

Playfully Disastrous

In no other mode of journey the lives are so literally put into the hands of the operator than by a country-boat apologetically fitted with a barely purring horse-power engine chugging along the captive, rough waters within narrow sea-lane. Anyone who once put to the sea from Cox's Bazar even on board a properly powered speed-boat or launch, headed for one of the islets, Maheshkhali or St. Martin's Island or Kutubdia, would recall the terrible battering his boat had taken all the way, in and out, regardless of seasons or the inter-play of tides.

"Not anymore", must have been the first words uttered by him, if he were a visitor to the place, on reaching to safety ashore. Yet, the people who inhabit that sea-board area, which happens to be configuration-wise one of the most turbulent bay zones in the whole world — being cavity-like — have to venture out to the sea with a religious regularity driven by the dictates of life and living.

That is exactly the reason why caution cannot be thrown to the winds by the private operators of river-craft who by default of a public sector involvement in the area, monopolise the business there. Does the virtual absence of a small scale state sector marine operation absolve the local authorities of their responsibility to oversee the private operations and intervene, where necessary, to stop putting so many lives at such great risk almost daily? Quite an assortment of patently unseaworthy boats are plied, as if the incidence of death by other forms of accident was not high enough already.

The country-boat that capsized in the Kutubdia channel on Sunday morning, drowning at least 100 people from amongst a bridal party of 170 on board, bears testimony to the utter failure of the authorities to enforce minimum safety standards in the mouth of the Bay. The boat, having an out-board shallow tubewell engine, barely able to pull it along and which could accommodate at the most 70 passengers, was carrying nearly three times its capacity. Attempting to change direction, with such a heavy load, compounded by the lowest tugging power imaginable, the country-craft could only tip on one side and meet its inevitable watery grave. The boat, like perhaps many others of its kind, bore no name meaning that it plied unauthorised, though not obviously secretively, without having been licensed or registered at all. Reports suggested that a union parishad chairman owned and operated it refusing to be wiser from an accident which another country-boat of his own had met with, in August last, drowning 40 lives.

The all-round tragedy has been made the more plaintive by the fact that the purpose of the journey was so auspicious, designed to herald a new pair of lives, and that only eight out of the 80 women and children could be rescued from the sea. But there was a streak of good luck for the rescue operation in contrast to what we have seen about the Dinar-II disaster near Chandpur. The local people and the men in their fishing boats helped save many lives, recovering dead bodies as well. That again brought to light how delayed it can get for rescue and medicare operation to reach the spot from the district headquarters which were barely 50 miles away.

Our sincerest condolences to the bereaved families whose losses are tragically so irreparable but perhaps would be only fractionally redeemed if we are able to avoid such a disaster in the future.

Reliving Lalou

When we remember Lalou Sain we do it on purpose. The purpose is going through the motions of owning up debts to the old man who, however, was not the one to care for repayments — of any kind. Then why these motions? Because these do pay and most of those that talk about him and sing his songs are not disinterested in this materially rewarding aspect of the formal remembrances. This we say saddened by the fact that whoever champions Lalou in talks or writings and researches, steers clear of being infected by the ideas and teachings of the great savant poet-philosopher. Lalou has offered a fresh ground to be exploited, after Tagore and Nazrul, by people not at all questioning as Lalou did, for the nature of the ultimate reality of man and the world or laying bare the smallness and imperfections of social impositions. Nazrul has so far been the worst victim of this mindless game of selling to society a wholly distorted and wrong image of those who had in their legacies the power to shape the society as also the individual into something better than now. The great fighter against communalism and the greatest bridge builder over the Hindu-Muslim chasm, the revolutionary committed to fashioning a society of equals sharing in a common heritage and marching to a common goal of a truly human society, is for decades being used without let up to serve as a Kalapahar to undo whatever he stood for with all his life. Interest in a resurgent Lalou, one fears, has already taken a pronounced turn towards such distortion of the vilest design.

