

LDCs' Poor Share in Global Trade

At the Marrakesh conference for formal endorsement of the Uruguay Round treaty, least developed countries, including Bangladesh, expressed misgivings about the extent of benefits accruing to the world's poorest nations from the global trade accord. There are solid reasons behind their apprehensions.

At the plenary session of the conference, ministers from the least developed countries drew the world community's attention to the declining share of the poorest economies in total global trade. As it is, the involvement of these nations in world commerce had been minuscule for a starter. Even this paltry share has been halved over the past decade whereas world trade had been growing all the while. The share of the least developed countries in the global trade was 0.6 per cent in 1980. It came down to 0.3 per cent in 1992.

No less disconcerting is the latest findings of GATT — the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade — about the flow of benefits from the global trade accord. In a forecast issued on the eve of the Marrakesh conference, the GATT, under whose aegis Uruguay Round negotiations took place, said that global income would rise by a staggering sum of \$235 billion annually by the year 2005. This enormous gain in income would accrue to the world community from the market access package contained in the global trade accord.

Reduction of tariffs is the main component of the market access package. Here, the GATT study predicts that the developed countries would reduce their tariffs on industrial imports by an average 38 per cent. Developing countries exporting industrial products to these rich nations would enjoy the benefit of 37 per cent lower tariffs on an average. However, the least developed countries would secure only a 25 per cent reduction in tariffs on their exports of industrial goods. In other words, the world's poorest nations would gain the least from the treaty's market access package on this score.

The new world trading environment would tend to erode the advantage that the least developed countries draw now from nonreciprocal special dispensations in their favour, such as the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) accorded by the industrialized nations. Likewise, phasing out of bilateral quotas under the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA) could hurt garment exports of least developed countries like Bangladesh although the measure would benefit the newly industrializing economies.

Nonetheless, the picture is not all bleak. The treaty also grants some special concessions to the least developed countries. These include differential treatment in the matter of depth of cuts in subsidies, a longer timeframe for putting through some of the treaty terms and exemption from certain measures. All such measures would bring advantages to the least developed countries that are denied to the others. In any case, the world's poorest nations just could not possibly risk isolation by refusing to endorse the treaty.

At the Marrakesh conference, the least developed countries rightly called upon the world community to urgently implement the treaty's provisions for grant of special and differential treatment to them. However, to survive the increasingly savage competition in world trade, the nations themselves have to build up their economies. They have to grow more efficient producers of goods and offer these in the global market place at competitive prices.

Return of a Passport

The government has given back Taslima Nasreen her passport. Not the same one that it took away on the plea that the token of Nasreen's citizenship hid the important fact that she was an officer of the government. The reason of the suppression of the fact is understandable: a person in the employment of the government, when travelling abroad, needs, on top of the usual passport and visa, a no-objection certificate, and Nasreen wanted not to be harassed by this restrictive provision.

Nasreen is right in that she is much better known as a writer than a government doctor and that describing herself as a quill-driver identified her better than stating that she was a government servant. Nevertheless her intention was malafide in that it was designed to beat a standard government restriction that all government employees are a subject to. As such when her passport was impounded there was not much of a protest from any quarter. No one took it as a worthy occasion to question the foolish restriction — for the recent years the literati of this nation has been divided into exactly two on a particular count — one is either prejudiced against Nasreen or a zealot championing her. There was hardly anyone who could take her as an ordinary citizen and react in alarm to the government's shoddy ways about the citizens' fundamental right.

One likes it or not, Nasreen has become one of our nation's best known citizens abroad, thanks to the international media interest in her. One likes it or not she has earned it through courage as a campaigner for a tabooed cause and as a writer of prose as well as one having firm conviction in what she thinks to be her mission. She only writes and through her writing alone she has been able to bring into the open things that a traditional and backward-looking society would rather have remain under the carpet. Her impact as a social phenomenon wouldn't, however, be enough to catapult her into international fame. This was left to be done, adroitly indeed, by her detractors many of whom thought they were Khomienis dealing with a home grown and puny Rushdie — and the government.

We are happy that government has given her a passport. They had no way but to. And we would refrain from congratulating the government for the good deed, for it is only a matter of setting some indiscreet action right. Let Nasreen make the best use of her passport and stomp around the globe — good luck to her — and come down the ladder of international focus. Banning her book on a delicate subject didn't do Bangladesh any good either — internationally, and was quite a blow to Bangladesh's march to democracy. Freed 'Lajja' would not eat up Bangladesh.

