

Truckers should Keep up the Spirit

Killer truck and its more familiar Bengali counterpart *ghatak truck* are coinages built with blood and death over decades. It is possibly one of the most frequently appearing terms printed in newspapers with a sense of both shock and disgust. As a truck roars by, the whole streetful of pedestrians and other vehicles panic very visibly. A truck is always a 'killer truck' to all of them. But a truck does not kill. It is more likely that its driver kills. Because he is rarely to be found or his employer, the owner of the vehicle, is hard to be tracked and made to answer — the truck has become the killer. Which is a way of getting adjusted with the horrific reality of truck deaths.

In a very welcome move the owners of trucks and those who work and run them — truckers, to include all — have in a demonstration on Wednesday taken their side of the story to people at large. They have, we are grateful, come out of a kind of facelessness and emerged as real people that can be talked to. Although a bit strange, this has been a very exceptionally rare case where the employers and the employees have joined hands to say to the people: it is neither the truck nor the driver that kills, it is indeed the situation that kills, a situation exacerbated by pervading corruption at the police and Road Transport Authority level.

They have, albeit under pressure of express public impatience with trucks, made the entire question of trucking open to scrutiny and in so doing come up with a series of weighty points meriting attention. Stopping of police harassment of drivers for bribes, construction of bypasses for inter-district truck routes, setting up of institutions by government to improve the drivers' skills, stopping issuance of fake and false driving licences by corrupt government officials, extensive media coverage of traffic rules and stopping overloading of buses are some of their demands that need immediate implementation for an early improvement in not only the truck related accident situation but of the whole road traffic scene.

Perhaps the best that the truckers' rally has done is to endorse The Daily Star view that most road deaths are hardly accidents. What they say in effect is implement their demands and road death tolls would come down. True enough. But that is not the whole of the things that needs must be done to achieve accident-free roads. The truckers have their role — a very big role — to play in that. Perhaps it is not for them to enumerate those although the whole society is aware of the same.

Do not the truckers overload? Don't they speed beyond what is good for all other road users? And do it all along from turning on the machine to putting it off? Isn't there corruption in trucking too? Who is responsible for all the drivers earning a lot on the side — and most of them going for unhealthy styles of life resulting in a spurt in road insecurity?

If anything has indeed developed in the decades after the exit of the British, it is roads and buildings. Roads rather than rivers have become the main artery of our economic life. It is trucks that keep the blood running through that artery. There is no way to overemphasise the contribution of the truckers to our economic survival. They must themselves be sensible enough first in order to drive sense into a corrupt and amorphous machine called government. The first expression of truckers coming to reason out things has been the rally. Please keep it up.

A Loss to Literature and Music

It is a long time since our great men of letters were also great as men of music. Tagore and Nazrul headed a quintet with Atulprasad, Rajanikanto and Dwijendra Lal the like of which hasn't quite a parallel in human history. Our dear and very own Sucharit Choudhury was a distant echo of their achievements — playing the flute to the delights of classical connoisseurs and writing delectably with panache to enrich almost all the genres of our literature. And he is no more. He breathed his last on Wednesday at his Nandankanon, Chittagong home.

That he composed about 25 hundred songs and wrote as many as 32 plays were facts eclipsed by his short stories which brought him early fame before even he was twenty and won him the Bangla Academy Award later on. Sucharit also wrote novels but was more famously associated with the founding and running of literary and entertainment journals. His collaboration with Mahbubul Alam in the inception of 'Simanta' and with Ruhul Amin Nazim in the publication of 'Udayan' was singularly responsible for putting Chittagong ahead of Dhaka as an example-setter to be modelled on. It is a wonder that this could be accomplished before the fifties — closely after the partition of India from which East Bengal — now Bangladesh — had hardly recovered.

Dying at 64 is rather premature for such prolific workers of intellect and creativity. He was lately been writing prose, saturated with the nostalgia of a mature mind of both knowledge and feeling, bringing a freshness of style rarely to be found now. He was an illustrious son of a remarkable man revered throughout the world of scholarship of East and West Bengal. But for the initiation done by this valued collector of ancient and folk manuscripts, Sucharit probably wouldn't have shaped into such a fine species of one given to the life of music and literature. Ashutosh Choudhury should have been happy and satisfied if he only knew of his son's achievements.

Rahul Dev Burman died in Bombay the previous day. We remember him more because of his connection to what was almost central to the unfolding of Bengali culture in the second quarter of this century, than his pre-eminence as a director of film music in the subcontinent. His father Kumar Sachin Dev Burman, a scion of the royal family of Tripura, was in fact a product of Comilla culture. Triumphant in all aspects of music — classical, folk and modern — and ruling over the broadest spectrum of Bengali minds for decades, he went to Bombay in his advanced years to do the one item he had so far left untouched. He started scoring music for films and soon overwhelmed the subcontinent with the quality and the pace of his production. He was the master. Rahul took on from him as a relay-racer. That one was a *wunderkind* only the other day should die in the fullness of his creativity at 56 comes as a shock.

