

Agitations: Have Farmers Also Joined the Fray?

It's not that farmers everywhere harbour any prejudice against protests and movements. Protesting against lowering of agricultural subsidies, French farmers in thousands had blocked roads with tractors, barricaded railway lines with iron bars and burning bales of straw.

Swadhin Bangla Dibosh

Today, April 17, twenty years back, something very crucial to the carving out of Bangladesh and its independence took place. The provisional government of the Bangladesh state was proclaimed. It was this government that launched the glorious Liberation War, waged it not only against a most barbarous occupation army but indeed a whole world of odds, and won the day for the Bengalee nation in the span of a more eight months. The importance of this day as such can never be overemphasized. The unfortunate fact is that there hasn't been any emphasis whatsoever on this day of days, in either state or political terms. This partly be the handiwork of a deliberate and relentless campaign to undermine the Liberation War. To blunt the fangs of such designs, milestones in the calendar of the war — there being nothing higher in import than April 17 except for December 16 — should be celebrated by government and society with all the heart in it.

April 17 is great but its greatness has however been somewhat compromised by a rather perfunctory naming of the day. It is not the place Baidyanathpur in Kushtia, later called Mujibnagar for many cogent reasons, that we want to celebrate. It is the event — the coming into being of the Swadhin Bangla Sarkar and the proclamation it made launching the Liberation War and setting forth the outline of the Bangladesh State and its ideals — which are important. It would be better to call the day the Swadhin Bangla Dibosh.

It is sad to note that the man who singlehandedly fashioned the government and guided as supreme the whole conduct of the war to a victorious fruition, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, is hardly remembered even on this day. Politics is, among other things, a catalogue of strange bedfellows. To remember that among the heroes of Baidyanathpur was Khondokar Mushtaque Ahmed who allowed himself to be a political sanctuary to the killers of the other four heroes of the day as also the architect of the new state itself And Yusuf Ali, who read out the proclamation — one who was given such insuperable honour as virtually announcing a new state — subsequently crossed to the detractors of Liberation War over the bodies of his illustrious colleagues and his leader! Nevertheless it was truly a great thing — true by the highest standards of any nation in the world — that four of the five-member provisional government preferred to be shot rather than compromise their patriotic position. What happened on November 3 was antipodal to April 17.

The story of our nation is made up more of negative attitudes and causes than otherwise. Of the few decisively positive and historically fecund steps that affect the welter of negative positions and actions, the brightest seems to be the April 17 Mujibnagar event.

The Plea Rings Hollow

Prime Minister urged all concerned to maintain a congenial atmosphere in the academic institutions. She used the occasion of awarding certificates to 325 meritorious students, last Saturday, to make her plea. It is perhaps only in our country that such pleas need to be made. Institutions which are supposed to be the place of scholarship, creativity, tolerance, political maturity, statesmanship, etc. are instead places that breed violence. The PM's plea failed to make the type of impression that it should because there is some reasons to doubt as to how sincere she is. As the head of the government, and as the elected Prime Minister of the country, has she done enough to give credibility to her plea? We have pointed out on several occasions that she should take the toughest of measures against those who use firearms in the University campuses and in other educational institutions. It is unbelievable that our CID or other intelligence bodies do not have, if not complete but at least a partial, list of those who use firearms in educational institutions. Why doesn't Begum Zia's government bring all such elements to book. Once the ruling party cleans its own house, then it automatically acquires the moral strength to go after similar elements in the opposition camp without being blamed of persecution.

We believe that a sincere pursuit of the criminal elements in the campuses, by the government, would have brought about a fundamental transformation in the atmosphere of the academic institutions. But unfortunately it has not been done. And hence the latest plea of the PM rings a bit hollow. The tragedy is that all major political parties are using the students as pawns in realising their political ends. Political parties themselves maintain criminal elements within the ranks of their student parties. Thus while publicly condemning student violence, they themselves are responsible for perpetuating this sordid affair. The change could have and should have been started by the government, and the ruling party. And having started, they could have taken the moral lead in the affair. But they were not sincere in their intention.

