

Hurd's Visit

Our existing ties with Britain were succinctly summed up by three mutually endearing facts that came to light during the brief, but meaningful, visit of Douglas Hurd to Dhaka. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Secretary hit the bottom-line of a steady friendliness to Dhaka over the last two decades when he said that after Hong Kong it is Bangladesh where British investment has been the largest — in the world. Bangladesh is also the second biggest recipient of British aid after India. To top it all, Bangladeshi goods enjoy the third largest market in Britain after the US and Germany.

It is from these vantage-points that the bilateral relations are now poised to be stepped up politically and economically with some regional underpinnings to them. This is evident from the joint statement issued by Bangladesh Foreign Minister and British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs at the end of the latter's visit here. The underlying significance of the British leader's trip to Dhaka on the first leg of his tour of the subcontinent — India and Pakistan being his next stop-overs — may perhaps be read into a certain renewal of British interest in the Commonwealth against the backdrop of its experience in the European Union which hasn't been altogether happy. South Africa is now a vibrant multi-racial member of the Commonwealth adding sinews to it. The British investors are evincing an active interest in the Asian region. We have all the reasons to welcome Britain's turning to the Commonwealth for strength and thereby make us feel stronger.

The joint statement is so much to our liking indeed, pin-point as it did, what are needed to be done to improve the regional environment to exploit the full potential for South Asian cooperation and development.

The British Foreign Secretary urged an early solution to the problems of water sharing between India and Bangladesh and to those concerning Myanmar refugees. Bangladesh tribal refugees and stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh terming these, very appropriately, as regional, humanitarian and human rights issues.

Recent visits of certain dignitaries did focus on the necessity for building a bridge between the SAARC and the European Union but Hurd's visit produced a concrete suggestion as to how to go about it: Exchange of visits between the officials and leaders of the SAARC and the EU and maintenance of contacts even otherwise.

We are grateful to the British government for standing by us in a dimming aid climate. Our benefits will be immense from the two accords signed in the energy and communication sectors.

New Work Ethics Needed

So, at last, people have started adjusting themselves to the demands that hartals place on them. Time lost is being made up by working equal number of — even extra — hours after the hartal. This is not a novelty as such: for, individually we tend to make up for the lost time or the lost work. What is perceptibly new is a growing trend among offices, particularly in the private sector, to recover the losses incurred due to frequent and consecutive days' hartals. The trend set by the garments industry is now being followed mostly in the private-sector including, in particular, the multinational companies. Only a few private establishments are yet to follow suit.

The government offices are in a working order during the hartals even though the output may drop. The question of working for them beyond office hours does not arise.

Here is a difference of attitudes that matters so much. Putting efforts and labour voluntarily and, on the other hand, withdrawing oneself from work on the pretext of some disruptions somewhere make a sea of difference in a country's output. The private sector has been learning it the hard way.

It seems therefore that gone are the days when office duties were a second nature to people. But today a more professional approach is needed and some of the private sector organisations are exactly taking such an approach. However, compared with the private sector the government establishment is so huge that things cannot move much if the latter fail to cultivate the virtue.

The lethargic impact of hartals on our socio-economic life is yet to be assessed. We really need to do readjusting with the challenging times to stay in competition.

Stranger than Fiction

Can anyone in his or her right senses ever prefer a life-term imprisonment to a free life? And that too by a student? Quite unbelievable, no doubt. But stranger things than we can imagine happen in the world. A South African student has shoplifted, he claims, to go to jail and spend there his whole life to write a book. He has been inspired, according to his own admission, by President Nelson Mandela whose autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom" came out only recently.

Quite a noble intent. But look at the means he has adopted. What he shoplifted is nothing but candy. There is no chance that the offence could bring him life imprisonment. He only pleaded for that severe sentence. After spending a few days in prison, however, the jail-enthusiastic student has changed his mind. He now has agreed to be released on condition that he be present at the court for subsequent hearings.

We do not know whether it was an ingenious ploy the student used for his release from prison after he had committed the offence with no intention of emulating Mandela. He might have concocted the story to get released. Or, he could be genuinely impressed by the great African leader's feat. Whatever it is, the student has had some experience of jail life at least. A life term in the jail could indeed give him further knowledge but could as well be deadly for him. Because Mandela lived there for his people and their love used to nourish him all the time. For the student there would have been no such sustaining spirit. Merely writing a book cannot provide that supporting strength. One can write a book out of prison.

TWO major obstacles stand in the way of sustainable progress towards quality primary education for all. These are: first, highly centralised planning and management structure, and practices that are inconsistent with local planning, management, monitoring and social mobilisation essential for achieving universal primary education; and second, the absence of the institutional capacity for R&D, technical support, evaluation and training for building, planning and managing the largest public enterprise of national scope, which is the primary education system. As the Prime Minister reaffirms her pledge by signing the Delhi EPA Declaration to achieve universal primary education, it is essential to re-examine and adopt measures to overcome these obstacles.

