

BGMEA Has a Lot to Do

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) seems to have at last woken up to some of its responsibilities. Initially when the sector was growing at an accelerated pace, we turned a blind eye to many of the irregularities, including violation of labour laws, lack of service rules or their manipulation and absence of safety standards at the garment factories. All because this fledgling but highly potential industry needed to maintain its competitive edge over products from rival countries in the international market. Today our garments industry has come a long way and the situation must change.

For a start, the BGMEA has announced that all 13 lakh employees in the garments sector would be insured under a plan whereby they will be entitled to a compensation claim worth Tk 40,000 each for a nominal annual premium of Tk 10. What is so amazing is that the scheme would be finalised within just seven days. When such a massive task is expected to be accomplished within so short a time, there should not be any doubt about the BGMEA's potential for catering to the wider welfare need of its employees. The BGMEA is yet to fix a reasonable minimum wage for garments workers. Rules for leave, medical facilities etc are almost non-existent and above all, the working conditions in the factories are mostly deplorable.

It took so many deaths for the BGMEA to come up with the insurance scheme. What more price the garments employees will have to pay for better terms and conditions of service?

We suggest that provision for an automatic switching-off device — common in factories all over the world, and one that gets activated through sensor whenever there is a short-circuit, fire or smoke — be made mandatory for every garments factory. Second, the breadth of staircases must be standardised. There should, moreover, be a provision for alternative exit routes, say, in the shape of metallic and spiralling staircases. Lastly, as the BGMEA has itself suggested, the fire evacuation drill will be of utmost importance for training the employees in the art of making emergency exits.

Collection Shortfall

Lest its budgetary calculations are crossed, the government better pay heed to an early warning conveyed through a Financial Express report published on Saturday. This dwelt on the fact that tax revenue collection in the '96-'97 financial year fell short of the target by Tk six billion. The current budget's expense account, both in its revenue and developmental components, is crucially reliant on collection of taxes whose net has been cast wider this year than before.

The government's deficit-financing in the last fiscal as reflected through its borrowing from the banking system amounted to Tk 14.97 billion. This resulted in a liquidity crisis for the banks and a credit squeeze on the private sector without any commensurate gain achieved in terms of improved performance by the heavily subsidised public sector. If the remittances from Bangladeshi workers abroad had not increased and the balance on the foreign account failed to register the slight improvement it did last year, the economy would have been left badly misshapen for the current year.

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) has ascribed poor tax collection to congestion at the Chittagong port wrought of frequent strikes, court cases at the rate of 300 per month to settle disputes, subsequent release of goods at concessional duties and money spent by the NBR on legal defence.

Now that the use of private equipment has been unequivocally allowed at the Chittagong port, the constraint in levy-collection should be deemed have been removed. At any rate, the port needs to be freed from the clutch of regressive trade unionism and intrusive local politics. The bottom-line question that arises is: how efficient and incorruptible the tax administrators are proving in the performance of their duties? Large-scale tax evasion should be normally ruled out in a country where there are not even a million on the paying list.

Bad Roads

The Dhaka City Corporation has asked for a government grant of Tk 153 crore from a shoe-string national budget. The objective is hardly developmental in the sense of being forward-looking, rather it is related to repair work which, in most cases, prove to be patch-worth and thence back to square one.

The DCC has retold the tale of indiscriminate road-digging by DESA, WASA, Titas Gas and T&T and that of incessant rains as reasons for the roads to be pot-holed and the drains to crack. While there is pervasive water-logging now in the rainy season, there will be only cracks, fissures and undulating stretches during the dry season.

Why there should have been haphazard excavations of roads when a coordinating body existed under the joint leadership of the LGRD Minister and the DCC Mayor? Although it was less than an apology for a city government concept we had advocated for the metropolis' march towards the 21st century, yet one deserves to know where the co-chairmanship experiment failed. This basic leadership problem needs to be resolved once for all.

The DCC under the present leadership of Mayor Hanif has been preoccupied with the follies of other agencies largely glossing over its own drawbacks. The road repair work has been chronically shoddy. Let's see a change there.

Is the Political-Economic Stability under Threat?

The deeper questions of who rules the country in a democracy and what roles the economic interest groups play in the decision making will have to be clearly answered and practised. Otherwise, the social compact that one expects will be eroded in no time.

