

Diminishing the JS

More than a third of the laws so far passed by the present Jatiya Sangsad, 59 to be precise, were ordinances promulgated by the present government. The fact made public officially through the publication of the Summaries of House Proceedings was very obviously and much too embarrassingly unflattering for the government's legislative performance. So much so that the Speaker Sheikh Razzak Ali would not mince words in his expression of dissatisfaction over the record by himself going on record as having always discouraged the treasury bench from resorting so frequently to promulgation of ordinances.

The Speaker's outspoken reaction, however, cannot be expected to salvage the BNP government from the damage it has done to itself. This record of 59 ordinances imposed in spite of there being 15 sessions of the JS, or five every year, has convincingly vindicated the old and persistent opposition accusation that the government has consistently been diminishing the importance and indeed the very existence of the Sangsad, so graphically proved from the very beginning by the Prime Minister's dismally poor record of attending the JS sessions. The government now is left with no way to prove that even those horrific figures were a fact, the BNP never meant indeed to diminish the Sangsad — except through mending its ways over the rest of its tenure.

If BNP has proved itself inept in the ways of governing through Parliament, it hasn't done half as much damage to the party as it has done to the nation. However, the government party doesn't exactly hold a monopoly in the business of diminishing the JS which is what lends, exclusively, legitimacy to the government as also to the opposition. It is only the JS and not the government as such through which the people — the source of sovereignty of our state — participate in the government. The opposition has been responsible for balking at that participation, for howsoever compelling political reasons there may be, now for months. It cannot be true that this act is not diminishing the Jatiya Sangsad.

But then it is also true that a great stride was made towards democracy at the end of '90 and the pace was held through most of the following year. And that two great milestones were set in that march towards meaningful and effective democracy, namely, the Shahabuddin elections and the JS voting for the parliamentary form of government. It was simply heroic the way BNP brought itself to the position of going along in this crucial decision being wholly given to the presidential one as if by a holy covenant.

That elan and the esprit that led it foundered on shoals and rocks of narrowness of vision bordering on petty egotism, sliding frequently into regular meanness while the rosebud of democracy was let to wilt all the time. There is no use here apportioning the responsibility of being the greater sinner among the two — for the record is clear and open for all in the nation to know the truth. What is indubitably certain is that the talk of victory for democracy is ringing hollow with every promulgation of an ordinance and every passing day of the boycott. As much as it will take two to end this boycott, it will need a full House to stop the ordinances.

Outrageous

To sit in on judgement over something legally as non-cognisable an offence as a gossip between a young girl and a man is itself patently primitive. And obviously the crudity would be at its outrageous worst if a judgement were passed summarily finding the girl guilty of an 'act' they were hell-bent to call 'shameless'. Having had it on the authority of the Coordinating Council of Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) that all this had happened at a village within Bagha Sadar Thana in Rajshahi district, we published a front-page news item on the subject yesterday given the tendentiousness of the malady. Poor Anjali Karmakar in her mid-teens was declared an outcast and banished from her locality for good as she violated the so-called norms of the village. She was reportedly allowed temporary stay in the village for her exams in a farcical semblance of a negotiated outcome making it look as if it was *saalish* after all, to the credulous folks around.

That was not all to it. Her crestfallen aged father Nitai Chandra Karmakar, a goldsmith by profession, was subjected to a grueling indignity before the public; he had to do sit-ups while holding his ears (very humiliating act in our custom), as if he was a helpless school boy of a prey doing the bidding of some scowling self-appointed masters or social guardians. What a teaching role model this ignoramus bunch is trying to present them as, largely by our default.

Saalish or arbitration has been traditionally permitted in our society, but exclusively as a mode of working out a compromise or peaceful settlement over any dispute arising out of small causes. It cannot be allowed as a method of passing any judgement having punitive implications which then would be a gross impingement on the legal authority of the courts — a mockery of the judicial system as such. It also constitutes a blatant violation of the norms of administration and law enforcement. It is the *ex parte* decisions, that again based on glib talk of the village caught on the antenna of the rural influentials raring to go at it, make the errand kind of *saalish* so very abhorrent. The practice in its degenerate form must be stopped; for, it is a close variant of *fat-wabaji*. Or since coming under scrutiny, is *fat-wabaji* trying to sneak up through another route? Curiously, the arbitration was held at the office of the local union parishad chairman. The office bearer being very much under the control of the government, the latter can do the needful with the former in all the union councils of the country, so that they stood guard over arbitrary *saalish*.

It is a question basically of protecting the constitutional, fundamental and human rights of people who may be vulnerable to a denial of these, specially in the remoter parts of the country. Since the victims in the present case belong to a minority religious community the wrong-doing of their tormentors is even more difficult to condone.

