

Caring for Child Workers

The Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has just set up a health and education centre for child workers in the city. Perhaps the first of an initiative of this kind coming from the private sector, the move indeed calls for special notice.

Employment of underage workers in mills and factories is not a practice which a society can bear with equanimity. Yet, harsh economic reality has led to its proliferation in many a developing country. The children who work in industrial establishments are often the sole source of financial support for families living below poverty line. Loss of a job of a child worker could bring the family a step nearer to starvation.

Employment of child workers for making garment yields implications which go beyond social dimensions. The industry produces goods for export to the markets of affluent nations. The affluence of consumers in these countries make them more discriminating as buyers of products. Their standards for human dignity also are more exacting. They view use of child labour in mills and factories as a clear abuse of human rights. So they refuse to use products made with child labour.

This is the situation not just with apparels but other consumer items as well. Exporters of carpets in most countries in Asia now attach labels to products they sell in Western markets, certifying that no child labour has been used in manufacturing the goods. And that is not all. Buying houses from importing countries carry out regular inspections of production facilities in manufacturing countries to make sure that this indeed is the truth.

Trade union activists abroad also have taken up the matter of employment of child labour in poorer countries as an issue of particular concern to them. On the eve of the annual meeting of the International Labour Organisation, held in Geneva last month, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions had launched a campaign against child labour, calling for a world boycott of products made by underage workers. In its annual report on working conditions in its 170 member nations, the ILO also spoke of the miseries of child labour around the globe.

Of even more immediate concern to our garment industry is the fear of losing the market for its product in the United States. Senator Tom Harkin of the United States who is piloting the Child Labour Deterrence Act of 1994, is said to be hopeful of the passage of the legislation this year. That would stop import of products made in whole or in part by child labour, into the United States. Meanwhile, our garment industry is continuing with the retrenchment of child labour. The process, it is said, would be completed by the end of October this year.

While inaugurating the new health and education centre, Labour and Manpower Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan called upon the BGMEA to rehabilitate the child workers being thrown out of jobs. He also thought that the retrenched underage workers should be given some financial benefits as well. The minister's concerns sound right. There is a need for a safety net programme both for the sake of the children losing jobs and their families.

Not just the BGMEA but also the government, foreign donor agencies and other private sector industries should join in an effort to rehabilitate the retrenched child workers. It is reassuring to learn that BGMEA plans to set up a training centre for workers with UNDP assistance. The retrenched child worker should have a prior claim to avail of the new facility.

Woman-bashing must Stop

Six thousand women have been claimed to have killed themselves in Bangladesh for some eerie and weird array of reasons in the single year 1993. We do not know how does this compare with female suicide situations in other countries of the world. But how we pray that even in populous China this figure is not crossed. And as fervently we feel that not even one woman died in Bangladesh in this manner. We are certain that women commit suicide in other nations because of frustrations and many unpleasant turns of reality. In Bangladesh alone women feel very strongly against suicide knowing this to be a very serious violation of God's injunctions and yet go for it not as a matter of choice but as a result of ultimate humiliation and persecution by the males in the house and without.

The report on the subject of women's persecution published by the Human Rights Coordination Council in that same year, 1993, says some 355 women were raped and of these 118 died due to those sexual assaults; intra-family quarrels killed 336. Beating all such in cruelty and barbarity was the new-tangled murder of women by *fatwas* and *shalish*. Although their victims numbered only five during the period, the inhumanity of the way these five were killed can neither be forgotten nor be forgiven.

Death due to wife-bashing amounted to 50. Besides these modes of straightaway murdering women, more hurtful ways to which Bangladeshi women were subjected to are kidnapping and selling into prostitution, acid, throwing and smuggling women in droves out of the country for selling, them in an awesome comeback of slavery.

This is the picture of a house of horror — if ever there was one. Is this the Bengal we have known for centuries? Where has the proverbial humanism of the Bengalee gone?

