

Autonomy for Radio, TV

The Radio, TV Autonomy Commission entrusted with the task of putting forward recommendations for granting autonomy to the state-run Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television is expected to do the job within the stipulated time of six months, according to the commission's chairman. Three months have passed since the Commission's inception and the progress in its works has been on the whole satisfactory. We cannot, therefore, say there has been inordinate delay in taking up the autonomy issue concerning the electronic media, but we certainly feel that a beginning of the process in practice, preceding the final and formal establishment of autonomy, is nowhere evident.

People wanted to see that, consistent with the Awami League government's pledge, both Radio and TV conducted themselves in a manner as to give no cause for complaint that the present government pursued a policy in this regard even remotely similar to that of previous government. By not delegating the responsibility and operational freedom to the two media administrations so far, the government has been doing harm to its own interests and also to the media. On the one hand, its credibility has suffered and on the other, the media have failed to develop the independent approach necessary for working in an environment of full autonomy in the future. The aim after all is to nourish professionalism.

It will be a great loss if the government fails to prepare the electronic media for greater freedom through the interim and experimental period. And the government does not need to look far for guidance. It can very well take cue from the caretaker government. Just recreate the norms and practices of the caretaker government for both Radio and TV. What the government needs to do is take some immediate steps to grant functional autonomy to radio and TV so that they can run their day to day operation without Information Ministry's dictates. This will prove the government's bonafides on this matter.

As soon as the recommendations are submitted, it must proceed with urgency to finalise the formalities and actually grant autonomy to the electronics media.

Delightful Disclosure

The much-awaited World Bank credit for improving Dhaka's increasingly deteriorating water supply situation has been sanctioned. The premier money lending agency for the developing countries around the globe will bear the brunt of a \$213m aid package marking a significant opening of gridlock in external economic assistance for developmental activities in Bangladesh.

The \$175 million Fourth Dhaka Water Supply Project is bound to bring about a discernible change in the city's much-lamented water reality. Not only volume of supply is expected to rise significantly, but the present acute thirst for pure, potable water also looks destined to be quenched considerably. The optimism around the project is not generated merely because of the announcement of a financial flow but more due to the rationale pattern of it. Its five components such as the programme for institutional reforms, increase in the capacity of current water production and service extension, reduction in systems loss and improvement of sanitation, technical assistance for institutional development and technical assistance for project preparation, makes it look like a comprehensively fool-proof plan that promises to leave a lasting and healing touch on issues ranging from supply to sewage.

If the water project smacks spatial narrowness in its area of concentration, the other part of the credit announcement brooks no such urban favouritism. Perhaps, more seminally attached to the raison d'être of an overwhelmingly rural and agrarian country like Bangladesh is the Second Roads and Markets Improvement and Maintenance Project. It is aimed to help boost rural employment and incomes and reduce rural poverty by establishing an improved, sustainable rural transport and trading infrastructure. In a country bedeviled by the vagaries of nature and corruption the word 'sustainable' is of utmost importance and no doubt project's accent on the word only echoes its soundness. Imagine the effect of 6000 culverts in networking 10500 kilometre of rural roads and the subsequent salutary touch on our economy.

While the ameliorative ends of the financial flow will need some time to spring in reality, it has already given a ready signal regarding the confidence of international donor agencies in the present government of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League. For developmental activities to get a spurt, this confidence is essential.

Woman-bashing by Fatwa

A women's rally organised by Mahila Parishad's Dhaka chapter last Wednesday at the Ramna Greens called for government action to resist the woman-bashing fatwas. Ordinarily such fatwas constitute an incitement to commission of violent offences and violation of human rights. No doubt these are a fit case for the government to deal with an iron hand. And that is possible keeping itself perfectly bound by law. But is it desirable that government do it alone and only through use of state power?

Perhaps not. This social menace must first be fought on the social plane. Without such actions preparing the ground for the government to step in and act — imposed action from above will not only fail to have the desired bite but may also generate counter-resistance by the criminals, mounted in the name of protecting religion.

