

Waiting for the Doctor

A conference, held in the city Monday, has sought to inject some badly-needed energy into government efforts to breathe life into 40,000 industrial units identified as being 'sick'. Organised by the Inter-Association Sick Industries Rehabilitation Council (IASIRC), the conference blamed policies of past governments and non-cooperation of banks and other lending institutions as prime causes of these private sector ventures falling sick. Speakers claimed that 90 per cent of those ventures had fallen into non-profitability and debt for reasons 'beyond their control', and demanded that the government should delay no further in embarking on an action programme to revive these units. Although the government-sponsored Sick Industries Revival and Rehabilitation Cell (SIRRC) has put forward a number of recommendations which seem quite appropriate for the purpose by the IASIRC, the government has yet to respond favourably to them and it is doubtful if the government would implement all its recommendations, particularly those relating to import restrictions.

The need for an urgent solution to the sick industries' problem is a universally accepted one, and the government itself has taken a number of steps to deal with the problem including setting up of the SIRRC and an industrial commission. What the government is yet to do is take concrete actions which would affect sick industries directly. That seems to be the crux of the problem, as far as the owners of the sick units are concerned. However, to suggest that 'somebody else' was responsible for the failure of all these industries to succeed is perhaps stretching it a little too far. No doubt government policies, bureaucratic corruption, malpractices by banks etc had a lot to do with the poor business climate that existed in the recent past, but we would be foolish indeed if we discarded out of hand the possibility that some, if not many, of these units went sick because of managerial or entrepreneurial shortcomings. Some may not have even been bonafide ventures, while others may have been turned into sick units deliberately either to evade tax or furnish excuses for defaulting on loan repayments.

Having said that, the number of industries which went sick for 'reasons beyond their control' may well constitute an overwhelming majority of the 40,000 and the government has to identify these genuine sick units. Not only that, the government has to decide, through a thorough survey conducted by competent professional people, which of these sick industries actually have a sound market prospect, since many may have turned sick because the previous administration might have given them licences and loans for business without proper feasibility studies. It is these units, which have a genuine prospect for survival and flourishing, which ought to be targeted for rehabilitation. Any effort to bracket all the 40,000 together may turn out to be not only an expensive affair, it may also be self-defeating. The government survey into these units should conversely try to identify any malpractice that might have taken place in loan procurement, tax-payment, book-keeping etc. Far from rehabilitation, people found engaged in such practices — thereby deceiving the public — should be dealt with in accordance with the law in a straightforward manner.

The important thing, however, is that the issue has acquired a sense of urgency, and government actions, from surveys to implementing the recommendations of the SIRRC, should also reflect that urgency. At present, owners of sick units are going through a tough time, uncertain about the future of their investments. Government ministers are undoubtedly aware that so long as this widespread sickness persists, economic rejuvenation will remain a distant dream. The government has to take on the responsibility for reviving these units because, for one thing, its predecessor's policy was largely to blame for current state of affairs, and also because the private sector is not strong enough, as yet, to look after itself. It is in the interest of the government and its industrial policy that action ought to be taken in this field without much delay, and action has to be characterised by a positive and pragmatic approach.

Love's Labour Lasts

Truth shall prevail. Love shall triumph. These and similar other high-minded phrases seem to come from world's long gone by — and literally, reek of mothball. Not so with the high drama enacted at the High Court on Tuesday. Like the piece of musk distributed in tiny bits by a beaten and famished Humayun on the occasion of the birth of his son Akbar, the fragrance of the good tidings from the High Court has wafted to all Bangladesh — and in the matter of a day. Everyone, with his or her heart in the right place, is feeling proud of Ali Ahmed of Feni and has become a sharer in the love with which Batha Essa Hamad Al-Anazi, the Kuwaiti young woman turned a real-life heroine overnight, holds this blue-collared worker from Feni. She has come all the way from Kuwait, spurning the express negative instructions of her parents and elderly relations who have gone to High Court to restrain her, to be the spouse of a man she loves.

The fairy tale takes on a more unreal aspect when one learns that Batha comes from a family which is affluent even by Kuwaiti standards and that this epitome of love has on her own chosen to live in Ali Ahmed's village home making it — the multifarious inconveniences and general squalor included as a matter of course in the card — her very own home.

