

Where are the Men Gone

A recent report from Natore (The Daily Star, June 13) starts with the information: child labourers are increasing alarmingly due to economic hardship of the poor families over vast areas of the district. On the same page the same day another report from the sea-washed Barguna says: Female labourers are on increase due to growing economic crisis. What has economic bad shape to do with rise in female and child labour population? Does it mean things are so bad that women and children, who are not supposed to work for earning, are being forced to go out to work leaving behind their homes and their normal preoccupations in the family?

That's far from the whole answer. What are the men doing then? Are they all working too? If they are, why is there the need for their wives and sisters and children to go and engage in backbreaking jobs for the living day — jobs behind which lurk all kinds of dangers and insecurity? No, specially in famine prone areas there are but very few jobs for men. But Natore and Barguna are neither Kurigram nor Dewanganj. If there aren't enough jobs how are the women and children being provided with such?

The catch lies in the fact of the employers or their labour contractors being able to get a full man's work out of a woman or even a child for half and much less than half money. If there are a whole lot of women and children swarming all around for jobs, why should they bother to hire full-bodied men at so much more price? Here then is a classic case of man-made crisis all over again. Man makes deserts and most of the earth's deserts are directly manmade. Man makes floods by large-scale defoliation leading to irreparable land erosion. And how well we know how man makes famines — from our experience of the great Bengal famine of 1943 in which at least 5,000,000 Bengalees perished.

We hardly can help recalling here the experience of Professor Muhammad Hanif, the illustrious former principal of Brajamohun College, Barisal. After taking up that assignment very late in life he wanted to do justice to the legacy of Jibananda Das, the incomparable product of that college, and Aswini Kumar Dutta, the unique founder of it. He planted and nurtured more than ten thousand trees on the campus and reinforced and restructured the original main building of the complex keeping the architecture untouched. Then he engaged in making pucca all the roads and passages of the campus. Soon enough he found that the labour contractor was billing Tk 70 for a man-day while infact paying out to women doing the road construction job exactly half of that. Hanif talked to the women, offered them the full sum and arranged for a weekly feast for them. The whole big job was done at less than both the estimated time and money. Reason: Woman workers neither malingering nor shirk. And they turn in more and better output over sustained spells of work.

A just and national employment approach in a land with so few job openings could first of all strike off child labour as outright out of law and then ensure equal wage between men and women. More jobs to women has more socially beneficial effects than is easily understood. Closing the gender gap and curbing women's repression are to issue from that as surely as would a reduced birth rate, helping greatly our fight for a zero growth population.

The Expanding Milky Way

One must have wondered as to whatever The Daily Star headline Galactic Cannibalism (June 9) could mean, specially when the story sat snugly beneath the "Off the Record" title of a bunch of usually juicy and titillating mini-stories. No, this was serious scientific matter come from the latest astrophysical-cosmological probes into the situation of our home galaxy — the Milky Way.

Scientists in US have found that our galaxy, long thought to be 80,000 light years across and up-to-date measures adding some 40,000 light years more to it, had, in fact, rings of dark matter round it extending its diameter to at least 600 to 800 thousand light years. The sea of dark matter on which the luminous core of the Milky Way seems to float as an island is being speculated to be formed of Stephen Hawking's dear predators — the Black Holes.

These Black Holes on the rim of our own island universe which may comprise 1,000,000,000,000 stars, are eating up loose and peripheral parts of a neighbouring galaxy, thus adding to the body of our own one. Hawking had suggested innumerable collapsed stars forming black holes throughout the universe but of ridiculously small magnitude. The University of California, Santa Cruz astrophysicists are suggesting that the dark Milky Way rim to be composed of Jupiter-sized black holes of subatomic particles in a state of super-condensation.

The predominance of dark unseen matter or the black hole ingredient is being said to be working as a brake on the expanding universe — causing the universe some day to start squeezing till the ultimate crunch — the Omega Point — whence it all began at the beginning through the Big Bang. Back to the primordial womb. Quite a scenario.

