

Return on Better Salaries

Within a year in office, the government has moved a juggernaut, as it were, arriving pretty close to incentivising its employees with new pay scales due in a week's time. These are to take effect from July 1 with the wherewithal indicated in the budget expected to be announced on June 12. Although the details of the package of salaries and benefits are yet to be made, the highly charged and animated interest in the subject has been rewarded already with fairly reliable disclosures about the shape of things to come. At the bottom tiers salaries are likely to be double and for the higher echelons increases could well be into the upper half of a hundred per cent. A string of benefits in kind is also visualised — hire-purchase housing facility for the low-income bracket and transportation and refreshment coverages, among others, for them.

The lamentation of government and state sector corporation employees over poor salaries must go now with their Jeremiad replaced by a healthy resolve to work with the hitherto missed target-centred motivation and dedication. Happy and even elated as they might be over their graduation from the under-paid status to a fairly well-paid one, they are widely expected to be conscientious enough in recognising the sacrifices being demanded of the nation to remunerate them well. The tax-base, not so much the rates, is in for broadening with an indirect tax burden presaged coupled with the likelihood of the utility rates going up. The sheer raise in the salaries may well fuel inflation and could increase government borrowings from the banks with an attendant credit squeeze applied to the private sector. Furthermore, there will be pressure mounting on the private sector to provide its employees with comparable salaries and benefits.

With better salaries, those in government employ should be able now to live down the stigma of being oversized, slow-moving, corrupt and inefficient and start delivering goods as expected of them.

The government is in business and mustn't therefore fail to get due return on the new investment it is making on its employees.

Of Poisoned Water

In Sharsha Thana, Jessore there is a village called Samta. The village is as faceless as most villages of Bangladesh are — with little claim to either fame or notoriety. Now that kind of anonymity is no more going to spare it the glare of national importance. It is a village of 5,000 residents with 279 tubewells servicing the community. Ninety-one per cent or 265 of the tubewells give water with dangerous arsenic contamination. Out of the 5,000 populace 334 were investigated and 97.4 of them tested positive for arsenic contamination of a grave level. The School of Environmental Studies at Jadavpur University, Calcutta conducting the investigation in collaboration with the Dhaka Community Hospital, an organisation specialising in surveying and researching arsenic pollution of environment. So, Samta becomes the first village in Bangladesh to be scientifically confirmed as dangerously arsenic contaminated and possibly also the worst polluted one among all where the investigations should now travel.

The big question now is how many Samtas are there? And what to do with them? Cases of arsenic poisoning are being treated in many health facilities of Jessore and Khulna. It cannot be said that any standard treatment is being offered there for, in fact, there is no set treatment for this affliction. Even if they do get well, the victims have to go back to their arsenic-polluted water. So? Some way must be found for stopping arsenic contamination of water.

To do that the source and process of this contamination must first be established with a satisfactory degree of certainty. There hasn't been any remarkable progress in that respect. And the pace and scale of research into the thing are such that do not promise any early breakthrough. Bangladesh is lucky to have received the cooperation of the Jadavpur University in the matter. But that alone may not be enough to devise too soon any effective preventive and save the threatened populations and areas and stop further spread of the problem.

The peril is by now a recognised one. But so far on the government plane we have had only expressions of complacency and not quite of concern. This would hardly do. The government is apparently failing the nation in a very serious matter. This is unacceptable.

Season's Delight?

Bangladeshi mangoes' fabled reputation is replete with anecdotal tales mellifluously singing virtues of the choicest hybrid species — *Fazli*, *Langra*, *Gopalbhog*, *Hinsagar*, to name only the few obvious ones. *Fazli* for one had soothed the gullet of a weary travelling British district official into the wooded interior so much so that he sent a sample across the Seven Seas right over to the dining table of Queen Victoria herself. It was he who named the mango as 'Fazli' after Fazli Begum who had offered him the succulent fruit to quench his thirst.

The season's delight is in a bad way today — thanks to its disorganised production, primitive storage, hay-wire marketing and a pathetic absence of processing industry for the commodity. Even a reliable assessment of the production figure goes by default as is borne out by confusing and contradictory reports about this year's harvest. Originally, a sharp decline in production was forecast owing to the nor'westers, but lately the impression gained from the city markets has been one of reasonable abundance. The mango-growing belt in the neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal may have had a bumper as *Langra* is reportedly selling at Rs 6 per kg there. Why should the going price of classy varieties be as high as between Tk 35 and 50 per kg here when the market is saturated with supplies?