JULY 1997 has been a hot month in senses more than one. Apart from being a hot summer month with heavy rains and floods in a number of northern districts, it has witnessed some most significant events like three 'hartals' strike in Chittagong port, death of 26 innocent workers in the outbreak of fire in a number of garment factories in Dhaka, vandalism in some industries including one in EPZ, ugly fights in the dorms of Eden Girls' University College and in Surjya Sen Hall of residence of Dhaka University, the indecent behaviour of the overzealous fundamentalists at the Eid-e-MiladunNabi function in the premises of the Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh Bank's (BB's) hot pursuit of 'defaulters' for their loan recovery and threats meted out to its Governor by some of the defaulters. President Shahabuddin's unsparing criticism of the political parties of June 29th but reverberated through the media in July in using students for their narrow political gains, court judgment on the Sheema rape and murder case, and public beating and killing of suspected child-lifters.

On the financial side, the government has been borrowing heavily from the banking and non-banking sectors and is proposing to set up a bond-financed Industrial Development Fund with Tk 2000 crore. All these have potentially destabilising effects on the political-economic stability of the country which it has been enjoying over the last year or so and badly needed for its smooth development. It will be worthwhile exploring the implications of some of these issues briefly. Some other issues especially those of financial sector will be dealt with in the next week's column.

The 'hartals' of the 3rd, 15th and 30th July seem to have ominous forebodings. The half-day 'hartal' on July 3rd enforced by BNP, the major opposition party, against the

budget of 1997-98 was not necessary since it expressed its views on the budget in the Parliament both in words and deeds. Apart from giving its critical views, it also boycotted the session when the budget was placed for approval in the parliament, which is a demonstration of strong disapproval of the budget and is an acceptable parliamentary behaviour. These were fully reported in almost all the newspapers. Why was it then necessary to call a 'hartal', a totally disruptive act for the economy? If the opposition was interested in disseminating their disapproval of the budget directly to the people, they could hold rallies, marches and public meetings, on the one hand, and write articles in the newspapers or buy pages of newspapers and television time, on the other. That would have avoided the huge loss of national product and yet served their purpose.

A 'hartal' is a 'bonus' holiday for the officers, employees and staff of the government establishment and publicly owned enterprises but for a businessman who has to earn his living by producing and selling his goods and services, it is a dead loss because he doesn't produce the output/service he can sell and yet has to bear the burden of paying salaries and wages to his employees and staff for the day. Income is foregone due to 'hartal', but the costs have remained to be borne by him. Politicians are in the habit of thinking, or should one say, fooling themselves as well as people, that by enforcing 'hartal' they have won the support of the people. If by enforcing 'hartal' they think that people are fully behind them, why don't any one of these parties get hundred percent votes at the time of the election?

However, coming back to the main line of argument, for BNP, the underlying reason for their 'hartal' on July 3rd seems to be a pre-play warm up session before they get to the field for the tough and protracted game of 'hartal' to overthrow the government, just to repeat what Awami League along with Jamaat and Jatiya Party did during 1994-96. During those days, about 90 people were killed, thousands were injured, more than 2000 cars and buses were burnt out and hundreds of crores of taka worth of products and exports were lost. But who cares?

democratic party has definitely been tarnished. BNP leadership perhaps should realise that it would do better by projecting itself as a sincere democratic and secular party believing in market economy with social security for the poor rather than a half-fundamentalist obscurantist party. However, the main reason why the religious parties enforced the July 15th 'hartal' was perhaps to assert their political strength on a religious issue. It looked like they were itching for a fight and gave a show of it after the following Friday prayer. There is, however, a

in their hands. The government or any other patriot or well-meaning person or group couldn't do anything. The underlying lesson of this is that any organized group can hold the country hostage for its own benefit. That means, a sufficiently powerful mafia or terrorist group can bring the country's administration to its knees and the economy to a grinding halt without any consideration for the woes and weals of the innocent citizens. The question that immediately springs to one's mind is whether this is the pattern of society that the country shed so much blood and tears for its independence? Politicians, social thinkers and policy makers will have to think very hard on how to avoid such dangerous situations.

To conclude, it looks like none of the 'hartals' of the month of July was really necessary to promote the causes that their proponents were saying that they were promoting. Their purposes could have been better served in other decent and democratic ways. The real reasons for enforcing these 'hartals' were politics and narrow group interests which were served at the expense of the interests of the ordinary citizens who are growers, producers and sellers of their goods and services. Ordinary citizens and the country as a whole have lost out while politicians and some interest groups have gained. But how can a democratically elected government accept it?

As the highly respected President of the country Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has said recently, 'The politicians want to get to power by any means fair or foul'. Since the politicians are ultimately responsible for everything good or bad happening in the country, they must realise that this is not a fair game that democracy should ensure. It is a game of muscles and crude power. It has to change, and change for the better, if the country has to be placed on the road to sanity, decency and development that everyone talks about. If not, one can just write off the future of the country and condemn it to where it has been wallowing for so long.



