

Saving Traditional Craft

During her visit to the Bangladesh Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) laboratories last Wednesday, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia called for integration of scientific and technological research with the ongoing process of industrialisation in the country. As she rightly observed, technological advancement was a necessity for survival in competitive market economy. Our plea is that the drive for higher technology should also embrace the needs of the country's traditional craft.

The plight of the traditional pottery industry provides a case in point. Reports keep coming in from outlying areas such as Dinajpur, Netrakona, Patuakhali—just to name a few—to the effect that traditional pottery is on the verge of extinction. Even allowing for some exaggeration in such reports, there is no denying the fact that traditional crafts like pottery had been yielding ground, slowly but inexorably, to more durable and often cheaper, industrial products.

Such changes are perhaps inherent in the process of industrialisation. Consumer choice shifts and an organised industry is better placed to promote its products. It will be too much to expect mustard oil turned out by traditional oil-press—ghant, as these are called—to survive in competition with mass produced palm or soyabean oil. And yet, it could keep its existence, albeit in a limited way, as a gourmet's delight or for its medicinal values—as a specialised food item, as they say in the West.

Potters in the countryside, it is said, are leaving their age-old vocation, taking to other means of earning a livelihood—as day labourers or rickshaw van pullers. Soon they will lose their traditional skills and migrate to the cities, adding to the rootless segment of the urban population.

As elsewhere in the world, pottery goes well back into the historical past in this country too. Archaeologists dig up shards of pottery which turn into museum pieces or, may be, collectors' items. Pottery can survive in this age too. May be no longer as a purveyor of household pots and pans but as a producer of specialised goods. Even now, determined potters who have clung to their skills, are said to be turning increasingly to fashioning out of clay, new range of products, rather than the traditional earthenware. Their skills could be put to even better use through organisational improvements in such areas as supply of input, finance and marketing—technological advances in production methods such as firing of clay and glazing. It would not need too heavy an investment to organise all these. Institutional framework for carrying out such a programme already exists in the country. Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) and its design centres, a premier research institution like the BCSIR, they all are here. With appropriate designs and improved technology, pottery could find a good export market too.

There was a day when a potter could collect clay from the land free of charge. Nowadays, he has to pay for the clay. BCSIR, we are told, has a glass and ceramic division. The institution's work in this area could help the country's surviving potters to find better ways of making articles out of clay.

During her visit to BCSIR, the Prime Minister had also asked the scientists to dedicate their researches for solution of the people's problems. Let us hope that apart from organisations like BSCIC and, may be NGOs also, the scientists and researchers in the country too, will apply themselves in helping the people engaged in traditional craft to survive.

A Relief for Major

The winning of the tactical confidence vote in parliament by British Prime Minister John Major was highly crucial. He has just managed to do that but the results are deceptive. It is not that Major's personal ranking as Britain's premier is all-time low but also his party MPs hves turned against him to precipitate his downfall. In fact, he could by now find him in the foot-steps of his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher, had his Conservative Party not have its own stake in saving him from yet another humiliating defeat in the confidence vote cleverly twisted with the Maastricht Treaty issue. Only last Thursday did Major lose the second of the two critical votes on the treaty.

So it was a political gamble he has successfully used in his favour to stay on course for a showdown with his party rebels and rivals. But only for a while. The Maastricht Treaty, no doubt a divisive issue, is considered to be a means for Britain's formal full integration with the new Europe its leaders are committed to build up. After Denmark's endorsement of the treaty, Britain had virtually no choice but to join the bandwagon. Therefore, the confidence vote was not on Major's performance but on the issue of ratification of the treaty seeking to drop the social chapter on Europe-wide work rules. The opposition Labour was in favour of the uniform work rules and in the earlier voting, the Conservative rebels joined the opposition to make the voting in the House of Commons a tie with a view to burying the whole treaty.

