

A Deceptive Sign

That women turning day labourers in an increasing number in a district surely signals a change in our employment pattern. Whether for good or bad is a different issue. The district under scrutiny is Netrakona and should perhaps represent the country in general. Home to 25,000 women labourers, Netrakona this year experienced unusual onslaughts of natural calamities of two extreme nature—floods on the one hand and draught on the other. On this count, the district may show more susceptibility to the after-effects of these natural disasters. But why women in particular should feel the pangs of this abnormal situation is the more important question.

An increasing number of women's participation in works outside of their homes could very well be an indicator of social development in every sense of the term. But this is no such opening up of society to liberal attitudes to work and equal participation. Far from it, this is an indication of the desperation, thanks to extreme poverty, that has forced women out of their homes in such labour-intensive works as cutting and carrying of earth for brick fields, lending their hands in construction of buildings, road repairing and in hotel service.

The report carried in this paper is not specific about more job creation in the district. We can safely dismiss a phenomenal increase in job creation and also man's reluctance to seize any such opportunities. All this then leads to the inevitable conclusion that women have taken over a substantial portion of the works so far considered men's exclusive preserve. This is however not because women have become more adept than men in performing those jobs. The bitter and hard truth is that women's labour can be hired for cheap wages.

It is precisely for this reason that the appearance of progress as indicated by women's employment is deceptive. The problem does not only Netrakona, but any part of the country more or less to the same degree. Nobody has so far complained that women's output is much less than that of their male counterparts. The taboo that women are inferior partners in progress has thus, of necessity, been broken, but pray in what an absurd manner!

However, the disparities between and among different classes and individuals—not just in case of women only—exist and women are the more vulnerable among any disadvantaged group. Sometimes, the faces of exploitation are ugly and sometimes masked under veneer of sophistication. The provision of minimum wage for farm labourers as law, has failed to serve the purpose in any significant way. Women as competitors cannot expect any better deal. And admittedly, the competition is unfair and unjust, because under the system productivity is hardly rewarded, the main concentration being on exploitation of the situation.

The crux of the problem manifests in that not all women are considered eligible for work and some have to turn to beggary as it has happened in Netrakona. Women beggars and destitutes, according to the report, are crowding the town just to keep their body and soul together. So what is the way out? The answer to this question may not be simple and it demands a lot of careful planning to address the staggering unemployment and human displacement. Both exigency measures and long-term rehabilitation programme with special emphasis on establishment of small-scale agro-industries have to be thought out. The advantage of agro-industries is that they use agricultural produces as raw materials and local expertise to run them. With such job creation in villages, the purchasing power of people there will increase—an important ingredient to boost the country's economy.

From Health-fad to Hygiene Consciousness

How can one describe present-day Bangladesh in one pithy sentence? Reality here is a study in contrast and to do justice to it even volumes would not be enough. However, if one suggests 'where everything goes', as an answer, it would no doubt be a formidable description. Lap up the cure-all ads in one particular vernacular daily, and you will know the range of that 'everything'. Suddenly a pharmaceutical giant, came up with flashy newspaper and TV ads addressed to the 'depressed' young people. This is very plainly a centuries-old confidence trick played as standard practice by the fortune-tellers—this suggesting to the client that he or she is unhappy. Who wouldn't agree—specially when one is in one's turbulent and gullible days of youth? Yes, everything goes in Bangladesh—from a Peer's talcum powder to a 'Drug Administration approved Mogha'.

These unending arrays of panaceas appeal in spite of their being very plainly suspect all the way. One can sift the same from those that are not quite so by the vulnerability of the sample to these suggestions that something is wrong with one's mind or body or both. Doubtlessly, there would be quite some people sane enough to skip such ads. Pillars of sanity they must be.

