Dhaka, Saturday, July 3, 1993

When will SKOP Leaders Learn?

Like so many of our politicians, a section of our labour leaders - often the identities overlap, and herein may lie the key to understanding some of their actions, - are bent upon not learning anything from experience. After being repeatedly rejected by the people, the SKOP has once again called for a 48 hour strike on 19 and 20 July What is this strike for? For whose benefit will the nation be once again held at ransom? On three previous occasions the people have shown their disapproval — more appropriately, their disgust at the calls strike for. Yet, now for the fourth time. SKOP has decided to force upon the nation. its suicidal policy of work-stoppage. We have absolutely no doubt, this time also, people will reject its call. But the question is when will SKOP leaders learn? Like a stubborn bull it keeps on hitting its head against the stone wall, in this case, it is the wall of public resistance, getting stronger and more determined as the SKOP plans increasingly reveal themselves for what they are - attempts to destabilise the economy.

In the current atmosphere of global competition, with which Bangladesh has to match its abilities, any call for work stoppage is nothing but a call for self-destruction. Whether we like it or not, it is more and more the 'Global Village' of which we are a part. The rules of the global market forces are not in the hands of the BNP government, or the Employers Association, or the various Chambers, and hence they are not amenable to our whimsical manipulation. Global market forces have a dynamics of their own, and the only way to play under those rules is to have a 'competitive edge' for our products. Strikes and barricades destroy the very basis of that 'edge' and push us further and further back in the race for poverty alleviation.

SKOP has fundamentally misread whatever public support, and consequent political clout, it acquired during the Ershad era, as support for itself. It was the public venting its frustrations against a corrupt autocratic government, and clutching at every means to pull it down. But after the changeover to democracy people want the rule of the new system strictly adhered to, which excludes forcing upon the majority of the population the interest of only a fraction of our people.

The anachronism here is that, as means of production and production relations — to use too hackneyed Marxist expressions — have drastically changed, the means of so-called struggle of our workers have not. SKOP, if it really wants to represent the collective interest of our workers, must devise new ways of mass action, without harming production. There are several methods of promoting its cause that SKOP did not yet explore. It can start by organising big rallies— on Fridays and other holidays, of course — in all major cities, ending with one in the capital. They can try to convince MPs about their demands and raise the issue in the parliament. There can be signature campaigns and winning support from community leaders. To prove its seriousness about national development, SKOP can produce suggestions and plans, as to how they see the nationalised industries turning the profitability corner. SKOP can come out with plans for improving management of the public sector units, 'ghost workers, labour-mafia and 'mastans' who exploit workers.

Time has come to change the traditional way of seeing the labour-management relations only in terms of conflict, and replace it by one of working together to acquire that critical "competitive edge". The bottomline is, unless the national 'cake' grows, none of the claimants for its pieces labour being a major one — can have it any better. And the 'cake' can only shrink with more strikes. For God's sake, try to understand this very simple fact.

Babangida Bungles

The latest decision — one should call it a decree - by Nigeria's military ruler, General Ibrahim Babangida that a "democratically elected president" would take power in the country in August, as scheduled, would suggest that he realises that his annulment of the election result made last week was all wrong. If this is so, the news from Abuja, the posh new capital of Africa's most populous country, is good.

However, where Babangida is concerned, it is never that simple. With his low credibility, few people believe what the General promises his people — or the outside world. In the past, he has repeatedly gone back on his glib assurances to bring about a civilian rule, thus staying on in power for long eight years. Now, on August 27, the junta will be observing the anniversary of the coup, when, as the General now says, a civilian rule will be installed.

What adds further complication to the General's announcement and makes his decision unacceptable to the people of Nigeria is his latest decree that neither of the two candidates who contested the polls, annulled by Babangida, would be allowed to participate in the August contest. This is absurd. By all accounts, it was the opposition candidate, Moshood K. O. Abiola who was leading by a wide margin against his rival, Bashir Othman Tofa, when the court barred the release of the result, thus giving the General the excuse for cancelling the election.