Clearly Major's tactical score is not an enduring win. It has just given him a breathing time and he remains to be the most unpopular PM Britain ever had in its history of West-Ministerial system of government. How the beleaguered premier will plan his future political strategy to fight his opponents in his party or outside of it will decide his fate. Conservative rebels have voted for him without expressing their confidence in him. In fact, they were forced to do so because the only other alternative was, as Major threatened with, to go for a general election in which they feared the Conservative party had no chance of winning. The rallying behind Major is as tactical as he himself has tailor-made for him.

John Major is no fool and he knows about it. He is expected to go for a clean-up of the Tory Party soon, in a drive against the dissident elements and potential rivals. But will he as well risk — gamble on — a snap election? The answer to the question will emerge within weeks after Major has taken on his opponents.

Was there Anything for the Third World on its Agenda?

THE Group of Seven is a club of the rich nations. In fact they do not make any bones about it. There are a variety of economic forums in the UN system but these are representative global bodies. The Economic and Social Council — the highest economic organ under the charter, the Trade and Development Board of UNCTAD and even the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the World Bank and IMF — are all available for the consideration of global economic issues. But the rich nations wanted an exclusive forum which would be very small and unencumbered by the presence of poor nations. This group has arrogated to itself the right to take most of the crucial decisions on economic issues of international concern, bypassing the UN organs and thus without even consulting the vast number of the Third World nations. This being the essential character of the G-7, there was no reasonable ground to hope that the leaders assembled in Tokyo would have any time for the poor countries. Indeed the results of the Summit proved it.

The leaders who assembled in Tokyo for the Summit were handicapped by the very low rating in the public opinion polls. The host of the conference, Prime Minister Miyazawa, whose fortunes have recently taken a nose-dive, has an approval rating of only 5.8 per cent of the people. No leader could possibly attend a conference and negotiate with others with that kind of standing in the country. John Major is supported by a mere 19 per cent of the British people. Helmut Kohl of Germany and Amato of scandal-ridden Italy enjoy an approval rating of only 27 per cent.

DAY by day, British public officials are embarrassed by fresh allegations of impropriety among the country's political parties. In recent weeks, both the ruling Conservative party and the opposition Labour party have admitted that they were funded, in part, by fugitive businessmen charged with serious financial offences.

But the parties deny the worst of the allegations, that donations were as high as hundreds of thousands of pounds and that the monies the parties received had been stolen. Party financing in Britain is considered a private matter, so it is nearly impossible for outsiders, including legal authorities, to verify the claims and counter-claims. The following aberrations in public party financing have been reported in the British press and some are under investigation, although no charges or government findings have been made:

- The Conservatives were secretly bankrolled through several elections by five foreign businessmen implicated in fraud, tax evasion and the arms trade, including Octav Botnar, now in Switzerland and wanted for evading corporate taxes when he was the head of auto importer Nissan UK;
- North Cypriot refugee Asil Nadir, wanted on charges of stealing hundreds of millions from the defunct Polly Peck International conglomerate he headed, allegedly paid £500 million to the Tories in search of a knighthood, which he never received;
- The Labour party received £9,500 from Charlos Costa, also now in Cyprus and wanted by Britain's Serious Fraud Office for questioning.

Of course, party officials say, if it can be proven that they received tainted money, they will give it back. But as any accountant can tell you, all money looks the same, whether it is illegotten or legitimately donated by its rightful owner.

And Britain is not alone in suffering through these embarrassing revelations. The Japanese government of Kiichi Miyazawa fell following a rebellion over his Liberal Democratic Party's plans to reform the country's electoral system, which has been plagued by charges of tax evasion and influence peddling since the Recruit scandal.

USA-Baghdad-Bosnia

Sir, The US bombed the Iraqi Intelligence Headquarter in Baghdad without any warning to Saddam Hussein and without prior approval of Security Council. US also requested for an urgent session of the Security Council after the air strike. As per President Clinton, the action was taken after 'compelling evidence' was found about Iraq's foiled plan to kill former President George Bush during his visit to Kuwait in mid-April. Very frankly speaking, I agree to some sort of punitive action against Baghdad if the allegation was squarely proved. But I have the following questions

(1) How can US take unilateral action without the approval of UN Security Council? Does it not amount to flexing of musclepower and disrespect to the world body?

