

Tight-rope Walking over Jute Sector

If the US\$ 250 million Jute Sector Adjustment Credit (JSAC) of the World Bank is the single-highest loan ceiling offered by it to Bangladesh to-date, the results sought to be obtained thereby are equally unparalleled.

It was determined quite rightly by the joint wisdom of the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) and the World Bank that nothing short of a radical transformation in the public sector-dominated jute sector could save the loss-making elephantine from plummeting to a new depth. There is no contesting the rationale of a drastic metamorphosis the sector must undergo nor is there any question about the 3-year time frame to complete the process; but our pointer is towards something else.

The adjustments are going to be organisational and structural so that these carry a natural gestation period which, in this case, happens to be a time-bound three year one. The excess manpower of the public sector jute industries has been reduced already by 12,000 out of the planned 20,000. The remainder 8,000 can be shed with plenty of time in hand. Perhaps well within the next three years nine of the 29 public sector mills would be closed down and 18 of them privatised bringing about a reduction in the cumulative excess — more precisely — idle capacity. The public sector's share in the total capacity is stipulated to be around 20 per cent in 1996 from the present level of 64 per cent.

As for the retrenchment part, a significant number of permanent workers of government-owned jute mills have quit their jobs under a 'voluntary programme'. So, willing job-leavers have helped allay the fear of resistance to the programme.

But the point here is not so much as to whether the programme will progress smoothly, nor is there any conflict over its ultimate objective which is clearly to make the jute sector viable. What bothers us at this stage is a possibility that as the structural adjustment process takes its time, the intake of raw jute by the mills and their standard output might both be affected, if adequate precautionary measures have not been taken. The dislocation in the intake and production schedules will only make it difficult for us to meet the export targets in jute goods and perhaps raw jute as well. We cannot be unmindful of this aspect when earnings from jute have dropped but otherwise higher demands seem around the corner with new markets having emerged on the world trade map. At a time when we are poised to produce green jute to be used as paper pulp, with its tremendous commercial prospect and are about to diversify the jute manufacturing process to make up for the lost market it is essential that as the structural adjustment goes on productivity is not impaired.

We are all for the transformation of the jute manufacturing sector along stronger and viable lines. And, we note that under the World Bank programme the Tk 400 crore outstanding debt of the sector would be restructured. While all this is good, the need is great nonetheless to ensure that in the interregnum the jute growers produce enough of the fibre and that the efficient among the mills, both in the public and private sectors, keep to their production schedules undisturbed.

In other words; there should be no compromise on production even as the structural adjustment programme gathers momentum. Hopefully some of the benefits of a reorganised jute sector would start flowing in a year or so. Even then let's make the most of the nearest season.

Reviving Railway

A computerised ticket-selling system would be quite a giant leap forward for the Bangladesh Railway. This is not to be confused with the technological advantages that could be derived from an introduction of the latest railway services like those in developed countries. Yet, handing the responsibility of selling computerised tickets over to a private company by all accounts appears to be a welcome move. Blackmarketing of tickets and various other irregularities have been preventing the railway from becoming a viable system. That the railway has become over the years a losing concern can be partly explained by the widespread irregularities with ticket-selling. Any move to get rid of this in-built corruption will only bring in some much-needed relief to the harassed passengers.

However, the introduction of the system at Dhaka will not fully cure the malaise. But surely it is expected to reinforce the need for bringing other points under it as soon as possible. No system can be effective if entrenched corrupt elements have their way and are bent on foiling any move to improve service. If everything is chaotic, unclear and unaccounted for, it suits the vested interest groups right.

The computerised system for the first time is going to bring in order the mess deliberately created with a purpose. The stake moreover for the company charged with the responsibility will be great, for its margin of profit will depend on the sale of tickets. It will be in no enviable position to stay in the business but if it can prove that further improvement at various other key points can indeed save the day for the railway, it will be a great job done. The existing system has indeed made a rough weather of everything — from booking to theft of engine parts and furniture in the coaches.

This measure is not expected to go far unless complemented by a radical shake-up of the whole moribund system. This should include the building up of new infrastructure and renovation of the decaying and lackadaisical railway engines, coaches and wagons. Private companies' involvement at various operational levels may surely give a new lease of life to the railway. The policy the railway is now pursuing runs counter to the concept of attracting more passengers and goods. Particularly on the volume of carrying goods largely depends the railway's profit margin. To make the railway a profitable concern all these points have to be addressed soon. One way of reviving the lost health of the railway may be delegating as much managerial duties as possible to private hands — may be on a contract basis.