But health fads lead to the collapse of many such pillars. These fads are but an expression of health consciousness which should by itself be very healthful. The health-wary is a health-conscious person who has taken, maybe, a single false step. And there is no shortage of developments that can bowl out the best of health-conscious people. The most effective of such is generated by reports on medical research findings. With nothing available to debate the claim that garlics do this and onions that, people who steer clear of 'sure-cures', are stumped and bagged by such research reports. Does it all then boil down to a difference between an ad and a report?

Tall things have been claimed for that Yemeni-discovered brew—coffee—in a news report published by The Daily Star on Sunday. The claims, coming at the end of a ten-year study conducted on 1.28 lakh patients, may be quite well founded and should very ordinarily be relied upon without an unwarranted scepticism. The findings say that coffee can protect people against depression and suicide. Could there be a piece of happier tidings for humanity? But don't rush to the stores for coffee beans or instant powders. A Norwegian study very convincingly relates heavy coffee drinking with death from heart diseases.

People as unusually sane as double Nobel Laureate Linus Pauling allowed himself to go mad over the virtues of vitamin C. Now the American FDA is going into a big action against all the vitamin pills on the plea that the claims made on their behalf have not as yet been substantiated. Indeed! Such great medical news has a way of subsiding into oblivion—with time. That is the nicest thing about these.

Uruguay Round Global Trade Accord and Bangladesh

COMMONWEALTH leaders' summit in Cyprus issued a declaration on October 22, saying, that a successful end to the Uruguay Round of talks being held under the auspices of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) by December 15 this year, was imperative. As a participant at the summit, Bangladesh also now stands firmly committed to the conclusion of a world trade agreement by the deadline. It's time to take a look at its implications for us. But before that, let's see how these negotiations stand now.

Of late, the media had been full of news about the 116-nation GATT trade talks. All of us know by now that these trade talks were launched in September 1986 at Punta Del Este in Uruguay. That's how it came to be known as Uruguay Round of trade talks. Incidentally, its predecessor was called Tokyo Round, getting the name from the city where it had been launched. Uruguay Round aimed at achieving a significant measure of liberalisation of world trade by dismantling or at least easing, tariff and non-tariff barriers. It covers fifteen sectors, ranging from services to intellectual property. December 1990 was the deadline agreed originally for the conclusion of the negotiations. Well, December 15, 1993, is the current deadline.

The new deadline draws its origin from an act of the US Congress. The Congress had extended the US administration's special trade negotiating authority until December 15. Also known as 'fast-track' authority, it permits the US administration to conclude the proposed GATT trade agreement and present it to the legislature for acceptance or rejection as a whole, without bringing in any modification or amendment. Any further extension may not be feasible. Hence the urgency.

Recession in the economies of industrial nations has added a new urgency to their efforts to conclude a world trade agreement. They perceive that not even a wealthy country can create new jobs without expanding

Can we expect a successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round by December 15? Not quite. As before, agriculture remains an area raising major controversy among the industrialised nations.

trade. Among the developing countries, the newly industrializing economies are looking for markets for their products. They also want global trade to expand, giving them an equitable share of the increase. All are taking count of the concrete benefits that Uruguay Round would yield. According to a World Bank study, released last September, the GATT trade deal, if brought to a successful conclusion, would add at least \$213 billion annually to the world economy, mainly by way of expanded trade in manufactured goods and agriculture, in the next decade, till the year 2002. World merchandise trade in 1992, it's worth mentioning, came to \$6825 billion. \$135 billion of the additional \$213 billion would accrue to richer industrialised nations and the balance \$85 billion to the developing and former Soviet-bloc countries. Later, at the Commonwealth summit, it was estimated that developing countries' share of the annual incremental trade would come to around \$55 billion.

World bodies and regional economic groupings are urging for the conclusion of the Uruguay Round by December 15. Both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have called on the world's nations to take decisive action to wrap up the negotiations by the end of the year. They have also warned of the dangers to the world economy if the global trade talks failed. Among others, the 14-member Cairns Group of agricultural trading nations, headed by Australia, had been pressing for a global trade pact before the year is out. A declaration issued by the economic ministers of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) at their 25th annual meeting in October, had warned that further delay in Uruguay Round negotiations would bring immeasurable adverse effect on the world economy.

