

Walking Backward

In many countries it is a popular belief that Satan has his feet extended backwards. This is one way of believing that satanic advance is for us all, except his followers, a movement towards past and traversed positions.

When it is claimed, perhaps not without factual basis, that Bangladesh has the largest organised and maintained jute gene bank in the world — still — one has a mixed feeling. While one very naturally wants to exult in the news, a surge of sadness overtakes thinking that this may not be true anymore — any moment any day.

The going on in the jute sector, as now coming out in the form of an extensive expose in The Daily Star, makes out a story developing in a matter of decades into a most painful tragedy of jute not unlike the tragedy wrought over Bengal textiles, muslin to be particular, by the British but over a period of plus-minus two centuries.

Jute is an ancient native of Bengal, — for all of its recorded history, bringing in foreign cash after it had met up all of the huge domestic needs. Well into the present century Bengal, the present-day Bangladesh to be precise, held the world monopoly of the produce. For that fact alone it was the most natural thing for Bangladesh to be the world leader in devising numerous charming as well as useful ways of exploiting jute, resulting in an ever increasing world demand of jute goods.

What has happened over the recent years is just opposite to that. Why? Fabrics with a warp or weft strand of jute were being experimented and even manufactured and sold on the open market less than two decades ago. Where are those gone? Uses other than in fabrics were also being very vigorously hunted for. That's also possibly gone. Dhobdohoye — a Jute Research Institute invention of immense and revolutionary potential — a dazzling white species of jute — was allowed to die an unnatural and unrecognised death. Why?

We had in these columns called upon the government — in a gesture resembling charity begins at home — to use all its curtain and covering fabrics made of jute-mixed material and moreover, ban import of cotton, silk or synthetic fabric for use as draping cloth. We had pointed out that, if nothing else helped, there was no substitute for the jute stick as a supplier of fuel and the plant itself as a source of green manure. All this as also the all too clear needs of the nation, has proved to be an endless crying — not unlike the one portrayed by Edward Munch — in the wilderness. We, however, want to feel that this would be over — good sense and the compulsions of reality would make it sooner than later.

From all indications and information regarding government handling of jute — specially its niggardly attitude toward the Jute Research Institute — persuades one to believe that government has virtually written off jute as something of value to the nation. That can be true only if those in power are wholly ignorant of the subject or are wholly indifferent to the well-being of the nation or both. Jute has been reduced to an instrument of exploiting the poor grower and enriching the dishonest trader and robbing the mills. We expect the government to put its foot down and make of jute the great national asset it was.

An Unusual Outburst

The high profile trial of the former Pakistani Army Chief, Mirza Aslam Beg, charged with influencing the court when he was heading the army, was overshadowed last Tuesday, by an event that attracted more attention than the trial itself. A courageous freelance journalist, Shahid Orakzai, who occasionally writes for the Peshawar based Frontier Post, openly accused the court of trying to exonerate Beg. It was only the press which was bringing out the evidence against Beg, he claimed. Repeated warning from the Court failed to calm him, and the affair ended with the court sentencing him for contempt.

The maverick journalist managed to escape from the court and is now absconding. But what his action has let loose is something that has the journalists of the Pakistani capital up in arms. In order to catch him the police is putting all sorts of pressure on the print media, including trying to arrest the chief reporter of the Frontier Post, who obviously did not have any knowledge of Mr. Orakzai's whereabouts.

The public outburst of Mr Orakzai was undoubtedly an act of disrespect against the court. It was rather naive of him to have continued to accuse the court, and yet expect not to be charged. He has been sentenced 'until he purges himself of the contempt'. He is to submit a statement to the Court's Registrar once every four months, which will determine how long he will be kept in jail. The sentence seems a bit stiff. While the act was a 'contempt' it was also very courageous. What forced Mr Orakzai to make the type of claims that he did. Given the well known clout of the Pakistan Army, and also the fact that Aslam Beg was a very powerful army chief, the charge of trying to influence the court while in power cannot be, and is not being, taken lightly.

However, the outburst of Mr Orakzai was totally misplaced. He never should have insulted the court the way he did. Being a journalist a whole range of options were open to him. We do not know whether or not he volunteered to testify before the court if he had any information. If he was convinced that the court was biased, he could have written about it, once the trial was over. There are always options for appeal.

While we appreciate the reaction of the Court, we cannot but feel that it over-reacted. For an independent and honourable judicial system is as important a part of democracy as is an independent press. The present conflict between the judges and the journalists is undesirable and detrimental to the strengthening of democracy in Pakistan. We hope an amicable solution to this touchy problem can be found soon.

