

## Not Faring Well

A 1991-92 survey of household expenditure, made public recently, has confirmed what we all knew by merely looking around us. The report said that nearly half of our population - 51.6 million - are living below what is called the absolute poverty line, defined by per day kilo calorie intake of 2,122 per capita. There is a sub-group of so-called hard-core poor of 30.4 million within the above group, defined by a lower kilo calorie intake of 1,805 per person per day. The survey goes into details of how much our poor people spend on food as compared to other items, how the protein intake has varied over the years, and many other important indicators to judge how our people are faring.

The bottom line is that they are not faring well at all. Behind these categories of so-called 'absolute poor' and 'hard-core poor' lie grim realities of deprivation, chronic malnutrition, exploitation and hardship which are far below human dignity. People live under conditions which people, nowhere in the world, should be forced to live under. While slogans of education, health and what not "By the Year 2000" rend the air, more and more people are swelling the ranks of absolute poor.

What we would like to point out today is the nature of our politics for a country whose half the population lives below the absolute poverty line — mark the word 'absolute'. Let us hasten to add that the other half is not far above it, except for a small group of privileged few. One would have expected that it will be totally dominated by the concerns of poverty, and how quickly and durably, we could come out of it. And yet how far away is our politics from it all.

Government's budget allocations continue to favour the urban as against the rural, the rich in preference to the poor and industry as opposed to agriculture. We still continue to expand cantonments and army divisions, diverting scarce resources into areas we can, by any definition of logic and ethics, hardly afford. Even a fraction of collective attention by the opposition on poverty alleviation, as compared to the single-minded determination with which it pursued the issue of a 'caretaker government' for the next election, would have done wonders to bring the poverty debate on to the centre-stage of our national agenda. But for that to happen, our politicians — on both sides of the fence — will have to understand what such statistics, as referred to above, really mean. May be we should start judging political parties on their "poverty alleviation agenda", and on nothing else. Coming election is the best time to do so.

## Tremor Without a Size

Wouldn't you find anywhere the like of this land, so said D L Ray in his unforgettable song. Taken out of context this expression of ecstatic love for one's own clime can be used to heartlessly deride the same native land. The earthquake of Saturday shook more the sensibilities of the nation than the land it populates. What? — Bangladesh doesn't have the gadgets to take the Richter Scale reading of the tremor? Incredible but true, it doesn't. This anachronism of a state doesn't even have the wherewithal to dependably measure the duration of the quake making such absurd claim of 49 seconds possible to appear in the press.

We do have a seismological observatory down there at Chittagong. But it has not been fully developed to do the whole range of seismological observation and analysis. And the equipment with which this was commissioned in 1965 has in thirty years of non-modernisation and non-replenishment come to be of little use. The Chittagong observatory was reportedly out of reach of the world from two days before the tremor — its telephone was dead. Experts feel there should at least be three, fully-fledged seismological observatories in the country.

How does a nation become a nation? By some single act, some single historical incident? No, a population grows into a nation through a myriad steps. A state is a nation's political expression, more formalised and with definitive structures permitting nothing that is undefined and indeterminate. How shall we assess Bangladesh's position in the above light? National maturation is much too complex a process to lay any blame on anything or any quarter for certain bad performance. The matter of the state has a solidity of its own. But governance is a different story. If you cannot track a cyclone and do not forewarn your vulnerable sections of citizens, you will have to draw the flak for governmental failure. The same would hold in the case of the earthquake.

## How to Make Do

Parts of this capital city of eight million souls have turned literally into a *Karbala*. That is an expression in Bengali of unsurpassed exasperation and suffering arising from water scarcity.

The installed capacity of WASA to service this mega-population doesn't come to even half of what is required. What can WASA do to help these pocket *Karbals* with its present poor capacity? The Rampura situation where water is currently selling at Tk four a pitcher should be an eye-opener to the WASA as well as to the citizens. When anything becomes a commodity and is in abysmally short supply compared to a yawning vast demand, a fertile ground for corruption opens up. The sufferers in Rampura suspect corruption at the root of their problem.

A kind of unfairness is built into our distributive systems of amenities. Power loadshedding is spreading to new areas as it is getting longer and longer. The shortfall, however, is not distributed equally among all sections of people and industry. Making a complete farce of democracy water is also supplied on a privilege-scale basis. Why?

That Dhaka ticks at all is due to the fact that most of its residents cannot or do not consume the absolutely daily minimum of 100 litre per head. Their consumption is much less. It is likely that 20 per cent of consumers eat up 60 per cent of WASA's supply. This built-in unfairness isn't any less injurious than corruption on a vast scale. Be it water or electricity. Let ours be a case of shared austerity. And for God's sake let not WASA emulate the power systems loss syndrome. Most people still can do without power but no people can do without water.