It can be said with a certain amount of confidence that persecution of women in the name of religion will be a thing of the past and something become completely irrelevant in the world beyond 2025. But that good prospect will not help the tens of thousands of victims who will have suffered in the meantime. A gritty programme of building social resistance, not only by NGOs but by women's groups as well as men's and, well, the political parties, will heal the society of this absurd gender-prejudice crime much before 2025. If, however, society continues to be as uncaring as it has been so far, the problem will remain well behind that date and be a hard-to-beat drag on this nation's keeping pace with the pressure to be fit for the new millennium.

At this moment, when my mind is filled with convocation thoughts, I visualize politics as a fierce goddess who has, in this land of ours, claimed many sacrifices, university convocation being one of them. At some point in the middle of the year nineteen seventy-five the parti-coloured goddess suddenly changed colours, went all black and transformed herself into an all-devouring monster. Convocations were but a minor sacrifice compared to the priceless social, cultural and, not the least, political values that lay annihilated at her feet.

Now, to put things in their proper chronological perspective, the first blood was drawn in this fray between the goddess and her victim some ten years earlier, when the graduates of Dhaka University, assembled in the convocation pandal, refused to accept their certificate from the hands of Monem Khan. The university authorities had failed to gauge the depth of resentment which students in general felt against a governor they looked upon as the Centre's stooge in East Pakistan. The convocation was foiled amid rowdy scenes. The governor wearing the gaudy robe of a chancellor had to go away disgraced and humiliated and he never forgot the insult.

During the thirty years that followed, that is till to-day, counting the number of years multiplied by the number of universities and institutions where they have degree awarding ceremonies desirably to be graced by the presence of the Governor/the President, the number of potential convocations would easily exceed hundred and fifty, but the number actually held between all the universities would be hardly fifteen. The figures will speak for themselves.

The politics or political culture that is responsible for this state of affairs I have painted as a terrible goddess all in black with an insatiable thirst for blood. The convocation I paint as a white maiden, that lies slain at the foot of the goddess in black, the protruding red tongue — is there also a chain of skulls round her neck, I wonder — showing her fiendish nature. The black goddess has, sometimes, for a change, worn white but never for long and never the pure white which only maidens wear.

Clinton's 'Trade Coup'? In recognising the importance of the information technology in world trade, the APEC summit has greatly boosted WTO efforts to conclude an information technology agreement by the WTO-Singapore meeting. Although it fell much below the expectations of Clinton's proposal for zero tariffs, it was definitely a surprising 'trade coup' by Clinton despite the fact that at first it appeared to be opposed by the majority of the APEC members. But Clinton again proved his successful maneuvering power to win the opposition and bring them in a row to adopt the US initiative to 'substantially reduce' tariffs on high-tech products including computers and semi-conductors by year 2000. Thus America used the APEC forum to help reinforce American exporters' access to the Asia-Pacific markets covering the APEC region. Hence the foremost challenge for the developing nations of this region is to weigh and ascertain what ultimately they gain and what they lose.

In short, who gains more at their cost, holding a rosy picture before them. There may be many 'ifs' and 'buts' to be considered by them to finally settle down on what is beneficial to them, both industrially and commercially. Asia Pacific region countries are no more so-called poor nations to be taken for granted. The West has realised it and that is why they are busy in making such moves to make a 'common cause' with them. But all that glitters is not gold. That is why Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed, known as Asia's most outspoken spokesman and not very much liked by the West for his straight talks, has expressed his indignation against some of the APEC proposals.

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To the Editor...

"History Speaks, Spawns the Truth"

Sir, My attention was drawn to an article by Mr Abdul Bayes titled 'History Speaks, Spawns the Truth' in the DS on the 14th of December, 1996. The writer says, "People, especially those born after 1971 were not allowed to peep deep into the true records of the independence movement lest they discover the truth and thus smash the planks of false premises upon which many of the so-called history makers survived." He then goes on to describe in a few lines the 11-point movement and names the "heroes" all of whom belonged to the Students League. The writer has argued that everyone should have their true place in history, and so he should have listened to his own sermon.