INSIGHT
by
Kabir U Ahmad

Coming to July 15th 'hartal' enforced by Jamaat and other fundamentalist parties, the same question has to be asked: Was it necessary? In spite of the unanimously passed resolution in the Parliament on the outrageous act of some fanatic Jews against prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) which represented national expression of disgust against such act, the Bangladeshi religious fundamentalists thought it fit to call a day-long 'hartal' which no other countries of the entire Muslim world did. There was simply no need for a 'hartal', a totally disruptive activity, and all the comments made above equally apply in this case too. What was most unfortunate in this case was the support given to this 'hartal' by the principal opposition party, BNP.

Its image as a secular and

deeper issue here about the religious fundamentalists who were allies of Awami League during in two-year-long agitation during 1994-96 and are now becoming the allies of BNP in its agitation movement against the government. In the process of alternating their alignment with anti-government agitators, they are gaining in strength which is seemingly becoming a threat to the 'spirit of liberation' that the two major parties seem to uphold so

The day-long 'hartal' of July 30th presents a different story. The SKOP and the government failed to come to a settlement on their 8-point demands and hence the enforcement of 'hartal' and the unpleasant incidents of the day. It was again a show of force by the workers. The economy became a hostage

Fostering Once More a National Reawakening

by Nilratan Halder

At a time when we need more and more Araj Alis and Abdul Wahabs among us — particularly in the village community — to keep the flame of knowledge alight, the so called fundamentalists have struck a serious blow at the pursuit of knowledge.

RABINDRANATH in his dedicatory preface to the *Viswaspatriya*, a book of physical science he authored in his own lucid style, has apologetically admitted to Satyendranath Basu his infringement on an alien domain. But at the same time, the poet has made it clear how enthusiastically he had been following science subjects since his childhood, and about the preparation he took in writing the book. He made extensive use of a few definitive books as ready reference, the poet declared. We do not know how the Bangladeshi scientist of Boson fame, whose name has become permanently associated with Einstein for his contribution to solving the seminal theory of the great scientist responded to this apologetic note of dedication. Tagore realised the need for preparing uninitiated minds for science, to be open to rational and pragmatic appraisal of all phenomena of nature and human life. So he set himself the task of writing a science book.

A simple man of a little known village Lamchari near Barisal town did not produce anything comparable to the scale of literary works by Tagore but his quest for truth is no less impressive. Of the 86 years the surveyor-cum-farmer lived, he spent 70 years in pursuit of knowledge. Self-taught, this man Araj Ali Matabbar has indeed jolted many a conventional idea and belief of our time. The originality and clarity of his thoughts and perception as expressed in his books *Sattyer Sandhane* (in search of truth) and *Sristi Rahasya*

(Mystery of creation) are simply amazing. Rabindranath would have been pleased to delegate the task of promoting science among people to this man of the soil.

Araj Ali Matabbar was lucky not to face ostracisation or a bizarre trial at the hands of religious extremists or gangs of *fatwabas*. He was however imprisoned for about two years for his radical views. In his inimitable simple style the sage of our time has dug out life's truth from his personal experience, observation and relentless study of books of science, theology, philosophy and almost every subject under the sun. Indeed, he achieved truth the hard way in the Tagorean sense where the poet loves truth only more so because he has known the daunting challenge to achieve that.

Abdul Wahab, a freedom fighter with an open mind and in quest of answers to questions relating to life and nature, of Salimabad village has not however been particularly fortunate in his pursuit of knowledge. A most able candidate to be the torch-bearer of the celebrated Matabbar, Wahab has been humiliated by the leading *fatwabas* gang of his area. In a trial held under their leadership and in presence of a few hundred of their cronies, this man of progressive and scientific ideas was found guilty and awarded

the death penalty. Desperate and fervent appeals from his wife and children luckily made the so-called judges softer the penalty. Abdul Wahab had to go through the indignity of carrying round his neck *shozi* strung together, a conventional punishment meted out only for the most scandalous types of crime, and then promise he would never study any book other than the scriptures. It should be mentioned that Wahab not only had developed interests in various subjects but was also able to imbibe the spirit in a large number of youths of his area. Himself an avid reader of books, mostly those of modern science, he lent them to the interested youths for studying from his own rich collection.

This enviable job the man was quietly accomplishing. Only not to the liking of those religious fundamentalists. They wanted to silence his voice once for all and also bring an end to the spread of progressive ideas and knowledge among the reading circle he organised painstakingly. They were able to make him swear things against his will. Now the man is known to be fleeing his tormentors. We do not know what the common people think of him and how they view the staging of a trial for him. However it is not very difficult to understand that even if they did not approve

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of the excesses by the religious extremists, they dared not protest the barbarity in the name of a trial the holders claim as sanctioned by religion. Then there must be a protest against this act of violation of an individual's rights. Our constitution guarantees the freedom of thoughts and expression. These fundamental human rights also enshrined in the UN charter cannot be allowed to be undermined by a few zealots.