The situation has turned complex and explosive. Abiola has proclaimed himself as the country's elected president. Technically, the opposition leader may be right in doing so, as an assertion of his political right. Unfortunately, with Babangida holding on to power and controlling the armed forces, Abiola is hardly in a position to exercise his authority. Meanwhile, demonstrations have been launched in various parts of the country against the junta and several countries. including Britain and the United States, have tightened their trade sanctions against this oilrich country to force the Nigerian leader to respect the result that gave victory to the opposition. Babangida can go on bungling again and again. But, at some point, he should let his con-

fused country to take a straightforward path back

to democracy. That's the only way for Nigeria to

bounce back as a front-ranking economic power

in Africa.

Bangladesh in 1971, we have been struggling between the two worlds - one dead, the other powerless to prevail. The phantom of the dead have endured in a shocking and ruthless manner because liberation did not lead to elimination of hunger from the fertile land, denial of opportunities remained rampant and the conditions of living deteriorated further. All of us go to bed every night wishing for a better world tomorrow. Those who go to bed hungry and the destitute wish for abundance of food the next day. Day after day, if such basic needs are not met, the bitterness and anger can only increase. Rebels without a cause are bound to flourish.

And, the struggle continues - between the world that is dead and the other that is too weak to prevail. Pakistan that emerged as a result of partition of the sub-continent in August 1947, was formally pronounced dead on a misty winter evening of 1971. Obviously, we must accept that there were quite a few who did not accept it - not only Jamaat, but there were others as well. Later on many have reconciled, others forgiven, some suffered and many collaborators went unpunished.

another and not necessarily in the same order of the past However, the most unfortunate reality has been the bolstering of the phantom of the dead world beyond all reasonable proportions, reinforced during the last two decades into a struggle through abundantly funded, organised political parties promoting bloody agitations. This has been possible

OMBAY, India's comme-

rcial capital, was maul-

ed and wounded by

communal riots in January as

hundreds were killed, thous-

ands injured and almost

US\$500 million worth of

city will be hard put to get back

on its feet but they didn't

reckon with a 79-year-old envi-

ronmental activist and consid-

ered by Indians a "living saint."

His name is Baba Amte, and he

had vowed "to bring back

Coming from others, that

would be an empty gesture but

from this popular social activist,

the daunting task of rehabilitat-

ing Bombay could be just a

affectionately called by the

throng he has helped, is himself

painfully crippled with a degen-

erative disease of the spine.

Today he can walk but not sit

erect, and must travel in a

ues to build, plan and create, to

eradicate what he calls "mental

leprosy" or "psychological

anaesthesia" which he believes

is the greatest of human limita-

Baba Amte explained to the

Observer newspaper why he

suddenly opted to stay in

Bombay and temporarily aban-

don his camping at the banks of

the river Narbada for months to

prevent the building of a US\$1

billion dam there. He called

Bombay a city that is beginning

prone position. Still he contin-

Baba (father) Amte, as he is

Bombay to its senses."

matter of time.

Many believed the wounded

property destroyed.

They are still pinning for

what is not - in one form or

The Struggle between the Two Worlds because "Sonar Bangla" with expanding job opportunities and rising per capita income could not be established and the struggle between the two worlds has intensified instead whittling down to a marginal issue. An army of unemployed has been available to join the hoodlums.

Today, the dead confronts the new born in a stupor stunned by the excesses of the life of poverty and depriva economic dislocation followed by famine and, above all, continuing economic degenera-

Similar Situation

At the end of the second world war, both Germany and Japan faced a similar situation. But the dead world could not resurrect itself because of German economic miracle and the Japanese economic wonder. Obviously, people preferred to enjoy unprecedented economic prosperity instead of being crazy to join the neo Nazis of Germany or pro-Imperialist forces of Japan. On the other hand, imagine that the Marshall Plan was a failure and therefore world economy quickly returned to another long-run depression, as severe as that of 1930s: German eco nomic miracle would have become a far cry, comeback of Nazis a distinct possibility and war devastated urban neighbourhood of European cities ruled by the thugs.