BANGLADESH Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has still two more years in her term. Normally, she should be able to retrieve the ground that she lost in the recent mayoral polls, in which she lost the posts in Dhaka and Chittagong. But she and her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) continue to betray the same complacency which has partly cost them the civic elections. After all, they had won all the constituencies in Dhaka and Chittagong in the parliamentary polls held three years ago.

A top BNP leader sees the results as a negative vote in favour of Awami League, the opposition party headed by Sheikh Hasina. It may be true to some extent. But one can see the change in the people's mood. They are disappointed over Khaleda's non-performance. They expected her to give them a better standard of living. They at least hoped for a secure life, a firmer law and order situation. But her government's credibility dipped further when six Awami League workers were killed as the news of the party's victory poured in.

In contrast, Hasina has insisted on peaceful behaviour from her followers. In the past such killings would have met with retaliation. The Awami League would have organised processions, Bangladesh's staple food, to register victory.

FOR a long time in Bangladesh, freedom of expression has been suppressed. Seventeen continuous years of de facto authoritarian rule had subordinated the individual freedom of citizens to the will of the dictator. Issues progressive and forces for democracy had to endure everything from subtle censorship to outright repression. Nur Hossain embodied democracy and had to die for free expression. Our expectations now, with the advent of democracy, is to be able to speak out freely and be informed freely. While this essay profits from this democratic inspiration, many others still cannot. The banning of the January 31 issue of *Time* is the most recent example.

The issue contained a story on, no surprise, Taslima Nasreen. It apparently upset some sensitive reviewers in our government. This put us in the absurd situation that the world would know something about us when we ourselves would be in the dark. It seems that some elements within the government do not consider the educated population of Bangladesh to be adults, able to select and understand reading materials by their own free choice. We are children, our feelings tender, and so our enlightened guardians in the government circles need to sift through the information to feed us what they think is suitable. We elected a government to lead us to greater freedom, not to curtail it.

Development means freedom. Economic, political, social, or human development — each, despite features of its own, ultimately implies an ex-

Dhaka Learning to Live with India

In fact, India figures in every discussion in Bangladesh. The Ganges water remains the core of differences between the two countries. Emotions run high on this subject and it is 'our Kashmir' as an editor of an influential English daily puts it.

But she cautioned restraint. She has learnt from experience that the posture of confrontation does not go down well with the electorate. She is already finding it hard to live down the image of being combative, any violence would have made her look irresponsible, an odium which a prospective prime minister cannot afford to carry.

If the present trend in politics continues, the Awami League may emerge as the largest party, gaining 25 to 30 seats at the expense of BNP. The Jatiya Party of General Ershad, who is in prison at present, may come to tilt the balance. The people in the subcontinent forgive and forget too soon. In India the electorate brought back Indira Gandhi despite the excesses she committed during the emergency (1975-77). But between now and then, Bangladesh will face messy problems. The opposition will put pressure for fresh elections.

Khaleda has to blame herself for the conditions prevailing in the country. She had everything going her way when she began her tenure in 1991.

The army was finally back in the barracks. The judiciary under Chief Justice Shahabuddin, who conducted the last elections, the fairest Bangladesh has ever had, functioned without interference. The crop was bumper for three years in a row. Donor countries oozed with sympathy and money. And the opposition was divided and disheartened.

The economic reforms, followed by the comma dictated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have yielded limited results. The exit policy has only increased unemployment and the withdrawal of subsidies has pushed up the price of necessities. Corruption has contaminated every tier of the government.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

The scene has changed in the last few months. The army is still far distant from the seat of power. But the judiciary finds the government overbearing. The Chief Justice has said that he is 'nobody' when the judges of the Supreme Court are appointed. Students are still queuing up for the examinations which should have been held two years ago. Donor countries are less confident than before.

The fault is hers because the government has failed to

deliver the goods. The economic reforms, followed by the comma dictated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have yielded limited results. The exit policy has only increased unemployment and the withdrawal of subsidies has pushed up the price of necessities. Corruption has contaminated every tier of the government.

The next-door India could have helped. But it imports only five per cent of goods from Bangladesh and exports 95 per cent, worth \$1 billion. True, Bangladesh has not much to offer but whatever it

can get embroiled in the bureaucratic games. New Delhi, for example, agreed to buy a miserly quantity of 5,000 tons of Hilsa fish but entrusted the job in West Bengal to only one company, which is not only dictating the price but also dragging its feet in picking up the produce contracted.