Mostly about Potato — a bit on Couch Potato too

IT is not a matter of the past really that people in this country were being urged to eat more potatoes to reduce rice intake. There were publicity campaigns extolling the virtues of potato as a food. Special food fairs used to be arranged, putting on display all sorts of tasty and varied dishes prepared from potato. The impression was given that it was just a matter of changing food habits to switch over from rice to potato as a staple diet.

The scenario has changed now. Food deficit has ceased to be a pressing issue. The urgency to promote consumption of potato as a substitute for rice is no longer there. Rather, the word is going round that potato could not be a substitute for rice anyway. How's that again?

Well, the Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (BNNC) is said to have held that potato should not be recommended as a direct alternative to rice. Citing a BNNC report, a news agency says that potato just could not replace rice as food. According to the findings of the BNNC report, rice or wheat is more than four-times in food value as compared to potato. Rice or wheat also contains more than four-times calorie as compared to potato. On top of that, the production cost of the same quantity of potato is higher than that of rice or wheat.

One redeeming feature about all of it is that despite exhortations in the past, people did not really take to potato as staple food instead of rice. To them, potato still remains a vegetable. It just helps them eat rice or bread, for that matter. The BNNC report also recommends intake of potato as vegetable and also as a snack food.

Potato may not have caught on as a staple food. All the same, its consumption, mostly as a vegetable, has expanded remarkably over the years. As a matter of fact, the rate of growth of potato output outstrips nearly all the other vegetables. During 1965-70, potato used to be grown in an area of 1.8 lakh acres on average. The annual yield was 6.5 lakh tonnes on average. Last year, potato was cultivated in 3.13 lakh acres of land. The output last year was nearly 14 lakh tonnes. The average yield during 1965-70 was around 3.60 tonnes per acre. Last year, an acre of land yielded 4.42 tonnes of potato on average.

Nowadays potato is considered to have an indigenous variety. However, the vegetable may not be a native to this land. Potato is usually recognised as native to South America although it is now widely cultivated all over the world. It was introduced into Europe around the year 1570. The word 'potato' is actually derived from Spanish *patato*, which itself, is a variant of native American *batata*. Even now, Holland is the place to go for procuring quality seed potato. Could it be that the potato came our way from South America via Europe?

Be that as it may, potato now is one of our major non-cereal agricultural crops. Official patronage may have helped cultivation of the item to expand. Economic considerations also have played a major role in promoting potato cultivation. The return to the grower is significantly higher in the case of potato as compared to other rabi crops such as pulses, oil seeds. However, the emergence of cold storage establishments had, by far, been a crucial factor in sustaining the growth of potato cultivation.

This then is a sort of low-down on potato cultivation. The growth of facilities for storage and preservation facilities in sustaining the growth of potato cultivation in the country, can well serve as a case in point. Plans for crop diversification must take the need for creation of appropriate storage facilities for agricultural produce into account. Future investments in the agriculture sector must be directed towards setting up storage infrastructure as well.

Creation of storage facilities also needs to be considered in the broader perspective of defining strategies for agricultural marketing. Just diversifying agriculture or increasing crop yields would not ensure a better return to the farmer unless marketing facilities for the produce are also improved. A storage infrastructure has thus to be supplemented with up-graded facilities for transportation of farm products. An integrated framework of agricultural marketing needs to be put in place in tandem with programme for crop diversification.

Given this setting, it is encouraging to note from a news agency report that the European Commission (EC) has initiated a study on finding ways to improve trade infrastructure for agricultural produce in secondary towns in this country, so that the growers could be assured of a better return for the crops they raise.

Weather permitting, the country has now reached the threshold of attaining food self-sufficiency. Increasingly there are talks of new strategies for agricultural development with emphasis on crop diversification. It is in this context that the contribution of a supportive framework

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An amount of \$1.2 million is said to have been earmarked for the study, to be completed in a couple of years' time. Follow-up projects would be taken up on the basis of findings of the study. It is to be hoped that our policy makers would extend full support to the EC programme.

To go by the report, the EC has taken up the programme in recognition of the phenomenon of the growers being often deprived of a fair price for their produce due to the absence of an appropriate marketing mechanism in the countryside. Poor marketing facilities, it is said, tends to place the farmers at the mercy of traders. Prices vary widely between the growers' and consumers' levels — the traders who act as middlemen eating up the difference as profits. Well, this is something which had been known all along. It's good to see someone taking cognizance and making a move to correct the distortions in the marketing mechanism for agricultural produce. And who knows, more efficient marketing methods could even promote the much sought-after total factor productivity increase — in other words, higher output that cannot be attributed to just more labour and capital inputs.