We grieve at the passing of Sucharit and send our sympathy to Asha Bhonsle, Rahul's celebrity wife.

Ailing Economy: Is Privatisation a Panacea?

by Md Asadullah Khan

INDUSTRIAL growth, although the government espouses so much about a breakthrough, has come to a halt. It is revealed from a source that about 94 industrial units including 22 textile mills, 13 jute mills and three garment industries have been closed down. Most depressing and worrisome it may sound, but the unofficial figure puts it that 57 textile mills have been closed down and these include 37 out of a total of 47 government-owned ones. Trade and business are also limping. Normal trading and business activities have been stalled because of extortion spree let loose by a new generation of vandals and masts.

Along with this another aspect, that has added a new dimension to the already festering wound, is that the nation is bracing for a demographic deluge. Bangladesh's population growth rate of 2.17% translates to an additional 2.4 million a year in a country that can hardly take care of 120 million. Coupled with these problems, another depressing picture that haunts the nation is that nutritional standards are so low while unemployment, especially in the metropolis and other cities, is spawning dangerous social tensions, strife and sectarian clashes.

It is a fact that economic depression and slump that plagued the developing countries has sent ripples of pain to all the underdeveloped countries like Bangladesh, India, Burma, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The warning has come from Japan which during the last six years has been the architect of economic miracle in South East Asia. It has invested large sums in factories in countries such as Thailand and Malaysia and helped greatly to boost their economy. Japan has stopped making any fresh investment even in the USA causing a deep slump in the commercial and real-estate business there.

Experiences of such a gloomy state of affairs in all

these countries should work as guidelines for us and should push us into action oriented programmes to be initiated and implemented by the people of this country. The economic activities in Bangladesh are yet to take a buoyant leap. Bank rate has been reduced significantly to attract and encourage potential entrepreneurs. Catchy slogan as 'one stop' service rings the ear but things are yet to take a momentum. There is dilly-dallying everywhere. Because of the large scale failure of public sector enterprises, governments in the Third World countries have been lured to embark upon privatisation and divestiture programme following

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Margaret Thatcher's drive in early 1985 to cure the ailing economy of Britain. The drive paid off immensely in Britain because Britain enjoyed the advantage of well-established capital markets, free trade relations with western industrialised economies and, most important of all, a stable democracy.

The challenges confronting the privatisation programme differ from country to country because of the political and economic situation prevailing in respective areas. In Bangladesh even when the government with a democratic set-up sets sail for new horizon with privatisation and free market economy, it may face blistering attack by the adherents of socialistic economy. But there is no denying the fact that the situation in the industrial and economic sector has assumed alarming proportion because of the sluggish growth of the state-owned enterprises caused by inefficient managers, unproductive workers and also corrupt bureaucrats. Evidently this has led to a situation calling upon the government to go for privatisation considered to be a panacea for all the cataclysmic

fuse of lawlessness and indiscipline.

Nevertheless, privatisation is a worthy goal. Many of the Third World countries embarking on this course have reaped the benefit. Selling off the public sector enterprises groaning under a debt-burden will enable the government to reduce public spending and allocate the limited resources more productively. Privatisation in Britain paid off enormously than anywhere else. For example, earnings at British Telecom rose by 11% a year since the company was sold off in 1984.

For economies under strain, the disposal of publicly owned companies will definitely usher in an era of prosperity. But while disposing it of, it has to be seen most meticulously that parties offering bids have significant technical credentials to complement their business. Studies in Japanese business and industrial growth revealed that 70% top management in companies involved in technology or manufacturing have training and experience in both business and technology. Toyota's chief executive officer, for example, is a world class engine designer. In as much as the

problem is very daunting, it needs to be addressed to with all the tact and skill.

Throwing money at the moribund enterprises without bringing about any structural and organisational reform was no cure for the country's crippling economic ills. At the same time, infusion of generous cash and credits unless matched by motivation of workers, and in absence of proper incentive, was destined to dry up like a drop of water on a hot stove.

Despite the fact that privatisation can work wonders in shoring up the profound economic slump, it is going to

economy to be meaningful: We need to make higher investments in education and health-care system because countries with such kinds of investments generally have a narrower gap between the richest and poorest groups in the population. Secondly, if literacy is higher, infant mortality lower and nutritional standards better, the society in general is more stable, women in such societies being better educated, marry later. As a result they have fewer children and in fact lose fewer.

Third World countries like Costa-Rica, Indonesia and Tunisia have successfully contained population-boom. Projection of world population growth

from business circles to political parties, who once favoured protectionist policies that shielded them from competition, are now struggling to break free from their regulatory shackles. People have given a clarion call for privatisation and free market economy and the government is making a desperate bid to invite foreign investment.