Although Lalou-geeti excels as a song-form it is not for creating melodies that Lalou carved these songs out of his mystic realisation of man and society. It is the lyrics — the words and ideas that must be got hold of first in order that Lalou is relived and becomes relevant to the present-day needs of our people. And, of course, his ideas of a universal humanity which is one with a pantheistic Unitarian God do respond to the needs of the modern man. Although Lalou's inimitable lines, couched as they are by haunting rhythms and melodies, reach out to strike a chord or two in many hearts among the illiterate masses, the singers and the talkers and the researchers are hardened souls wanting in such Chords. There is a glorious exception to this rotten situation — some of the bauls keeping assiduously to the pristine form and spirit of the genuine Lalou, must have been grasping Lalou as only he should be grasped. Let them not die out under the deadly weight of the greedy middle-class purveyors of art and culture.

RICH and poorer nations clashed at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) annual meeting which ended on October 6. This year's annual meeting was held in Madrid. World Bank and IMF usually hold two consecutive annual meetings in Washington, where their headquarters are, and then in the third year in a member country. The Madrid meeting also marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of the two institutions and lasted for nearly two weeks. As it happened, it also turned out to be one of the most contentious annual meetings of the World Bank and IMF.

The main controversy centred on the IMF proposal for an expansion of global liquidity by way of a substantial augmentation of reserves of SDRs (Special Drawing Rights) for a general distribution among the member countries. SDRs are also called the IMF's currency. The Fund maintains the accounts of the member countries in SDR units. A composite of the US dollar, German mark, Japanese yen, French franc and British sterling, SDR is really an artificial currency unit. At the time of the World Bank and IMF annual meeting, one SDR was worth about US \$1.47.

A strapped international liquidity situation provided the rationale for creation of SDRs in the late 1960s. New stocks of SDRs can now be injected into international reserves only if there is a global need for augmenting liquidity. This time, the IMF had felt that there might be shortage of international liquidity in the coming years unless stocks of global non-gold reserves were expanded. The way to do this was to create new SDRs and allocate them to all the member countries of IMF. It was pointed out that international reserves were adequate for

Rich and Poorer Nations Clash Again— at WB/IMF 50th Anniversary

less than three months of import requirements of 55 per cent of the countries represented in the Fund. The situation of the former communist states was even worse and 67 per cent of them had reserves equivalent to the minimum three months of import. It was estimated that the need for non-gold reserves of all IMF member countries would expand by about 400 billion SDRs over the next five years.

Compared to the perceived needs, IMF's plans for increasing stocks of SDRs were rather modest. The Fund proposed a general distribution of additional 36 billion SDRs over the next five years to its 179 member nation. The amount is equivalent to about \$52 billion and would have met only about 9 per cent of the anticipated additional global need for reserves. The new allocation would have gone to all the member nations — both rich and poor. However, the poorer nations only were understandably enthusiastic about the IMF proposal, modest though it was. Any accretion to their reserves was welcome. It would increase their capability to finance much needed imports and service past debts. It would be an indirect form of development assistance. Developing countries, therefore, backed the IMF proposal stoutly.

The rich nations at first would have none of it. The Group of Seven leading industrialized countries (G-7 — Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States) dismissed the IMF proposal outright, declaring it to be unnecessary. With the growth of global capital mar-

ket, they said, there was no need to augment international liquidity through a big expansion of the IMF's currency, which the world's central banks could cash in for dollars and other freely convertible currencies. Rather, creation of such new money by the IMF would exert an expansionary influence on the world's stock of free currencies, which was potentially inflationary, they averred. They even said that the IMF's move could set a dangerous precedent which, presumably, would lead to resurgence of financial indiscipline the world over.

Besides the former communist states, the principal beneficiaries are also next-door neighbours of the European members of G-7.

The compromise proposal called for a special allocation of 16 billion SDRs, equivalent to about \$23 billion. The newcomers would undoubtedly have been the main beneficiaries. Certain poorer nations possessing good track records with the IMF, would also have shared the benefit. Developing countries naturally viewed the compromise proposal as restrictive and took a strong stand against it. At the same

time, they continued to give full backing to the original IMF formulation for allocation of new SDRs. As in other global forums, the developing countries are in a numerical majority in the IMF. However, they command barely 30 per cent of the IMF votes while the G-7 countries represent about 45 per cent. New SDR allocation requires approval of 85 per cent of IMF votes. Thus the compromise proposal could not be carried through without the support of the developing countries.

