

We Salute You

'Liberte Leading the Masses' by Eugene Delacroix has over the last two centuries become the universal symbol of man's struggle for freedom from all forms of bondage — an eternal celebration of the French Revolution. We had in Jahanara Imam exactly such a celebration of our Liberation War and a symbol of the Bengalee people's undying endeavour to resist evil and come into their humanist egalitarian own. That she was a woman and, more, that she was a mother of a martyr fitted so poignantly to the role she chose to play when the war had been formally concluded in an euphoric victory. Hers was a self-appointed mission of keeping the embers of the Liberation War simmering in the none-too-covert hope of the phoenix rising someday. She died on Sunday in a foreign land, and the predictability of this end to her long suffering mortal coil did not detract even by a speck from the fact of her being one of our heroes of all time.

She was a teacher, very popular both for her professional acumen and an outstandingly attractive presence what with a striking resemblance with a great film personality and what with her affable ways of making friends of any, mostly students. When her eldest son working underground for the Mukti Bahini was taken away by Pakistani butchers and tortured to death, she bore with him his death for all of the myriad moments till his killing — but she did not break. And later when her husband died out of that shock, she only steeled herself. And she poured it all out in her immortal diaries of the nine-month inferno — something as immortal as the diaries of Anne Frank and Zlata, the Bosnian child, and indeed much more.

She did not stop at building such a memorial to the valiant hearts that defied the Pakistani genocide, she went on to realise her ideals, the ideals of the Liberation War, in practice. This she embarked on when cancer of the mouth had already robbed her almost wholly of her speech. It was at this point that she became one of the greatest teachers of our nation distinguishing herself even among that select band by teaching exclusively through practice and none at all by precepts.

That one can sublimate personal loss and grief to such a height of all-in surrender to the cause of keeping on an even keel a people being awfully buffeted by confusions and self-doubts, is not wholly unknown in history. Those that do that are truly great. Jahanara Imam was great by that token and perhaps even more so because her achievements were fashioned even as she was mortally afflicted and was suffering physical pain severer than which is not known to man.

Courage and fortitude, humanity and patriotism, thy name is Jahanara Imam. We salute you and how we wish to be a pall-bearer unto your eternal resting place. Let your ideals live so that Bangladesh can live.

Tokyo's Testing Time

Prime Minister Tsutomu Hata's resignation after barely nine weeks in office, ahead of a no-confidence vote he obviously did not like to face, finds Japan in a most difficult politico-economic bind since the Second Great War. This may have saved chances for a realignment across the Japanese polity to yield a new prime minister or for Hata's come-back — as speculated in some quarters — by a permutation and combination of the last resort.

But his stepping down, so closely on the heels of Hosokawa's, as the head of a weak, disparate coalition sends the signal once more that the political arrangement cobbled up as a replacement of the Liberal Democrat rule for 38 years is too ensnared by contradictions to present an effective alternative government. Ironically, Hata bears the cross because he led the group of legislators who had broken away from the Liberal Democrats which brought the latter's downfall. And if by the dictate of national interest which the Japanese prize greatly as well as that of finer dynamics of her politics, the conservative LDP and the left leaning socialists come to align with each other to save the day for Japan one needn't be surprised by that paradox either.

But there is so much of unfinished business on the desk of any Japanese Prime Minister, having a bearing on Tokyo's international relations, specially on the economic side, let alone her meeting the heightened popular expectations of a good and stable government. Tokyo can ill afford the leadership vacuum with the July 7 summit between Japanese Prime Minister and US President Clinton and the July 8-10 Group of Seven meeting on the foreground. Moreover, another shortlived government may place Tokyo at a disadvantage in coping with any contingency arising out of the nuclear issue vis-a-vis North Korea.

The negotiations between Washington and Tokyo on foreign trade and currency value adjustments will receive a further setback if Japan were to be leaderless for too long. Of course, the permanent bureaucracy is there but they stand in need of reform themselves for the sake of free competition and access of foreign merchandise to Japanese markets.

The Japanese government has been averse to cutting taxes to boost demand for imports which the US wants for working off the trade imbalance with Tokyo. Japan, on the other hand, may seek cooperation of the USA and Europe in levelling off the sky-rocketing value of Yen which has been pushing the price of Japanese exports upwards to a non-competitive notch. On these two burning issues, Tokyo badly needs the skill and credibility of a stable government headed by a seasoned prime minister to carry out successful negotiations at the international level.