Now that the whole nation has rejoiced in the happy outcome at High Court — a very rare thing to happen — a squabble should be in order to pop up. Some of us would want to see in Ali Ahmed an extremely loveable hero who had during the Iraqi attack on Kuwait saved her and other female members of her family risking his own life. Why, if Batha herself is so engrossed in him he must be worth our best of admiration?

And there will be others who will see in Batha a greater lover of the two. While not detracting in any way Ali Ahmed's achievements, perhaps we can agree on Batha's doing a supreme act of courage, sacrifice, and resolution — all for love.

Text-book aphorisms do come to life some times — happily.

South Asian Economic Bloc: Will it Ever Materialise?

by Nilratan Halder

It takes a man of vision to see into the future. The vision in order is more so when the improbable is the subject of prediction. Kuldip Nayar is no visionary; nor is he an ordinary man. With no less than four decades of distinguished journalistic career behind him, specialising in domestic and international affairs, he is more competent than most to pass judgement on issues concerning the politics of the South Asian region. But when the veteran journalist, more known as a columnist with incisive insight, almost certainly predicts a grouping — more economic than otherwise — among the states of the region within next 20-25 years, not many people would be found to buy his idea, much less to share his conviction.

Now the question is, if what he envisions is completely outlandish. What is the basis of his inferences to reach such a conclusion? Economic compulsion, more than anything else, according to Kuldip, will be the deciding factor. Even a cursory look at the developments sweeping across the wide world at a very fast pace will most certainly point to the fact that there is enough pith in his argument. Economic necessity, not military interests, has brought the West European countries together to look forward to a one Europe. In a counter move, America has formed with Mexico and

Canada a North American trading zone — the world's largest until now. Diplomatic forays by Japan into ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries along with China and other nations of the region manifest the Japanese concern for its trading interests abroad. Add to this the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the abrupt departure of communism from the East European soil, there indeed emerges a set of new priorities far removed from the one before the end of the Cold War.

Political considerations apart, the geographical proximity offers a vast market, the potential of which need to be exploited through a collective decision by the members of the SAARC. The technology required for the means of production is there, the unity among the diversity of the peoples' socio-cultural settings should prove an advantage rather than the reverse.

In a more-than-ever-before competitive world, the groupings of nations, aimed to protect their collective but no less selfish interests, are the natural outcome. The free market economy certainly has this drawback of not being enough liberal when it comes to the question of unrestricted trade the world over. On no account were it desirable to drag the row over the conflicting interests in the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) talks. But the unpleasant has taken place only because the rich nations, particularly America and Europe, have not found a meeting point of their interests. Nations, therefore, are increasingly looking for al-

lies to strengthen their individual economic positions through such regional collective force. The EC, in particular, is moving lock-stock-and-barrel towards that end. The *raison d'être* for its member countries can be more compulsive and greater than the peoples of the South Asian region for getting so closer.

Therefore, the point is that the compulsion behind the SAARC countries to bind

currency because that way the separatist movements now taking a heavy toll of lives and resources in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh can be brought under effective control.

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pressures at times on the administrations of these countries but to what extent they will exacerbate will depend on factors that have until now only marginally come into focus.

The most outstanding of those factors is the quality of life of the peoples in the region. While the peoples of the EC nations enjoy a relatively decent living standard — even not excluding the ones at the bottom of society — the majority of the population in the SAARC eke out a living pitifully low. A minimum standard of

order within a nation can be established, only then the attempt for a regional enduring tie stands to be successful.

Evidently, the absence of such a social order in each of the countries of the region will prove to be the greatest stumbling-block. Equitable distribution of wealth has so far not become the strongest point for the South Asian countries. This, in turn, has been responsible for the low level of education and culture among the people at the lowest rung of society. Even the rising fundamentalism in parts of Asia can be explained by this fact of life. A lot will depend on how the individual countries separately deal with this ever-increasing trend of social polarisation. Resources, instead of trickling down to the poor, must be rationally available to all. Only then the social advancement in the region will reach a stage where all will discover a workable meeting point.

The common man does not directly take part in a negotiation for a closer regional link, but silently his actions ultimately decide the fate of state-to-state relations. Therefore, the South Asian nations should give top priority in reducing the existing social disparities in society. Otherwise, optimism of people like Kuldip Nayar notwithstanding, any economic bloc of South Asian nations will remain elusive.

China's Press: Let a Thousand Surveys Bloom

Xiong Lei writes from Beijing

The high percentage of audiences not convinced by China's press coverage 'should compel decision-makers to ponder on ways to press reform'

'VINTAGE' bourgeois' was how many Chinese news journalists dismissed the first opinion poll conducted in 1982.

