

Unwanted Garment Workers

A bill to be placed at the next US Senate session seeking a ban on imports of garments from factories employing children below the legal age has set the alarm bell ringing in garment factories of Bangladesh. Already, the process of retrenchment of employees has started. But apart from the impacts on the industry itself, the step is going to adversely affect the socio-economic life here.

Considering the importance of the issue, we once again take the opportunity to elaborate the points. It is clear that the US concern is based on the social standard it has set for its people. But Bangladesh's problems are not similar to America's. The difference in the qualities of life in the two countries must not go out of sight while taking the punitive measure.

Little though the wages may be, the earning by the children who might otherwise be rag-pickers, brick chippers, or else idle is a sure way of a better life. The fate of an estimated 55,000 children is going to be thrown into further uncertainty; and almost an equal number of families are going to be worse off.

A drastic retrenchment measure is not going to solve the problem. What we need is a more caring and humanitarian approach to the issue. With the establishment of garment factories, it is the women of the lower social rank who have risen in esteem. About 80 per cent of the workforce in the garments industry are women.

What ought to be done under the circumstances is that the under-age girls working in garment factories ought to be given a better pay and working condition, including congenial times. Work and education should be combined together, preferably in or around the working place.

Containing the 'Bad Master'

Fire, as the old saying goes, is a good servant and a bad master. Because it is such a bad master, we take all sorts of measures to keep it in control under normal circumstances, we also plan special measure when it gets out of hand.

Many questions have been raised by this report. First is obviously that of corruption. How could things come to this pass? For how many years have the Fire Department been sitting on this fact that so many firms do not have fire safety certificate? Since when do they know about the violations, and what have they done about it?

We urge the government and especially the Fire Department to take a very serious look into the whole question of safety from fire hazards. According to the Star report, congested areas in the old part of Dhaka are potential fire disaster areas.

The government should immediately investigate the whole question of fire safety in the city and make public its findings and take immediate steps to solve this problem.

It is one thing to have opinions, quite another to be an opinionated person. I have always considered understanding to be more important than opinions. Once you have your understanding of a thing, you may or may not pass an opinion on it, and very likely your opinion will be at best tentative.

The columns and the post-editorials have attracted an impressive number of writers contributing more or less regularly to the Bangla dailies. The English language dailies are not so much in the game. I offer this opinion with hesitation because I cannot claim to have the necessary facts.

EHSAN Ullah Khan was born in 1947 in Bahuchistan, his father a district postmaster. At 19, while a student in Lahore, a chance meeting changed his life. He came across an old man weeping in the street and stopped to help him.

Baba Kullan was a debt-bonded worker in a brick kiln. Too old and ill to work, his owner had sacked him and sold his daughters (11 and 13) to recoup the debt.

Khan left college and founded Bhatta Mazdoor Mohaz, the brick-kiln worker's union. Today it is called the Bonded Liberation Front of Pakistan (BLFP) and Khan is known internationally as its President.

His meeting with Kullan had revealed the age-old system of debt bondage which still enslaves millions of poor people and their families in many parts of the world.

The system works like this: a man takes an advance on his wages from a brick-kiln owner until pay-day, but the interest rate is high and the rate per 1000 bricks is low.

The debt slaves in the brick kilns work under armed guards, and are beaten if they fail to meet their quota. They have little food and no medical care. Women and children are subject to sexual abuse.

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.

The press and journalism

Sir, It appears that about 66% of the readers of The Daily Star belong to Awami League or at least are supporters of Awami League.

Recently, out of three letters, two in support of Awami League gives me this impression, I may be wrong. But the sharp worded rejoinder by Zillur Rahman and subsequent letter published under opinion column of The Daily Star on January 7, reaffirmed my belief.

Zillur Rahman's attempt to teach S M Ali ethics of journalism leads me to my earlier belief that it is the internal affairs of AL, and Zillur Rahman wants S M Ali to remember it.

Of Columns and Columnists

Of the multitude of columnists, a few have risen to certain heights, if not on the strength of arguments, arguably on the power of their pen. . . . If you put your opinion first and if you are relatively unaware of the fact that there may be, in fact there are, other points of view, the ideal will be wellnigh impossible to attain.

dailies — and they are some of the best — that I read has written a word about it. But I will admit, of the English dailies, I read only the Star, was my faint defence. And then I was told that the news and/or the opinion came out in one or two of our English dailies.

