

An Important Anniversary

From the days of Bangladesh starting on the wrong foot with wholesale nationalisation in the early seventies, to the twentieth anniversary of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) that was observed with considerable panache last Wednesday, we have come a long way. When the Prime Minister, in her inaugural address on the occasion, urged the private sector to play a pivotal role in national development, our nascent entrepreneurial class finally got the importance that should have been theirs much earlier.

Begum Zia was quite eloquent in stating her government's policies that favoured the growth of private sector. She was elaborate in mentioning the reforms that has been brought about in various sectors of our economy. But unfortunately she was unable to claim, with similar eloquence, the successful implementation of her policies.

According to the finance minister, the reasons for our low growth is our low savings. This, in our view, does not wholly explain the reluctance of our industrialists to borrow money from the banks to set up new ventures or expand the existing ones.

Then there is the question of some legitimate protection of our industries either due to their 'infant' status or because of the 'dumping' policies of other countries. On the face of it, such protection measures could be seen as contrary to open market policies, yet in small doses and within a limited framework, it could give some of our industries that critical push which is so vital for them at the initial stage.

The twentieth anniversary of the FBCCI marks an important milestone in the life of our struggling nation. The various Chambers grouped within the national Federation, have all played important roles in the respective areas that they represent.

Pay up Your Dues

Successive US administrations have been tardy in paying up the dues to the United Nations, sometimes due to bureaucratic bunglings and quite often to signal the world body of Washington's dissatisfaction with the policies pursued by the UN or any of its agencies.

This has happened again, judging by a letter to President Bill Clinton by a group of 13 senators, Democrats and Republicans, emphasising the urgency of Washington paying up the overdue UN bill. According to the letter, the Congress has so far failed to fund Clinton's 1993 supplemental request for 293 million dollar in the world body's peace-keeping operation and has cut one third off of the President's request for 620 million dollars.

True, the United States contributes over 25 per cent to regular budgets of the UN and most of its agencies and some 30 per cent of the UN peace keeping operation. But all this is not arbitrarily imposed on Washington. It is all based on a formula that is accepted by all concerned.

For Washington, not to pay up the dues which amount to not even a fraction of the US defence budget does not certainly improve the international image of the Clinton administration. Let us hope that the plea of the US senators will get the attention — and prompt the action — it deserves. It is never too late to pay up the dues — to anyone!

A can of Rawshogollas, juice-ball in literal English translation, either imported through the normal channel or smuggled (in fact the line of distinction tends to be thin — better no question asked), is cheaper than freshly made rawshogollas at leading sweetmeat shops of Dhaka.

Such unheard of import substitution of a very traditional as well as favourite Bengali snack food has been an awesome experience just a few days prior to the announcement of the national budget 1993-94.

Bengali sweetmeats are popular throughout the subcontinent but our part of Bengal used to be better known for the delicacy. There were famous brandnames like Manda of Muktagachia or Kachagolla of Natore because milk, the main ingredient, used to be available in abundance during the flush months of the year between November and April/May.

No doubt the sweets are still available but the feeling of plentiful supplies during flush months are no longer there simply because population has increased but not the production of milk. In fact it must have declined since within the limited space of 55,000 square miles, pasture or Bathan lands of milkshed areas have been converted to paddy lands.

Perhaps it is better to be ignorant when it is folly to be wise. Now taxes on milk powder, imported in bulk have been reduced. So powder supplies should increase. Also Mistiwallahs will henceforth pay no value added tax. Thus with

The Story of the Rawshogollas

The major problem that we face in this respect is our endemic import bias. When there was a shortage of rice in Japan they used to import raw rice or paddy so that the processing could yield rice bran as a byproduct which could be further processed into edible oil and poultry feed apart from the main product rice.

But what will happen to our new emphasis on dairy farming? How do they compete with imported milk powder? No problem, taxes on animal feed imports have also been reduced so that our emerging class of gentleman farmers could rear the lactating animals without suffering from tax burdens. Eventually, 'Mistiwallah' might have a choice between domestic liquid milk and imported milk powder; while consumers enjoy the freedom of choice — fresh rawshogollas or in cans. These are differentiated products and demand for them should be determined by consumers preference. Obviously, there must be a premium paid for local milk instead of milk powder and fresh instead of canned rawshogollas.

