

We Salute You

Today, as all of Bangladesh knows, is the intellectual Martyrs' Day. This is a unique observance perhaps among all the nations of the world and renders special glory to this poor and backward one. The genocide mounted on the Bengalee majority of Pakistan by the presiding military junta of Pakistan, had as its target not the elimination of the entire race of Bengalees. The design was to traumatise this nation for decades if not centuries into abject submission forgetting all about its democratic struggles and cultural aspirations. By a massive and blitzkrieg-fashion operation of killing and burning. For nine months they were at it killing lakhs upon lakhs and burning thousands of villages.

The mass murder of the Bengalee intellectuals was, however, a different story. Individual men and women of intellect had to pay with their life for the crime of their brilliance all along human history — from Socrates to Giordano Bruno to Mansur Hallaj to, well, Leon Trotsky and all the 'witches' burnt at stake in medieval Europe sanctified as a whole by the canonisation of Jeanne d'Arc into St Joan. In occupied Bangladesh, the whole class of intellectuals was under a death sentence for a month and more, earning for this class an honour hard to find in the annals of man. By a single stroke the whole lot of Bengalee intellectuals were raised to the hallowed height of Socrates. We remember them specially on this day not only to weep over their memory, but more to honour them and in turn ourselves to be honoured by belonging to the same people as we and fighting for the same causes that we did.

It was Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and the encyclopedists led by Diderot and D'Alembert who paved the way straight for the French Revolution. Pakistan blamed the rising awareness among the Bengalees of their rights as a people — something that was shaking the foundation of that country as they understood — on the intellectuals of the then East Pakistan. Among the first objects the Pakistan army hit with an intent to obliterate were the Dhaka University campus with its residences of teachers and students, the barracks where Bengalee policemen and paramilitary were billeted. Although hundreds of teachers and students fell in the initial thrust, defiance simmered among the intellectuals and the literati throughout the land.

By November '71, it was clear to the Pakistanis as well as to their collaborators that they had nothing to hope for. Faced with a certain, ignominious and total defeat they chose to maim the Bengalee nation by divesting it of all its future. The Pakistani murderers with their Bengalee local cannibals attempted to liquidate the whole living bridge spanning the Bengalee people's past and future. Intellectuals and artists, scientists and professionals made up that bridge. They were killed as gruesomely as man has ever been done. If time would permit, the victims' number would have run into tens of thousands.

It is a sad piece of history that Dhaka fell to the allied forces on the 16th and not on the 14th of December as planned. Forces coming down from the Meghalayas were held up due to intelligence reporting adverse Chinese manoeuvres in the region. Perhaps many could be saved if that weren't so.

Even sadder is the reflection that, as things are, the Pakistani design behind the murder of intellectuals seems to be yielding unexpectedly big results in that this nation has largely been confused about the truths of its historical aspirations and strivings, specially about the spirit and the goals of the Liberation War of which the martyred intellectuals constitute an important part. Things have gone to such absurdly unacceptable limits owing in a big way to the murderers of intellectuals going about quite respectably.

We have a debt to our intellectual martyrs waiting to be repaid. We are bound to it unto eternity. We salute them and vow not to rest in our struggle to vindicate their sacrifice.

The Lifeline and Baul Songs

It came as a pleasant surprise when Mr Nazmul Huda, without doubt one most vociferous minister, the other day close to talk about culture — and he talked urgently and meaningfully. We are certain the venue and the reason helped him a lot in this. It was a *baul mela* at Bamanshur on the other side of the Buriganga. Malek Dewan and Khaleq Dewan were two brothers much prized and popular with the masses of the Dhaka Division — as singers of traditional songs of devotion and mysticism harking back to esoteric sufi and tantrik cult mysteries. They hold a yearly homage in songs to their father Alfi (Alif) Dewan. Mr. Huda spoke in this 'festival of the dampers of urbanisation eating up the rural riches of our culture. It was imperative to preserve the rich thing — our folk culture — in the face of dire challenges for the benefit of our nation. How true and obvious. There is indeed a very big threat to our national culture in the shape of our traditional homegrown philosophies and the melodies couching them being devoured by an anti-culture spread of urban commercialism pandering to wholesale vulgarism.