In fact, India figures in every discussion in Bangladesh. The Ganges water remains the core of differences between the two countries. Emotions run high on this subject and it is 'our Kashmir' as an editor of an influential English daily puts it. Before the Farakka barrage was built to flush the desilting Hoogly, the river carried 65,000 cusecs of water to Bangladesh.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, father of Bangladesh, allowed the operation of the Farakka barrage after an understanding with Mrs Gandhi on an assured supply of 40,000 cusecs. The Janata government entered into a five-year agreement in 1977, reducing the quantity to 34,500 cusecs. Mrs Gandhi allowed the arrangement to continue on her return. It was Rajiv Gandhi who cut the sup-

ply, which was only 9,200 cusecs last year.

The crucial period is for two months, March and April, when the flow of water in the Ganges is minimum. That is the period which affects Bangladesh the most. Nearly one-third of its fertile land becomes a bowl of dust. Even drinking water becomes scarce. Hundreds of meetings between New Delhi and Dhaka have brought no settlement.

New Delhi favours a link canal to channelise water from the Brahmaputra to the Ganges while Dhaka wants reservoirs to be built in Nepal to augment the supply of water in the Ganges.

The last word is expected from Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who is believed to have told Khaleda during their last meeting that Bangladesh will not be allowed to suffer on account of water.

The Bangladesh government is in fact awaiting his arrival in Dhaka; the more he delays the more edgy will be the Bangladeshis.

The return of Buddhist Chakmas, who have taken shelter in Tripura after facing harassment in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and their settlement, will lessen tension between New Delhi and Dhaka. As a result of a breakthrough in negotiation, the first batch of Chakmas returned to Bangladesh last Tuesday.

Censorship in a Democracy

by Jalal Alamgir

Our infant democracy, however, has failed to give feminist views the necessary support. If such issues cannot be supported at the state level for political reasons, fine, but in no way should the issues be suppressed at the state level.

panion of our freedom and capacities. Democracy, in similar vein, is one aspect of political development, as it represents the right to freely choose and express. This right is reflected as much through free elections as by an enduring presence of a free media and free flow of information. Accordingly, censorship undermines democracy and political development by stifling freedom of expression and conscience, and by reducing transparency and accountability.

The blatant example of suppression of conscience in Bangladesh is feminist thought. Persecution of feminists is natural in this grand patriarchy, despite our constitutional guarantee of equality between the sexes. The vision of an equitable world which was the bedrock of our first constitution is a long way from fulfillment. Our infant democracy, however, has failed to give feminist views the necessary support. If such issues cannot be supported at the state level for political reasons, fine, but in no way should the issues be suppressed at the state level. A democratic regime led by a woman, by principle, should not resist the flow of information that pro-

notes the struggle for equitable rights for women. And from the political stance of majority rule, after all, women constitute half of the population, whereas fundamentalists are only part of the other half.

In the absence of state support, it is the media and the publishing world, native and foreign, that has come forward to further the issue of gender rights along with other progressive concerns. Freedom of media, freedom of information, and freedom of expression are all irrevocably interconnected, and they are all essential ingredients for political development. Political development requires free expression for all points of view. It is through media — radio, television, and the print — that different views spread across and take root. And for that very reason newspapers and magazines have always been under watch by an authoritarian status quo.

The very first issue of the first periodical in Bengal, the *Bengal Gazette*, published in 1780, got into trouble with the then Governor General, Warren Hastings. Since then, the English, and at times the nawabs, have indiscriminately used censorship on papers English and Bengali. Even

treason clauses were included in the censorship laws of the British Indian Penal Code, but it still could not stop the spread of progressive ideas, ultimately leading towards independence. The Pakistan government and our own military regimes have subjected the newsmedia and the intellectuals to similar paths.

Two changes, however, should lead us towards optimism. One, our political system finally is a democracy, which embraces free expression. Two, technology, has made information borderless, and it is increasingly difficult to restrict the freedom of media. In spite of these two developments, the government, we find, still takes measures to suppress information, and thereby undermine democracy. Whatever the reason for doing so, such censorship has lengthened our walk to political development.

In this age of wireless communication, progressive thinkers in Bangladesh so far has been able to utilize only the printing press, notwithstanding censorship. Radio and television has been the sole preserve of the regime in power. In no other sector of the information industry is

censorship as harshly imposed, so much so that competition in domestic broadcast media is not permitted at all. By retaining that monopoly, the government holds on to a last bastion of authoritarianism. Especially in times uncomfortable for the ruling regime, TV and radio in Bangladesh invariably relays baseless information. Even during the just-concluded City Corporation elections, we have to turn to BBC and VOA for dependable information, just as we have been doing for the past two decades. If freedom implies choice, then one of the urgencies towards political freedom is to open up domestic broadcast media for private competition. BTV and Radio Bangladesh can remain government spokesmen, but other viewpoints, feminism or whatever, need access to additional microwave frequencies. Only through competing sources of

information can free thinking and free media truly come into being, and proper transparency and accountability of a political system be established.

