

Pacing the Nation's Run to Literacy

Information, the lynchpin of modern civilisation, can at times be very vexing, very very un-fetters. The government's programme of 'compulsory free primary education' must have been launched on the new year's day with an eye on effect. But it ended in a befuddling experience for those that took the matter with the seriousness it warranted and tried to decipher the government-originated pertinent report distributed by BSS.

The first sentence of the report has enough puzzles to occupy one for a long time. 'Compulsory free primary education will be introduced in all schools throughout the country from today — that was it. One is at a loss to understand if this means that all schools — including the high schools and, say, technical schools, started free primary sections on Friday and that madrasahs, which of course are not called schools, have been excluded from having a role in the big thing? And, also, how can the schools be the medium of introducing 'compulsory' education? They can at the very best teach the students that go to them on their own volition — free of cost, if the government foots the whole bill. A school, or for that matter, any number of schools cannot make education — upto whatever level — compulsory. It will require a law to do that. The only sensible thing that can be made out of this is that education in all existing primaries have been made *compulsorily* free. But this simple solution doesn't go with the temper of what government has so long been endeavouring for — bringing all children of school-going age to the primaries. Moreover, if government wishes to make education up to that level free, it is a matter of a flick-of-a-hand decision with a caring eye on the purse string of course, but requiring no 'compulsory' business.

Our idea is government has indeed launched a 'compulsory primary education' programme which will not charge the children anything. But for such a radical thing — why shouldn't it be called revolutionary, to be launched in the whole of the nation? The nation should have been briefed on the present situation of the primaries and how many more of such were needed to make 'compulsory' meaningful and how was government going about the business of filling up the gap.

We are fully aware of 'compulsory primary education' which was drummed as a landmark of the Ershadian regime and launched towards the close of that autocratic patch of demeaning time. The present government could, of course, have done better than putting a stamp of approval on that piece of gimmickry. Making primary education wherever it is imparted free is a great thing and our government deserves to be complemented roundly for this. But one thought the epithet 'compulsory' — retained by this government — continues to cry for some justification. Only when primary education is at once both compulsory and free, the programme will start moving the whole society.

Primary education — a weighty part of the most important items that constitute our national desiderata, namely universal literacy, isn't an area we can talk proudly about. The cause of literacy, another area of dismal national performance, has suffered because of that. But glib talking hasn't stopped for even a while during all these decades of horrible education showing. The nation is well justified in suspecting all tall claims and projections in these affairs. The suspicion grows with such reports as covered the launching of the 'free' primary programme.

Although free primaries are nothing novel in this country irrespective of wherever it is imparted and by whoever, it is indeed a good step-forward that will pave the way for making basic education truly 'compulsory'.

Shri Lanka Needs a New Approach

President Ranasinghe Premadasa has made an appeal that the break-up of Sri Lanka be prevented. It is rare that Premadasa talks about the break-up of his country and makes the type of appeal that he has done. The beautiful island country of Sri Lanka has been engulfed in an infernal war for several years now and the death and destruction of the innocent people, in addition to the combatants, have passed the mark of several thousands over the past few years. But to what avail has all this sacrifice been? Premadasa is correct when he says that "Lethal weapons have not brought peace anywhere at any time." But unfortunately, it has been the language of arms that has spoken far louder in that country than the voice of peace.

As a very important partner of SAARC, we cannot but be extremely alarmed at the prospect of break-up of that country as the President fears. Therefore, we would urge all the warring parties to come to some sort of negotiated settlement of the issue that is separating them now. The LTTE must understand that the demand for independence, though very attractive and carries along a deep sense of pride, must be judged in the context of economic, cultural, security and ethnic factors. There are several examples where a headlong surge towards independence has resulted in the creation of newer problems and the people being worse off than before. The psychological wounds that bullets cause are sometimes far more damaging and deeper than the physical ones. We are afraid that years of bloody conflict may have already created a deep wall of suspicion between the Sinhalese and the Tamil community. This 'wall' may become the biggest obstacle to a future of staying together.