(2) While months and months were wasted in UNO

If the liberalization of trade among the industrialized countries leads to high growth rate and increase in domestic demand, it may help the developing countries in increasing their exports to these affluent countries. But other than the expectation of such indirect benefits, their pressing problems did not merit even any mention in the statements made by the Summit leaders.

cent. Bill Clinton improved his rating in the polls by bombing Baghdad but even then it was as low as 38 per cent. President Mitterrand's poll rating is 46 per cent but the electoral disaster of the Socialist party has further taken the shine off the veteran French leader. Kim Campbell, the seventh member of the group, has been sworn in as the Prime Minister of Canada just before the Tokyo summit and therefore her standing in the country is still a matter of conjecture. Given the vulnerable position of the leaders at home it was only to be expected that their main goal at the Summit would be to refurbish their personal image and standing in domestic politics and gain some economic benefit for the country. No one expected any major initiative from the group. Yet the Summit seems to have made a significant breakthrough in the area of international trade.

American frustration with the Japanese market, which they have been unable to penetrate in any significant manner, has been a major problem in the bilateral relation between the two countries. Bush put pressure on Japan to open up its market but could not make much headway. Clinton, by contrast, sees to have succeeded in persuading Miyazawa to make a number of concessions in removing both tariff and non-tariff barriers. Similarly the EEC countries have agreed to tariff reductions on agricultural products. It may be recalled that the US and the

EEC have been at loggerhead on this question. The Market-Opening Agreement signed at Tokyo is the most important achievement of the Summit. The leaders claimed that the 'far-reaching and comprehensive market opening package of goods and services' will help spur worldwide economic growth, increase employment and strengthen the fight against recession. In specific terms, the leaders identified a common list of product sectors for com-

plete elimination of tariff and non-tariff measures. They also agreed to harmonize tariff for chemical products. For tariffs of 15 per cent and above, they will negotiate 'the maximum achievable package of tariff reductions'. They committed themselves to engage immediately in multilateral negotiation to 'complete expeditiously the agricultural market access package, including processed products, as an essential component of the agricultural agreement and of a global and balanced Uruguay Round package.' They agreed on more open financial, telecommunication, maritime and audio-visual services.

It is indeed an impressive document which seems to have added laurels to Clinton's feather. More open trading in all these sectors was what the Americans have been demanding with little success and increasing national frustration. Back home Clinton may not get exactly a hero's welcome but given the problems that his administration was having, the success in Tokyo will certainly help him in restoring some confidence in the nation about his leadership capabilities. The Washington Post, in an editorial on July 9 said, 'It came at the last possible minute, but the trade deal announced on Wednesday in Tokyo is genuinely a great achievement. Paying tribute to the Clinton administration the paper said, 'The Clinton administration did a lot to get this process of negotiation moving again, but the credit is shared by all seven of the governments meeting in Tokyo. The other six are all working with minimal public support at home and it took courage to reach this week's agreement. It will take even more courage to finish this gigantic round of trade deals by December.'

Will this agreement be of any significance to the Third World countries? According to the leaders themselves, the benefit will come to them only indirectly. If the liberalization of trade among the industrialized countries leads to high growth

rate and increase in domestic demand it may help the developing countries in increasing their exports to these affluent countries. But other than the expectation of such indirect benefits, their pressing problems did not merit even any mention in the statements made by the Summit leaders. If it is doubtful if the plan to increase domestic demand in the rich countries will materialize. Germany, for example, resolutely resisted all attempts by the United States and others to reduce its interest rate. Such a step would have eased pressure on other European currencies and stimulated demand and investment. In view of the importance of German economy in global trade but particularly in Europe, this would have helped the EEC countries to get out of the recession. But Germany fears inflation more than unemployment and so it stood firm in its policy. So the prospect of a sharp boost to the exports of the Third World countries does not seem to be justified.

