

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Sunday, December 26, 1993

Mayors Show the Way

The mayors of three city corporations — Chittagong City Corporation, Rajshahi City Corporation and Khulna City Corporation — have resigned their posts voluntarily. This they have done to contest for the mayoral offices they held since their appointment to the posts in early 1991. Mirza Abbas, Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation is soon to follow suit — in fact, the expected resignation is likely to come about before his filing the nomination paper on December 29. When this happens, all incumbent mayors will have left their offices at least a month ahead of the scheduled mayoral elections on January 30, 1994.

Through this welcome resignation the point that the mayors have attempted to make loud and clear is that they are ready to respect the democratic principle of equal opportunity for all the candidates. Indeed, even if their resignations may not have substantially curbed their privileges they used to enjoy during their tenures, the symbolic value of the act will be well received by the common people, the cities' electorates in particular. This little gesture of democratic liberalism will not only earn for the ruling party candidates good wishes but also a few more votes. But the richest contribution they will have made in the process is the strengthening of democratic institutions — and by extension, the country's democratic tradition.

While we record our unreserved appreciation for the step taken by the ruling party candidates, we are also of the opinion that this is not enough. With the ruling party's blessings, these candidates can still take advantages of the administration in a manner unacceptable in a democracy. In countries like ours, the administrative machinery has a queer notion of pleasing the bosses by enthusiastically promoting — sometimes without the authority's bidding — the ruling party's causes. The true test of the men in power lies in overcoming the temptation of using — better say, abusing — any willing machinery. Once the mayors have taken the first step, our hopes rise to a new pitch that the public representatives will not fail to uphold the democratic code of conduct.

This expectation of ours is however not unusual because it has to do with the very basics. People's representatives have long thrived on rhetoric and hypocrisy and the results have not been very good for society. At a time of social degradations all around, the leaders have themselves to set examples of integrity in the first place before they asked it from the common man. The mayors have, let us hope, just set a precedent which will be relentlessly followed, and extended beyond the confines of mayoral polls. The January 30th election must keep its slate clean on a few other counts. For example, the use of government vehicles for election campaign and any ministerial backing for the ruling party candidates can and should be avoided.

When all this has been ensured, the other most important task will be to hold a free and fair election. Not only are the polls to be held freely and fairly, these must also be seen to have been held as such. This is important. The opposition should also be responsible and generous enough to see virtues in the positive move taken by the ruling party in having their candidates vacate their offices ahead of election. The bottomline is to give democracy a real chance and come out of a murky past once for all. Let the good work done leave its beneficial and invigorating influences on other areas of life, so that the language of reason gets the better of any dubious ego-play.

Hearty Christmas Greetings

The festive mood of the Christian communities throughout the world has been a shared joy for everybody in Bangladesh. Pope John Paul II set the tenor from the Vatican: 'Let humanity rejoice in the joyful news of the birth of Christ which heralded a religion of great, perennial values. Through the carols and Masses and other festivities were created a soothing and delectable atmosphere conjuring up the wider and partaken vision of harmony, peace and prosperity in a trouble-torn world.'

It is the express — as distinguished from the merely ritualistic — expectation of the ecclesiastical order, from the top to the country level, that we share their joy which underlines the universality of the Christian approach. It is in this light that we consider the greetings that the President and the General Secretary of Bangladesh Christian Association Lewis A Costa and Michael B Malo respectively have conveyed to all communities of Bangladesh. It is of the essence in Christianity to share the weal and woe of mankind and co-exist in peace with other religious communities of the world. The two 'h's — humanity and harmony — make up the messianic content of the great religion.

On mankind's shared journey, Christianity has left indelible imprints. Christian values, in matters small and big, have formed an integral part of the human heritage. Some of it, in human affairs, has been star-studded — like in aid to the poor and distressed segments of humanity and the occasional concerns expressed for human rights and civic discriminations. At the other extreme, religious and ethnic bigotries have wittingly or unwittingly had a field-day in pockets of humanity, somewhat receiving an oxygen of support from those who held the power to set the wrongs right.