The proposal for new SDR allocation was perhaps the only major initiative at the 50th anniversary meeting of the World Bank and IMF. In the event, the move fell through or at least got stalled for another six months. At the end of the

meeting, hopes were expressed that there was still a measure of cooperation between the rich and poorer nations which might yield a formulation acceptable to all the member countries. At the same time, it became quite clear that it was no longer possible for any particular grouping of countries to impose its will on the others. It is also to be noted that both the proposals would have brought benefits to the poorest countries like Bangladesh. There is an estimate which says that the G-7 compromise package would have added more than \$4 billion to the reserves of the poorest countries. However, it lacked the transparency and automaticity as envisaged in the original formulation with regard to access to the new stock of SDRs. Anyway, developing countries opted to stand together on this issue.

Analysts in the West read in the developing countries' attitude on the SDR allocation issue, another proof of a new assertiveness of the poorer nations. They hark back to the Uruguay Round negotiations where developing countries had resolutely opposed western moves to link trade to labour standards, human rights and environment. Developing countries, on the other hand, tend to interpret the West's attitude as its continued failure to appreciate the needs of the poorer nations.

During the imbroglio over the SDR allocation issue, the world's leading industrial nations told the developing countries in more or less clear terms that they should go the global capital market to raise

True, cheap labour attracts foreign investors to developing countries. However, the cost advantage to the foreign investor accruing from cheap labour could as easily be wiped off when infrastructure facilities such as dependable power supply, adequate transportation network, are lacking. The gap between the level of inflow of FDI and the perceived needs for infrastructure investment is clearly too wide to be met by the developing countries from their own savings. The time has not come yet for the rich nations to choke off new avenues for the developing countries to augment their resources through such measures as additional allocation of SDRs.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

The poorer nations were up in arms and strongly berated the attitude of the G-7. There was also another dimension to this issue. The last infusion of SDRs took place in 1981. Since then, some 37 nations, mostly former communist states — or, economies in transition, as they are apt to be called these days — have joined the Fund. These newcomers had no opportunity to gain access to SDRs to supplement their reserves, for the simple reason that there had been no fresh allocation after they joined the IMF. The rich nations conceded that this was not quite fair. All the same, it was perhaps more in the nature of a damage-control exercise that persuaded a couple of G-7 member countries to advance a compromise pro-

posal. Besides the former communist states, the principal beneficiaries are also next-door neighbours of the European members of G-7.

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Economic Growth Fails to Ease Lives of Asia's Poor

Depthnews Reports from Bangkok

EVERY night in many parts of the world, some 550 million people go to bed hungry.

Of the world's estimated 1994 population of 5.6 billion, more than a billion live in a state of absolute poverty with income and consumption levels below nationally defined poverty lines. These people survive without many of life's basic necessities on an income of less than US \$370 a year.

For the poor, life expectancy in short. Disease, hunger, malnutrition and crime constantly threaten the life and limb of these people.

Although the poor are in virtually every country, the overwhelming majority are in the developing world. The Asia-Pacific, home to about 3.6 billion people — almost 64 per cent of the global total — has also most of the world's poor.

The annual *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific*, issued by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), said: "Nearly three-fourths of the world's 1.1 billion poor people live in the ESCAP region. In terms of absolute numbers, the poor are highly concentrated in the region's more populous and densely inhabited countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan. The proportion of the poor in several other countries with small to medium-size populations is also quite high."

"The latest data indicate that Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, together contained some 465 million poor people," it said.

ESCAP also pointed out that the number understated the magnitude of poverty since the data included only the rural poor for Bangladesh, China and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"Afghanistan, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea and Viet Nam are probably other countries with sizeable populations below the poverty line; the relevant information for these countries is not available," it said.

The rural poor represent more than 80 per cent of the total number of impoverished people in developing countries.

South Asia, home to 30 per cent of the world's population, accounts for almost half of the world's severely impoverished people.

The UN agency also stressed that poverty is not simply and exclusively a rural phenomenon. Neither is it more severe in its impact in rural than in urban areas.

The urban areas generally have better health, education, water and sanitation facilities, but, the access of the urban poor to those facilities is neither guaranteed nor necessarily qualitatively better than those available to the rural poor. The urban poor suffer from squalid housing, contaminated water, chemical pollution, and a congested and unhealthy environment, conditions generally worse than those facing the rural poor," the report said.