The society is breaking fast with no sign of any healthy replacement. All encompassing and dehumanising poverty is pushing women out of the household and into not only the streets but to invade man's traditional preserves. Lakhs of them are now being gainfully employed and every day better openings for them are being offered specially in education. The male bastion of power and born-superiority are being challenged seriously. Women are waking up to their rights as human beings. *Fatwabazi*, far more than sporadic cases of murder and violence inflicted on women, is becoming, with every passing day, the philosophical arm and justification for thwarting the women from coming to claim their share in the family and in the society at large. Some mullahs as derided by Kazi Nazrul, are trying to turn back the hands of the clock of history — and they are doing that against justice. Our government has so far allowed them a long leash, for reasons best known to them. Giving them any further rope will surely contribute capitally to the undoing of the society as well as the government itself.

Corruption: Cure could be Easier than Prevention

by Abdul Bayes

THE economics of corruption or 'brbonomics', as many would like to term it, is increasingly assuming a visible and volatile political issue across the world. The subject of corruption failed to earn prominence in official international fora 20, 15 or even five years back but, over the years, public concerns began to mount as growing corruption started to peril economic, social and political fabrics. Broadly defined as the sale by government officials of government property (e.g. production of licences or passports or the right to build new infrastructures) for personal gains, the news about increasing corruption around the globe and dauntless public outrage over its effects, continue to steal newspaper headlines.

Not for Poverty Alone

In common parlance, the act of corruption is said to have a positive correlation with poverty and underdevelopment of the society (Mr X is corrupt because he is poor). Not far from the truth, this notion, however, partially captures the real world situation. Allegations of rampant corruption are being aired not only in poor countries like Bangladesh, Nigeria, Brazil etc but also in the richer ones like Italy, Korea, Japan etc. The difference between the two, probably, lies in degrees, dimensions and dispersions of corruption as well as in institutional modalities under which corruption takes place. A further difference could also be in evidence in the varied roles of news media, judiciary, and governments in nurturing or containing the ills and the weevils of corruption. The more the social and institutional development, it is being hypothesized, the more would be the application of the rule of law across the board and hence the more likely is to be the exposure of and the axe on corruption. Newspaper reports on business people and politicians being hurled into Italian prisons, prominent Japanese facing public disgrace and Latin American presidents on way to be impeached — all for the abuse of power for personal gains — go to indicate that corruption has its own cost. But such happenings are rare events in typical underdeveloped societies where governments, more often than not, like to suppress corrup-

Micro Economics of Corruption

Although corruption is rampant and news and views on it are in abundance, systematic enquiries to its basic micro economic principles, growth and sustenance are, however, scarce. Corruption takes place in a market where two parties face each other viz., buyers and sellers. Corruption is not a commodity but helps the production of a commodity called 'service' — an end artificially created to justify the means like corruption. The price of such artificial service is called bribe. It is an illegal market that exists with either monopoly, quasi monopoly or oligopoly structure but never with perfect competition. In this market, supply may create its own demand or demand may create its own supply.

In the case of supply creating its own demand, the bribe demander (supplier of service) creates conditions in which bribery would appear to be the best available options to the supplier. For example, suppose Mr X, after a long stay abroad, brought home some duty free commodities. It was under strict baggage rules but the Customs employee raised questions on the size, make

and value of the commodity. Let Mr X pays the tax, which would reach the exchequer, the employee would hint that the importer could minimize the rot by paying him a part. Suppose, after carefully examining all the options available, Mr X decided to pay the bribe. Thus the supplier could create a demand for its services or what we call, in economic jargon, supply created its own demand!

But suppose, Mr Y, a very influential person, landed at ZIA with some banned or high duty consumer durable. He can exert some pressures (using own or uncle's power!) on the employee to submit to his false declaration but chose to, for unknown reasons, buy the 'service' at a price called bribe. The Customs employee also has several options viz., remaining honest but facing different odds including a transfer, clearing the goods but fearing future enquiries or else agreeing to Mr Y's proposal. After seriously considering the options faced, assume that employee fell prey to Mr Y. In this case it can be said that the demand for bribe created its own supply. (The above two ways of generating a case for bribe can equally be applied to similar other cases like a transfer, a contract, a licence, import of goods etc.)



Prime Minister Kibomiyazawa (right) facing parliamentary questioning about his government's corruption scandals.

