

Raphel's Visit

So long as we have the political impasse we shall perhaps continue to receive friendly advice from countries anxious to see it resolved. But even there, things are settling down to their nature. Visiting dignitaries and foreign diplomats in deference to local sensitivities have been urging us to resolve the crisis ourselves by recourse to our own genius.

The US Assistant Secretary for the South Asian desk Ms Robin Raphel while winding up her four-day tour impressions of Dhaka told a select gathering of pressmen that she thought there should be a 'Bangladeshi solution' to the present crisis in the country. Compromise being the key to a resolution of the dispute, she underlined the need for it. Like so many of us have been doing for such a long time but to little avail so far. In her assessment, which has the merit of academic dispassion about it, the problem is not so complicated as to be beyond the capacity of human mind to overcome. It needs to be approached 'creatively' and happily the people of Bangladesh are no strangers to the art of trying 'different methods' to solve their problems.

Robin Raphel met the top leaders of major political parties, called on the army chief to discuss Bangladesh's role in the UN peace-keeping operations, went to the CHT to observe the rehabilitation of returnee tribal refugees from India and left the country on an expressly optimistic note. Her visit has gone down very well not only among the government and private business circles because she has lauded the move against child labour, our rehabilitation work at the CHT and our participation in the UN peace-keeping efforts but also among the opposition and the intelligentsia in general for her measured but pragmatic words on the politics of the country.

One recalls that the political crisis had once moved to the centre-stage in April when the Emeka-Ninian role to facilitate a dialogue got in motion interspersed with a staggered agitation by the opposition. We seem to have again woken up to the political impasse amidst opposition calls for strikes and demonstrations. Raphel's visit, too, has stirred a fresh concern for coming to grips with the crisis. So late in the day, we cannot afford this reawakening to go waste except at our peril.

The Incomparable Musician

Although he was seventy nobody expected Salil Choudhury to go right at this moment. His creative surge had hardly ebbed and he was as prim and trim as he ever was before he was moved to hospital on August 1. On September 6 he left behind a subcontinent of admirers mourning the unexpected loss.

Salil Choudhury entered the Bengal musical scene as the standard-bearer of Benoy Roy and Jyotindra Moitra's innovation of *ganosangeet*. These gurus of his were the founders of the Indian People's Theatrical Association — known throughout the subcontinent as IPTA. Soon enough Salil became the musical mainstay of IPTA. He excelled in writing *agitprop* lyrics and setting them to tune both moving and beautiful — and more importantly, ushering in new rhythm patterns.

In spite of his prolific output that nearly revolutionised Bengali music, Salil became a victim of the Communist leadership's dogmatic belief that art and culture came way behind politics. Salil changed pasture, went to Bombay and started doing music for films. He had done film music in Calcutta as early as in 1956. Bombay, because of the all-India market it commanded and also because of a concentration of talented people, helped Salil's radical musical ideas to come to fruition with more facility and spread to find a billion-strong clientele. It was during his tenure in Bombay that he brought Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle and others to Bengali music.

After the 'Five Suns' — *Pancha-Bhaskar* — of Bengali music, namely Tagore, D L Ray, Atul Prasad, Rajanikanta and Nazrul, Kamal Dasgupta took over as the sovereign. Hardly had his reign ended, Salil Choudhury started his long 30-year rule.

Will he be remembered as only a film man? Never. As only the creator of a long strand of super hit Bengali songs? That wouldn't either adequately describe him. For his IPTA achievements are the best guide to the inner truth of this incomparable man and musician given incorrigibly to innovations that always clicked and broke ever new grounds.

A Haunt for Intellectuals

Have we anything comparable to the Indian Coffee House, that Calcutta *adda* of writers and artists — from supernovas to greenhorns? No, not quite. Then where did our set of Dhaka *Bohemians* meet and debate, love and hate each other?