Poverty not only continues to worsen in urban areas but, according to the Survey, the decline in the incidence of poverty in these places has not been as fast as in rural areas. "This is because urban poverty is partly a spillover from rural poverty through the migration of the rural poor to urban areas in search of job opportunities," it pointed out.

Poverty has also begun to swell in the developed nations. In the United States and Europe, nearly 15 per cent of the population live below the poverty line.

Thus, at present, one out of every five people lives below the poverty line. Some 13 to 18 million people die every year of poverty-related causes. Moreover, the ranks of those suffering extreme poverty are expected to increase four-fold within one lifetime if current economic and demographic trends continue.

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali laments, "The world is suffering from a social and moral crisis which, in many societies, is of immense proportions."

He stressed: "It is unacceptable that individuals and societies with the fewest resources — the poor, the unemployed, the weak and the vulnerable (should have to bear) the greatest burden of the economic and social transformation of our world."

As the problem of poverty has become global in scope

and with national boundaries becoming increasingly less rigid, its solution could not be other than the result of the collaboration and cooperation of the international community.

Responding to the socially deteriorating conditions worldwide, the UN is spearheading the World Summit for Social Development to be held 6-12 March 1995 in Copenhagen, Denmark. It will address three issues: poverty, unemployment and social disintegration.

Mr Ghali explains this UN initiative: "The United Nations' role is to be in the forefront of social progress... The Social Summit will be both a test and an indication of the commitment of international society to help the most impoverished. This is a rendezvous that we must not miss."

He said it is the ultimate responsibility of governments to ensure that current major problems — poverty, unemployment and social disintegration — are addressed through principles based on social justice and democracy. Actions to deal with these issues must be built on respect for human dignity, individual freedom and equality of rights and responsibilities.

The UN official said: "The globalization of economies (characterized by increasing interdependence in everything from markets to population movements to decision-making modalities) should benefit all people."

This concern about ensuring that benefits are spread to all people is shared by the Asia-Pacific where, despite impressive economic growth rates in many countries, large pockets of populations remain impoverished.

"Notwithstanding the economic growth and political reforms recorded in developing countries across Asia and the Pacific in recent years, the region's fundamental social objectives of the eradication of absolute poverty, enhancement of population participation and realization of distributive justice have yet to be fully achieved," ESCAP said.

ESCAP, in anticipation of the Copenhagen meeting, is

holding the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference in Preparation for the World Summit for Social Development in Manila 12-18 October.

The centrepiece of the week-long ministerial conference is the draft *Social Development Agenda for the ESCAP Region into the Twenty-first Century*. The draft addresses critical issues by identifying specific courses of action to be taken by the countries in the region, individually and together.

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By A Correspondent

Canada is one of the richest countries in the world and plays a vital role in poverty alleviation of the third world under-developed countries extending cordial support to the development organizations in Asia, Africa and Latin America with financial assistance. This assistance especially is extended to the sector of poverty alleviation, as well as human resource development, formulation of effective development strategy and research etc. To impart training in these fields the Canadian Government has utilized a training institute internationally reputed as Coady International Institute, an extension of St Francis Xavier University of Nova Scotia.

Coady Institute arranges regular training course for third world development organizations. This year trainees from 51 countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America took part in the training course. Md Shafiqul Haque Choudhury, Chief Executive, Association for Social Advancement (ASA), a development NGO in Bangladesh, presented four papers in the course as a Visiting Fellow. All, however, related to the activities of his organization with, of course reference to poverty alleviation.

In the first phase he presented, among trainers of Coady, the development approach in transition explaining the self-reliant development model (of ASA) which includes an effective combination of so-

cial and economic programmes towards poverty alleviation. The second phase included discussion on emergence and growth of NGOs. He pointed to the socio-economic condition of Bangladesh in which NGOs had to start working while explaining the state of present working situation. In the third phase he discussed about group formation, programme implementation, impact assessment and evaluation of participatory development programmes — all that work ultimately towards poverty alleviation of the rural poor. He further shared experience of ASA's savings and credit operational techniques, utilization of fund through revolving process; decentralization of administration & management and self-reliance of the landless poor. In the fourth and concluding phase, he put some suggestions regarding what should be the relationship and communication strategy of Coady with other NGOs as development institution stressing upon the need for changing the nature and process of some Coady programmes to suit the requirements more effectively. For development is a dynamic process which cannot be kept confined within a limited sphere. It changes with the change of time, situation and environment. He mentioned that after liberation of Bangladesh, NGO activity in the country was mainly relief

oriented but afterwards, it has changed and expanded and presently, programmes on development education, awareness and conscientization, poverty alleviation through economic empowerment have become popular.