Sylhet Division: The Quicker We Go for it the Better

by Chapal Bashar

The movement for new Division in Sylhet is aimed at bringing about changes in the administrative structure for ensuring local development. It will be unfair to term this movement as regionalism. The government should consider immediate implementation of this demand of people of Sylhet.

the people of Sylhet region — irrespective of party affiliations or political opinions — are in favour of the demand and are united to realise it.

The demand for Sylhet division is not a new one — but the movement flared up only last year soon after official inauguration of country's fifth division in Barisal on January 1, 1993 comprising six districts. Before that, the country had four divisions with headquarters in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna. The four districts of greater Sylhet are now in the Chittagong division.

Besides Sylhet, similar demands for creating new divisions have also been raised from some other regions — Rangpur, Mymensingh, Comilla and Faridpur. But the intensity of the movement in Sylhet is, by no means, comparable to those of other regions. While others' campaign are in low profile, confined only to statements or pamphlets, the Sylhetis are agitating vigorously in a much more organised way.

"Ours is not a new demand — it was raised soon after the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and since then we are fighting for our own division," said Dewan Farid Gazi, a former minister and an Awami League leader. Farid Gazi is also a front-ranking leader of the Action Committee for Division Implementation and Development of Greater Sylhet, the biggest organisation striving for the cause.

The action committee was formed about two years ago with most of the opposition parties such as the Awami League, the National Awami Party, the Communist Party,

the Ganatantri Party, JSD, BSD and other social and cultural organisations. A number of similar committees with the same objective have also been formed under different banners. Even the ruling party, BNP has a committee styled 'Sylhet Division Implementation and Development Committee'. The Jatiya Party and Jamaat have their committees under the party banners while some non-political platforms like Qano Dabi Parishad also exist to carry on the campaign for Sylhet division.

In contrast to the pattern at the national level the district leaders of a ruling party maintain similar stance like the opposition on this issue for local interest. Clarifying this situation, Yunus Khan, a senior leader of Sylhet BNP, said, "We cannot disassociate ourselves from the people — so we are continuing our campaign through a constitutional way."

Sylhet was a part of the then Bengal until 1874. Afterwards, the British rulers separated it from Bengal and included it in the newly-

The leaders of Sylhet division movement allege that all the governments of Bangladesh since 1971 also assured and promised to give divisional status to greater Sylhet. "But none kept their words, moreover the present government added insult to injury by creating a new division in the south," said the aggrieved leaders. Consequently, now the demand for a division is also a question of prestige and sentiment of the Sylhet people.

Justifying the demand for Sylhet division, the local leaders say that the region is not only rich in natural and mineral resources, but is also a food surplus area for decades.

"We contribute a lot to the country's foreign exchange earnings by exporting tea and also through remittances from four lakh Sylhetis living abroad. Yet we are deprived of our due share in development," they claimed.

This feeling of deprivation is the root-cause behind the demand for creating the Sylhet division. To ensure adequate development of greater Sylhet, the action committees also raised other common demands such as: upgradation of the Osmani Airport to an international one, setting up Tea Board head office in Srimangal, formation of the Haor Development Board, establishment of a separate Investment Board to utilise remittances of Sylhetis living abroad, establishment of an Education Board for Sylhet, development of the educational institutions etc.

The authority and power of the Divisional Commissioners and their administrations have been squeezed substantially

after the emergence of Bangladesh. Under the present administrative structure, the district authorities maintain a direct link with the government for almost all affairs including development matters.

The leaders of Sylhet division movement are also aware of this. And for this reason, they are also demanding more power and authority for the divisional administrations, especially for development activities.

"We are not fighting to have a Divisional Commissioner or a DIG of Police — we also want adequate authority for the divisions," said a leader adding, "to ensure this authority, country's constitution may be amended if required."

Nevertheless, it is to be noted that the policy makers of the government appear to have realised the gravity of the situation. The prevailing situation centering around the demand for new divisions may aggravate if not tackled positively and immediately.

Finance Minister M. Saifur Rahman, who is also from Sylhet, told a gathering in Moulvibazar on April 14 that the government is actively considering to set up an administrative division in Sylhet. He assured that a decision to this effect and regarding such other demands would be taken soon.