If we can have a perishability - sensitive storage-cum-transportation system encompassing the reverie and railway routes, apart from the cross-river automobile mode, much of the problem relating supplies and pricing will be solved. Then we need to nurture a pre-determined acreage for a predictable output of high quality mangoes. Let's also have fruit-specific storage and processing units to enable us to export mangoes, both in raw and canned forms.

FOR quite some time most of our national dailies and weeklies have remained agog with the issue of South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) proposed to be created by the four existing members of SAARC. The members are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. The membership of India is limited to the seven north-eastern states which are also known as the seven sisters. Out of the four members of SAGQ, Bhutan and Nepal are land-locked, same is the case with the seven Indian states which have been included in the Quadrangle. Only Bangladesh is privileged to have an open sea access with sea ports. By international grading of economic status, three members of the SAGQ are in the category of LCDs (least developed countries) and if the seven non-eastern states of India are considered together on the basis of their level of economic development, they could be clubbed in the same category with the others. So any initiative to develop such an area through a joint effort with the assistance of internal and external expertise and resources could have been a welcome step in most part of the world. But unfortunately that has not happened with the initiative of SAGQ. The authorities in Pakistan as well as a section of intellectuals in Bangladesh have strongly opposed the idea of creation of SAGQ. The opposing stand of Pakistan may have some grounds, though not very convincing, but the stand taken by the opposition party of Bangladesh is not that easy to fathom. What is most disturbing is their effort to paint SAGQ as a threat to our national sovereignty and independence. By the same note, the section of the intellectuals are also projecting themselves as the protectors of our independence.

Painted Picture

Let us have a look on some of the views expounded by a section of our intelligentsia on SAGQ or sub-regional grouping as a whole. First, SAGQ is 'ties of Gordian knot' which runs parallel to SAARC and undermines the importance, interest and functions of the latter. Second, SAGQ will offer a 'corridor' or 'transit facilities' to India which will be used to crush the insurgency in north-eastern states. In a context of 'intensive war' between India and China, the facility will be used to ferry military personnel and war machines by India. Third, other sub-regional groupings like Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg (BENELUX—Christians), the

should not bring that much of objection and protest.

Here also comes the question whether SAGQ runs parallel to SAARC and undermines the influence and spirit of it. This reminds us the long persisting debate of multilateralism versus regionalism in the approach of development. It has by now been accepted that regionalism is not a stumbling block but a building block to multilateralism. Same should be the case between regional and sub-regional arrangements. If SAGQ promotes the development of linked infrastructures between and among the member countries, then these facilities could also be used by other members of SAARC to direct their trade with and investment (if any) in this area. Advantage of strategic location puts Bangladesh ahead of others to derive the benefits of SAGQ in promoting trade with inside and outside nations. So SAGQ could work as a building block for fostering the economic cooperation process envisaged under SAARC. This at the end will help the implementation of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in the long term. SAGQ in that way will work as a synergy to the success of SAARC.

The second point raised is regarding the hypothetical use of the 'corridor or transit facilities' by India for military purpose in a possible scene of war between India and China and for suppressing the insurgency in the north-eastern states. Any man of intellect and common sense can visualise the emerging alliance between China and Russia to face the perceptible threat from NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) in general and from the United States in particular. China as an aspirant superpower needs a peaceful neighbour. In this scenario, if the United States looks for a powerful front-line state to counter China it has two choices open. It can look forward to the ASEAN countries as a whole or/and to reorient a friendly foreign policy with India. But in a hypothetical nerve-war situation between

China-Russia and NATO India is more likely to remain non-aligned or bent toward the former. Leaving aside this angle of future relation, the present trend of developments between India and China indicates that both countries are converging for a peaceful coexistence. In his last visit to Pakistan in December 1996, the Chinese President Jiang Zemin advised his host to develop a neighbourly relationship with India on the basis of Indo-China model. That amply shows a faith and a maturity of Chinese policy towards its immediate powerful neighbour. So the nourishment of an imagination of a war between India and China should not get any ground to the sensible people.