A positive outcome of the Summit was the agreement to provide three billion dollars to Russia. Yeltsin was warmly received by the group and hints were dropped that once Russia regained its economic health it could become the eighth member of the Group. In contrast, President Soeharto of Indonesia, currently chairman of the Non-aligned movement, received a tepid if not a cool reception. In fact Soeharto was embarrassed by the kind of critical questions raised in Tokyo

about East Timor. The biggest disappointment of the summit was its failure to take action against the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The leaders backed away from any prospect of use of force against either the Serbs or the Croats. Their softened stand reflects clearly their diminishing commitment to assist Bosnia's Muslims in their fight against the Serbs and Croats in a way that could affect the outcome of the civil war. According to a Japanese foreign ministry official, 'The discussion just went round and round in circles despite substantial time spent on the topic.' Once again, European diplomacy has succeeded in neutralizing any desire on the part of the Americans to stand up against genocide. Secular and conscientious people all over the world have observed with dismay and disappointment that the Christian nations of Europe, despite their modern ideas and values, have failed to rise above religious prejudice. There can be no other plausible explanation for their persistent attempt to block any action that might lead to the end of the massacre of the Muslims in Europe.

The Western news media plays up the economic summit as the biggest and most significant event for the world economy. In reality it is a caucus of the very rich in search of solutions to their own problems of growth, joblessness, exports and investment. They do not seem to have any time for the poor nations who must wait until the rich are able to put their own houses in order! It is a rather harsh assessment but after a very close scrutiny of the Summit's outcome one does not seem to have any reasonable ground to have a different view.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

Wednesday in Tokyo is genuinely a great achievement. Paying tribute to the Clinton administration the paper said, 'The Clinton administration did a lot to get this process of negotiation moving again, but the credit is shared by all seven of the governments meeting in Tokyo. The other six are all working with minimal public support at home and it took courage to reach this week's agreement. It will take even more courage to finish this gigantic round of trade deals by December.'

HOW POLITICAL PARTIES ARE FINANCED?

For Sale, Cheap: Elections, Many Locations

Michael Urlocker writes from London

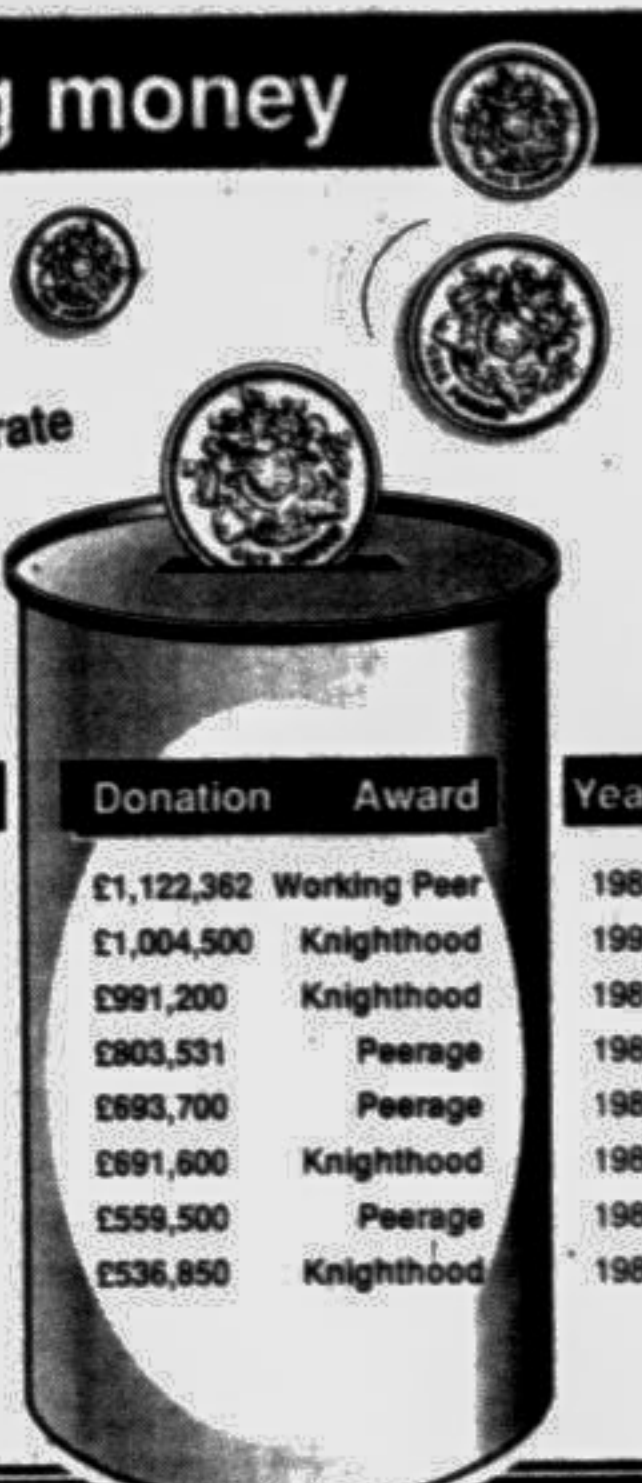
Britain's latest financial scandal, involving allegations of ill-gotten payments to both the Conservative and Labour parties, raises questions about how political parties are financed. So too, do irregularities over the years in Japan, the US, Italy, and India — all self-proclaimed vanguards of democracy. Clean political financing is a rarity, argues a Gemini News Service correspondent, bolstering the case for state funding of parties.

