

A Bold Decision

The government has taken a commendable decision of cancelling the disputed GSP certificates. It was a hard one to take particularly in view of the inexorably advancing EU deadline, the BGMEA leaders' opposition to it, and the cacophony of contradictory opinions for and against such a measure.

The annulling decision is however far from being a final act in the context of the problem and has to be followed up with vigorous campaign to regain the confidence of a market that accounts for more than 60 percent of our export in the garment sector. It looks like strong, persuasive and imaginative diplomatic skills will be required on the part of the Bangladesh government to impress the fact upon a complaining EU that the house has been cleared; exporters tampering with the GSP facility have been penalised and Bangladesh is ready to do justice to a facility offered as boost to its export. Because business is all about trust and goodwill and it takes time to remove suspicion and remove trust.

Apart from a timely reprieve from a looming threat, the other major aspect of this decision is the challenge it pits one of its own agencies — Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) against. In fact, the government is now morally bound to go for a thorough probe into the EPB to find out the culprits responsible for issuing false certificates. The people in the government who connived with some immoral exporters have to be brought to the book. Given the all pervasive trend of politicisation and tunnel vision that exists at all levels of our society, it is going to be a tough decision to implement. But this has to be implemented not only for the record of this government's efficiency and its stand against corruption but also for Bangladesh's future in international business.

The decision has the potential to be regarded as a bold and far-sighted only if the government can show the political will and determination to take on everything that comes with it in a holistic manner and certainly not as a trouble-shooting cameo or a bailing out measure.

Why Patent Old Knowledge?

A national workshop on Plant Genetic Resources that began in the city on Tuesday has rightly expressed its concern at the gradual depletion of genetic resources in the country and biopiracy by transnational corporations or individuals from the developed West. The attempt to establish intellectual property rights on plant resources should be viewed as an infringement on the traditional knowledge of the developing countries. Rich in biodiversity such countries have long been familiar with the medicinal qualities of herbs, shrubs, trees and creepers and also have successfully been using them for treatment of different human ailments. Now some people in the West want to monopolise their control over plant materials.

Clearly, the threat comes both from within and outside. First, we need to protect whatever plant resources we still have. In India, a retired high official has devoted his life to the task of conservation of every known plant in an organised manner with the hope that its medicinal quality will one day be discovered by scientists. The famous brain tonic has been developed from *brahmi lata* (a kind of common but neglected creeper). Can't we think of developing a repository to save the rare plants?

As for biopiracy, a phenomenal judgment in a US court will have far-reaching consequence in our favour. The Indian government won a case against two American scientists seeking patent on turmeric for its healing quality. Similarly, neem tree was patented in the US and we feel this patent should also be cancelled on the same argument as was advanced in case of turmeric: that people in this part have long known the use of neem for its medicinal quality and therefore it cannot be patented. The West can use our plants for medical purposes but should refrain from trying to establish their monopoly on them.

So Many Sans So Little

A recent World Bank statistics has exalted East Asia's remarkable success in poverty alleviation.

The most enviable and interesting aspect of this economic leap is that it has taken place in such a relatively short period of time. Only two out of ten in this belt now live below the poverty line while the figure used to be as high as six out of ten in 1975. In little over twenty years' East Asian countries have pulled off a dramatic turnaround to be a source of awe and admiration for us.

Where do we or for that matter South Asia as a region stand? Not on a healthy or speakable footing at all. Reportedly, 900 million people in the region between Mongolia and southern India live in obolary conditions. A large section of this population is caught in a minute struggle to manage a farce called life with an income of less than one US dollar a day. It is better imagined than said how far removed these people must be from the basic necessities like food, education and health care. What has led to this jeremiad of such a vast population? Not long ago, South Asia's sympathetic view of East Asia was no better than that of it being an economic backwater. And quite rightly so.

That idea has been transformed radically. East of Asia has emerged as a revelation in economic growth while South Asia still pants under the burden of a huge poverty stricken population. This comparative discrepancy comes with a special dose of poignancy in the aftermath of the Subcontinent's 50 years of independence celebrations as the Indian and Pakistani forces engage themselves in fiery and fatal skirmishes at the Kashmir border.

Leadership has made all the difference. The broad vision and dynamism required to wake up a nation from the nightmares of history is something South Asia has never had sufficiently. Dearth at the leadership level has to go for this region to link itself with the growth phenomenon of the continent in general.

Impasse in Palestine-Israel Relations

The futility of war as a means of settlement of the Middle East conflict has been proved beyond any shadow of doubt. Will the unfortunate people of the Middle East have to wait for a change of guard in Tel Aviv and Washington so that a ray of hope may shine once again?

has physically moved away to the West. Yet there is no denying the fact that Jesus Christ was born in the area and preached Christianity in the region.

