

Seeking Mayor's Attention

Several months ago, in this very column, we wrote about the environmental degradation of the once beautiful Dhanmandi Lake and the potential health hazard that it posed. Today our dire prediction appears to have come true. According to a report of the Department of Environment (DOE), Dhanmandi Lake is dying, and along with it are all the fish and other aquatic life. The villain in this case is the decision of WASA and the City Corporation to use the Lake as the dumping ground for the sewage and solid waste of this big residential area. The unthinking nature of this practice is most strikingly evidenced by the fact that the Lake is landlocked, and the stagnant water cannot take an unlimited supply of the waste material without becoming a cesspool. And that is what it is about to become. The forty-four sewage drains and the four storm sewer lines, spilling all sorts of contaminants into the 150 bigha water body has turned it into a serious health hazard. According to the DOE report the oxygen level of the water is far below normal, and at some points it is almost zero. This means no aquatic life can survive in these waters and in places where they do, they must be totally contaminated.

It will be recalled that Dhanmandi Lake used to be the most popular locale for anglers in the city, and thousands of amateur and professional anglers flocked to this lake side to pursue their hobby. There also used to be annual competitions organised by various bodies, some of which almost became national institutions, drawing anglers from all over the country as participants. Nothing of it remains, except perhaps for some unaware anglers who continue to catch fish from these contaminated waters. It is quite possible that the catch are consumed by these unaware anglers, or sold to others who, in turn, may be selling them in the market.

As the Star report of yesterday points out, much of the trouble of the Lake stems from diversity of its ownership. The land of the Lake belongs to the Ministry of Works. The Ministry of Fisheries is supposed to look after the fish. The trees around the Lake belong to another department of another ministry. Nobody, therefore, is responsible for looking after this important and beautiful landmark of Dhaka City. In some parts of it, especially near the bridge on Road 32, the Lake appears to have become so shallow that it looks more like a stagnant pool of smelly water than a part of the big Lake. During the dry season some parts of it turn so unbearably smelly, that residents literally become sick.

A serious look into what can be done to restore this landmark of Dhaka is the need of the hour. First and foremost, the drains spilling sewage and solid waste must be immediately shut and alternative outlets found out. Then parts of the Lake have to be dug, to give it some depth. Then scientific cultivation of fish and marine life will have to be undertaken to restore its ecological balance. But for it all to happen, the authorities must first stop its deliberate contamination.

Can we draw the personal attention of the new Mayor of the City?

Towards a Fuller History

One day early in May they dug out from a freshly opened up archaeological site in Kotbari, Comilla quite a ponderous work of art - undamaged. A picture of it was published the next week in a national daily. One casual glance at the thing even by a non-expert was enough to convince that this was something very extraordinary. The experience came very close to that of the first modern observer in the Altamira caves of 40,000 year-old early Cromagnon paintings - a girl child - crying 'The Bull, the Bull'. Or Major Alexander, stalking a tiger in the jungle fastnesses of central India, finding himself in an unending gallery of frescoes the like of which has not been found so far anywhere else in the world. Yes, it was Ajanta.

This Kotbari find is an image of the seated Buddha, in solid bronze, 1.4 metres high and weighing 1600 kilograms. These physical parameters are important in that they place the fresh image among the best archaeological and artistic finds of the world - which is an event of great pride for us, - for decidedly those that fashioned this metallurgical wonder were our forbears. The press reports said the face value of the metal alone would at the present market rate be 10 million Taka. What lay people would fail even to guess is the engineering problems in forging such a big metal thing - probably seamless. This is surely indicative of a very highpoint in Bengali people's achievements in metal chemistry and engineering giving a headstart to this nation in metallurgy and placing it among the best in the world until even the eighteenth century.

Of course, the artistic merit of the find far outweighs its technological achievement. Bengalees had as a people an artistic turn of mind otherwise the eminent sculptural school of 'Bengal statuary' wouldn't be there. And to excel in this medium, stone had to be carried all the way from Rajmahal to places in rural Dhaka demonstrating a rare urge for art and the high value put on art by society. Thanks to scholars like Bhatashali and Akshay Moitra, the National Museum in Dhaka and the Barendra Museum in Rajshahi are so full of the sculptures of the Bengal school. The Kotbari Buddha found in the vicinity of the Shalban Vihara and Kotila Mura sites of Mainamati would find an honourable place even among that crowded assemblage of high art.

The site yielding the miracle find, now being called the Bhoi Raja Vihara, was opened only on March 31. Hardly two weeks passed and up came the Buddha with attending hordes of art objects. We are literally sitting on a civilisation of past times - only grander and more advanced than the one we now have - and this applies especially, it seems, to Comilla where every earthy protuberance in the Lalmai valley is sure to hide fantastic depositories of cultural wealth.