Japan, with its economic priorities, talent for crisis management and deep institutional loyalties, will hopefully reach a national consensus to steer clear of the political disarray.

A grief-stricken nation mourns the death of Jahanara Imam. Her admirers, millions of them, will no doubt recall in the years to come her great contributions to a grateful nation. At a critical time in the nation's history she emerged as the symbol of the people's patriotism and courage. Her courage to stand up for her beliefs, for the values she cherished and above all, for a Bangladesh which would be modern, progressive, secular and independent, inspired millions of her compatriots. Indeed she embodied the Spirit of the Liberation War. Like her youthful son Rumi who bravely gave his life fighting for the independence of Bangladesh, she also fought on till the last breath against the forces of evil and darkness which threaten to engulf the nation. In fact she died as an accused in the court of law for her alleged crime of seeking the punishment of Ghulam Azam for his crimes against the nation during the Liberation War. For this the BNP government will no doubt remain answerable to history.

Did Rumi inherit a bit of the spark that seemed to illuminate the life of this remarkable woman? To my mind the only historical figure she can be compared with is Joan of Arc, that extraordinary Frenchwoman who galvanized a demoralized nation to stand up against the enemy. Jahanara Imam has also galvanized the progressive and patriotic forces of the nation to resist those elements which bedeviled Bangladesh ever since the beginning of our struggle for independence. Her indomitable courage as well as her vision and determination were the shining armour of the movement that she launched and led till her death. Her war is not yet won but no one should doubt that the ideals that she represented will triumph. Jahanara Imam has proved beyond doubt that even a frail woman can fire the

Jahanara Imam: A Symbol of Courage and the Spirit of the Liberation War

by Shah A M S Kibria



imagination of millions of people to take up the most formidable challenges.

Jahanara Imam was certainly a most versatile person. A loving mother and a devoted wife, she was also an educationist and a prolific author. Her book 'Ekattorer Dinguli' is one of the most moving stories of the Liberation War as it was fought in Dhaka. Her language is simple and unadorned but most effective in depicting the emotions, the anxieties, the horrors and the frustrations of those who were fighting the enemy from within the country. It will remain one of the most valuable and inspiring documents of the war. Generations after generations of young people will read this book to get a glimpse of life in Dhaka during those fateful days when brave men and women and even boys in their teens risked their lives for the independence of the motherland. Her other books also bring out her sensitive and creative nature as well as her iron will and the steel in her character. Her fight against cancer, almost in the full view of the nation, will be remembered as yet another example of the resilience and fortitude of her character. My wife and I had the privilege of knowing her personally. In fact she visited us at our house this time a year ago and presented us with a set of her latest books. A kindly lady with innate empathy for others, she impressed me most with her profound commitment to the cause that she believed in. She knew that deadly cancer was gnawing at her and that her days were numbered. But she did not like to talk about her personal afflictions; she talked about the Bangladesh of her dreams and her plans for the future. She did reminisce about the past

but only briefly, because she had a positive and forward-looking approach to life. Undaunted by temporary setbacks she passionately believed in the ultimate victory of her cause. Collaborators and Razakars, even influential ones like Ghulam Azam, she believed, will be punished for their crimes.

Jahanara Imam was, until her death on June 26, the leader of the nation-wide movement against the collaborators and Razakars and other assorted anti-liberation elements in the country. Within a period of only three years the

movement has spread across the length and breadth of the country and aroused the conscience of the nation against those who not only fought against the freedom-fighters in 1971 but who never stopped their conspiratorial activities to derail the newly independent state from its basic ideological moorings. A severe blow was struck to the spirit of the Liberation War in August 1975 when the Father of the Nation was killed and elements opposed to a modern, secular and nationalist Bangladesh were brought back to the centre of power. In a series of ac-

tions these anti-liberation elements re-introduced communal and religion-based politics, amended the constitution to change its secular character, installed well-known collaborators in positions of power and influence and altered the very fundamental orientation of the state. The nature of these changes was evident when Gen Ziaur Rahman allowed a large number of collaborators including the arch-Razakar Ghulam Azam to return to Bangladesh. Stunned by the tragic event of August 1975, the nation could hardly resist these basic changes which were carried out under the cover of martial law. A systematic campaign of disinformation was launched to rewrite history in order to malign the freedom-fighters and to denigrate their heroic role. Even the name of the Father of the Nation was made taboo and his killers were exempted from the operation of criminal law. Indeed, the new generation that came of age in the middle and late eighties were presented with false, distorted and misleading versions of the history of the Liberation War. The collaborators and Razakars have been rehabilitated under this dispensation.