At a time when we need more and more Araj Alis and Abdul Wahabs among us — particularly in the village community — to keep the flame of knowledge alight, the so called fundamentalists have struck a serious blow at the pursuit of knowledge.

This is not the way of taking our society to the new millennium. If the politicians fail to understand this or wilfully neglect their role, society will certainly pay a heavy price, ultimately. Even those who claim to be upholding secularism are not doing any credit to it by exhibiting religious pretension.

Then what about others, say, social and other leaders? It is very heartening to know that the Bigyan Chetana Parishad organised a rally in Nagarpur to protest the trial of Abdul Wahab. A member of the parishad in his speech demanded that a centre for open discourses be established exactly on the same place where Wahab was subjected to limitless humiliation.

interpretations. Instead, our politics has mostly fostered religious dogmas and failed to take a tough stand against elements who have used — better say abused — religion to derive material or political benefits. Such intolerance is what breeds communalism and religious persecution. We have been witness to a number of illegal and cruel incidents where the *fatwabas* have taken law in their own hands and subjected innocent people, mostly women, to ordeals of the Middle Age-style.

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OPINION

"Brutal Student Politics"

Professor Mehrunnisa Ahmed

I congratulate *The Daily Star* on its editorial captioned 'Brutal Student Politics' in its 24th July '97 issue. It is not only praiseworthy but very much thought-provoking.

During the last hartal called by the opposition party, I was shocked to see pictures of girl students running like street urchins, picketing poor *rickshaw-walas* who had to take the risk of coming out for their livelihood. My immediate reactions were 'what sort of education they are getting in these educational institutions' and 'what kind of mothers they will make to our future generation'.

Now, again, the explosion of a bombshell in the form of violent clash between female students of rival political groups at Eden Girls' University College rocked the whole campus and surpassed all past records of female hostility and aggressiveness. The brutality and cruelty that they exhibited during the clash has tarnished the fair and beautiful name of 'womanhood'.

Woman, an epitome of love and dignity, seems to have become a myth in the eye of present generation, who has lost all consciousness of our heritage of social and moral values and code of behaviour. Such extreme violence in women of our society is unthinkable and simply alien to feminine nature — unless they lose their sanity for some plausible reasons. I repeat, what sort of mother they would make to their own children.

In this connection, I invite valued opinions of other readers.

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Rain harvesting

Sir, It is hoped that the government have some rain-harvesting main or pilot project in operation, in view of the presence of arsenic in ground water in some areas.

Pilot projects create awareness of small and traditional technologies, much neglected these days due to pressurised market-oriented projects of the foreign donors. The state, as facilitator, may not compete with private enterprise.

Let there be total conversion of names of the present and future generations in Bangla, for

social and moral norms and codes of behaviour and help them to face the world in future with self-confidence and self-respect in befitting manner, otherwise their children will be easily misguided and trapped by outside evil forces as is evident by what we have recently witnessed — the 'reign of terror', unleashed by the female students on the Eden Girls' College University campus.

The teachers of our country, especially of colleges and universities, have a much greater role to play in the life of students for they are dealing with adolescents — an age of extreme emotions and sensibility. Guidance and counselling become easier if the teachers could earn love and respect of their students. It is difficult though, but not impossible for a proficient and sincere teacher — a bit of sympathy, some understanding and, of course, quite a good deal of patience are needed.

All this, again, greatly depends on our respected leaders who have the power and responsibility to lead the nation to a better future of peace and prosperity and social justice. Our earnest request to them is to establish healthy and constructive politics. Create a peaceful and tension-free atmosphere, essential for the welfare, progress and development of our country, one of the poorest in the world. Our younger generation, the real backbone of the country and torch-bearers of posterity, must be protected and saved from being destroyed in the disastrous whirlpool of present politics.

The writer is the Registrar of Central Women's University, Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Misplaced generosity'

Sir, I fully support the views of Mr M Kasem of Moghbazar, Dhaka, which he expressed in his letter under the above caption published in these columns on July 21, 1997.

The government donated one lakh taka to Mahbub's family, whose dead body was discovered inside the wheel carriage of an aircraft of Bangladesh Biman. This act of the government surprised us greatly. How could the family be entitled to receive a gift for the rash act of the son? His action might have resulted in a plane crash and all the passengers might have perished. Mahbub had lost his life in the debut but he might have taken many more lives with him. So, honouring the person as a hero is really too much.