There is also economics on the determination of the price of corruption. Various authors tend to argue that when officials do enjoy some monopoly power over a service, bribery is likely to slow growth by raising its prices (the law of demand). Again buying different services from different sources and paying differential costs (as for, say, gas, electricity and water etc.) is likely to enlarge the bribe amount, since, every body charges its own rates without knowing others' rates. For this reason it is said that an organised, colluded and disciplined system of corruption does less damage to economy and households than one in which every one is grabbing as much possible for himself.

The organised corruption has another merit which is unlikely to be provided by unorganised ones: You may be coaxed in getting the service and have a sweet sleep. For unorganised cases, you pay the amount but lose your sweet sleep, too.

Some Effects of Corruption

By and large, corrupt governments usually turn out to be inefficient governments. When delays in taking decisions or clearing files tend to promise a scarcity of work in and earnestness of work is sacrificed causing inefficiency to creep in. This is the likely situation in typical X. However, corrupt governments could also be efficient governments. Think of the reputedly corrupt governments like Japan and Malaysia who are also dubbed as highly efficient economic managers.

A priori, the act of taking bribe should not affect GDP because the amount is just a transfer from the supplier to the demander. But corruptions may adversely affect economic growth when, say, funds originally earmarked for human resources development e.g. schools, hospitals etc are channelled into projects of negligible social value by officials receiving kickbacks from commercial contractors or say, appointing an inefficient cousin on the heap of vital growth augmenting projects could also affect the output generated by those projects.

Corruptions also appear to crush the potential benefits of free market forces by letting honest business persons go broke and by twisting the rules

of healthy economic growth. In such cases, bribe addiction bypasses the rule of law and harbours a sentiment of economic controls.

Corruption corrupts politics of the country. Corrupt officials and business tycoons often succeed in buying political leaders by providing money to party's fund. Thus whoever is in power, finds it difficult to lash at those who provided financial support.

Corruption also poses threat to the establishment of democracy. In Brazil, for example, the latest series of congressional scandals have prompted some calls for the dissolution of the legislature, threatening democracy established only in 1985. In Zaire, the corruption in government is alleged to be so significant as to negate the establishment of an open democracy. In Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, a lot of allegations are heard about corruption of the top notchers but few are heeded to by the government. This erodes the credibility of democratic set-up and destroys institution-building.

But, for that matter, it would be naive to conclude that corrupt societies have slower rate of economic growth. In fact, the sign of correlation could be indeterminate. For example, China is rated as a middle corruption country with a growth rate of above 10 per cent during 1984-93. It is much higher than that of low corruption countries like Taiwan, Singapore, US or Germany. Again, high corruption country Russia had negative growth rates during the same period of time while other high corruption countries like Nigeria, Venezuela, and Philippines had growth rates averaging 3 per cent or so. (The Economist, March 19-25, 1994).

How Much to Pay

George Moody-Stewart, a retired British business person with decades of experiences in Asia and Africa, emphasizes the dangers lurking in other corners. He talked about the "grand corruption" of ministers, head of states whose influence determine the fate of the Third World countries. Moody presents the arithmetic in corruption game that varies across the countries. According to his opinion, (a) 5 per cent of US\$200,000, will be interesting to senior officials below top rank; (b) 5 per cent

of \$2 million is in the top officials area; (c) 5 per cent of US\$ 20 million is real money for ministers and key staff and (d) 5 per cent of US\$ 200 million justifies the serious attention of the head of the state.

How to Confront Corruption Practices?

That corruption cannot be uprooted from the society is, perhaps, an accepted truth. The fight against corruption worldwide is the fight to minimise the rot. We can, therefore, attempt to suggest some measures that would contain corruption.

First, the small scale grafts in customs and civil services could be addressed by civil service reforms and adequate pay protection and incentives for the officials. When families cannot be fed with tiny income, kickbacks appear as silver lining despite ethical and moral adages that go against corruption. Second, controls and regulations are the strongholds of corruption. There should not be unnecessary controls on economic transactions implying that the government should distance itself from commercial transactions. Third, non-transparent policies harbour different interpretations and thus behold scarcity premiums. The most visible episodes of corruption appear to hang around international transactions including investments. With growing globalisation, there should not be problems in setting transparent standards of each deal. Fourth, establishment of clear property rights, new laws and an accountable governance are essential in filling the void. The delay in securing those tend to deepen and expand corruption, making it an accepted way of life. And finally, parliamentary committees should be made much more powerful and not be headed by ministers. These committees should have the right to interrogate even the head of government, if needs arise.

