

Of Sufficiency and Security

Food self-sufficiency is any nation's first choice unless as in Japan or UK this is neither possible nor worthwhile. But becoming food surplus, something passing sufficiency, would lose much of its meaning if it cannot build food security for its citizens.

Foodgrains production has been one silver-lining to our dismal performance in almost all other sectors of endeavour to provide sufficient goods and services to the nation. One of the most impoverished sections of people in the world, the Bangladesh peasantry has defied Malthus to keep the rate of food production ahead of that of population growth.

Where is the guarantee that an eventual end to the traditional food deficit would bring an end of starvation to the nation? The politics that used to emphasize equitable distribution of income and food and other security is fast nearing the fate of the Dodo.

Food sufficiency is within our reach. Let things be developed so that food becomes purchasable by all. When the nation will have enough food for all and more, let it follow that then there will be none going without it.

Chittagong Mess

When will the government employees incorporate the element of cordiality into their professional obligations? A pertinent question that made a strong comeback yesterday as a natural reaction to the press report on the appalling condition of the utility services in Chittagong following Monday's hurricane.

Disruption in the supply of water, power and telecommunications is a part of the inescapable consequences of all natural disasters. There is not much man can do in his encounter with elemental wrath but human endeavour and sincerity have a truly wonderful channel of expression in the aftermath of a natural cataclysm.

But when it came to defending an institution, they sat back in their seats enjoying the spectacle of prime minister standing for 30 minutes and trying vainly to introduce the women's reservation bill. They may not like Inder Kumar Gujral. But the attack was not on him but on India's prime minister.

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By contrast, Mayor Mohiuddin made his own Corporation employees run that extra yard that we all need in time of an emergency.

Apparently, the relief and rehabilitation operations in the hurricane affected Chittagong have hit a snag. More than resource constraint, it is the attitudinal problem which seems to be augmenting instead of alleviating the sufferings of the people.

We expect a more assertive government presence in quickening the restorative process which appears to be in a bit of doldrums currently.

How Dare They?

The killing of a youngman in broad daylight and that too in front of the police control room in the city shows how perilous life has become in Bangladesh these days. It comes as little relief to know that two of the killers who exchanged gunfire with the pursuing group of police in one of the busiest city points at the rush hour were finally caught.

Some would tend to play it down as the desperate attempt of the criminals to make their presence felt in the wake of a resonant and renewed drive of the law enforcing agency against them. There could be some substance in it. But the fact is, by retreating day and night in its encounters with crime, the civil society has come to a position where its very foundation appears to be shaken.

THE CHT question of a compatibility test between the state interests of Bangladesh and the demands of the tribals seems poised for a mutually satisfactory resolution. In a dramatic announcement that sounded almost like giving the lie to doubting Thomases, Abul Hasnat Abdullah, Chairman of the National Committee on CHT said on May 14 at the end of his fourth round of talks with Shantu Larma, the brother of late Manabendra Narayan Larma of doctrinal and rebellious fame, that the two sides have reached a consensus on all points paving the way for a peace agreement by the end of June.

Seemingly facts are starting to prevail over fiction, realism over emotion and prejudices and the majority tribals' craving for normal living over the misplaced insurrectionist adventurism of a handful rendered largely irrelevant vis-a-vis the opportune moment that has arrived to help strike a deal which may not present itself again for years to come.

What are the points on which 'consensus' has been reached and how close has it gotten to meeting the sticking points of both sides? Obviously a middle road has been hit on the sensitive points. For instance, it is understood that the demand for a regional council may be acceded to with such an empowerment of it as would be consistent with and subject to the supreme authority of the national government.

Just Think of Peace Dividends

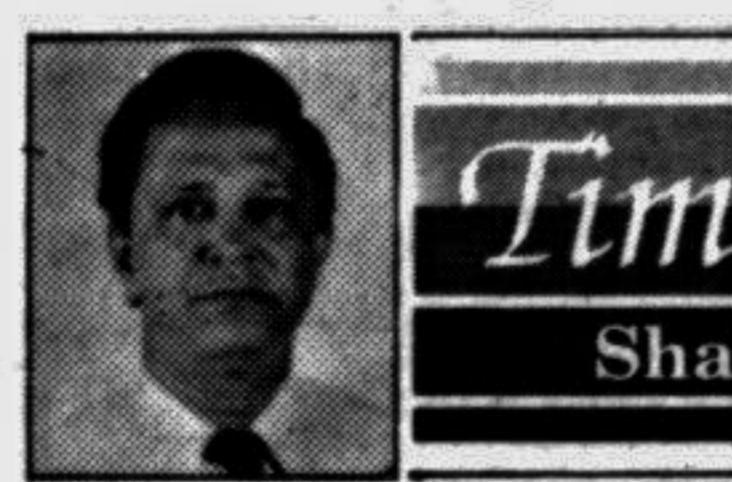
Now is the time for the tribal community to think of harmony and see the whole range of peace dividends awaiting them just a short distance away... It is no doubt imperative, specially in a democracy, for the majority to respect the rights of the minority and thereby win their hearts, but the minority need also to reciprocate the sentiments of the majority to make it a two-way street.

