

## Are the Villages Living?

Every uninvited overlord tries his hand at the worst of autocratic ploys like floating parties and buying up politicians and crying democracy every minute of his existence — all to eternalise his spot. The funniest of such things is the autocrat's frantic striving to hit some slogan in the expectation that this would like a *mantra* protect him and his cohort and their positions. The latest of such slogans was "If 68 thousand villages live, Bangladesh will live." The converter of this truism into a safe-conduct for an autocrat, namely, H.M. Ershad was not much helped by it to prolong his hold. What happened to the villages? These started dying so fast that Bangladesh was in the 80s the site of one of history's biggest migration of people to the towns. Dhaka city's population gained by more than three million during his regime. There is no doubt other towns also met with the same kind of bloating during the same nine-year period.

A very important fact of our national life at the present moment is that the procession continues and there is no sign of its diminishing soon. The procession continues because many of the villages, especially the ones not yet taken up by some of our hugely successful NGOs, are progressively becoming uninhabitable. And the procession continues to carry death to the towns. For a picture of such a village, pick up any news of gang-raping and murder and acid throwing, for these take place round the year not only there but in perhaps all of those '68 thousand' villages. Turn to the national page of The Daily Star of, say, yesterday and you cannot miss the 'top' news of Rehana Begum, alas only 25, committing suicide in a Bhola village unable to bear the shame of being gang-raped the previous day. Imagine a social situation that allows such a crime and forces the victim to take the ultimate punishment. To talk of suicides, in the villages of Gopalganj 130 people, 85 of them women, took their own lives over the last ten months. This is on the same page as is the news of an armed piracy committed on the Padma near Shibalaya.

To top it all there is on that same page a big splashy item — A village so insecure. The items catalogued there as belevelling the village Shahjadpur in Sarail, Brahmanbaria are but standard for all villages of present day Bangladesh. Cattle-lifting is a bane vexing all of our rural areas — a problem that is held at the peasant's level to be a worse crime than murder. It ruins a whole family. Villagers are as such very wary of this crime and a cattle-lifter that fails to melt away stands to be publicly lynched. In Shahjadpur the cattle lifters are not that elusive and shadowy characters. They dictate the villagers to take back their cattle on payment of the demanded amount of ransom money. Thieves of other description are taking the cue from the cattle lifters. Three stolen water pumps were returned on payment of ransom the other day.

Fifteen burglaries were committed in 25 days in the village where it used to take 25 years for as many crimes. This has not come unaccompanied. Standing paddy is cut away every night from this or that *para* of the village. No house and no property is safe in Shahjadpur, to compound it there are the habitual and professional gamblers holding open sessions drawing in innocent village folk to scalp them.

This is the setting in which all forward looking and unsparing peasants are subjected to extortion and bribery at all levels of farm production including poultry, pisciculture and horticulture. And thus the only moving and earning sector of our economy, agriculture that is, and the base on which both society and economy ticks on, namely the villages, are being decimated at a pace unsuspected in the towns. Shahjadpur is an exceptional village in that it has no *fatwabazi* problem, neither are there zealots that burn down schools and cut down trees. Most of the '68 thousand' are not that lucky.

So many of our villages are dying. What can the townspeople do about it? Act they must if only in self-interest.

## Parliamentary Fiasco

If the democratic history of Pakistan is fraught with turbulence, the parliamentary sessions there can neither be any better. On Saturday the lawmakers of Pakistan's People's Party and the opposition Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif traded unparliamentary languages and were even engaged in a scuffle in the House. The same day Taiwanese MPs also came to blows in the parliament. It might be a coincidence that the parliaments of Taiwan and Pakistan have witnessed almost similar ugly incidents on the same day. The Taiwanese members of parliament, like their counterparts in Pakistan, have also an unenviable record of parliamentary proceedings.

The similarity however ends there. For Pakistani politics is marked by intense hatred between the ruling party and the opposition. Violence is so deep-seated that the spill-over sometimes affects the parliamentary proceedings. What is little noticed is that in the process the legislative members earn a bad name both for themselves and parliament. It is indeed regrettable that politicians at this level fail to behave rationally and give such a deplorable account of themselves. Wherever such things happen, they are bad enough. Yet, to be fair, an instance of the Taiwanese parliament is not likely to draw our attention as much as a similar incident in Pakistani parliament does.

