's Executive Council.

One of the early decisions facing Patten will be whether to appoint Martin Lee to the Executive Council — a move the Chinese would hardly favour.

As Patten prepared to take up his new post, China told him the appointment of such liberal legislators to the Executive Council 'clearly is not conducive to the territory's stability.' The Hong Kong China News Agency editorial said: 'Chris Patten must not take this lightly when he becomes the Governor of Hong Kong.'

'Patten's way ahead will not

be a difficult one if he can cooperate with China sincerely and frankly in the interests of both Beijing and London.'

In swift response, British called in China's Ambassador in London, Ma Yuzhen, to warn him that China must stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs.

An editorial in the Hong Kong Standard called the controversy a 'return to megaphone diplomacy,' adding: 'There are clear indications that China wants to test the mettle of our new Governor, Chris Patten, by trying to impale him on the horns of a political dilemma.'

Since the Opium Wars of the last century, China has accepted the British occupation of Hong Kong only reluctantly. As 1997 draws nearer, it sometimes seems bent on humiliating the British by influencing the decisions being made here.

That is bound to turn Patten's job into a series of delicate balancing acts. He has to negotiate Hong Kong's transfer to China while fending off Beijing's persistent attempts to interfere.

He also has to maintain the confidence of the people who

will stay in Hong Kong after 1997 and try to accommodate their growing demands for more say in how the colony is governed.

Patten must also win China's approval for the financing of Hong Kong's mammoth Chek Lap Kok airport project — a multi-billion dollar scheme that could become the world's largest construction project.

The plan has caused major diplomatic bickering between London and Beijing ever since it was announced by Patten's predecessor, Lord Wilson, as a confidence-boosting measure following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre when army tanks in Beijing crushed pro-democracy activists.

People here hope Patten's proven political skills will give the necessary impetus to creating a better climate. In the past, the governor's office has been filled with China experts like Wilson, who speaks fluent Mandarin.

Outspoken independent legislator and journalist Emily Lau has warned that Patten's political ambitions at home in Britain could influence his actions to the detriment of Hong Kong.

Lau said she did not expect Patten would bring much policy change for Hong Kong, adding: 'We should not have illusions. But we also have to put pressure on this politician and steer him in the right direction.'

FRANCES KELLY is a Canadian journalist based in Hong Kong.

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.

Brain drain

Sir, A developing country like ours needs talented manpower to run the statecraft efficiently. Efficient management is a prerequisite to economic development. But our talented boys who will make the show a success are not staying in the country. Being disappointed about their future, they are leaving for abroad for higher studies and subsequently staying over there to have a shiny future.

Very often we say our sons and daughters are future hope of the nation; they are to shoulder the future responsibilities of the country. It is also true that each of our boys/girls has some commitment to the nation where he/she is born. But despite all good intentions our brilliant boys/girls, seeing no ray of hope about their future, plan to leave their motherland. They are very much frustrated with the infinite killing of time to get a certificate of 2/3 years' course. Time is valuable. Boys/girls are not willing to kill their valuable time. Even after getting a degree, there is no surety to get

a job. So another few years will be wasted. Our life span is short. How long a student can wait to get a degree and job? So the good boys/girls are leaving for abroad.

Have we ever thought of the consequences? I would request all the conscious citizens of the country to apply their influence and employ efforts to keep our talented boys/girls in the country, to have their contribution in nation building activities.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury
Deputy General Manager
Sonali Bank, Head Office,
Dhaka

Private forestry

Sir, The major part of the BTV's Mukho-Mukhi (face-to-face) with the Hon'ble Minister for Environment (8-7-92) was the usual plethora of generalities. Only towards the end could Mr Glas Kamal Chowdhury steer the debate to brass tacks — the preservation, protection and expansion of our forests. By then it was too late and Mr Chowdhury's dis-

appointment was quite evident as he was bubbling over with pertinent questions.

Since the state of our forests no longer brooks the niceties of diplomatic discourse, may I please be permitted to put these down in black and white.

