

On to More and True Freedom

The night one of the worst genocides of history was committed was followed by a day dawning under a new-arising sun — the sun of independence for Bangladesh. Nations hardly ever get their freedom on a platter. But Bangladesh's independence was specially blood-smeared. For nine months thousands of Goths of the Schindler's List notoriously killed unarmed civilians at will, burned houses and crops, raped women and butchered children. It was a hard-won independence. It is proving harder to make it meaningful. The state is free and sovereign as much as its inner strength would make other states respect this. But the society, the collective entities of diverse description, is not so free of inherited inabilities and of the burden of present challenges mainly of daring and bursting forth. And man in the wastelands out there in the villages everywhere is the farthest from freedom shackled to a beastly life of illiteracy and hunger, insecurity and unhealth and joblessness and landlessness. The villages are dying and men are rushing to towns in droves, carrying their unfreedoms intact with them. On the 23rd anniversary of our independence let us commit ourselves to building more and more freedoms for us all — economic and political and cultural. And let these freedoms be realised not in statistical quanta alone but be the portion of each and every individual peopling this land.

Without universal literacy strewn generously with patches of education and culture of intensive and high-reaching quality — and without democracy that would make us treat each of our 120 million citizens at par with the Prime Minister and may be more — we wouldn't be able to address the question of entering the Third Millennium with the slightest modicum of decency of presence. Expanding education and democracy would call for a matchingly expanding jobs market — something in which we have been faring the worst. An inevitable cut in the dependence on arable land would release a tremendous mass of manpower for employment in services and industrial production. Trading will absorb more people when more people will have jobs and go for more consumption. At the moment nothing is moving in any of these areas. We must find the tricky spot pushing which would set the whole machine awhirl.

A people is a people when cemented together by politics and culture. A much-touted homogeneity and a true-enough rich trove of past cultural achievements not only in the arts, literature and learning but also in an enviable build up of a national ethos — have for very evident reasons, failed to stand us on a good stead as a people. A plethora of devious palaver is choking the life out of culture which must be a living sentient thing in order to be life-giving. The worst expression of this has been the so-called *fatwabazi* spawning medieval persecution of women, burning of schools and newly planted trees. The *fatwas* are but aggravated forms of what the fundamentalists, after failing to resist the independence, are doing to destabilise and divide the society with such non-issues as the religion of the Qadianis.

We haven't been doing any better politically. Consensus was needed to go part of the way to a pluralistic society and democracy. Erasing the black laws and annulling the indemnity and other unjust and anti-Bangladesh amendments couldn't be realised without consensus. And without doing the first things first, we shall only be roaming in political wilderness. The Magura polls have hit the nadir of our political showing since the exit of Ershad. This worsening political climate is not going to help bring the campuses back to sanity and normalcy.

But we shall overcome all this and more. We have seen far worse. And we are here — a free people poised to carve ever more freedom. On this auspicious day of our national unshackling we bow our heads in gratitude to the millions of Shaheds who died so that we can live. We also remember our debts of gratitude to our comrades in war and sacrifice from across the border as well as everywhere else in the world.

For Efficient Banking

The recent shake-up in the managements of some private and nationalised banks, ostensibly for the purpose of making the banking sector more efficient and accountable, has reportedly given a jolt to the banks' normal functioning. This does not augur well especially when the banks are required to be dynamic in credit disbursement and foreign exchange transactions. This missing dynamism is looked upon as key to greater investment in the economy that is caught in the trap of low investment.

It is difficult to understand why those who are not affected by the shake-ups should allow themselves to be worried apprehending more such actions when they have themselves given no cause for these. Equally it is admitted that an indefinite vacuum at the top level positions would slow down banking initiatives till the slots are filled in.

To an extent, even new administrations will take time to be in full gear. But, as it happens, we have a tendency to take corrective measures all at a time making these look sweeping and somewhat frightening.

At any rate, there is little denying the fact that the banking sector, particularly the NCBs, needed to be streamlined and tailored to the requirement of a free market economy and the imperatives of development.

New and forward-looking equations have to be developed between the Bangladesh Bank and the whole lot of other banks as much as the relationship between the directors and paid chief executives should also improve.