The question remains, a lot others must be doing so too, as to why the Milky Way's own pack of hounds on the rim should feast only on meat from outside — and spare the luminescent members of our galaxy on the inside?

Why Americans are So Concerned about Democracy?

by Badrul Haider Chowdhury

WHY Americans are so concerned about democracy? Betty laughed to my query and said that "our 200 year old experiment with Constitutional democracy is the kind of good news we should convey to the developing world." Paris conference on Democracy and Democratizing of the neo-democracies was in point.

Betty Southard Murphy is a senior lawyer and an associate of a top-ranking law firm in the USA. She is also the member of Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution which is headed by Chief Justice Warren E. Burger of the United States (1989-96). She mentioned 27th Amendment as an example of American patience for evolving democratic culture. The 27th Amendment of the US Constitution reads: "No law, varying the compensation for the services of the Senators and Representatives shall take effect, until an election of Representatives shall have intervened." This amendment was submitted by the Congress as part of the proposed Bill of Rights on September 25, 1789. The amendment was not ratified together with the first ten Amendments which became effective on December 15, 1791. Democracy is really a question of relationship of rights to duties.

It took 200 years - on May 7, 1992 the Twenty-seventh amendment was ratified by the

vote of Michigan. In one phase of American history in the beginning of 20th Century the United States refused to recognize and accept the consequences of its new interest in the global affairs. Her policy was based on a "Series of mirages." Peace, disarmament, no entangling alliances, Collective Security, Hitler's conquest in Europe and Japan's aggression in Asia had to be nullified by a world war.

The US has a strategic interest in the democratic evolution. She was drawn into the two world wars. The US Government made an unprecedented investment of resources in the maintenance of peace and stability — by massive aid through Marshall Plan and then through stationing of US troops in Europe and contributing major share of its defence resources to NATO. The US cannot afford to see instability and danger of conflict that might threaten peace in the world. The best insurance against such an outcome is the emergence of prosperous democracies and their rapid integration into community of nations. The truth is that democracies do not go to war with democracies. Liberty is in a sense peculiar virtue of democracy. "If one is concerned with liberty as an ultimate social value, one should also be concerned with the fate of democracy because a more democratic world will be

friendlier and more peaceful and less likely to go to war." Huntington, as quoted in Alvin Toffler's Third Wave, says: "The future of democracy in the world is of special importance to Americans. The United States is the premier democratic country of the modern world and its identity as a nation is inseparable from its commitment to liberal and democratic values. Other nations may fundamentally change their political systems and continue their existence as nations. The United States does not have that option. Hence Americans have a special interest in the development of global environment congenial to democracy."

The key to democracy is an effective legislature. People as a whole are not interested in the complexities of Constitutional Structure; they are interested in practical results. Failure to produce an economy that makes everyone better off in a reasonable time period could lead to such frustration in the electorate that they give up on the democratising experiment and move to anything that provide quick relief — usually a more authoritarian model. This view of William H Robinson and Francis Miko both from Congressional Research Service was echoed by Prof. Oman Faruk Geuck-aya of Bilkent University, Ankara who said that a recent survey shows that

people are getting tired of Constitutional experiments and Turkish experience with Parliament and democracy still improves slowly. He concluded: the real struggle for democracy arises between traditional State elite and the new political elite with contradictory elements."

New democracies are fragile and their failure to betterment of life for the majority is making it difficult to enable a government for seeking renewal of mandate with confidence. Democracy is based on concept of consent and fundamentalism in any form is challenge to democracy. Michael Meadowcroft, former Liberal MP and Chairman of the Electoral Reform Society of Great Britain and Ireland in his paper "Can Democracy Survive the challenges and strains of the 1990s and beyond" pointed out that fundamentalism propounded by Hindu BJP in India, Protestantism in Northern Ireland and Zionism in Israel are threat to democratic order because "they claim that a higher authority invests their political beliefs and actions." Only political parties, according to him, based on philosophy (or ideology) have a chance of sustaining pluralist democracy. Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the library of Congress has provided information analysis to US Congress for nearly 80 years. Of late it has been the implementing

agent for several congressional efforts to assist in the development of Parliamentary institutions in East Europe.