Can we expect that all these exhortations will lead to a suc-

cessful conclusion of the Uruguay Round by December 15? Not quite. As before, agriculture remains an area raising major controversy among the industrialised nations. In parenthesis, it is to be noted that the Uruguay agenda had, for the first time, included agriculture in GATT negotiations. Since then, the United States had been arguing for substantial reductions in farm subsidies and freeing global trade in agricultural products. However, the European Community (EC)

the world's people. The so-called Blair House accord on agricultural subsidy reached between the US and EC in November last year, is at the centre of the controversy raging across the Atlantic. This six-year farm subsidy reform plan calls for a reduction in the volume of EC subsidised exports by 21 per cent. The planned level of subsidy cut falls short of the current GATT treaty draft formula. Better known as the Dunkel Draft (named after the former Director General) the

guages, leading to a monoculture. Others see this move as merely a ploy for the protection of the domestic film and television industry. In the final analysis, it is the attitude of the Quad powers that would decide the fate of Uruguay Round—if they would agree on a market access package, including agriculture. In the meantime, they are asking the developing nations also to come up with new trade offers for increasing market access. ASEAN and the newly industrializing economies in East Asia seem to be drawing their special interest. India also has been urged to lower tariffs.

What about us? Well, our imports and exports taken together, account for only about 0.08% of world merchandise trade. From this perspective, our action or inaction would not seem to hold any implications for global trade. However, adverse trends in global trade would affect us. As for agriculture, the Dunkel Draft permits developing countries to retain 10 per cent subsidy on their agricultural products. Subsidy element in our case is much below this threshold limit. Customs duty on agricultural products would have to be reduced by a weighted average of 36% over a six-year period. This also should not present much of a problem. The market access package for services sector worries many developing countries. ASEAN is said to have made a conditional offer to open up its services sector in return for entry of more of its manufactured goods to the markets of the developed countries. In our case, it is highly unlikely that foreign banks and insurance companies will be in a rush to enter our market. The GATT deal's provisions for intellectual property and copyright protection are causing concern among some developing countries, mainly on the ground that these will kill off local initiative. However, the deal merits support on moral grounds. In any case, this is not perhaps a matter for

immediate concern to us. Paradoxically, trade benefits flowing from the Uruguay Round to other developing countries could also hurt us, at least in the short run. For instance, the 1974 Multifibre Agreement which restricts export of textiles and clothing from the developing countries under a system of quotas, would be phased out, once the GATT deal is struck. We captured many a developing countries' potential market abroad as they themselves could not expand their clothing exports due to quota limitations. Multifibre Agreement phase-out would leave them free to expand exports. We would be losing these markets unless our products are more competitive than theirs.

As for our own tariff and non-tariff barriers against imports, the ongoing trade liberalisation process has brought us to a better position than before. In our case, average tariff rate is 23 per cent. According to a GATT report, the average tariff rate is 71 per cent in India. Even then, it would be difficult for us to match the tariff cuts proposed under the GATT deal.

The market access package negotiated by the Quad powers in their Tokyo summit, calls for complete elimination of tariff and non-tariff measures on specified products such as construction equipment, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, steel, furniture, farm equipment, beer and spirits; up to 50 per cent reduction for tariffs of 15 per cent and above and tariff cuts by an average of at least one-third for the remaining products. However, as a least developed country, we are also entitled to special considerations under the GATT rules. As a matter of fact, GATT is said to have already initiated consultations on giving special attention to the needs of the least developed countries as specified in the original Punta Del Este declaration. May be, the principle of non-reciprocity for least developed countries would prevail and we would not be called upon to match the offers of the industrial nations.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

and Japan had been resisting it. The understanding reached among the so-called Quad powers—the quadrilateral coalition of the world's major trading nations, namely, the US, EC, Japan and Canada—on reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, in July this year at the annual summit of the Group of Seven (G-7) leading industrial countries in Tokyo, had been hailed as a significant breakthrough in the GATT negotiations. It is to be noted that this accord also had skirted the vexing issue of agriculture. The agreement had merely spoken of the participants' willingness for entering into immediate negotiations on the agricultural market access package.