The political situation in 1991 ought to be viewed against the backdrop of these developments. Little known in the political circles, Jahanara Imam burst upon the stage with an impact which surprised friends and foes alike. Known primarily as the mother of a martyr and the author of a widely read book on the trials and tribulations of her family during the Liberation War, she was remarkably successful in uniting a wide cross section of freedom-fighters and patriotic forces under the banner of the

Ghatak Dalai Nirmul Samannay Committee. The people's court formed by the Committee and the verdict delivered by it on Ghulam Azam was widely accepted. Indeed the nation expected that out of respect for the people's wishes the government would take necessary legal steps to constitute a war tribunal to try Ghulam Azam. But the BNP government had other ideas. It arrested Jahanara Imam and other leaders of the movement against the collaborators for allegedly violating the law. Meanwhile, Ghulam Azam was taken to custody and the rest is known to all.

Jahanara Imam has served the nation well. The new generation of young men and women which either did not know much about the struggle of our independence or which was given a garbled version of history by the post-seventy five rulers, learned about the true heroes and villains of the war.

Today, thanks to the relentless efforts of this brave lady and her fellow workers, the Razakars stand exposed. Regrettably the BNP government has played a strange and often inexplicable role in all this. Let history and posterity be the judge of this issue.

Jahanara Imam, a brave and patriotic daughter of this deltaic land, coming from modest background, has done her duty to her motherland. A legend in her life time, she is truly a legendary figure. She will shine, just as Wordsworth described a lonely evening star, in the national horizon of Bangladesh, giving inspiration to those who can muster the courage to stand up for their convictions. Let me conclude this brief write-up on this remarkable person by quoting a few lines from a poem by Emily Bronte:

Yes, as my swift days near their goal,
'Tis all that I implore:
In life and death a chainless soul,
With courage to endure.

Training for Poverty Alleviation: The Grameen Bank Approach

by Syed Naquib Muslim

BANGLADESH is facing unemployment of a colossal magnitude. The unemployed population increased over time from 10.2 million in 1984-85 to 11 million in 1989-90. As poverty is inextricably linked to unemployment, reducing unemployment is almost synonymous with reduction of poverty. In fact, the increasing rate of unemployment is contributing to the aggravation of the state of poverty and landlessness in the country.

Against this background, Grameen Bank (GB) has come forward to strike at the root of unemployment of the poor, especially the rural poor, who are described by Prof Yunus as "bottom fifty per cent". The rural people must first of all know how to lead a productive, healthy and clean life. They

must learn how to survive and thrive on self-employment and how not to depend upon hand-outs or adhoc reliefs. GB believes that training can help considerably in their empowerment and the basic training rural people need is how to make optimal use of money/credit that may be made available to them. They have ideas but they do not have money to give shape to those ideas. Thus the objective of GB's training activities is to arouse curiosity to know and to develop or sharpen the capacity of the poor for innovation.

Training therefore constitutes one of the major components of GB's design and delivery system vis-a-vis poverty alleviation. The experience of GB proves that the poor are not only bankable but they are also

trainable. In the framework of GB, the trainees do not go to the trainers for training; rather trainers approach the trainees for training. Moreover, the trained borrowers also in turn act as trainers to the new borrowers.

For GB, the master-trainers are the high officials of the institution. The field level trainers are the bank assistants or bank workers and trainees are the poor borrowers ninety-three per cent of whom are female. The trainers impart training to the poor borrowers on site and face-to-face. The emphasis is clearly on on-the-job training. The trained borrowers in turn work as trainers to the prospective borrowers. Training occurs at two levels — Training of the GB of-

officials i.e. those who are directly or indirectly the target group.

