

## Lower Taxes on Medical Equipment

We felicitate the Society of Surgeons of Bangladesh (SOSB) for hosting the three day, (17-19 Dec) Fourth International Surgical Congress here in Dhaka, in which about 500 surgeons, including a few from Japan, Pakistan, India, Singapore and the USA, are participating. Such gatherings of professionals permit our own surgeons to exchange views and experiences with those from other countries and help in the overall improvement of the professional norms and practices. We would also like to compliment the government, especially the ministry of health for backing the effort of the SOSB.

Both the President and the Health Minister, raised the issue of how to stop the exodus of patients going abroad for treatment. This, they said, should be done by improving our facilities here. The spirit of the suggestion is well taken indeed. In fact, there could be nothing better than to have a level of medical service of our own which would make it unnecessary to go abroad for treatment. But this pious intention is much easier expressed than implemented. The question that needs to be asked is why do people go abroad for treatment. Some, the very rich, may go for the heck of it. But many go because of the absence of proper medical facilities here.

In what areas do we have the expertise that match the facilities, say in Calcutta, Bangkok or Singapore — the three places most frequented for medical purposes. The president of SOSB, Prof Kabiruddin said that many difficult and specialised operations, like kidney transplant, brain tumour surgery and open heart surgery are being done here. We are heartened to learn about these impressive advances. But are we not talking about laudable exceptions rather than the general case? To stop people going abroad, these facilities must be made available in a much wider scale. Here the president of SOSB has raised a very important point — that of tariff on the import of sophisticated surgical equipments. The 'prohibitive' level of tax works as a major disincentive to the type of growth of medical facilities that both the President and the health minister was talking about.

We would like to add our voice to that of the SOSB's president, regarding autonomy for medical education. At the present time it comes under the purview of the ministry of education and that of health. Normally one bureaucracy is bad enough. But the highly sophisticated one of medical education has two. This must change, and quicker the better. In this regard models of other countries, especially that of the SAARC region should serve as good examples. About the establishment of a Medical University, the suggestions deserves serious consideration. However, we would like to draw the attention of both the government and that of the doctors as what terrible state the current medical colleges are in. So, before improving them, going for and University may not produce the desired results.

## Unfettering the Judiciary

One principle of democracy that must be kept above controversy is the separation of Judiciary from the Executive. The former must be allowed to function independent of the latter. A democracy remains uninstitutionalised, and left truncated and rather woolly, if it has to work without the benefit of a neutral judiciary. All this means in practical terms that if the judiciary is to remain fettered, accountability of the government of the day cannot be fully ensured. True, the Parliament is there to test the government's answerability to the people yet in two aspects its accountability is secured by an independent judiciary.

First, the citizen of the Republic look to the courts of law as the ultimate redresser of their grievances, if any, against the administering authorities. Second, the interpretation of the Constitution being in the hands of the Supreme Court, the judiciary's role happens to be of far reaching importance.

So, in the belief that everybody is keen on judicial independence, the recent debate over the issue following a reported expression of regret by the Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed that both the ruling party and the opposition had not yet taken any concrete step in the direction, can be seen in a positive light. It only focussed on the urgency of the matter. The chief justice's views on the subject boil down to this: Article 116 of the Constitution empowers the President to make judicial appointments at the lower level in consultation with the Supreme Court but the latter is hardly consulted. And Article 116 (a) says to the effect that the judiciary will work independently. The two clauses being contradictory, Justice Shahabuddin wants the Article amended.

We might as well say that there is hardly any reason in our democratic context today why the Supreme Judicial Council, having to do with the code of conduct of the judges, should not be given a fuller play. More so, when the Judges of the Supreme Court comprising the Appellate Division and the High Court Division are appointed by the President in terms of the Constitution. The suggestion is that this could make room for greater judicial independence even though the President's control is in the capacity of the Head of State and not of the Government as such.

Whether our Parliament should be associated with the processes of judicial appointments and dismissals like the legislatures are in the USA and the UK cannot but engage our attention as well. In the USA top executive hiring and firing are subject to Congressional scrutinies, too. So that we find supremacy of the legislature stretched to its limits. But there, too, the Supreme Court is the interpreter of the Constitution.

How perfect would be our separation of the judiciary from the executive organ of the government is naturally left to the elected representatives at the Jatiya Sangsad. Since we have a long way to go, the matter cannot be endlessly in the works. The fact is, more than two years have passed since the tabling of a bill on the separation of judiciary by AL MP Salahuddin Yusuf and the formation of a composite special parliamentary committee to report on the subject. We must quickly get past the procedural phase and bring about the required constitutional amendment by a two-thirds majority.