SHRI Lanka is described in high school geography text books as a 'pearl' drop in the Indian ocean. This fascinating island nation shares many things in common with its South Asian neighbours, but at the same time occupies a unique position amongst developing countries. However, for the man in the car here, Sri Lanka represents insurgency, tea and cricket, not necessarily in that order. For the man in the street, Lanka is a mythical nation inhabited by 'nivanas'.

It is easy to identify with the country and people of Sri Lanka. The mild-mannered, rice eating inhabitants could well have been Bengali — indeed the Sinhalese trace their ancestry to invaders from Bengal led by Vijay Singhe around three thousand years ago. The mild Sri Lankan exterior can be very deceptive. Bouts of violence that seem to engulf South Asia from time to time, has not spared the Lankans either — with a severe ethnic-religious divide which promises to be difficult to bridge.

The development experience of Sri Lanka has however been vastly different from the rest of South Asia, and indeed from other developing nations. In terms of per capita income (around US\$ 400) it ranks among the poorest 36 countries of the world. In terms of the Human Development Index (HDI) of the UNDP, it ranks far above countries at a similar stage of development. This points to some remarkable achievements in the social sectors: a long history of free or heavily subsidised food, free education, pure water, good communication and a widely accessible public health service have combined to raise life expectancy to 68 for females, i.e. close to developed country standards. Similarly, literacy levels are at around 90 per cent with a highly equitable distribution of resources. Virtually no gender-differences exist with respect to access to education, income and employment. The population growth rate is low (1.2 per cent) and there is no significant rural-urban migration. The sharp rural-urban divide found elsewhere in the region, is absent here. The rural poor preferred to remain in their own villages.

How has it been possible for Sri Lanka to accomplish so much? Why have others, especially those in the same region and with a similar colonial experience, remained so far behind? A small population, a strategic location and high revenue earnings from tea, coconut and rubber exports, have certainly been key elements. The most important factor has been an early and sustained political commitment to provision of basic goods to everyone. The origins of massive state subsidies can be traced to incentives provided by British planters to immigrant Tamil labourers to induce them to work in the tea and rubber plantations. These included free food rations, housing and free medical services. The advent of independence, combined with an egalitarian-democratic political stance, set the scene for an ever-widening state sector, geared to social and human development. Thus, until 1971, the entire populace received free food. Targeting was considered difficult and expensive, and therefore not attempted until much later.

It is no wonder, therefore, that in terms of nutritional, health and social development indicators Sri Lanka should score so high. Despite such a great head-start, it has not done as well as, say, the SE Asian countries in economic terms. While it is easy to blame this on the insurgency, one wonders whether the explanation is not more complex.

Strength is also a Weakness

My own view is that Lankans have for too long been excessively pampered by the state. The level of subsidies and public goods enjoyed by Sri Lankans during the hey-days of state intervention surpassed even those of many socialist states. Developments in the social sectors were not mirrored by events in the economic sectors. The economy remained undiversified and dependent on primary commodity exports and a subsistence agriculture. Improvements in health, nutrition and education did not usher in a new era of high productivity and growth. Excessive state intervention appears to have stifled private initiative.

What's there to Learn from Lanka?

by Dr Firdous Murshid

Westernisation Sri Lankans are undoubtedly the most westernised in South Asia — not merely in a superficial sense, but truly westernised. A few examples will be illustrative. Both western classical and popular music is widely practiced. Rarely have I seen the same performers on their musical instruments twice, in the lobby of the hotel where I stayed for over three weeks.

My Lankan colleague, incidentally of Tamil extraction, and a retired international civil servant, told me that his first language was English, that both he and his wife grew up in families where only English was spoken, and that they in turn communicate with each other and with their children in English. I had occasion to listen to the gentleman talk to his newly wed daughter and could not help noting that not a single non-English word was used, not even of an 'achcha' or 'thik hai' variety. While the grammar and vocabulary was beyond reproach, the tone was essentially Sri Lankan, including the 'teh' sound that is occasionally employed during conversation, along with the side-ways sway of the head. Despite the fact that in my own family, we tend to use a lot of English in everyday conversation, I believe I suffered quite a culture shock that day. This was the first time that I had encountered such a pucca WOG (western orientated gentleman). Westernisation has also meant that not just men, as in the rest of South Asia, but also women, unlike in other parts of S Asia, have converted wholesale to western clothes, which have largely replaced indigenous ones. Women and girls of all classes seem to be perfectly at ease in skirts, slacks and tops, even in the remotest of villages.