Only one newspaper — the China Daily, the country's sole English-language newspaper — ventured to run the survey months after the results came out. The survey was made on the readership of leading Chinese news media in Beijing.

'The survey was better known among foreigners than among our countrymen,' recalls Professor Chen Chongshan who made that first opinion poll for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Since then, a whiff of change has pervaded many of China's news desks — and beyond. Polls have also been introduced to other fields to test a product or an enterprise's popularity, probe the market potential for an industry and solicit opinions on a government policy.

Although the opinion poll still seems 'alien' to some people, Prof Chen says the Chinese news media in the past decade has attached more importance to the study of its audience.

'Opinion polls, or surveys on the news media audience, are likely to form a breakthrough in China's press reform,' says Chen Ruichang, an editor with Guangdong Television.

'We have polled listeners on several occasions since the mid-1980s,' says Bao Weijuan, a senior editor with the Central People's Broadcasting Station. Their responses have become one of the most important references in our decisions on whether to retain or scrap a routine, or to set up a new programme.'

Prof Chen's first attempt in opinion polls made in 1982 resulted in surprising revelations: only 24.2 per cent of the 2,423 people polled 'fully

believed in' what they read in the Chinese press.

A further survey on more than 80 per cent of those who had professed reservations about the credibility of the news media revealed that the major cause to this rift was that, 'they reported only the good news but held back the unpleasant information,' and, 'what they reported failed to be information enough to appeal to their audiences.'

Chinese leaders have always valued social surveys, says Prof Chen. Mao Zedong, the late chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, often conducted surveys before making important decisions, and called on the whole Party to pay attention to realities revealed by the surveys.

However, traditional surveys were normally conducted with very limited scope, involving at most dozens of people, each considered 'representing a segment of life.' Surveys either paid them door-to-door visits, or summoned them for a group discussion.

'This allowed some in-depth discussions and it was time- and energy-saving,' Prof Chen says. 'But it's impossible for it to lead to a scientific, quantitative analysis the opinion poll can offer.'

That's why he believes it is necessary 'to combine the conventional survey method with the modern means of opinion polls.'

As opinion polls became popular after the mid-1980s, the Public Opinion Research Institute of the People's Union of China was set up in 1986. It polled 200 ministerial officials and senior intellectuals in 1988, the first poll conducted at such a high level.

'These noted figures showed even stronger dissatisfaction with the press,' says Yu Guoming, an associate professor with the Institute. 'Among them, 62 per cent were

strongly dissatisfied with the performance of the Chinese press, while 91.5 per cent thought the press voiced 'too little of the people's city.'

Another high-level poll jointly conducted by the Journalism Institute (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) and the Capital Press Society in 1988 revealed clashing views between deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC) — China's supreme legislature — and member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), an honorary united front organisation.

'While 62.1 per cent of the 1,542 NPC deputies polled were satisfied with the openness of the Chinese press, 63.2 per cent of the 472 responding CPPCC members were dissatisfied with it,' says Min Dahong, an associate professor with the Journalism Institute.

'Also, more than half of the deputies felt satisfied with the press' critical ability, but nearly two-thirds of the CPPCC members said the press were far from being critical.'

'For many years we emphasised the news media's propaganda function, pinning attention to 'who said what, when and where,' but ignoring the questions of 'to whom' and 'to what effect,' says Jiang Xiuzhen, an associate professor with the China Journalism School.

The high percentage of audiences not convinced by China's press coverage, she says, 'should compel decision-makers to ponder on ways to China's press reform.'

She and many scholars agree that press reform should start with the acknowledgement of the audience's right to know, to voice, and to supervise the government through the news media. 'The Chinese press leaves a lot to the desired in this respect,' Mr Jiang says.

The Chinese press has traditionally regarded the readership as its 'god,' Prof Chen says. 'But during the years when class struggle was taken as the 'key link', the press was reduced to a tool of dictatorship, responsible only to those in power, but totally ignoring the readers' interest.'

When China instituted economic reforms in the late 1970s, it ushered in a 'golden era' for the study of media audience, Prof Chen says. Scores of national and provincial opinion polls conducted from 1982 to 1991 have resulted in several hundred theses and a dozen monographs on the relationship between news media and their audiences. Two national symposiums on the topic were held and a society was founded to promote nationwide surveys of radio and television audiences.