Say No with Life

The Noorjahan Memorial Award for 1994 was announced last week. The second year's prize for journalistic expose of gender repression went to Mizanur Rahman Khan for his piece fatwabazi. We feel that the insurance company that has instituted the award has done so after a most worthy cause. Persecution of women continues in our country without any signs of abatement. A worse phenomenon of violation of human dignity and rights of the individual can hardly even be imagined. The writings the Noorjahan Award is promoting and recognising would help social awareness of the crime to increase and social resistance to be built up.

What does Noorjahan, that village young lady of Chaatakchhoira in Kamalganj, Sylhet represent to us three years after she took her life? Rejection, a contemptuous no to inhumanity inflicted in the name of religion — that was what Noorjahan's courageous action meant. Subsequently it came to light that as much as there was no easy limit to this pseudo religious repression of women, there was on the other hand no shortage of Noorjahans either who would denounce fatwabazi and shame the complacent middle class literati with their lives. Noorjahan and those that followed her example, knowingly or otherwise, are all martyrs into a very lofty cause. They are the new post Liberation War heroes of our nation.

Increasing refusal to bow to masculine fiat and successful gaining of ground by women workers are also contributing to brutality aimed at containing women's progress. One only hopes this to be the parting cruelty of a barbarous army on retreat.

So we have had a nearly weeklong bout with strike, siege, barricade and blockade in Dhaka. On some days it had been a countrywide operation. Rickshaws were plying the streets through all these anyway. People who normally travel by bus could at least take a rickshaw. Albeit there was the risk of being forced to dismount to please enthusiastic pickets along the road. Moving in rickshaw, rather than bus, costs a packet of more money besides being more risky a venture under these circumstances. How about building a special safety net for people who are obliged to travel by rickshaw on a day a strike is on? Something like a 'strike allowance' to compensate them for extra expenditure and trepidations! Well, the law of the land won't permit that. Hiclings have to go to work — come rain, hail, storm — or strike.

Our word hartal captures better the nuance of a strike, at least the sort we are thoroughly familiar with by now. The English language dailies actually use the word routinely in reporting such events. They feel no compulsion to put 'hartal' in italic type to differentiate it from the other words in English. Readers also understand the meaning better that way. So be it — hartal it is. Let's hope that like so many other words from the languages of this subcontinent, hartal also will find its way into the English dictionary.

Likewise, our words gherao and oborodh seem to serve us better than siege, blockade,

For a start, the English words are harsh, belong to the military terminology and speak of warfare, all-out armed conflict. Rooted in our ethos, gherao and oborodh sound somewhat less militant. A barricade, on the other hand, also stands for barrier thrown up hastily across street to obstruct movement. Stones, bricks, cart's tyres, logs — all such things would do to build a barricade. That seems to suit our scenario fine. In fact, some vernacular dailies do use the word barricade instead of a tongue twister protibandhakata. The language gets enriched, though that is not a barricade's purpose exactly.

The aptness of our word hartal notwithstanding, it could well be that we borrowed the concept of strike from abroad. As the pundits put it, a strike is the workers' mode of protest against long hours, for higher pay, poor working conditions and so on. They walk out of a shop or factory, cease work to wrest concessions from the employer. It is said that strike was first used as a chief weapon of labour unions in England in early 19th century. The Luddites strike (1811-16) is often cited as an early instance of this type of workers' action.

As students of English history know, the Luddites strike was a machine-wrecking riot really. Rioters were protesting against low wages and unem-

ployment attributed to the introduction of textile-making machinery. Well, people in the West seem to have grown out of the habit of wrecking machines during a strike. All the same, our hartal still often brew an orgy of destruction of property. However, we usually wreck cars and buses only. In a traditional strike, the people who have engineered it stay away from work. In our case, when political activists call a hartal, they have to work

singly to dissuade others from work during strike. Picketing during our hartal merely follows the pattern. Then again, pickets are, as we all know, upright pointed stakes used for fences mainly. Trade union enthusiasts could also use the stakes to beset workmen showing inclination to return to their jobs during strike. Anyhow, pickets are an integral part of strike and so it is with hartal.