Two global concern confront the American leadership: halting the degradation of physical environment and ending human hunger. Ecological imbalance will bring peril to mankind be it for withholding of legitimate share of international river by the upper riparian or for dumping of industrial wastages.

The USA had initiated peaceful process for settling up the disputes with Mexico over the water of Colorado.

Very large scale integrated projects frequently involve more than one country as with: Columbia River Scheme. The general tendency seems to be toward international co-operation in water use even between politically inimical countries.

In concert with other nations and the UN system the USA should lead the way in halting pollution of the oceans and waterways. An international effort led by the US to protect the world's environment "could well be our first line of defence and national security" opined a participant in the conference.

Then the urgent need to win the struggle against hunger. Here again the United States is the best endowed nation on earth to lead the effort to end starvation and malnutrition. "We have the technical capabil-

ity, the agricultural abundance and the shipping to lead the way to a world free from hunger." Former Senator George Mc. Govern who was the Democratic Party's Presidential Candidate in 1972 once said "A more imaginative use of our surplus food in the short term and a greater effort to improve the agriculture of the developing world in the long term is the kind of internationalism that will give new force and respect to American's role in the world."

With the collapse of Soviet Communist empire a vacuum has been created. Nature abhors vacuum. The Super-power concept is gone — America has become willingly or unwillingly the gendarme of the world today. How far she was able to discharged her responsibility successfully in the lag end of twentieth century and maintained the balance of power will be matter of interest for the social scientists in the twenty-first century.

Prof Lawrence D Longley, Chairman, Research Committee of Legislative Specialist of the International Political Science Association concluded his final session speech in Paris conference by echoing Betty Murphy: "Because of this historical responsibility Americans are in quest of this internationalism and that is why they are interested in success of democracy in other countries."

The writer is a former Chief Justice of Bangladesh.

Orphans of Punjab: A Little Grown-up, still Traumatized

MEET the orphans of Punjab — Sandeep Kaur, Ranjit Kaur and Kanwal Pratap Singh.

They are the innocent debris of the decade-long violence that has been the fate of this State in India's northwest. Rendered fatherless by militants and security forces alike, they are constantly haunted by memories of a father they will never see again. Negative feelings of revenge, sorrow, hate and fear appear indelibly printed on their young minds.

Every time Kanwal Pratap Singh, 15, begins talk about his father, he breaks down. Amar Singh was a police inspector posted in Jandiala, where he died during an encounter with terrorists in April 1992.

Kanwal relives the painful memory of that evening in Jalandhar, when his father's gunman knocked at their door with the news that was to shatter their lives.

However, helping to prepare them for a healthier and happier future are institutions like the one located behind the Kesgarh Sahib Gurdwara complex in Amritsar. It is a school, a unique educational institution for children orphaned during the decade-long violence in the State.

Most of the orphans at this school are children of militants killed by the police. There are also a few children of policemen killed by militants, and those of

ordinary civilians who fell victim to terrorists.

Set up in 1989, the school provides free boarding and tuition to approximately 80 students.

Nine-year-old Sandeep Kaur arrived at the school with her two sisters a few months ago, after her father was killed in an encounter with the police. She does not know what a militant is, but naively describes her father as a "kharkoo", the local term for a militant.

Sandeep Kaur does not know where her father worked, why he became a "kharkoo" and why he was killed. She does, however, know that he was killed by the police.

She recalls with a smile that her father would hug all three girls during his infrequent fleeting visits to their village in Gurdaspur district. Her face becomes wooden when asked what she wants to be when she grows up.