United Nations-mediated reconciliation process be something that parties in the Shri Lanka conflict may wish to consider. In view of the fact that armed conflict has now been in place for so many years, UN's presence may bring about the confidence building element that is so essential in any negotiated settlement of ethnic or national problems. The splitting of the country must be prevented at any cost. It is our considered opinion that in the long run the interest of the minority Tamil community will be far better served by finding ways of co-operating with the majority Sinhalese population. But for that to happen the majority community will have to come forward with credible and practical proposals that will meet the concerns of the Tamils. For all this to happen there is a need for a new approach.

Less Rapprochement, More Differences Across the World

Nineteen ninetytwo will be remembered as TUMULTUOUS. If this is a precursor of what is in store as we approach the end of the twentieth century, there is good reason for us to hold our breath.

The collapse of the Soviet Union is undoubtedly the Mega event of the year. This gigantic federation, tightly controlled from Moscow for the last seventy years and which occupied 6th of the globe, produced eleven states, without any bloodshed or violence. If socialist revolution prophesied by Marx and Engels came with a bang, it vanished from its motherland without a whimper. The debris is so colossal that it will no doubt spill over into the next century. After the exit of Mr Gorbachev, President Boris Yeltsin is trying bravely a holding operation. New states have marched out of the former Soviet Union including six Central Asian Turkic states. All the former members are tied in a loose federation called the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Gingerly they are charting a new course.

The Turkic republics suddenly feel the pull from their kith and kin in the Republic of Turkey, which suddenly finds herself catapulted from the extremity of Europe onto the centre stage of Eurasia. The advent of the new states out of the former Soviet Union has signaled bloody ethnic clashes

in many of them. In Nagorno Karabakh, in the heart of Armenia, the struggle between the historical enemies, the Azeris and the Armenians, is the bloodiest. In Georgia, in Tajikistan and in many other parts of the former Soviet Union, it is bloody ethnic struggle and alas this looks like only the first chapter of a very thick book. The upshot of all this is that for the present the Federation of Russia has inherited the tattered mantle of the might Superpower of yore—the Soviet Union.

With the disappearance of the other Superpower, the lonely Superpower on stage is the United States of America.

Quite naturally she has tried to spread her power in all the corners of the globe. In her stride across the continents, she has been preceded by that world class drummer — the CNN. By her appropriate claim of world news leader, she is an indispensable element in the US supremacy of the world. The UN is another link in the same chain. Technically there are still five members of the Security Council, who wield the veto. In the old cold war days, there was competition between the US and the USSR, for the utilisation of the veto. The Security Council has never been more unipolar as it is today.

It is not conceivable that the US would be absent from any major problem plaguing

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The world. The US has also witnessed this year her once in four year ritual — the presidential elections. Incumbent George Bush was soundly defeated by an unknown called Bill Clinton. It was George Bush trying to get reelected on his experience and particularly success in foreign affairs. Bill Clinton successfully brought him back to the domestic reality of an economy gone sour and the blighted social scene. His most telling refrain became the 'trickle down economy' of 12 years of Reagan-Bush. After 12 years the Democrats have returned to power raising high hopes among the vast middle class, who became impoverished by the free wheeling economy of Reagan and Bush. Bill Clinton has the enormous responsibility of turning the economy around in the US, prepare this only Superpower for the 21st century and maintain world peace. The agenda is awe inspiring and will require leadership of the highest order.

European Community (EC), which has had a reasonably orderly progress since its birth nearly four decades ago, felt the impact of the tumultuous year 1992. Forces seemed to range pro and anti Maastricht. The convulsions in the money markets of Europe, the negative Danish vote and the close positive vote in France seemed to call everything into question. The Edinburgh summit

however managed to put a brave face to Europe's troubles and EC appeared to be on course again. The Community appears ready to expand from its 12 to 15 in the near future. The Community has so far been a success story and there are many waiting in the wings to get on to the band wagon. The Community has set its sights on a single currency during this century although on vital foreign policy issues, appears very far yet. Anyhow the EC as of now appears as the second centre of power. On the world stage she is playing second fiddle to the US as is evidenced from her hand wringing over the blood bath in Bosnia-Herzegovina, next door to her.