Our hartal seems to have

braces not only national issues but purely local problems as well. These tend to be localized hartals really. A vernacular national daily reports that during the first three months of the year, some 45 hartals were observed locally in different parts of the country outside the capital. Most of these were half-day hartals. Some lasted longer, for eight or twelve hours. These hartals focussed on a wide spectrum of issues including assault on local leaders, shifting of voting centres, elections to student organisations, demand for new administrative districts or divisions, removal of officials, additional supplies of gas, electrification, sale of adulterated foodstuff and so on. Total time eaten up by these hartals? Some 350 hours, so says the report.

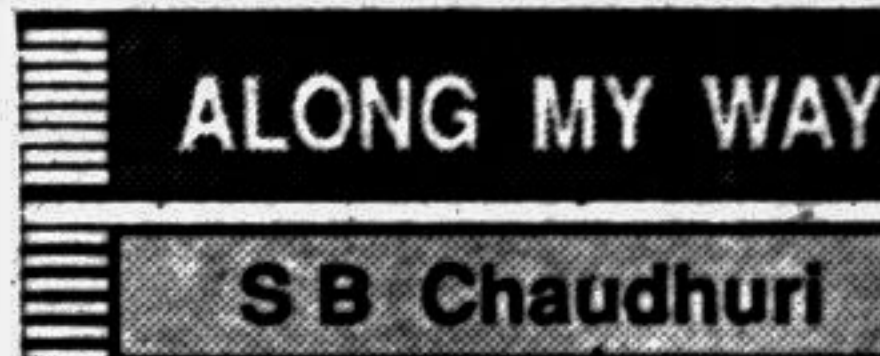
No doubt the capital city last week had a prolonged encounter with hartal et al. But there was a bit of relief too. The nurses resumed work after 20 days of nonstop strike. This was something of a small peace offering in an atmosphere charged with militancy.

TILL March or so, in the midst of hartals, sieges, blockades and barricades raised by a variety of interest groups, farmers had by and large retained their equanimity. Withdrawal of agricultural subsidy had hurt the farmers directly. Yet, organised protests by farmers

had hardly been witnessed.

It's not that farmers everywhere harbour any prejudice against protests and movements. Protesting against lowering of agricultural subsidies, French farmers in thousands had blocked roads with tractors, barricaded railway lines with iron bars and burning bales of straw. Japanese farmers mounted huge demonstrations against import of rice from abroad as that might hurt subsidized farming at home. So did the South Korean farmers. Together, Japanese and South Korean farmers even staged a spectacular protest, far away from home, in Geneva. There were reports in newspapers the other day of South Korean farmers demonstrating in Seoul against throwing the country's agricultural market wide open to foreign competition. In India, farmers have held rallies and demonstrations, organised marches, to protest against possible reduction of government subsidies on farming and foodgrains.

In the wake of the fertilizer crisis, our farmers also seemed to have joined the fray. They did not go for hartal. They loved their land too much to cease working and let it lie fallow. They took to siege, blockade and barricade. True, the farmers' agitation was limited to a specific issue. Political activists could have lent a hand in fomenting unrest. Yet, our farmers did abandon their traditional passivity. And they were quite prepared to go for organized protests, often turning violent. This, indeed, is a phenomenon which may have to be taken into reckoning in the days ahead.



harder than before. They might even put in overtime to make a success of the hartal. There is the task of drumming up support for the hartal. Torch processions parading the streets on the eve of hartal is a common sight. Comes the day of hartal and pickets have to be posted at strategic points to dissuade others from going to work. And there are lots of other jobs to be done of course so that the hartal may triumph. Picketing during hartal merits to be treated as a legitimate part of the operation. In fact, old style strike also sanctions pickets. Trade unions would set up pickets by stationing adherents in a body or

been patterned on traditional general strikes. To hark to the pundits again, a general strike calls for cessation of work in an entire industry or throughout a region or country. We are also told that a general strike is often politically motivated in that it seeks government concessions. A general strike may even aim at overthrowing the government. One earliest example cited is that of the general strike in Russia in October, 1905, which resulted in granting of democratically elected parliament. Are there points of similarity with our hartal? Better mull over it.