I started off with potatoes and better end up with it. But before that, I ought to mention another important consideration which would deter people from turning to potato as replacement for rice or wheat. It is the price factor. Earlier, I spoke of the food

value of potato. Because of its relatively low nutrient content, you would have to eat a lot more potato to get the same amount of nourishment as from rice or wheat. That would cost you more. For calorie intake for instance, to obtain 1000 K cal from potato, you would have to spend Tk 6.3 on average in '90-91 prices. For the same calorie intake, you spend Tk 3.7 on rice and Tk 2.3 on wheat. The costing pattern more or less repeats itself in respect of intake of protein, fats and carbohydrate. In short, you not only spend more money but also gorge on potatoes to draw the same amount of nourishment as from rice or wheat.

Nonetheless, the humble potato also seems to have been taken to exemplify a certain form of human behaviour. For the TV addicts, lexicographers have coined the phrase *couch potatoes*. The same goes for the inveterate viewers of videotapes on the VCR. The appellation seems to apply mainly to those human beings who are wont to indulge in apparently insatiable prolonged viewing of images on the screen, presumably lounging on a couch. Potato is an edible tuber. Some people also fondly call television, the tube. You hear a twang of words sounding similar: Is it because TV and VCR addicts vegetate on their lounging seats that they become *couch potatoes*? Or is it that their prolonged viewing moor them to their seats — figuratively taking roots — which turns them into *couch potatoes*? Well, your guess is as good as mine.

Party activists have generated some electoral enthusiasm. Posters plaster the walls even though forbidden under election law. Streamers are draped over roundabouts. The noise of Colombo's traffic clogged roads is punctuated by *cheenapatas* (crackers) and the propaganda blasts of young bucks racing around in open vehicles.

But there is almost as much speculation about the possibility of post-election violence as about the outcome of the election. The omens seem bad. There has been an ugly resurgence of violence in the run up to the election. Clashes, thuggery, a few shootings and killings, disruption and strikes at workplaces have marred the campaign. — GEMINI NEWS

MALLIKA WANIGASUNDARA is a freelance Sri Lankan journalist.

sort of business enterprise) come from Asia.

These statistics reinforce the view that Asian immigrants make strong commitments to Australia. They also refute the often-heard accusations that Asians are a burden on the rest of the community because they are unskilled and lack entrepreneurial resources.

Statistics published recently show that Asian-born students are at least five times more likely than locally-born students to achieve the necessary very high marks at school to enable them to enter the medical faculty at universities.

"They are more keenly motivated, and receive tremendous encouragement from their families," an educationalist commented.

Asian faces are also being seen more frequently on the Australian sporting scene — even in that very English game of cricket. A prominent cricketer is 23-year-old Richard Chee Quee who is so proficient, he plays both in Australia and England.

He was born in Australia of Chinese parents. He is the only cricketer of Chinese descent to play at first-class level in Australia. His promotional work among school children has encouraged more Asian youngsters to play cricket.

— Depthnews Asia

be greater in comparison to those who secured the fast, easy lane from the UK and Europe.

Australia's Western Pacific location within a vertical hemisphere with East Asia seems to help Asian immigrants adapt to their new country. They are also naturally not concerned about Australia's increasing association with Asia, politically and economically.

But many non-Asian immigrants tend to look upon this thrust into Asia as an abandonment of English and European traditions — only to be tolerated because of the dynamic surge in nearby Asian economies. The more pragmatic among them take the reluctant attitude that Australia will just have to accept being part of the Asian scene and will have to make the most of it.

Some 40 years ago Asians comprised less than three per cent of Australia's annual immigrants. Today more than 40 per cent come from Asia.

Asians make up at least half the total number of immigrants with work skills. About 90 per cent of Australia's business immigrants (those who buy, invest in or start some

agents, other crime prevention agencies, and even the diplomatic corps making sure their people live in a reasonably crime-free spot.

Col Mirza Shafiq Banani, Dhaka

Sewerage in Mirpur

Sir, Endorsing Mr Md Nizamuddin's letter, "Sewerage in Mirpur" of 8th instant I like to add more pitiable points in this regard. The pipes are not only insufficiently narrow but also set in the wrong way. The slanting is not enough to pass the sewer towards the big pits. Moreover, five big pits here in Section No 11 Block A are not yet cleaned

Chandrika Bids to Become her Country's Second Woman Premier

Mallika Wanigasundara writes from Colombo

CHANDRIKA Kumaratunge's mother was the world's first woman prime minister and 49-year old daughter is campaigning to get the job herself.

To become a contender, she fought and beat her brother Anura for leadership of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), still formally led by her mother Sirima Bandaranaike, 79 years old and in poor health.

Now Kumaratunge is leading the opposition assault in the 16 August parliamentary elections, in which she is hoping to capitalise on a palpable desire for change.

The SLFP, the main party in the opposition Peoples Alliance, has been in the wilderness for 17 years, during which time it lost every election it fought — until it broke the mould last March with a stunning victory in elections in the Southern Province.