administration (in a composite sense) as a representative of the central government and the MPs from the hill constituencies need to be well-defined. The very democratisation of the hill administration will be a big step forward from what historically has been the headman political culture topped off by dynastic succession of Rajas.

Autonomy in the operative parlance means devolution of powers somewhat in the micro-cosmic way that there are autonomous bodies in the governmental structure and organogram that enjoy a certain operational latitude subject to the policy framework of the government. Granted that in the case of Chittagong Hill Tracts it is a more serious question of righting the wrongs of history like, for example, the displacement of tribal people from their homes and property by the establishment of Kaptai Dam in 1956 which was of quite dubious distinction and relevance.

The kind of power equations the elected hill councils will have in relation to the local

sponsive chord in anyone baffled by the complications of the land rights issue is the idea to set up a land commission with local MPs, Chakma and Boming Rajas, PCJSS representatives and Commissioner of Chittagong Division. Headed by a retired judge of the High Court, the commission will go into the land disputes and settle them promptly and permanently.



On land rights, the point one wishes to stress is this: in an area constituting as much as 10

per cent of the country's land-mass we must be able to ensure excellent living conditions to less than one per cent of our total population the tribals comprise so as to win their hearts in checkmating any possible reverse discrimination against those who have settled in the CHT legally.

What instantly strikes a reader is the waiting time for the peace process to take a tangible shape and acquire substance, a time for exercising responsibility, caution and restraint on both sides, so that the appealant so thoroughly stacked with the prized fruit is not upset by any word or action of unguarded indiscretion.

There are certain good omens for peace that one reads into these facts: (a) PCJSS delegation has held three of the four rounds of negotiations in Dhaka, close to the centre of power; (b) they came all the way from across the border or thereabouts from their 'sanctuary' having made references and cross-references to their colleagues, moderate or extremist. Each time they went back to their camp with the possibility that their posturings at the meetings carried a tacit approval of their comrades; (c) they have had inklings from close quarters as to how the minds of the Indian central and Tripura governments worked on the twin issues of refugee repatriation and political reconciliation with Bangladesh and; (d) the PCJSS and even Shantibahini has often been publicly quick to deny having

weapons, general amnesty and rehabilitation of the armed cadres.

Unanimity has also been reportedly reached on the vital questions of repudiation of armed methods, surrender of

had anything to do with violent incidents that occurred from time to time. Even though PCJSS leader Jyotindriyo Bodhipriyo Larma, alias Shantu Larma, was forced to relinquish his military command over the Shantibahini insurgents and there is Pritilata Larma with a somewhat discordant note around Shantu's dogged pursuit of the peace process with the blessings of a vast majority of tribals must have enhanced his clout and standing with the entire community. Besides, his detractors have not gone on record with any rabid criticism of the peace process as such.

Now is the time for the tribal community to think of communal harmony imbued with the spirit of Buddhist teachings and see the whole range of peace dividends awaiting them just a short distance away—in the horizon. It is no doubt imperative, specially in a democracy for the majority to respect the rights of the minority and thereby win their hearts in a spirit of comradeship; but the minority need also to reciprocate the sentiments of the majority to make it a two-way street.

Chittagong Hill Tracts can thrive and prosper on bee-keeping, cane furniture, rubber and fruit-processing industries, not to speak of the idyllic tourist attraction and old-age venue for temporary foreign visitors it can be bringing prosperity to the people there.

The Institution of Prime Minister

It takes decades to build institutions. But they can be destroyed in no time. They are like a mirror. Once broken, they show the crack even if they are put together with care. What is unfortunate is that the effort to revitalise them is yet to take place

leader of the house. They, who claim to be supporting causes cutting across the party lines, were just mum, adding insult to injury through their silence.