The 11-point movement was unique in its character in that it was unexpected at that time. Its architect was the General Secretary of DUCSU at that time, Nazim Kamran Choudhury, who belonged to then notorious NSF. I say this not because Kamran Choudhury is my husband, but because as a student of the university at that

Convocation Thoughts

Regularly held convocations, as and when the process starts, will signify the end of the long period of disorder in the field of higher education and will be taken as a confirmation of the end of disorder in the wider field of politics.

I have on my shelves the two volumes of Dhaka University convocation speeches. It is impossible to read the speeches, or even to turn the pages casually, without being sad. One is sad at the absence of a good number of speeches delivered by the distinguished guest speakers. The editor says that the Registrar's record room couldn't provide those missing speeches. It gives

one reflects on the end of those dreams and visions. No one living then could imagine that the same university and others that would swell the number in future could go on as they actually have, 'living and partly living' for years on end, without a convocation. Jahangirnagar, according to the press announcements, is going to hold its first convocation

in its twenty-five years' life. Great news indeed! In recent weeks, one or two such ceremonies have been held and the President, as the Chancellor, has graced them by his presence. After these small but auspicious beginnings, the Jahangirnagar convocation will be the first big event, in so many years of bleak disorder. Will it signify the return of order, of purposeful pursuit of academic goals, is the thought that will agitate a thousand minds

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

a sorry picture of the records office and the callousness of the persons responsible for keeping the records. The volumes would have been immensely richer with those missing speeches. But even with this lack of completeness, the two volumes evoke an ear of sanguine hopes, of achievements by scholars and researchers like Satyen Bose and GC Ghose an era marked by dreams and visions which the young and vibrant university of Dhaka held out for all in those days. One is sad as

effects on the local industries in the developing countries. A WTO analyst, Stella Mushiri, commenting on the WTO proposal, has rightly said, "It means you actually give up your sovereignty."

The other snag is West's insistence on raising labour standards in the developing countries. A move as a clever device by the West to cripple the economic progress of the developing countries, by checking the flow of their cheap products from these areas. It would be totally unrealistic to compare labour standard of a developing country with that of a developed country. It is interlinked with the over-all economic development of a country. What was the labour standards of the European and other Western countries when they had to pass through a long process of industrial revolution to reach the present stage? From the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century the labour standards were nothing but inhuman. The change for the better was not brought about by a magic wand or a state decree overnight. As Rome was not built in a day, as they say, the West should not try to impose their labour standards on the developing countries. It will be balancing itself in due course through a reasonable period of processing. So the Western industrial countries shouldn't create a bogey, by playing the 'labour' card, to push back the industrial progress so far achieved by the Third World countries, particularly the Asia-Pacific region.

Let the labour question remain the 'baby' of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and it would be sheer folly on the part of the industrially advanced countries to snatch it from ILO and hand it over to its 'surrogate mother' WTO. It was better late than never that the West realised it.

West Wants to Regain 'Lost Territories'

In fact, the West wants to 'regain' their 'lost territories', which they had ruled and controlled economically, politically and militarily for the last three centuries or so, through a new 'mechanism', called 'market liberalisation', 'improvement of labour standards' and tearing down of tariff walls. The West has now realised that emerging Asia has grouped up with tremendous economic potentialities in the fields of

Trade Game and USA

This US-led role to revitalise and rehabilitate the falling economy of the West, is not a new thing — it is a process being followed by them in some form or other. It can be recalled here or there, and much more, in a formal treaty. 'Don't we hear the echo of the same music' at the APEC Manila Summit and WTO Singapore meeting? What 'shadow' they cast?

Sharing Sovereignty: In Whose Interest?