Although the religious taboo against music is somewhat subdued now, the social mainstream has hardly taken this art and the pursuit of it to be at par with others such, as the sciences or the technologies or the professions. The *baul* music may be all right for the *bauls* — who are only a sect quite distinct from the mainstream — but why should the whole nation exert to see it live and thrive? A career in music would be the last thing an average family would want for its sons and daughters. And a career in folk songs? Forget it.

Who will then preserve folk music — the best part of all that has come down to us from tens of centuries. We very strongly feel that this is a living thing in no need at all of preservation. At the very best this could be a worthy thing for conservation in the fashion the species of flora and fauna threatened with extinction are. We would rather fight the prospect of our folk music or folk culture being reduced to the condition of museum pieces. In fact Bangladesh has no way of coming into its own snapped from its cultural moorings very largely manifested in the folk riches come down from a past very wealthy both spiritually — and, yes, materially. Those *baul* songs do constitute a link in the lifeline of the people of Bangladesh.

Economics and Politics of Rice Trade Liberalization

by Abdul Bayes

Almost all of the countries in this part of the world opted for a self-sufficiency in rice production. Invariably, the central food policy question confronting Asian governments center around conflicting objectives of providing rice to consumers at a lower price and buying the same at a remunerative price from the growers.

DESPITE the fact that the income elasticity of demand for rice has been on a wane in some of the high-income countries, it continues to be the most important staple food in Asia accounting for 40-80% of total calorie intake. Not only does rice deeply intertwine into cultural and historical fabrics of Asian societies, 'rice politics' has always been a very powerful weapon to cause governments shake, even to fall, in the event of soaring rice prices. Over 90% of the world rice is produced and consumed in Asia occupying about two-thirds of arable land and providing the major source of livelihood for small farmers and agricultural labour households. Such an importance of rice, obviously, demanded that the major economic and political goals of the nations be tuned not unfriendly to rice.

This could be in evidence from the fact that the governments in Asia could hardly afford to leave rice prices determined by the inter play of domestic demand and supply forces (free-market solution). Almost all of the countries in this part of the world opted for a self-sufficiency in rice production. Invariably, the central food policy question confronting Asian governments center around conflicting objectives of providing rice to consumers at a lower price and buying the same at a remunerative price from the growers.

Of the total rice production in the world, China, Indonesia, India and Bangladesh together account for the largest share of 69% (almost an equal proportion in consumption) followed by 14% of production from Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Japan together. At the periphery are some non-Asian producers comprising the US, Australia, Argentina and EC.

The US accounts for roughly 2% of world production but trades 18% of total flows.

In the discussions above, rice has been portrayed as a homogeneous product and in fact many of us hardly know the kind of satisfaction that rice has to face in the international market. In fact, rice specialists tend to argue that to understand the world rice market, one needs to have a grip on knowledge relating to differentiated rice. 'Indica' and 'Japonica' are the two primary varieties followed by aromatic and glutinous rice. 'Indica' is a long grain rice and when cooked, easily elongates into large, fluffy and easily separable kernels. The japonica, on the other hand, is a shorter and thicker grain rice and becomes sticky and moist. Japonica is a traditional hot favourite in Japan, Korea and the northern provinces of China. Indica rice production and consumption, on the other hand, are mostly concentrated in South and South-East Asian nations, including Bangladesh. It needs to be mentioned here that the quality of rice in the world market is judged by the per cent of broken rice in addition to odour, colour, heat damage etc.

By and large, 95% of world rice production is consumed and only 5% appear as residual to enter into the world market for trade. By the sheer volume of transaction, international rice market could be dubbed as 'thin'. The thinness is further edged by the fact that 45% of Asian production is prone to rain-fed condition and thus relies heavily on the vagaries of nature. To make things worse,

is a myriad of trade and production distorting domestic policies to, as said earlier, provide the so called food security. All these factors tend to make international rice market highly volatile which, if allowed to be transmitted to domestic economy, might produce a socio-economic and political jolt.