A bunch of irresponsible members, holding no institutional sacrosanct, took over the house. They insulted the prime minister and made much remarks as bring down the dignity of his office. The prime minister went on pleading: Please sit down. Let me speak. But they are not made of the stuff that is malleable. They want their stamp, their way, prime minister or no prime minister.

I have no complaint against them because their type of politics knows no institution, no respect for a prime minister. My complaint is against Vajpayee and Chandra Shekhar. Why did they not intervene? They are as much to blame for exposing the prime minister-ship to ridicule as are those who did not let the prime minister introduce the bill.

There are very few institutions left intact in the country. Mrs Gandhi demolished most of them. She did not destroy some because that would have amounted to destroying herself. One of them was the office of prime minister, which she occupied for some 15 years. She made it more powerful by centralising authority. The prime ministership, however, remained pre-eminent. For the first time since independence, it has been mocked at in the house, which is that of people.

BJP president L K Advani may be justified in saying that the Janata Dal did not respect its own leader. But that is not the issue. The issue is the esteem that a prime minister deserves. Today, the prime minister is from the Janata Dal. Tomorrow, it can be from any other party. What will the office

its name in the Lok Sabha the other day. Its members should have condemned the insult, which was not heaped on an individual but on India's prime minister. But then, as the Shah Commission report on the emergency has said, their desire for self-preservation is the sole motivation for their actions and behaviour. It was the CPI (M) leader, Somnath Chatterjee, who came to the prime minister's rescue. But even he did not

mean if it is devalued? By not protesting against the calumny heaped on the prime minister, the BJP has exposed itself. The party's tall talk about the respect for institutions does not come to anything. It is all politics. But then Advani recently threw a brick also at the office of President with the remark that he acted unethically when he invited Gujral to form the government.

I was not surprised over the silence of Congress. It has a bad conscience. Some of its rulers defiled the institutions. Still it got an opportunity to retrieve

touch upon the larger question: an attack on the institution of prime minister. And that requires a wider debate.

Once a person comes to occupy the position of prime minister, he or she remains a member of a political party but only in a technical sense. The office is bigger than party. Therefore, what happened in the Lok Sabha brought down the prestige of the house and of the nation. Parliament members should seriously consider the repercussions of such an exhibition on the people in the

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The nation owes it to the present and the succeeding generations to ensure that the institutions are not subverted in the future in the manner it has been down to serve the personal ends of any one individual or a group of individuals in or outside the government. What some Janata Dal and the Muslim League members did was inexcusable. But it is strange that the Speaker too did not take anyone to task. Nor did he turn out anyone from the house. He allowed the show to go on as if the individual involved was an ordinary member, not the prime minister.

Yet if the country is to preserve fundamental values of a democratic society, reflected in the institutions, every person, whether an MP, an MLA or a private citizen must play a degree of vigilance. He or she cannot allow the institutions to be

clipped off. Lack of concern landed us in the authoritarian rule of emergency when the press was gagged and effective dissent smothered, followed by a general erosion of democratic values. The scene in the Lok Sabha too has not aroused indignation. Political parties tend to measure every act in the scales of politics. But the intelligentsia, Gujral's biggest lobby, should have reacted on yet another attack on institutions.

It seems that over the years, the dividing line between right and wrong, moral and immoral has ceased to exist. MPs, who should be a model, are the worst examples. Most of them are rabble rousers and it does not matter them whether the venue is parliament or a maidan. The issue is not important but it is what can catch attention and headlines. Without the awareness of what is right and a desire to act according to what is right, there may be no realisation of what is wrong.

If the country is to settle down to a 'space' of clean, efficient and purposeful functioning, institutions should be allowed to work freely and fearlessly. Attacks on the judiciary and the investigating agencies suggest that certain elements are out to finish whatever is left of institutions. The impudent behaviour towards the prime minister appears to be part of their unfinished agenda. Too bad, those who should fight against this appear to have given up even before joining the battle. And others are too busy in their petty, parochial politics.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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To the Editor...

The SAEC Sir, We Bengalees are developing all right, in the upper chamber, because we are becoming so inventive. Now we have invented SAEC. The South Asia Economic Community has been proposed by Bangladesh at the latest SAARC meeting of the heads of states in Maldives.