At the same time "the interests of the directors may not always be similar to those of the depositors." It is the managing director's job to strike a balance between the two categories of interests. Of course in Bangladesh there is a need for growing traditions that clearly delineate responsibilities between the Board of Directors and the top management — the former deciding policy guidelines while the latter ran the day-to-day affairs of banks without interference.

Reviving Super 301: A Diminished Giant Syndrome?

by Abdul Bayes

To utter dismay, the world could learn that the US is going to revive its trade weapon, called Super 301, that was lapsed four years ago. It may be mentioned here that Super 301 is to be used against partners' resorting to unfair trading practices. There is also a normal section 301 which is an old provision of American trade law that allows American individuals or the government to retaliate against any traders abroad deemed to be unjustifiable, unreasonable or discriminatory. Super 301, on the other hand, was invented in 1988 when America lost patience with GATT's barely functioning and marathonic dispute settlements system. Unlike its cousin — the normal 301 — Super 301 adds a rigid timetable which is meant to prevent the President from being soft on foreigners by quietly dropping suits. Under this, at the end of March, America will publish a list of unfair trading practices. Six months later, it will begin to investigate a few of the most serious cases. And three weeks after that the 301 complaints can become formal (Economist, March 1994).

The Genesis of the Crisis

The dominance of the US in world trade has been warning since President Ronald Re-

gan's era, that exacerbated during Bush regime and virtually coming to a halt at the moment. The supremacy on trade of goods vanished long ago and the US is now thriving on the edges of its trade in services. Available evidence points to a growing US trade imbalance with the rest of the world. For example, during the period 1991-1993, the trade deficit increased from US\$67 billions to US\$116 billions. Analysts tend to argue that such a deficit sprang mainly from US budget deficit and higher household spending and, therefore, US trade imbalance should be reasoned to poor macro-economic policies pursued by the US administration. Another school of thought posits the imbalance in terms of the falling productivity in the US manufacturing sector for which an escalation of production costs occurred to make US goods dearer to consumers. Even during the Reagan era, successive devaluations could hardly arrest the surge in the demand for high quality foreign goods.

However, what seems to annoy the US administration most is the growing trade imbalance with Japan. Deficit with Japan rose from US\$43 billions to US\$60 billions during the same period of time. That is, nearly half of the total imbalance with world, is

caused by an imbalance with Japan only. And out of this US\$60 billion deficit with Japan, about two-thirds could possibly be attributable to the trade of cars and spare parts that tend to flood the US market. In the meantime, it is reported that the US auto industry rebounded strongly and the US is expected to overtake Japan this year as the world's largest auto-producer for the first time in 13 years. The turnaround also appears keen in high technology, especially computers. The US has been making fervent appeal to Japanese leaders to open their markets and failing to catch a positive response. The US seems to have decided to resort to Super 301 in vengeance.

Actions and Reactions

It is reported that the US wanted Japan to allow her commodities to enter into the Japanese market through numerical target setting. This act of trade — dubbed as managed trade — did not appear acceptable to the Japanese leaders mainly because GATT rules do not permit this. If Japan has to provide access, that should equally be applicable to all the nations so long the GATT rules are alive and respected. The

Protests from different countries of the world erupted to say that by threatening to reviving 301, the US appears to have taken the law in its own hand by bypassing the trade court, GATT. It is being argued that as a member of the multilateral trading system, a particular nation has no right to assume the role of judge and jury on trading partner's trade practices. Such a precedence could also be honored by others in future. For example, France might like to see that a numerical target on the imports of French wine be set by the US against her inferior Californian brands.

How far the revival of the weapon would hurt Japan is very difficult to ascertain since much of Japanese productions are from the subsidiaries located in different parts of the

world including the US. Fears loom large that the axe 301 might also fall on China and South Korea's shoulders — the former being deemed for the so-called human rights situation in China and the latter, for closed car markets. The most formidable argument against such act of trade practices is that as a preacher of the so-called free trade doctrine, the US honours the breach than the practice.