Our common political past and almost similar problems facing our democratic institutions naturally prompt us to closely follow the political developments in Pakistan. When the parliamentarians in Pakistan fail to see their opponents eye to eye over the divide, we feel worried. Not that it creates a bad precedent for the Pakistani parliament alone but somehow it may have an undesirable influence on the region as well. This is even more striking when such chaos in parliament threatens to jeopardise the parliamentary democracy in that country. Fortunately, it does not do so often enough but the past legacy is not very inspiring. There is no guarantee that the past will not repeat itself.

Therefore, the need for developing a code of conduct for the politicians of the countries in the region should be given priority. Parliament is sacrosanct only when the members take it as seriously as they should. This is why the parliamentary norms have been made and they need to be respected. If the parliamentarians cannot show what they stand for, the common people find no guiding light to follow. Those who are engaged in consolidating democracy must show restraint and tolerance in their behaviour first.

# Could Earth Fail to Feed its Teeming Billions?

**L**AST week, in these columns, I wrote about clean water. The occasion was the World Food Day. This year's theme was 'Water for Life'. So it was all about safe water. All the same, talking only of water to mark an event that has food written large over it, leaves one with a vague feeling of discontent. Here it is, then, a bit about food too.

Can the earth feed its teeming billions during the decades ahead? That is the question that worries the world today. Broadly, there seems to be two schools of thought. One side maintains that an explosive population growth would outstrip world's food supplies soon enough. The other camp considers the dire prediction an exaggeration. Population has recorded a secular upward trend all along, they say, but the world's food output also has grown faster.

Experts who foresee a global food crisis looming ahead say that the world's population had been growing during the last 50 years or so at the fastest rate in recorded history. People now live longer and fewer children die. Births and deaths no longer cancel each other out. World population in the mid-1980s was 2.5 billion. By 1993, it has more than doubled to reach 5.7 billion. The earth will not be able to support such a growing population.

The opposing camp points out that the world output of cereals has increased by 2.7 per cent per annum since 1950 while population has grown by about 1.9 per cent annually. Despite the increase in the number of mouths to feed, the per capita availability of foodgrains has actually improved.

Nonetheless, given better growing techniques and the

right price signals for farmers in the developing countries, the world would still be producing enough food in the coming decades, the optimists surmise. Nor should perhaps their optimism be dismissed out of hand. For instance, Manila-based International Rice Research Institute announced just the other day that a new strain of rice has been evolved which can yield 25 per cent more grain than now, on the same area of land. If put to wide use, the

food supplies, letting the spectre of famine loose world-wide.

While the debate among the demographers and economists rages on, the world community has decided to play it safe. At the September UN population conference, an ambitious plan of action, stretching upto the year 2015, has been drawn up. The 20-year programme envisages stabilizing world population at around 7.8 billion in 2015. Implementing the Cairo conference agenda is going to cost a lot of money. The action

agreed to increase their contribution to one-third of the total outlay. That would fetch about \$6.7 billion annually by the year 2000, leaving a financing gap of \$11.3 billion. Does this mean that the poorer countries would be required to spend \$11.3 billion themselves annually on population programmes alone by the year 2000?

The donor community, including multilateral aid-giving agencies, could conceivably put a little more money into the programme. Even then, expenditure on such massive scale would no doubt strain the resources of the poorer countries.

And as it happens, the poorest among the poor will be required to spend the most because their population growths need to be curbed first.

True, the global population programme is not concerned with reducing birth rates alone. It extends to education, healthcare, environment — sustainable development.

Activities in all such areas will bring beneficial consequences for development efforts generally. Still, the possibility is there for a poor country being obliged to curtail its normal outlay on development worked, if it has to embark on an expanded population programme as well. The agenda for poverty alleviation would be a victim then. There will be fewer mouths to feed but not enough money to buy the food either.

**D**ESPITE their differences on the proposition that an expanding population would overtake world's food supplies, mainstream economists generally

tend to agree that poverty alleviation is the answer to the problem of hunger and over-crowding. People attain a higher standard of living as their incomes rise. They aspire to hold on to it and try to improve the quality of their lives further. In the present day society, they also realise that limiting the size of the family would provide a crucial input in maintaining the newly-earned higher standard of living. A bit more of education at this stage helps them carry out their resolves. Birth rates would come down. Fears of overpopulation outrunning world's food supply would recede.

