

Pushing Jute Forward

A week ago we published a special supplement entitled "The Future of Jute: Problems and Prospects", based on the transcript of a Roundtable we had held, with the major players in jute sector taking part in it. Two things have happened since then. Firstly, we have got an initial feedback taking note of the new effort launched to breathe life into the tottering jute sector, something we like to believe would gather a greater momentum in the fullness of a public debate in the near future. Secondly, true to his commitment at The Daily Star Roundtable discussion, Jute Minister Brig. (Retd) Hannan Shah is hosting a national dialogue on the subject in a couple of days' time.

We can allow ourselves the nostalgia of bemoaning the old glories of jute only in passing, but not the luxury of being frozen in that frame of mind. The basic thing to realise is that hard-headed decisions are needed within a national policy framework to integrate our jute sector with the world market in a context so vastly different from the Korean war-time boom enjoyed by the golden fibre.

There has been a decline in the production and quality of raw jute as well as of jute goods. Our costs of production have made the merchandise, both in its raw and finished forms, uncompetitive on the international market. Add to this our interest rates that keep above the worldwide rates of between 3 and 4 per cent on an average. Our export prices are overvalued in relation to those of India which is our major competitor in the field.

It is not only at the level of raw jute production but also at the manufacturing level that we have had to subsidise the sector that is so full of potential to be highly profitable in its own right. While the costs of production reduce the competitiveness of our prices abroad, and our foreign exchange earnings drop, the other folly of keeping the industries alive by huge subsidisation goes on impoverishing the tax-payers. So, it has been loss all the way.

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A Helpful Academy

The Shilpkala Academy has eased the procedure for selection of works of art for the 11th National Fine Arts Exhibition. Now an artist — painter or sculptor or any worker in the visual media — will not be required to carry his pieces to the Academy for selection. Slides and colour photographs will take the place of the original works for selection purpose. This will be very helpful to painters and specially to sculptors. And artist from outside Dhaka will be much benefited by the new arrangement.

One may debate that a photograph, either in the slide or print form, cannot wholly be a substitute for the real thing; but the many good points of the new mode should outweigh the reservations that may be aired by some. The more cogent point is whether there are adequate facilities for making good colour slides or prints of paintings and sculptures outside Dhaka City. If a badly done photograph fails an artist — and not his lack of quality — it would be a most unfortunate thing. But this hardly can be avoided.

One had the impression that these selections had always been vitiated by lobbying and other kinds of influence peddling — whether or not such malpractices proved paying. If the outstation entrants must send their slides and prints through mail or courier, can't it be made binding on all to do the same? Could the names of the artists be kept away from the knowledge of the selectors? This would sound a little less outlandish if you kept ten or twenty artists outside of this 'selection' competition for inviting those venerable masters to please participate in the show.

Is a 'fair' selection of works of arts possible? It is possible that a jury would not be influenced in their judgement by considerations other than strictly aesthetic. That can be a 'fair' selection but not necessarily a competent or good one. The selectors must of necessity be picked from painters of reputation, experience and power and probity and art connoisseurs and critics of unimpeachable records as to their knowledge of and feeling for art and also their integrity of opinion. There should be a homogeneity of approach among the selectors which may not always be the ideal gauge to measure quality of art in a world now dominated by plurality of tastes and standards.

The Shilpkala Academy must be complimented for their generous promotion of the visual and plastic arts. One only wishes that they did the same to the other forms of art specially music and the theatre. The Academy once played a significant role in promoting the folk theatre 'Jatra.' The Jatra was then suddenly consigned to a state of limbo by people on higher perches. Has the Academy been steadfastly upholding the cause of that form and exerting to salvage it in the way it should have? An answer in the negative would only justify our earlier call — the Shilpkala Academy must be a wholly autonomous trust set up. We repeat our call.

Military Rule in Haiti, Nigeria and Myanmar: Response of the International Community

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

After the ignominious fall of Marcos in the Philippines and Ershad in Bangladesh there was a widespread expectation that the age of military strongmen was perhaps coming to an end. An air crash had removed Ziaul Huq of Pakistan from the scene. But the little Napoleons are very ambitious. Few countries in the Third World are yet safe from them. I had written an article in The Daily Star of August 21, 1994 about the machinations of the generals in Nigeria. I had earlier written about the military junta in Myanmar. Today I intend to write on the developments in Haiti — a tiny little country which is in the international limelight these days.

Although Haiti is a state in the western hemisphere, we have become involved in the affairs of this far away island country as a result of the government's decision to join the international force to restore the legally elected president to his office. This force was being put together in response to an UN Security Council resolution. President Clinton reportedly requested our Prime Minister personally to provide troops for the mission. President Carter, as an emissary of President Clinton seems to have diffused the crisis in Haiti without bloodshed. American troops are already there but on the basis of agreement with the General Raoul Cedras and other junta leaders. But the elected president of Haiti Mr Jean Bertrand Aristides, living in the US as an exile, has not yet returned to the country. The generals are still negotiating the terms on which they will leave the country. The fragile peace brokered by Carter is welcomed by everybody but the goal of the United States has not yet been fully realized. However, since the US troops are gradually gaining control over the situation in Haiti, the general's grip on power will not last. What is really significant in this connection for countries in the Third world is the decision of the UN Security Council to authorize the use of

Haiti and Dominican Republic — two small states

force to restore the elected president of the country. There cannot be two opinion that it was the right decision. The response of Bangladesh to the request for troops was also the correct one. In fact, as far as I am aware, no mainstream political party in the country has expressed any reservation on the point. But the question that haunts us all, particularly in the Third World is: why is the UN not applying an uniform standard in dealing with identical problems?

I realize that the answer to the question is not a simple one. While the people in the vast majority of the UN member states would like to see an end to the oppressive and illegal military regimes in different parts of the world, the UN seems to act, as did in Haiti, only when it serves the interests of a great power. That is the international reality today. The situation in Nigeria, for instance, is similar to Haiti. The former military ruler, General Ibrahim Babangida, voided the results of an election in order to deny the office of president to Mr Noshod Abiola, the person elected by the people to that post. His successor, the new head of the military junta, Gen. Sani Abacha, is doing exactly what his predecessor did: he is brutally suppressing the popular movement in favour of Mr Abiola. In Myanmar too a military junta nullified the results of a general election by putting the elected MPs and their leader Aung San Suu Kye behind the prison bars! Defiantly, the regime nullified the people's verdict and ignored international criticism. Yet neither the UN nor the champions of democracy in Europe and America thought in terms of UN intervention on the side of the people of those countries. Is it because these are resource-rich countries and the western businessmen would not like to rock the boat that offers prospects of such profit?

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