

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 founded 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 (CCHR) 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 gruelling 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 errant kind of *saalish* so very abhorrent. The practice in its degenerate form must be stopped; for, it is a close variant of *fatwabaji*. Or since coming under scrutiny, is *fatwabaji* 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'S 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 *patata*, 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?

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

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 fa-

cilities 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

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 invertebrate viewers of

videotapes on the VCR. The

appellation seems to apply

mainly to those human beings

who are wont to indulge in ap-

parently 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 sound-

ing similar. Is it because TV

and MCR 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.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

storage and preservation of the output is a feature which attracts special notice. The installed capacity of the cold storage units exceeds 4 lakh tonnes which is used largely for potatoes. About 3.5 lakh tonnes or roughly one-fourth of the total annual output of potatoes, are stored in these establishments. Potato is now a vegetable which is available all the year round. Availability of storage facilities clearly improved marketing opportunities for the item and supported growth of production.

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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 upgraded 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 and capital inputs.

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 tones in this country, so that the growers could be assured of a better return for the crops they raise.

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 eat 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

Chandrika Bids to Become her Country's Second Woman Premier

Mallika Wanigasundara writes from Colombo

The opposition is hoping to end 17 years in the political wilderness when Sri Lanka goes to the polls today Aug 16. And opposition leader Chandrika Kumaratunge has another, more personal ambition to follow in her mother's footsteps as prime minister.



Ranil Wickremasinghe:
Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

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

cedures, 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 Thondam, 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 People's 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

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

Asians Make Good Australians