Tomorrow Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is expected to ceremonially sign the Education for All Declaration of the nine high-population developing countries, which together account for 70 per cent of the world's illiteracy. This Declaration adopted in December 1993 in Delhi by heads of government, or their personal envoys, from Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan, contains the pledge that "no child (shall) be deprived of education for lack of a teacher, learning materials, or adequate space." In signing the document, Begum Zia will join the ranks of other leaders, such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Premier Li Peng of China and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, who were not personally present in Delhi but later reaffirmed their personal commitment by signing the declaration.

The commitment and efforts of Bangladesh, since the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990 to promote universal primary education have been acclaimed widely. The Compulsory Primary Education Programme has raised significantly the enrolment in the first year of primary education has generated a nationwide awareness of the problems, and has led to the involvement of communities and citizens in social mobilisation for universal primary education at local, district and national levels. A separate division of primary education has

been created of which the Prime Minister herself has taken charge. Budget allocations for primary education have been increased substantially. The contribution and participation of non-governmental organisations and communities, especially in carrying out non-formal approaches in primary education, have been encouraged and recognised as an important component of the total primary education effort.

Despite the accomplishments, the challenges remain daunting.

In round numbers, at least 20 per cent of the almost 18 million children of primary school age still do not enrol. Less than half of those who enrol complete the five-year primary cycle. The result is that barely 40 per cent of our children are completing primary education.

The capacity of the exist-

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ing system, in terms of physical facilities and personnel, is such that even with two shifts, it cannot hold and serve much more than those who are served at present rather inadequately. It would in fact be a real quandary if the present mobilisation efforts succeeded, and the majority of children did not drop out.

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While primary education is nominally free, various informal but required charges imposed by school, and the cost of learning materials (pencil, exercise books etc.), become a heavy burden on poor families. The practice of private tutoring for children, arranged by parents who can afford to and who want to ensure that their children will qualify for secondary school, has spread to the rural areas. A system of educational apartheid is threatening to emerge which would leave children of the poor essentially deprived of primary education.

Clearly a major expansion of capacity is needed in short order to accommodate all

children into the system within a reasonable time-frame. At the same time, a very substantial improvement in the quality of teaching and learning has to be achieved if primary education for all children is to become a reality. These twin challenges are being faced in varying degrees by other countries in the South Asian region.

A South Asian Workshop on the theme of capacity-building for planning and management of universal primary education held recently (12-21 December, 1994) in Kathmandu, under the auspices of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning and UNICEF, provided an opportunity to explore the issues. Official representatives from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and observers from China and

the most important national endeavour. Yet, the planning, management and technical support structure for the primary education system is woefully thin, inadequate and disproportionate to the scope and expanse of the system. Professional training in planning and management of primary education has scarcely received any attention; there is no institution specifically devoted to research and development (R&D) work in primary education; no centre worth the name exists for studies, evaluation and exploration of policies and pedagogic issues in primary education. All major planning, financial, personnel and curriculum decisions, affecting the remotest village school, are taken at the national level.

The questions of decentral-

ising public administration, social services and development programmes have agitated the minds of our decision-makers from time to time. At least three abortive initiatives were taken since liberation, but each attempt quickly became politicised and eventually were declared casualties of changes in the political regime. A bill for establishing district governments is at present pending before a committee of the Parliament, which is unlikely to be in a position to consider this bill in the foreseeable future.

It is, however, unnecessary to sort out the thorny issue of decentralisation of the total public and development administration system, before steps can be taken in primary and basic education. Given the scope and size of the UPE effort, the paramount importance of popular participation in this enterprise, and the need for local planning and management to achieve universalisation, the UPE programme is the natural starting point for decentralisation. The Universal Primary Education programme has the potential of becoming a pace-setter in moving towards decentralisation and community involvement in all public services.

A beginning can be made on a trial basis in the context of the intensive district approach

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approved by the government for five districts for the UNICEF assistance programme. The essential steps will be:

- To determine the changes necessary in the functions and competencies of institutions and community in the school, village, thana, district and national levels, to promote UPE effectively including changes in legislative, administrative framework and procedures;
- To identify planning and management tasks and roles related to primary education performed at present at different levels; and to assess professional skills and competencies of the functionaries to perform these functions; and
- To develop a realistic plan for devolving the responsibilities and authorities down the hierarchy close to the people, as well as for strengthening the needed skills and competencies at different levels.

The guiding principle for these steps would be to shift maximum authority as close to the direct beneficiaries as possible and promoting maximum community and citizen participation.