Textbook Example The situation seems to be very similar to the perfect textbook example of an ideal fiscal strategy leaving the free market forces undisturbed; when actual prices would tend to be identical with corresponding shadow values. It seems to be a minimum tax regime of a competitive utopia where nobody is hurt and we all, in theory at least, should be eating plenty of rawshogollas, canned or otherwise.

Unfortunately, fiscal adjustments in view of deep-seated structural problems of underdevelopment, are of marginal importance. The response to fiscal options will indeed be very limited and canned rawshogollas would still continue to remain cheap unless Taka is devalued against Indian currency and imported milk powder will dominate the milk market because supply shortfalls can never be met by domestic outputs alone, in spite of all the vigour and enthusiasm of gentleman farmers from Savar. Like it or not, we can never achieve self sufficiency in milk.

What should be done now — encourage import of milk powder in tins, ready for consumers to buy; or promote bulk import and thereby develop a domestic milk packaging industry? There is yet a third alternative of heavily taxing imports of all kinds so that domestic milk production is encouraged. There are three separate vested interest groups in support of the three alternatives and it is difficult for the government to support one or the other since there are potential voters everywhere. In order to find the right answer, let us go back to the rawshogolla episode and ascertain how from export of milk in the 1960s, short of rawshogollas in cans was possible.



Before and Now Before 1965, shortage of milk forced the imposition of a ban on manufacture of milk based sweets in West Bengal so that supply of liquid milk could be ensured for the vulnerable groups in the population. During 1970s, the ban was withdrawn with some improvement in supply but milk based sweets did not appear to be as plentiful as in Dhaka. The mini-size rawshogollas were expensive compared to what used to be available at Dhaka.

domestically produced. It must be noted that dairy development cannot achieve self-sufficiency because enough arable land to grow fodder could not be made available. However, that does not mean increasing dependence on imports. The strategy should be to produce locally as much as feasible and meet the deficit through imports.

The traditional milkshed areas — the extremely low-lying floodplains — must be the focus of attention. From November to April, six months of the year, these char lands are too dry for any crop cultivation without irrigation. Hence a fodder crop is planted first on the residual moisture left by receding floodwaters followed by natural growth of grass fodder. A large cattle population thrive on these so-called Bathan lands of Pabna, Natore, Manikganj, Tangail, Faridpur, Sylhet and Mymensingh districts while on the low lying chars of the coastal belt, buffaloes are reared. With the onset of monsoon, the Bathan lands all go under water for half the year when the animals are taken to the village high grounds where they survive on a meagre ration of stall-fed fodder and other crop residues.

Notably, rawshogolla has staged a comeback in all its white glory. It is being canned and exported to Bangladesh where milk production has declined. Perhaps with the flood of milk due to Operation Flood, they eat as much rawshogollas as they can and they can what they can't. We import milk powder as well as rawshogollas and slaughter our cows for the meat. After all, we love the meat as well. So why not slaughter when milk powder can be easily imported, sometimes as free gift from the donor countries — thanks to the huge milk surplus of Europe and North America. Without any Operation Flood of our own and given our voracious appetite for both milk and meat, what else can we expect?

The story of rawshogollas ultimately boil down to our own dairy development programme so that enough milk could be milk marketing, followed by enhancement of rural milk production. Today at every street corner of Calcutta, there is a milk booth as well as abundant supply of packet milk at grocery stores. Naturally rawshogolla has staged a comeback in all its white glory. It is being canned and exported to Bangladesh where milk production has declined. Perhaps with the flood of milk due to Operation Flood, they eat as much rawshogollas as they can and they can what they can't. We import milk powder as well as rawshogollas and slaughter our cows for the meat. After all, we love the meat as well. So why not slaughter when milk powder can be easily imported, sometimes as free gift from the donor countries — thanks to the huge milk surplus of Europe and North America. Without any Operation Flood of our own and given our voracious appetite for both milk and meat, what else can we expect?

