

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 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 118 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 *shashis*. 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 straightforward 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 'bribonomics', 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 passes or the right to build new infrastructures) for personal gains, the news about increasing corruption around the globe and countless 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 corruption.

Daily Star (DS): As Foreign Minister for the last three and half years, would you please tell us about your achievements and failures?

Mostafizur Rahman (MR): Achievement in most cases are silent ones. It is not easily visible or perceptible. When I took over as foreign minister in 1991, first of all I evaluated our country's position vis-a-vis other countries.

My assessment indicated that we have not fulfilled the requirements of the foreign ministry as envisaged in the Constitution.

The cornerstone of our foreign policy is friendship towards all and enmity towards none. I decided that we will have two strategies — one for our neighbours and secondly, being a majority Muslim country, having good relations with all the Muslim countries.

DS: What are some of the problems that you found when you took over?

MR: With our neighbours, we had some bilateral problems. We had problems both with our immediate neighbours and regional neighbours.

We had some bilateral problems with India. The first strategy we took was to take a bilateral approach towards our problems with India. In August 1991, I visited India. Though I had met the Indian Foreign Minister earlier in Male, it was during my visit to New Delhi that we got down to discussing bilateral problems — and in the process came to an arrangement on Tin Bigha. Later special arrangements were reached on Jamdani sarees and Hilsha fish. Chakma repatriation also followed as a part of our agreement.

DS: But how does the relationship with India stand now?

MR: One major issue is still remaining. That is the sharing of water. The issue requires indepth study and indepth discussion to come to some sort of solution. Our eagerness and decision to solve the water problem can be well judged not only from my visit, but also by the visit of our Prime Minister in May, 1992. But, I feel India has not exhibited sufficient political will in solving the water issue.

Similarly our Prime Minister visited Pakistan to solve the problem of assets and liabilities and the question of stranded Pakistanis. Following her visit a plane load of stranded Pakistanis were sent. As a result of our efforts, the process of repatriation, that was long stalled, has commenced.

DS: What was the outcome of your visit to India on the water issue?

MR: Indian Prime Minister Narashima Rao assured us that we will not have to face any distress or difficulty with water. This assurance gave us

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But suppose, Mr Y, a very influential person, landed at ZIA with some banned or highly 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.)

tion news, especially of the upper echelons, and thus help its growth without any risk, whatsoever.

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

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