Dangerously 'Unfair'

The world trade giant thus is showing some dangerous syndrome on, the verge of being on a diminished scale in world trade by resorting to unfair weapons to face the so-called unfair trading partners. Japan could probably escape the rot by its sheer growth and dominance all over the world. But what would happen to a poor country if, for a moment, its trading practices are also adjudged unfair by Uncle Sam?

Perhaps, history is not too far to tell us that much of the woes in the world production and trade of commodities and services could be adduced to the domestic policy imperatives of the developed countries. The less developed countries could, if at all, only be blamed for following the suit. The most virtuous and the most favored free trade has

The writer is a Professor, Deptt of Economics, Jahangir University.

Nepal's Koirala Wins a Battle but War Goes on

Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

Having survived a parliamentary showdown, the next battle for Nepali Prime Minister Koirala is within his own party

NEPAL'S first freely elected government in 32 years has survived a major crisis but political trouble for its head, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, appears to be far from over.

The government has successfully weathered severe and bitter attacks from within the ruling Nepali Congress Party of the Prime Minister as well as Communist opponents. After winning a vote of confidence in Parliament, the government is believed to have emerged even stronger.

But for Mr Koirala the battle to keep his post may be a protracted one.

The Prime Minister won the first round when the House of Representatives, Parliament's lower house, rejected the vote of no-confidence proposed against him jointly by the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) or UML, the biggest opposition group in the legislature, and the radical United People's Front (UPF).

When voted upon by the lower house on March 7, Mr Koirala received all 118 votes of his ruling party's members in the 205-member chamber while the opposition could only muster 81 votes in support of their proposal.

The no-confidence vote was actually scheduled to be taken March 4 but the 72-year-old Prime Minister, exhausted and nervous, collapsed in the middle of an hour-long speech. He was rushed to the hospital where he spent the next two days.

Having survived the House showdown, Mr Koirala's next battle will be within his own party where he is being criticized for his arrogant and authoritarian style of governance, as well as of corruption, graft and nepotism. He also stands accused of having betrayed his party by masterminding the defeat of Congress Party president Kirshna Prasad Bhattarai in the Feb 7 parliamentary by-election.

The Prime Minister had been opposed to Mr Bhattarai's candidacy which was endorsed almost unanimously by the ruling party members. Allegedly feeling threatened, Mr Koirala told Mr Bhattarai, "Under the present circumstances, it is better if you do not contest. Your prestige should be secure for the next election. If you lose this time, government may be in crisis. The party would also be unpopular."

Although Mr Bhattarai, whose people control the

Congress Party, had stated that he did not seek to end Mr Koirala's premiership in running for Parliament, few people believed him. At the very least, the party president's presence in Parliament was expected to moderate the Prime Minister's high-handed style of governance.

Following Mr Bhattarai's loss, anti-Koirala demonstrations were held for days despite the party president's appeal for restraint. Mr Koirala's followers suffered physical assaults from angry demonstrators. The Prime Minister's people, in retaliation, organized their own protest rallies.

Mr Koirala's victory in Parliament was helped enormously by the firm support of 35 members belonging to his party. However, these MPs only agreed on the condition that the Prime Minister would quit in favour of younger colleagues in the party.

The next couple of weeks would be decisive for Mr Koirala as well as for Nepal's political and economic future.

To the Editor...

'Women's status'

Sir, I was rather shocked and puzzled after I read Syeda Zakia Ahsan's letter in your column.

Zakia is totally against the idea of Bangladeshi women going abroad to participate in any sort of beauty contest. Her excuse is that it is humiliating to our culture and heritage. She has also connected the word development with this. May I have the pleasure of reminding her that our neighbouring country India has sent their women to different beauty contests and their culture and social behavioural pattern has a lot of resemblance with that of ours. But the most crucial point is that they are developed and in most cases self sufficient. Sending women to different contests had no detrimental effects on their development process. A jury investigating the contours of the bodies of Bangladeshi girls, investigating the colour of their skin, the texture of their hair, eyes, smile, the colour of skin, and everything else about her physical being. These girls are in a way displaying themselves but we don't mind as long as one with her charms, tries to attract attention of the people to buy a product and in a way is indirectly participating in the development of the country.