Well, the promised negotiations on agricultural package are on. However, the talks so far have not yielded any positive results, rather, differences have come into sharper focus. The Cairns Group noted that the major industrial nations together spend more than \$354 billion of their taxpayers money to support agriculture. As they put it, subsidies given to each dairy cow in some countries in Europe is higher than the per capita income of more than half

GATT formula requires subsidised agricultural exports to be cut by 24 per cent. The Rio group of Latin American states had already indicated that a 24 per cent cut was the minimum they could accept. However, the EC, led by France, wants even the Blair House accord to be renegotiated. France, it is said, feels that the agreed level of subsidy cuts would ruin its farmers. The United States, by all accounts, has not agreed to reopen the issue. Now, some are talking, not of renegotiation, but of fine-tuning and interpretations. Japan was ready to import apples but not rice. Here, it was a question of protecting rice farmers mainly. This year, nature sees to have intervened. Following a disastrous harvest, Japan is importing rice this time. However, these are being termed as emergency imports. The blanket ban on rice import is yet to be lifted. Meanwhile, the culture issue has been added to the transatlantic dispute. Inclusion of audiovisual services in the GATT accord is at stake now. It is being argued by some that unrestricted entry of American film and TV wares would interfere with Europe's diverse identities and lan-

If we want to grasp the real nature of African problems and help to resolve them it is time for more of those of us living outside the continent to look through African eyes.

To say that the continent is in turmoil is simply to stress the obvious. The old white settler mindframe will doubtless ask that else can be expected as it sees its worst fears of the consequences of independence from colonial rule being realised.

Behind such a question is the assumption that Africans are backward, uncivilised and not capable of ruling themselves.

There is another side to this, the African side, and only consideration of it needs to take on board aspects of African life all too commonly ignored.

The African tribal system of government, ubiquitous to the entire continent, evolved over many generations in response to one of the harshest environments on earth. Its people have, after all, been exposed to problems of extremes of climate, of distance, of disease, of transport difficulties and of isolation few other parts of the world have known.

To this day the sheer size of the continent still fails to impinge on the general consciousness of observers. The Sahara Desert, for example, is 60 times larger than Britain, Zambia, is five times as large.

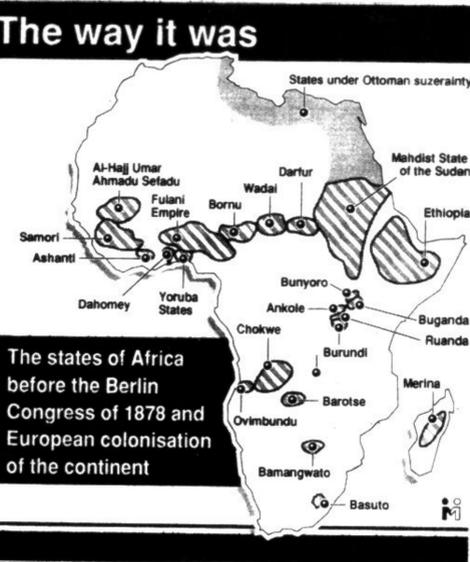
Such immense distances cannot fail to impose their own barriers to forms of economic development which depend on such facilities as good natural means of transport and communication. None of Africa's great rivers are navigable. In almost every instance their courses are broken by rifts and falls.