Rewarding big money

Honours awarded to corporate donors of Conservative Party

| Recipient | Company | Donation | Award | Year |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------|--------------|------|
| Sir Frank Taylor | Taylor Woodrow | £1,122,362 | Working Peer | 1982 |
| Robert Clarke | United Biscuits | £1,004,500 | Knighthood | 1983 |
| Kath Showering | Allied Lyons | £991,200 | Knighthood | 1981 |
| Sir William Cazyer | Brit & Com/with | £803,531 | Peerage | 1982 |
| Sir Charles Forte | Forte | £693,700 | Peerage | 1982 |
| Austin Bide | Glaxo | £691,600 | Knighthood | 1980 |
| Sir Edwin McAlpine | Newarthill | £559,500 | Peerage | 1980 |
| John Baring | Barings | £536,850 | Knighthood | 1983 |

Source: Labour Party



Likewise, bribes and mafia connections became a way of life for Italian businessmen and politicians, while in India, stockbroker Harshad Mehta, himself facing charges following the country's biggest securities fraud, has alleged that he paid suitcases loaded with cash to Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao.

In an interview with an Indian magazine, Mehta's brother, who is said to have been in on the deal, explained their action: 'There was never any immediate gain that we were looking for. It was sort of a political insurance.'

Even in the United States, which undertook a massive reform of its party funding after the Watergate scandal in 1974, little real change has materialised.

An exhaustive study by The Wall Street Journal revealed that many of the top donors to the Republican party in recent years were the same people who bankrolled Nixon two decades earlier, courtesy of legal loopholes that circumvented the new rules. Unfortunately, major companies in the oil, defence and development businesses have always found a need to curry favour with elected officials.

And that really cuts to the

heart of the matter. It is very easy for people in Western countries to condemn activities in Nigeria, where the ruling military dictator has again delayed a transition to democracy, or in Kuwait, where there is no tradition of free multiparty elections, as undemocratic. But the traditional methods of campaign funding in many countries serves the very same purpose: squelching the voice of the people in favour of narrow, but powerful special interests.

As long as politicians are elected on the basis of who has the most money to spend campaigning, which increasingly seems to be the rule, charges of corruption are bound to follow. After all, no business donates huge amounts of money simply

OPINION

Political Activism for Service to the Nation

Shahabuddin Mahtab

Honorio Ventura of the Philippines has this to say. 'Public office is a public trust and not just a place for enrichment. In the third world countries we find too few patriots and true social workers.'