The thrust of GB's training programmes are attitude development, behavioural change and formation of good habits. The emphasis is on the group and not on the individual. A group is formed with five members and eight groups constitute a 'centre'. Availability or entitlement of credit depends upon formation of groups. One or two groups together are imparted training through a seven-day structured training programme. Unless this training is accomplished the group members will not be entitled to any credit. Programme officer works as a mechanism to check if training has been rightly imparted or not; if he is satisfied, the group is recommended to receive or is granted credit. The primary step of training is internalization of the 'Sixteen Decisions' on the part of the trainee-borrowers. The training contents comprise—

- Rules of availing credit facilities;
- How to conduct meetings;
- How to operate as a group leader and effective members;
- Developing propensity to save;
- Child education and health-sanitation;
- Decision-making; and
- Kitchen-gardening.

Weekly meetings are not only problem-solving mechanisms, these may also be designated as learning sessions or, more specifically, cross-training sessions. Meetings open and close with the articulation of sixteen decisions which aim at developing self-discipline, fostering team spirit and changing outlook of the rural people. In the process of holding weekly meetings, they learn organizational skills. The poor borrowers are trained in such a way that they can identify the kind of income-generating activities that suit them. In the words of Prof Yunus, "When a nervous borrower asks a Grameen staff, 'please tell me what would be a good business for me', the staff knows

how to respond to the request. He is trained to respond in the following way — 'I am sorry I am not smart enough to give you a good business idea'. This implies that ideas are not thrust upon the borrowers; ideas must come from those who will ultimately run the show. One of the core principles of GB's training philosophy is to shun arrogance and show humility to all the poor and rich alike.

GB staff are trained in such a way that they can not only identify the poor but also develop an empathic attitude to work for and with the poor. They are taught how to motivate and organize the disadvantaged rural people particularly the underprivileged rural women. According to Prof Yunus, "We train our staff to find faults with themselves, not with the borrowers." This is of course a lesson for government functionaries who, with exceptions, are known more as fault-finders than as problem-solvers.

The writer is a Deputy Director, BPATC, Savar, Dhaka.

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.

Qualification vis-a-vis employment

Sir, Due to availability of greater number of highly qualified candidates (particularly in terms of academic certificates), different private firms/organisations are appointing over-qualified persons for various posts including typist, guard and messenger. This has given rise to certain complications/dissatisfactions.

For instance, imagine — 1) A graduate typist was instructed to type a letter addressing one personnel manager. The typist typed "personnel" instead of "personnel". While corrected, he retorted that he was right (thanks to our education system). Is it 'little learning is a dangerous thing'?

2) Ladies of an office began to complain against one security guard who was lecherously eye-balling them and often trying to communicate offensive messages through different ploys. The guard had appeared in BA (Pass) examination and was awaiting the result to come out. He felt no way inferior to others and more of a Romeo than a guard. May be 'an idle brain is a devil's workshop'.

3) An HSC passed, after working abroad in an army, joined as a messenger in a private firm. In our country, there is also a notion that a returnee from abroad is superior to the others who have not yet visited a foreign land. So, this young-man felt doubly like a prestigious person and would not put on the uniform which he found humiliating and kept on attending office in casual dresses until very drastic and harsh measures were taken by the superiors. Sort of cruel consequence.

These are a few of the examples how over-qualified per-

sons while appointed in posts not appropriate for them, may create disorder and disturbances.

In view of the above, the employers in private sector should have a clear-cut and unambiguous recruitment policy to avoid employment of over-qualified persons and if a lower grade staff attains higher academic/technical qualifications/expertises, there should be an appropriate provision for upgradation otherwise this will dislocate the system and may even send despicable sparks across the society.

John Arun Sarkar
Dhaka

BBC — Views and News

Sir, I have been an ardent listener to the programmes of BBC for a very long time. Most of the commentaries, features, plays are, in a word, wonderful; they enthrall me with tremendous joy. Now that we, in and around Dhaka city, receive BBC through FM, our enjoyment has doubled. However, it pains us and pains us hard when we hear distorted/provocative/biased and one-sided view points, particularly so in the case of South Asia. It seems that South Asia news could/should be renamed as Indian news. For example:

a) In the Bangla service the time of West Bengal is stated before the time of Bangladesh; the argument most probably quoted would be that their (West Bengal's) time comes before the Bangladesh time. Has BBC forgotten that Bangladesh is an independent country with Bangla as its state language whereas in India it is a regional language and West Bengal only a province? Countless letters have been written to BBC by many listeners; un-

fortunately BBC has always shown rather an arrogant bias towards this particular matter.

b) In case of extra period dedicated to the listeners of Dhaka, most of the music/discussions are also bombarded with those from across the border.

c) The South Asia report broadcast in English is again an All India report. Except the negative news from Bangladesh such as hartals, parliament boycott, cyclone deaths and the only other matter to find air space is that of controversial personalities such as Shri Lanka — the only country in SAARC designated as medium-developed by the UNDP, World Report, 1994. What has taken them to that spot, in spite of the prolonged civil war in that country, is basically patriotism and relative 'honesty of the powers that be.' 'Hingsha' (jealousy) which is all pervasive in our society is found there too, but when it comes to the comes to the national interests, it fades into insignificance.

