

Youth Show the Way

Spearheaded by Bangladesh Scouts and youth organisations, a citizens' rally and procession was held in Dhaka last Friday on the theme "Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka." Youth Ministry, DCC and BUET were co-organisers of the event. We in The Daily Star are extremely proud to have played our humble role in launching the idea and bringing everybody together. It was an event with a difference. When inhabitants of the city are used to seeing rallies and processions that are either boycotting, condemning or demanding something, here was one that proposed to do something for the Dhakaites — to keep their localities clean. Many wondered, if it was for real.

Well, here lies the real test. Is it for real? Rallies and processions are comparatively easy to organise. Much harder task lies ahead. To actually mobilise the local youth force in every ward of our city, and get them to physically clean a dirty corner will require discipline and motivation. We know that the scouts have both. But we must remember that what they are doing is setting the tone, starting the ball rolling and working as a catalytic agent. We should never think that the scouts will clean our neighbourhood. It is our job, a job that we have forgotten about. What the scouts and other youth organisations are doing is telling us to revive the community and the self-help spirit that once was a part of our culture and civic life.

According to plan, the ward-based cleaning is to start from next Friday (22nd) and is to take place from 9 am -11 am. Obviously the key supportive role here is of the Dhaka City Corporation. Mayor Hanif must seize this opportunity created by the Scouts and Department of Youth, and do everything to bring about community mobilisation at the grassroots level. He should activate all his ward commissioners and instruct them to work with the Scouts and Youth Ministry groups to organise all socio-cultural and sports bodies at the ward level. The Mayor must also ensure that DCC's garbage trucks visit every ward next Friday to clean up all the garbage brought together by the scouts and other voluntary groups.

We must make this community campaign "Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka" a great success. It is a simple, do-able task, and a highly necessary task. Success here may embolden us to take up other civic issues, such as traffic congestion and crime control in our localities.

The Beijing Milestone

Many were the forebodings and most were well-founded too. Yet the Beijing Conference of World Women ended on a recognised note of success. Considering the challenges against it, one should not grudge calling the conference a blazing success. With the UN record of never arriving at a consensus and the memory of the Cairo women's conference fiasco still fresh in mind, the Beijing declaration of the Platform for Action on violence to and discrimination against women is a positive achievement that comes only after decades.

It was a conference exclusively addressing women's issues on a truly global scale. And the root problem, women's place in a man's world, having a very widely diverging nature in the different societies, the conference was bound to hit the rocks on fundamentals such as sexual rights, rights to abort and to equal share in patrimony. A safe and successful course could be charted only after paying a price — agreeing to leave the interpretation of the declaration to individual governments. This bought an absence of determined obstruction to the liberal and libertarian temper of the document.

The greatest achievement of this decidedly greatest show on earth was its crescendoing the feminist partisan stance and correctly identifying that in empowerment of women lay the empowerment of mankind. This rare success on the part of the UN was indeed fashioned by women activists of the world. And for Gertrude Mongela this rightly was a personal triumph. We gratefully acknowledge her great work.

How Low Can We Stoop!

Ever since the anticolonial *agnijug* days of the thirties Dhaka has been at the centre of socio-political action against establishment. Mass movements and massive demonstrations, hartals and upsurge of students and the multitude have rocked this city with hardly ever a year of respite between them. And yet in all these there hadn't happened ever, ever what came to pass near the Doel Chattar on Saturday. A gentleman was stripped of all his clothes and left on the road in the complete nude — perhaps for the crime of trying to walk up to the Secretariat where he works. Our ingrained idea of propriety is such that the victim must have gone through the agony of more than one death. We denounce the meanness of the humiliation and pray the nation doesn't ever again stoop to such aberration for whatever reason.

Great causes are only harmed by such warped expression of excessive enthusiasm. One should, however, be careful not to mix this up with the show of people's solidarity that the hartal has been. Such vile acts should be denounced by agitating leaderships that their repetition is made well-nigh impossible. Otherwise, the good work stands to be dangerously compromised.

Wisdom, restraint and tolerance did indeed mark our great popular upheavals in the past. Let us see a revival of decency and tolerance once again in our mass movements.