In many ways, the struggle for political development translates into replacing concentrated power with diffused power. The latter enshrines freedom of conscience and freedom of expression. Power becomes naturally distributed among different competing views, if views have the freedom to express themselves. Sustainable democracy is based on diffusion of power, very much so in the information business.

John Naisbitt, in his best-selling book *Megatrends*, identifies 'information in the hands of many' as the most influential source of power in the modern world. As formal democracy in Bangladesh paces into its third year, we have to make sure that we, the citizens, are no longer denied this power and the freedom that it embodies. Permitting private competition in television and radio, withdrawing censorship, and ensuring a free flow of information, domestic and international, will be an urgent first step towards political freedom. And it is upto the individual, not the government, to decide what one can read or not.

OPINION

Degradation of Values

Mohammad Anjad Hossain

Unlike earlier celebrations of English New Year's day, the occasion following the midnight of 31 December this year witnessed an unusually wild atmosphere. The overenthusiasm shown by a section of young people in different cities of the country had really surpassed the norm and decorum of our society. Our values are not identical with that of western society. And we uphold our values and tradition, we feel proud of our culture and age-old tradition.

On the so called new year's eve, pedestrians on main thorough fares of the capital city witnessed some unusual, and rather unacceptable postures of the younger generation, some of them did not even attaining puberty level. Many of them were roaming around the main thorough fares with beer cans and whiskey bottles. They were seen sipping and singing and dancing blocking the traffic. They went ahead of indulging in undesirable activities. Some of the young boys pelted pebbles at the panes of the cars passing through the VIP road towards DOHS and Banani areas. Travellers of the cars, particularly women and girls were even hauled and insulted. Cars were stopped and a few of the boys rode on the bonnet enjoying their drunkenness. The manner in which these young boys celebrated English new year's eve reflects degradation from traditional values and norms of our own Bengali culture. It is a shame, indeed.

In one of the incidents a couple of young boys accompanied perhaps by some masters of the locality broke open the Social Welfare Club of the Officers Colony and enjoyed the new year's eve with hard drinks! They beat the darwan and intended to snatch away the TV set but because of the darwan's resistance they could not succeed in this act.

It is understood, most of these young boys hail from the middle class families. And from their activities it is clearly evident that they are misguided and also perverted. Perhaps to overcome the frustrating gap between the in-

come groups in our society they might have chosen the anti-social activity as a way out! As a matter of fact, celebration of Bengali new year on first of Baishakh has become part of our life. English new year did not assume such importance in our society, nor it has to late. There can't be any comparison of values of Bengali society with that of the western ones.

In the west the trend is different. Merry-making on days like the New Year, Thanksgiving and Halloween turn out as nuisance when valuable lives are sacrificed at the altar of violence. The western society could possibly afford such violence for the sake of fun. Bangladesh being a least developed country can hardly cope with such undesired atmosphere. But when young boys, not only from rising affluent society but also from the middle class join in the midnight chorus of Happy New Year in their style of vandalism, it seems to be high time to take stock of the situation keeping in mind the centuries old sublime cultural tradition of Bangladesh. Since our society is not attuned to such unruly behaviour at midnight which often turns into crime, majority of the population gets panicky.

In view of the increasing unrest in the society, and involvement of younger generation in undesirable activities, it is felt that guardians and saner elements of the society should make efforts to arrest this deteriorating trend in the greater interest of the nation. Increasing unemployment, decreasing influence of the character moulding institutions, high rate of illiteracy and overpopulation combined with influence of western obscene films video contribute to the degradation of values in our society. So the people who care for values and culture of Bangladesh must evolve ways and means to divert the younger generation to the desired nature of activities. And, above all, the law enforcing agencies have a greater role to play in stopping the antisocial activities endangering the society itself.

To the Editor...

Global standard education

Sir, We are one of the poorest nations in the world now. But, we are told, once upon a time this land was one of the rich territories. But gradually the richness has diminished yielding places to crises and problems. True such condition has been reflected in our present economic and education standard.

We have no international standard education system. And poverty is eating away whatever we have in that. It is generally accepted that education is the backbone of a nation. And now, without a global standard of education no nation can reach its objectives and is not able to face any challenge.