Be that as it may, our institution of hartal nowadays em-

Benazir's American Odyssey

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi on the just concluded trip of Benazir Bhutto to USA

Regretfully, however, we add up the PM's successes, the F-16s still remain very much in the Mojave Desert and will probably never darken Pakistani skies, the expected one-time waiver on the Pressler Amendment notwithstanding.

Ms Benazir has certainly excited US entrepreneurs into investing in Pakistan, that is a consensus of even the most cynical. While no one accepts the volumes spoken of in the blizzard of MOUs, Pakistan is being looked at positively mainly because of our geopolitical importance as an international crossroads of sorts. It would not be out of place to give due credit to the Leader of the Opposition Mian Nawaz Sharif in starting the process of opening up of the economy and giving it the initial momentum. However, for various reasons not entirely Ms Benazir's fault the economy is in bad shape with a large deficit looming over us like a dark shadow. Skilled on-hands economic management is required rather than policies that change like a chameleon. Coupled with the bad law and order situation, the economy in the present state will act as a disincentive rather than an encouragement. Moreover, while the rhetoric of bureaucracy is always good during foreign visits, some mechanics has to be developed to have them portray the same enthusiasm to potential entrepreneurs when they visit Pakistan rather than the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde negative vibes they presently radiate.

Among other issues, Ms Benazir spoke about taking a frontline status in the war against drugs and terrorism. In fact US President Clinton made a mention in the Joint Press Conference about the PM's help in the extradition of

the two drug barons and the terrorist Ramzi Yousof. The two events were well timed to coincide with Ms Benazir's visit and why should she not reap dividends in the resultant adulation? One hopes that she will show the same haste and purpose in dispatching PPP MNA Munawar Hassan Munj whose driver was held with 35 kgs of heroin and 30 kgs of hashish in the MNA's car, to USA by a very special aircraft. What better way of showing her resolve as a front-line fighter of the drugs cartel than not allowing charity to begin at home? The preparation for the MP's visit to USA was creditable and if we get even a percentage of what is on offer, that is money well spent (even on the hundreds of 'accidental tourists' who did NOT make up the official delegation). At the end of the day, it is not the US media Ms Benazir has to vow but Pakistanis at home. Since we have it on good authority that we have our PM back in the country for some time, we can ask her to show the same single-minded pragmatism and purpose she showed in the US and enter into a political dialogue in Karachi. When she puts her mind to it, Ms Benazir can be pretty effective, left her now focus on her (and the country's) primary problem.

The PM has repeatedly exhorted foreign entrepreneurs to invest in Pakistan, the inducement is profits for the corporate entity and not because Pakistan is Heaven-on-Earth. These entrepreneurs

may be of different beliefs and ideologies, some may even be anti-India to Islam but in the greater national interest, the PM persists with her yeoman's burden. For a moment, let the PM imagine that those in Karachi estranged

from the national mainstream are also entrepreneurs of a different kind who must be encouraged to come home and invest their time and expertise in the wholesome process of pace that the city of Karachi badly needs if we have to have any investment at all. The difference between the prodigals we want her to woo home and the multi-nationals being that these are our own brethren with the same belief in religion and ideology of Pakistan.

Question of a Freedom Fighter's Son

by Nadeem Qadir

DETAILS of a horrifying crime during the military rule in Argentina was revealed in March by an accomplice of the regime. He claimed that many of the thousands who went missing during that time were put to sleep and hurled alive into watery deaths from aircraft.

Since then a group calling itself 'Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo', representing those buried in Argentina's Rio de la Plata, have been throwing flowers into the sea in memory of their loved ones.

The Canadian government last month announced that it would seek to extradite Ericha Tobias, 84, for alleged war crimes to his country of origin, Latvia. Tobias reportedly admitted of being involved in mass executions of civilians under the Hitler regime.

But for many in Bangladesh, they have no place to leave flowers for their listed 'missing' during our 1971 War of Independence against Pakistan — only painful and horrifying memories of the genocide. While the question of trying alleged war criminals 'according to the laws of the land' remain so far only words, with little chances of becoming a reality.

I am not only speaking about those war criminals who proudly call themselves Bangladeshis, despite opposing the bloody birth of this nation, but also about those Pakistani troops they helped to rape our beloved country.