1992 ends with war raging with all its ugly brutalities in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Who can recognize Yugoslavia, which in the Tito years was the indefatigable peace maker among the superpowers? The Serbs have outdone Hitler's hordes and have enriched human vocabulary by coining the word 'ethnic cleansing'. The orgy of rape and murder in which the Serbs have launched themselves against the Muslims of Bosnia, will remain one of the blackest chapters for humanity. Indeed the tumultuous nature of 1992 with its most barbaric face has made its appearance in Yugoslavia.

From bloody civil war in Yugoslavia, Somalia present us

the face of slow death — aftermath of civil war and total collapse of any kind of authority. The emaciated bodies of Somalians are literally receiving food from the end of the barrel, since under US leadership a force more than 30,000 has been assembled. Here the tumult is the pictures, since the skin and bones are too weak to make any sound. The picture of lack of authority in Somalia appears again and again throughout Africa with few notable exceptions. In the sixties colonialism disappeared in haste without bothering to prepare orderly succession. The problems are coming home to roost. It is a bleak picture for this continent as it prepares for the year end.

Latin America appeared to remain largely untouched by the tumult elsewhere. She also appeared to leave behind the sorry succession of coups, dictators and violence on a small or large scale. Indeed the fate of the elected President of the largest Latin American country — Brazil, is an object lesson for practitioners of dictatorships.

Asia — the largest and the most populous continent presented stark contrast. Japan continued her economic miracle, although her political landscape was mired by corruption. New economic tigers like South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia have appeared and others are in the wings. China, the giant of East Asia continued her orderly progress and silently contin-

ued to expand and grow. The Emperor of Japan has made a visit to China, which is a truly historical event. The potential of China-Japan combination must make many chancelleries pass many sleepless nights.

The Subcontinent, which ended the year in an orgy of communal violence, triggered by the destruction of the historical Babri mosque, presented the most anachronistic picture of 1992. SAARC, which has a population of one-fifth of the globe, has so far failed to make any meaningful impact in world affairs and the fact that the annual Summit was postponed, went virtually unnoticed. As many parts of the world were taking giant strides in progress and development, the subcontinent continued to remain the home of misery, whose picture might shame those of Somalia.

The deep cause that lay underneath the tumultuous 1992, was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the lack of authority on a global scale, in spite of valiant efforts by the USA. Indeed the economic decline of the US started many years ago and young President Bill Clinton has taken on a challenge, which is not only national but global. The centre of gravity of power is inexorably shifting to the East as the year ends and almost heralds the dawn of the new century.

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Will the 21st Century Belong to Japan?

by Abu K Selimuddin

A decade ago, United States was the world's economic leader. Japan was then its number one challenger. A decade later, US has traded place with Japan and complementarily watched Japan to take the lead. The question now is: Will the 21st century belong to Japan?

Japan's economy, for all its stunning success, has a number of serious flaws which will challenge Japan in the 21st century. First: American companies, which are cutting costs and restructuring today because they got bloated and inefficient in the 1980's, will make a strong comeback and compete fiercely with the Japanese companies in the 21st century. What's more, the Asian newly industrialized countries (NICs) — S Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore — are the emerging powers that Japan will have to reckon with. These NICs have successfully captured world's manufacturing market shares from less than 2 per cent in early 1970 to nearly 20 per

cent today. To make matters worse, a united Europe, led by a united Germany, will be yet another force to challenge Japan's lead in the 21st century.

Japan will counter new competition as long as it can keep cost down and quality up. This will require Japan to move more of its manufacturing output offshore. Foreign production will reduce Japan's manufacturing share in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), leading to rising unemployment at home. Japan's domestic employment capacity, for instance, is forecasted to decline by 600,000 to 800,000 jobs by the year 2000 because of Japan's direct foreign production.