Redefining and reassigning roles and responsibilities of the scale suggested will require a support system of research, technical assistance and training. Sri Lanka and India in this region provide examples of such a support system. The National Institute of Education (and the Staff College for Education within it) in Sri Lanka, functions with a charter similar to that of a university rather than a government organisation. It has its own independent board of management, faculty and budget, appropriate for carrying out research, evaluation, policy studies and training related to the planning and management of education. The main objective of the institute is to help build the technical and professional capacities of education functionaries and orientation of community representatives at provincial and local levels where major educational decisions are taken.

Similarly, a nationwide structure of technical and professional support in the basic education of India includes the National Institute of

Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) at the national level; State Councils for Education Research and Training at the state level; District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) at, increasingly, resource centres at Block and sub-Block levels. Both NIEPA and NCERT possess the characteristics of a university, in terms of prestige, governance, faculty, and activities.

A beginning for developing R&D and technical support capacity in Bangladesh can be made by working out a plan to transform the National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE), into the nucleus of a network of technical support and resource centres for primary education. Such a move will call for an autonomous charter for the Academy comparable to that of a university; a professional faculty and research staff (not persons without technical background seconded temporarily to the Academy) and a high level commitment to see through the institutional development process. A first phase five-year institutional development programme has to be undertaken that will guarantee necessary resources and allow professional interaction with relevant institutions in the region and in other parts of the world.

A third obstacle concerns the total education system rather than just primary education. The most pernicious form of politicisation that afflicts the whole education system of the country, vitiating the values and behaviour of educational administrators, teachers, and students at all levels, cannot but have an impact on primary education. This is reflected in the appointment of personnel, dealings with teachers' unions, allocations of budgets, decisions about curriculum objectives and contents, and management of institutions. A national consensus among all political forces, to keep political skulduggery out of education is the answer. This perhaps is too much to expect in the present political environment.

The author, an internationally known education expert who has worked for many years in Asia and Africa, and now stationed in New York, is currently on a visit to Bangladesh.

"I shall not use TADA"

said N T Rama Rao, the Andhra Pradesh chief minister. Such draconian detention laws are a blot on democracy. He believed the guilty or the suspect should be tried in an open court, under ordinary law. H D Deva Gowda, the Karnataka chief minister, however, differed. "I shall use TADA very sparingly but I can't do away with it since some anti-social elements, terrorists and criminals cannot be deterred or dealt with ordinary laws."

The conflicting viewpoints represent the two different persons they are. NTR is clear and confident. Deva Gowda is diffident and deferential. The first chief minister for the third time, is a charismatic leader, who knows he does not require legal props to administer the state. The second, chief minister for the first time, has risen from the ranks. He is not sure whether his personal popularity can cope with the extraordinary situation that restrictive laws give him necessary power. One is sure of people, the other is at pains to win them.

The difference is reflected in their department as well. You reach NTR after weaving through the throng that crowds his residence and office. He gives you appointment for 7 in the morning. (It is better than the 4 o'clock one I was given when he was the chief minister last). Deva Gowda asks for your convenience. He likes the crowd but prefers privacy.

I met both of them when they were in the midst of expanding their respective cabinets. How similar they were when it came to the nitty-gritty of politics! Asked if they would induct persons with sul-

ted reputation, their answer was ditto. They could not leave out certain persons because of pressure or practical difficulties. But to maintain their high moral profile, they assured that the ministers they had appointed would be judged from the day they took oath. Their past was of no concern to them.

Even then the two strongly denounced corruption. Both believe that the Congress (I) was bundled out ignominiously because "it is reeking with corruption." They said when people found even the highest in the party (the reference was too obvious) not above board, they voted against it with a vengeance. The maladministration equally galled them. The Congress (I) gave the state the worst type of governance it ever had," said NTR. Deva Gowda opined: "There has been no government in Karnataka since the exit of Virendra Patil more than three years ago." Both took pride in the belief that people had returned to them because of the "good governments" they had given — the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and the Janata Dal in Karnataka.

The outcome of state elections had made them look confident of the 1996 parliamentary election. They expect the National Front to revive. They do not mind any other combination provided it is federal in structure. NTR wants to defer the idea because he wants first to concentrate on

his state. Deva Gowda is prepared to work on an all India alternative straightaway.

He has in view a combination of not only the two Janatas, the communists, NTR and Mulayam Singh Yadav but also Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalitha and former prime minister Chandra Shekhar. (Former Karnataka chief minister R K Hegde, whom I met in Bangalore, blamed former prime minister V P Singh for not allowing the Janata Dal to consolidate. "I implored him to

make me the party vice-president so as to enable me to organise a real all India party but he did not agree," Hegde said.) NTR has no Hegde overlooking his shoulders. But he has the kitchen cabinet — his wife Lakshmi Parvathi and two sons-in-law, N Chandrababu Naidu and Daggubati Venkateswara Rao — to reckon with.