Archaeology is the least cared for discipline in Bangladesh. A strong social streak of anti-history bigotry has created a situation in which one could easily banish this subject from here. Fieldworks in Mahasthan or Mainamati have been resulting in gigantic steps towards the discovery of ourselves - so important for our existence into the future. Sadly enough whatever have been thrown up by the very negligible volume of archaeological work have not been appropriately followed up by scholars integrating them into a fuller history of our people. Let us by all means give much more money to archaeological digging and put our mind to delving deep into our past to present our people with a historico-cultural bearing.

The Proposition is: Should the Next General Elections be Held under a Caretaker Government?

Dr Khandoker Mosharraf Hossain, Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources and Member, Standing Committee, Bangladesh Nationalist Party argues against the proposition of the caretaker government.

Interviewed by Asiuzzaman

able. However, a dialogue can be opened between the opposition and the government or the ruling party and perhaps, we could arrive at some mutually acceptable understanding.

According to the constitutional there is no room for a caretaker government. And if

out a neutral person acceptable to all the parties. Then what will be the option for the President? By which method we can choose a caretaker government?

A nine-year struggle against an autocratic ruler had brought the political parties closer, so they were able to reach a con-

parishad elections and also the city corporation elections.

We lost the capital and the port city of Chittagong in the mayoral polls. How was it possible if the election was not free? Nevertheless, we are ready to strengthen the Election Commission (EC) but the opposition should come to



demand reflects the public opinion.

If we consider this point, then we (BNP) should not have the right to rule the country. I think they forgot, that in a democratic or parliamentary system, simple majority party forms the government. If we take their example into consideration, then election of none of the MPs is valid. In almost all the constituencies total votes of the defeated candidates must be higher than that of the winners.

If the opposition parties forge unity before the election they can secure 69 per cent or 70 per cent of the total votes and they can do anything they like in parliament. So election is the solution. After a prolonged boycott by the opposition, if we resign from the cabinet en masse then the president will ask the prime minister to continue till the next election. Then also a BNP government will remain in power. In this case also election is the only solution.

About the insistence of the opposition, I would like to say that if we sit on the opposition bench after the next election and submit a 19-point demand at the very opening day of the parliament session, ask the ruling party to implement it and warn that otherwise we will boycott the parliament, then what will be the situation? But BNP will not do that. We will wait for the next election. This is the difference between the politics of the Awami League and the BNP.

Finally, I would like to say we will not accept anything against the spirit of the Constitution.

Tomorrow Begum Matia Chowdhury, MP, and Secretary for Agriculture and Cooperatives, Bangladesh Awami League, argues in favour of the proposition.

Some opposition leaders are now citing examples that the BNP got 31 per cent of the total vote cast in 1991 election and the opposition bagged 69 per cent. So the opposition demand reflects the public opinion.

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we want to make room for it, then we have to empower the President to appoint a caretaker government, and that may lead to an arbitrary selection of the head of a caretaker government.

Under the present system the president is elected by the parliament and generally, the nominee of the majority party wins that coveted position. How a President, who belongs to a party, can appoint a neutral person if he is given the discretion? On the other hand, in the present political situation it will be difficult to find

sensus to install a caretaker government. Now a democratic system is working and everyone is involved in their own party politics. So, such a consensus is a almost impossible and if the present system can work, none would be interested in becoming a President through palace conspiracy or coup. Democracy is a bit safer under this system.

Then come to the question of free and fair election. This Election Commission successfully and independently conducted several by-elections, paurasava elections, union

parliament with a proposal for empowering the EC. The EC is able to conduct the next general election which will determine who will rule the country in future.

We repeatedly said that the people gave us mandate for five years and if the people do not like our programme they can reject us in the next election. This is democratic practice.

And in a democratic set up, the election is conducted by the Election Commission. People will be the deciding factor. No one has the right to overthrow an elected government.

We should not bow to any implausible or illegitimate demand.

We must remember one thing, so far, in our history no elected government was able to complete its tenure. We have been given the mandate to do so, yet we are creating issues one after another to prevent this government from creating its tenure.

Some opposition leaders are now citing examples that the BNP got 31 per cent of the total vote cast in 1991 election and the opposition bagged 69 per cent. So the opposition

Trade and Human Rights Linkage Fails a Test

ITS all rather confusing. The leading industrialised nations in the West keep telling the emerging economic power-houses in East Asia that they must improve their human rights record. The assumption is that human rights are being neglected in the newly industrialising countries in the region. The West apparently means well. There are talks of universal human rights standards. The West wants the world to be better place for all to live in.