As a third world poor country, Bangladesh must give top priority and special importance to her education sector — both primary and secondary and also higher studies. Unless we develop our standard of education, we will not be able to establish ourselves as a potential member in the family of world nations.

Fayezur Rahman,
Masdair, Narayanganj

Road accidents

Sir, Road accidents in Bangladesh have become the order of the day. Except for occasional outbursts of public reaction against the killer trucks, and buses and some innocent cars and followed up by editorials in our newspapers after a tragic accident involving an innocent student, a film star, or a journalist, no one bothers about accidents. Government appears to be almost unconcerned as, if it has no responsibility at all. Perhaps the government's reasoning is why should the government be responsible, after all the accidents are caused by the private transports. The opposition parties are also mostly inactive

on this matter. They raise their voices on everything but alas, not on this matter!

The government can, of course, claim that they observe traffic week and TV publicity is given showing a policeman stopping a bus emitting black smoke and the amused driver promising repair of the same. Or the policemen helping school children, dressed for the occasion, to cross the street. I wonder if the BTV has not been showing the same shot again and again every year!

The survey undertaken by the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) appearing in your esteemed newspaper on 26th December last was very interesting. Have they asked the drivers of the cars (both professional and owner drivers) if they knew the significance of the various road signs especially the zebra crossing; if they knew that all transport should stop before the red STOP light and should not proceed beyond the stop light and cause jam at the crossing and that the pedestrians have the right of way over a zebra crossing and it is an offence in civilized countries to park on a zebra crossing?

The CAB should have asked the policemen on duty about the road signs. I will not be surprised if the answer from the drivers and the policemen alike often goes to the extent that the road signs are put to beautify the roads before the SARC meeting or the SAF games!

I have a few suggestions in this regard:

1. Open a number of information centres in the city accessible to everybody where by posters, Videos, free booklets the public are made conscious of a few important rules of the roads to be observed by drivers and pedestrians alike.

2. Go for wide publicity on radio, TV, and cinema houses as to make the public and the drivers conscious of the courtesy of the road. In this case a model of publicity on Oral

Saline or Polio, can be taken as model.

3. Traffic Week should not be observed to collect fines and publish figures of fines collected, as is normally done, but it should be observed as traffic courtesy week. Drivers should show courtesy to the pedestrians and vice versa. All voluntary organisations should be motivated to take part. Rotarians, Lions, WVA, Inner Wheel, Zonta, Scouts, all should take part. The week should be full of courtesy. Good planning should be done in advance to make the week a real success, half-hearted measures will not do. Considering that it is a national problem, all the political parties forgetting their political differences, should wholeheartedly take part in it.

4. A few well-organised driving schools should be established where not only driving but also the rules of the road are taught.

5. NGOs can definitely play an important role in this. One of them may take this up as a project.

6. If this country can make success stories of the Grameen Bank and BRAC, there is no reason why one should feel frustrated that traffic problem cannot be solved in Bangladesh. In this respect the people of Chittagong and their present Traffic Dept deserve to be congratulated. They have shown the way.

P G Muhammad

Increased rates and taxes

Sir, People owe a duty to pay rents, taxes and duties in a welfare state to help the government run the day to day administration smoothly. Unfortunately, there has been a trend to increase rates of rent, taxes, duties in recent years besides charges of utility services, quite exorbitantly

with least regard to the capacity of the taxpayers. In view of increase of prices and imposition of all kinds of taxes the sufferings of people of the lower income strata are simply increasing.

It should be the object of the government, particularly of that which has assumed the democratic character, to provide atmosphere of ease for the common men to live an undisturbed life by pursuing a policy of punishing the culprit and protecting the innocent. No government or any other authority should increase rates and taxes to an extent which becomes unbearable for the tax payers.

In the past any proposal for increase in tax or utility charges used to come in the form of a bill, and before implementation underwent a process of scrutiny in the parliament. But from the time of Ershad's autocratic government the strategy has been changed and various authorities and departments are found to impose new charges and increase duties frequently at their will.

During the last four years of the JP rule, increase in charge for every utility service viz. WASA, electricity, gas, telephone, land revenue etc was not only exorbitant but also distressing. Persons who were instrumental for such arduous increase had little anxiety for the people of limited means. It was strongly hoped that the democratic government in order to provide instant relief to people of lower income strata would do away with the last instalment of increase in the utility charges and duties. But people are still to bear the burden of increased rates. Recently water rates have been further increased causing further hardship to the people and that too bypassing the Parliament, which is unbecoming of a democratic order.

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