'We are convinced that only with a good understanding of the audience can the press reform have a definite objective in view,' Prof Chen says. But she predicts it might take years, even decades, to achieve reform goals, 'because too many ideological obstacles still exist.'

But Wei Yongzheng, deputy director of Shanghai Journalism Institute, is more opti-

mistic: 'The momentum of the economic reform will surely spur on press reform at a pace faster than we could imagine.'

In fact, he says, press reform 'is already going on quietly.' In the past two years, more than 60 national and provincial newspapers have launched weekend editions, which are fat with highly readable investigative reports on various subjects appealing to readers. Television and radio networks have also increased entertaining variety shows.

Isn't that a departure from the propaganda domination of the press? Wei says. He cites the booming stock exchange as another new plus to press reform.

'In Shanghai there are more than 300,000 stockholders, and they devour all information concerning stocks,' he

says. 'The newspapers covering Premier Li Peng's visit to Shanghai's Stock Exchange early this year sold out within hours of coming to the newsstands, though few people would show interest in such news even a few years back.'

Mr Wei says the Chinese news media will soon be confronted with such an audience, who are independent in thinking and action, who have more choices, and who want more information.

Their responses may determine the fate of a newspaper or a broadcasting company,' he says. 'The press had better be ready for the competition in a market-dominated environment for such an audience, and the study of the audience should well prepare them for it.'

— Depthnews Asia.

OPINION

Dhaka's Traffic Jam

For every city dweller, Dhaka's number one civic problem appears to be its traffic jam. The traffic problem is worsening, getting more complex, obscure and cumbersome day by day. But unfortunately our public leaders, city fathers and concerned government officials, are virtually taking no effective steps, short term or long term plan and programme, to combat this menace. As a result of which, with the passage and wastage of time, the situation is assuming more alarming, uncontrollable and explosive stance.

There are a thousand and one reasons for the worsening of road traffic problem. We however identify only the following three main causes: 1) Unaccountable number of rickshaws plying in the city roads. 2) Haphazard parking of buses at any and every place. 3) Holding of public meetings in the busy and important public roads.

From time to time, whenever we come across any traffic jam, we instantly blame the poor rickshaw pullers. Undoubtedly, the number of rickshaws, beyond optimum level, is one of the most important factors for creating road traffic havoc but side by side our over-massive bus drivers as well as some of our political leaders are equally responsible for the indiscipline, disorderly and chaotic traffic problem in the crowded capital city of Dhaka.

We have observed that the buses, and mini buses are parked in the important and busy places occupying huge spaces and blocking the roads for hours together. Buses also make frequent halts at different 'Bus Stops' in rows of three to four completely blocking the passage and movement of other buses, motor vehicles and the rickshaws.

It is also very surprising and disappointing that part of our national highway-cum-city road stretching from Jatrahari to Nilket via Folder Street, Wari, Kali Mandir and Gullistan has, perhaps, developed into the 'longest open air garage' in this part of the world where all sorts of repairs, vulcanising, body making and painting works and being done and the defective buses are parked for weeks together blocking the normal flow of traffic without any objection. Interference, opposition and legal action by the law enforcing authorities, traffic police, Dhaka City Corporation or RAJUK. It is alleged that a group of 'mastans'

'collect a heavy amount of toll' from this 'longest open sky garage' daily.

Again some of our political leaders hold public meetings in the busy and crowded public roads barricading the thoroughfares for hours together to the suffering of the greater number of public.

For a long time the city dwellers have been suffering and suffocating due to constant traffic jams and deteriorating road traffic situation. We therefore urge our political leaders, city fathers and the concerned government officials to kindly save the residents of metropolitan Dhaka from the alarming, chaotic and dirty road traffic problem and to take the following steps including other necessary measures they consider fit and essential to do away with the horrible and painful situation:

1) Issuing and renewal of licences by Dhaka City Corporation for new and old rickshaws may be totally stopped for next five years. 2) Only rickshaws with valid licences may be allowed to ply on the city roads. 3) The existing number of licenced rickshaws may be so proportionately divided and distributed and their jurisdictions fixed that no area in the city is over crowded with rickshaws. 4) Repair, vulcanising, body making, painting of buses on the bus routes should be totally banned. These may be done at least 200 feet away from the bus routes/roads. And parking of buses for more than five minutes should not be allowed. 5) Bus Stops may be made at least twenty feet away from road junctions, road corners and road crossings etc. 6) Underground road crossings or flyovers may be constructed for the convenience of the pedestrians and also for the movement of the vehicles without any interruption. 7) Public meetings should not be allowed on public roads on working days except on Fridays and government holidays. Public meetings may be held in Suhrawardy Uddayan (the place where Gano Adalat was held) and Parade Ground, Tejgaon all the times, when necessary. 8) Our traffic police and law enforcing agencies should not remain as silent spectators but actively help maintain discipline, traffic rules, law and order and bring the offenders to book for the welfare of the people.

