

Law on Retreat

In a disquieting manifestation of lawlessness, club-wielding autorickshaw drivers, with the owners tagging along, created a havoc in city-life in a reaction overkill to the traffic authority's verification drive of their papers. The policemen's abrasive descent on them without any warning issued to avert chaos does call for observations. But we are withholding these for the time being to express our shared disgust with the public over the riotous behaviour of the autorickshaw drivers and owners.

Taking wrath out on others has become a standard practice. This has proved to be expedient also. What business the autorickshaw people had to damage buses, trucks, private cars or to pick on some pedal rickshaws whose owners and operators had nothing to do with the seizure of papers or the autos? Imagine, too, the stunning revulsion of the passengers and the passers-by against their delinquent conduct. Their holding rallies was enough of a public show but by drawing the citizenry into the vortex they have only earned public displeasure. Well, this might have been a calculated risk the agitators took in the belief that they can make the authorities buckle under the pressure of a show of group strength. This is a proof enough of the law being on the retreat. If yesterday bus and truck drivers or owners had gone wild at any imposition of rules, today it is the autorickshaws and tomorrow we may see another group coming on stage to disturb public peace.

In matters of traffic management, the cops have a way of bringing most things to a campaign proportion, albeit on a publicity hype that tends to boomerang in the end. Why so many three wheelers were allowed to run with fake or duplicate licences for so long a time and then a swoop descends on them abruptly to demand on-the-spot production of original documents? Only if they had served a notice through the electronic and print media urging the autorickshaw owners and drivers to get their documents verified by a certain date, most of the work would have been done quietly enough. The remainder could be handled firmly without unnecessary trouble.

Turkey's U-turn?

The emergence of pro-Islamic Welfare Party (RP) as the largest single party in the Turkish general election is obviously a politically-loaded development in a secular country. The RP, with 158 seats, however, falls far short of the 276 seats needed to form a government in the 550-member parliament. There is little likelihood of the other two major parties — the ruling True Path Party (DYP) and the opposition Motherland Party (ANAP) — becoming its coalition partner. The conservative parties are likely to enter into a coalition to form a government which they seem capable of doing with their current strength in the parliament.

The outcome does not put the liberal and secular parties in good light. Turkey, let us not forget, is the first Muslim country to turn modern and secular in outlook as early as 1923. Now the voters have become divided in almost three equal segments where no one party has been able to muster enough support to form a government on its own. It may not be a total rejection of the secular political forces in Turkey, but it is a rejection anyway.

So, what is the implication? In countries like Algeria and Egypt religious fundamentalist forces have already posed a serious challenge to governments. Now such forces are gaining ground in Turkey. In the meantime, however, the secular parties in Turkey — like their counterparts in other Muslim countries — must be engaged in a soul-searching to find out what has gone wrong with them. In Turkey, as elsewhere, rampant corruption in the administration allegedly made people turn to Islamic radical parties. Secular Turkey's leading towards a religion based political party is extremely meaningful to other Muslim countries where people are trying to establish secular government. These governments have failed to live up to peoples' expectations, and hence the u-turn. We must all learn from the Turkish elections.

What Costly Grains Mean?

World grain prices may be double by the year 2010, according to a projection of the Japanese Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry. Wheat and rice prices will go up by 2.12 and 2.05 times respectively if 1992 is taken as the base year. Now does the news set the alarm bell ringing for us or do we have anything to gain from it? Well, it depends on how we respond to the projected scenario.

No doubt, at the current rate of our cereal import — about two million tons annually — we have every reason to brace up to it. We can make a gain from a price rise in the global market. The key question, therefore, revolves round the issue of our agricultural policy. Overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture the country is yet to decide how it should harness the sector to her maximum benefit. On the question of prioritising between agriculture and industry, its indecision is rather amazing.

As against a world decline in the annual cereal output from 3.6 per cent to 1.8 per cent over two decades between 1960s and 1980s, Bangladesh has recorded remarkable gains in foodgrain production. But in some parts of the country a slow growth has already been registered. Yet the country's full potential in cereal production has not been utilised so far, thanks to the lack of a comprehensive agricultural policy. We must go all out, with a forward plan, to make the most of a rise in grain prices in the international market promising good dividends to the numerous farmers engaged in cereal cultivation.