THE publication of the Brook's report on science, growth and society in 1971 is considered to be a watershed in our efforts to relate science and technology in society. The report reassessed the role of R and D of science in the context of the growing social problems of modern days. Although it has been admitted that ever since the invention of fire, plough and the wheel, technology has been man's principal means of development, efforts have been made to blame technology as the scapegoat and science sharing the blame as its progenitor, for the problems. In this context, the Club of Rome, the independent group of scientists, humanists and industrialists, has been trying to focus attention on "interaction between some of the more important quantifiable variables of world situation such as population and economic levels, food requirement, valuations, and depletion of raw materials, etc."

Goethe was convinced about the primordial instinct of human kind, about what he saw as its inclination to war and discord and its extraordinary ingenuity in putting all that intellect to the invention and production of the genie of destruction, while mankind is the most wonderful being of the creation, endowed with the nobility of the soul and the intellect of mind, its self-destructive instincts is at times all pervading. It is not surprising, therefore, that Goethe's Mephistopheles complains that since "men drown in evils — I find its boring to torment them!" One finds the same strain in what Bertrand Russel said, "man is by nature

Gauguin condemned the modern world — left his family behind to escape from the 'rotten Europe in 1890. The world Gauguin created in Nirvana and La Belle Angele in 1890's could be recreated by him in 1990's also but the impulse in the lagoon today would not create any other symbol than that of the 1890's.

Thomas Aquinas and most of us would, however, demur with what looks like a rather depressing view of human nature — homosapiens are not lemmings — they do not necessarily move inexorably towards self-extinction.

Prof Lewis Thomas, while not concurring with Goethe, throws a new light: We are told that the trouble with modern man is that he has been trying to detach himself from nature. He sits in the topmost tiers of polymer, glass, and steel dangle his pulsing legs, surveying at a distance the writhing life of the planet. In this scenario, man comes on as a stupendous lethal force, and the earth is pictured as something delicate, like rising bubbles at the surface of a country pond, or flights of fragile birds!

"But it is illusion to think that there is anything fragile about life of the earth — surely this is the toughest membrane imaginable in the universe. We are the delicate part, transient and vulnerable as cilia. Nor is it a new thing for a man to invent an existence that he imagines to be above the rest of life — this has been his most consistent intellectual exertion down the millennia. As illusion, it has never worked out to his satisfaction in the past, any more than it does to day. Man is embedded in nature."

Goethe's Lucifer had the presence to see the darker side of man's genius! When Leo Szilard wrote a letter to Joliot Curie in France pro-



Waliur Rahman

posing that atomic physicists should make a voluntary agreement not to publish any new findings on the fission of uranium, he was making a momentous statement. The time was crucial in history, shortly after Munich. Just at that time scientists left no doubt that the atom of uranium could be split. Szilard added, "in certain circumstances this might then lead to the construction of bombs which would be extremely dangerous in general..." While the nuclear energy has been harnessed to positive and constructive uses by mankind, this has also become in the hands of man the principal agent of possible annihilation of mankind. We are glibly talking about nuclear winter. Energy from 0.5 uranium can be sufficient for heating a major city like New York for a day, the same amount of uranium could also produce an explosion equal to that produced 7000 metric tons of TNT. It is the paradox of life at this end of the century. When we are relentlessly fighting to achieve disarmament and redirect the scarce resources at our disposal from disarmament to development purposes, particularly in developing countries, the mad rush to armageddon goes on. Prof. Lewis Thomas be-

comes philosophical — about the wonders of sciences and its prime beneficiary, the man: "We have become, in a painful, unwished for way, nature itself. We have grown into every where, spreading like a new growth over the entire surface, touching and affecting every other kind of life, incorporating ourselves. The earth risks being atrophied by us. We are now the dominant feature of our own environment."