The emerging economies deeply resent the idea that they are careless about human rights. They argue that the West's notions of human rights lack a global perspective. The socio-economic conditions and the needs of a particular society have to be taken into account in judging its human rights standards, they insist. East Asia has its own heritage. Countries in the region have their own concepts of morality, human behaviour, personal freedom and social obligations which suit their conditions best. These may not conform exactly to West's ideas on human rights. However, variations arise because socio-economic conditions in the West differ from those prevailing in East Asia. Countries of East Asia declare that they are no less committed than the West to uphold human dignity. At the same time, the diversity in human behaviour and societies' needs cannot be ignored. The progress in human rights has to be tuned to the structure of the society in a particular country and the stage of its economic development.

Unconvinced, the West says that human rights are universal in application and must answer to certain minimum standards everywhere. The West also applies pressure - not only on the emerging economies in East Asia but other developing

nations as well - in international forum and bilateral dealings, to improve their human rights records. These moves only serve to increase the apprehension of the developing countries that the West means to foist its own notions of human behaviour on them. Conditions prevailing in the society in a developing country may not be perfect. Nonetheless, even such a country would greet with indignation any effort on the part of the richer nations to impose the norms formulated on the basis of their own traditions.

The rich nations try trade leverage. They say that granting trade privileges to the developing countries would be conditional on their raising the wage levels and improving working conditions in mills and factories. The move confirms the lurking fear that the West was merely indulging in moral posturing. The aim was really self-serving. What the rich countries wanted was to protect their own output and jobs by taking away the poorer trading nations' comparative advantage in export of low-cost goods. Wages in the developing countries are relatively low. They can thus produce goods at lesser cost than the advanced economies. If they raise their wages anywhere near the West's level, the cost of the output would go up tremendously, making the exports much less competitive. They would thus lose the market for their products in the rich countries.

Some of the human rights activists admit as much, in moments of candour. Cheap goods from the emerging economies are flooding their markets, they say. Domestic producers find it difficult to sell their goods in competition. Out put shrinks and jobs disappear. Manufacturers are relocating their production fa-

cilities to lands where labour is cheap. They produce the same quality goods as the domestic manufacturers, but at lower costs abroad. The goods then find way home, driving more of the surviving domestic manufacturers out. More jobs are lost. All of it amount to unfair competition, these activists argue. Trade should not only be free but also fair and the solution lies in introducing higher level of wages and better working conditions for labour in the emerging economies, they add.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

These arguments do not impress the poorer nations. Wage levels are conditioned by national incomes and the stage of development of the economy. Raising just the wage levels arbitrarily at the behest of the West or improving the working conditions of labour, leaving the rest of the population in the same squalor as before, would bring serious distortions in the economy and the society, blocking the growth path, the developing nations assert. They read in the arguments of the human rights activists another ruse for introducing new forms of trade protectionism by the West. The rich nations link trade to labour in the guise of human rights just to keep the goods produced in the poorer countries out, they aver.

Thus it was that each move in the ongoing sparring between Washington and Beijing over the renewal of China's trade privileges by the United States, came to be watched by

analysts and human rights activists with lively interest. In this instance, the fact that China is not a member of GATT (General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade) has added a twist in the imbroglio over human rights. GATT rules oblige its member countries to apply their lowest tariff rates in trade with each other. Each member country thus treats its trading partner as the most favoured nation. China was a founding member of GATT. However, it left the organisation in 1949. China, therefore, cannot lay claim on most-favoured-nation status in its

trade with the United States as a matter of the latter's obligation under GATT rules.

China's eligibility for most-favoured-nation (MFN) treatment in trade with the USA had thus come to be negotiated every year. Improvement in human rights performance had been stipulated by Washington while granting MFN status to Beijing, which allowed the goods exported by China to enter the America market on payment of duties at the lowest applicable US rates as in the case of GATT member countries. US stipulations on human rights became more specific when China's MFN status was renewed last year. Seven human-rights categories were listed as calling for improved performance. It was also given out that future renewal of MFN status would be conditional on China's making "overall significant progress" in human rights. China's current MFN status with the US expires on June 3. For a con-

sideration of the renewal of this trade privilege, an overall determination of China's human rights performance had to be made right away. Hence the excitement.

Stoppage of export of goods made by prison labour and easing emigration restrictions come on top of the seven criteria for measuring China's progress on human rights. Other areas under scrutiny include free foreign radio and television broadcasts, release and accounting of political prisoners, allowing prisoners to be visited by the Red Cross, better deal for the Tibetans and adherence to universal human rights standards. However, few if any, thought that the decision on renewal of China's trade status would be guided by human rights considerations alone. China's exports to the United States came to some \$30 billion last year. Denial of MFN tariff privilege would erode competitiveness of Chinese products and hurt exports.