FREE trade is still considered to be the best means of growth and development for all economies. But in practice, no country in the world can claim to follow free trade policy in the true sense. In the international arena, an interesting feature of modern day trade is that while the developing countries are vigorously pursuing a policy of openness for their economies, the developed countries are increasingly becoming inward-looking at the same time. They are showing a growing inclination to some sort of regional trading arrangements (RTAs) as an alternative to free trade. The creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the effort to create the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are the latest examples that highlight their desirous goal and role for the world trade. The developing countries may find it increasingly difficult to go alone in the emerging economic environment and they may try to save their own business interest in a collective way. Thus the proliferation of RTAs in different regions is the distinct possibility in the days to come.

The SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) is an effort in our own region to promote intra-regional trade among the participating countries. The agreement to create SAPTA was signed at the Seventh SAARC Summit held in Dhaka in April, 1993. Reports emanated from different capitals of the member countries indicate that the drive for SAPTA might get some added impetus within a short period. By this time, six of the seven members have exchanged lists of products that they are willing to negotiate for tariff reduction under the aegis of the agreement. The negotiation is expected to begin shortly to come to a compromised list of products which are to be offered tariff benefits for trading between the countries. No doubt, this is an important step towards strengthening the existing trade relation in this region. At this juncture, the following two issues are needed to be addressed urgently.

First, why is SAPTA necessary for the South Asian countries and what does it hold for the future? Secondly, what is the role of entrepreneurs can play to make the effort (SAPTA) a success? The width and depth of any regional cooperation can easily be understood from the existing trade volume between the member countries. A meaningful cooperation among the members of a regional organisation is usually translated into business activities. And this is the area where the SAARC members are extremely lagging behind. Cooperation in the field of trade and industry could be the first areas of emphasis when SAARC was inaugurated in 1985. But unfortunately, though without some practical reasons, they were not included in the Integrated Programme of Actions (IPA) scheme. As the issue of trade is being seen as a very sensitive one, it remained untouched for nearly seven years of SAARC's existence. Thus the creation of SAARC has not so far been able to provide a needed boost to regional trade. In 1985, when SAARC was established, cross-frontier trade in this region accounted for meagre 3.6 and 1.9 per cent of regional total exports and imports respectively. Upto 1991, the intra-regional trade scenario among the SAARC members remained more or less the same though a marginal shift had

In 1973, the system underwent a total transformation. By promulgating an Ordinance, the central government took over all the District School Board funds, and all the movable and immovable properties, and funds of 36,165 primary schools in the country. All school managing committees were abolished. And 1,42,824 teachers of the taken over primary schools became national government servants.

Thus, by a stroke of pen, the central government overnight assumed the total authority and responsibility for the management and supervision of all the thousands of primary schools all over the country. Appointment, transfer, posting and supervision of the work of the huge number of teachers and management of the schools involving even petty repairs all became sole responsibility of the central government. Such a totally centralized management of primary education system in its entirety was and still is without any parallel anywhere in the world, including the then socialist countries (ostensibly the model presumed to have been emulated by the proponents).

The consequences of this rash and thoughtless action were: (a) The traditional link between the school and local community completely disappeared. As central government servants, teachers came to believe that they are in no way accountable or responsible to the community, or even the guardians of the students. (b) As government servants, they became, in theory, accountable to their superiors in the official hierarchy. In practice, any such mechanism hardly existed. (c) Primary Teachers' Association was transformed into one of the largest and strongest trade union in the country. It not only became vocal in pressing financial demands for its members, but also a potent political force. Yet it remained totally indifferent to the need for inculcating professional ethos and competence among its members. (d) The guardians, local community or even elected local government bodies lost all rights and responsibilities in the matter of management and maintenance of the schools. They were precluded from having any say in respect of the quality or quantity of instructions imparted in the schools. (e) Local mobilization of resources, and financial and moral support of the community for the schools completely

ceased. (g) Planning and development of primary schools were totally centralised and began to be dictated from Dhaka. In this process, no consideration could be given to local conditions and circumstances, and, to local needs. The result inevitably was that despite massive investment over the years, the requisite numbers of classrooms, educational equipments and teachers could not be provided. The poor quality of the construction of new school buildings and almost total lack of maintenance of the existing structures also resulted from such centralisation.

No one at the policy level of the government, political or administrative, seemed to have given any thought on the need to restructure and substantially strengthen the education management machinery of the government to cope with the manifold increases in its role and responsibilities resulting from the nationalization of primary schools, transformation of all their teachers into central government employees and total centralisation of the system as a whole. Administration and management of this huge number of institutions spread all over the country continued as before (as if nothing has changed) to be the responsibility of an Assistant Director, supported by a handful of junior employees and clerks in the office of the DPI (Director of Public Instructions). Further, this functionary responsible for the management of primary education would be someone from the higher education sector usually without any knowledge, experience or interest in primary education. Even with the best of intention and effort, it was beyond his capacity to deal adequately with the problems of salaries, leave, pension etc. of the multitude of teachers, leave aside the management and development of the system and academic standards.