Tobias, according to the Canadian Jewish community, should be tried by Latvia not only for the killings, but also because he was a collaborator of the Nazi regime.

Every year, just three days after we celebrate the new Bengali year, my family goes into mourning. Yes, April 17 is the black day for me and my family. It is also the day the Bangladesh government in exile was set up. Why and what is the difference between me and my family?

On this day in 1971, my father — Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Abdul Qadir — was picked up by the Pakistani occupation troops and since then remained missing. To us he is a hero who fought for his country the best way he could, even if he is among those martyrs who have been put more on the forgotten chapter in Bangladesh history.

My family owe thanks to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, who last met my father around March 23, 1971, in our Chittagong residence, for paying tribute to his memory in 1993 during a visit to Qadirabad Cantonment, named after the un-sung hero.

But none of our heads of state or government have taken up the case of the

'missing' with our 'very brotherly' Pakistan, despite the fact that many of us had given names of Pakistani army officers and their local agents, who carried out the 1971 genocide, described by the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) as the worst in history. The UNHRC in a 1981 report said 'even if a lower range of 15 million deaths was taken, killings took place at a rate of between 6,000 and 12,000 per day, through 267 days of carnage. This made it the most intense genocide in history'.

The premier is scheduled to travel to Pakistan this month as chairperson of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which permits talks on bilateral issues during such trips. Maybe, she will remember the families who remain in constant pain and request her Pakistani counterpart to release all information on the 1971 genocide, including the whereabouts of those missing. She has her husbands grave to run to in times of both joy and sorrow, but what about those like my mother.

The women in Argentina can at least go to the beach, leave some flowers and talk to their loved ones lost there, and surviving with the hope justice will be there. Where can I or my family go? To the memorial which are only pruned up ahead of ceremonies? No, thank you. They are also not the place called grave or even the place which has been identified as such.

Canada is preparing to extradite one of their citizens for alleged war crime. And what have we done? We have forgiven the foreign invaders supposedly under international pressure and blessed their local collaborators. We have made no attempts to trace the named killers at least to ascertain where the missing persons are in the name of 'laws of the land' repeatedly.

As I welcome the probe into the killings of major general Abul Manzoor and ex-president Ziaur Rahman, both of whom my family knew very well, a question lingers painfully in my mind: what about justice for a martyr like my father — who has been denied rightful official recognition, because he was arrested before he could join the war front?

For those who may ask why do you ask for recognition, I can only say in a land where war criminals still speak against the independence war and move around freely, that recognition is something like a balm for the wounds in our hearts from where blood still trickles as we wait for the return home of my patriot father.

The writer is a Special Correspondent with Agence France-Presse (AFP), Dhaka.

THERE is no doubt that Ms Benazir's US visit has been a media triumph for her personally. The Prime Minister happens to be one of the more charismatic leaders of the world, having more name recognition and goodwill than any other leader of Pakistan, past and present. This has been extremely well exploited to the advantage of her person and in extension, the country. All this has resulted in a not-so-subtle pressure on her US hosts to recognize that Pakistan has a case for favoured treatment in contrast to the doghouse-status we have been assigned to. Even making others recognize a reality is some achievement.

Nothing is more becoming to Ms Benazir Bhutto than aggression and defiance, that has always been her finest moment. She has used it within the parameters of diplomatic nuances to good benefit for the country with both the US Establishment and Congress. She had the President of the US very visibly on the defensive in accepting that a fair standard was not maintained in the business of our paid-for arms and equipment (in the pipeline) that had been virtually confiscated. In a manner of speaking, she ticked off her hosts in the Thatcher-style, calling a spade a spade, maintaining viz. (1) new equipment or our money back, (2) trade not aid and (3) no deal on nuclear non-proliferation unless tied with commensurate treatment to India. For good measure she brought Kashmir into international focus making India truly squirm with discomfort. Since Americans like nothing better than an underdog and are hyper-sensitive about fairplay, things went down well in Peoria, Illinois.

With a better understanding of our vital necessities and reminded about our cold war role culminating in the turning of Afghanistan into Soviet Union's Vietnam. It is to be expected that US will search

some way to assuage our feelings of hurt and abandonment, one hopes by some material help rather than symbolic rhetoric only.