Why so many name droppings at such quick intervals? If one idea is opposed, another is quickly substituted. Now it has happened the fourth time. The JS can make neither head or tail of all these acronyms coming up in quick succession since the new regime took over in Dhaka. What's wrong (or right) with Bangladesh? What's the urgent and immediate problem, or the emergency measures of the do-or-die category? SAARC's thawing did not come after a decade. How long to wait for SAEC?

When SAEC was proposed, the proposer did not explain what's wrong with SAARC. Is SAARC going to be scrapped? None has the moral courage to bury it if it does not work? Publicly the reasons are known unofficially. Let us announce: "The news about the expiry of SAARC has been exaggerated". Who are going to explain all this high speed diplomacy? Include the confederation idea being discreetly mooted. Where do we go from here? A Husnain Dhaka

The economy Sir, We had an opportunity to read the article written by Mr Shahed Latif titled 'Why the Economy is Not Moving?' published in The Daily Star on the 27th April, 1997. The writer has rightly pointed out the low price of rice and paddy with high-cost of production, the notorious stock market, indecision in economic management, hartal politics and need for a low-cost housing etc. The retarding energy constraint also cannot be ignored. We can here add the following problems. There are administrative systems loss everywhere in Bangladesh. This includes right persons are not in the right posts. Bureaucratic attitudes should be changed. There are late attendance in offices and those without works are found everywhere. As a result, we

cannot get the desired results. If so-called 'fuel' is not available, none works sincerely. But if 'fuel' is available, everyday and night, work can be done like in the passport office, etc.

It is said that so-called secretaries can be managed only by experienced political ministers. We should ponder about it. Cooperative systems should be started in agriculture sector for more production with low-cost of production. The last but not the least point is to learn lessons from Malaysia, Bangkok, Korea, Singapore and Japan who are removing persons known as corrupt.

Quote it! Sir, The sports news carried by different dailies about the inaugural day (May 3) conveyed the avid readers the triumph of Beauty in the 100 metre race for the girls. It is a news but it is more than that she comes of a day-labourer's family. In her first-time appearance in any national games she left the sports think-tanks to take care after this financially handicapped genius. It is high time to improve her financial status and the government—at least the Prime Minister—should pay an instant look toward the emotional girl who could not help stopping her tears after winning the glorious title.

If the main opposition party of our country can present valuable gifts to the cricketers (members of the Bangladesh team), I believe they would not fail to help her. The wise opinion of that day's another hero Nizamuddin, winner of the 100 metre race for the boys, "Antorjatik porjaye safajoye janyo je sujog subitha darkar grame ta pabo kotha?"—allowed the sports boss of our country to spend money in the remote areas for the glorious success in sports of our country. Md Snikdha Akhtar 108, Sir A F Rahman Hall Dhaka University

Weekly holiday Sir, I have been following, with interest, the current discussions in the national press

on the above subject. The short write-up 'Weekly Holiday—Is it a Dead Issue' (DS dt. 5-4-97) deserves special mention in this connection. The author has put forward many arguments, relevant and irrelevant, but his main opinion is that the weekly holiday in Bangladesh should be changed from Friday to Sunday.

It is an incontrovertible fact that Bangladesh is one of the least developed poor countries of the world and our immediate and main concern in this highly competitive modern world should be maximum utilisation of time and resources for national development. People in the developed world are justified in having five or six working days in each week, because on the working days of the week their work output is far in excess of what we achieve. And in Bangladesh, instead of undertaking a crash programme for economic emancipation, we are indulging in useless debates about justification of weekly holidays on Sundays or Fridays. In the modern world of commerce and industry, industrial production, banking and trade like all other essential services is a 24-hour job. So why should we care so much about holidays?

According to the author (and the local business circles) the change of weekly holiday from Sunday to Friday resulted in about 30 per cent decrease in export and import trade. Is there any one who can give us the assurance that the present quantum of trade will increase by 30 per cent on changing the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday? In the education sector in Bangladesh, there are many institutions with five and others with five and a half weekly working days. Education is not a commercial activity and I fail to understand how changing the main weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday will benefit the educational institutions.

For Muslims all prayers including the Juma congregation are divinely prescribed. There is no point in giving up prayers in the name of duty or ignoring duty in the name of prayers. The time and duration of prayers have been very precisely defined. Therefore, a working person, at least in Bangladesh, can arrange his

work schedule in such a way that he can work over-time (without claiming payment) for the time spent on prayers.