This is exactly what happened to overcrowded 55,000 square miles of delta land dislocated, at the eastern edge of the south Asian sub-continent. The economy went spinning downward - deprivation

became the order of the day. I have seen Permanent Secretary to the Government waiting in a que to buy milk powder in 1974; while in the following year, a former Member of Parliament had to borrow money from me to return to his village home. He was a freedom fighter, elected a law-maker but within four years, he was back to squalor -

Inevitably, the streets tend to be ruled by the thugs. The

young, including Mastans, that if we try with all our efforts. put in hard work and persist through repeated endeavours. then, in the long run, definitely the next generation will live in "Switzerland of the

Dream Scenario

However, the dream seenario was not even conceived as the minute seed; so that after lying dormant, for a decade if need be, it could one day sprout, become a seedling and

WINDOW ON ASIA Shahed Latif

only difference is that we have given them a new name -Mastan. They belong to the post-Bangladesh generation craving for a Kata rifle to rob or hijack; or a forged passport with a fake visa to get into an OECD country as illegal immi-

Nobody can overnight transform Bangladesh into a Switzerland of the East. In January 1972, Bangabandhu announced it on his return from captivity, raising hopes and aspirations among the people for more jobs and better income. Only through sustained growth in jobs and income "Switzerland of the East" could be a reality in the longrun. The announcement was the beginning of a new struggle. It ought to have led to gradual but certain unfolding of new trends and developments convincing the people, old and

from thereon, to a growing plant — ultimately maturing as a giant rain-tree. Instead we got busy with distribution often amounting to plunder. The utmost concern for production went unheeded. Who gets what of abandoned assets or enforcement of public control over them received highest priority; while, the giant rain-tree of the dream scenario never saw the light of the day. We cut down the trees that were left to create an

empty landscape. The phantom of the dead world has been lurking behind all this time. It was hardly realised. Quietly, they gathered strength. Today, manifestation of confrontation between the two worlds is the movement launched by Nirmul Committee. In the midst of the immediate issue of trial and punishment of a collaborator.

ish other mosques in the coun-

try as these were built by the

Mughal emperors. "Let us hope

they realise that unearthing his-

tory at this stage is like an ar-

ruins instead of in the ruins.

chaeologist finding his career in

shrinking in size and in places

like Europe where they are do-

ing away with imaginary

boundaries and moving towards

a common currency and a

cupied with what Emperor

have done grave injustice to the

Buddhists, destroying their

monasteries and some Jain

Bombay, not for others but to

pacify my soul," he said. "I want

to stay in the most disturbed

OPINION

"I want to set an example in

He said even Hindu rulers

common market, "we are preoc-

Babar did centuries ago."

In an age when the world is

we have virtually failed to comprehend the fundamentals of social and political dynamics, of agitation and aggression that are at work + in fact working overtime - due to faflure of the nation to give to its people the way out of poverty and deprivation.

if the economy experienced an average rate of growth of 6 to 8 per cent per annum (same as other South-east and East Asian countries) over the last wo decades [1972-1992] then Jamaat and Shibir from the world of the dead would have remained buried in the deepest graves and Mastans automatically vanished from the streets of Dhaka. The events would have taken an entirely different course: the radicals of today concerned with problems of deteriorating environment; while, the funda mentalists agitating against high tides of westernisation, inevitable in any rapidly industrialising country.

But that is not to be the case: the rise of the Nazis was defeated by German economic miracle but neo-Pakistanis have, a heyday due to Bangladesh economic debacle. We are now bogged down in the quagmire of counter-revolution because we are power less to retrieve ourselves from the cesspool of a stagnant economy. Only economic growth, I repeat, economic growth, alone can sweep away the trash heap of communal, partisan politics.

Past Predilections Offshoots of past predilec-

tions, often of colonial origin do afflict the path of progress

Second World War. Those who succeed in containing them could do so primarily because of their economic success. It is economics which must be at the forefront -- times without number this has been proved without any reasonable doubt Take for example Malayasta where the deep-seated problems of a multi-racial society were resolved only because of its rapid economic growth from a plantation to a industrialising economy and the ethnic minorities also gained from economic prosperity. On the other hand, communal disharmony of the sub-continent, inspite of partition. could not be contained since economic stagnation was not overcome: cowdung remained the prime source of fuel and bullock carts the major means of transport. The end of the cold war was not due to any military failure - it was the result of a grand collapse of the centrally planned economy of the vast Soviet Empire. Cold war was not won - it ended without a single missile being

of countries who gained inde-

pendence since the end of the

Similarly, the struggle between the two worlds in Bangladesh cannot be won by any one side. It must end through redundancy of the adversaries when withdrawal from the battle-lines will be automatic without application of any force. Likewise, Mastans will vanish, not eliminated through police actions. For these to happen, the basic condition is one and one only: a vibrant and growing economy where vast majority of the people will clearly perceive. every night before going to bed, that it will be a better world tomorrow.