Second: Intensified international competition is already making Japanese business executives to enforce stricter management practices on their workers in the form of reduced salaries and bonuses, more work and higher productivity and loyalty. This is making the Japanese work-

place tense and unfriendly. Increasing unhappiness among workers is visible in the Japanese society. Job dissatisfaction and stress from overwork is causing the frequent job hopping and will reduce productivity and competitiveness of the Japanese workers in the years ahead.

Third: Growing international perception that Japan is an unfair trading partner is putting increasing pressure on Japan to open up its closely protected domestic markets and stop dumping its products abroad. As Japan will be made one way or another to absorb more foreign imports, its mountain of trade surpluses, a source of Japan's strength, will diminish. Worse yet, rising consumption at home will transform Japan from being a high saving society to that of a high consuming society. With savings down and consumption up, Japan's economic clout will erode.

Fourth: The captains of the

Japanese industries are already complaining about labour shortages of both skilled and unskilled workers. Japan's usual response to labour shortage is to use more technology and automation. Ironically, the labour shortage is showing in industries already stuffed with robots and computers. Japan, unlike America, will encounter difficulties to import foreign workers. Why? Because Japan is yet to globalize its labour market. Its unique homogeneity of race and strong resistance against accepting a multicultural society will hurt Japan in the 21st century by worsening its labour shortage problem.

Fifth: Japanese consumers are increasingly showing signs of despair and hopelessness. Many unmet social needs like

overcrowding, long commutes, woefully high cost of living, cramped housing, and the third-world level of drains, parks and roads leave most Japanese feeling distinctly un-rich. Good life in Japan seems frustratingly out of reach. The young Japanese feel pressures from home to achieve excellence in education. Their government wants them to sacrifice individual interest for the nation. Companies demand on them hard work, productivity and loyalty. The 'pressure cooker' environment at home is making Japan an unattractive place to live in. Young Japanese are emigrating for better opportunities, leading to brain drain that will hurt Japan's technological and innovative edge in the 21st century.

Sixth: Japan's elderly population is growing at nearly

twice the German rate and six times that of America's. While today, an average of 6 workers support 1 retiree, in the 2020, there will be only 3 workers for each retiree. Consequently, the Japanese government will have to support a great many unproductive consumers in the 21st century. The demographic transition will curtail Japan's capital export and bring about a fall of Japan's social-welfare system.

Japan is well aware of these critical problems. And unless Japan can come up with some answers, these critical problems will continue to threaten Japan's economic lead in the 21st century.

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OPINION

An Efficient Bus Service Required

Tens of thousands of rickshaws have flooded the metropolitan city, giving omens of catastrophic consequences. This mind-numbing heavy inundation by rickshaws has made the traffic flow increasingly impeded and abnormally erroneous and hazardous. These awkward vehicles occupy most of the road space and they are solely responsible for a sizeable percentage of the major and minor accidents occurring on the city roads. The mostly illiterate rickshaw-pullers do not know or do have a tendency to violate the traffic rules. The way they take this turn or the other, the ordinary road-users are gradually falling into the grip of totally unruly traffic.

The number of fast-moving vehicles — the buses and minibuses — are still too small in number compared to the necessity to cater to the demand of the freshly-emerging circumstances. The bus service not only lacks in efficiency, it also chronically suffers from a viciously debilitating lack of willingness to come from the behind. Too disturbing to note, many buses are found in the roads which do not at all conform to the rules and regulations that gives a vehicle a road permit. Astonishingly, they somehow manage to move freely right before the traffic police; for some overt or covert reasons, the inspectors do not bother.

The buses are found to be always running out of capacity. The misery of the people in an overcrowded bus can be easily understandable. This overcrowdedness is the perennial problem here in the Dhaka city. The bus conductors push inside the bus as many people as possible. People are seen to be hanging from the bus-doors. People often tussle with others to enter a bus. People with a thin purse thus are forced to take risks of fatal eventualities while rushing to reach their destination.