Milk-Vita Example

The MILKVITA project of Bangladesh Milk Producers Cooperative Union Limited, was based on collection of milk from milkshed areas — processing and marketing of upto 200,000 litres of milk every day, round the year. Obviously, milk, much in excess of 200,000 litres per day was supposed to be collected during flush months which would be spray-dried into powder at the feeder balancing dairy established within Pabna milkshed area. Therefore a steady market supply (200,000 litres per day) of both fresh and recombined milk could be maintained throughout the year. The project failed to

achieve the marketing target since required volumes of milk were not collected. This is because pump irrigation converted Bathan lands into IRRI rice fields. Milk is like a cash crop in milkshed areas but HYV paddy cultivation is definitely much more profitable.

When MILKVITA scheme was initiated, the assumption was that Bathan lands will not be converted into paddy fields. Instead of HYV paddy, HYV fodder seeds would be planted, cattle breeds improved and supply of feed concentrates as well as veterinary services ensured so that dairy farming can retain its viability against competition from IRRI paddy cultivation. Unfortunately, MILKVITA established the basic infrastructure for processing and marketing of liquid milk but the follow-up dairy cattle development was never initiated in right earnest.

In the meantime, imports have taken care of rising demand while MILKVITA gave up its original intention of dairy cattle development under strong pressures from vanishing Bathan lands. What else it could do? Without fodder, there cannot be any dairy cattle and unlike milk powder or canned rawshogollas, fodder cannot be imported.

Given the vacuum, the gentleman farmers have emerged to rear dairy cattle in the vicinity of Dhaka city. This is a naive approach which will never succeed. We must return to milkshed areas, establish the viability of dairy farming through two crops of quick growing maize fodder during six dry months, improve cattle breed, set up plants to manufacture feed concentrates and promote veterinary services. Milk production will definitely expand — fully utilising the facilities established under MILKVITA or the like.

Still local production will not be enough. Import business should be made rational by encouraging domestic packaging industry for powder which eventually should expand into domestic manufacture of milk powder itself when more milk can be produced in the milkshed areas of the country. In the meantime, let us enjoy canned rawshogollas. It will remain cheap since we do not have enough sugar at home. After all, how much sugar can we smuggle in from India?

Russia is Getting Drawn into the Tajik Civil War

RUSSIA seems set to follow the same policies in Tajikistan that the former Soviet Union did in Afghanistan — to perhaps similarly disastrous effect.

In the name of protecting the lives of some 3,500 Russian border guards posted on the Tajik-Afghan border, as well as Russia's oft-cited 'geo-political interest and its allies', Moscow has deployed jets, artillery, tanks and troops along the Tajik-Afghan frontier and begun shelling villages in Afghanistan.

Although Russian leaders are still squabbling over what to do with the situation, Moscow is fast getting sucked into the still unresolved civil war in Tajikistan, a country with which it does not share borders.

Some military experts in Moscow defend Russia's present practice of issuing stern warnings that it will not remain idle to any cross-border attacks.

"Of course, it is very attractive to argue that the Tajik-Afghan border is far away from Russia and we should not let our boys there," says one Russian specialist here.

"But if the Islamic rebels breach the short border on the Amu Darya (Oxus) river, it is very possible that ten years

later, we will be defending a border that extends from Astrkhan on the Caspian Sea to Mongolia," he adds.

Moscow can also claim it is acting within the context of the six-member Collective Defence Treaty, which includes Tajikistan as well as three other Central Asian republics. It also has a bilateral security agreement with Tajikistan.

But the Soviet Union had justified its military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 under the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the two neighbours, signed a year earlier.

Article Four of the treaty stated signatories 'shall consult with each other and take, by agreement, appropriate measures to ensure the security, independence and territorial integrity of the two countries'.

Just like the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) before it, Russia is now intervening in a civil conflict in another independent country.

The terrain of Tajikistan resembles Afghanistan's, and the conflict there is also along similar lines: between Communists and pro-Islamicist groups.

The civil war in Tajikistan erupted about a year ago.

Tajik-Afghan border clash threatens to suck Russia once more into a Central Asian morass. Dilip Hiro of Inter Press Service reports from London.