Late President Anwar Sadat of Egypt had toyed with the idea of creating in Mount Sinai a meeting ground for the three faiths away from the tumult of Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Netanyahu overturned the apple cart by suddenly and unilaterally starting building new settlements in West Jerusalem. He had attempted earlier to open a tunnel through the rocks causing a storm to erupt among the Palestinians. The upshot of all this is that Netanyahu appears hell bent to annex Jerusalem through guile and deceit. Failing to conquer Jerusalem by force of arms Netanyahu seems determined to grab Jerusalem by fair means or foul. Netanyahu has a ready and willing

ally in the shape of the US Congress, who positively responds to every Israeli move.

In the tussle the White House has been one element of sanity. The first major breakthrough came in 1978 when Camp David peace accord was signed between President Sadat and Menachem Begin, Prime



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

Minister of Israel. Israel returned to Egypt conquered Sinai in exchange for peace with Egypt. The second major step was the famous handshake between Chairman Arafat, Prime Minister Rabin and President Clinton. President Bill Clinton was thus proving him-

self a worthy successor of President Carter.

The question now arises: Is President Clinton running out of steam? The question has become an urgent one since the assumption of the post of Prime Minister by Benjamin Netanyahu. He goes on repeating his concern on the question of

security. It is as if Chairman Arafat can press a button and make all terrorist activities disappear from the hate-filled sands of Middle East as if magic. Appearing on a CNN programme Chairman Arafat was asked if he thought he could do business with Ben-

jamin Netanyahu. Chairman Arafat responded 'Netanyahu was elected by his people and therefore I must deal with him'. There was no enthusiasm in the voice of Arafat.

The Middle East conflict is nearly half a century old. In the wars and intermittent peace negotiations the hawks have had a mostly field day. After many years of barren negotiations which culminated with the sole superpower US taking on the job of the sole peace-maker there has been remarkable progress. Diplomatic relations between Israel and Egypt and Jordan have been established. Negotiations between Syria and Israel appeared to have reached a crucial stage. Indeed the stage appeared set for a final settlement.

If the latest round of peace process was started by President Jimmy Carter, President Clinton appeared to have given it a great thrust early in his

presidency. Yet during his second term, when his hands should be relatively free, he gives the impression of losing the momentum. Yet the fact is that whatever progress has been achieved has been due to total US involvement and lot of arm-twisting among the recalcitrant parties.

When Camp David was signed back in 1978, I was Bangladesh Ambassador in Egypt. One of peace dividend was to receive the Israeli daily Jerusalem Post. We discovered in amazement that the Peace Lobby in Israel was alive and doing well. Watching the latest turn of events one comes to the sad conclusion that the Peace Lobby has gone into long hibernation. In the meantime, the war mongers have started sabre rattling. Again and again the futility of war as a means of settlement of the Middle East conflict has been proved beyond any shadow of doubt. Will the unfortunate people of the Middle East have to wait for a change of guard in Tel Aviv and Washington so that a ray of hope may shine once again?

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Bill Cosby's "Rendezvous", the Feuding Kennedys, and India's 50th Anniversary of Independence

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

The good old days are over for the Italian Mafia in the United States, especially in New York.

a parent, that is a crime punishable by a stiff jail sentence. The question Bill Cosby has not answered is: what about his own conduct? How can a man, apparently happily married to one wife, commit such breach of trust? Fortunately for Cosby, this is no big deal here in America. There was absolutely no condemnation of the popular actor's errant behaviour.

It is a testament to the society we live in that someone like singer Madonna can actively seek to, and have a child with a non-husband, and not be condemned even by her own Catholic church. This writer knows a married Catholic colleague, who had a child with a younger, unmarried man! Even then, her husband wants her back! Among coworkers the only person truly outraged by the sordid incident was yours truly!

Another celebrated case came to a close also in New York. A jury convicted mobster Vin "The Chin" Gigante of racketeering and conspiracy to commit murder.

The good old days are over for the Italian Mafia in the United States, especially in New York. Led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), an Italian-American prosecutor, Rudy Giuliani, who is currently the Mayor of New York City, succeeded in breaking the Mafia's infamous 'code of silence' in the 1980s, and hauling most of the leaders to jail.

One can gain some insight into the mob culture by certain tactics practiced by Gigante. He forbade his operatives to refer to him by name. If his name was to be invoked in a conversation, the operatives had to touch their chin and say 'The Guy'. Hence the nickname, Vin "The Chin" Gigante!