A Saint Strives to Save Bombay

to resemble Beirut.

"I make a very bold statement when I say that the time has come when we need to freeze history. (Hindu fundamentalists) have twisted Lokmanya Tilak's thesis on Hinduism. This is gradually creating a Balkanisation in the minds and hearts of the people of India."

He appealed to the silent majority among the 800 million Indians to rise and put a stop to this epileptic fit.

"I am worried about the silent majority of this country, he added. "How many people are affiliated to political parties? Perhaps, 50 to 60 million. The rest are unconcerned with political parties. It is this majority that is my great hope, my only hope. I am telling them that if they remain silent now, they are in danger of becoming a silenced majority with fascism making a bold thrust."

Baba Amte's mission is to get the silent majority to listen to their conscience. He has rejected the proposition that Muslims should be moved to Muslim majority areas and Hindus to Hindu-dominated areas. "People should be encour aged to go back to their original neighbourhoods. Dividing the two communities will only deepen the chasm. Even dividing the mohallas (localities) is a dangerous thing to do."

Prakash Chandra writes from Bombay

'How many Indians are affiliated to political parties? Perhaps, 50 to 60 million. The rest are unconcerned with political parties. It is this majority that is my great hope, my only hope'

Baba Amte has been visiting the arson-hit areas. In one locality, Behrampada, he saw how fire engines were being obstructed by Hindus from saving Muslim houses from burning down. He heard slogans like "Let these houses burn."

These fundamentalist forces, he said, have turned rabid. They will soon learn that their attempt to divide the nation is futile. In an analysis of Bombay's problems, Baba Amte noted that the communal poison was growing in the hearts of the lower middle class and the upper middle class.

The staffers of the electricity board. Oil and Natural Gas Commission and other municipal workers refused to visit the Behrampada slums as it is a Muslim locality. Water and electricity connections were not re vived at the slum areas as the maintenance staff said the members require police protec-

Baba Amte has rejected activists of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other Hindu extremists who went to demol

struggle on the banks of the Narbada, Though I am broken in body, I am not broken in

Baba Amte, who has won a UN award for protecting human rights and a Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service, is now being blamed by the fascist Shiv Sena (The Army of Lord Shiva) for disturbing the peace in the city and obstructing relief work.

Baba's wife Sadhmatai Amte has backed her husband throughout his struggle, although she has remained in the shadow of the popular activist. Of her life with him, she says: "I would describe it as a constant battle against death".

It was with the full support of Sadhmatai Amte when, a few weeks after his marriage in the 1950s he gave up his practice of law and management of his family estate. He resolved to devote his life to helping society's cast-offs.

The loathing and fear he felt upon seeing a leper helped him decide to study the disease at the School of Tropical Medicine in Calcutta. In 1951, with his area before I go, back to my old family, six leprosy patients and

a lame cow, he moved to 20hectares of rockstrewn, -tiger and scorpion infested wasteland in Chandrapur district and established Anandwan, or Forest of Bliss.

Today, Anandwan is a 200hectare complex, complete with a 1,600-student college, a 300student agricultural college and schools for the blind, for the deaf, dumb and physically handicapped and for leprosyafflicted children. There is an orphanage, a home for sentor citizens and housing for some 2,000 people.

Born 78 years ago into a wealthy, high-caste family, Baba Amte was educated to be a lawyer. Now he devotes his time to social activism.

Meanwhile, he established in 1957 Ashokwan, a settlement occupying 40 hectares, and in 1967 another 526-hectares complex. Like Anandwan, these settlements are both rehabilitation centres for the handicapped and integrated rural development, using scientific agri-

cultural methods. Baba Amte received the 1985 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service in Recognition for his work-oriented rehabilitation of Indian leprosy patients and

other handicapped outcasts.