Lately there has been an attempt to revive the Beauty Boarding nostalgia. It worked. Stalwarts of arts and literature met some time back to eulogise the Beauty Boarding contribution to our poetry and painting, fictions and plain intellectualising. This they have done against the temper of time in Bangladesh. Going for class in writing and painting and thinking is now being reviled by the predominantly *mastan* culture of Dhaka. A derivative term has been invented for those seeking refinement and is being hurled in season and out of season — *antel*. Beauty Boarding was a loving retreat for such *antels* and hardly a cup of tea went down the gullet without the helping of a profusion of *antelami*.

A Beauty Boarding *Sudhi-Sangha* was formed last week to carry on with the tradition. A haunt for writers and artists could be revived if the first Beauty Boarding giants start visiting the place regularly. People like Shamsur Rahman and Syed Shamsul Huq, Aminul Islam and Jewel Aich, of course, would attract a crowd of neophytes, not to speak of a mob of curious spectators.

The first post-partition *adda* was, however, in the Capital Restaurant of Nawabpur Road. After it had broken, stragglers patronised for a time the Rex restaurant of Ahmed Saheb. It is time someone started writing about those wonderful memories.

THE major thrust of any structural adjustment and stabilization programmes usually falls on the fiscal sector mainly because fiscal deficit tends to rise when the fiscal sector is in disarray. Steps were also afoot to streamline Bangladesh's fiscal front since the days the structural adjustments and stabilization marked a start. To what extent the various measures undertaken so far yielded the dividends could be in evidence from the Independent Review of Bangladesh Development (IRBD) of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). This section on the fiscal sector owes to Dr Omar Haider Chowdhury or the BIDS.

Tax Revenues

As far as revenue collection by the government is concerned, substantial improvement has been recorded. It is reported that from a meagre 8.8 percent of GDP during the 1980s, the share of revenues to GDP increased to a little over 11 per cent in the early 1990s. Both tax and non-tax revenues showed some increase over the period under comparison. For example, the total tax/GDP ratio, according to the researcher, ranged around 7.5 per cent during the 1970s and the 1980s which appears to have shot up to 9 per cent during the early 1990s. (ie 1990/91-1993/94).

Likewise, the total non-tax/GDP ratio averaged 2.1 per cent in the early 1990s as compared to the average of 1.3 per cent during the earlier periods. The fact, however,

Performance of the Fiscal Sector

The doomsday seems to be over and Bangladesh should continue to, given appropriate environment, finance increasing amount of developmental outlays from own sources and thus move towards self-sufficiency.

ever, remains that notwithstanding the improvement in revenue collection, Bangladesh still trails far behind the South Asian average total tax/GDP ratio of 12 per cent (India: 16 per cent; Pakistan: 11 per cent) and of 18 per cent in 82 developing countries.

Direct Taxes

It may be recalled that the major sources of Tax revenues are direct and indirect taxes. The former comprises income taxes (individual, institutional and agricultural) and property taxes (wealth, registration, non-judicial stamps etc) while the latter applies mostly to consumable goods and services. According to the report, the share of direct taxes to total tax proceeds rose from 18 per cent in the late 1970s to 23 per cent in the early 1990s. The major chunk of the direct tax flows from income tax of which 60 per cent goes to institutions, mostly, few companies. Less than one per cent of the people of Bangladesh tends to pay income tax. The feeble contribution of the direct tax to total outlays thus seemingly springs from low tax base.

The most disconcerting event relates to the land-tax revenue which is reported to

have gradually fallen over time from 10 per cent of total taxes in 1960/70 to only one per cent in early 1990s. The same phenomena is also said to be observed in the case of agricultural income tax. It appears that unless agricultural income and land taxes give more to the exchequer, the share of direct taxes to the total revenue collection can hardly be expected to show any upward

the age-old arduous sales and excise taxes. According to the report, international transaction of goods (mostly import duties) contributes the largest segment of the total tax revenue. Import duties contributed 56 per cent in the late 1970s and continued to share half of the total tax collection in the early 1990s. During the same period of time, taxes on domestically produced goods and

liance is a function of import and aid inflows. So long a dent can't be made in generating more tax and non-tax revenues from other non-import sources, the self-reliance would have to be continued to be sponsored by the donors.