But things have not moved in the way we anticipated. Many foreign companies are repelled by bureaucratic red tape, others refuse to invest in a country that remains politically disturbed and economically uninviting. Because of the unrest dominating the labour area, foreign investors are shy to make any meaningful investment in the country even admitting the fact that it has access to very cheap labour. Foreign companies have made a lot of studies and exploratory activities about the infrastructural facilities available in the country. But the result is far from satisfactory.

Repairing the economy and tearing off the shackles of bureaucratic red-tapism seem to be the government's main concern and top-priority now. But how can these be achieved by pronouncements and formulation only unless the scam and infection is cured at the grass-roots level? The current economic system that represents an uncomfortable blending of socialism and free enterprise can't work. Whatever the system we are going to envision for the country, it must involve the middle class who have expressed their strong commitments in national progress and have always worked as catalysts in accelerating the development of the country. This must be understood that the purpose of the government is to set policy, not to manage banks, hotels and other businesses. For successful transition to market economy, it needs a group of people thoroughly committed and dedicated to the programme.

The writer is Controller of Examinations, BUET, Dhaka.

LOOKING INTO 1994 — MIDDLE EAST

A Year on the Brink of Peace or Chaos

Michael Jansen writes from Nicosia

Despite an initial setback, the new year beckons hope for the Arab-Israeli peace process. Movement towards an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is expected. The continuing decline in oil prices and the growth of militant Islam may be other dominant themes in 1994. Gemini News Service gazes into the crystal ball for the world's most volatile region.

The peace timetable

Under PLO and Israel Declaration of Principles signed in September in Washington, Palestinians will have self-rule in Gaza and Jericho within 6 years. Israel refused to withdraw on December 13 as promised

1999 February 13	Permanent settlement in force
1996 February 13	Israel and Palestinians start talks on permanent settlement
1994 July 13	Palestinian elections followed by inauguration of Palestinian Council. Israeli military administration in occupied territories dissolves
1994 April 13	Israel completes military withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho, transfers powers to nominated Palestinian authority

cordance with the Oslo timetable. So far PLO, Chairman Yasser Arafat has not set up the institutions required for all this.

Instead he has undermined confidence in his leadership by creating committees of loyal members of his own Fatah faction to take over in the territories, giving rise to the fear that he is trying to establish a Fatah dictatorship.

To prevent this happening there will have to be either a constitutional coup within the PLO depriving Arafat of his extensive powers or Arafat will

have to be overthrown.

The \$570 million in external emergency aid pledged for 1994 will have to be channelled promptly and efficiently into Gaza and the West Bank so their residents have proof that peace can bring them benefits.

The most urgent need is employment for the 60 per cent of labourers out of work in Gaza and the 40 per cent in the West Bank. To provide this an estimated 60 per cent of the first instalment of aid will be invested in rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed by neglect during the 26 years of

Israeli occupation.

The remaining 40 per cent will go to Palestinian hospitals, universities and other institutions starved for funds since Gulf contributors began their boycott of the PLO after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Anger in the Gulf over Palestinian support for Iraq is not the only, or even the main, reason for the refusal of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the other oil-producing emirates to underwrite financially Palestinian self-rule in the territories.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are in serious economic difficulties because of falling oil prices. At the end of 1993, crude was under \$14 a barrel, slightly above the five-year low of \$13.51 reached in mid-December, but 30 per cent below the December 1992 price.

Oil experts point out that heavier crude is already selling at \$8.00 a barrel and the price of higher grade crude could slide to this figure in 1994. One factor unsettling the market is fear of the resumption of exports by Iraq, banned from selling its oil since 1990.

This is unlikely. The four Western powers on the United Nations Security Council are trying to forestall the lifting of sanctions on Iraq by making

new demands on Baghdad in spite of the fact that it has complied with UN requirements on the destruction of weapons and monitoring of its defence industries.

Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter, has run up an external debt of \$67 billion over the last 10 years while its foreign assets have fallen from \$138 to \$50 billion. Paying for the Gulf war and more than \$120 billion in arms purchases from the West have accounted for major external expenditures.

Instead of encouraging the Saudis to cut arms spending, the US is pressing them to buy \$25 billion more to sustain its manufacturers.

The Saudi government has had to cut back on health, education and welfare programmes, creating popular disaffection and discontent which was exploited in 1993 by Islamic militants critical of the ruling family's ties with the West.

A stable Saudi Arabia is necessary for Gulf security. The combination of falling oil prices depressing living standards and organised Islamic opposition could threaten the West's oil supplies and invite intervention.

The test of Islamic intentions and strength will come early in 1994 in Algeria. Economic collapse, caused partly by diminishing oil revenues combined with crushing external debt, enabled Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front nearly to capture power in January 1992.