I was not interested to find out what they had written about my friend's nomination for the Ekushey prize. While I thoroughly approved of his gesture, his letter to the State Minister of Culture indicating in advance his refusal to accept the honour, I had other thoughts at the back of my mind.

To come back to opinions and to the popularity of the regular doze of opinion on which newspaper readers are being fed. As I see it, this is a new trend. I am afraid that such a lavish display of opinion on national issues has helped only in making all of us opinionated, a little more opinionated than we were.

It may be objected that I am drawing a false line, separating the one from the other. My answer to that objection will be, no. I was only suggesting the precedence of the one over the other.

Eight Million Children Call Him Mother

There are an estimated 20 million debt slaves in Pakistan, eight million of them children. Although the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has passed a law banning debt-bonding, the practice continues. Ehsan Ullah Khan has organised bonded labourers and raised the issue of their plight at national and international forums. Gemini News Service profiles the man many refer to as "the Mother Teresa of Pakistan".



EHSAN ULLAH KHAN IN LONDON 'Debt bondage is the whole world's problem'

To the Editor...

published on December 20, 1992 in The Daily Star. It has been perhaps a splendid declaration and advice as well, which could possibly be applicable to many of the leaders of existing political parties of the country.

Democratic responsibility

Sir, Congratulation to Mr S M Ali for the wonderful and thoughtful commentary 'Hasina should take a responsible line in her statements' published on December 20, 1992 in The Daily Star.

But as a student of journalism I think the conventional trend of giving skeleton news are not followed now-a-days. It is now to inform, educate and entertain, in news. People want to know more, they want news behind the news and lots more.

Still, however poorly supported by analysts and understanding, the mere fact of found vent more in the post-editorials than in the editorials. Editors were happy, yielding place to people who were less inhibited in expressing opinion than themselves.

PASSING CLOUDS Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

Over the years, there has been a perceptible decline of the editorial as a vital feature of a daily. This has underlined the decline, in a regimented society, in the power of the press. The gathering strength of the movement for democracy brought political opinion to the fore, from its retreat under martial law, both overt and covert.

If you put your opinion first and if you are relatively unaware of the fact that there may be, in fact there are, other points of view, the ideal will be wellnigh impossible to attain.

While I say this am I trying to find an excuse for a personal shortcoming? — my inability to arrive at a certitude about many things. I have held a few dogmas firmly for many years but about many other things, if

strength of arguments, arguably on the power of their pen. Verbosity and longwindedness characterise most of them and even the best of our contributors are not free from this common flaw. And I regard it a flaw for a columnist whom I expect to be terse, with an arrow-like swiftness.

My non-committal stance about private universities remains unchanged. I attended the recently held seminar on Higher Education, Trends and Direction. Between the keynote paper of Professor A F Salahuddin Ahmad and the trend of talks delivered by others, I failed to find any correspondence. Others talked about, rather concentrated their criticism on, the non-performance of the existing, state-managed universities. One

that debt-bondage was illegal, the court acknowledged it was endemic and that the law had no power to stop it.

He campaigned in Parliament and in the media for a statute law against debt bondage. Embarrassing items about debt bondage in Pakistan appeared in the international media. Anti-Slavery International, the world's oldest human rights organisation, backed his campaign.

In 1992 the government finally passed the Bonded Labour Abolition Act. However, its critics say that the act is only cosmetic, since its enforcement depends on local police and courts which are often corrupt. It had taken 25 years fighting to get the new law passed. During this time, Khan also freed thousands of bonded workers, and founded 122 primary schools all over Pakistan, where 5,000 children learn the three Rs and their human rights.

Although he loves children, his dangerous work means he dare not marry and raise his own family. But he laughs and says he has eight million children, who love him as if he

During the 1980s he was imprisoned 12 times and put in solitary confinement for six months. The jailers tried hard to break him, but he said: "To struggle for human rights in Pakistan is to play with fire — I expected imprisonment and torture when I began."