Canadian free-trade advocate Don Etchison, commenting on NAFTA, said that it is about pooling or sharing sovereignty. "It would, actually, mean surrendering 'sovereignty on the control of foreign investors' in the developing countries. That is why the developing countries opposed tooth and nail recently the WTO proposal on unfettered foreign investment and linking of trade with labour standards in the developing countries, mounted by the developed countries at recent WTO meeting in Singapore. And it was a great victory for the developing countries when the developed ones gave up their insistence on making WTO responsible for ensuring labour standards in the developing countries and agreeing that ILO was the 'competent body to set and deal with labour standards'. It has proved the stand of the developing countries against the so-called 'sharing sovereignty' theory. However, the big question of 'sharing sovereignty' would continue to haunt the developing countries until WTO, dominated by USA and the European countries, come down further from their insistence on uncontrolled multilateral trading and investment plan. This was echoed by the leaders from the developing countries in their statements at the WTO meeting. There were much noise of grumbings and rumbblings voiced by the developing countries. They were really apprehensive of the proverbial 'Greek gifts'."

APEC Summit and WTO Rumbblings: A New Trade Game in the Offing?

In whichever way it is interpreted, the role played by the developed countries at the APEC Summit, has shown that their new move is a part of a 'new trade game' that they have been playing to rehabilitate them economically in the flourishing and booming Asia Pacific region, writes A M M Shahabuddin.

Mahathir's Reaction on APEC 'Coercing'

Mr Mahathir accused the APEC forum of 'coercing' the less developed countries to free trade 'beyond their capacity'. He also alleged that APEC was paying 'too much attention' to trade liberalisation than development cooperation. By raising the problems to be faced by the less developed countries against the developed countries, Mahathir has touched the right chord. Actually, the APEC Manila Summit has proved to be more prone to tow the line shown by the developed countries, including USA, Canada and Japan. In whichever way it is interpreted, the role played by the developed countries at the APEC Summit, has shown that their new move is a part of a 'new trade game' that they have been playing to rehabilitate them economically in the flourishing and booming Asia Pacific region in order to exploit their vast economic resources and cheap manpower under the cloak of trade liberalisation and tariff cuts. Does it herald the arrival of a new modern-day Trojan horse at the gate of the developing countries of Asia? It reminds us that 'a big fish always eats the little fish', or as the old adage says: 'Fear the Greeks bearing gifts.'

Multilateral Investment Accord: Storm Signal?

Perhaps a new storm is brewing over Asia Pacific region. Although it is not a new thing, as the region has weathered many such rough weather during the last three centuries or so. As the coming events cast their shadows before, indicating either an welcome feature or an ominous sign, so is the case with the Multinational Investment Agreement (MIA), a brain-child of the European Union (EU), which is now before the WTO for adoption. The main thrust of the proposed agreement is that the host country should treat the foreign investor and his investment operation in its territory in the same way as a domestic investor or firm. When the MIA idea was first presented to a group of developing countries in Geneva in 1995, it was opposed only by India. Later, Pakistan and Malaysia joined India, to oppose the proposal, while a number of developing countries, including Egypt, Cuba and Tanzania, are 'concerned' by its implications. If WTO succeeds in going ahead with the proposal, it would have damaging

commerce and industries. According to a recent APEC report, the economic growth rate among members of APEC forum would remain 'robust' in the 1997, after growing at an average rate of four per cent this year. Even a decade ago, in 1985, Asia-Pacific region accounted for approximately 60 per cent of world GNP and 40 per cent of the world's foreign trade. The coastal areas of China are reported to be among the fastest growing economies in the world today.

Seeing the upsurge in Asian economic growth, a Canadian analyst recently remarked that "while high unemployment lingers like a curse in Canada and USA, Asia is riding out the recession in style." It's true as Asia's economies are growing nearly seven times faster than the West. The poor Asian countries which were regarded by the West a few years back as "little more than economic backwaters", have bounced back as industrial power houses, raising eyebrows in the West.

Asia's Economic Success

Asia's economic success has turned the entire region into one of the world's largest production centres as well as a huge consumer market and the West has had to suffer a lot as the region is no longer dependent on them, as 60 per cent of Asia's trade now circulates within its own boundaries, giving a healthy boost to South-South trade. And that's why Asia was free from the fall-outs of the West's recent recession. So the Asia-Pacific region offers, on one hand, a ready-made consumer market because of the affluence that its industrial progress has brought, and, on the other, the availability of cheap manpower that turns over industrial products at a much cheaper cost. Naturally, the West is extending its hands to this region, following the time-honoured dictum: "Put your hands where money lies". The West, therefore, wants to make hey (not while), but wherever the sun shines. And in this new trade game worldwide, America, being the only political as well as economic superpower, has taken its 'legitimate' role, to juxtapose its position and influence, as recently shown both at the Manila APEC Summit and Singapore meeting of WTO ministers.