Government Expenditure

The share of governmental expenditure to GDP reflects the contribution of governmental activities to national development. Total government expenditure averaged a little over 15 per cent of GDP during the 1970s and the 1980s which shared a marginal rise to 16 per cent in early 1990s. However, the share of revenue expenditure to GDP accounted for about 9 per cent in early 1990s as compared to 8.4 per cent in the mid 1980s and 6.3 per cent in 1975/76-1979/80 period. On the other hand, the development expenditure trended a miserable downturn from 8.9 per cent in 1975-76-1979-80, 7.5 per cent in 1985/86-1989/90 and 7.2 per cent in 1990/91-1993-94.

In this context, so few observations pertaining to the composition of governmental revenue and expenditure shared be in order. The rev-

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



movement of an appreciable order.

Indirect Taxes

Indirect taxes account for more than three-fourths of the total tax collection by the government and mainly springs from two sources: taxes on domestic goods and services and taxes on international goods. The advent of the VAT in 1991, which is imposed on imports and manufacturing stage, gave a further fillip to the revenue augmentation by replacing

services comprised one-fourth of the total tax outlays while VAT (in early 1990s) provided 28 per cent.

Sponsored Self-Reliance?

Seemingly, it appears that Bangladesh is caught by a paradox. Domestic resource mobilization is an index of self-reliance but the tax structure is heavily tilted towards import duties. And given that 60 per cent of the imports are financed by foreign assistance one can, possibly, argue that our self-re-

The Need for Emergence of Civil Society

by F H Abed

degradation, inequality and dependence, especially in the South. Instead the 90s have witnessed a world beset with increased violence, drugs, hunger and violation of human rights with the North assuming a self-proclaimed 'humanitarian' and 'peace-keeping' role.

The Asia-Pacific region has been characterized by a plurality of approaches to social transformation representing a wide range of political and economic systems from the communist regime of China to the market economy of Japan. In many of the countries of this region some of the essential elements of democracy such as free and fair elections, independent judiciary and freedom of the Press, internal party democracy and accountability of Members of Parliament are yet to graduate from their rudimentary forms. Black laws prevent people from enjoying many of their fundamental rights and military interference and police atrocity threaten any attempts made by citizens to question the status quo.

The revival of civil society

has been in response to the failure of the state to meet the expectations of the people. The State, instead of seeing the people as its natural constituency and addressing the agenda of the people, has developed, over the years, its own constituency consisting of its organs and clients. It has granted them a degree of autonomy superseding the sovereignty of the people. The slow but defiant rise of a global civil society movement is to be seen in this backdrop.

What distinguishes the situation today are the dimensions and diversity of new groups that are emerging. The 1993 UN Human Development Report describes an explosion of participatory movements or non-governmental organizations which has made people's participation the central issue of our time.

In India, for example, public advocacy action, on a wide range of social issues, has led to a major breakthrough in the power of the State and its clients.

Trade unions have pro-

vided much of the impetus for the wave of democratization in the 1980s, particularly in Poland, Bulgaria, South Korea and several Latin American countries.

For places such as the former Yugoslav republics, Afghanistan and embattled parts of Azerbaijan, experts advocate encouragement of broad-based associations reaching beyond parochial bonds or tribal perceptions that fuel aggression.

Thus, in many parts of the world, especially in the South, independent political and social forces have emerged to challenge authoritarian, patrimonial regimes of many varieties.

NGOs with their dual interface at the grassroots level and at the national and global levels, with their flexibility, management capacity, resources and global image, represent a significant and influential sector of civil society.

This, however, is not to say that the contributions of other sectors of civil society, such as the cultural movement, labour movement and

media are any less significant. In fact, most of the fundamental changes in favour of people's rights in the past 100 years have come, long before the emergence of NGOs as an institutional body, through the collective movement of these sectors of civil society.

NGOs are, in fact, only one sector of the broader civil society. The struggle for empowerment of civil society as a whole will become more meaningful when different sectors find better grounds and space for collaboration towards addressing their separate, as well as common agenda.