Historically, agricultural trade in general and that of rice in particular, has been facing insurmountable barriers all over the world. The US and EEC as well as other countries, until recently, embarked on heavy subsidization and trade protection for their respective agriculture. The story goes like that the amount of money used as subsidy in dairy products in the US could, if used otherwise, buy a cow for each of the American households. So with Japanese subsidy on agriculture which could enable each Japanese household to buy many hectares of farm land. For the vested interest of these countries backed by strong farm lobby, so the critics opine, agriculture had to be out of GATT orbit for such a long time. The recent successes in trade liberalization that we hear of applies mostly to manufacturing. The costs of such agricultural protection are well documented. *Inter alia*, these include: (a) a substantial reduction in consumers' surplus; (b) inefficiency in the use of resources; (c) various domestic distortions and (d) environmental hazards induced by lower input prices.

As to rice particularly, the major countries widely insulating their domestic markets from that of the world are reported to

be Japan, S. Korea and Taiwan. It is estimated that a total of about 15-16 million tons of rice are consumed in Japan and Korea at a domestic price of 7-8 times the international one. Taiwan follows the suit by consuming nearly two million tons at a price 2-3 times higher. Quite naturally in the respective domestic economies, such insulation brought forth the variety of costs mentioned above but also, at the same time, paved a way for large accumulation of rice surpluses (especially in the US) that needed an open door to get rid of. Many critics tend to argue that the present hue and cry for free trade in rice appears to emanate not so much from a respect to the economic principles per se as to the disposal of surpluses accumulated out of a prolonged ring of protection. No wonder that agriculture trade and production that was dashed to the sidelines for years in GATT negotiations are now invited to occupy a centre place in the field, the question of a 'playing-level field' notwithstanding.

Available research works tend to reveal that a regime of free trade in rice would result in imports to Asia amounting to about 14 million tons (about 450% higher than the base scenario) while about nine million tons (112% higher than the base) would flow to other parts of the world. The important observation is that japonica and high quality indica rice would reap most of the increased trade volume. The opening of the rice gate in Japan, S. Korea and Taiwan would swallow almost the whole of japonica and a respectable amount of indica. The

low quality indica would benefit marginally from liberalization. As to the price effects of liberalization, the same research works tend to assure a reduction in the variability of rice prices and apprehend a substantial up turn (but less than non-free trade price) in japonica rice prices. By and large, a move towards free trade in rice would, *inter alia*, expand the volume of Asian rice transaction by 450%, raise Asian revenue by US\$ 4 billion, expand exports of many Asian countries. However, not all Asian countries are likely to harvest the benefits, free trade would largely benefit only China, Vietnam and Thailand with a fair chunk of export quality rice. Others could also gain with the proviso that resources are shifted to japonica rice.

Where does Bangladesh stand in this glow of liberalization? As we know, Bangladesh is at the brink of autarky and largely produces low indica rice. According to rice traders, high quality Thai rice has 5% brokenness, the lowest quality 25% + and Bangladeshi rice could reach 15% with the provisions of better milling facilities and grading check. Assuming Thai rice fetches US\$ 280-325 per ton, Bangladeshi rice would appear to earn US\$ 200 per ton — a difference of about \$80-105 per ton.

Stability in world rice price, and transmission of that into our economy might contribute to a major reallocation of resources in the farm sector. And since rice and wheat are substitutes (not perfect), free trade would produce a cross-price effect to the interest of

Bangladesh. However, a very negligible portion of fine quality rice has, nevertheless, a feeble chance of competing with Basmati rice and given proper marketing efforts, could be exported to the Middle East and to some countries of Africa. To appear as a rice exporter, Bangladesh has to put a lot of efforts to the expansion and development of finer quality of rice in the long run.