The second aspect is the insurgency problem of India. Just like any other regional and multilateral agreement, SAGQ must contain many 'yes' and 'no' clauses regarding the use of the transit facilities. The possibility of using the facilities for military purpose could strictly be barred by incorporating such clauses. Not to forget, any party to any international agreement keeps the sovereign right to withdraw from any agreement on the ground of sovereignty and independence. So any breach of the spirit of agreement could effectively be checked by the withdrawal clause.

Third, giving religious colour for justification of closer economic relation is simply preposterous. The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) has remained a non-starter in fostering economic relations between its predominantly Muslim members, whereas ASEAN is flourishing with members of different religious beliefs. Again, Pakistan could not have exploited us economically and organised one of the biggest genocides in the history of mankind when we were a part of it, at least if the religious bond could have a deterrent effect.

Fourth, those who understand the inner dynamics of a developing region, they must be aware of the power of the 'big

push'. This big push is the investment for production, development of infrastructure and social well-being (education and health) of the citizens of a country. The SAGQ region as a whole is extremely deficient of finance required for development of infrastructure. So development in this area with the international funding agencies (in case of SAGQ the WB, ADB have shown interest to provide fund to different projects) along with the local finance cannot be delayed for an automatic inner simulation of factors of growth. Rather the investment will work as catalyst to stimulate and utilise the existing factors through backward and forward linkage. Take the example of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge (JMB) here. The JMB alone is expected to usher in a new era of economic activities in the whole of North Bengal. Again taking the advantages of the JMB, Sirajganj is going to house the fourth export processing zone (EPZ) in Bangladesh. So it remains to be seen how the 'factors of growth' can remain stagnant and immune to the development of infrastructure and other investment for further economic development.

Finally, it is surprising to see that the concept of Indian 'economic aggression' is being propagated by a party which actually assisted to foster that very aggression, if there is anything like this. Let us take the help of the trade figures between Bangladesh and India for the period of 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995. During this period, as per the figures provided by the *Direction of Trade Statistics* of the IMF, Bangladesh imported \$170 million, \$284 million, \$380 million, \$486 million and \$954 million respectively from India. Imports from India grew by 70 per cent from 1990 to 1992. Since then the growth of imports from previous year were 34 per cent, 30 per cent and 96 per cent for 1993, 1994 and 1995 respectively. Look at the phenomenal surge in imports in the year 1995 over that in 1994. Taking into a conservative account of smuggling for 1995, the

total imports from India must go double to around \$2000 million. Leaving the unofficial trade figure aside, import trade grew on an average by 60 per cent since 1992 and 1995.

On export scene, the assessment brings out a very dismal picture of the recent past. Export growth could not literally match or could not be pushed to match growth of imports from India. The figures for exports to India for 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995 were \$22 million, \$4 million, \$13 million, \$26 million and \$36 million respectively. Blaming India alone for this miserable show cannot answer the whole spectrum of failure of the then government. If someone leaves a floodgate open and if flood comes during the period of his supervision, then he should not try to shift the blame on others. Hypocrisy should have a rule also.

But I have a liberal view on this development because this is not abnormal or unnatural in the arena of international trade. Take for example of the trade relations of Canada and Mexico with the United States. Each year about 70 to 75 per cent of their total trade is done with the giant neighbour. And in 1995, 42 per cent of total international merchandise trade of NAFTA had been done between them. But what marks the difference between Mexico and Canada trade with the US and ours with India is the share of exports. The United States absorbs the major part of its neighbours' exports while India does not do the same for us.

Conclusion

This is a problem and we have to address it. How this could be done? There is no magic formula or therapy to solve the problem overnight. On bilateral front we have to pressure India to be reasonable with its policy of trade so that the tariff as well as non-tariff barriers are minimised. Quality and price factors of our products also may not be overlooked. It would be nonsense to only argue that our products are better price and quality wise but cannot penetrate into the Indian market because of tariff and non-tariff barriers. If that is so, we would have seen a reverse flow of smuggling. If that is so, we would have seen a reverse flow of smuggling.