It must be clearly understood that the demand for a new division for Sylhet is rooted in the desire for greater decentralisation and control of the administrative and financial authority to accelerate local development. It is not a reflection of regionalism, as some have tried to depict it. Given the need of the people, and the important role that the people of the four districts concerned play in our economy, the government should consider immediate implementation of this demand of the people of Sylhet.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

The activities of most of the action committees have been spreading all over the greater district of Sylhet. Dewan Farid Gazi informed this writer that his action committee has branches in all the four districts which are active in the unions and villages. "There is no justification for denying a division to greater Sylhet, since such a division was granted to Barisal," he maintained.

Fateh Yunus Khan, Coroner of BNP's action committee, said that previously greater Sylhet was one district having four Mahakumas (sub-divisions). "Now it has been divided into four districts — though our culture, heritage and life-style are the same," he said adding "we want to remain unified as before — so we need the division, which will also provide us more authority and opportunity to develop our

formed Assam province. In 1905, Sylhet was again brought under East Bengal during the partition of Bengal and was attached to the Dhaka division. But in 1911, when the partition of Bengal was repealed, Sylhet was transferred back to Assam.

During the partition of India in 1947, Sylhet seceded from Assam through a referendum and joined Pakistan.

The demand for upgrading the administrative status of Sylhet was first raised in September 1948 when Khawaja Nazimuddin, the then Chief Minister of East Pakistan, visited Moulvibazar. This was the first of the 24-point charter of demands placed before him at a reception. Nazimuddin promised to consider the demand for a division, which, however, was not done during the Pakistani rule.

Lest We Forget: Wajid Ali Khan Panni

One who Defied the British as well as the Muslim Zamindari Tradition

by Dr Syed Anwar Husain

A non-painting of Wajid Ali Khan Panni (Chand Miah) held by the British Museum carries, at the bottom, a comment that reads: "One who defied the British". Defiance of imperialist penetration and exploitation by the indigenous people is a part of history; there is nothing unusual in this phenomenon of defiance. With victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 the English East India Company was afforded an opportunity to turn itself into a political master over the land thus conquered. The subsequent rise and expansion of the English power face resistance, intermittent but sustained, in Bengal. The history of resistance spans a period of nearly hundred years at the end of which, in 1857, there was the biggest defiance called the Sepoy Mutiny. The activities of leaders and key personalities of all these resistance movements are well-documented in British records. But a picture of any one of these personalities with such a cryptic comment is hard to come by. Perhaps the unusual personality type and demeanour of Wajid Ali Khan Panni occasioned such a comment. As a zamindar, a scion of a well-trenched landed aristocracy, he was expected to be a loyal and collaborative element for the British Raj, however, this zamindar cast his lot with his subjects. In doing so he appeared to be someone like a trail-blazer, as no other Muslim landed aristocrat is on

record of having done so. So Wajid Ali Khan Panni defied not only the British but tradition as well. Indeed, as already suggested, he himself created a tradition of serving his Muslim compatriots and at the same time his subjects irrespective of caste, creed or religion.

He was a short-lived life; but the art he performed was larger than his life. Having lived less than seven decades (as he died at the age of 67) he left behind a real heavy legacy of his activities that would certainly strain the expertise of a meticulous chronicler. All his life he laboured either for the Bengali Muslim community or for his poor subjects. He served his community well, but he was not communal. He was a zamindar par excellence running the estate well, but could never earn the stigma of an oppressive one that was quite usual to earn in those days. Little wonder that Maulana Bhasani, the life-long fire-brand in the cause of oppressed peasantry in Bengal, had to shower the encomium on Wajid Ali Khan Panni in the following words: "Were all the zamindars of the type of Karatia I would have struggled for safeguarding the zamindari system in East Bengal rather than for abolishing the same".

He was far-sighted enough to visualise the uplift of his community through modern education. Founded in 1926 on the model of the Aligarh Muslim University the Saddat College at Karatia stands to be

with all its grandeur as the demonstration of such a leader-like perception. It needs to be put on record of history that no other Muslim zamindar



has ever established a college or any institution of higher learning. In 1901, he upgraded the secondary Hafiz Mahmud Ali Institution. To encourage English education one Mr Smith was appointed Headmaster of the school. To promote the cause of Muslim education on a larger basis he sponsored and organised the Muslim Educational Conference in 1910 at Karatia. In 1926, synchronising with the establishment of the college, he started Rokea High Madrasa, named after his wife.