A little grown-up, but just as traumatised, is 13-year-old Ranjit Kaur, whose father, Ranjodh Singh, was slain by terrorists. "He was a pious man," she says.

Ranjodh Singh, a priest, was taken away by two unknown men one night three years ago. His bullet-ridden body was recovered a short distance from the shrine where he worked the next day.

Ranjit Kaur, too, is unaware of militancy. She does not know

Priya Darshini writes from Amritsar, India

Negative feelings of revenge, sorrow, hate and fear appear indelibly printed on their young minds

why her father was killed, who the militants are or what they want. And though one girl has been orphaned at the hands of the state and the other at the behest of the terrorists, both are victims of the age they live in.

Kanwal, too, studies in a special institution, attuned to fragmented young lives like his. Only this school is in Amritsar set up by the Punjab Police and takes in only children of policemen both serving and killed in action.

The Police DAV Public School has been in existence for just over two years. It is touching to learn that it is funded primarily by all the 14,000 policemen of the border range (comprising Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts). They contribute a nominal portion of their salary every month. The 200 orphans (of the total strength of 1,500) study free of cost.

Kanwal is one of them. He says there isn't a single waking moment that he doesn't remember his father. And with a fierceness born of the desire for revenge, he seems to want to consecrate his father's sacrifice by joining the police when he grows up.

Says Kanwal, "I want to fulfill

my father's dream of becoming a cop. I feel very angry whenever I think of the people who killed my father. I can never forgive them. If I am left with the alternative of arresting or killing them, I will choose the latter."

The headmistress, Seema Verma, shakes her head sadly. The only hope she can offer is that "perhaps he, along with other children in the school who feel the same way, will change as they grow up."

Six-year-old Satwinderbir Singh, of class one, voices identical views. He says, "I will become an SSP (Senior Superintendent of Police) to avenge my father's murder by terrorists."

He entered the school with the tag "fatherless" when he was just four. His father had been a head constable and gunman to Amritsar's SSP Hardip Singh Dhillion, then posted in Batala.

Ironically, like Ranjit and Sandeep, he, too, does not know why his father was killed. But, he says with wisdom far greater than his years, "The terrorists are killers and they deserve the same treatment they meted out to my father."

However, he becomes a child

more, recalling how his father had bought him a "golden" bicycle just a few days before he died.

There are nights when Gurdip Singh, 12, finds it hard to sleep. He vividly recalls that fateful night two years ago when a group of terrorists had forced their way into his house in their village in Sangrur district.

He remembers the militants asking his father, a constable, for a scooter. Then they opened fire killing his father, mother, grandparents and even his older brother and sister. He was spared somehow for reasons not known to him.

Gurdip spent the rest of the night of terror at a neighbour's house. "I did not sleep the whole night. I was too shocked and horrified," he says. Like Kanwal, he, too, wants to join the police to seek revenge. He does not know who the killers of his father are, but he is confident he will trace them out once he is in the police.

On the Amritsar-Tarn Taran Road there is a small housing complex of double-storey flats. It was built by a pious local for those affected by the November 1984 riots after the assassination of the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Among the few riot-affected families that have since settled in this colony after migrating to Punjab, is the young widow (recently remarried) of a dreaded militant, Balwinder Singh, who was killed during the raid on the Golden Temple in 1988.

Her boisterous son Ranjodh Singh, who is just four-and-a-half years, does not know where his father is. He was born three months after his death. His mother Ajit Kaur says, "I do not want my son to be a terrorist. My life has been ruined because I married one. I will not allow this to happen again."

But young Ranjodh Singh doesn't like his new father or the new life his mother has tried to build for him. Will the boy be different from his father? Is a question which is difficult to answer.

But it is a fact that cannot be ignored. They are after all Punjab's future.

Ironically though, the children themselves are uncertain of their own future. Their innocence has been sullied by yesterday's violence.