OPINION

A Journey to Sanity

Syeda Shamse Ara Huseyn

I read with interest an editorial of The Daily Star dated 25 August 1995. In the editorial, government decision to abolish admission test in the HSC classes by the colleges has been termed as a 'Mini Revolution' and extension of the same to the Engineering University, Medical Colleges and other Universities has been advised.

Apparently one can find good logic in the Government decision. But if the total scenario obtaining at present in our educational system and environment, prevailing in that sector are pragmatically analysed, one may not consider the decision of the Government as the panacea to the ills in the admission system.

I feel that all the relevant issues involving admission and also the standard of education maintained by different colleges are matters to be taken into consideration. There are certain very important points which justify admission test. I elaborate these points below.

(a) As per Government decision colleges are to declare their number of seats for admission and admit students according to the marks obtained in the SSC Examination. This method has been acclaimed on the ground that this system will stop malpractices by certain institutions, tadbirs by influential quarters and exploitation of the guardians by the coaching centres. While we cannot be so sure to achieve these objectives by abolishing the admission test, on the other hand, quality of education may further deteriorate.

(b) Results of the Public Examinations specially at the SSC and HSC level are influenced by so many factors, i.e. intensive tutoring, unfair means at the examinations, question bank, forged marksheets etc. Therefore, these results do not guarantee the level of quality of the students in spite of codification of examination scripts and publication of computerised results. Under such a situation admission tests enable the colleges to find out students suitable for continuing and maintaining a certain level of educational standard by them.

(c) Disapproving the coaching business, your editorial has commented that by one fell stroke the education authorities has set this coaching business at naught. If your contention was correct,

we would be happy. On the contrary, this 'roaring business' is still running with impunity and certain educational institutions have adopted private coaching by their teachers as a system ignoring normal academic exercises in their respective classes. Unless some Government action is taken to prevent these practices the entire measure taken by the Government to improve admission system will remain ineffective.

(d) There are instances, that some basically good students getting lower marks for some reasons beyond their control, come out unsuccessful in the admission tests, and show their talent in subsequent examinations. In my view, the remedy for the suffering of the students for admission at the HSC classes lies elsewhere than in the admission test. If confidence of the guardians and students could be diversified from only a few colleges to most of the colleges then the pressure on a limited number of colleges will reduce and suffering of the students will be minimised. This can be done by improving the quality of education of the defaulting colleges. Government may take appropriate action to improve the situation.

Private coaching has emerged due to the negligence of the teacher to do his duty in the classes. If a teacher is recruited without judging his aptitude, he may not be responsive to the need of teaching. Hence not only the teachers should be adequately paid, but at the same time recruitment of a genuine qualified teacher must be ensured. As far as possible, teachers must be discouraged from undertaking private coaching. Students must learn their lessons in their classes.

Finally, I express my firm conviction that admission test can give proper scope to a deserving student to get admission as per his or her aptitude. In my view, that will serve greater interest of the society by providing scope to deserving candidates and its denial will deprive many.

The author is Principal, Siddheswari Girls College, Dhaka.

It, therefore, devolves on all of us to continue our efforts to strengthen the civil society and empower it. The author is the Executive Director, BRAC.

To the Editor...

Yasmin and after

Sir, It is unparalleled in the history of Bangladesh where the policemen have committed atrocities against a girl — namely Yasmin in Dinajpur — which eventually led to a severe confrontation between the police and the public. The prevailing evidence unmistakably showed the girl was raped by the patrol police and was later killed and left on the road. There cannot be a greater outrage than this perpetrated on this innocent girl by those who are responsible for the maintenance of law and order and for the protection of the honour of innocent citizens.

I do not know if the criminals have been really identified by the Home Ministry and severe punishment meted out to them. The ministry ought to do this.

In the immediate context of the violation of the innocent girl, I have the honour and grace to suggest that the honorable Home Minister may resign following instances of many of a civilised administrations. This may at least partly restore the honour and dignity of the government as well as the ruling party among the people of Bangladesh.