Higher incomes influence food habits too. Studies show that as incomes rise, people tend to change their diets. In poorest countries, a large segment of the population lives below poverty lines. If their disposable incomes rise (say, by way of all in foodgrain prices) they increase consumption of the staple diet. This happened in Bangladesh in 1991-93 when rice prices had slumped. Marginal farmers and day labourers could increase their intakes of rice because they could afford it. At still higher incomes, however, people shift from cereals such as rice and wheat, to costlier and more varied foods such as meat, fish, milk and eggs. This is happening now in emerging economies in Asia such as South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Relative prosperity acts to reduce consumption demand for foodgrains. Freed of poverty, the world would thus need less foodgrains. Dangers of a growing population overtaking world's food supply would recede still further away.

On the World Thrift Day we should have a slogan — Thrift and Saving for Development — which must reach every household of the country. Though traditionally savings means postponement of luxury consumption, in the context of Bangladesh it might mean sacrifice in real terms, by reducing essential consumption. Yet mobilisation of internal resources is more vital than that. There are two alternatives — voluntary saving or compulsory saving through taxation. And the more we generate from voluntary saving the less dependent we are on taxation.

There will be a greater sense of participation among the people if they are made aware that it is their own savings which got to build the roads, bridges, irrigation and navigational channels they use and the agricultural inputs they are supplied with to increase the productivity of their land. — and with what the schools, colleges and hospitals are established where their children get education and thousands of sick and disabled get relief.

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## ALONG MY WAY

**S B Chaudhuri**

new breed could produce about 100 million more tonnes of rice per year than is currently grown, feeding an additional 450 million people in Asia. The Institute is also trying to evolve even better strains of rice. Research is said to be underway to develop better hybrids capable of producing 50 per cent more rice per acre than the current yield.

A plentiful supply of cereals globally would not, of course, mean that every country would have ready access to as much food as it needs. Poorer nations which do not produce enough to meet their requirements will continue to buy, beg or borrow food from surplus countries. Even affluent nations have poor people who cannot buy the food they need. Hunger and starvation will continue to stalk the earth. What the optimists do not accept is the other side's dire prediction that a growing population will eat up global

plan calls for annual spending of \$17 billion on globally by the year 2000 for population control and development, which is about three-times the current level of expenditure.

Population is growing fast mostly in developing countries. Available estimates suggest that around 95 per cent of the global population growth in the coming decades will come from the poorer countries. Thus, the UN population conference's plan of action, nearly all of it, really concerns the developing countries. Poorer nations cannot obviously spend \$17 billion on their own every year on population programmes, however urgent the matter may be. They just can't afford it. Well, some help would be forthcoming. The donor nation, currently fund around 25 per cent of the estimated four to five billion US dollars spent annually on population programmes globally. At the Cairo conference, they

## WORLD THRIFT DAY

### Savings — the Sure Way to Development

by A S M Nasiruddin

**S**ion was taken to observe World Thrift Day on 31st October every year. Since then the day is being observed throughout the world. In Bangladesh this International Day is being observed since 1987.

World Thrift Day presents a special opportunity to forge and strengthen the essential links between savings institutions and their customers. On this occasion, use of all the advertising and promotional means can be made in full to underscore the growing importance of and the need for saving to further social and economic development of our country.

The idea of thrift as well as saving is almost as old as hu-

man nature. In general, the history of thrift has its origin in the inception of humanity. An involuntary prompting had always been there in man, be it of stone age or space age, to lay by something out of his resources, meagre or otherwise, for the rainy day. When the caveman killed deer, obviously he did not devour the whole animal, instinctively he set aside a portion of his kill after satisfying his immediate hunger. So far as the underlying idea of thrift or the economical use of means is concerned, there is a little difference between the cave dweller and the modern man.

Thrift is a virtue which should be practised by all. Saving means setting aside a

portion of current income for future use. In a wider sense, it is' austerity, avoiding extravagance and restraining from wastage. Saving means keeping off one's own self from short-lived transient pleasure, for a greater and longer one. For an individual saving is an ideal. It is an endeavour to attain a better and happier life. A nation whose expenditure exceeds its means, exposes its economy to serious hazards. Then its economic health must fatally decline due to a pernicious process of financial hemorrhage. And failure to stop this process will not only leave gaping holes in its economic fabric, but will create a problem of survival.

Too much dependence on foreign aid is an unhealthy sign, particularly for a developing nation whose main task is to quicken the process of economic growth. In fact growth will remain a pipe dream if a

## To the Editor...

**L**etters 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.

### Tribute to Burt Lancaster

**S**ir, I want to express the true feelings of a school student at the sad demise of Burt Lancaster. The world mourns his death. We will always remember him with fond memories. The affection and fond care which he had once given to his early movie character in 'From Here to Eternity' (1953) got him the Oscar award. When Burt passed away on Thursday at his home in Los Angeles after long suffering from a stroke that had left him partially paralysed for four years, he left behind not only memorable but some of the strongest characterization in the history of cinema.