The writer has recently completed his Doctoral Research from the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

Cooperation through Regional Arrangement

SAGQ and Answers to Some Questions

by Munim Kumar Barai

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South Africa and Bangladesh: Partners in Progress

by Runi Khan back from South Africa

New South Africa is now undergoing the tests of freedom, upholding the responsibilities of freedom, and facing the challenges of freedom, through a political system of democracy through consensus. This process calls for a story of its own and arguably there will be useful lessons for Bangladesh to draw upon

THE recent historic visit to Bangladesh by President Nelson Mandela heralds the beginning of a new relationship between the two countries. As we celebrated twenty-five years of Independence, so South Africa celebrated three years of freedom on 27th of April 1997.

South Africa was for decades a symbol and exemplar of global injustice. The problems of the 'colour line' was exposed at its worst, as the Apartheid violated the world's basic human rights and became the 'howling pot of human misery'. In Apartheid, South Africa, more relentlessly and for longer than elsewhere, blacks knew both the demoralising inner lash and the violent outer lash of what Ben Okri, the Nigerian novelist called 'the skins anointed pain'.

The struggle against Apartheid was a long sustained struggle of resistance, which unified black and white, the majority of South Africa and men and women all over the world. From the injustice of Apartheid and the wounds of three hundred years of racial conflict, the new South Africa has risen, the proverbial Phoenix from the ashes, not only a miracle of reconciliation and unity, but also as the best economic hope for the marginalised continent of Africa.

New South Africa is now undergoing the tests of freedom, upholding the responsibilities of freedom, and facing the challenges of freedom, through a political system of democracy through consensus. This process calls for a story of its own and arguably there will be useful lessons for Bangladesh to draw upon.

To the Editor...

Hepatitis E Virus

Sir, Hepatitis E virus (HEV) is the major cause of enterically transmitted hepatitis worldwide. Hepatitis E cases are also common in Bangladesh. During the past decade, much has been learned about the virology of HEV and diagnostic tests for HEV infection have improved considerably. Many Hepatitis E outbreaks have consisted of several thousand cases; the largest reported to date, involving over 100,000 cases, occurred in north-west China in 1986-88. In population-based studies of Hepatitis E outbreaks, clinical attack rates of 1-15 per cent have been reported, ranging from 3-20 per cent among adults and 0.2 to 10 per cent among children under 15 years of age.

Hepatitis E virus is transmitted primarily by the faecal-oral route. In most reported outbreaks, faecally contaminated drinking water has been identified as the likely vehicle of transmission. Unlike Hepatitis A virus (HAV), which is also transmitted by the faecal-oral route, person-to-person transmission of HEV appears to be uncommon, even in settings with poor environmental sanitation. Reported secondary attack rates for households with Hepatitis E cases have ranged from 0.7 to 2.2 per cent compared with 50 to 75 per cent among susceptible contacts in households with hepatitis cases.

Clinical signs and symptoms in patients with symptomatic HEV infection are similar to those of other types of viral hepatitis. The most commonly reported signs and symptoms include malaise (95-100 per cent), anorexia (66-100 per cent), nausea/vomiting (29-100 per cent), abdominal pain (37-82 per cent), fever (23-97 per cent) and hepatomegaly (10-85 per cent). Other less frequent signs and symptoms include diarrhoea, arthralgia, pruritus and urticarial rash.

The reservoir of HEV is unknown. It is possible that an environmental reservoir may exist because Hepatitis E outbreaks have been associated with faecally contaminated drinking water. Prevention relies primarily on the provision of clean drinking water. Epidemiological data suggest that boiling water may inactivate HEV. However, no data are available regarding the efficacy of chlorination of water in inactivating HEV and studies are needed to identify other appropriate environmental control measures. Experimental vaccines have been developed that offer the potential to prevent Hepatitis E.

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Political 'will' and 'shall'

Sir, No political group in power can establish or carry out reforms in the following sectors, without political and apolitical consensus:

1. Infringement and poor education, the country remains an enigma of the First and Third Worlds — a reality that provides massive opportunity for relations with Bangladesh.

2. The possibilities of importing primary and secondary products from South Africa is massive. The country has a highly developed manufacturing sector in non-ferrous metals, basic iron and steel products, machinery and equipment, electrical machinery, motor vehicles and accessories, processed food, beverages, industrial, chemicals, plastic products, wood and wood products amongst others.