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and with that the end of the Cold War, there is a general consensus towards an agreement for limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The agreement in New York in April-May 1995 NPT review conference for extending 'the NPT for an indefinite period is indicative of the movement towards that direction. Most substantive development is the agreement of the members of the nuclear club to sign a CTBT in 1996. However, France and China have both stated their declared intention to continue their nuclear tests in order to perfect their access to simulation technology to build independent nuclear deterrents. China's recent underground nuclear test and the most recent French test

in the Muruoa Atoll has to be evaluated in this light — particularly when both of them have given firm and irrevocable commitment towards signing CTBT in 1996.

While the commotion against the French test, particularly in the South Pacific region, is understandable, a professional evaluation would be that the 50-year-long peace after 1945 has been largely possible due to the existence of nuclear deterrents. It is an unpleasant truth but human nature is not always very pleasant. The reason why professor Szilard's proposal did not find much sympathy in the nuclear community was priceless because of the complex nature of human approach towards the question of self-preservation and building of security is commensurate with its economic and technological potential.

The institutional safeguard guaranteed in Article 51 of the UN Charter for the right of self-defence of a member country of the United Nations is to be seen in this light. An

identical consideration prompted the international community to vest the power of veto in the five permanent members of the Security Council — so that the United Nations as conceived in 1945 did not face the same fate of the League of Nations. The world is not ideal as human nature is not.

As the French scientists have demonstrated beyond doubt that underwater nuclear test does not cause an environmental hazard, one would pause and listen to them. It is a world far removed from the pristine and ideal world of Paul Gauguin and his paradise in Tahiti — a paradise that he built actually in his own mind. The calm in his paradise would not be much different in the blue lagoon of Muruoa if one would consider the reality of the world we live in.

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Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Dear Diary

Dear Diary: I have just been elected to the US Senate, and I can't tell you how excited I am. I plan to reduce the deficit, change the tax laws, reform Social Security and get lucky with one of the girls in the office.

Dear Diary: Things are going very well on The Hill. My Ethics Committee is hard at work investigating sexual harassment in the Senate. The woman lawyer doing the committee work is a knockout, and I can't wait for her to discuss her findings with me in the clothes closet.

Dear Diary: I am having a picnic for the staff. I received a case of California wine from the Napa growers, I told my people that I was so happy with their work I wanted to kiss each and every one of them. The truth is that I really want to kiss Miss Pickle. She is dynamite and has the best legs of any administrative assistant on The Hill. If she doesn't feel the same way about me, I'd be surprised.

Dear Diary: Bad news today, Miss Lockstep, the receptionist, has charged me with sexual misconduct. It's ridiculous.

All I did was give her a box of chocolates and ask her to stay until midnight and help me cut the defense budget.

I didn't do a thing to her except discuss a new voice mail system that I am thinking of installing in the office. Because this would mean less work for her, she thought I was making a pass at her. Will the ceaseless carping ever stop?

Dear Diary: I had a wonderful day. No one accused me of doing anything wrong. I was toying with the idea of putting a sofa bed in the anteroom where the employees relax between armed forces hearings. Miss Belvedere starts work today, and I want to make sure that she knows what needs to be done with the B-2 appropriations bill. Once again, it looks as if I'll have to work all night.

Dear Diary: The Senate seems to be agitated about all the charges filed against me by members of the staff. I have demanded a full and open hearing to defend myself. My lawyer says that there's nothing wrong with kissing women as long as you maintain your congressional immunity.

The committee wants this diary to incriminate me. They're not going to get it. Everyone knows that I am a passionate individual, but that doesn't mean I don't respect those who work for me. A kiss on a person's earlobe never hurt anybody.

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The Regeneration of Our Society

by M M Ahmad

IT was a pleasant surprise to read the commentary (Star, Sep 9) on the role of the current society by F H Abed (of BRAC). What made him think aloud and write to the press? Many enlightened and informed citizens must be thinking along the same line, but most would not bother to seek audience outside the drawing rooms.

The current malaise and stagnation deserve the attention of the thinkers. We have been placing too much trust and burden on our political leadership. One unpleasant offshoot of this delegation of trust and confidence is that a section of the political leadership appear to be taking advantage of the public frustration and pent-up feeling in this decade of changes. Some of the diversionary tactics appear to be questionable.