Despite the substantial gains accruable to producers and consumers of Asia as well as gains reaped from optimal allocation of resources, the euphony of free trade could hardly pervade the minds of policy makers, especially, of Japan, Korea and Taiwan. The reasons are not far to seek. A move towards free trade, so argue the opponents, would completely destabilize their farm economy that has already been facing a gradual squeeze by the massive industrial progress. To them, subsidizing agriculture is to subsidize the income differential between the rural and urban areas. While I was attending a Conference on Agricultural Trade Liberalization in Seoul, I was told that 13 million Koreans signed against opening the door of rice trade. Japanese seemed equally loaded with the same kind of reasoning. However, such arguments might lose grounds in the event of a retaliation by the US for their industrial products and as such, the option might saddle in between.

The welfare gains out of free trade in rice, till to-day, are mere wishes, not horses. The horses are the decisions of policy makers flocking around GATT. But with the reported snags in GATT snack, wishes might remain cosy wishes. Hope this is not.

The writers is Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University.

Sino-US Relations: Listless in Seattle

Jun Yi writes from Beijing

Trade ties have not been seriously damaged by political uncertainties. The United States is China's third largest trading partner, after Japan and Hong Kong.

IT was the first time in nearly five years that a high-level summit took place between China and the United States.

But 90 minutes of tough talks between President Bill Clinton and President Jiang Zemin reflected little exertion to resolve differences between the two countries that hinged on human rights and trade.

But that the two countries talked at all during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Seattle was important enough. It was the most significant meeting between them since the June 1989 Chinese crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square.

'Sino-US relations are at a crucial juncture,' Mr Jiang said before going in his first overseas trip since becoming President in March. It was a high-profile trip, including a visit to Boeing Co, the aviation giant where China (its biggest overseas customer) accounts for 14 per cent of its overseas sales.

But President Jiang stressed 'the importance of non-interference in the affairs of other nations' and rejected US calls for improvement in China's human rights record. He also downplayed efforts to link the improvements to renewal of Beijing's most favoured nation (MFN) trade status in which it enjoys the lowest available tariffs on imports to the US, calling it a relic of the Cold War.

President Jiang had no comment on the US\$18 billion US trade deficit with China but hoped his meeting with

President Clinton will 'put Sino-US relations on a normal track and have a new start.'

For its part, the US gave China permission to buy a supercomputer from Cray Research. Concerns over human rights and nuclear proliferation (and Japan's resistance to opening its markets to rice and other products) were also conspicuously missing from the APEC forum's 'joint vision' statement.

Chinese experts here saw the Sino-US meeting as far more than just another photo-opportunity or a political publicity ploy. They saw it as breaking the ice and paving the way for smoother relations.

To warm up the meeting, many American officials have recently visited China, including Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy, the first Cabinet member sent here by the Clinton administration, and Assistant Defence Secretary Chas Freeman. The deputy foreign ministers of the two countries also held consultations in Washington shortly after these visits.

Still, Sino-US relations have yet to return to pre-1989 levels, and a number of sanctions imposed on China at that time remain in force.

In part, chances for a closer alliance between the two countries depend on how much the Chinese can satisfy the Americans with regard to such issues as human rights, arms sales, export of products produced by prisoners, and safe-

guards for intellectual property. It also depends on how much the US values China's role in a new world order. Perhaps most important is how much the two sides feel they have in common. History has shown that bilateral relation improve when the two countries stress their similarities rather than differences.

Fortunately, trade ties between the two countries have not been seriously damaged by the political uncertainties of recent years.

Only 20 years ago, when former US President Richard Nixon visited China for the first time, bilateral trade volume between the two countries was zero. By 1979, when diplomatic ties were established, bilateral trade exceeded US\$2.4 billion.

Ten years later, in 1989, the figure had grown to US\$10 billion. And over the first ten months of 1993, the amount reached US\$18 billion. The US is China's third largest trading partner, after Japan and Hong Kong.

Clearly, the stakes between the two countries are high. To date, Chinese authorities have approved over 8,000 joint ventures with US companies, rep-

resenting a total contractual investment of more than US\$10 billion. Almost a third of these investments have already been realised.