Zakia has spoken of the serenity of the Bangladeshi women. Her serenity is badly affected if she appears in beauty contests but not when she appears numerous times in front of unknown people to make herself agreeable for matrimonial prospects. The respectable writer of the letter has also mentioned the Nurjahan case, though I still cannot find any reason for mentioning this incident, but as she has, I would like to point out to her that this is the result of being hospitable and serene.

When Bangladeshi women can break their age-old barrier and move with the rest of the world then they shall have equal rights, not before. They will participate in beauty contests, in various games etc. It is development we want. We want self-sufficiency in every field. We want world recognition for doing something commendable and for that if we have to discard some foolish regulations, I think we are in bad taste. When we are making display of our women in our own country then what could be wrong sending them to international contests? At least they will get world-wide recognition and Bangladesh will come to the headlines for something positive. All the news we make have created such poor impression that it is about time that we start reversing that.

Madam Zakia does not want to accept that with time the people, their social behaviour change. It is normal and an inevitable rule of nature. She

can't stop it. A few years ago, participation of women in advertising was considered to be an anti-social and degrading act. Now girls and boys from all spheres of the society are constantly taking part in various advertisements. Frankly speaking, when these beautiful girls appear on TV we (people of the 20th century) start appreciating their outstanding features — hair, eyes, smile, the colour of skin, and everything else about her physical being. These girls are in a way displaying themselves but we don't mind as long as one with her charms, tries to attract attention of the people to buy a product and in a way is indirectly participating in the development of the country.

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To make way out of this deadlock it should be ensured that upgrading should not disturb the time-honoured balance between different cadres. Hence, the following suggestions can be given a thought:

District Judges and Deputy Secretaries with ten years standing and with a minimum Class-I service of twenty-five years may be placed in National Scale three. Similarly, officers of other cadres with similar service records may be placed in National Scale three. ADCS, Additional District Judges, Senior Scale Section Officers, Executive Engineers etc. with minimum ten years in Senior Scale and with a total Class-I service of twenty years may be placed in National Scale five. If this policy is followed uniformly, this will satisfy all concerned and won't lead to any inter-cadre heart burning. Will the newly set up committee and Parliamentary Committee on Ministry of Establishment look into it?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka.

OPINION

The Issue of Literacy

Hubert Francis Sarkar

not even know the meaning of the phrase — alike.

Rightfully pointed out by Mr Anam, the issue needs to be addressed by a gigantic nationally-initiated campaign consisting of well-coordinated programmes, participated by the people and their cheerleaders who raise their hands and voice in political rallies, extend their help as volunteers in social gatherings and even become the master-of-the-ceremony in the seminars and symposia. No doubt, the prevailing scenario inexorably puts us into "a deep anomic". Yet, the pathfinders must come forward. The impending challenges have to be faced squarely. In this context, Mr Anam's outpourings are highly thought-provoking.

Of course, the call for the universal literacy is nothing new in Bangladesh. There were times when people wielded authority raised their voice for spreading Bangla in all spheres of our life. We must admit that they had enormous forcefulness in their voice, even if they had infirmity in their hands and feet. And, in the same breath we must admit also that they could only make a little contribution in this regard, if not nothing. Whilst they talked for Bangla, their activities did reflect a little respect to the language and the culture which did not depend on empty braggadocio of just paper tigers to thrive through centuries of political and economic subjugation by many rajas, lords, nawabs. Perhaps in their subconscious they had a little respect for our mother tongue and our own culture; perhaps they esteemed more another men's mother tongue and another men's culture. Perhaps, whatever pious thoughts they had, had produced only a series of action-plans which were just half-measures floating in the mist. We don't know exactly what is the reason for all those pleas to go to school. I believe that shield of harsh sounding pragmatism deserves to be held aloft.

I have justifiable reasons to give bravo to this gentleman. For these three years, I have been observing how aggressively — and persistently — he is addressing the issue of literacy. While a lot of write-ups written on the occasion of the Ekushey February degenerate into inflated verbosity and hollow sloganizing, a very few like Mr Anam's ones bear the touch of a down-to-earth approach. Of course, often this sounds very harsh. I believe that shield of harsh sounding pragmatism deserves to be held aloft.