At present, economic empowerment and self-employment of the poor is a very powerful approach. It aims to upgrade human status through eradication of hunger and poverty. Many rich countries including Canada have been providing financial assistance to achieve this goal in many poor third world countries. But there still prevails a gap between the developed and under-developed countries in respect of meeting the target. And there is no exception in case of Coady too. It extends training on social development without, however, much emphasis on economic empowerment of the needy poor. To make the process truly effective a change in the curriculum is needed, and as observed by Mr Choudhury, social and economic development activities should be conducted through an integrated process. And as such a proposal to revise Coady training curriculum to make it consistent with the present need and trend of development, which of course should be on the basis of field level experience, was accepted.

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To the Editor...

General Provident Fund

Sir, The government has reduced interest rate on General Provident Fund (GPF) of the government employees from 14½ per cent to 13½ per cent. It is well known that the government employees are not squarely well paid. For this reason, it is hardly possible for them to save money. Their forced saving is GPF. They mostly depend on that saving at the end of their long service life. Virtually it is their last resort.

In view of this reality, we would like to request the concerned authority to relax the rate of interest on GPF at 14½ per cent. In connection with this we need to mention that interest on DPS (Deposit

Pension Scheme) is still 15 per cent.

Shahid Jahangir
Circuit House, Dhaka.

Computerized results

Sir, Recently the government has taken a good step towards improving our examination system. It has computerized the SSC and HSC examinations, script evaluation. There were many allegations of corruption in the script examination under the previous system. It was probably because one could easily identify the scripts of candidates of some selected schools or colleges. It naturally left some room for manipulation. The present system seems to have put an end to this practice.

The effect of this new system is clearly demonstrated in

this year's SSC results of all the Boards. In the past, Cadet Colleges under all Boards dominated the results table. Students of these colleges occupied most of the top twenty positions under each education board. It naturally gave the impression that they were the best. This year they cut a very sorry figure. It is true that these colleges admit good students; they have good teachers and their management is also good. These are, of course, not enough to reasons justify their good results every year. The significant absence of Cadet College students from this year's top positions in the SSC exams in almost all the Boards, raises questions about the old system and justifies the introduction of a new one.

Naziat H Choudhury
University Campus, Rajshahi.

International Student Festival in Norway

Sir, This letter is in regards to the International Student Festival in Trondheim, Norway where students from Bangladesh participated for 10 days, 6-15 October. The topic of the festival, "Human Rights", is especially pertinent today given the events around the world. I believe this will be an important event given both the topic of the festival and the thoroughness in which it was covered. The student festival this year engaged 500 students from over 100 different countries in seminars, small-group discussions, and thematic meetings on topics such as suppression, refugees, genocide, and human rights and population growth. The structure and organization of the

festival is such that the students were able to meet and discuss their individual experiences so they can collectively better understand what the fundamental human rights are. Hopefully, a festival statement on human rights can be agreed upon and the students will share this with their respective countries.

We were fortunate to have as guests at the festival three noteworthy world figures who can accurately speak on human rights: His Holiness the 14. Dalai Lama of Tibet, who spoke on the suppression of human rights in Tibet, Dr Naftali Sadik, the under-secretary general of the United Nations and the head of the UN population fund and Taslima Nasreen, the self-exiled Bangladeshi writer. Dr Sadik spoke on human rights as it relates to popula-

tion growth and Taslima Nasreen spoke on women's rights and the freedom of expression. The opening of the festival was addressed by Dalai Lama and Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway.

The tremendous diversity of culture and the types of human rights violations that was shared by the students made this festival unique. It was a tremendous opportunity for the students and others who were interested to mobilise support. I think it would be very beneficial both to the students of ISFIT and human rights in general. If you could help us share this information through your newspaper.

Joseph J Grzymiski
International Press Relations
for ISFIT 1994.