This was averted by cancellation of the first multi-party parliamentary election and creation of a temporary presidency council to rule until the end of 1993. By then a means to make the transition to democracy was supposed to be devised.

This did not happen and the government had to extend the council mandate and invite the Front to talks. If the Front agrees it could be co-opted by the secular authorities which would then be in a stronger position to suppress the radical militants. A war of attrition with the army has cost 3,000 lives.

Success in co-opting the Front would permit Algeria's campaign against the violent militants to settle into the sort of low level effort pursued by Egypt against its radicals, a war neither side can win or lose, disruptive but not destabilising. Failure could result in all-out civil war.

The stand-off between governments and Islamists could tilt in favour of Muslim militants if the Arab-Israeli peace process fails.

The Islamists, sustained by popular despair, mass unemployment and the corruption and inefficiency of pro-Western Arab regimes, could be given a strong enough spiritual boost to pose a serious threat to the unsatisfactory status quo.

1992 will be a year on the brink — of peace or of chaos.

MICHAEL JANSEN was born in the US and lives in Cyprus. She has covered the Middle East for many years.

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.

Senseless deeds

Sir, I am beginning to wonder whether conscience is bidding farewell to the minds of the people of Bangladesh as they have started doing irrational and erratic things, under whim, totally ignoring reason and logic. For instance, on 15th November last a medical student was killed by a truck. Unfortunately, other angry students chose damaging vehicles randomly as an outburst of their grief. Again, on 16th November, many garment workers, to retaliate an alleged assault on their employer by Customs officials, did the inevitable thing — breaking the glass doors of Zia International Airport and damaging the ve-

hicles present there.

These are but examples of many similar destructive acts. I would like to know what the innocent vehicles did to deserve to be broken? All sorts of vehicles are expensive. Most of them are bought by the aid-money Bangladesh is receiving from many countries and there are also private ones. The loss that the Government and ordinary people are suffering from these whimsical and senseless deeds is no doubt great. These are leaving this poor country poorer.

If people want to protest something, why not try the particular person who is the cause of the accident or incident, rather than showing wrath on the dumb vehicles

and materials? And I think, the persons who damage public property in the wake of any objectionable occurrence, also deserve very strong and exemplary punishment. If this kind of vandalism continues, who knows, maybe in the near future we shall see students of even nursery classes following the footsteps of their elders! No doubt such frequent examples of disgraceful performances would help to make them excellent neophytes!

Ismat Haseen
Old DOHS, Dhaka

The Customs dilemma

Sir, I am writing this to redress my grievances — to bring to the kind notice of the relevant authorities that even after more than two and a half years of submission of a bill of entry (5005) at Chittagong port (dated 28.1.91), I couldn't as yet clear the consignment.

What I like to place stress on is that under the preaching

of free mixed economy, the shortcomings of import policy (whether the imported photocopies are new or used, in my instance) should immediately be removed, otherwise a small trading house has to bear such harassment as blockage of capital, moving from pillar to post and even (still) sailing without destination.

The last hope of justice also sank when I learned that higher rank of National Board of Revenue, while signing the revision petition order (20/93 dated 11.9.93) had defended the findings of Customs officials rather than to show justice to a small trading house whose ruin was almost complete.

Mohammed Mohiuddin
Section-1, Block G 3/19
Avenue, Mirpur, Dhaka-1216

Common market

Sir, worldwide common markets are being organised for development of trade and industry among member na-

tions. There exist EEC, ASEAN, OPEC, NAFTA etc., while SAARC common market is expected to function in future. Unfortunately the cost of most of the agricultural and industrial products are very high in Bangladesh, compared to India, Pakistan and Nepal. Thus our producers start crying at intervals when commodities from neighbouring countries find their way in Bangladesh market.

Against this backdrop it would be fair and justified if your esteemed daily, as well as others, published the price of consumer goods, food items etc. of India, Pakistan, Burma, Nepal and Sri Lanka regularly so that we can know where we stand in regional competition. This will definitely help our entrepreneurs.

Sadiq Alee
Magbazar, Dhaka

International airfare

Sir, It has been observed that international airfare from

Dhaka to other international destinations is not merely high, it is rather exorbitant. A return air ticket from London-Dhaka-London costs 400 to 550 pounds depending on the carrier one chooses. But the same ticket from Dhaka-London-Dhaka costs in terms of taka fifty thousand or so which is highly disproportionate. This is just an example. The same is the case with all other international destinations.

It has been alleged that fare from Dhaka to other destinations has been fixed at a higher rate by Biman and rule has been framed so that no other airline can charge rates lower than Biman. If that is so, it is highly unjust and unethical. In the short run, Biman may gain but in the long run it will be the loser. Moreover, this may tarnish its good image. Will the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism and relevant Parliamentary Committee look into it?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Carit, Dhaka