Substantial and unprecedented increase in financial outlay for primary education was but one aspect of the reform measures initiated by the government in 1979. This was accompanied by actions aimed at structural changes in the management system and leg-

# SAPTA and the Role of Entrepreneurs for Fostering Regional Trade

by Munim Kumar Barai

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been followed in terms of volume of trade. That is, during the period exports among the countries declined while imports registered an increase against the total trade of the countries. In 1991, the intra-SAARC trade constituted only 2.42 per cent of exports and 2.15 per cent of imports. This really depicts a pathetic picture of trade atmosphere prevailing in this region. But regional Organisations like the European Community (EC) — now European Union or EU) or the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) bears eloquent testimony of the phenomenal trade amongst the member States. It was rather economic considerations that motivated them to come under the trading umbrella. Between the EC countries, the proportion of intra-Community trade advanced from 55 per cent in 1982 to 59.58 per cent in 1991. The ASEAN members have a far better show than their SAARC counterparts in intra-members trade which constituted 20.2 per cent and 17.8 per cent of their total exports and imports respectively in 1991. What we should not forget here is that the members of these two organisations did not have a tension or dispute free relation when they started their ventures.

Thus, the present flow of trade among the SAARC countries do not represent even a normal condition of trade that could exist between physically proximate countries (if they are not bitterly hostile to each other). There is definitely fur-

ther scope for improvement and there lies the importance of SAPTA. SAPTA is, as we understand, a much delayed economic venture of the SAARC countries. The broader aim of this venture is the expansion of intra-regional trade that could act as a powerful stimuli to the development of national as well as regional economies. To stimulate trade between the members, the contracting states of SAPTA have agreed to liberalise and offer preferential treatment to each other products by way of reducing tariff, para-tariff and non-tariff restrictions. Theoretically, more trade in an economy is expected to lead expanding investment and production, hence absorption of more people and resources. Moreover, opening of trade, even in a limited scale, helps to reduce price distortions, reallocates resources across sectors and increasing economic efficiency. Therefore, SAPTA holds a promise of economic readjustments in both micro and macro level in the long run.

Now, what is the role of entrepreneur class can play in the changing trading environment in South Asia? Before attending this question let us make another query — is there any difference between a businessman and an entrepreneur? Yes, there is as they are not same and equal. A person can be a businessman if he engages himself in the activities of producing, buying or selling of product(s), or commodity (ies) from profit motive. But along with the motive of profit, the

spirit of innovation, foresight, ability to explore the unexplored avenues are the basic traits that distinguish an entrepreneur from a common businessman.

The creation of SAPTA has the potential to ignite a perceptible expansion of intra-regional trade and to pave way for cooperation in the field of industrialisation. The entrepreneurs are better placed than any other group in the society to reap from the expected opportunities arising from SAPTA. But for that, they have to come out with innovative ideas and initiatives that could fit most in the changing circumstances. The general image of our entrepreneurs is that they are by nature extra-cautious, lukewarm in their attitude to grab any opportunity quickly.

They wait for the governmental initiative to start anything. No doubt, till today state controls are strict and too much in numbers regarding to many issues of economies and trade in this region. But it is also a part of their business game to motivate the government to fall in their line. Now, say for example, the contracting parties of SAPTA have exchanged products list for negotiation to bring them in the preferential trade treatment list. How can we believe that the government officials of the SAPTA Nations alone are competent enough to pick winning products or sectors to give or to get preferential treatment in the opened up market? Everyone understands that they might

classes cannot be sole aim of an accountability system. It has many other aspects and dimensions. Those who prepare projects and approve the same for investment in primary education must be accountable for ensuring that the given investment has created maximum possible and most effective physical and academic infrastructures.

In the decade spanning 1980-81 to 1989-90, total development expenditure for primary education was approximately Taka 30,000 million. Revenue expenditure during the same period was still much higher. Increase in enrolment was about 50 per cent only resulting at the end of the decade in an enrolment rate of about 70 per cent. Still, despite the massive expenditure, the number of schools increased only by 4 per cent and number of teachers by 1.7 per cent. There was practically no improvement in drop-out rates.

The inescapable conclusion is that efficiency was lacking in respect of both development and revenue expenditure. For instance, according to World Bank approved design capital cost of a rural school is Taka 4,14,000, an urban school Taka 1.6 million and in metropolitan area Taka 2.5 million. It has been estimated that if these standards are followed, construction of all the required classrooms to accommodate all students in fully effective universal primary education will require an investment of 28,000 million taka!