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.

Re-open BCI, please

Sir, While the Government and the Directors of 'temporarily closed" BCI Ltd play 'cops and robbers', the hapless depositors caught in the crossfire are bleeding, wondering why they are being punished for the crimes of others. While the depositors burn in agony the 'Neros' of the bank and administration play their fiddles!

Elderly patients are losing their life due to financial inability to seek proper treatment. Students cannot concentrate on their studies. Some marriages have broken up. Some marriageable girls have had to cancel their wedding engagements. More than five depositors have lost their lives. Many more are in their deathbeds. Many have lost their mental balance. Why did this happen in a country where there is supposed to be a Government charged with the sacred trust of protecting the life and property of its citi-

drag their feet and display reluctance, jail them, strip them, confiscate their businesses and properties, freeze their accounts, impound their passports, till they cough up their dues and meanwhile reopen BCI Ltd under a fresh management approved by the Government.

If the 'Directors' of BCI Ltd

The depositors of BCI Ltd request the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Finance Minister to put them selves in the shoes of the hapless depositors and feel their agony and to take positive action to solve the problem. If BCCI and NCL can be revived why not BCI Ltd? Are the depositors of BCI Ltd not sons and daughters of this soil? Or are the depositors of BCI Ltd aliens in their own mother-

It is not unnatural that from the depths of their hearts the depositors of BCI Ltd invoke the curse of Allah on those who are intentionally creating complications by their apathy and inactivity in reaching an immediate solution to a fully solvable problem as has been proved by actions pertaining to BCCI and NCL

So, in the name of humanity please re-open BCI Ltd and thereby save three lac depositors from a state of sub-human existence.

A B Sattar 32/4 A, Shahjahan Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Graf was just too tough

Sir, Through your esteemed daily, I would like to congratulate Steffi Graf in her recent victory in the French Open this year. Steffi Graf was totally invin-

cible. It is true that if Monica Seles were present, then the entire tournament would have been more exciting. But she could not attend due to a mishap caused to her by one of Graf's fans in April last. Graf played Three Sets only

in the finals against Mary Joe Fernandez, beating her 4-6, 6-2, 6-4 after trailing 1-0 behind in the First Set. The game lasted 2.5 hours and Steffi won mainly due to her professional acumens. This was her 73rd career Title and, through it, she has reestablished her No. 1 position. In passing, it may be noted that, Steffi holds the record for being No. 1 for the longest period of time

(186 weeks, August 1987 March 1991). Even the greatest of them all, Bjorn Borg did not stay at the tip of the iceberg for so long. Steffi is also the only person to achieve a Golden Slam i.e., she won all four Grand Slams and the Olympic in 1998. Borg is beaten here again. Graf was just too tough.

Asrarul Islam Chowdhury Department of Economics Jahangirnagar University

Padma Barrage

Sir, Countless sittings and meetings took place between India and Bangladesh centering the Ganges water sharing issue but no fruitful result could be obtained as yet. The Farakka Barrage was erected by our next door neighbour for their greater interest, so to what extent the problem can actually be solved is a matter of thought. We should, therefore, also try to find out a solution to this great problem within our

geographical boundary. We can possibly think of constructing a barrage on the river Padma in such a place that we can accumulate a high volume of end-summer water in the river to meet our dry season requirement. A barrage within Bangladesh would be able to counteract the adversities created by the Farakka Barrage to a great extent as this would function like a huge reservoir. Dredgers may be engaged to remove siltation of the river-bed gradually in phases starting from our boundary to the proposed barneeded to combat AIDS - igrage end in order to accumunoring the scientific evidence late greater quantity of water. showing that one can be in-Proper measures should also fected by it merely through the be taken up so that the promisfortune of needing blood posed barraged does not cause transfusion or being injected floods. Such a project is posby an unhygienic syringe. We sibly no less important than seem nowadays to be wallow making Jamuna multi-purpose