Despite these vast distances, Africa—except in the north, which is isolated from the south by the barren immensities of the Sahara—possessed not a single beast of burden. The northern camel could not survive beyond desert regions. The

Africa from the Outside Looking in

John Papworth writes from London

Tribalism may be a dirty word in and outside Africa, but it served the continent well for centuries. It was disrupted only when the colonial powers set about establishing an eggshell framework of European-style government that has no roots in Africa. This is argued, in this Gemini News Service report, by a man who has had lifelong connections with the continent, including nine years as assistant to the former president of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda.



zebra, like the African elephant, has always proved untamable and the horse, a recent introduction, has always existed under the obliterating tyranny of the tsetse fly.

Any movement of goods from the interior was invariably on the backs of human carriers. And even if goods from those remote regions could be conveyed to the coast, what then? The thousands of miles of African coastline is remarkable

for its virtual absence of natural harbours or ports.

Rudyard Kipling pronounced that transport is civilisation. He no doubt meant the railway civilisation which burst on the world during his lifetime; but to transport we surely have to add communication.

To outsiders the African drum may appear to be no more than a quaint cultural artifact. To the African people, for centuries, it was a vital means of

communication, as important as the telephone may be today, and it was used with remarkable skill, precision and effect.

No royal house was without its complement of highly trained drummers. Their role was not simply traditional and ceremonial. They were messengers speedily conveying the royal will over considerable distances on a multitude of matters concerned with government and administration.

The African solution to its immense environmental disadvantages was the evolution of its tribal system of government, the oldest political system in the world. When the plenipotentiaries of the Egyptian pharaohs penetrated the interior of Ethiopia their parlayings were with African tribal chiefs.

No system of government can claim to be perfect and in such a vast land mass as Africa we should, when examining the record, reserve our surprise for the absence of occasional bouts of misuse in one place or another rather than for its existence.

Yet no system can long endure if it fails to correspond to peoples' needs at quite fundamental levels. The fact that the tribal system met those needs for millennia helps to explain why its royalty, tribal chiefs and elders were accorded—and in many parts are still accorded—a degree of loyalty and respect their European counterparts might well envy.

The colonial period was an astonishingly brief and recent one, for the most part spanning less than a single century, but

during that time it disrupted, and to some extent destroyed, one of the most enduring and stable political systems in the human record.

Despite the unspeakable tragedy of slave raiding and the multiple disasters of colonial rule, the tribal system retains much of its power and authority. The colonial forces have done no more than establish an eggshell framework of European-style government that has no roots in Africa.

Despite the fact that it is totally unsuited to its environment as much as to the African ethos of self-rule, the belief persists that these brittle and obviously transient structures are the model for future development.

It is a belief based on sheer fantasy. Africa's present national leaders, with centralised administrations they cannot control and problems of government they cannot solve, will go on making a mess because their problems are insoluble within the non-African contest which they are seeking to operate.

Indeed, a touch of humility may be required from their former European masters if they are to see that the institutions they have so thoughtlessly imposed on Africa appear to be working with a diminished success even in their own countries.

'Tribalism' has come to be seen as a dirty word even among many African people—not least among leaders of national parties to whom tribal forms of rule constitute a direct

challenge to their own. These leaders will have their day and pass—as indeed they are beginning to pass.

After a long and violent struggle the people of Eritrea decided to become independent from Ethiopia. The Somali tribespeople are seeking the same status. The question of tribal independence is increasingly raising its head from one end of the continent to the other.

What will remain are the imposing natural factors of African geography from which over the centuries the tribal system so naturally evolved and came to prevail. It did so in response not only to the unique geographic factors but to some more profound principles.

Growth can proceed only through two forms, that of division or of unity. By and large the Western world has sought growth through the principle of unity.

Arnold Toynbee, in his *Study of History*, was at pains to show that in all past civilisations the achievement of unity has been the prelude to collapse. This may well be why the Western world is in such trouble today.