The power to influence is being subtly misused, as the exchange of views is not at peer level at the public meetings, where lung power and venom overpower rationality — the heart takes over from the head. One tendency has to be viewed with concern is the attitude of belief in physical confrontations on a mass scale, employing

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demonstrators, the majority of whom are economically unstable. The implications are dangerous, because fatalities become a stark reality; releasing uncontrolled emotions, and encouraging violence as a chain reaction. Using people as political fodder in the guise of patriotism has to be minutely scrutinised, to separate the good from the evil designs. The good may get the benefit of the doubt, but the bad (and there are bad people around at all levels) have to be spotted, exposed, and their influence neutralised.

Change releases two opposing forces: one of expectations on the on-going development projects, and the better days anticipated ahead; and the other an anxiety on the possible outcome of too many changes too soon — the inability of the current infrastructure to absorb fast changes. There have to be channels to direct the en-

thusiasm into the right directions. The diverging forces, at work at the 'democratic' level are too many. The leaders have to contain dissipation and bring into focus constructive forces which will become foundations for the next generation.

Society, at this fluid stage, has to influence the politicians from over-reaching themselves. The politicians need competition from the non-political leaders of the society, otherwise we say good-bye to self-discipline, and let autocratic and group tendencies take over. Now the politicians — the good and the dubious — are controlling the society, almost unopposed, basking under the halo of the great deliverer from all the miseries of life.

The youth is attracted by a certain glamour in the political field. The situation has been changing every decade, and will change direction

once some degree of economic emancipation is achieved. The development efforts during the last four years reveal a glimmer of hope that the stereotyped style of conducting politics in this country may bring about a change in the old and hackneyed style. A defossilization campaign may be in order.

The pessimist has an argument: the Bengali mind is traditionally anti-establishment. The cause is not far to seek: the British divide-and-rule policy of favouring the minority community in the provinces, and suppressing the majority from rearing its head and dictating the terms of the local society. The Bangalee Muslims are coming out of the stupor, after the frustrating experience in the first phase of partition. The two centuries of indoctrination will take a couple of generations to be erased.

In politics, there is a vacuum in statesmanship. The have-not syndrome is eroding slowly. Those who consider themselves leaders of the society have some hard self-tests to perform, before they appear in public with their manifestos.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Beauty contests

Sir, I could not help feel amused at the way some people expressed their concern about holding beauty contests in Dhaka. Beauty contests have long ceased to be centered around beauty only. Nowadays the contestants are also graded on poise, grace, personality and intellect. It is by no means vulgar.

In fact to get a taste of what vulgarity is, the critics only have to see the Bengali cinemas shown in our cinema halls. It is here that women are treated as sellable products and it is this media, not the beauty contests, which is available to the majority of the population. Devoid of any meaningful role, the chief purpose of the actresses (barring a few) seem to revolve around lewd and indecent songs and dances, which by any definition, violate our cultural heritage. So the outcry of anti culture would be more meaningful if directed at these perverted movies.

Another interesting point raised was that the beauty contests do not portray our culture. In a country which does not have a national dress, I think this reasoning hardly stands. In fact the initiative to uphold our culture would be more meaningful if

the government could decide upon the national dress which our leaders could wear at the international arena and reflect our true heritage.

Almost no advertisement, whether it be tooth paste or shaving cream, is complete without female models. The same is true of billboards and ads in the newspaper and magazines.

Band shows, following the footsteps of the western shows, regularly feature female models dancing, walking or smiling provocatively in the background while the song is played. BTW which airs these programmes and which is under the direct jurisdiction of the government is yet to be rebuked for its low quality shows. It makes one to laugh to think that stopping beauty contests would alone save our society from an anti-culture wave; especially in the age of electronic media and satellite dishes.

The initiative to preserve our culture is a noble effort. However, culture is dynamic and if we prefer to cling to it no matter how times change we would still be living in the era where women used 'purdah'. By coming out of the cocoon women have not really degenerated our culture but in fact have enriched it by

their active participation in the society; examples could include such personalities as Begum Rokeya, Sufia Kamal, Laila Arjumand Banu and Feroza Begum who took the bold step forward despite the conservative and restrictive environment which existed at their times. Beauty contests are a manifestation of the times on a different plane.