Whether we continue to have Fridays as holidays or not will not be of much consequence to Muslims in Bangladesh. They belong to a fraternity of people who have willingly submitted to the will of Allah and His Prophet (SM). It is regrettable that they are often subjected to verbose articles in which writers try to pose as authorities on issues of Islam, in almost the same ways as Mullahs who begin or end giving an opinion, with the formula, 'Riwayat aachhe' or 'Kitabe likhechhe'. Ziaul Mustafa Department of English University of Dhaka

The umpire is partisan

Sir, We have seen that the losers in a cricket or football match generally blame the umpire or the referee for their defeat. Mr M M Rezaul Karim's article titled 'Resignation of the CEC: Why or Why Not' published in the DS on May 1, 1997 unfortunately smacks of the same attitude.

I fail to understand how a senior citizen of the country could see things with one eye only. It appears from the article that the writer is in favour of resignation of the CEC. But why? Is there any clear proof that he was personally involved in any kind of rigging, if at all, in the last general election? The article gives an impression that large-scale rigging took place at different centres under the nose of CEC. He is also blamed for not taking any positive measures against alleged rigging.

The writer has unfortunately totally ignored the reports of foreign observers and the views of overwhelming majority of newspaper reporters. All of them have unambiguously expressed the view that the last general election was free, fair and impartial. The allegation that the foreign observers were not allowed to take a close look at the election process is baseless because they were the ones who could see the voting and ballot-counting process from a close range. The article further gives an impression that the writer is in favour of resignation of the CEC

and appointment of a judge in his place. May I ask, is there any valid reason for his resignation? If all umpires and referees resigned everywhere in the face of protest of the losers, in that case, no person would be available in future for umpiring a match.

The writer knows it well that the post of CEC is a constitutional one and that he cannot be removed arbitrarily before the expiry of his term. He is also well aware of the kind of general election conducted by a judge. We have seen how helpless he was when massive rigging of election took place at Magura, Mirpur and other voting centres. The people expected that he would come out with a press release but he didn't do it presumably for security reasons.

We also know how the sixth general election was held on February 15, 1996. Although the major parties like AL, Jatiya Party and Jamaat etc., boycotted the election, the BNP went ahead with the election. There were massive protests everywhere including Nilphamari, Sirajganj and other places against that election. Many people died and thousands sustained bullet injury in police firing and many leaders were arrested allegedly without warrant but the ruling party ignored all this. This was the kind of 'one-party democracy' practised by the BNP.

We are observing with a sense of horror the activities of the opposition party since the assumption of power by AL after the last general election. Unfortunately, we have not yet come across any situation where the opposition party showed tolerance toward the ruling party. On the very day of the first session of the present Jatiya Sangsad, the opposition started pandemonium, thumping files on the table, hurling abuses at the ruling party and finally walked out. And all these happened before the formal proceedings of the Parliament could start.

The writer unfortunately has never raised his fingers against the misdeeds of BNP. The tendency of playing second fiddle to the irresponsible demands of the opposition party and trivialising the good works of the ruling party will certainly hinder the development of a sound political culture. A

sound political culture is a precondition for the healthy growth of democracy.

Aly M Sayeed House 401, Road 7-A, Gulshan, Dhaka

BTV's 'half-news'

Sir, BTV plays 'safe' with its news broadcasts. Only the pleasant news is shown. The 'happenings' in the private sector are ignored, or receive mini-treatment.

On May 4 evening, the DSE/SEC hot news was suppressed. All the citizens are not heart patients or suffering from brain tumour. Give us all the news, fit to print or broadcast. We are adults. BTV has no 'nose' for news. Plastic surgery won't do, as there is nothing called plastic news. Why the state-controlled BTV is so scared of facts? We can form the opinion. Let us share the responsibility that way.

After the main evening bulletin, there may be a daily 10-minute news review 'What's in the News Today' by two or three independent critics from a panel of experts. A Zabr Dhaka

The civilised and uncivilised

Sir, At the end of the 20th century, Bill Clinton in Washington DC has claimed that the USA is the greatest civilisation on earth. But at the same time, the dictator-corrupt President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and his opponent rebel leader Laurent Kabila on the one hand and the greedy Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the other are trying to establish rule of jungle in Africa and in the Middle East.

We find a war between civilised and uncivilised people is getting momentum in different parts of the world day by day. We are at a loss to understand what to do.

We are all awoken today. We cannot return back to dark ages. We would request the advanced and civilised countries, especially the G7, to help establish democracy and human rights in every nook and corner on this good earth. OH Kabir Wart, Dhaka-1203