But a rupture in trade relations, leading to retaliation by China, would hurt the USA too. American exports to China last year came to \$8.8 billion. All the same, China is one of the fastest growing market for US products. US companies have invested more than \$9 billion in China. In the event, the United States renewed China's MFN status, delinking trade from human rights. It would, thus seem that trade and human rights linkage has failed a major test this time.

Meanwhile, labour ministers of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) at a biennial gathering held in Singapore earlier this month, strongly criticised developed countries that try to impose their systems of labour relations and standards on developing nations. Ministers from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia,

the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand issued a communique affirming their commitment to improving their workers' well-being. However, use of rigid labour standards stifles trade and economic development, they said, undermining competitiveness of developing countries. The ministers also urged the International Labour Organization (ILO) to take into account the special circumstances in the labour markets of the developing countries.

OUR manufacturing sector does not pose a threat to the industrialised countries. In that sense, we do not belong to the same league as East Asia. Nonetheless, human-rights activism is influencing our labour market also. One such issue is the employment of child labour in factories, particularly in garment industry. A US television network is said to have even aired a documentary showing children at work in garment factory in Bangladesh.

We do have a law against employing underage workers in factories. However, child workers also happen to be the main source of support for many families. Experts also maintain that even the ILO conventions permit employment of children above 12, if socio-economic conditions of a country justify it. Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) is reported to have drawn up plans to provide health care and schooling for workers and children. The ILO conventions also allow employment of underage workers only if they are provided with schooling parallelly. May be, human rights activists from abroad would join BGMEA's efforts in this regard. That way they would be really contributing towards engineering social changes in a poor country.

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.

Stop the warlords

Sir, Some of them are warlords and some of them are president, vice-president and prime minister turned warlords. They use machine guns, rocket launchers, tanks and fighter planes to kill their own people and to prove their power and supremacy.

We find the holocaust created by some of the warlords is worse than an atom bomb explosion in Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

We always hear the USA cry and plead others to sign a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. But we wonder how and wherefrom the warlords in Afghanistan, Somalia, Rwanda, Yemen and the Bosnian Serbs procure heavy arms and ammunition?

Can't the USA take any action to stop the macabre annihilation of the innocent people by the warlords?

O H Kabir
Dhaka

The economy of Arakan

Sir, The alluvial soil of the Mayu, Kaladan and Lemo Valleys in north Arakan is so fertile that the area was once popularly called Dhanavati or granary of rice. The surplus rice of Arakan was exported in huge quantities to the neighbouring countries till the beginning of the military government of Burma. In 1950s Akyab alone had 50 rice mills working on whole year basis.

The Arab traders of early times who established trading colonies in Arakan were particularly attracted by the rich natural resources of the land. They used to build and repair ships with Arakanese iron woods known as Pyinkadow. Besides Pyinkadow, Arakan's forests produce naturally grown teak and other good quality timber. Bamboo and

cane are plentiful. Arakan is ideal for rubber, tea and palm oil plantation. It produces oranges, mangoes, lemons, sugar-canes, tobacco and other fruits of various kinds.

Arakan's long coastal belt is rich in fish and produces high quality shrimps in the dams built along the estuaries of tidal creeks and rivers. Huge quantities of salt are produced at the Arakan coast. There is also pearls breeding along the coast which is also full of O H Kabir's 'black gold'.

Arakan is also rich in mineral resources. There are confirmed reservoirs of petroleum and other mineral resources but until now totally untapped. A beautiful waterfall is waiting to produce huge quantity of hydro-electricity.

On May 17, 1964 the military government of Burma devalued kyats 50 and 100 banknotes affecting mainly the

people of Arakan. After the nationalisation of the shops, demonetisation and imposition of restriction on movement, the backbone of economy of the Rohingya crumbled.

In 1967 there were acute shortages of rice in Burma proper. Bulk of rice from Arakan was carried away to Rangoon causing shortage of rice in Arakan. This triggered riots against the military regime at Akyab. The military crushed the riots by killing many people.

The one-party dictatorship ruined the economy of Burma. Burma has turned into a least developed country (LDC). Except a few Army elite, the people of the whole country were wrestling with poverty.

The SLORC crashed Muslim businessmen of Arakan in the year 1991, under the Pyi Thaya operation. Muslims having large or small trade and busi-

nesses, were detained, tortured and subjected to long prison terms. Many of them were sent to military front lines to work as mine cleaners or porters. All their business establishments were confiscated. On the other hand the SLORC is now lauding the free market economy.

According to a recent report written by Minoru Piri, Japanese economist and Burma expert, commissioned by the UNDP, the economy has worsened dramatically since the SLORC took over. 'Prices of all daily necessities, including the staple national food rice, have nearly tripled since the present junta assumed power in September 1988. In addition, Burma's trade deficit has widened to kyats 2.2 billion.'

Jilani,
Arakan, Burma