Massive state intervention a more western outlook and ability to communicate in English did not spark off any economic miracle. Until the mid 70s, subsistence agriculture and the plantation sector still dominated the economy. However, Sri Lankans profited in one way: their literacy level and command of English helped them to migrate to the Middle-east in large numbers. Similarly, professional Lankans were able to compete effectively for international jobs, where their representation is much higher than what the size of the population would lead one to expect.

Thus except for the insurgency in the north and east, all the traditional text-book conditions for sustained growth, including a modest savings rate of over 10 per cent, appear to have been fulfilled. In addition, since 1977, the country has embarked on the so-called open economy policies — which is an euphemism for freeing imports, eliminating tariffs and removing subsidies to both consumers and producers, and freeing the exchange rate and rate of interest from controls. These structural adjustments are expected to unleash the latent growth potential of repressed economies along lines dictated by their comparative advantage. The experience of over a decade is very mixed, although on the whole positive, at least when compared to Bangladesh, which so far has had very little to show for its own open economic policies.

The challenge before Lanka today is how to take off into a sustainable path of high growth. All the pre-conditions are in place. Serious 'distortions' (i.e. protection, subsidies) have been removed. The government wants to promote exports and diversify its agriculture, away from paddy and tree crops. The question is how? Should it not be left to the private sector? Is there a role at all for the state? If so, what further can it do? These are all difficult questions, and the nature of the difficulties can best be illustrated by two examples.

(a) In its impatience to undistort the economy (presumably a result of considerable donor pressure), Sri Lanka decided to lift import restrictions on textiles in the early 80s. The flood of import of cheap cloth devastated the indigenous handloom sector, almost overnight. Some 40,000 people, mainly women, lost their livelihoods. A more rational strategy would have been to open up gradually, and to give local industry a chance to compete.

(b) In an effort to diversify its agriculture, Sri Lanka made strenuous efforts to get farmers interested in fruits and vegetables (again undoubtedly at the behest of some expatriate, donor-funded consultants). Efforts seemed to have been rewarded, when Sri Lankan farmers produced a bumper harvest of high-grade tomatoes. Unfortunately for those farmers, the world price of tomatoes fell dramatically that year, and the tomatoes were left in the fields to rot, in the face of cheaper imports that flooded the market.

The open economy game is full of traps for the newly converted and the unwary. The above examples illustrate how easy it is to destroy what you have, and how difficult it is to break into established markets.

What Lessons for Bangladesh?

Both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are irrevocably committed to the doctrine of 'export or perish'. Sri Lanka is certainly much better poised to play the world market compared to Bangladesh. A highly literate, westernised population, a tradition of trading, an amiable people and an excellent climate make it an attractive country for foreign investments. As an important tourist destination, it has, over the years, developed an excellent infrastructure and communication network. And yet, Sri Lanka is having difficulties. Even senior public servants have openly confessed that they do not really know what to do. Like Sri Lanka, many other countries are quickly at work, honing their knives to cut out a piece of the cake called the world market — e.g. Vietnam, China and the Philippines.

Secondly we must conduct a much more efficient public relations exercise. The role of the state, and in particular that of our diplomatic missions abroad, should no longer be geared to 'begging' i.e. soliciting aid. We need to aggressively identify markets and help attract foreign investors. This requires a new breed of diplomats and commercial secretaries. Suffice it to say that the quality of our personnel in foreign missions does not do us proud. I refrain from giving examples.

The author, an economist and an occasional contributor to the Star, recently visited Sri Lanka on an assignment.

Shonekan — Unofficial PM or President in Waiting

Chuks Iloegbunam writes from Lagos

THE extension of general Ibrahim Babangida's military rule in Nigeria until August surprised few. After all, Babangida, President since 1985, had already missed two earlier self-imposed deadlines to restore democracy in 1990 and 1992. But Babangida's bid to delay elections has had an unexpected effect. It has introduced an unlikely ally to the forefront of Nigerian politics: Chief Ernest Shonekan, a London-educated lawyer and former darling of the Nigerian Stock Exchange.

In his latest incarnation, Shonekan is chairman of the Transition Council (TC), a body of 27 civilians established in January to turn, in Babangida's words, "the day-to-day affairs of government." Shonekan is invariably known as the country's unofficial prime minister and there is no clear indication of whether the ambitious businessman is satisfied with a mere transitional role.

Shonekan, who has acted as an informal economic adviser to Babangida since 1988, says the TC shoulders the 'daunting task of ensuring a smooth transition from the present military government to a democratically elected and credible civilian administration by August 27, 1993.' His ultimate goal is 'to lay a foundation necessary for our successors to accomplish sustainable economic development and steady growth of our economy.'