In choosing the path of division, Africa has enjoyed for centuries a unique form of political stability in an uncommonly harsh environment.

No doubt the tribal system needs its own forms of modernisation so that it corresponds more closely to developments in current concepts of democratic rule.

No doubt it would be a mistake to regard it as a panacea for all the problems of political life.

And no doubt the tribal system is as capable as any other of producing its own occasional political scallywag or tyrant.

But the alternative to its restoration is to see an entire continent continue to sink into chaos.

JOHN PAPWORTH was for nine years the personal assistant to the former president of Zambia, Dr Kenneth Kaunda.

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.

Eviction of hawkers and barricades by buses

Sir, Dhaka Municipal Corporation and Dhaka Metropolitan Police have evicted hawkers and vendors from Gullistan, Motijheel Commercial Area and some other places. But we fall to understand as to why the DMC and DMP are allowing 'U' turn and haphazard parking of buses, including public sector staff buses, at Gullistan and Motijheel Commercial Area for hours together at a stretch?

Haphazard parking of buses on the busy roads do more harm and create more serious traffic problems than what the hawkers and the vendors do. Moreover, all sorts of repair works, welding, vulcanizing, engine overhauling, body manufacturing and painting etc. are being done on the busy and crowded Dhaka-Narayanganj Road from Captan Bazar point to Narishikkha School, Hatkhola/Folder Street point barricading the public road and thus causing untold sufferings of the people. We wonder how the so called motor workshop owners

at Captan Bazar-Toynbee Circular Road, Jai Kali Mandir Road-Folder Street-Hatkhola Road got trade licence from the Dhaka Municipal Corporation?

We have repeatedly suggested in the past that Dhaka city roads should be divided into two categories i) bus route and ii) no bus route. The bus route should always be kept free from all sorts of traffic hazards like parking of buses/motor vehicles more than ten minutes at a time, holding of public meetings, occupation of the road by hawkers and vendors and repair of motor vehicles etc.

Would the Dhaka Municipal Corporation and Dhaka Metropolitan Police kindly look into the matter?

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S M Ali

Sir, I am deeply shocked at the sudden demise of Mr. S M Ali. When I first heard this news on the BTV I couldn't think it to be true. I never thought he would leave us in such a way. We will be deprived of reading his writings so soon! I thought he would come back from Bangkok after proper treatment on time. But, alas! he came to us not alive. To me, S M Ali was a journalist of most high calibre and a personality of extraordinary merit. I became very much interested in reading his writings since he began to write in the Bangladesh Observer.

He had a different style of writings which read very well. I can't think no more new writings of S M Ali will appear in The Daily Star. However, we have to surrender to the will of God. He has left this beautiful

earth forever by responding to the call.

In my eye, his greatest achievement was to be successful to bring out a quality newspaper like The Daily Star. S M Ali is no more with us, but he has presented us with a fine English daily. I hope the Journalists of The Daily Star will try heart and soul to keep the standard high in the days ahead.

Md Delowar Hossain
North Shajahanpur, Dhaka

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Sir, I was greatly shocked to hear about the sudden demise of Mr. S. M. Ali. It was a bolt from the blue to me and my grief is too much to be expressed in words. Mr. S. M. Ali was a great journalist and editor and indeed the loss that the country is going to suffer from the demise of this dauntless representative of the

people is beyond compensation. He was sincere, uncompromising and bold in expressing his opinions and had the guts to criticize any kind of wrong doing—be it of the Government or the Opposition or of any other's.

I hope The Daily Star will keep up its noble job of enlightening the people and continue with the efforts or Mr Ali from where the left off, in leading the readers to the right path with its honest journalism. I guess this is the best way to honour him and get over the bereavement.

We were proud to have one like Mr. Ali in our country. He will be remembered always and will live forever in the hearts of people through the works he has done. I pray to God, may his soul rest in peace.

Ismat Haseen
Old D. O. H. S. Dhaka