Are cracks developing in the code of solidarity among the mighty Kennedys? John F Kennedy Jr, the assassinated President's only son edits a popular magazine, "George." In the latest issue, he took to task his first cousins, Congressman Joe Kennedy, who will also be running for the Governor of the Massachusetts, and his

younger brother Michael.

John criticised Joe for his messy divorce, and Michael for sleeping with an under-age baby sitter. (It's in the Kennedy genes, John! Aren't grandpa Ambassador Joseph Kennedy's trysts with actress Gloria Swanson well-known? What about dad President Kennedy's philandering with actresses Marilyn Monroe, Angie Dickinson and Audrey Hepburn!) John Jr. labeled his cousins as "poster boys for bad behaviour." The privileged should be held to a higher standard of conduct, John Kennedy said in his piece. Of course, John Jr. said nothing about his own wild, bachelor days, especially his dalliance with much older singer Madonna.

Joe and Michael are late Bobby Kennedy's sons. Joe Kennedy returned the favour by satirising his very famous uncle's very famous speech: "Ask not what you can do for your country, ask what you can do for your magazine!" India and Pakistan's 50th

anniversary of independence has been celebrated here in America. The TIME magazine published an essay by Salman Rushdie, an uprooted Indian. He celebrated India's independence and criticised Pakistan's. The New York Times published in-depth front page articles on India on August 14, and on Pakistan on August 15. People wonder why India and Pakistan celebrate independence on different days. Earl Mountbatten presided over Pakistan's independence ceremony at Karachi on August 14; by the time he flew to Delhi, it was too late in the evening.

This reminds me of an article an old, retired New York Times reporter (I forget his name) wrote in the paper ten

years ago, on the subcontinent's 40th birthday. He related an interview he tried to conduct with Mr Mohammad Ali Jinnah, immediately after independence, in Karachi.

The reporter asked Mr Jinnah about his new nation's economic development plans. "Talk to the Finance Minister," Mr Jinnah said. Asked about the nation's educational reconstruction, Mr. Jinnah's response was the same: "Talk to the Education Minister." The reporter realised that Mr Jinnah was giving him the run around.

Then suddenly, Mr. Jinnah broke into a huge smile, lunged forward and said: "Put it (the pen) away. Let's have a heart to heart talk." According to the reporter, Mr Jinnah told him that when it came down to the fundamental interests of the Hindus and the Muslims, Mr Gandhi and Mr Nehru always came down solidly on the side of the Hindus. That, in short, is why Mr Jinnah went after a homeland for the Muslims!

OPINION

Bangladeshi English Literature

M Ahsanur Rahim

The whole world is quite familiar with the Bengali language; so much so that we don't need to translate good post-Liberation works by Bangladeshi writers so that they can be read by the unfortunate few who are not familiar enough with the Bengali script. Or else, our writers believe that their talents need be recognised only in our country.

The problem with our writers is that they suffer from such similar delusions.

In recent years, we have indeed seen a slow proliferation of English books written by Bangladeshi writers. But most of these books are, political or sociological in nature. They pertain to our country mainly and hold little interest for readers living in another country. That is, unless the people concerned are the respective professionals, or they are truly concerned about global welfare. Unfortunately, the latter are rare to find indeed. Most foreigners would be interested in mainly our history or Bangladeshi fiction which depicted our sorrows, our joys, our griefs and our happiness.

Talking about translations, we come to some interesting observations. If we examine what ever translation work is done in English by Bangladeshi writers, we find that the standard of written English is quite poor indeed. Readers might have noticed a number of mistakes probably on this article also. It infuriates a writer who finds that after spending a carefully people responsible for composing his or her work onto the newspaper makes mistakes that were not there on the original scrip. This annoying situation is rendered by the fact that most of the graduates from our educational institutions have an idea of written English which is insufficient for carrying out their duties.

Bangladeshis have an abnormal attitude when it comes to learning English. It is not an uncommon habit for Bangladeshis to jeer at the idea of learning proper English. I have seen many put their tongue in their cheek and assume a superior "Bangali" attitude when it comes to passing remarks on people who have a good command of English. This is also reflected in most of our writers. They do not consider writing their works in English as they consider it unnecessary and demeaning, unnecessary because, as already said, they think that Bangladesh and, perhaps West Bengal too, is a sufficient market for their works.