"Yes, there has to be some 'people to do initial thinking,'" was his reply when I asked if there was a kitchen cabinet. His enthusiastic secretary, Jai Prakash Narain, tried to suggest that it was a "ginger group." But NTR brushed him aside and stuck to the concept of kitchen cabinet.

At present, he is all set to implement his poll promise to

sell rice at Rs 2 a kilogram. The cost works out to be Rs. 1,500 crore and, according to former chief minister Vijay Bhaskar Reddy, the state is in no position to foot the bill. "I can't give even food to my people, what is the use of my staying as chief minister?" asked NTR. He had a dig at the prime minister when he said: "Wherever the government, whether at the Centre or in a state, its topmost priority is to feed its people."

When I drew his attention

Bank's policy of not giving overdrafts, it appears that NTR would have to finish other schemes or join issue with the Centre. He is in a mood for the latter because he has been returned this time with 219 seats in a house of 294. When he made his debut in 1983, he won 202 seats.

Deva Gowda has only a simple majority — 115 in a 224-member house. He does not want to take on the Centre. But he may inevitably clash with it since he proposes to transfer most of the funds to the panchayats and wants New Delhi to contribute towards the building of the infrastructure. Power is already in short supply and roads are in poor shape. And he has promised better health and nutrition facilities.

His other priority is to change the Lok Ayukt Act to bring it in line with the growing challenges. He did not spell out what he had in mind. The Karnataka legislation already covers the chief minister, unlike the one in Andhra Pradesh where the chief minister cannot be arraigned before the Lok Ayukt (an ombudsman) on the grounds of corruption. "I do not want to change it because the Congress will haul me over the coals and not allow me to do any work," said NTR in defence of exception.

I did ask Deva Gowda whether Hegde wanted to be the chief minister and whether the fracas that broke out on the day of the election of the legislature party chief

was because of that. He merely said: "Let us forget the past." Hegde vehemently denied the allegation. "I made it clear that I was not a candidate." This is correct but he also gave the impression during an interview on Doordarshan soon after the election that he might accept the position if the party elected him.

S Bangarappa, chief of the Karnataka Congress, confirmed this. He was, however, happy that he was instrumental in splitting the Congress vote in 90 seats. He polled a little over five per cent of votes, which went in favour of the opposition, and won 10 seats.

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao has said that people will return to the Congress (I) in the parliamentary election in 1996. Much will depend on how NTR and Deva Gowda perform in their states. "I shall win 20 out of 28 parliament seats," claimed Deva Gowda. NTR's party expected to repeat the assembly performance in the Lok Sabha election. It is, however, too early to predict.

One factor against the Congress (I) is that its leaders in the two states are demoralised. "I did so much work in the last two years and still the people turned against me," said Vijay Bhaskar Reddy. Veerappa Moily's story in Karnataka is somewhat different because he came to power late and was all the time harassed by dissidence. More than the demoralisation of Congress leaders is the fact that people have ceased to trust the Congress. The gods who fall seldom retrieve faith. I could see that from the deserted look that the Congress party offices and the residence of ministers wore. The Congress would need a second birth.

To the Editor...

Session jams in Chittagong BIT

Sir, The session jam in Bangladesh Institute of Technology, Chittagong has reached an alarming point. Compared with two other BITs — Khulna and Rajshahi, it is one year behind.

The session 1992-93 has commenced only lately while the session 1993-94 is not likely to start even this year. The students who passed their HSC in 1994 will sit for admission test very recently. Naturally the question arises as to when the classes will start for those who will be selected for Chittagong BIT in the admission test of 1994.

To solve the session jam problem 1993-94, session should be started immediately.

May be it will cause some more pressure on teachers and the staff but the jam will clear very quickly. The following sessions will not face such kind of troubles of session jam. Only a sufferer knows how much painful it is to face a session jam. Relevant authorities should take immediate actions to do away with the session jam as quickly as possible.

Neamul Haque
Mirpur, Gubtoly, Dhaka

'Hajj and Ijtema'

Sir, I refer to Mr Ali Asgar Chawdhuri's letter captioned as above, appearing in The Daily Star of 31.12.94, commenting on my letter captioned — "BTV, Radio and Biswa Ijtima" which appeared on 12.12.94. Mr Chawdhuri is

absolutely right that there can be no comparison between Hajj and Ijtima. Hajj is Hajj and Ijtima is Ijtima.

While stating in my letter that Biswa Ijtima is the largest Muslim Congregation after Hajj, I merely wanted to emphasise the fact that in terms of number of devotees participating in the Biswa Ijtima, it is next to Hajj. I meant no comparison between Hajj and Ijtima. No Muslim can think of such a comparison.

M Nazmul Haque
Dhaka

Voter's identity card

Sir, We are delighted to hear that the government has enacted laws for issue of laminated identity cards