Many have had the regrettable reason to feel that if Bosnia-Herzegovina were not a Muslim majority area its troubles would have been long over. There is obviously a palpable difference between militant Islamic fundamentalism and the defence of fundamental rights of a civic population being trampled for no better than religio-ethnic causes. Seen from a purely religious angle, for argument's sake, both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic, with oneness of God as the unvarying article of faith with them. Jesus Christ is also a prophet of Islam. How are the Muslims to be satisfied on this point.

Quite evidently Christianity as a religion is not blamed here. In fact, many politically reputed leaders and opinion-makers of the Christian persuasion itself, in Europe and the USA, were unsparing in their criticism of Christian values being thrown to the winds in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This, we believe, to be the glimmer of strength in Christianity, that needs maintaining to its logical flourish.

This note is added to reinforce how very prized the immutable values of Christianity are to the entire humanity. And what other occasion as celebrative and stirringly reminiscent of Christian ethos would be as fitting as the present one to recall it all.

We greet the Christians all over the world on the great occasion making it to Easter with all the sincerity and goodwill flowing naturally out of our hearts.

Victory Day in a Rural Community: Unfulfilled Dreams

The anger of these poor farmers discomfited me because I was going to address the meeting in few minutes' time. For these bitter and disillusioned men the emotion-charged discussion about freedom and sovereignty did not seem to evoke the kind of response that one expects.

observe the celebrations of our Victory Day in several communities.

The public meeting held on the occasion in Nabiganj was large, well attended and meticulously organized by the local Awami League committee. The audience at the meeting consisted of a cross-section of people, with the relatively better-educated apparently well-represented. Students and youth, who maintained discipline, dominated the meeting by their vibrant slogans. The true villagers, those who do not live in the town but had come to the bazaar for shopping or other business were there too, but they were rather quiet. Standing on the side with bags or baskets in hand, they seemed to me to have a bemused and perhaps, also a detached look. Some of them had come to sell their farm products to get some cash to buy fish or spices or some other items of daily necessity. Looking at the scene I wondered if the patriotic speeches and all the excitement carried any meaning for them. Their reaction, when I spoke to a few of them, astonished me. They certainly knew that it was Victory Day and the significance of the occasion; they knew that on this day twenty-two years ago the Pakistani forces were defeated by the Mukti Bahini and the Indian forces. They revered the Father of the Nation; they would not tolerate anybody questioning their patriotism.

There was, I detected, much bitterness over the current failure to address the pressing problems of the rural population. One outspoken man asked me rather sharply if the Awami League had anything to say about their plight. He was bitter about the prices of farm products. Rice farmers in particular, but also those selling vegeta-

bles, were angry that nobody paid any attention to their difficulties. They were unanimous in criticising and blaming the present government for the deterioration in the economic situation in recent years. They condemned the negligence and insensitivity of the government. I tried to argue that the low price of rice may be a help to the landless labourers who buy rice for their families. (This is the view held by the World Bank and other donors). The particular farmer I was talking to replied that he was himself a landless farmer but he was working on a few bighas of other people's land as a share cropper. The low price affected

me speak so eloquently about did not mean exactly the same thing to them. There is a gulf that separates them from the educated and relatively well-off elite of the country. They were not cold to the patriotic speeches but it was clear to me that their minds were preoccupied by other, more urgent concerns. Largely illiterate, beaten by the daily struggle to stay alive and often heavily burdened by debt, the farmer is unable to share the joy and the glory of victory in our War of Independence.

I sensed the public mood and perhaps the other speakers sensed it too. To some extent the farmers' mood changed

character. It was certainly a public meeting but by sunset it turned into a local festival. Thousands of people from the surrounding villages had converged in a field near the bazaar to celebrate the day. Since there was no electricity the organizers had installed a generator. Agriculture is the main economic activity of the area but there are many families with wage-earners living abroad. Perhaps, for this reason, the community was relatively prosperous, despite being entirely rural. I was told that this particular area was severely affected by Pakistani brutality in 1971 and the memory of murder and rape has not yet been erased by time. The enthusiasm for independence remain undiminished. Here too, I faced insistent appeals to arrange a visit by Sheikh Hasina. I was astonished to observe the intensity of the emotion for Bangabandhu and the appeal of Sheikh Hasina's magic name. The fanatical devotion to the Father of the Nation, whom so few of the people assembled there had seen, reflected more than just affection for the man; it stemmed, in my view, from a deep-seated belief in his dreams.