# Rabindranath as a Reformer: His Poverty Alleviation Efforts

While observing the 134th anniversary of birth of the great poet, at a time when we are more concerned than ever before with poverty alleviation, it is also fitting to have an insight into a humanist Rabindranath and his concern for the poor.

**R**ABINDRANATH Tagore not only distinguished himself as a great poet, short story writer, dramatist, painter and composer, but he also excelled in his unmistakably reformist vision and action which, I feel, deserve our special attention for the creative possibilities and encouraging results they exhibited.

A *Zamindar* as Tagore was, he also emerged as a reformist, aiming at the emancipation of the downtrodden people of Bengal. For example, he desired to eradicate illiteracy of the poor, and establish model villages which would serve as a source of inspiration for the entire India of his times. He thought of educating the entire population of his *Zamindary* and offering them all kinds of facilities which could possibly be made available.

In his letter from Russia, Rabindranath explicitly and emphatically mentioned about the improvement of the condition of the peasant community through making them self-reliant. He strongly held the view that land does not belong to *Zamindars*, but to those agriculturists who cultivate it.

A series of reform measures were undertaken by Rabindranath Tagore in his *Zamindary* to improve the lot of his tenants. He was no doubt right when he thought of improving the agricultural sector on which the majority of the population was dependent. He was of the opinion that there would not be any improvement of agriculture unless the cultivation of land is carried out collectively through a cooperative system. It is difficult to cultivate land which is fragmented. In his own way, Rabindranath, though not being an agricultural scientist, introduced the cultivation of potatoes through a scientific method. Initially, the cultivation of potatoes was undertaken in collaboration with the poet-dramatist-agricultural expert Dwijendra Lal Roy, but without success. But Rabindranath was not discouraged at all, at his failure in producing quality potatoes in a large quantity. But then, his experimental project carried out by his tenants around the Shilaiddah estate achieved more than encouraging results. This was reflected in the report of 1899 which was recorded in the land records of agriculture. The report said: "Experiments with Nanital potatoes were made by Mr Rabindranath Tagore in the Tagore estate at Shilaiddah in the Kushtia Sub-Division. The crop was not satisfactory owing to the defective cultivation. One of Mr Tagore's tenants, however, working under more favourable circumstances obtained a bumper crop from a portion of the same seed and success of the experiment is said to have induced several

neighbouring Rayots to take potato cultivation. Their experiments together with others introduced by Mr Tagore on his farm will be continued."

Having been somewhat unsuccessful in his potato cultivation project, Rabindranath had sent his son Rathindranath to America for higher studies in Agriculture. When Rathindranath returned, Rabindranath Tagore established two experimental agricultural farms — one in Shilaiddah and the other in Patisar in 1910. In Shilaiddah, cultivation began on as many as 80 acres of land. The seeds of maize, clover and alfalfa were imported from America. Modern implements were also brought in. A small laboratory reasonably equipped with modern implements was set up for soil-testing. In Patisar, tractors, pump sets and fertiliser were introduced to bring about changes in the method of agricultural cultivation. Rathindranath himself conducted tractors and trained a number of agriculturists to handle a tractor. As a result, the production of agricultural products went up considerably. Cultivators increasingly took an interest in purchasing tractors. Rabindranath charged a nominal one taka per acre for the payment of the salary of the tractor driver.

There was thus quite a remarkable achievement in agriculture in Shilaiddah. Rathindranath was delighted to receive a piece of compliment from Mr Mayron Phelps (a lawyer from New York, who was on a tour to India), who told Rathindranath that he had discovered a genuinely successful American farm.

Having collected money from his friends, Rabindranath established an Agricultural Bank at Patisar in Rajshahi in 1905 to popularize the cooperative system. Credit was granted to the poor agriculturists and others with a view to boosting agricultural production and promoting cottage in-

dustry. The bank began its operation with Rs 90,000 paid up as capital. The depositors used to receive an amount of interest to the tune of 7 per cent, while the debtors paid at 12 per cent per annum. The main purpose of establishing the Agricultural Bank was to free the poor cultivators from the clutches of local money-lenders. Rabindranath took so much interest in the development of the cooperative system and welfare of the poor that he invested in the Bank his entire one lakh twenty thousand rupees which he received as the Nobel Prize for literature. It is true that the poor people of Patisar succeeded in paying back loans to money-lenders. It is also true that money-lenders had to leave Patisar. But, it is disheartening to note that because of the mismanagement and misuse of the Bank by the managerial members, the bank ceased to function after twenty years of its successful operation.

Apart from potato-cultivation, Rabindranath also introduced the cultivation of quality sugarcane and mulberry. He also advocated in favour of planting saplings of shimal, banana, pineapple, date palms, etc, along the ridge of plots and around the homestead courtyards to alleviate poverty. Indeed, the thought of improving the quality of life of the poor tenants occupied his mind.