Motius Samad Chowdhury, Phultola Tea Estate, Sylhet

The Charity-case Syndrome

For quite a while now, I Shaf Rahman have been pondering over a problem. What concerns me problem that seems to be more and should concern us plaguing our nation and all are the causes. The whys. depriving us of our dignity. The disease, and surely it is a Why, for instance, do we feel so immune these days to the disease - although not of a fallout of our thoughtless terminal nature, one hopes words and deeds? I have a afflicts both the rich and the theory — only a tentative one. poor, the educated and the hasten to add - and it involves illiterate, the powerful and having to make a harsh analogy. But then, what could possibly be harsher than the future we face if we do not make an attempt to face reality? In any case, I would like to share the hypothesis with others in the hope that it may ruffle a few feathers and give rise to the kind of constructive debate

> that will rid us one day of this crippling disease. The causes are many, needless to say, but the one I wish to raise today I call 'the charity-case syndrome'. Or, to be more brutal, 'the beggar's mentality'. Let me explain, although let us, first of all, have clear in our minds what mean by the beggar. I do not refer, of course, to the person who, because of unavoidable circumstances, is in need of help. Such a man can quite rightly expect us to come to his aid and besides, our charity will be given with a positive aim - to help him stand on his own two feet. As long as he ful fills his end of the bargain by doing that, or at least trying to in all sincerity, he cannot in any sense be called a beggar. However, if instead of using our assistance to better himself, he allows it to become a permanent crutch, begins to expect society to subsidise his existence on a lifelong basis, then such a person can rightfully be called the beggar because he will have developed in time the beggar's ethos. The give-me, give-me, give-me

mentality. Now what's the main trait of countable to society for his words and deeds. He can say anything, do anything without bothering about what others might think. All that he's concerned with each morning is to seek out those lucrative corners of the city where he knows that charity comes easy. What is upsetting to see though is the nation as a whole descend to that same mentality, that same attitude of unaccountability. And, in my tentative view, for the very same

Again, let me explain. Ever since becoming an independent nation, we have received billions of dollars in aid. Now, if we were to honestly ask our selves the question: "How much of a genuine effort have we made to use that money to stand on our feet?", how else could we respond but: 'Very little indeed'? Instead, what we have done is become dependent on aid. Used it to build palatial houses but barely a single industry. And after decades of socalled independence, the bulk of our budget continues to be made up of donor's aid. What we cannot afford, we continue to import; what we used to export, we do not these days; while, like the beggar, we keep on thinking that charity will be forever flowing. Under such circumstances, are we not likely to develop the beggar's ethos and everything else that goes with it? Do we not begin to behave like him? Hold ourselves unaccountable for our words and decds? It's inevitable, I think, and

while I accept that mine is only a theory, I would still wish to make this plea, and specially to those in whose hands the future lies. Let us, for the sake of our dignity, stop using the aid as a permanent crutch. Let's regain what's left of our fading pride and let those who still have an ounce of it be given the chance to come to our aid. Let us use the money to build a worthy nation in stead of looking, like begginto make an easy living.

the weak and, if one must give it a name, one would have to call it 'the malaise of unaccountability'. The license, in other words, to say or do almost anything without fear of being held responsible for the consequences. It's a curse that hangs over the country as a whole and encourages one Minister to claim that contrary to what many of

us would like to believe, the electronic media belongs not to the nation but to the government in power — to deal with according to its whims. The examples are endless and rather than bore your readers with too many of them, let me point out only a few recent cases. A noted MP in the ruling party, a freedom fighter himself, comes up with the startling statistic that no more than 3 lakh people were killed in '71, thereby contradicting the figure of 30 lakh accepted and quoted officially for the last twenty years. I hold no personal view on the accuracy of either figure but quote them only to show the amazing disparity. In another instance, one of your regular contributors to the Letters Column not only includes leprosy among the sexually transmitted diseases but goes on to add, and with an air of piety at that, that a pious existence is all that is

ing in a strange mixture of

piety and slogans while the

nation as a whole edges closer

to disaster. But that is the

the professional beggar? What is it that sets him apart from the others? Above all, it's the fact that he has decided to surrender his pride and, hav ing placed himself outside the norms, feels no longer ac-