Following some months of indecisive fighting, actively aided by Uzbekistan, the communist-dominated government, based in the northern Tajik Communist stronghold of Hjojand, attacked and overpowered its pro-Islamicist opponents in Dushanbe, the capital.

But instead of being satisfied with its military victory and acting in a civilized way towards its adversaries, with a view to forging national reconciliation, the Tajik government carried out a bloody vendetta against them.

It made matters worse by seeking, and getting, increased Russian military aid in patrolling the Tajik-Afghan border on the ground that its opponents were getting training and weapons from the Afghan Islamic Mujahedin.

Following the defeat of the pro-Islamicist alliance and its persecution by the government, tens of thousands of Tajiks fled to adjoining Afghanistan. Among them are partisans of

the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), the most militant of the ruling communists' opponents.

To get even with the government in Dushanbe, IRP partisans and others resorted to attacking Tajik targets across the frontier. Until June, their actions were small-scale. A month later, sources in Dushanbe and Moscow said the rebels escalated their attacks, with one raid on Jul. 13 resulting in the deaths of 90 rebels and 22 Russian border guards.

This infuriated Moscow. Disregarding the history of the disastrous Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, which resulted in 15,000 Soviet deaths, and reversing his earlier policy of

not getting directly involved in the Tajik civil conflict, Russian President Boris Yeltsin decided to raise the stakes.

Such cross-border conflicts have happened elsewhere — most notably, across Israel's borders. The history of Israeli-Lebanese frontier raids, involving Palestinians and Lebanese guerrillas, provides a cautionary tale.

The attacks started in small scale. But as Israel retaliated with air raids and artillery fire, the guerrillas escalated their raids.

After years of tit-for-tat attacks, Israel was able to have a semblance of security along its northern border only by creating a security zone inside Lebanon. It did so largely by fostering and sustaining a Lebanese-manned force called the South Lebanon Army.

The question now is whether or not the Tajik government — alone or in conjunction with

Moscow — is in a position to create a security zone inside Afghanistan. The problems are immense, starting with the Tajik-Afghan border which is 1,300 kilometres long and mountainous.

Ethnic Tajiks live on both sides of the border. The Dushanbe government does not have full control over Badkshah Autonomous Region, which takes up 45 per cent of Tajik territory and has a long frontier with Afghanistan.

The Kabul government also lacks full control over all of Afghanistan.

Within Tajikistan, the strength of the Islamicist opposition is considerable. In November 1992 its presidential candidate won 34 per cent of the popular vote. Thus, say observers, Moscow should help bring about rapprochement between the warring Tajiks instead of adding to border tension.

OPINION

Anatomy of a College Election

The election is over. Panel sheets lie crumpled and discarded, stagnating in pools left behind by the monsoon rains. Faces of candidates stare out at the passing populace and will continue to do so till they too are marred and disfigured and finally washed away. In the meantime, the result has been declared. The student front of the ruling party has won and now all that remains are the victory marches and slogans and, of course, the inevitable anointing of the victorious with the ritual paint.

Seven years ago, after over twenty years of living abroad, I decided to return and familiarise myself with my own country again. I knew that the best way to link up with my roots was to return not to Dhaka but to some district town where the pace was sure to be less hectic and life more reflective of the actual realities of this country.

Certainly more so than a cosmopolitan capital gone berserk in its avid search for the tinsel of wealth and status. It was a wise choice, for it has given me the opportunity to study this land at a more micro than macro level and the election process at the local college this year is a case in point. But what has been learnt? And does it fill me with joy or despair?

Let us consider the top post for the moment — that of the college VP. I must confess that living all those years abroad has made me a hard task-master, given to demanding nothing but the best in terms of sincerity and honesty. But even by that harsh yardstick, the one candidate who stood head and shoulders over the rest was the opposition party's nominee for

the post of college VP. He reminded me, above all, of those earlier days when candidates had to be of the soundest of calibre — both intellectually and morally. And although it's true that he belonged to Chhatra League, he was, in reality, much more than that for in his prevailing role as the college GS, he was equally helpful to all. Irrespective of which party they happened to support. In the eyes of most it made him, therefore, the ideal choice for this year's VP, despite the fact that he wasn't a Muslim. In fact, it seemed not to matter the least. But then, on the way to the polls, an odd thing happened. Just a week prior to it, a strange rumour began to circulate. At first it was as faint as the first wisp of smoke in the midst of a forest — too gossamer to presage the inferno ahead.