Once upon a time, jute was the mainstay of the economy of this part of the world. No more so, mainly because no concerted efforts (patriotically) has been made towards its development — and of course for the shrunken world market after the introduction of although "environment unfriendly" but "lighter and cheaper" synthetics. The two main sources of foreign exchange of Bangladesh are remittances from the expatriate community (mainly labourers) and exports of garments (mainly 'manned' by our underprivileged women-folk, some of whom are even underage).

I feel grateful to these two groups of people, whom most of us don't care for.

In spite of the exploitation by the manpower agents, the semi-skilled workers are sweating their heads off in the deserts of West Asia, kitchens of London and cabs of New York, risking their lives in the west (only recently, one Bangladeshi cab driver of New York was shot dead) and braving scorn and derision of the Arabs, who have quickly forgot-

ten their own condition three or four decades ago. They tauntingly call our workers 'Miskeen' (pauper) and sometimes 'Rafiq' (friend) — though not meaning it. Yet, our lads persevere. Why? Just to earn some money for themselves and their family back home.

The garment workers (95% females) have earned a name for themselves — by the long back-breaking efforts they put in for transforming textiles into garments. Their hours are long, their pay packets are measly and they have to undergo the humiliation of taunts and jeers when they walk home, sometimes quite late in the evenings. Their working condition is anything but satisfactory.

No health care, no job security, no in-house entertainment, and hardly any opportunity to improve their skills. Their plight today reminds me of the plight of 'Family Welfare Assistants' (FWAs) when the Government took up family planning as a policy in the 1960s. How the poor ladies suffered! But today their perseverance has paid, and the country has one of the best family planning programmes in the world.

Remittances from our overseas workers has been increasing — from Tk. 26,860 million in 1986-87 to Tk. 37,240 million in 1991-92. However, the manpower agents must try to get better deals from the overseas employers, otherwise, at the present rate of decline in workers' wages in real terms, very few would accept job offers abroad.

Earnings from the garments sector has been increasing too — from Tk. 14,448 million in 1988-89 to Tk. 39,770 million

OPINION

How about Having Two New Monuments?

Javed Helali

There is no denying the fact that ours is one of the poorest countries in the world. Even within SAARC we are nearer to the bottom than to the top, the top position being occupied by Sri Lanka — the only country in SAARC designated as medium-developed by the UNDP, World Report, 1994. What has taken them to that spot, in spite of the prolonged civil war in that country, is basically patriotism and relative 'honesty of the powers that be.' 'Hingsha' (jealousy) which is all pervasive in our society is found there too, but when it comes to the comes to the national interests, it fades into insignificance.

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in 1991-92. However, the garment exporters must realize that all eyes are on Vietnam and Cambodia whose garment industry is progressing in leaps and bounds. Unless the productivity of our workers is increased by way of better working conditions and emoluments package, this sector may also die down like jute.

How do we, who don't belong to these two heaven-sent groups, show our gratitude to them? One, by taking bold new steps to re-settle the returnee workers. Two, by enacting and enforcing laws which would make the life of the female garment workers better — improved working conditions, higher wages, compensation for maternity leave, etc. The government of Bangladesh can do the above, and more.

What can the direct beneficiaries of the efforts of our overseas labour and garment workers do to show their gratitude to them other than charging less fees from the outward bound workers and improving the lot of the female garment workers by giving them better working conditions?

To my mind, what the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Association and the Manpower Exporters Association can do is to erect monuments in honour of the two groups of workers. For the garment workers somewhere near Mohakhali railway crossing and for the overseas workers, outside the international airport at Uttara. Two simple structures would do — one, showing a woman working at a sewing machine and the other, a young man with a shoulder bag and a passport in one hand striding outward. How about it, beneficiaries?