

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-arriving 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 Goeths of the Schindler's List notoriety 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 unemployment 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 shuffling 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 Shaheeds 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 depositors" is not always similar to those of the directors. It is the managing director's job to strike a balance between the two category 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 time table 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 (Economic 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 billion to US\$116 billion. 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 billion to US\$60 billion 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 deficits with Japan, about two-thirds could be attributed 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

US argument could probably field sympathy if it could be proved that the bilateral trade imbalance has been due to tariff barriers in the economy and in the event of that, the complaint is lodged with the GATT secretariat. The actual situation is, however, just the reverse: Japan's surplus grew out of a recession in the economy and a higher average and marginal propensity to saving of the Japanese.

Protests from different countries of the world erupted to say that by threatening to revive 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 shielded by 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

been ravished by the imprudent domestic and border policies of the developed countries to protect their producers. The century old world disorder in production and trade only made the rich, richer and the poor, poorer via the engine of resource transfers. That is why rice, sugar, dairy products etc. are produced in those countries at a much higher domestic resource cost and at the cost of development from export earnings of the poorer ones. The 43-year-old GATT conceived agricultural trade liberalisation many times but succeeded to produce it only this time. The delay was due to the DCs whose interests were hooked on to the interventions in agriculture in their own economies. However, after many years of parleys, the world trade and production structure have been brought to the GATT ambit to foster reasonably free and fair trade — an accomplishment greeted even by the South. If this opportunity slips out of hand, the world might face another anarchic world trade regime. Mr Clinton is better known to avoid clashes. Hope this impression is true.

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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

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.

Mr Bhattarai's support is crucial for the Prime Minister. Will the feuds once again break out in the ruling party and the wounds opened up again with both the quarrelling partners accusing each other of antarghat (Nepali word for betrayal)?

A close aide to Mr Koirala confided to *Depthnews* that the ruling party was at a "turning point" and organizational and ideological problems have to be addressed urgently by the party *Maha Samiti* or general assembly.

No date has been fixed for the assembly, dominated by Mr Koirala's loyalists. One of its main agenda is to cut down to size the powers of the party president.

The vote of no-confidence against Mr Koirala was debated at the special session of the House summoned by King Birendra on Feb 20 in response to a petition by 62 UML MPs who asked for it in view of the extraordinary political and economic situation in the country.

Apparently, the UML wanted to take advantage of the infighting in the ruling party, hoping that at least 35 Nepali Congress MPs opposed to Mr Koirala would vote against their own party.

At the Feb 18 meeting of the ruling party's Central Working Committee, dominated by Mr Bhattarai's loyalists, the party president asked Mr Koirala to step down. Mr Bhattarai said the party would finally support the Prime Minister when he faces the no-confidence motion in the House but he will have to step down later to make room for a younger generation of leaders.

Rather than resign timidly, Mr Koirala wanted to face both the ruling party's parliamentary group and the Parliament itself. But 35 MPs of Mr Koirala's party boycotted the parliamentary party meeting. They have vowed to oust the prime minister even as they supported him by voting against the no-confidence motion.

Mr Bhattarai admits that his party is in deep trouble. "The differences between Mr Koirala and the members of his own Nepali Congress Party in the House of Representatives, have been growing. But I am hopeful that we would be able to reach a settlement which would be in the interest of the party and the country."

The trouble started when Mr Koirala after urging Mr Bhattarai, his arch rival, to contest the Feb 7 by-election, later changed his mind and asked the party president to run. When Mr Bhattarai lost the election to his communist rival, Mr Koirala was accused of antarghat.

There are fears that the

ruling party might split. Others speculate that the division would benefit "regressive" forces out fishing in troubled waters. "History must not record that builders of democracy in Nepal have become its grave diggers," warned Devendra Prasad Singh, Mr Koirala's old Indian friend.

Mr Bhattarai, 70, was interim prime minister who played a significant role in the smooth and peaceful transition to democratic rule. But he lost the 1991 general elections. Nepal's first free elections in 32 years, to Madan Bhandari, veteran UML leader.

In the Feb 7 by-election, Mr Bhattarai lost again, this time to Vidya Bhandari, the 32-year-old widow of Mr Bhandari. Mr Bhandari, who died in a road "mishap" in May 1993, is believed to be the victim of an assassination plot.

The Communist-backed no-confidence motion accused Mr Koirala of having traded Nepal's national interest, and of being under heavy Indian influence.

In a 90-minute speech at the House on March 2, the leader of the Opposition in parliament, Manmohan Adhikari, lambasted the performance of Mr Koirala's 33-month-old government. The country is being pushed towards anarchy and is mired in abject poverty, corruption, inflation, unemployment, suppression of the Opposition and regression," he charged.

— *Depthnews Asia*

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 makes Zakia blush in shame. But every Bangladeshi girl, especially the married ones have had experiences quite similar to this but under different circumstances.

A girl in Bangladesh is scrutinised in the same manner before she gets married, but in this case, the whole thing is totally humiliating and offending for the bride to be. Our own country holds thousands of these ritualistic contests every month but in a much small scale. Moreover, the jury in an international beauty contest are civilised people and they don't ask offensive questions, neither do they pass remarks that 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 (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.

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 should go for it.

Time has changed; now-a-days boys and girls freely wander around together. They do different things together, a girl of 18 now has the opportunity to choose whom she wants to marry, these are all signs of the new society and a set of new values. So let's forget our age old custom of hiding our women and keeping them wrapped in their shyness which ultimately gives their

male counterparts a chance to exploit and abuse them.

Let the girls go forward and let them participate in contests and display the rare Bangladeshi beauty, charm, elegance, and style. At least, they can bring some trophies home, which our boys have so far failed miserably in doing. After all, a thing of beauty is for everyone to behold, and appreciate. Why deprive the world of this rare opportunity of appreciating the authentic Bangladeshi beauty?

Touheed Feroze
A F Rahmani Hall, DU.

Upgradation of pay scales

Sir, Recently, the government issued orders upgrading the pay scales of nine Cadre Services. This led to sharp reaction in the administration cadre because it created serious imbalance among the different cadres. In the face of agitation, government had to postpone the upgradation order and set up a committee to go into the matter and submit its reports within three months.

To make way out of this deadlock it should be ensured that upgradation 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 twentyfive 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?

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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 wielding 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 braggadocios of just paper tigers to thrive through centuries of political and economic subjugation by many rajahs, 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 vain. Also, we don't know for

sure if all those who were sounding so pious were only the empty vessels or just the heroes coming up right from the pages of the Greek Tragedies.

Very aptly Mr. Anam has pointed out, "Our pride for our national language appears empty and devoid of sincerity if the literacy rate remains to be as low as 30 per cent or near thereabouts. Our respect for the martyrs of the language movement smacks of being only a lip-service or public posturing if millions of our school-going children remain deprived of education." The caveat is remarkably well-placed: It is so appropriate that he should say all these on the eve of the immortal Ekushey February. No, he does not stop at telling as the negativity; yes, he suggests of a beginning of the beginning. Yes, like him, I, as a common man, love to imagine a scenario where thousands of voluntary organizations, community bodies, local institutions, and the hundreds and thousands of students and members of the public who visit the Central Shahid Minar at Dhaka and those that are spread over the country, should all express their firm pledge, on that 'Sacred Day' to work for mass literacy, and support local educational initiatives, or do whatever they can to contribute to the government's efforts to provide mass education. Yes, what better way indeed could there be to celebrate 'Shahid Dibash'.

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 sloganeering, 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.