The US has become one of the top foreign investors in China, and the flow of American capital into China continues to accelerate. Over 50 of the 500 leading US enterprises have started business ventures in China, including high-tech companies such as Motorola, AT & T, General Electric, and Wing-Merrill. Consumer products have found a ready market, in China, bearing the labels P & G, Johnson & Johnson, H J Heinz, Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola, and many others.

The key issue in current Sino-US trade talks is the renewal of the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) status, viewed as a basis for normal trade.

Attaching a list of political or 'ethical' conditions to China's MFN trading status is 'a practice left over from the Cold War,' says Chinese Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen.

Chinese leaders will also not accept conditions that have nothing to do with trade. They point out that normal trade relations require mutually

The question now is how to implement such agreements. If both sides wish to keep the ball going, says a Chinese observer, disputes cannot grow into obstacles. An American doing business with China agrees, calling differences in the bilateral trade relations 'growing pains.'

The Chinese proverb 'well begun, half done' applies here. That both sides have agreed to the Seattle meeting bodes well for Sino-US relations. But the hard work of ironing out differences will continue long after the talks have ended.

— Depthnews Asia

Confrontation and Honeymoon

Sino-US relations can be divided into four historical periods since 1949.

The Confrontation Period (1949-70): During this time contacts between the two countries were almost nonexistent. In April 1954, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai expressed China's willingness to discuss relaxation of tensions caused by disputes over the Taiwan Straits, and talks at the ambassadorial level were initiated in Geneva in August of that year.

During the next 15 years, 136 rounds of talks were held, but no substantial progress was made.

The Growth Period (1971-78): Beginning with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China in July of 1971 and then President Richard Nixon's China visit in 1972 which resulted in the first Sino-US Joint Declaration (the Jinjiang Accord issued in Shanghai in 1972), bilateral relations steadily improved.

The Honeymoon Period (1979-89): China and the United States established diplomatic ties on January 1, 1979. Shortly thereafter Deng Xiaoping became the first leader of China to visit the US. Bilateral relations were greatly strengthened during this period.

The Set-back Period (post-1989): Sino-US relations have suffered as a result of American sanctions imposed on China after the June incident in Tiananmen Square when pro-democracy demonstrators were killed.

— Depthnews Asia

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.

Thanks to the 'old citizen'

Sir, Thanks to a nice old citizen who has written a letter in your letter's column on 6th November, regarding the country's number one problem — corruption. Government and political parties are believed to have been struggling all along for the betterment of the commonmen. But unfortunately, the fate of the general mass remains unchanged. A few people's lot often change overnight by the blessings of corruption.

Many of our progressive politicians, intellectuals and educated persons lack the emphasis to speak and act against rampant corruption which is really a very sad state for a nation where honest people of all strata are cornered and suppressed by the gangs of dishonest persons. In this backdrop of social scenario, a stance against corruption needs enough boldness and strength to face adverse situations that might follow.

In the history of humane civilization, there is no chapter of progress of a nation by virtue of corruption. But, we have rather chosen corruption as a policy to seek the golden deer of

prosperity. A corrupt persons are not to be accountable to anybody; they carry on doing whatever they like! Became the very system in which we live and are administered, unfortunately, encourage corruption, and discourage honesty. In this background, if the courageous patriotic people of the nation like the 'old citizen' could raise their heads to speak against corruption, then one day the corrupts might be alert before involving themselves in unfair deeds. Let all the patriotic forces play their role to fight against corruption.

I pray to Almighty to grant long life to our 'old citizen' to write more boldly for the cause of the nation.

Dr M A Hanif
Halderpara, Brahmanbaria

'Much Ado about Nothing'

Sir, The rejoinder from Bangladesh Awami League on the commentary of The Daily Star, is itself a reflection of how a crisis (which is just over) starts.

1. Any crisis may begin with the genuine failure to decipher the meaning of any speech —

straight, figurative, blunt; or of any writing — plain, paradoxical or rhetorical.