Professor M T Haq  
Pallabi, Dhaka

UN-NATO air strike

Sir, Although overdue for last forty months and too late yet we welcome UN-NATO air strikes against Bosnian Serb targets.

It appears that following the bold and brave Croats teaching the barbarous Serbs a lesson, perhaps the USA, UK and France gathered the courage to launch the long awaited air strikes against the Serbs consistent with the demand of the peace loving people of the world with a view to punishing them for their atrocities, mayhem and genocide which have been continuing unabated.

We feel a sigh of relief that now for the first time Radovan Karadzic the 'Hitler'

and Ratko Mladic the 'Halaku Khan' have started talking, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, about a negotiated settlement of the Bosnian crisis. Radovan Karadzic told the United Nations that there was no need for UN-NATO air strikes saying the Serbs had opted for peace. However, Ratko Mladic has still kept himself engaged with typical 'yes, but, provided' etc, churlish quibbling and sinister design.

We strongly feel that at last the UN and NATO have realised the facts about Bosnia and they have awakened after a long and deep sleep.

Let us hope that all the Bosnian Serbs war criminals would soon be brought to book and the United Nations ensure that they would never dare to commit inhuman crimes and genocide in future.

O H Kabir  
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Voice of frustration

Sir, The ultimate in vexation is instilled by the contemporary usage of the abstraction — "the people" — by our motley politicians. So, what or who are the 'people' and more importantly, what measures or numbers determine the likes and dislikes of the people of a nation? Intellectuals and practitioners of politics have, over centuries wrestled with such concepts and with the aim of elucidating at least partially, the potential ambiguities of such emotive terms of "the people", helped evolve the institutions of Parliament, judiciary etc. etc. Such an evolution towards some overvalued ideal of democracy has always resulted in the shrinkage of the arena of politics whereby individuals of the civil society are allowed their own political, private and social spheres.

And the entire nation of Bangladesh, goes under house-arrest for 12 hours, 24 hours, 36 hours with more such indictments

Traffic jam

Sir, Traffic jam in Dhaka has become endemic. It is a fact of life and we, the residents of this city, have come to realise that no solution is in sight and we have to live with it. But still the road-users can get some respite if all the users could show little bit of consideration towards each other. Most often it is compounded by the fact that neither the car drivers nor the rickshawpullers would give a side to the traffic coming from the opposite. A case in point is the regular traffic jam around the Viharunessa School. As I live in the vicinity, I witness the drama everyday. I presume similar problem occurs in front of every school.

Three times a day — morning, mid-day and afternoon — the roads around the school is clogged with traffic as all the available road surface is occupied by both incoming and outgoing vehi-

cles. This could be avoided by applying the most rudimentary traffic regulations. During the rush hours when shifts change, three roads around the school viz. Elephant Road, Siddheswari Road and Bailey Road should be designated as one-way roads without allowing any vehicle (including rickshaws) to enter the roads from opposite direction. This will, however, require the cooperation of the traffic police, the school authorities and, most importantly, the owners/users of vehicles, both motorised and non-motorised. Let this premier academic institution of the city (country) set an example for others to emulate.

Hedayat Ahmed  
Bara Magh Bazar, Dhaka

War Crime

Sir, My heart swelled with pride and joy as I read in the newspapers in Pakistan, Rafiqul Islam Miah, Member of Parliament Suranjitine Gupta and Reid, Justice K M Sobhan of Bangladesh have not only demanded that Pakistan should apologize to Bangladesh for the horrendous atrocities committed by the Pakistanis in 1971 but they should also be put on trial for war crimes.

It is a long felt demand of the people of Bangladesh and it is about time the government, the intellectuals and the International War Crimes Tribunal do something about it. The Japanese and the Serbs look like boy scouts compared to what the Pakistani Army did in Bangladesh and it is unimaginable that they should be allowed to get away with it. The Nazis are still being hunted down like rabid dogs fifty years after the end of the War and there is no reason whatsoever for the Pakistanis not to be hunted down and brought to trial.

Keep up the good work gentlemen. History and the nation will be forever grateful to you.  
Parveen Haque  
Lahore, Pakistan.