Can Shonekan succeed? It is a demanding assignment. The military has clung to power for 23 of the country's 32 years of independence through a succession of coup-prone leaderships. And the economy has limped along under the

More than 200 candidates have put themselves forward for the presidency of Nigeria when military ruler General Ibrahim Babangida returns it to civilian rule. Many have already been disqualified. Meantime, Babangida has appointed Chief Ernest Shonekan as chairman of the Transition Council, a new body of 27 civilians set up to run "the day-to-day affairs of government." Gemini News Service reports on the tasks and the record of the new unofficial prime minister of Nigeria.



Chief Ernest Shonekan Can he succeed?

Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund in 1986. The programmes were intended to salvage an ailing economy but virtually did the reverse, leaving the country strewn with mounting debts, rising unemployment, spiralling inflation and collapsing infrastructures.

Those who believe in Shonekan's abilities point to his antecedents. Now 56, Shonekan took an honours degree in Law from the University of London in 1962 and was called to the Nigerian bar the following year. In 1964, he joined the United African Company as a legal assistant and became eleven years later the company's head of legal and secretarial services. In 1976 he was appointed to the Board. Four years later he became the chairman and managing director of United Africa Company of Nigeria Plc.

Chief Shonekan's 12-year stint as chief executive officer was marked by a string of suc-

cesses. For seven of those years, the firm won the merit award of the Nigerian Stock Exchange. It posted a 3.1 billion naira turnover and a pre-tax profit of 358 million naira in 1991. These enabled this largest single employer of labour after the Federal Government to declare a dividend of 36 kobo per share to its 130,000 shareholders in the individual and institutional categories.

Shonekan's company is not Nigeria bound. It was a principal technical partner in Unilever London, helping it sustain its leadership position in Nigeria's technical, agricultural, trading and service sectors. In addition the company has gone into a joint venture with the United States giant General Motors Corp. for the assembly, manufacture and distribution of vehicles in Nigeria.

Apart from exercising his business acumen, Shonekan has remained in the last four years or so something of an

unofficial economic adviser to the government, helping to draw up the nation's annual budgets.

He never wavered in his support of the tough Structural Adjustment Programme even as other corporate bosses were consistently citing the disaster which the programme had visited on the people.

Analysts impressed by Shonekan's personal attributes point apprehensively to elements in the darchical equation not in the chief's hands. Foremost of these is that far from enjoying the credibility inherent in the headship of an elected government, Shonekan is indeed an appointee of a military administration which should long have stood down in accordance with its own numerous promises.

Secondly, what is Shonekan's real place in the current political structure which retains General Babangida as President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and Admiral

Augustus Aikhomu as Vice-President?

Thirdly, how does Shonekan relate to the Federal Legislature, a body of elected law makers which must now pass bills and then refer them to the newly-created National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), a higher body than the Transition Council, for assent and onward transmission for the President's endorsement?

Putting these questions temporarily aside, pessimists concede that the inauguration of the Transitional Council marks a significant shift in terms of economic policy implementation. Hitherto, the crucial responsibility was left to the devices of theorists. Now a captain of industry is to lead other businessmen, technocrats, bankers and intellectuals to reform the economy.

Except that time is not on their side. It took nearly eight years for the Babangida administration to bring Nigeria to its present position. Is it therefore rational to expect the TC to perform miracles in just eight months before the long awaited Third Republic takes off? Babangida appears to say 'Yes.'

'I want to assure you that they won't fail,' he promised as the inaugurated the Council.

CHUKS ILOGBUNAM is the United Kingdom representative of the Nigerian magazine TELL.

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.

Responsible to Almighty

Sir, As one continues to read of the bickering between the two political parties this quote from Leslie Newbigin is pertinent: "Democracy can only work in the long run if those who are elected to power know themselves to be responsible before God to the whole community and not just to those who voted them into power. If democracy is only the right of a majority to enforce its will on a minority, it is bound to break down. The Church (or Mosque) must have the boldness to affirm that democracy must necessarily break down unless those who exercise power know that they are responsible to God."

Cody U Watson, Jr. Barani, Dhaka

Mochtar Lubis

Sir, Many thanks for sharing with your readers the rich experiences of a dedicated and upright editor such as Mochtar Lubis in the interview by Nancy Wong. I only wish that our local journalists will learn the valuable lessons of integrity, grit and preparedness to sacrifice for high principles. If they have only a fraction of Lubis' concept of service to the community, our country will follow them through hell and high water.

Parveen Rahman Barani, Dhaka

Is the 'paradise' lost?