This system of collecting money under the *Zamindari* of Tagore remained absolutely voluntary. No coercion was exercised in any way to collect toll. It may be noted that the people of Janpur under the Shilaiddah estate were exempted from paying additional taxes, as the tenants themselves constructed a *Kachari* house (*Zamindar*'s office) voluntarily.

Money was collected by



Rabindranath among peasants at Shilaiddah

## Twenty Years after the War — Vietnam's Icon is an Aging Monk

Many observers are convinced that today's Vietnam is an economic dragon waiting to take off, with Singaporean technocrat Lee Kwan Yew playing the role of Hanoi's new guru. But this vision ignores the depth of popular yearning for something or someone that can fill Vietnam's spiritual void. So far the one figure who comes closest to meeting it is an aging monk named Thich Huyen Quang, who has been imprisoned without trial since December. Pacific News Service editor Andrew Lam, a San Francisco writer and journalist, travels frequently to his native country of Vietnam. Here is his report:

**B**Y many a foreigner's account, Vietnam 20 years after the war has become a quintessential secular country — a tangle of billboards, flight times, mini-hotels, factories, high-tech night clubs. The real icon of the age, Ho Chi Minh's true successor, is Singaporean technocrat Lee Kwan Yew, whose blend of soft authoritarianism and free market economics has become East Asia's new religion. But a Vietnamese will tell you that this is far too simplistic a picture for a country that is 3,000 years old. Vietnamese are too rooted in spirituality, too informed by religious tradition to accept the glamour of the cosmopolitan city as a substitute for real religious freedom and civil liberty. If anyone has replaced revered but long dead communist Uncle Ho, it is an aged monk named Thich Huyen Quang, the abbot of the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, who has been imprisoned without trial since last December.

Previously nominated for the Nobel peace prize, Quang is a constant thorn in Hanoi's side as it struggles with the loss of its own ideological direction following the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union. While party bureaucrats appear willing to forfeit communism to embrace the free market economy, millions of Vietnamese, especially the young, are flocking to churches and temples to rediscover their spiritual roots and fill the ideological vacuum. It is this mass base, and the ability to wield religion as a nationalist weapon much as Ho Chi Minh wielded nationalism as a religious weapon, that gives Quang, and the Buddhist and Christian clergy in general, their potential power.

It is why Hanoi, even as it

opens its doors to foreign investment and loosens its grip on the society as a whole, paradoxically continues to crack down on religious leaders. Hanoi knows only too well the tumultuous relationship religious leaders have had with the Vietnamese state stretching back for centuries. Persecute a monk, the history books warn, and the dynasty will fall apart.

It was, in fact, a monk of

Quang's religious order whose act of self-immolation in 1963 reverberated around the world, ultimately toppling the Dien government.

No mere aberration, that

fiery act of defiance sets

Vietnamese apart from their

Chinese neighbours to the

north. While Chinese dissidents brave imprisonment and execution to demand Western-style political change, Vietnamese Buddhists immolate themselves. Their spiritual reference point lies in a Hindu-Buddhist south rather than Confucian north. When authorities moved to arrest

Thich Huyen Quang late last year, a dozen monks and laymen were planning to immolate themselves to protest religious oppression. The last thing Hanoi could afford was to have pictures of monks going up in flames flashed across the global media.

Meanwhile no charismatic leader has emerged from the now much distrusted Communist party. Instead, the thirteen-member politburo is

driven by internal fighting, with some members reportedly pushing for a multi-party democratic system. To counter such moves, Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet and President Le Duan, once barely visible, now appear frequently on TV. Widely viewed as corrupt, these Marxist-Leninist-trained figures light incense sticks and pray in churches at every opportunity.

It is, after all, a headache to run a country with such a bloody past and a precarious present. If Hanoi clamps down harder on society, there will be an upheaval. Yet if it allows a

new charismatic leadership to

emerge from the ranks of the

clergy — or, for that matter,

from Buddhist human rights

activists like imprisoned doctor Nguyen Dang Que or poet

Nguyen Chi Thien, who lives

under house arrest — it could

also prove politically fatal. At

77 the abbot Thich Huyen

Quang's time is running out.

But from the Buddhist per-

spective, his death could prove

catalytic.

Two years ago in Hue, some

40,000 people turned out in

the largest mass demon-

stration since the end of the war

to protest the arrest of Thich

Tri Tuu, abbot of the Thien Mu

Pagoda. Tuu was charged with

failure to denounce a layman's

self-immolation to protest re-

ligious repression.

What Quang and the

Politburo both know is that the

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will never satisfy the Vietna-

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And when it comes, the more

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