Shunning changes is a step backward. It would be better if we could identify the real factors eating away at the roots of our society instead of blaming it all on something that is new to our society. We do that, and together we take a step forward.

Aziz Mallick, Gulshan, Dhaka

Save Bangladesh Diesel Plant

Sir, Bangladesh Diesel Plant Ltd. (BDP) an enterprise of the Bangladesh Steel and Engineering Corporation (BSEC) is the only factory in the country manufacturing diesel engine of different capacities, mostly for irrigation pumps. This factory was set up in collaboration with world renowned diesel engine manufacturer of Germany M/S Klockner Humboldt Duetz (KHD).

Earlier, the Diesel Engine manufactured in this factory were mainly purchased by Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC). As activities of BADC has been squeezed up for the last three to four years, BDP can not sell their product and only remaining institu-

tional buyers in bulk quantity are Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA), North East Minor Irrigation Project (NEMIP), North East Irrigation Project, (NEIP) Project Implementation Unit, under the Ministry of Agriculture and Semintensive Shrimp Culture Project under the auspices of the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock. These government organisations purchase diesel engines by floating International Tender and BDP has to compete in these tenders for selling their diesel engine. In most cases these organizations prefer to purchase from abroad instead of buying from the BDP, whose product has been proved to be of international standard and competitive in price. Due to lack of order from all these institutional buyers, the enterprise remains idle for most of the period of the year. Consequently the employees are not getting their salary for the last four months through 110 nos of officers and workers have been retrenched under the 'Golden Hand Shake' scheme of the government.

If the products (diesel engine) of BDP are not purchased by those institutional buyers like BMDA, NEMIP, NEIP etc, this factory will also be closed down and have the same fate of Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory.

Recently Telephone Shilpa Sangstha producing telephone sets and Telephone Cable Sangstha producing Telephone Cables have made huge profits. But this was

only possible because T&T Board purchased all their required sets and cables from them instead of buying from abroad. National Tubes Limited and GEM Co. both under BSEC also made profit and survived closure due to purchase order placed on them by Titas Gas Co. Bakrabad Gas Co. PDB & REB respectively.

In similar manner to avoid closure of BDP and save the employees, government may direct BMDA, NEIP, NEMIDP and PIU to procure their required diesel engines direct from BDP instead of buying from abroad.

Bangladesh Diesel Plant and Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory are two separate entities. The employees of BDP may be engaged to run BMTF as suggested by me earlier in the opinion column, dated 18th July '95 thus saving the costly machinery of BMTF.

A survey was made a few years back by the Diesel Plant management which revealed that more than 45,000 nos. diesel engine driving deep tubewells, shallow tubewells and low lift pumps are out of order in the country. Considering the importance of the repair and rehabilitation of diesel engines used in the agricultural sector, the government approved the TA project submitted by MOI for implementation by BSEC with the manpower and expertise available at BDP. If BDP is given financial assistance, these engines can be repaired by the idle work force of BDP as they earlier completed repairing of about

5000 diesel engines financed by UNDP which had enormous contribution in increasing the agricultural product of the country. By fixing spares of 8 to 10 thousand taka, these huge quantity of engines can be brought in operation saving huge amount foreign exchange which would otherwise be required for importing new engines at a cost three times higher than that of repair costs. While visiting National Tubes Limited, the honourable State Minister of Industries said that "government was making effort to make all public enterprises profitable and is committed to provide all sorts of assistance so that industrial units can run successfully" is really encouraging words for BDP and other industries.

When the Govt. and the private entrepreneurs are sending teams abroad for inviting foreign investors to invest in our country, at the same time the Govt. should vigorously look into the factories established with huge financial investment but now are on the verge of closure and incurring heavy losses. I would urge and request the Honourable State Minister of Industries to look into the matter of Bangladesh Diesel Plant Ltd. and take appropriate action as suggested above so that this state owned factory along with all its employees survive closure and exist as a standard to guard against price and quality of imported engines.

Anwarul Karim, Kathalbar, Dhaka.