There were movies like 'Trapeze', 'Airport 70', 'Elmer Gantry' and 'The Birdman of Alcatraz', 'Marco Polo', 'The Field of Dreams' and 'The Unforgiven'. Burt Lancaster has acted with such famous celebrities as Audrey Hepburn and Helen Hayes. We urge BTV to telecast a Burt Lancaster movie in the future as a special tribute. May his soul rest in peace.

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### Rail and road blockade

**S**ir, Rail and road is one of the main infrastructural facilities for developmental activities. A blockade programme that involves these two, even for an hour, will stop the economic activities resulting in a colossal loss to the nation. The blockade programmes by the opposition parties stop movement of all types of transport. The production in the mills/factories remain at a standstill. The working hours of all workers and employees are reduced. The rickshaw, push cart puller, van driver cannot ply their vehicles freely.

But unfortunately, rail and road blockade programmes

have become popular language of protest in our country. Everyday the programme is being observed in some parts of the country for one reason or another. I do not oppose to any idea of demand and protest. But I like to emphasize upon the adoption of means for achieving the goal. If everything is done for the betterment of the nation as a whole then we should also consider the economic activities of the country too. We should attach all importance to get the ball of economic activities rolling.

Apart from economic activities, rail and road blockade brings many other discomforts also. The students cannot attend their schools/colleges. The patients cannot go to doctors and hospitals for treatment. Rail and road is a state-owned property. Any attempt to create a blockade to stop the easy movement of people is not at all acceptable. There are also some institutions which render public utility services and these institutions do not fall under the purview of the strike. The rail and road is one of the main means of communication and essential to all public and should be immuned from any sorts of blockade programme. I request all concerned to think over the matter. And, if necessary directives be issued to keep rail and road out of politics for the greater interest of the public.

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If members of Bangla Academy are not allowed entry into the library it will mean that the authorities are not serious about study and research.

### Bangla Academy Library

**S**ir, For whom is the Bangla Academy Library? This has always been a non-lending library. No one objected to that. But now even the members of Bangla Academy are denied access. They cannot enter the library and see and handle books. This is too much. After all, it is a library and not an archive and should not be used like an archive.

If members of Bangla Academy are not allowed entry into the library it will mean that the authorities are not serious about study and research.

*A deprived member*

**N**EW YORK — There is no doubt that the entire world would be much better off if every country got rid of its arms. The question is how to get to that point.

With universal disarmament, we could all live in peace and security, unthreatened by each other, compelled to settle our disputes through nonviolent means, while the nearly one trillion dollars a year once spent on arms could be used more productively to feed the hungry, cure the ill, house the homeless, clean up the environment and much more.

But practically, universal disarmament is almost impossible. If a country disarms unilaterally, it invites aggression as an easy and tempting target. The only viable solution would be to have all countries agree to get rid of all their weapons at the same time, but such universal agreement is hard to reach.

There is, however, a detour to the promised land without risk: non-offensive defence.

To explore this possibility, Professor Gamal Abd an-Nasir (Nasser) believed that a strong air force would make Egypt more secure. The result was the opposite. Both Egypt and Israel had vulnerable bomber fleets on open desert airfields.

Each side knew that in case of war, whoever struck first could destroy the opponent's air force on the ground. When tensions rose in 1967, Israel felt compelled to destroy the Egyptian air force before it could destroy Israel's, and did so in a pre-dawn surprise attack.

A defensive posture clearly tells an opponent, "If you attack me, you face heavy resistance, but if you leave me in peace you have absolutely nothing."

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By contrast, the signal that an offensive military posture sends is, "If you leave me in peace, you face a constant threat, but if you destroy my weapons, you can reduce that threat." To send such a signal, even if unintended, is dangerous.

Far from being mere theoretical speculation, the purely defensive military posture is practical and has worked where applied.

The only two countries free from war since Napoleon's time, Sweden and Switzerland, have pursued a policy of neutrality and non-offensive defence. Their military forces are prepared only to repel aggression up to their borders, not to seize foreign territory.

While Sweden and Switzerland could not defeat the larger forces of a determined opponent, they only need to make it clear that the costs of occupying them would far outweigh any gains from doing so.

Of course, non-offensive defence is only one among many measures that should be taken to avoid wars. We also need greater international cooperation, increased efforts to mediate disputes before they erupt into violence, and a global police organisation to enforce international law.

But the