Bangladesh has neither the need nor financial resources for this standard of construction all over the country. Except for areas frequently affected by severe cyclones and floods where the schools may have to be used as cyclone or flood shelters, it is hardly necessary to have all brick, mortar and concrete structures as being constructed now. The first Primary Education Project in 1980 recognised the need for developing low cost designs for school buildings and accordingly provision was made for consultants to work on this. The subsequent projects also paid provided funds for consultancy services for the very same area. Apparently, studies were till going on with foreign consultants visiting Bangladesh and our officials making foreign trips!

Primary Training Institutes have been constructed at substantial cost. Loan and grant funds have been liberally spent on experts of both exotic and indigenous varieties. However, no one can say with any certainty if all these have provided any improvement in the standard of classroom instructions.

During the last ten years, a large number of expatriate experts have been working on the development of improved curricula and textbooks. Still the task is far from nearing completion.

Since 1980, manifold increase has taken place in the number of officials deployed for the planning, management and supervision of the primary education system with very little to show in the form of overall qualitative improvement.

A system of accountability has to be introduced and enforced in all these areas mentioned above, and without any further delay.

(To be concluded tomorrow)

## Primary and Mass Education-II Consequences of Nationalisation

by Kazi Fazlur Rahman

lative measures with view to ensuring efficiency in management, quality in instruction and accountability at all levels. These efforts continued till about the end of 1931.

Among the many reform measures initiated and either fully or partly implemented during this period, the following deserve special mention: (a) A separate and full-fledged Directorate of Primary and Mass Education was set-up. (b) Approximately for every twenty primary school, a new post for Assistant Thana Education Officer was created. The objective was to improve the supervision and enhance the quality of instruction. (c) A Curriculum Board was set up with view to developing improved instructional materials and textbooks. (d) New Rules for recruitment of primary school teachers were promulgated. These rules, for the first time, stipulated that fifty per cent of all new appointments of primary teachers will be from among the female candidates. In order to ensure this, initial entry requirements for female candidates were relaxed. (e) Most important of all the reforms was the enactment of the Primary Education Act (1981) with a view to ensuring active participation of the local community and accountability through a process of decentralised management.

Regrettably, the entire reform process adversely affected by the political violence and turbulence in 1981 culminating in military rule in early 1982. The worst setback was the abandoning of the implementation of the reform measures embodied in the Primary Education Act (1981). Most other measures which were too advanced to dismantle, survived the political change but in emasculated form. Absence of any interest or motivation among the new rulers in many cases led to lapses from the objectives and ideals with which they were launched.

Each Authority was empowered under the Act to: (a) appoint, post, promote, transfer teachers, and take disciplinary actions against them, if necessary; (b) prepare schemes for development of primary education within the jurisdiction of the Authority and implement the same after government approval; (c) supervise the functioning of primary schools; (d) prepare annual budget; (e) establish new primary schools with prior approval of the gov-

**Structural and Legal Reforms (1979-1981)**

**Primary Education Act of 1981**

"Management of primary education shall be restored to the community"; this was the unequivocal commitment made in the Second Five Year Plan document. The objective was to

solved in the spirit of goodwill and understanding.

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### Corruption scandals

Sir, The whole nation learnt with shock and dismay about the corruption scandal indulged in by a leading BNP MP, (Daily Star Report 4.12.93) then a Managing Director of the Sonali Bank. This was revealed in the parliament by PUC, headed by another BNP MP. People's hope and aspiration of a corruption free Govt after nine years of autocratic rule is again going to fade away. Independent mass media and right thinking people have

since long warned the ruling party of the danger of politicising institutions like banking, insurance and industries.

The ruling party claims that the Parliament is sovereign. People will wait to see what action the Speaker of the sovereign Parliament recommends against the defaulting MP and how the Govt. is going to uphold the recommendations of the Parliament. Let these people who have been pushed too high not on the qualities of their honesty of purpose and commitment to national interest but because of their sycophancy no longer play foul with people's money. Fazlur Rashid Bakhshi Bazar Road, Dhaka.

## To the Editor...

### Kashmir

Sir, Both India and Pakistan shall commit a grave mistake if they allow a third party to intervene in Kashmir.

The land-locked valley of Kashmir seems to have little viability to be an independent entity as its dependence on mainland for passage to sea can hardly be established unless both India and Pakistan ensures her a passage to sea water. The area comprising Jammu and Kashmir could either be demilitarised or could be jointly controlled by both India and Pakistan with the internal security left in the hands of Kashmiris themselves. This small buffer state could be a

play-ground of South/South East Asia and could survive on tourism earnings.

It is high time the sub-continent leadership must have appreciated the realities — the sub-human condition and mass poverty of Kashmiris.

The united effort of the entire region must be to fight poverty, disease and malnutrition instead of making their countries market for the sale of military hardware. The three sub-continent countries — India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh may even forge a joint defence to face external threat. The Ganges water sharing the main irritant between Bangladesh and India — must also be re-