Epilogue

A professor met anti-corruption minister with a list of actions to prevent corruption: "Sir, if you follow the list of my prescriptions, I am sure, the spread of corruption would come down," said the professor. "Definitely, I will...but how much would you pay me in return?" questioned the hon'ble anti-corruption minister.

Interview with Foreign Minister

'India must Show Required Political Will'

Bangladesh has been the Chairman of SAARC for more than a year now. To review its role The Daily Star decided to interview Foreign Minister ASM Mostafizur Rahman to find out how Bangladesh has done as the head of SAARC. The paper took advantage of the occasion to ask the Foreign Minister a range of questions about the whole gamut of our foreign policy, including the recent campaign by some people against NGOs.

In this interview the Foreign Minister answers questions about our bilateral relations with India and Pakistan, about our role in global affairs and also about Bangladesh's thrust towards 'economic diplomacy'.

M Mostafizur Rahman was interviewed at his office by M Anwarul Haq, Star's Chief Reporter.

hope and since then we are waiting that Narashima Rao would come to Dhaka to discuss the issue. Meanwhile our Prime Minister has met the Indian Prime Minister at the SAARC summit when the water issue was raised at the bilateral level.

As you know Begum Zia, in her speech at UN General Assembly raised the water issue in our policy statement. However, the problem is still existing between India and Bangladesh.

DS: Why was the issue raised at the UN?

MR: We decided to raise the issue at the UN for all to take cognizance. And also to build a pressure of world public opinion.

DS: Do you want the problem to be solved bilaterally?

MR: Very much indeed. We believe in bilateral negotiations. Our desire to solve the problem bilaterally should not be misconstrued. We raised it at the UN only to strengthen the bilateral process.

DS: What do you think are the stumbling blocks for a solution of the water issue?

MR: It needs a political will on the part of India to come up with a solution which could be mutually agreeable and acceptable.

My belief is that an answer cannot be found unless you sit at the table and negotiate. By keeping away from a problem, you cannot expect a solution. In our day to day dealings, problems will always come, but it should be solved through sincerely dialogue.

A clarification call by one party will not result in any solution unless the other party responds or sits to negotiate. I come back to the question of political will on the part of India.

DS: Do you think India is dragging its foot on the issue?

MR: I would again say that they (India) have not been able to produce the necessary political will which could lead to a solution. It is still lacking that political will.

DS: Do you think India would like to link this with

other issues?

MR: Water issue needs to be solved separately and the other issues can be solved one by one. Water issue for us remains not only an issue that will assuage the suffering of millions of our people. But it is also an issue of our right, of fairness, of justice, and of good neighbourliness.

DS: What has been Bangladesh's foreign policy role in global affairs?

MR: We strongly believe and advocate for peace the world over. We believe that peace is essential to have economic growth. Keeping this in mind, we have strongly supported peace-keeping efforts. That is why we have signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) and support the UN in many peace-keeping operations. Today Bangladesh stands as Number Four contributor to UN's peacekeeping operations.

DS: What about diplomatic thrust on the economic front?

MR: Our thrust now is, building the economy of the country by keeping peace in the country and working for it outside. Our diplomatic efforts are primarily aimed at improving our economy. We want to do more trade, and that is why we want to convert the role of diplomacy to economic diplomacy. We have already instructed all our missions, not only to evaluate and move in economic directions but also to find out what to do where, to meet our changing requirements. Please do not get the impression that trade only means goods. It also means human beings. We are stepping our efforts to provide manpower to different countries.

DS: What about foreign investment?

MR: Since our taking over, we have gone for market-oriented economy. And we have given a thrust toward bringing in new investment into the country.

The recent visit of our Prime Minister to Japan is a clear manifestation of that policy.

DS: What has been the follow up of the Japan visit?

MR: Our and their bureaucracies have to interact. The main thrust have to come from the private sector. We can only act as matchmakers.

DS: In matter of foreign policy, what efforts did you take to involve the opposition parties?