2. Crisis may also come up with the ulterior motive of making any damn thing a point for the sake of crisis to achieve the target at any cost.

The timely and cogently-written commentary by Star — which was however aptly followed by some English dailies and should have been preceded by our vernacular dailies at large — was a point to ponder for both Opposition and Treasury bench members. The commentary was indeed a reflection of readers' reaction to the mock stalemate in the parliament. We expected both Awami-League and BNP would ponder over the commentary in order to come to term with themselves.

But it was disheartening to observe that AL seemed unable to take Star's neutrality granted. Did they expect DS on their side too (as there barely exists any newspaper in the country which is not biased or patronised by any political party)? Besides tolerance, both AL and BNP need proper use of diction. BNP should feel the difference between pertinent and impertinent remarks while AL needs to know the difference of being a sensual and sensuous. They should be able to distinguish the words like flattery, exact comments, critical appreciation, scrupulous remarks, sceptical views before they label someone as 'biased'.

The parliament crisis over, a vernacular press report on the

front page quotes the leader of the Opposition as saying, 'I just only moved a little which has so greatly shaded the government. There will be more moves to follow!'

This gives the answer to the making of a crisis by cause No 2. And the present crisis — 'Reader's Response to AL's Rejoinder' is by cause No 1.

Shakespeare's 'Much Ado about Nothing' is delightfully amusing whereas it only amuses us!

Salahuddin
Rampura, Dhaka

Vat and inflation

Sir, While VAT was introduced some two years back, it was said that it was a replacement of sale tax and would not result in any inflationary pressure. But the fact remains that price of practically everything has gone up since its introduction. Shopkeepers have found it a good plea for raising prices and Government is doing nothing to check unbridled price hike. It is a matter of common knowledge that prices of fish, vegetables, pulses, onion, sweetmeat and snacks etc have gone up abnormally, but the government is claiming that inflation is at all time low.

Since rice is the main component of family consumption in poverty ridden rural Bangladesh, that is the principal factor while calculating rate of inflation. Rice price is, of course, low for the last two

years. But that is not at all the credit of the government. It is mainly due to favourable weather conditions. So, that is not something to bank upon.

My main contention is that if VAT is a replacement of sales tax why should it push up prices of all relevant items? Will the government look into it?

Mrs Montaz Jahan
Dhaka Cantt

BTV

Sir, In spite of being repeatedly criticized the authorities of BTV are still continuing to change their scheduled programmes creating inconvenience to the viewers. The popular series like L A Law, Dallas, Tipu Sultan etc often are not shown on scheduled time. Unfortunately when important occasions coincide with these scheduled days, BTV gets the chance to compel the viewers to swallow their special discussion programmes at the time of these series. If a programme like 'Malancha' is postponed by direct telecast of cricket game, it may be stored for next week and it is not that necessary to relay it after news at 10 PM and delay the series L A Law by half an hour for which the viewers who have to attend office next morning are late to bed. This was done on 3.12.93 and 12.11.93.

Like in other countries, BTV can change the timing in winter and start their programme at 4 PM. If BTV finds 10.30 PM the most appropriate time for spe-

cial programmes then why 'Tipu Sultan' which is shown at 9 PM was replaced by the special programme on 21.11.93? 'Tipu Sultan' is popular to the viewers of all ages. My five year old daughter waited the whole week and could not resist her sleep by the time BTV was kind enough to relay it at 10.30 PM. Let us stop cheating at least these kids who have just started knowing the world.

Zafar Shaheen
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Sir, Whenever one watches BTV news, usually the first item he/she comes across is PM's public meeting and the content of her address — often vilification of the opposition. May be the opposition, leader is also doing the same thing in her public addresses. But we are saved from the agony of watching her addresses on TV.

Since TV is a public media such frequent display of vilification on it is a gross misuse of national facility. This practice should come to an end. This does not enhance one's image in public eye. And I as a woman feel ashamed to observe this which also shows that our national politics is devoid of norms and ethics.

Mrs Roushan Jahan
Lalmatia, Dhaka