A recent seminar on "Current Macroeconomic and Sectoral Trends" organized by the Bangladesh Economic Association (December 5, 1995). Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud warned against the danger that, with elections approaching, the government might be tempted to go for "macro-economic populism", including "taking up too many low-priority politically mandated projects". The State Minister for Planning, Dr Moyeen Khan, felt impelled to rebut this in the course of his own presentation. He claimed that "politically mandated" projects were in fact projects that reflected the will of the people, since no MP could hope to be re-elected by implementing bad projects in his area. The MPs, he claimed, were in this sense strictly accountable to their electorate, while bureaucrats and technocrats were not really accountable to anyone. Thus ostensibly sound but bureaucratically mandated projects are less, not more, likely to reflect the needs and aspirations of the people.

Put this way, the issue hardly seems debatable. Surely no one with democratic pretensions will put the wisdom of the elitist technocrat, no matter how well-meaningly paternalistic, above the revealed preference of the voters. This notion that an elite knows better than the people what is good for them has been the hallmark of all varieties of authoritarianism, and in particular has dogged and ultimately

The MP and the Technocrat

by Abu Abdullah

We seem to have here the operation of a political mirror-image of Adam Smith's invisible hand. That hand led people, acting purely out of self-interest, to achieve socially desirable ends

mately doomed the delusions of socialist central planning. However, further reflection inevitably raises some second thoughts. A project wanted by the people of a particular constituency will no doubt be a good project — for that constituency. Does this automatically ensure that it will be good for the country as a whole? If a project for a particular constituency were voted for, not simply by the voters of that constituency but by all the voters of the country (voting, let us assume, on the basis of complete knowledge about project costs and benefits), would it necessarily be voted in? My purpose is to show that there is no such guarantee, and hence that the fragmented version of "people's will" revealed through constituency-based voting can lead to the selection of extremely bad projects.

It may be objected that the criterion I have set up is absurd: why should we insist that all the people should have to prefer a project which is local in nature? (If the project is not local, the sense that its output affects many people outside the constituency, then I don't suppose that even the Planning Minister would claim that local approval is either necessary or sufficient). This is because in a real sense no project, even if its benefits are totally confined to the people of one particular con-

stituency, is truly local, unless it is also funded entirely out of local funds. If the costs have to be borne by the treasury, out of revenue or borrowing, then every citizen of the country, or at any rate every tax-payer, has a right to a voice about the project.

As I said, the people of a particular locality will prefer the project (or portfolio of projects) that is good for them. Now how good a project is for them depends on (a) its total benefits, (b) the share of those benefits that accrues to local people, (c) its total costs, and (d) the share of the total costs to be borne by local people. Thus the preference of local people is influenced not only by overall costs and returns, but crucially by the share of these costs and returns that accrues to them. There will be a preference therefore for local projects in the sense that the benefits accrue largely to local people, and for projects which are funded from the central budget, so that the share of costs borne by local people is zero or negligible. It is easy to see that a bad project (bad in the sense of having a negative net return to society) may look very good from the local viewpoint. Thus if an investment of a hundred takas yields a benefit of 50 takas, it is, from society's point of view, a waste of resources. But if the benefits accrue entirely to

the locality, while they only have to bear one per cent of the costs, it will look like an exceedingly attractive project. This is quite likely to happen in all constituencies. In the end (assuming tax-payers are uniformly distributed across constituencies) the people who have successfully got others to fund their lemons will find that they have in turn been struck with funding other peoples' lemons.

But perhaps the voters would learn with time that this kind of beggar — my neighbour policy is self-defeating, and stop voting for such projects, helped along perhaps by members of parliament, incumbent or aspirant, who dare take on a tough, educative line instead of passively reflecting the local peoples' preferences? While this is not inconceivable, there are difficulties.

First of all, the connection between projects implemented and the costs paid in terms of taxes and/or inflation is not a transparent one, and is even conceptually not all that clear. The voter cannot know for sure that taxes or inflation would have been lower if he had not promoted the embankment. Secondly, a version of what economists call the "prisoner's dilemma" operates; the voters in each constituency will find it advantageous to restrain themselves only if they had a rea-

sonable guarantee that voters in all or at least most other constituencies would do the same. Otherwise he/she is left with the worst of both worlds — paying for other people's lemons without a compensating lemon or two of one's own. Therefore, it would be a bold MP indeed who would dare run for office on a platform of fiscal restraint, unless there was a general agreement between rival parties to that effect.