The Kushirara river flows through the area which is almost at the border of Sunamganj district. As I was going by a microbus I saw parched land on all sides. Refreshed by the silt of the overflowing river, the soil is good and capable of yielding two or even three crops. The local people recognize the potential but they lack the resources to develop irrigation facilities. The small list of demands that was presented to me by the local people was so modest that it was almost pathetic. Nabiganj, like the greater Sylhet area as a whole, the

people believe, is suffering from official neglect. The road condition confirms their complaint of indifference. The Nabiganj-Nabiganj-Sherpur road is practically in the same condition as I saw it fifty years ago, as a young school boy. Risking life and limb on the kuccha and extremely bumpy road, I was reflecting on the progress achieved in half a century of development work. This stretch of road will not only connect Nabiganj town with the Nabiganj thana centre but also shorten the road distance between Dhaka and Sylhet. But these are issues which have failed to move the authorities in Dhaka. As a result, the public meeting in Nabiganj turned into a forum for ventilating the grievances and demands of the people of Sylhet. The resentment at the Prime Minister's remark dismissing the demand for a division was strong. This remark, they thought, was typical of the government's discriminatory attitude towards them.

Victory Day for the people of rural Sylhet was a day of remembrance, a day of festivities, a day of rededication to the ideals of the Liberation struggle. The joy was genuine. But how can the people forget that the victory has been hollow for them? All they want is a dispensary which will stock simple medicines, a school with walls and teachers, roads which will enable them to transport produce and to travel to the nearby administrative centres, and better security through improved police services. Although half a century of promises and deception have made them rather cynical and have taught them to depend on themselves, the restoration of parliamentary democracy has given them new hope that the political system will become more responsive to their needs. All the national parties have a solemn responsibility in ensuring that this hope does not give way to frustration and disillusionment.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

him as much as the owner of the land. Farmhands who neither own any land nor till other people's land under share cropping arrangement are in a worse predicament because wealthy farmers, who usually employ them as farmhands are refusing to do so because of the unremunerative level of price of the farm products.

The anger of these poor farmers discomfited me because I was going to address the meeting in few minutes' time. For these bitter and disillusioned men the emotion-charged discussion about freedom and sovereignty did not seem to evoke the kind of response that one expects. In the end, they were polite and many of them — the farmers who had come from the surrounding villages — listened to the speeches attentively but I had a nagging feeling that the Victory Day that

when we started to explain the 'Save the Farmers' programme of the Awami League. These days even the illiterate peasant understands the importance of the price of fertilizers and pesticides or the cost of running a pump or the procurement price of rice. He knows the critical importance of timely credit on reasonable terms. The government, they feel, has turned their back on them and the people are aware of the present government's indifference to their problems. So they wanted to know more about Awami League's programme for the peasants and they wanted to hear it directly from Sheikh Hasina. Their feeling was that the leaders now in office have let them down.

The public meeting organized on 17 December at Inatganj bazaar to celebrate the Victory Day was somewhat different in

Siberia: God Returns to the Gulags

Siberia's vast frozen expanse has for centuries been a place for internal exiles. Now, even God is staging a comeback, reports Maria Persson Lofgren of Inter Press Service from Novosibirsk, Siberia.

It is probably one of the most inhospitable places on earth. It's cold, it's poor, there are few comforts — and for centuries even God was banned by its strictly atheist population.

Siberia: of all places in the former Soviet bloc it had the least regard for religion. Even before the advent of communism in faraway Moscow, opponents of the Russian Orthodox church were banished to this godless Gulag.