MR: Time and again in the parliamentary standing committee on foreign affairs we listened to their suggestions. We also do it on the floor of the Parliament. Our foreign policy efforts are always in the close scrutiny of the people's representatives.

DS: Do you have anything to comment on the role of the opposition in implementing an effective foreign policy?

MR: The role of the opposition is important.

One aspect that I would like to point out is that, one of the weapons of the opposition, to give vent to their protest is calling for hartals. No doubt, this is a democratic means, but it tends to impede our desire to develop the country. Mind you, in a parliamentary system, all those opposition leaders who are sitting in the Parliament are part of the government — and they are supposed to train themselves as shadow cabinet members so that when time comes, they can take over and run the affairs of the country. But I regret to say, and my personal observation is that this practice has not taken root in our democratic system.

DS: Would you like to comment on the demand for a caretaker government?

MR: The demand clearly indicates the opposition's bankruptcy in thinking on politics.

DS: What about bringing a bill as demanded by opposition parties?

MR: Our Prime Minister has spoken on the floor, and she has asked the opposition to come and join the parliament. If they join the parliament they can bring as many amendments as they want. Their role will not only be highlighted but also remain on record in the



nation's history. I personally think that the opposition should take advantage of the call.

DS: What has been achieved by Bangladesh as the chairman of SAARC. Has it made much headway?

MR: Since all the countries have their bilateral problems, it will certainly take some time for SAARC to blossom fully, as visualised by our late leader Ziaur Rahman. You may note that the EC and ASEAN countries have taken sufficient time to come of age and effectiveness. It will be unfair for anyone to expect us to move forward fast.

However, since you ask whether SAARC has made headway, I would say we had SAPTA signed and it is moving forward to take some shape. Poverty alleviation is one area where we are making some progress. We are also contemplating to build a South Asian Development Fund.

I was given the task by the SAARC Foreign Ministers to get in touch with two regional groups, the European Union (EU) and the ASEAN group, which I have done. I will give a report of my discussion at the SAARC Foreign Ministers meet in Dhaka on July 30.

The activities that I have mentioned also needs the Finance Minister's involvement. The Finance Ministers are meeting in Dhaka and we hope to go for a comprehensive plan on poverty alleviation.

DS: What is the position of the repatriation of the Rohingyas. Will the MOU with the UNHCR be renewed?

MR: We would like to see more people, i.e. the refugees to go back to Myanmar so that we can take advantage of the border trade agreement as soon as possible. Therefore, we are continuously sitting with

the UNHCR to explain the urgency of this requirement and to settle all modalities for the purpose. We are asking UNHCR to help us expedite the process.

DS: The Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina has said in an interview that the 25-year treaty with India should not be renewed. What is your position?

MR: Why she has spoken, she understands it very well. So does the nation. So I do not want to offer any comment on her views.

DS: The recent incidents of burning down some schools, attack a NGO workers and destruction of development work (like uprooting mulberry trees) have created anxiety and worry among the people. What are your views on these events?

MR: Our government realises that development is our Development which can come only if our people are educated. Therefore our Prime Minister has launched an all out campaign for mass education. Therefore, we will not be silent spectator when some misguided people are burning down schools. We will take appropriate action against anybody trying to destroy schools or thwart our attempts for development.

DS: What about the attack on women? What role do you think women could play in our development efforts?

MR: Prime Minister is very clear about education of women. We believe that an educated and enlightened mother can bring up an educated family. Therefore, we will not in any way allow anybody to dampen our efforts to make progress. It is an article of faith with us that women should be brought up at par with men so that they can contribute to development. BNP stands committed to this.

DS: Now about Taslima Nasreen? What is the government's position?

MR: I find it very difficult that one group is shouting so much asking for severe punishment of Taslima Nasreen while the other group is calling for her protection. She has a case against her under section 295A of Bangladesh Penal Code.

The court in our country is very free and fair. It is up to her to prove her innocence.

DS: Is she seeking asylum?

MR: I am aware of a rumour that people of certain countries are thinking of giving her asylum. I know that rumours, in most cases tend to be false. Therefore, I am not taking any cognizance of that.

DS: What if some country gives her asylum?

MR: That would not be a friendly act.

DS: Thank you Mr Minister, for your time.