The buses keep on standing at stoppages for an indefinite time and there is a little dependability whether the bus will reach the destination in time. Thus time-keeping becomes a luxury for most of the people. The plight of the majority appears to be unpromis-

ing all the time and is overlooked by the high and mighty. Again, the bus fares are increased arbitrarily and the bus authorities do not feel it obligatory to notify it publicly or issue tickets. Thus people are exposed to cheating by the bus conductors and the bus owners.

Mentionably, the small-sized fast-moving vehicles like 'tempo' have failed to fill the huge demand in the absence of an adequate number of buses. Reportedly, these are very much prone to accidents. They also are found to be belching smokes and fumes which are quite injurious to the health of the tempo-riders and also are potential air-pollutants. The buses and the good uses alone can be banked on as a major remedy to ease the problematic circumstances.

Time and again, the people made desperate pleas to the relevant authorities to increase the number of buses in commensurate with the tremendously increasing population, to increase the efficiency of the system by introducing efficient management techniques. Why can't some management wizards be consulted to evolve a pragmatic and practicable formula? Unfortunately for the people of Dhaka, the people having executive power have been found to be hard of hearing.

For the benefit of all, the number of rickshaws shall have to be slashed down drastically. Definitely, it will be a great economic hardship for the rickshaw-pullers if the crack-down on the rickshaws is done without arranging alternative ways to livelihood for the rickshaw-pullers. Again, taking half-hearted measures to go for a city transport system capitalising on buses will turn the things worse for the already severely-punished denizens of the capital city. Transferring from one place to another has become almost an ordeal for them. The shattered shape of the transport system has been caused primarily by the unthinkable growth in the city population. But, it cannot be used as an excuse to cover up the sluggishness and half-heartedness on the part of the big bosses of the transport sector. As accountability is a forbidden word in their realm, no salutary measures are under-

way. Solutions are hard to come when the Administration sleep in the face of the looming crises.

Threateningly, the crisis in the Transportation sector is becoming mountainous day by day. The crisis is not new; but, some people thought that the crisis was not real until that touched their life. They sought to reach oasis in the newer part of the metropolis. But, as the things stand now, the spiralling effect can be felt in the newer part of the city also.

As the things stand now, it is no use to hide behind the piles of files. Things have turned out to be all-pervading like an octopus and are gradually and speedily catching up the whole of the city. If administrative decisions are to save the travelling public from all sorts of troubles on the road, they can come only from the transport Sector. Traffic police can come to help only if the higher echelons in the Administration look upto them as the vehicle to carry out the specific duties they are entrusted with.

Forty years back nobody could think of Dhaka to see the phenomenal change the unfortunate city-dwellers have come to embrace and to come to this total and unhindered mess, a city seized by the huge thrust of the onrushing streams of destitute and poor people from all over the country. Fourteen years back, people in the newer chapter of Dhaka could sneer at the old Dhaka without the fear of being entrapped in the endless evils of an over-populated and overcrowded city. Now for everybody, things have reached an exploding stage. It is already too late, yet, time never runs out for amendments however huge it may stand out; it is high time the Transport Sector in consultation with other public authorities takes up plans and programmes to revise and revitalize totally and completely the transport service and put forward an efficient bus service in the metropolis, curtailing enormously the number of the awkward, slow-moving vehicles and the smoke-belching, fast-tracking vehicles.

Hubert Francis Sarkar Shingola, Dhaka.

Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Sir, An illustrated news appeared in your esteemed daily on 12 November on evacuation of Bosnian Muslims by UN peace keepers had highly disconcerted us. We wondered if it was a shift of tactics in the extermination of the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The move for shifting the Muslims from their hearths and homes smacked of an unholy plan: It was alleged that, instead of repulsing Serbian aggression the UN was trying to change the demographic complexion of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Such a move would only exonerate the genocidal acts of the Serbians. On the face of it, the move for shifting the embattled populace seemed pious but, in reality it might have some ulterior motives to be candid—exodus of the Muslims designed to make the land clear for the Croats and the Serbs. The Serbs must want that.