Siberia, which means 'Sleeping Land', is so big it could fit in the entire United States with lots of room to spare. It spans five time zones and its untapped riches — timber, minerals and coal — are drawing greedy looks from Korean and Japanese tycoons.

But the slumbering giant is showing signs of waking up. Novosibirsk, a town of one million inhabitants, is regarded as Siberia's capital and is now going through something of an economic boom.

Further east, Khabarovsk and Vladivostok have been transformed by slick clothing stores, fast-food outlets and hotels that cater to businessmen from across the Sea of Japan. And economic free trade zones are emerging to boost business.

In many ways, Siberia today has the feel of the American wild west in the days when European migrants surged westwards in search of land and riches.

Even more astonishing than Siberia's material boom is that religion is also on the rebound. It might be the least likely place in the world one would expect a religious revival but God has, undoubtedly, returned to Si-

beria. The two Russian Orthodox churches in Novosibirsk had been largely neglected for decades and their congregations dwindled down to a few old-timers calling in for Sunday mass.

Today, there are three churches, a chapel under construction and four religious gathering halls. There are church schools, Sunday schools, masses, baptisms and, most popular of all, a lot of religious singing. Services are all well-attended despite the dark, bone-chilling cold of the long Siberian nights.

The new religious fervour is inspired by the sudden entrance of evangelists from the United States and different parts of Europe. The missionaries are generally young, well-dressed, well-versed — and hold a certain appeal for the population of a town that has for too long been frozen in a spiritual limbo.

The Western arrivals are spreading the word of a variety of religions. Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of God, Catholics lead the contingent. There are German groups, US Scandinavians have arrived in force.

It has all been enough to fire a new religious spirit in the community — and in the classroom. Some schools now allow representatives from the different sects to lecture pupils.

A few religious sects have even opened their own schools in and around the city.

Thirteen-year-old Julia was so impressed by a Swedish missionary in her classroom, that she decided to be baptised. Despite the invitation to join

their church, however, she chose the faith of her elders — Russian Orthodox.

Paradoxically, Julia's main problem was trying to find a god-mother. Although Siberian youth are more enthusiastic about religion, many of the older generation remain sceptical.

Many of the city elders also scoff at the youngsters' fervour. They say religion has just been made more fashionable from all the flurry of activity, but that there is no depth of belief.

The influx of Western sects — despite their success at inspiring followers — has also annoyed the Russian Orthodox Church, which itself is trying to reassert itself after decades of suppression under communism.

The Orthodox church says the Western sects have a totally different perception of Christianity from the Eastern church.

One Russian Orthodox priest in Novosibirsk charged: 'The Western missionaries don't know the real God — they are preaching false and wrong messages.'

The Eastern church perceives that life in this world should be endured in waiting for the real world after death. While the soul is part of man and in the world, it is in a constant mystic and holy unification with God.

The Eastern church's perception of endurance and the religious culture it has traditionally inspired are evident in the Russian people's patience and their resilience to withstand even the most appalling difficulties, such as living in a frozen wasteland like Siberia.

To the Editor...

Safer plastic bags

Sir, Here is small contribution to the ongoing discussion about the polythene bags in my country, Germany, there we use already for quite some time plastic bags which are bio degradable. It might be considered to help the small polythene bag manufacturers to acquire the necessary knowledge and technical provision for making safer plastic bags which indeed for many people are almost a necessity.

H Lechner
Direktress
German Cultural Centre, Dhaka

Road accidents

Sir, It seems that there is no remedy to frequent road accidents in our country. The incidence of road accidents is increasing day by day. Recently the young son-in-law of our British Council Association's office secretary, had died in a tragic road accident near Mohakhali. We condole the death and express our profound sympathy to the bereaved family. Everyday we are losing our nearest and dearest ones on the roads!

But this situation should not continue to exist. I think, the government should undertake

an effective programme involving the members of the public to contain road accidents. Perhaps the rickshaw, bus, tempo, taxi passengers should now take initiatives to make the drivers of these vehicles aware about the curse and consequences of road accidents. The youth clubs can also help in restoring traffic discipline.