Will there ever be the forgiveness in their hearts? Elders can only wait and watch and hope for the best.

— Depthnews Asia

Letters 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.

Scarcity of fish

Sir, For the last one year there has been acute scarcity of fish in the open market. One of the reasons is indiscriminate catching of fish fries by the unscrupulous fishermen. Although officially there is some restriction on catching of fish fries, that is rarely followed. Hence law enforcing agencies should be more active and alert. This is the time for discharging fries by the fishes. Hence it is suggested that upto the month of 'sravan' there should be a total ban on catching and sale of fishes except sea-fishes. People will not die if they go without sweet water fishes for two three months. But this will have a salutary effect on the prolonged supply of fishes in the country. Will the Fisheries Ministry ponder over this?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury, Dhaka Cantt

Fighting AIDS

Sir, Today everyone is frightened and terrified to hear the word AIDS which is spreading like a wild fire all over the world. It is more a sexually transmitted disease. There is no known cure but the scientists are working to develop a vaccine. In different periods of history abuse of sex has led the people to live a accursed life infected by leprosy, syphilis and gonorrhoea and now the AIDS has surpassed all the dreadful sexual diseases of all times. Surprisingly the more a country is so called advanced and prosperous the more there are the cases of AIDS. The USA for example from its 'hippi' way of life of 1960's has marched

forward to 'homosexuality' fashion in 1990's. The USA and many European countries are spending billions of dollars to contain AIDS but in vain.

We strongly feel that we need not waste billions of dollars on invention of vaccine or on advertisement for use of contraceptives but to build up a high moral character and to lead a pious way of life to defeat the catastrophe of AIDS.

Oll Kabir, Dhaka

Tariff burden on books

Sir, The budget proposals, as announced, show that an ad valorem (on estimated cost) tariff burden of 7.5 per cent has been imposed on all imported books (previously nil). There were, most certainly, very good reasons not to put any import duty on books.

Possibly the reasons thought for the imposition of the duty, have been the following: (a) to boost the publishing industry in Bangladesh; (b) to increase the badly needed taxes; (c) keeping away harmful books of foreign origin.

If the objective is to boost the local book industry, the remedy does not lie in the tariff barrier. The printing cost of a book here is prohibitively high; the reasons being the cost of ink and the price of paper. We would suggest that both these items be heavily subsidised, if we intend to open up the vista of learning. India is heavily subsidising the promotion of good books in that country. It has opened up the frontiers of knowledge for its middle class book lovers. Furthermore, un-

der franchise a book costing \$20 in the USA is being sold in the Indian market for Indian Rs. 150, i.e. at less than one third of the original price in the USA.

The Government's earnestness to increase the tax base is understandable, but let this be not here. It would bring in a very limited revenue for the Government, and a heavy burden on the private book buyers. A very large number of books are purchased by the Government for the public library system, the Universities and the Colleges. So what is earned in one hand, has to be given away by the other hand.

We would propose that a system may be devised, a well thought out one, by which we can exclude all harmful books and magazines. The 'bot tola' books (books that are sold under the banyan tree i.e. cheap, exploitative) may be totally eliminated from our shores.

We would request the Government to announce the National Book Policy soonest possible. We would further hope that the Committee would make a comprehensive and multi-dimensional study of the problem, and which may have as its objective, the increase of the knowledge base and promote learning in the country, so that a correct step is taken for the 'development of human resources.'

Shahabuddin Mahtab, Siddheswari Road, Dhaka

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Sir, I completely agree with your editorial comment of June 11 regarding imposition of import duty on all kinds of books. Imposition of duty on imported books is a very deplorable move.

Recently, the Government has introduced duty on scientific equipment used for research and laboratory instruction in the universities, colleges and research institutes. Now, we are to pay import duty on books. We urge the parliament mem-

bers to oppose this move to tax knowledge. With the passage of this bill prices of all text and reference books on engineering, medicine, law, science, liberal arts will go up. As it is, imported books are expensive because of high exchange rates for dollar and pound.