Each year, at about this time, the 'Ganga Jal' ceremony takes place and it is normally a colourful and amiable affair. This year promised to be no different. Not till, that is, a stranger appeared at a shop fronting the central mosque and asked the shopkeeper to hand over a piece of paper to the local Imam. There was nothing sinister about the document. It was only the usual courtesy-call invitation to the festival requesting help and cooperation — a polite and formal gesture that would have gone unnoticed in less paranoid times. However, that wasn't to be the case on this particular occasion. Almost imperceptibly, the plot along with the smoke thickened and before one knew what had happened, the strange messenger had evolved into the college VP

candidate and his motive, far from being innocuous, was being interpreted by vested interests as an attempt to humiliate the Imam in particular and all Muslims in general. This eleventh hour rumour spread like wildfire through the college campus and had its inevitable consequences. The candidate, till then the ideal choice, became a leper and was soundly thrashed at the polls.

I draw no conclusions as to the original source of the plot but find myself greatly disturbed by subsequent events. On the day following the declaration of the results, a high ranking official (they barely come higher), presiding over a victory 'milad', was quoted in the local Dainik Thikana as having made this rather inflammatory remark: 'It is a victory for all Muslims! What equally disturbs me is to read the words of the most famous Minister of all who is quoted in The Daily Star (7-8-93) as having said: 'No hypocrisy in the name of religion is to be allowed in this country. We do not want to indulge in the politics of religion but are pledged to establish religion in our politics.'

The mind doesn't just find that confusing. It boggles. One final footnote in connection with the election. It is generally accepted that the fundamentalist party has over 250 votes at its command. Of these, only 27 were placed at the disposal of their candidate for VP. The question that begs to be asked is obvious: Where did the rest go?

Shaf Rahman Char Kamapur, Faridpur

To the Editor...

Public accounts

Sir, This has a reference to a news item (Daily Star, 13th July) which stated that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Accounts, chaired by Mr L K Siddiqi, observed in the House that different ministries show 'serious reluctance' to settle audit objections despite repeated directives to do so. The committee further stated that audit reports for the last nine years are yet to be reviewed by the committee.

The Parliament is vested with the supreme power, as the people's representative, and they have enough clout to stop the rut that has set in, in the accounting and auditing system. If the Parliament does not act, it would be falling in its duty and trust reposed on it by the nation.

Here I would like to give a quotation from the sayings of Mahatma Gandhi which is very relevant here. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Carefully kept accounts are the since qua non for any organisation. Without properly kept accounts it is impossible to maintain truth in its pristine purity."

Harassment at ZIA

Sir, Please refer to your news item — Ansars and cabbies

clash at Zia International Airport, published a month ago. We notice that Zia International Airport systems have improved to a great extent during this period of BNP Government. We also learnt that much of the improvement were achieved through the personal initiative of the State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism. The Green Channel (nothing to declare) is a great relief to the tourists and businessmen, both local and foreign.

Unfortunately, however, the harassment caused by a gang of touts and taxi drivers remain unchanged. A week before the incident I noticed one foreigner being harassed by three touts inside the Airport building. Outside the Airport, immediately after leaving the gate, one lone Middle-East returnee who was having difficulty to manage his various luggage was virtually gheraoed, pushed and pulled to different directions at least by 10 people (taxi drivers or their helpers). I also noticed that a group of foreigners were watching the incidents with disgust.

Immediately after passing the Green Channel and the Exit Gate almost all the passengers and specially the foreigners fall subject to this unnecessary harassment. This is the first impression our country produces to a foreign visitor! The businessmen or foreign investors within the hours of landing at

Shahabuddin Mahab Siddheswar Road, Dhaka

Harassment at ZIA

Sir, Please refer to your news item — Ansars and cabbies

S I Dewan Banani, Dhaka