We have a stereotype of the Bangladeshi poet and writer in our minds — a man in a dirty gown (a punjabi), similar trousers, and a cloth bag he travels from one end of the country to another for inspiration. Only the very few lucky

ones can travel to other countries. Nonetheless, they can create extraordinary literary works. However, unlike so many Indian writers, they have not been able to gain international acceptance. This is because they have not translated their works so that other people could read them. (We may note that it is a reliable opinion that Rabindranath would not have won the Nobel Prize if he had not translated his works into English). This is really disappointing as our poets and writers have considerable literary muscle to flex if they could.

It comes to our notice that the powerhouse of Bangladeshi literature — the Bangla Academy — uses Bengali as its first and last language, i.e., except for the Bengali to English, and converse, dictionaries. This is hardly surprising that Bangladeshi writers prefer Bengali to the effectively main language of the world — English.

Now a frequent complaint by avid readers is that Bangladeshi books are too expensive. Putting this to the publishers, we get the reply that unless they sell sufficient books, they cannot bring their costs down and, thus, cannot lower prices. Now in a country where most people do not know how to read and write properly, it is hardly surprising that publishers cannot sell their books in sufficient quantities in Bangladesh. We can export to West Bengal; but there, readers are biased towards Indian books not just because of cost but also because of the quality of printing in Bangladeshi books. This also happens when we try to spread our ideals and principles worldwide by selling our books to foreign countries. The quality of the print in Bangladeshi books is despicable.

Just in printing a book, so many gaffes are made that we become truly astonished at their incompetence. Even our government approved and published text-books have endless mistakes. The cover is dull and the paper used is of low quality. As for advertising, there are nothing more spineless than those who advertise Bangladeshi books.

We may now draw our conclusions that, firstly, our publishing houses need subsidies so that they can at prices and sell more books. Then agreements need to be signed so that tariffs are not imposed on Bangladeshi books as they enter foreign markets. Moreover, our writers need to use English directly so that they can gain easy access to foreign readers. In order to do this, proper learning of English must be emphasised upon. Publishers must be more efficient and creative in order to print, advertise and sell their books. In all the writing, publishing, distributing and selling, end must be thoroughly revamped.

To the Editor...

About uncovered manholes

Sir, It was interesting to see the front-page picture of a car (DS, Aug 11) that got stuck up in an open manhole, being pulled out by some passers-by. And of course, your editorial the next day, on the subject was quite timely.

In this connection, I want to narrate my own experience in dealing with the relevant authorities about such open manholes. First of all, one has to be sure that he is talking to the right authority, because WASA and City Corporation maintain two types of sewerage lines running parallel to each other (but why two authorities almost for the same purpose?).

The approach road from my house meets the main road (Bashiruddin road, east-end), and just at the meeting point an open manhole cover of the City Corporation has been missing for quite a long time. Actually there is another one few yards to the east, and this one is in such a critical location that a vehicle can hardly take a turn without one of the wheels falling into the manhole. I personally talked over the phone about a month back to the City Corporation authorities (of course, I had to stand the test of 'cross-examination' from the other end, because the gentleman wanted to be sure that it was their responsibility) and finding no response, I wrote a letter to the Executive Engineer of Zone-5 at Nagarhaban on 30-7-97, but again with no response.

On August 11 night, I was stranded for more than half an hour right at that point, because one vehicle got stuck up in that uncovered manhole and the entire traffic movement got halted. I do not know what else remains to be done from our side. Actually, it appears to me that we may go on shouting (low or loud), but no one simply cares!

Prof K A Latif
Dhaka-1205

Poverty alleviation

Sir, A report published in The Daily Star dated 3.7.97 under the caption 'Couple commits suicide due to poverty' said that a young couple married only four months ago committed suicide by taking poison due to poverty. We are shocked to learn this.

The present government came to power after 21 years. After formation of the government, our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said it was our prime objective to build a society free from poverty and hunger. As such the government gave the highest priority to education to achieve a soci-

ety free from hunger and poverty. Because without education, hunger and poverty-free society cannot be achieved. The government was doing its best for poverty alleviation.

When we learn that one commits suicide due to poverty, we become disappointed. We cannot keep confidence on the activities of the ruling party. It appears that the ruling party is not working sincerely to fulfil their commitment. The role of Awami League on poverty alleviation seems to be unworthy. People expect from the Prime Minister a mode of action commensurate with the commitment.

We, therefore, request our PM to look into the matter earnestly and to take positive steps for poverty alleviation in order to achieve her vision for a better tomorrow.

A M Kais Chowdhury
Masdhair Gorshan Road,
Narayanganj-1400

Rape...