The Government may rather supply paper at subsidized price for publication of text books as is done in India. Acquiring knowledge should be encouraged, not discouraged through taxing it.

Dr Nooruddin Ahmed, BUET, Dhaka

Administrative Reforms

Sir, It is learnt that the government is contemplating to make administrative reforms to activate the work of different cadre services. The representative of different professions have already expressed their view. The services of nationalised commercial and central banks can also be encased. At present the promotion and postings of nationalised commercial banks and DFI's are controlled by the Ministry of Finance. But the promoted officers of different NCB's and DFI's do not fall in any cadre of service.

The central bank, nationalised commercial banks and DFI's play a vital role in the national building activities. These institutions are the back-bone of economic activities of the country. But unfortunately, the services of the bankers have not been given any weightage. A nation like Bangladesh needs brilliant students in banking services to chalkout and implement the economic policies. And the brilliant students will only be attracted to bank services if a separate cadre for bank services is created. We request the government to ponder over the matter before implementing the administrative reform.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury, Kalabagan, Dhaka

OPINION

Negotiate Now

M Anis Ud Dowla

Wage fixation in the public sector enterprises remains a live issue, notwithstanding the failure of the 72-hour strike of the workers under the banner of SKOP. The Government, being the employer, should not forget that the wage issue in the public sector remains unresolved. The initiative must be taken by the Government now, rather than wait for pressure to build up again.

I believe that Sector Corporations should be asked to call their respective Collective Bargaining Agents to negotiate a wage increase, keeping in view the financial viability and profitability of the sector. Those sectors where productivity is low, higher productivity, targets must be fixed as a precondition to increased wages.

Some sectors should be able to make handsome wage concessions because of their good performance. The workers of those sectors should be duly rewarded with good increase in their remuneration.

In some sectors increase will be small because of poor financial performance. If the workers in that sector refuse to accept the wage settlement, they can take recourse to tripartite negotiation, strike or adjudication as the law provides. It is the right of the workers to unite under the banner of their Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) and take legal industrial action. We must uphold the right of the CBA to bargain for a good deal for its members, provided they remain within the bounds of labour laws.

The initiative on the part of government to begin dialogue with CBA will re-establish the rule of law in the field of trade union activities in the public sector and prevent a unified movement of workers once again under the umbrella of unregistered bodies.

Also, on Minimum Wage, the Government should set up several Minimum Wage Boards to work simultaneously to review wages in sectors where review has not taken place for many years. Some sectors

remain viable and robust since its last review while several sectors remain vulnerable or have become unviable. Re-fixation of minimum wage must take into consideration the viability of the industry, its productivity and its ability to absorb increased wage cost. Industries which can afford must pay higher minimum wages to workers in order to equitably share the gains of success.

Meanwhile, I would like to congratulate the workers who in large numbers have accepted voluntary separation under the schemes of the various public sector corporations and autonomous bodies. The workers have made this ultimate sacrifice so that their organisations remain viable and their fellow employees who are left behind can continue in employment. The courageous workers who have opted for voluntary retirement deserve our appreciation.

I find the provision of Tk 256 crores in the supplementary budget for payment on account of voluntary retirement grossly inadequate. At least Taka 500 crores should be needed for the separation plan that are known to be already in hand. The organisations that have received voluntary retirement applications hardly have any cash to meet the costs of redundancy. I suggest that the government pays the separation money to the workers partly in cash and partly in interest-bearing Redundancy Bonds, encashable over a period of three to five years.

Finally I would like to emphasize the need for re-training of the retrenched manpower to start small business with the cash they will get so that they not only become self-employed but can in turn generate employment for others in the small scale enterprises they may set up.

The writer is the CEO of ACI and the president of the Employers Association. This piece is written in his personal capacity.