Alongside encouraging education and learning he also patronised press and publications owned by the Muslims. Mujibur Rahman, the editor of the Calcutta based renowned Muslim weekly *The Mussalman* (later daily) once had to seek financial assistance from Wajid Ali Khan Panni. Mujibur Rahman originally proposed to sell him fifty shares of rupees ten each. But the editor was astounded when Wajid Ali Khan Panni proposed to buy shares worth rupees ten thousand. Ultimately, however, he had to be coaxed into buying shares worth five thousand rupees and Mujibur Rahman himself had to explain how risky it was to invest such a big amount of money in such an uncertain commercial venture. By Wajid Ali Khan Panni was perhaps not thinking in terms of a commercial investment; he was more on the side of investing in the cause of the

uplift of the Muslim community.

On 16 October 1905, he made his debut in national politics with his election as the Vice-President of the Mohammedan Provincial Union. This was forum organised to support and sustain the partition of Bengal. He also presided over the farewell meeting on 4 November 1905, for departing Lord Curzon. In his zeal to thwart the anti-partition agitation he enlisted himself as a member of the Imperial League and another organization named Eastern Bengal Assam. In 1909, he had the distinction of becoming Vice-President of the Provincial Muslim League.

With the annulment of the partition of Bengal in 1911 the anti-British stance of Wajid Ali Khan Panni became more pronounced, he became more and more involved in agitational politics and with institutions. In fact, he was now wearing quite a few political hats — President of the Mymensingh Khilafat Committee, and Vice President of Bengal Provincial Congress and Provincial Khilafat Committee. Such an active and committed political adversary could hardly be countenanced by the British Raj. In November 1921, he was jailed; but failing health forced his early release in June 1922. In the same year, Desbandhu Chittaranjan Das travelled to Karatia to accord him a hero's welcome. This meeting between the two leaders subsequently proved to be histori-

cally significant.

In April 1923, Chittaranjan Das along with prominent Muslim leaders, worked out the Bengal Pact envisaging proper share of the Muslim community in every sphere of political life. The draft pact was put before the meeting of the Provincial Congress held in Sirajganj on 2 June 1924. But led by Ismail Hossain Siraji the *Anjuman-e-Islam* of Sirajganj was opposing the pact. But it was entirely due to the influence exerted by Wajid Ali Khan Panni that this opposition and anti-pact agitation could be muted. Chaired by Maulana Akram Khan the Congress could eventually meet, and the pact be ratified. But for this mediating role of Wajid Ali Khan Panni the fate of the pact could have been sealed even before ratification. The pact could not however be implemented as the central committee of the Congress vetoed it.

Thus Wajid Ali Khan Panni defied the British rule by involving himself with the Khilafat-non-Cooperation movements. He also defied the Muslim zamindari tradition by working for the uplift of the Bengalees irrespective of caste and creed; and also by endeavouring himself to the downtrodden masses through his benevolent activities. Therefore the comment at the bottom of his picture held by the British Museum should be rewritten in the following way: "One who defied the British as well as the Muslim Zamindari tradition".

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.

GATT and Bangladesh

Sir, Ministers from 124 countries including Bangladesh have signed the 22,000 pages of liberalised trading rules, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. In the fabulous Royal Palace of Marrakesh, Morocco.

Some people opine that the accords will lead to a 40% global reduction of tariff and wider market-opening agreement on goods. But we believe that mere holding of grand show and signing of lot of papers do not help solve the problems of poor and needy nations. Only a handful countries would be able to reap a good harvest from the accords.

Over past several centuries some so called adventurers, merchants and traders took away billions and billions of dollars of wealth from many Asian and African countries to Europe. Today under a changed situation and changed circumstances it is the G-7 which controls the whole world economically and monetarily.

In fact GATT or no GATT

most of the poor and underdeveloped countries would continue to suffer as usual because being far backward in science, technology and industry they cannot compete with the advanced and developed countries in the world market.

Besides this, it is complained that the operation of the international trade is being made by some countries on 'double faced' basis. Goods and commodities of a big neighbour are smuggled into the small neighbouring countries in the name of market economy. One-sided deficit or surplus trade balance continues unabated for years together among some countries. No concrete step has been taken so far to check the flight of capital from one country to another.