He became influential. In 1988 he brought a debt-bonded family before the Supreme Court to test the weakness of constitutional law. The court cancelled the debt and freed them. However, while confirming

such office should be announced in the local press or through miking. A post of a "surrogate" MP or an "Assistant" to the MP may be created by the MP himself (After all, MPs are generally rich enough spending lakhs just to be elected. I am sure they will not shirk from spending some money to actually do something good for the constituents and thereby providing employment to at least a few people) to monitor public opinion and to keep the MP (or Minister) abreast of the situation in his/her constituency. There is a danger here though. This appointee might become more popular than the appointer! How many MPs/Ministers do we have who will take the risk?

I suppose some of my suggestions may seem a bit far fetched to some, but the idea behind suggesting them, is to nudge the parliamentarians into "a thinking". In a similar vein, I had, some months back, written to the leader of the opposition, Begum Hasina Wajed, about forming a "Shadow Cabinet". Unfortunately she hasn't been able to reply to it as yet.

Talking about democracy and believing in democracy are two different things. Believing in democracy and practising democracy again are two different things. I don't really know if we actually need the pluralistic democracy which is advocated but what we do need, is to see that those who profess it, practice it.

OPINION

I Want to Meet my MP

My democratically elected MP from Dhanmondi/Mohammadpur was Khaleeda Zia. She forsook us, retained her Feni seat and is now the PM. Jamiruddin Shorkar (Nee Sircar) got elected in the bye-election from the same constituency. We don't see him in our constituency much, if at all.

My question is, who, when and where do we go to, in order to get the problems of our locality redressed? Are the MPs supposed to maintain an office in their constituencies? Do they have any stipulated time when they meet their constituents? If not, why? I have not seen any physical or socio-economic cultural improvement worth mentioning in the area since the advent of democracy in the country.

I have a few suggestions: Barring emergencies, during parliament sessions, absence from the country on official duty, all MPs, by LAW, should spend at least 2 hours, 2 specific days a week in his or her constituency specifically to meet with the electorate and try to ameliorate the problems of the area as and when pointed out by the latter.

could easily draw the conclusion that the responsible people who spoke, the UGC Chairman, the Minister for Education among them, have in their eagerness to bless the Independent University (College), Bangladesh, have written off the existing ones. It is as if they existed in a limbo. There was hardly any suggestion that the state-university system was the main structure, and will always remain so. The private universities could at best play a peripheral role. If they had really despaired about the future of the main system, they had no business to be there.

I have not formed any opinion yet on private universities. It is not important to have an opinion on something which is yet to start functioning. On the question of legitimacy, if I once believed that private universities were unwanted because unnecessary, I have revised that opinion. I can visualize the private university system as complementary to the main system, and not threatening it in any way.

I hate communalism but I am not sure if I should like to see Jamaat-e-Islami banned. One day I may but for the moment I would be content to see the government laying down political norms in clear terms and this should include trading on religion and religious sentiments a punishable offence.

I salute those who have readymade opinions on most things and who are not shy at all in expressing these opinions. I am not one of them. With this self-distrust haunting me, I cannot continue as a columnist for long because, in terms of Bangladeshi journalism, a columnist is a man who has an opinion on almost everything, including things he doesn't understand.

where their earthly and spiritual mother. Khan is hero-worshipped at home and respected abroad, and if the debt-bonded workers could use their vote, he could be a viable political force.

The opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto has asked for his support, but he told them first to support his cause.

Said Sardar Mazar, an exiled member of the Provincial Assembly: "Khan is greater than any of our politicians, and those who love our country should follow him. He will lead the downtrodden children of Pakistan to freedom."

Mian Iqbal, an exiled senator and founder member of the PPP agreed: "He gave fresh hope to the children of Pakistan — it takes a great heart like his to fight on when your life is threatened and I pray God he will be saved."

However, the Pakistan government has accused him of damaging its export trade by organising a ban on carpets produced using child labour. Right-wing agitators have called it a foreign plot and demanded his arrest for treason. His life continues to be threatened.

The last time he was in London, he summed up his life's work thus: "Debt bondage is the whole world's problem. We must help the helpless, and especially the children — they can reward you only with their prayers."

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