Sir, 'Rape' is the most horrible word in a woman's vocabulary. To her it spells out a world of shame, disgust and agony. For it's not only the rape of her body but the rape of her very soul and spirit. She loses her self-esteem, she loathes her body, she hates to face any body, she despises the whole world which has inflicted this agony on her, for no fault of hers at all. Why is a woman punished so horribly for no offence done by her?

No male can ever understand the agony it inflicts on a woman, like no man can ever understand the extent of pain of labour i.e. childbirth. And that is the reason why punishment severe enough is not given to the culprit. Because the ones who made the law and the ones who pass the judgement and the ones who are to catch the culprit are all male, who haven't the slightest idea what a woman goes through, after being a victim of this heinous crime. To them, it's probably just like a theft or robbery! Since the culprits are mostly at large and rarely punished, the crime is on the rise in an alarming pace. Shouldn't we think of switching to Islamic punishment since western one is not helping in controlling it?

I would be glad if some learned person can throw light on this subject, for we haven't got any idea about the Islamic judgement on this crime. Why in the villages they are not punished according to 'Fatwa', as girls are, for any minor offence?

Another thing, after reporting the crime, newspapers always write that nobody has been caught. If the potential rapists see this, they will think

that since nobody is caught and punished, so why not go ahead with it. And this is why the crime is increasing at such a pace.

Nowadays, we must also consider the consequences of this offence on a woman, when passing the judgement. It is not only the act which demands justice but also the after-effects of it on the victim e.g. an unwanted pregnancy, psychological trauma, sexually transmitted diseases, and worst of all AIDS — which is still incurable. So all of these must be considered before passing a judgement or the laws must be adjusted to fit in these.

Dr Sarah
Dhaka

What's in a name...?

Sir, This is in response to Mr Sulaiman's letter published August 3, 1997.

I like the topic. It seems ridiculous, but interesting to me because our names make first impression on our personality. As the old saying goes: "First impression is the last impression", but I do not dare to underestimate the eligibility of a person from his trifling name only.

I find English names better than Bengali ones. Just take for example with some of the most popular names like Hitler, Bill Clinton, George Bush, Margaret Thatcher, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Diana, Barbie, etc. More informal ones Puppy, Foxy, Catty, Hopsy, Fishy and many more.

I ask you to judge, which sounds better and more effective — 'Stop!' or 'Thamul'.

I recently came to know a girl named Simple Chakraborty and believe me, I do doubt her simplicity.

Last but not the least, laugh it off. After all, "What's in a name?" We should better concentrate on a person's deeds. Correct me if you think better.

Azra Nadia
Lalbagh, Dhaka

Sick industries

Sir, Our government is committed to gradually privatising our sick industries and to save the public exchequer from incurring financial losses of hundreds of crores of taka every year. In this connection, the government has identified 219 state-owned enterprises for privatisation of which 82 would be handed over to private sector during the current financial year. We welcome the decision and also wish the government all success in its endeavour.

It may be recalled that one of the major causes of the deluge of the former super-power the Soviet Union is the colossal monetary loss it had to bear for

decades due to corrupt, lethargic and inefficient public sector enterprises.

The present-day world strides with democracy and market economy. We also must march forward consistent with the requirements of time and situation.

Ours is, however, a very poor country with limited resources. We wonder if our private sector would be able to manage the SOEs, rejuvenate our comatose economy and help poverty alleviation. We would therefore suggest that side by side with privatisation, the government may also kindly consider legal framework for running our SOEs with foreign aid and assistance under joint venture system.

It may be further mentioned here that we are contemplating on establishing more and more export processing zones in the country. Why can't we find out ways and means to run our sick industries including SOEs with foreign aid and loan under "domestic-foreign" joint investment in the private sector?

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street,
Wari, Dhaka-1203

More flyovers

Sir, During my recent visit to two busiest cities of Asia, i.e. Tokyo and Bangkok, I have seen that they have constructed a number of flyovers to ease traffic jam and to maintain traffic discipline.

I strongly feel that in our country at least a few flyovers should immediately be constructed on the main thoroughfares of the capital city in order to lessen our traffic jam problem.

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar,
Dhaka-1207

Adulteration

Sir, The Daily Star of August 21 carried an editorial on food adulteration titled 'This Mad Compromise' and in the front-page it says WASA supplied water is unfit for human consumption.

Who then is the bigger adulterator? The food maker or WASA, the government-owned agency selling water and covering a much larger number of consumers in Dhaka city?

I believe if adulteration is to be seriously tackled then let the government-owned WASA first set its own house in order. For adulterated water is more dangerous compared to any other essentials, because it is used by everybody from the youngest to the oldest. So "physician heal thyself" first.

S A Mansoor
Gulshan, Dhaka