O H Kabir
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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.

Of 'peanuts' and 'Drishtikone'

Sir, When a few years ago, the late President of Pakistan dismissed the proposed Aid package from the USA as 'peanuts', we all thought, that was because the amount was considered too insignificant especially, since the President of the USA at that time was a peanut farmer (I think). Not anymore, so please read on.

On a rare visit, I was delighted to see, outside the Bijani Bitan (Cig), a trolley full of 'imported' (I dread to say smuggled) peanuts two to three inches long. I could not resist the temptation and promptly ordered 100 gms. It was weighed out as precisely as would a goldsmith, carefully packed and handed over with a terse demand 'Chhoy Taka'. I drew back in horror, mentally calculating, Good Lord, Tk 60/- per kg! Fleeting glimpses of my childhood flew before my eyes, when even a Palsa's worth would not only fill all my pockets, but a word of appreciation about its freshness and taste would result in the vendor thrusting another fistful to you.

A couple of dozens of persons had already converged

around us (I suppose, the sight of an octogenarian, reasonably well-dressed, at a peanut stall on a busy public road is not only unusual, but a pleasant prospect for our itinerant but talented pick-pockets) and since I could not even hope to compete with the loudspeakers in the building opposite, blaring out their regular demands, I wisely decided that discretion was the better part of valour and quietly forked over the Taka 6.00.

Back home safely, I carefully counted the pods (42), shelled and counted the eatable peanuts (86), before the glaring eyes of the Begum who could clearly be seen as contemplating whether it was now time to despatch me to Pabna (mental asylum). She melted when I placed her share of 14 nuts before (86 divided by six) her with the extra two going to the youngest. But at Tk 0.07 per nut, I would have to be a Super-Nut to buy these again. The last words, as usual, belonged to the Begum. 'You should have known better, you old fool, now-a-days even peanuts do not come as cheap as, well — peanuts.'

It is astonishing that a section of the Press is actively advocating the removal of

'Drishtikone' from BTV. The anti-social elements, terrorists, the corrupt and the degraded must be celebrating en masse. It seems these people are under the delusion that if we just sweep all our dirt under the carpet, we will be rid of it. One day we will just find out that these elements have consumed the carpet as well. Drishtikone however, does have a serious limitation. It is shown only once a month. Fortnightly would be more apt, weekly much better and daily would be the answer to our prayers. More power to Drishtikone and peanuts to the critics.

Quazi Akhlaque-uz Azeem
Anderkilla, Chittagong

Arms and politics

Sir, Arms can be roughly defined as the things used to coerce the opponent and 'politics' as the struggle to attain rights. Whether arms are to be attached with the struggle to attain rights or not has been an ongoing and perhaps an irresolvable debate. Evident successes coming out of arms in the national politics worldwide as well as in international politics, provide the fanatics rational boost to briskly avail arms in politics. However, arms do not move alone, rather accompany death and destruction.

Arms had also been inducted in politics by some great men, justifying limited loss for broader social benefit. They proved their strategies to be viable bringing about change

in the erstwhile socio-political-economic systems.

Introduction of arms in politics around us today understandably does not involve any such broader objective mentioned above. They operate in a selfish, helpless and in cases, aimless efforts to destroy the opponent but ultimately destroying themselves and bringing unending chaos in the society and substantiating the strategy to be a grievous wrong.

Should we induct arms in politics? Why?

Md Abdur Rouf
International Relations Department, DU

An appeal

Sir, I am a medical student studying MBBS in Dhaka. I have a brilliant academic background of having scholarships at all levels star marks in the SSC and HSC exams. But at present I am very frustrated about my prospect as a medical student for some unavoidable reasons specially economic, because of the sudden death of my parents.

I cannot afford the necessary expenses without which completion of the medical course is not at all possible. Will any kind hearted persons or establishments/farms/NGOs (at home or abroad) come forward with any decent conditions or show me some practicable way out, which might help others like me too.

PR
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