Sir, The world is a hell for many and a paradise for a few. "The world is not an inn but a hospital, a place not to live but to die in," said Sir Thomas Browne while Rabelais ob-

served, "Half of the world does not know how the other half lives."

Whether a country is under a monarch, a republican, an autocrat, a democrat or a dictator, only a limited persons enjoy all the amenities and facilities of life and the majority of the people are deprived of human rights and necessities of life.

In recent years, there have been profound geo-political and socio-economic changes all over the world. We have also seen division and unification of many nations. But no peace nowhere.

The principles of human rights, freedom and democracy on the one hand and 'glasnost' (openness) and 'perestroika' (restructure) on the other, all appear to be vague and fake. Man has made what not for his living, leisure and pleasure, and also destruction?

Is the 'paradise' lost? Yes, there are only tension, turmoil, chaos and confusion, violence and bloodshed in every nook and corner of this 'good earth' because most of us are derailed from the basic principles of life. We would request the world

leaders to arrive at a consensus on socio-economic, political and judicial matters on the basis of glorious teachings of the holy books of all great religions and take care of all the human beings equally with love and affection.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203

Night primary schools

Sir, To augment literacy in the country the government has made primary education compulsory. The idea is good. But real and tangible steps are needed to attain the objective. At the moment, we do not have enough primary schools to enrol all the children of school going age, not to speak of the adults. It will obviously take lot of time to construct and commission sufficient number of primary schools due to resource constraint. Moreover, due to poverty, many people in the rural areas have to engage their children in economic activities in day time. Adults also have to earn a living by working in day time. Hence, it is suggested that if night shifts are started in the rural primary schools, this

category of children and the adults can easily learn three Rs. Supply of electricity to the relevant primary schools will be a help for the purpose. A suitable syllabus can be worked out by educational experts for the night primary schools. Help of NGOs can be sought for the purpose. However, before going on a mass scale, a limited number of rural primary schools can be selected under the scheme and if the experiment succeeds, this can be expanded. The services of rural educated but unemployed youth can be utilized for this purpose on payment of a small remuneration. The experiment may be a good vehicle for spreading the light of education in rural areas.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantt.

Cell for letters

Sir, Through his various letters published in national dailies, Mr M Zahidul Haque, Asst. Prof., Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka has very rightly suggested for opening of a Cell in the Prime Minister's Office to collect important letters from the dailies

Compared to these countries, Bangladesh is at a decided disadvantage. As a potential foreign investor reportedly asked, why should I invest in Bangladesh when Bangladeshis themselves are taking their money out of the country? This is one boat however, which we cannot afford to miss. Our policy makers, planners, politicians and academics have not yet committed their hearts and souls to the new policies. We are still too busy with out internal contradictions and unresolved national issues. Important as these are, we ought not to lose sight of broader goals. Our massive poverty and dismal economic performance should encourage us to place a moratorium on 'unproductive' national debates so that we can concentrate on the real i.e. economic sectors. I repeat, we are in every danger of missing the boat of export led growth. It is perhaps not yet too late, but urgent steps need to be taken to put us firmly on course. This is our historical duty and to ignore this is to invite great peril.

There are two specific aspects that need immediate attention. First we really do need to bring back the rule of law and put an end to the anarchy all around e.g. on the campus, on the roads and even in the police and defence services. Recent events in Chittagong, Rajshahi and Mirpur do not improve our self image or our credibility as a nation. I believe that the only way to curb fundamentalism and various backward looking tendencies is to forge ahead with a high, sustained growth rate.

Secondly we must conduct a much more efficient public relations exercise. The role of the state, and in particular that of our diplomatic missions abroad, should no longer be geared to 'begging' i.e. soliciting aid. We need to aggressively identify markets and help attract foreign investors. This requires a new breed of diplomats and commercial secretaries. Suffice it to say that the quality of our personnel in foreign missions does not do us proud. I refrain from giving examples.

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and weeklies and to channelize those for appropriate action by the relevant departments/organizations. Mr Haque has written numerous letters on important subjects, which speak of his desire for improving the social, economic and political condition of the country. He deserves our praise, for who cares to spend so much time and energy for such matters now-a-days?

However I would like to add that the scheme should not be confined to Prime Minister's Office, rather all departments, mills, factories, organisations, banks, educational institutions etc may be asked to open such cells. Cuttings from the national dailies as well as regional papers should be collected and maintained in a file for necessary action by the authorities concerned. While I was working with a Managing Director of a jute mill, one of my duties was to read all important newspapers, especially of Calcutta and collect every news concerning jute industries and keep the MD informed of.

K R Zakhami, Khulna