We seem to have here the operation of a political mirror-image of Adam Smith's invisible hand. That hand led people, acting purely out of self-interest, to achieve socially desirable ends. This invisible foot seems to lead well-meaning members of parliament to attain a socially undesirable end.

The crux of the problem is that the members of parliament are doing the wrong job. This was explicitly acknowledged by the Planning Minister in his presentation, though he did not quite draw

out the implications that I am stressing. Members of parliament should be the legislators of the nation, not lobbyists for local development. This latter task should be left to powerful organs of local government, with enough taxing powers to finance (with some central subventions which however should not be tied to project portfolios) their own development projects. This will ensure that the beneficiaries pay the costs and are compelled to choose only economically sound projects. Such local governments will need the services of economists to pick out the good projects for them, just as the central government will need economists' advice on non-local projects. In the meantime, as long as the current state of affairs persists, the only protection against this tyranny of local interests over the "true people's will" would be to apply impersonal, non-local criteria for all projects, local or non-local.

At the end of the day, therefore, the elitist technocrat may be a more reliable champion of the "people's will" than the election-seeking member of parliament.

From 'Song of Freedom' to Song of Peace

In celebrating twenty-fifth year of independence the nation is currently busy churning up the past in an attempt to evoke the traditionally sentimental and stylized response of a people much given to poetic and heroic notions of patriotism rather than the practical and everyday ones which would be reflected in daily respect and responsibility for one's country. Amidst all the celebration of the Past with the multi-ring cultural circus comprising dance, music, recitation, exhibitions, discussions and, last but not least, the screening of the much vaunted 'Mukhtir Gaan' or, 'Song of Freedom' — the film that has touched the hearts of many like an intimate home movie of a particular generation and a particular time — we seem to be trying desperately not only to dispel the mood of despondency and frustration of our present political reality but to reaching out to a vanished era, in a bid to bring back into our lives some of the heady magic of pristine nationhood and patriotism.

once related to, but that our own former lives and convictions, by their distance from our present reality and predicament, had become abstract, neutralized, transformed into the fiction of film and irrevocably entered the mythology of our times. This idealized world, the landscape of our nation's genesis was now unreal, like a biblical past. My eyes were wet but my heart was dry. And much as I applauded the film and appreciated the labour of love which had given back to us all a moment of our past, I no longer felt with my heart the passion and the fever which we had once felt and which had dared to snatch Freedom from the jaws of death and destruction. In the childlike contours of the familiar faces on the screen I recognized our own childish audacity to hope and dream, and from some cerebral seat where resides memory, I merely remembered how once, by this very audacious act of hoping and dreaming we had carved out our castle in the air, a whole new country. With my

Benazir's Brazen Comment — an Affront to Bangladesh

by Shahjahan Mian

Benazir's apology to Bangladesh on behalf of Pakistan would rather have demonstrated her political foresight. The expression of sincere remorse by Japan for the aggression of Japanese army in Asia and the Pacific region during World War II did not belittle their image

PAKISTAN'S Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto does not know about what happened in Bangladesh in 1971. Benazir's brazen comment in Beijing not only annoyed the Bangladesh people, it also stunned the world at large. When the members of the Bangladesh Human Rights Implementation Organisation were protesting against the oppression of women in Bangladesh covering their faces with veils and holding candlesticks in their hands at the Fourth World Women's Conference, a female member of the Pakistani delegation candidly said that Pakistan should apologise to Bangladesh for the violation of women in that country in 1971. When the attention of the Pakistani Prime Minister was drawn to the matter, Benazir, to everybody's utter astonishment, expressed her complete ignorance about the heinous crime committed by the Pakistani occupation army in Bangladesh in 1971.

The oblique reference to Bangladesh by the Cambridge and Harvard educated Pakistani Prime Minister has aptly proved that she has inherited in full the traits of her father. Benazir's insolent remark does not stem from her ignorance. It's a trick to evade the truth. The embarrassing question nakedly exposed the carefully veiled ugly side of an otherwise fascinating face. Her behaviour was a clear manifestation of arrogance and attitude of a feudal princess. It was, as if, the appropriate act of a competent heir to, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the heinous partner of killer General Yahya's genocide, rape and barbarity in Bangladesh and the power-hungry man who turned mad to capture the office of Pak-

istan's Prime Minister even after failing to secure majority seats in the parliament in 1970 general elections.