The USA on the one hand advocates for market economy but on the other hand she disputes with Japan on the latter's trade surplus. The USA also threatens China of withdrawing her from the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) trade status. For one reason or other the USA in collaboration with some members of the UN

Security Council insists on continuing trade embargo against Iraq. The USA imposes quota on the import of garments from Bangladesh and also wants the application of infamous Harkin's Bill.

Many countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa import arms and ammunitions worth billions of dollars from a handful of arms exporting countries but it is alleged that the amount is not shown in the revenue earning and expenditure of export and import of the concerned countries.

World trade appears to be a very complicated, knotty and intricate subject. We the people in the poor and underdeveloped countries strongly feel that we must produce and fulfil at least 70% of our requirements of goods and commodities locally and domestically and import only 30% of our required items from foreign countries and that too on the basis of a balanced trade.

Would our public leaders and Members of the Parliament kindly discuss the pros and cons of the GATT and take necessary steps to safeguard the interest of Bangladesh?

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Bengali new year

Sir, Our Big Ben striking 12 midnight 13 April 1994 of the Gregorian Calendar dawned a rare event Pehela Baishakh of

the new year 1401 BS stepping into the threshold of the Fifteenth Century, leaving behind a year of more discords than accords, fewer resolutions of reconciliations than belligerence and occasional flickers of aspirations and values. Customarily both the new year and the century were wildly welcomed through rejoicing, greetings and celebrations with aura of sweets and dresses, trauma of dance and songs.

Despite human limitations, commoners are harmless denizens concerned for fellow beings, but few homo sapiens cause rot breeding strifes, clashes, confrontations, deaths, destruction. Ironically history's lessons to learn from past mistakes are not heeded to. The year for the nation had challenges from within and outside. Political 'mayhem', opposition threat, inoperative JS, violence, strike, election algebra with fallout, law without order threw nascent but hard earned democracy at sixes and sevens. Economic spectacle was in doldrums, Rohingya issue, India's push-in and its trade team leader's obstinacy in monopolising our commodity market, globalising Ganges issue by our PM in UNGA, Chakma issue, misguided and misfuelled Shanti Bahini insurgency, Ganges seminars in Columbia and London varities are sore points besides many obituaries of different intellectuals and

talents. Still Bangladesh went high in score board at VI SAF Games. And what's wrong in hoping that political consensus would come in the new year for the country?

We belonging to an LDC with several concomitants of under-development could take a new year's pledge and vow to rise to the occasion to flight the trying times jeopardized by non-issues. Last year witnessed a pathetic episode of seething turmoils in all continents except Australia. Grotesque euphemism, ethnic cleansing, Muslim persecution, intra and inter feuds, genocide, conflagrations must turn into peace, stability, harmony in the globe and world's policeman USA and fashion house UN cannot shirk their role in post cold war world when science, high-tech did their bits.

Boeing 777, computer voice controlled net book, electronic pen, bubble telescope in orbit, slim camcorders, info super highway, USA's deadly F-18 fighter surfaced. And the new year may not cause as many problems as it may not solve. Bangladesh Army as UN peace keepers earned rich laurels and may continue to do their bits towards that end and will go down in the annals for future generation when many of us will be not around. But media, writings, records will remain in libraries needing nationalisation as in UK, USA, Japan. I wish all readers, writers, esteemed editors a very

happy new Bengla year, fetching a new century too which is not common often but rare. Few have opportunity of sharing such a momentous occasion.

Ghulam Murshid,
Dhaka, 1205

Ombudsman or Sheriff

Sir, Our Establishment Minister is back after acquainting with the working of 'Ombudsman' in Scandinavian countries. Ombudsman has been introduced in those countries at least four decades ago so as to ensure human rights and privileges involving minor offences. Even a taxi driver can be punished if she or he refuses to go to certain locality and if it is reported to 'Ombudsman'.

Here, only the other day supporters of rival political parties fought gun battles in broad daylight in presence of law enforcing agencies and there were casualties too. Under the above backdrop it would be proper to engage 'sheriffs' in line with USA so that these sheriffs are made responsible (and fit too) in maintaining law and order in their respective jurisdictions. Ombudsman is justified in 100 per cent educated society while in a half educated and uneducated society 'sheriff' type administrator is more justified. Sadiq Alee
Maghbazar, Dhaka