3. The momentum for reform came into force with South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 and acceptance into the world economy. There was broad consensus that the pre-existing trade regime was stifling growth and employment by protecting inefficient industries, promoting inward-oriented capital intensive investment and discouraging non-traditional exports due to internationally uncompetitive input costs. The new South African government, therefore, proceeded to detail the phasing of tariff reduction for each individual tariff line to ensure firms have time to adjust. In certain cases it went beyond the World Trade Organization directives, especially where it was felt that speedier lifting of protective measures would be more conducive to becoming internationally competitive. South Africa has also moved increasingly away from trading in primary commodities into manufactures which now accounts for more than 50 per cent of non-gold exports and some 40 per cent of total exports.

4. Significant and accelerated reductions in tariffs and duties on goods going into the country also makes South Africa a new and an attractive target market for South Asian countries. Bangladesh could be looking at exporting textiles, garments, leather and leather products, agricultural produce, tea, jute and jute products, printing and packaging, ceramics, kitchen and tableware and many other consumer-oriented products. Although many may have visited South Africa and conducted a preliminary investigation of the market conditions, no serious business has yet commenced except for one major contract recently awarded in the Railway sector under the Ministry of Communication.

5. There are certainly many opportunities for exchange at a business to business level, and perhaps, more critically at a non-governmental level. Organisations such as Grameen Bank, BRAC and Gonoshasthya Kendra have already attracted the interest of the South African government, therefore, proceeded to detail the phasing of tariff reduction for each individual tariff line to ensure firms have time to adjust. In certain cases it went beyond the World Trade Organization directives, especially where it was felt that speedier lifting of protective measures would be more conducive to becoming internationally competitive. South Africa has also moved increasingly away from trading in primary commodities into manufactures which now accounts for more than 50 per cent of non-gold exports and some 40 per cent of total exports.

6. The attendance of President Mandela at our Independence celebrations, amidst an extraordinary busy schedule that has taken him to South East Asia, the US, Africa and Europe in the past few months, is testament to South Africa's interest in and commitment to South Asia in general, and Bangladesh, in particular.

7. Our two nations, young democracies both, striving for development and an improved quality of life for all our peoples, have enormous synergies and potential for mutually beneficial relations at almost every level. We could certainly grow and progress together through concerted effort between private business groups and government, and the partners in progress.

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9. The separation of the judiciary from the executive is a reality that has been carried out so far for 50 years? Why can't we do it? Therefore, how then present regime can do it? There is no backing of history; and the society hasn't enough experience and guts to turn the table.

10. Freedom of the electronic media when 70-80 per cent of the population (illiterates and semi-illiterates) have no access to the print media. Theory says freedom, for practice, there is no infrastructure and 'will'. Willing is not enough! The new materials might be there in the kitchen, but where are the chefs? Before the dinner table comes the pantry. The dressing has to be right. We are not in a decorative mood. Operation clean-up will continue for some time, sociologically and politically speaking.

11. Campus violence to campus non-violence to campus politics. The teachers and the students are infected with the political virus. Seek a solution from the teachers — how to teach!

12. Noisy JS, or parliamentary culture does not depend on grafting. Ask the politicians, but do not listen to their excuses, because they don't believe in themselves, and go for non-political 'civilian' caretaker interim government!

13. What is left? Status quo. A Zab Dhaka

The trio

Sir, Fifty years ago on the 15th August, the Indian sub-continent achieved independence from the British Raj after 200 years of domination. It was a great day for all the people of the sub-continent who could not believe even in early 1947 that the British would ever leave the sub-continent.

During their rule, especially after India came under direct control of the British government, they established rule of law, developed an efficient judiciary, efficient public adminis-

tration, efficient banking system, efficient postal and telegraph system, efficient service etc., which by and large made the life of the common people happy and more or less contented. There were discipline, transparency and accountability. It produced eminent scholars, historians, doctors, scientists.

Yet we were a dependent nation.

So the joy of independence knew no bounds. Those who remember the day cannot forget the joy of hope and aspiration. So much was the joy that in Calcutta which were the scene of communal riots for months, Hindus and Muslims instead of killing embraced each other exchanged sweets. We, who witnessed the event then, want to relive the joy of the great day.

Let us celebrate the 50th anniversary jointly with India and Pakistan. This is also a great opportunity to start an era of mutual understanding between the Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

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