We are an extremely cynical lot at home. While there is definite promise about some progress on the F-16s, more likely our money back rather than the birds in the desert, there is no change in the status quo. There is then also the question of the missing squadron (minus 10 F-16s) as to how 38 paid-for aircraft became 28? Or is it an adjustment as some rumours suggest for commissions paid which General Dynamics wants refunded? And who was (or were) the beneficiary/ies? The question also arises as to why the contract was so one-sided that after we paid one installment and did not receive any delivery, we kept on reinforcing failure till we had the whole sum tied up and no aircraft to show for it?

Regretfully, however, we add up the PM's successes, the F-16s still remain very much in the Mojave Desert and will probably never darken Pakistani skies, the expected one-time waiver on the Pressler Amendment notwithstanding. Our PM has reiterated repeatedly on prime time media that while we possess the knowhow, we do not possess the bomb. Given the measure the US govt places in Ms Benazir's credibility, why does the US President simply not give the certification necessary on her word of honour to obviate the requirement of the waiver? While the hoopla of success achieved cannot be denied, the actual proof of the pudding lies in getting the arms and equipment we need. We cannot keep on waiting till hell freezes over (for India attacks us) for promises to become reality.

To the Editor...

Improprieties

Sir, The other day (April 11, to be precise), I received a phone call at 10:38 am at my residence. A deputy collector of income tax, wanted to talk to me. The call had been made by his secretary. The gentleman, quite politely, asked me if I could make a donation to his madrasa. I refused, and there the conversation ended.

On the face of it, it is a simple request. The money would have gone to a madrasa, and there was no force applied. The implications, however, need to be analysed. For anyone living and working in Bangladesh, a deputy collector of income tax is a powerful person, and my refusal to pay may well translate into a significant financial loss. The call was made to my home phone, a number given only to close friends, and only available to the tax collector because it was in his confidential file. He was ringing me from his office during office hours, using his secretary for the purpose, all government privileges, with the idea of extracting money for an organisation that he is personally affiliated to.

As improprieties go, this is not a major one, and certainly far bigger ones are committed by higher officials each day. What I would like to address is the institutionalisation of these abuses of power. Where does one begin to resist this insult

Reflections on Asian Cup Cricket

Sir, I was always under the impression that Aaqib Javed is an under-rated bowler. Lately he has been coming into prominence.

Although a medium pacer, he is quick off the pitch, making the batsmen mistime, Tendulkar tried to sweep too early in his innings, and paid for his over confidence. India is short of fast-bowling practice, and the Indian bowling is not yet world-class. Tendulkar is priming for the peak.

Inzamam was majestic — a talent not seen at his age. Reminded me of Walter Hammond, the English captain. Inzamam is more elegant. His cool (ness) is likely to unsettle any bowler.

Saeed Anwar's stylish batting is of Caribbean vintage — a natural stroke player delightful to watch.

Bangladesh is coming up well. Without an international pitch at home, her progress will be hampered. We need a string of medium-pacers, and a couple of well-coached spinners. The new cricket stadium should be opened before schedule. Get an all-rounder coach.

The Sri Lankans have always something up their sleeves. They have a lot of reserve talent to take care of the next decade.

The saddest past is that our politicians do not play 'cricket'. Then a lot of our problems would have been solved!

A Mawaz Dhaka.

For a modern state

Sir, I salute The Daily Star for its balanced style, in print journalism. For example, on 23 March you published a special supplement to mark 'Pakistan Day'. It contained an article titled: Pakistan: A Modern Islamic State, by M I Lashkar.

And then on 11 April you published an AP story, titled: Member of Ahmedis, Sect Stoned to Death in Pakistan.

The esteemed readers of The Daily Star can draw their own conclusions. I can only say that 'Thank God, I do not live in Pakistan!'

A savant said: A man has nothing to live for unless he has something to die for. Let us all take a vow, on the commencement of this new Bengali year, that we shall lay down our lives to build a modern secular state with perfect rule of law and guaranteed basic human rights for all our compatriots, irrespective of caste and creed.

Thank you once again for even-handed journalism.

Nuruddin Anjad House-676, Road-32 Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka-1209.