PRESERVATION AND PROTECTION: From 22% to less than 6% in 45 years is the sad and disgusting story of our forests. Yet even after decades and expenditure of millions of takas and dollars, the authorities and the DFIs have failed to perceive the simple truth in that old saying: 'Public property, unless efficiently and honestly managed, ends up as nobody's property.' Freedom for us has become a licence to loot without fear of consequences.

The Forest Department's 45-year monopolistic guardianship of our forests is the equivalent of allowing foxes to guard one's chickens. If 6% still remains, it simply means that there are men of integrity still around. But like our forests, they too are on the verge of extinction. It is generally alleged that most transfers are wangled to lucrative posts only against proportionate cash layouts. Thus during their tenure for a little while their only desire may well be to make good on their 'investment' with a healthy profit. Motivation, commitment, hard work etc are

stuffed into 'fairy tales' for periodical public consumption.

Over the years, the state of affairs has evolved a distinct breed of dealers, traders and merchants who must toe the line of face extinction. Then there is the ancillary horde of middlemen, touts, sawyers, labourers and carriage contractors. Between the three the cake is divided, some crumbs being thrown, allegedly, to Upazila and Thana Kamarkartas and the 'mastans', who, like maggots, are quickly attracted to the 'corpse' (our remaining forests). To keep the private foresters, if any, at bay, there are the endless rolls of red-tape and the innumerable laws, rules, regulations and procedures of the Forest Act 1927.

EXPANSION: In recent years, a regular ritual is enacted at about this time. But does anyone seriously believe that our problems will be solved by the planting of individual trees in one's backyard or even by the symbolic planting of dozens, hundreds or even thousands of trees by different groups or organisations? Who will subsequently care for them, nourish, protect and finally derive some benefit from them? This is never revealed or discussed. Recently some interesting and illuminating statistics have been revealed viz: 1) About 3,500,000 acres of degraded land exist in Bangladesh. 2) While 5,400,000 acres of govt forests

produce a growing stock of 1,620 million cft, just 670,000 acres of village forests not only manage 1,930 million cft, but contribute over 80% of the country's supply of timber and fuel-wood. Now, the Forest Act 1927 will be tightly applied so as to strangle this sector also. No one dares to question, that if the poor illiterate villager can achieve this level of productivity, what heights can well-managed Private Agroforestry Units scale if left alone without fusts? 3) The forest dept afforests (?) an average of 25,000 acres every year. The minister hoped, on Mukho Mukhi, that this will be increased to 250,000 acres in the next two years. Can we afford to wait for between 30 and 1000 years for the dubious solution to a life and death question at the hands of a department noted neither for its efficiency or virtuosity? 4) As a smoke-screen, some schemes have been undertaken, as proudly depicted on BTV's Matt-O-Manush in backward and tribal areas on a 'Care and Share' basis. The ignorant and the illiterate have been conned into a Social Forestry Scheme on the promise of a 40% share of the eventual proceeds after the trees, planted on forest lands, mature in 7-10 years. One wonders if there is a legal contract? Will the forest staff who will preside over the 60/40 share after 10 years be less 'rapacious'? Who will settle the innumerable disputes, desires

and needs in the meantime?

As the pioneer and perhaps, still the only private forester, if I cannot freely and legally harvest just a small portion of the thousands of trees I have planted since 1980, on my own land, by my own efforts and with my own money, due to the forest dept's obstructive, unnecessary, impractical, ridiculous regulations, what chance do these innocents have of ever seeing a plugged nickel after a decade?

When will our authorities and the DFIs wake up to the fact that to motivate mass participation for saving our forests, beating on just the environmental aspect with pious platitudes, sermons and seminars will never be successful, especially for those schemes where the forest dept is a party? But profitability is something everybody understands! It is already known that most trees are renewable, sustainable and immensely profitable, as indeed they are.

Given small plots of degraded lands, enabled to plant and to eventually harvest their trees without let and hindrance, I am sanguine that we will see a spontaneous rush to plant, protect and nourish millions of trees on our degraded lands, and that will make the California Gold Rush look like a school picnic.

S Sikander Ahmed
Paireen Farms, Chittagong.