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This US-led role to revitalise and rehabilitate the falling economy of the West, is not a new thing — it is a process being followed by them in some form or other. It can be recalled here or there, and much more, in a formal treaty. 'Don't we hear the echo of the same music' at the APEC Manila Summit and WTO Singapore meeting? What 'shadow' they cast?

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our lack of knowledge or foresight, built as a gymnasium, an American concept of economy and practical good sense. The Syndicate asked me to invite General Zia for the occasion, and seek his consent. I met him and made the request, on behalf of the Syndicate. He suggested the Vice-President, Justice Sattar who, under a special arrangement, had the delegated responsibility of the Chancellor. The President still remained the Chancellor, and it was he whom we wanted as the Chancellor. He saw my point and agreed. So we were going to have our first convocation in 1982. His assassination put an end to our hopes and preparations. Since then we never had a moment when a convocation could be seriously considered.

Regularly held convocations, as and when the process starts, will signify the end of the long period of disorder in the field of higher education and will be taken as a confirmation of the end of disorder in the wider field of politics. With the goddess of politics changing her aspect, and demanding no more sacrifices, there should be a return of convocation which is the crowning ritual in the academic calendar of a university. My convocation thoughts fly on the wings of hope.

Latin American debt crisis in the 1980s

(What is the 'genesis' of the APEC Manila Action Plan, followed by WTO-Singapore decisions?) To quote the Canadian columnist, "What began as a search for a way to use the crisis as a lever to pry open gains for US financial and industrial interests, evolved into support for what appeared to be a perfect solution — a trade agreement which would not only guarantee a return on investment, but would lock in that return, and much more, in a formal treaty. 'Don't we hear the echo of the same music' at the APEC Manila Summit and WTO Singapore meeting? What 'shadow' they cast?"

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Art Buchwald's COLUMN

The Senior Skies

It isn't that you can't go home again — it's just that it's getting tougher and tougher, especially for senior citizens. I was flying home from Florida the day before Thanksgiving and noticed that everyone on the plane was over 70. The man sitting next to me might have been 75. "There are a lot of senior citizens on this plane," I remarked. "Yep," he said. "Everyone is going to visit a relative for Thanksgiving. Only the old folks have the physical strength to travel at holiday time." "You're right. While you're chewing your fingernails on the plane, the kids and the grandchildren are snug in front of the fireplace waiting for the seniors to straggle in the front door." He chuckled. "Not one of my children knows how to change flights in Chicago. I'm proud to say that ours is the last generation capable of dragging a 30-pound suitcase five miles through the O'Hare terminal." "Do you think that the children are aware of what all the parents on this plane have gone through to get to other homes for the holidays?" "I doubt it. 'I'll be lucky to have my son and daughter-in-law meet me at the airport.'" "Why do the seniors do it?" "To be with their families because their kids are not going to fly anywhere to see them. The children's rationale is that since the old folks get senior citizen discounts on air fares, it's to the family's advantage to have the parents do the flying." "I notice that many people boarded the plane in wheelchairs." "They're the toughest of the tough. Don't take their seat by mistake — you'll get a clout in the ear." "I guess if it wasn't for the seniors there wouldn't be a holiday season any more." "It's true. All the family used to come to our house. I liked that a lot more because I could just go to my bedroom when they started talking about their swimming pools." "But the worst part of the trip is when I arrive and they treat me like the village idiot. Sometimes I wonder if they're right. Anyone who flies 3,000 miles to play Scrabble with his offspring can't be too well in the head." "Are you angry with your children for making you come such a long way?" "Only when I eat the airline food." By arrangement with UNB and Los Angeles Times Syndicate