M Zahidul Haque
Asstt Prof, BAI, Dhaka

A welcome move

Sir, The present government, the first one democratically elected since 1975, has not given us much reasons, contrary to popular expectations, to be effusive about wielding of state authority. But still I am obliged to congratulate Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia for taking a good step — maybe a small one, but certainly a right one in the right direction. This step relates to naming of five city roads in and around Dhaka University campus after five highly esteemed martyred intellectuals of our country namely Professor Muneir Chowdhury, Zahir Raihan, Shahidullah Kaiser, Altaf Mahmud and Dr Fazle Rabbi.

While I wholeheartedly wel-

come this decision, may I suggest the relevant authorities find out at least three more such roads to be consecrated to the sacred memories of Dr G C Dev, Dr Joytimoy Guhathakurata and Dr Alam Chowdhury to whom the nation owes a debt too great for words.

S A Momin
6 Free-School Street, Dhaka

BTV's weather report

Sir, In BTV's weather report we see the recorded maximum and minimum temperatures of our five divisions each day. It really looks funny to see Barisal division so small compared to the size of other four divisions. Barisal division is nearly one third of Chittagong division. In order to keep a reasonable uniformity in size, BTV can possibly mention about four regions like north-east, north-west, south-east and south-west by drawing imaginary lines in our map in four approximately equal regions instead of five divisions.

We hope this will give it a better look.

Motius Samad Chowdhury
Phultola Tea Estate, Sylhet

OPINION

Rice Markets in Bangladesh Work

A most notable development in our economic scene is a considerable decline of rice prices in real terms during 1992-93. The causes and consequences of this have captured the minds of both the professional and ordinary people. The professionals, for obvious reasons, are more concerned. Rice economy after all has been responsible for a quarter or so of Bangladesh's gross domestic product in the early nineties. And rice is a wage good par excellence: it accounts for about two-thirds or more of the daily calories consumed by the bottom half of Bangladesh's population. Finally, rice price is perhaps among the most important determinants of the level of overall commodity prices. An active and practical interest in the economics of the rice economy of Bangladesh appears to be in order.

It is in this context that the article by S B Chaudhuri in The Daily Star of October 14, 1993 is notable. The author reviews the positions, mooted more recently, in relation to both the favourable and deleterious effects of rice price decline. The author weaves rice's multiplier effects and issues of agricultural diversification into his interesting approach to the evaluation of the policy problem at hand. At a formative point, however, the author expresses dissatisfaction with rice's private marketing system. His reasoning runs like this: Paddy prices have fallen drastically. But rice prices that consumers in Dhaka, both in the city and rural areas, pay have not fallen commensurately at all. The existing marketing system of rice, to quote, 'seems to work to the disadvantage of both the growers and the consumers'. A ringing indictment of the rice marketing chain lapsing upon most of the differentials between paddy and rice prices is a major conclusion of this article.

And, with due respect to Chaudhuri, this writer finds this conclusion substantially invalid. It is the aim of this writer to put the author's data and methods under a somewhat more detailed scrutiny.

The Price Evidence

To use Chaudhuri's evidence is about movement in the consumer price index (CPI) for middle-income families in Dhaka, and for rural population in Dhaka (district) respectively. Rice is only one of many different types of goods in households' consumption baskets. Although it may be the single most important. The contents of the following Table are of inter-

Nuimuddin Chowdhury

est in this context. It suffices to highlight merely two observations about this information. First, for urban middle-income households, only 36 per cent of all expenditures on food are on rice, and this is lower than the corresponding percentage for rural middle-income families (of 44.6%). (The fact of the rice's percentage share being lower for urban families here is probably due to average incomes of those families being higher than for their rural counterparts.) Second, by the same logic, rice's percentage expenditure share — call it ABS, a code for average budget share — is likely to be lower for middle-income families in Dhaka than the 36 per cent mentioned earlier. While this was not made explicit in the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics data I used, it will be safe to assume this to be in the neighbourhood of one-third.