The Muslims want peace and security. Such UN move, would only goad Serbian desire to force out the Muslims through pogrom. The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina has a right to live in their own land. This is their inalienable right. Neither the Serbs nor any agency has any right to displace them. Evacuation of the Muslims — who have already known enough of massacre and trauma — will only add misery and sock to their life. What is at stake in Bosnia-Herzegovina is humanity and the task of the UN as a world body is to salvage the humanity.

Golam Nabi
East Nasrabad, Chittagong

Utilization of foreign aid

Sir, It is very shocking to learn that a huge amount of foreign aid committed by World Bank, Japan and many other countries and agencies is remaining unutilized every year while the country is languishing in abject poverty and backwardness. This is a very sad commentary on our planners, policy-makers, bureaucrats and all others involved in the execution process. Countries like India, Pakistan etc also share same problems

like us. But their utilization level is much higher than ours. As a result their per capita income is much higher than that of Bangladesh.

It is felt that, with a little, practical imagination and proper planning, utilization level can be improved a lot. Projects with short gestation period can be given priority. Some of these projects can be construction and improvement of rural feeder roads, construction of primary and secondary schools, small irrigation projects, development of dairy farms, food godowns, government staff quarters, setting up of more youth development centres etc.

But of course many of the aid programmes are tied and hence there will be need for negotiation with the donor agencies for diversion of fund for these purposes. But given honesty and sincerity of purpose it is not difficult to obtain their concurrence.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment

A gift of insults

Sir, A recently published news item regarding the donation of 80,000 used rickshaws to Bangladesh by the Pakistani government attracted our attention. The Pakistani government is phasing out the use of rickshaws in several cities and asked the district administration to pack the used rickshaws for shipment to Bangladesh. It was mentioned in the news report that the Pakistani Prime Minister during his recent visit to Bangladesh offered this gift. It was also mentioned that this gift to Bangladesh will be given "as a gesture of goodwill" and to promote "brotherly relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan".

One may hardly call an used rickshaw anything but a piece of junk. By proposing to send 80,000 pieces of junk to Bangladesh, Pakistan government has shown a serious lack of judgement and managed to offend everyone in this country. We in Bangladesh feel insulted that of all countries Pakistan has selected Bangladesh for dumping a huge pile of junk in the name of sending a 'gift'.

Bangladesh does not really need any 'gift' from Pakistan. What Bangladesh actually needs is the just and equitable sharing of assets of pre-Bangladesh Pakistan. People in Bangladesh always expected, and still do, that Pakistan will agree for a just and equitable sharing of assets of pre-Bangladesh Pakistan. We still remember that in 1971, PIA had a large fleet of wide-bodied aircraft. At that time Pakistan Shipping Corporation, too, had a large number of ocean-going vessels. People of Bangladesh have at least 50 per cent ownership to these and other assets. But Bangladesh did not get a single ship or a plane. It would be really nice to see that Pakistan comes up with a proposal to share these assets. We suggest that Pakistan abandons this frivolous plan of sending 80,000 pieces of junk rickshaws to Bangladesh and do something meaningful.

If the Pakistani government is genuinely interested in giving a gift to Bangladesh, it can do so by taking back all the stranded Pakistanis. This will be a gift every Bangalee will wholeheartedly appreciate. Meanwhile, we earnestly request our government to reject the Pakistani junk 'gift' and save the nation from a major humiliation.

Manjur A Chowdhury, PhD
and
Lt Col Mohammed A Latif
Khan (Retd)
Banani, Dhaka

Palestinian Deportees

Sir, More than 400 Palestinians have been deported by Israel and refused entry by Lebanese authority. These human beings have been thrown into 'the no man's land' to suffer without any justice. Where are the human rights movement leaders? Why they have failed to compel Israel to take back these people, who are their own citizens (so-called).

I condemn these atrocities on innocent Palestinians and urge leaders of the Muslim world to solve this human problem urgently.

S A Rahman
Dhaka