The poll rocketed Kumaratunge into prominence and revitalised the party. Among her supporters are many of the 2.4 million young voters on the 11 million strong electoral register.

Reports of corruption, in-



Ranil Wickremasinghe: Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

cluding complaints by foreign governments about improper contract placement, proce-

dures, will work against the ruling United National Party (UNP) led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe.

So will the rising cost of living, fuelled by the removal of subsidies at the insistence of the World Bank, and by a civil war in the north. The government's free market policies have maintained growth rates of 4-6 per cent a year, but the poor are struggling.

But the UNP traditionally has a 40 per cent block of support on which to draw, compared with the SLEP's 30-35 per cent, and is partnered by the powerful, 400,000 member plantation workers union led by Savundramurthy Thondamon, a Cabinet Minister and one of the country's shrewdest political strategists.

It is promising a cluster of welfare and manpower training measures, including an expansion of the existing food

stamps scheme, special youth training with a monthly allowance thrown in, better financed university scholarships, fertiliser loans for farmers and land for members of the security forces.

It failed to put these measures in place in the last 17 years except in a peripheral, piecemeal way, but then all parties are making unrealistic and extravagant promises.

The Peoples Alliance — which also embraces communist and Trotskyist parties and breakaway group from the UNP — promises a basket of food items for the young unemployed, a dole of poor families, a write off of agricultural loans, social insurance for the disabled, abolition of pay as you earn tax, cheaper and bread, cereals and fuel oil, and much more.

The SLFP and other opposi-

tion parties have vehemently opposed the free market for a decade, characterising it as a sell out to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and transnational corporations.

It has now embraced some free market policies, with reservations and without total conviction. The Peoples Alliance talks of an open economy, with a human face, which has never been defined. Kumaratunge has been wooing the business community, which is severely perturbed by the prospect of an opposition victory.

Holding polls in the north, where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is fighting a separatist war, is a major problem. Though some areas are under the control of the security forces, many villages have been abandoned. Several parties have entered the fray

claiming to represent the Tamils but the LTTE has told Tamils, who form about 14 per cent of the population, not to participate in the elections and will certainly try to disrupt voting.

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Asians Make Good Australians

Vincent W Stove writes from Sydney

Asian immigrants make a stronger commitment to their new country than people from the UK and Ireland

As stating that he has never attempted to force his wife to become an Australian citizen because "it would be quite sexist of me to tell my wife what she should do about these things."

Many female immigrants from the UK return to that country when pregnant so that their children will be born "at home" and have no problems retaining British citizenships and passports.

It is probably not surprising then that so many Australians of British descent — even after two or three generations — are expressing strong support for the retention of the British monarch as Australia's head of state and are opposed to Australia's becoming a republic.

Asian immigrants are much more enthusiastic for Australia to relinquish ties to the British monarchy and for an Australian to be head of state. They support the idea of their adopted country being seen as an independent republic of the

Western Pacific.

A Vietnamese immigrant commented: "In many respects, Asian immigrants have a greater vision for Australia's future and a deeper commitment to its role in this part of the world than people who come here from England and Europe."

While many, if not most, immigrants from the UK and Europe would not accept that they lack total commitment to Australia, all would agree that most Asian immigrants had to display greater initiative and determination to be able to come to Australia.

Although the country has long abandoned its racial immigration policy, it is evident that more funds and other types of support are available to encourage and assist the immigration processing procedures in London, for instance, than in Bangkok.

And the commitment to Australia of most of the so-called boat people from Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia must

be greater in comparison to those who secured the fast, easy lane from the UK and Europe.

Australia's Western Pacific location within a vertical hemisphere with East Asia seems to help Asian immigrants adapt to their new country. They are also naturally not concerned about Australia's increasing association with Asia, politically and economically.

But many non-Asian immigrants tend to look upon this thrust into Asia as an abandonment of English and European traditions — only to be tolerated because of the dynamic surge in nearby Asian economies. The more pragmatic among them take the reluctant attitude that Australia will just have to accept being part of the Asian scene and will have to make the most of it.

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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.

"Taslima Nasreen"

Sir, I am glad that Abu Abdullah has written in (DS Letter 13 Aug) to infuse some clarity into the Taslima Nasreen affair. Time and again columnists and correspondents have made reference to the lady's literary skills — as though the case against her is proved if her abilities are successfully denigrated. Time and again they have devalued and

observed her quintessential point that the womenfolk of our country are very badly served by, among others, those who deliberately misuse religion to reinforce shoddy, archaic and often cruel notions and manifestations of male chauvinism. Time and again even the most enlightened, intellectual and enlightened among them have argued themselves awkwardly into a dark corner that, ironically, il-

luminates their thin veneer of tolerance