A statement about the margin-lapping conduct of a marketing chain is on tenable grounds when based on evidence of comparative price levels for the commodity at issue corresponding to its different marketing stages. (To be on really solid grounds, I hasten to add, such a statement would have to be based on more information than mere price levels.) I had Chaudhuri availed of just such a comparison of rice's retail prices during the year through March 1993, he would probably have dissuaded himself from the assertion he made, as I show shortly.

His choice of the price evidence misleads. Given the ABS of rice, the price of rice could have fallen quite perceptibly without taking the CPI down with it at all, or by a commensurate measure. Why? Because non-cereal foods absorb more than half of the consumption basket at issue, and because their prices might have increased as much as to essentially neutralise the effect of the fall in rice prices. At this point let me present the evidence that Chaudhuri's argument really needs.

The Evidence

Rice price at retail level fell roundly for all grades since about September, 1992. More specifically, in March 1993, prices for medium rice in Dhaka were 12 per cent down, and for fine rice 13 per cent down, upon a year ago. During the same month, prices for coarse rice, which predominate rural consumption, were down nearly 18 per cent. It is inescapable that rice's prices fell in Dhaka for both urban and rural buyers

reflecting price declines registered for paddy. During this whole period, public distribution of either rice or wheat remained limited to a virtual trickle, and had nothing, in essence, to do with the price fall. (The large public stocks had been pressing foodgrain prices downward independently.) The conclusion is inescapable that private marketing system has substantially delivered during the period at issue. The best-kept secret of the situation is that rice markets of Bangladesh are labour-intensive, crowded and competitive.

Bangladesh's Rice Markets

Time was when, at least in popular perception, rice markets were haplessly servile to the rapacity of a handful of wholesalers. That perception used to be grounded on the evidence of a fairly large seasonal price spread dividing the post-harvest trough and the sharp spikes during the hungry seasons of Ashwin and Kartik. Such large spreads can, in principle, be due to several other structural features of the economic environment at issue than merely the rapacious proclivity of traders. A thin rice market, typical of pre-Green Revolution technology, is one such feature. The growing diffusion of high-yield-variety (HYV) technology, especially in the production of winter rice, has growingly delivered. Rice markets have expanded quite vigorously. About a half of Bangladesh's rice output in 1989-90 was marketed. The number of marketing agents in the rice economy is large, close to at least two hundred thousand in 1989-90. To give an order of magnitude about the growth in the number of marketing agents, the number of aratdars in Badamtoli in 1973 was 13, and in 1993 is about 230 — a gain of nearly eighteen times. Badamtoli is seemingly the most exclusive place of all in Bangladesh's rice markets.

The paddy and rice marketing is labour-intensive. In 1989-90, close to 58 per cent of all paddy marketing by farmers of paddy was directly absorbed by *faris* at the farm gate. Farmers are an important port to call for every conceivable buyer class of paddy, except the automatic mills. The degree of price competition, which is the norm, is high. And, finally, rice markets are reasonably well-integrated. The action and resources of a regionally more decentralised mass of market players, than has been true historically, increasingly determine the price and distributional outcome of rice exchanges in Bangladesh.

This account is rendered here so that the reader is better informed while evaluating the recent changes in Bangladesh's rice economy. Rice's marketing system, while it can undergo considerable improvement in terms of grading, standardisation and the like, has at least delivered to urban consumers most of the downward price adjustments of more recent months.

TABLE — Distribution of Food Expenditure for All Groups and Middle-Income Families, All-Bangladesh, 1985-86

	All groups	Rural	Middle income	Rural
Cereals	36.3	50.8	40.5	49.6
Rice	31.6	45.5	36.0	44.6
Wheat	3.4	3.9	1.1	1.5
Non-cereal	63.7	49.2	59.5	50.4
Fish, pulses, meat	24.1	18.2	21.8	18.4
Vegetable	9.0	8.3	9.6	8.3
All other food	30.6	22.7	28.1	23.7

Note: Middle-income ranges from Tk. 2500-2999
Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Household Expenditure Survey