The Bengalees known for their emotion and forgiveness are already showing signs that the memory of the unprecedented atrocity perpetrated by the Pakistanis on the soil of Bangladesh is fading fast with the passage (25 years) of time. May be, for that reason a sort of weakness was growing among some Bangladesh people towards Benazir Bhutto. Such as, in the event of a political rivalry for power with her arch-rival Nawaz Sharif, many politically conscious Bangladeshis talked and hinted in favour of Benazir.

Even I felt that some sort of softness was also developing in me towards this highly educated and prolific orator. I had to stay in Pakistan capital, Islamabad, for over a month in October-November, 1989 to cover the political crisis arising out of the no-confidence move tabled by the opposition in the Pakistani parliament. While in Islamabad, I had watched her speak in the parliament session in impeccable English to subdue her political rivals.

Her immaculate and most intelligent performance at the post-parliament session press conference attended by more than two hundred journalists, including about one hundred from abroad, rather showed her enormous quality as a leader and the amount of patience she had in her as a politician. I still remember the moment when she asked her State Minister for Information sitting by her right to give me the floor when my voice was drowning in the midst of the noise created out of the barrage of ques-

tions put to her from all corners of the crowded press conference. But Benazir's attitude of shutting her eyes from the heinous act of killing 30 lakh people and violating two lakh women in Bangladesh by the Pakistani occupation army and their henchmen annoyed me very much like the rest of the people in the country.

The most irresponsible comment by twice elected Prime Minister of a country in a way echoed the sentiment of her country's former military rulers. It was certainly unbecoming of her.

Reluctant to apologise for the crime committed by the Pakistanis in Bangladesh, Benazir could at least say sorry for the matter. If she had felt shy to do that she could describe the matter as regrettable taking advantage of deceitful political language. She even did not care to do that.

The genocide, massacre, destruction, loot and arson carried out by the Pakistanis stirred humanity and touched the world conscience. Did the news and pictures on Pakistani brutality covered extensively by the world news media fail to catch Benazir's attention? And even the present Pakistani Prime Minister was not a tiny lot as not to understand the matter. Benazir's pretension of not being abreast with the Bangladesh liberation war and the failure of the Pakistani army to silence the aspirations of Bengalees for a home of their own is nothing but a shameless act, as such.

Benazir along with her Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to Dhaka just a year before that fateful night of March 25 in 1971 and put up in the then Hotel Inter-Continental, now Sheraton. Dressed smartly in

jeans and putting on high-heel shoes the teenaged Benazir galloped in the yard of the intercon surrounded by the lush green Ramna park to keep mark of her youthful exuberance.

Dhaka's newspapers frontpaged her picture with the accompanying news. How could she forget the genocide and rape perpetrated in Bangladesh within a year of her visit? Possibly, the events in Bangladesh reminded her of her ambitious father's collaboration with the entire bestial scenario. And hence her perverted reaction.

What pained me much after Benazir's arrogant remark was the intolerable silence of the country's politicians. It was surprising that neither the government nor did the opposition parties voice any protest against it. Even the freedom fighters, the brave sons of the soil, did not say anything about it. It was most distressing that the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the villain of politics of the then Pakistan is getting away behaving nastily with the Bengali nation. It's a disgrace for the nation. No doubt, the country is passing through a political crisis arising out of the opposition's demand for holding the general elections under a neutral caretaker government which the ruling party is not accepting. But the national image and interest should also receive due attention from all quarters.

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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.

Champion of democracy

Sir, Professor Roushan Ara Hoque's "Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy: A Champion of Democracy" printed in The Daily Star of December 5, 1995 is an extremely well-written article. Such good write-ups on this great leader of the freedom movement of the sub-continent from the British Raj seldom appear in the newspapers. I, therefore, recommend that students of history who have missed this article should find time to read it now.

out three factual errors which need to be corrected. These are as follows: i) Suhrawardy himself was the mover of the resolution in the All India Muslim League Convention of Delhi on April 9, 1946 where the word "State" was substituted for "States".