In the third world countries, the nascent democracies find themselves in a situation where the seeds of democracy do not flower easily. It had taken several hundred years for the western European countries, to evolve an evolutionary process for the flowering of democracy. In the Latin American countries, the elected governments are frequently changed, often with the help of the armed services. The armed forces often feel that they are the true arbiters of the nation, and have, therefore, to intervene whenever there is a crisis or a semi-crisis. In our sub-continent, India has, over the past forty-five years, a democratic culture, and has kept the armed forces under the control of the civilian government. In Bangladesh, there is still hope that the democratically elected government would be able to function till the completion of its term.

The democratic culture has to be established in the home, in the party meetings, in the local level governments etc. Democracy has to be a part of our daily living.

A democratically elected government, if moderately well run, is obviously considered to be superior to that of the 'reign' of a dictator ('All power corrupts, absolute power absolutely').

We in Bangladesh to-day have a false sense of values and prestige. We are living in a society, where there is atrocious display of wealth, which was

easily earned and also dissipated quickly.

If an election has to be won in this country by spending three to five million Taka, then it happens to be the victory of wealth, and not that of sincere social service. If one spends one to two million Taka for his daughter's marriage, this too cannot be the hard earned money.

Our government leaders and opposition members by their deeds and examples may hold up a noble example of simplicity and austerity, for the nation to follow.

Messrs Lal Bahadur Shastri and Chandra Sekhar always wore the simplest of clothes, with their heads held high. Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan on his death left a bank balance of Rs. 1300/- . When a leader lives a life of luxury, more often than not, the money is obtained by hook or crook.

The USA President declared his wealth at the time of assumption of his office.

Now we have a former executive President, who is already suffering a jail sentence for twenty years. Now we have the case of a State Minister who was forced to resign, because of the largely circulated charges of corruption. In fact the charges of corruption were being discussed widely, for the past several months.

Our democratic government may consider now for the submission of wealth statements by all holders of important offices of the government at the time of assuming office and similarly before departing from the office.

I shall end this writing by repeating an old quotation, 'the price of liberty is eternal vigilance'.

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.

keep his pre-election campaign promises.

Syed Abu Saleh Malibagh, Dhaka

Communal harmony day

Sir, We are yet to forget the great Calcutta killings of the 16th August 1946. This was one of the darkest chapters in human history. Hindus and Muslims (Congress and Muslim League?) fought each other with extreme savagery, cruelty and madness. Thousands of men, women and children lost their lives for no fault of their own. Rioting has been a common phenomenon in the pre-partition India and the trend is continuing till now. Only God knows when this trend will end in this sub-continent.

Communal harmony is the demand of time today for India and also for us in Bangladesh. May we take one particular day of the year as Communal-Harmony Day and the 16th August would be much appropriate for the same.

A B Chowdhury Mohammodpur, Dhaka

Amnesty International

Sir, The grisly murder of Sharmin Rima awfully stupefied the whole nation — which

waited steadfastly to see the murderer properly punished through the process of law. It is gratifying that the murderer has been meted out with proper punishment by our courts. All legal procedures have properly been exhausted and the President has rejected the criminal's mercy petition. The murderer is, now, to go to the gallows.

Law is not a social revenge. It is an instrument for maintaining a civilized social order. It is exemplary, it is, also, demonstrative.

Amnesty International (AI) is, so far, a prestigious, humane watchdog organization. It is supposed to uphold the cause of the prisoners of conscience, unjustly oppressed and persecuted by the military rulers and oppressive regimes the world over.

But surprisingly the AI is, recently, working otherwise. Or how on earth the AI has, reportedly, asked for clemency for Rima's murderer? In this world of increasing violence and lawlessness, if a grisly murderer cannot be punished even under the law, how civilized societies will exist and maintain law and social order?

If the AI does not find any better things to do it should better wind up.

LR Bhuiya Motjheel, Dhaka