This was despite the fact that the ambiguity in the Lahore Resolution (1940) was removed by Mohammad Ali Jinnah two years ago in his letter dated 17 September 1944 to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. (For details readers may refer to Gandhi-Jinnah talks; New Delhi, The

Hindustan Times; 1944; pages 21-25, and Sharif Al Mujahid; Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah: Studies in Interpretation, Karachi, Quaid-e-Azam Academy, 1981, pages 397, 496 & 618); ii) the political party formed by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy in 1949 was originally named Jinnah Awami Muslim League and not Awami League; and iii) the word "EBDO" introduced by Ayub Khan stood for Electoral Bodies Disqualification Order and not for East Bengal Disqualification Order.

Syed Imran Sharaf Gulshan, Dhaka

On Plays of Dhaka

Sir, I was happy to see the article in The Daily Star titled "Bangladesh Theatre: Brave New World" (December 16, 1995) with its well-documented and upbeat approach by Shafi Ahmed. I was

especially glad to see the notice given to the production called "Bishad Sindhu" put on monthly by the "Dhaka Padatik" group. I have seen this unadvertised production at least six times and still I discover new marvels about it.

I have attended plays in New York, London and Paris, but the ones I enjoy in Dhaka are the most original and cogent. Keep up the good work: all of you — directors, actors, actresses, set designers, costume designers, electricians, and stage-hands. Through you lies a powerful "voice" for Bangladesh.

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On a national scale we seem to be pining for some sort of emotional confirmation of our existence as a family of people, united after all, by our shared past. Unfortunately, I think the best that we have been able to muster up in terms of felt response, in spite of the physical presence of the crowds milling around the designated cultural spots, is only an orchestrated and half-hearted nostalgia, that diluted version of and substitute for, real emotion. But unable to let go of the past, we wallow deeper in the comforting mud of history because I suppose, we are afraid that the past is all we have.

I queued up for the film with the muted excitement of someone about to be given a glimpse of a lost world, granted a vision of the way we were. Predictably, throughout the film I had an ache in my throat: how young we all were, how ardently we had believed in ourselves as a people, how touching had been the idealism that had fired everyone's spirit, how sweetly we had all sung our song of freedom. But my deeper sadness was reserved not for the evanescence of youth or the passing of the age of our innocence but at the realization that something has been irrevocably lost: our capacity of dream. Not only are we older, more hardened, cynical and bitter, but bereft of our illusions we are exiled from our dreams and deals with no way to return to them.

For those of us who belonged to the generation relevant to the film, as soon as it started, I could feel the hall of our collective consciousness darken as we projected onto the screen of our memory moments as if from some previous incarnation when like restless songbirds we too, like the protagonists of the film, roamed the uncharted tracts of our political destiny, warbling the song of possibilities, of liberty defying death. And yet, suddenly it occurred to me that what I actually watched was no longer a slice of personal history familiar to many of us, events and feelings we had

POSTSCRIPT

by Neeman A Sobhan

intellect I saluted the spirit of the film, but my soul was leaden. I know that as a nation we can no longer be seduced to lay our hearts at the flamboyant altar of idealism, blind patriotism or love of heroism. We have middle aged souls which know that indifference and despair at a national level is a malady that requires more than song to cure it, more than nostalgia to revive it. The song of innocence has inevitably brought in its wake the song of experience; now it is not enough to sing the flighty song of freedom, which must be followed by the more earthy songs of home coming, of planting and of harvest, of plenty and prosperity, of rootedness and belonging, and of the eternal rhythms of tranquility.

But after twenty-five years of coming home, we are still at war. A nation that wrested victory from the enemy outside, is today on the verge of succumbing to an ignominious defeat at the hands of a host of enemies within. We are armed against ourselves, while the enemy walks with us, lives with us. It shows its face in our despair, in our squalor and poverty, in our corruption and cynicism, our helplessness and complicity; it is revealed in our lack of political leadership, in the bitter factions and clashes of blind will, and in the vacuum in our ideals. This enemy is of our own making which has brought this nation to its knees, denying us our innate nobility, depriving us of our ability to build dreams.

Once upon a time we won political independence, but no freedom can be sustained without its twin — Economic freedom. Today in the throes of nostalgia we may recall the song of Freedom, but if we want to celebrate another twenty-five years of independence, of real freedom, of economic emancipation then we need a different tune. In fact, we need to build ourselves into that instrument of national prosperity on which the years will spontaneously play that eternal song which should be the anthem of every nation — the song of Peace