

Disturbing

Are we heading for an inexorable destiny of being called a nation of morons? An uncomfortable proposition to grapple with even in a nightmare but that is the question the recently revealed Unicef report on the state of children in Bangladesh provokes us to ask ourselves.

The Unicef report has observed quite categorically that the poor nutritional condition of the Bangladeshi children is not due to lack of food as much as it is due to want of care. One may very well wonder if facts that 700 children die everyday in Bangladesh mostly due to malnutrition and eighty million people including more than 20 million children lack adequate nutrition at all ring in the ears of national leaders like Sheikh Hasina and Khaleida Zia as they, in their sound and fury of mutual hatred, carry the people in a frenzy of acrimony.

The government has formulated national nutrition policy. It has to be pursued vigorously. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has not so far lived up to the expectations in its imaginative and facilitating role. Not any particular NGO, we want it to involve as many non-governmental organisations as possible for the welfare of the children. And since an attitudinal overhauling is the order of the day and not mere supplying of vitamin pills, we urge the national leaders to think anew and reset their priorities.

EU Review

With the US market for our processed fish somewhat retrieved, we have a far greater challenge embedded in the latest signal beamed to us by the EU that it will review our held-up status on export of frozen fish to its member countries. We have inside of a month left to finish upgrading the conditions of our fish processing plants and quality control laboratories, vitally ancillary thereto, so that we meet the EU standards prescribed with the imposition of the export ban.

The stakes being that high in a turn-around, we have not a day to waste in brooding over the empty roost that may be filled with plenty of eggs to hatch depending upon how we seize the opportunity unfolding by virtue of a scheduled review in Brussels of our position next month. The three-member EU team on a visit here lately identified some improvers among the processing plants which may serve as models for others to do the needful. Let them not be penny-wise, pound-foolish shirkers of obligations whose fulfillment is bound to help them restore the lost goodwill and reintegrate them into the world fish market.

A Ban Never Enforced

The government had already had a ban on catching and selling migratory birds that come here every winter from their habitat in the Siberian Taiga. The ban existed on paper. It is still doing so with vendors hawking these birds on busy and important roads. They have been flouting the ban for years in the most exhibitionistic manner, dangling their live wares under the nose of police and magistrates, environment bureaucrats and ministers.

That exercise is here again for the umpteenth time. The government has instructed the authority concerned to take legal action against those involved in catching, hunting, buying and selling of migratory birds — to quote a news item published Wednesday. What if the authority concerned fails the instruction? For fail they will. We do not know the authority, nor intend to do so. We dare the government to catch the recalcitrant elements, for the sake of ensuring the livability of this land. The bird vendors and the owners of black-smoke spewing vehicles are evidently enjoying the government's best protection. But why? The government can afford not to heed our outrages only at great peril to itself.

There Was a Will, and There Was a Way

Mother Teresa once said, "We ourselves realise that what we are doing seems a drop in the ocean but had that drop not been added, the Ocean would remain incomplete."

JUST three miles east of Gaibandha district town, there is a river called Ghagot and beside it, a large tract (1200 acres) of waterlogged area. People call it Sonali Beel. Eight months a year, the area remains submerged, and provides only one crop. Most of about 300 families of Konarpara and Godarhat villages — adjacent to Sonali Beel — are poor.

There is a saying: Blind despite having sight. So is the case with the people surrounding Sonali Beel. Poor despite having resources. Darkness shrouded them years after years but they never shrugged their shoulders to eke out a better living by utilising the untapped resource of Sonali Beel. Only last year did they mobilise all villagers to optimally utilise the beel for economic gains.

The people embarked upon cultivating fish in that 1200 acre beel. But where to get money to face initial expenses? There was a will and so there was a way. The villagers formed a committee by themselves and

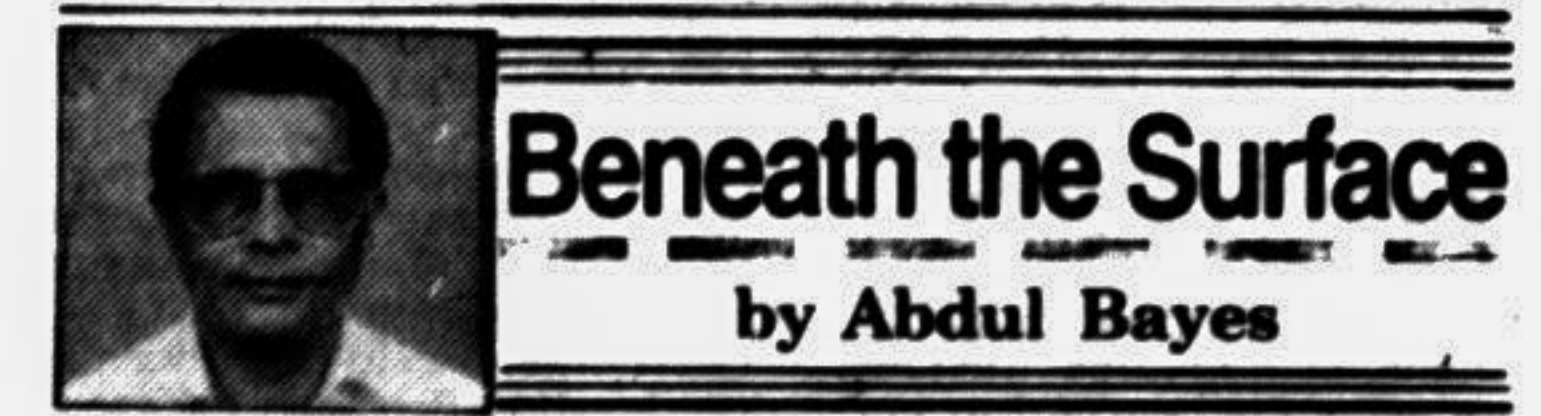
decided to issue share certificates. They raised about three lakh Taka through share certificates — the total cost of the whole project. They sold fish worth Tk 10 lakh and thus reaped home a net income gain of about Tk 7 lakh within a span of eight months.

There are few other such kind of initiatives now on in and around the villages not very far from Gaibandha town. The other day I visited one such project called Velakoba Cooperative Fisheries Project close to the Sonali Beel area mentioned above. Velakoba has an area of 2000 bighas that remains under deep water for most part of the year. People of the villages Madonpara, Kismat Fala, Beguria and Sardarpara are mostly poor and the unfortunate victims of river bank erosion.

The people of Velakoba beel area also decided to follow the footsteps of those in Sonali beel area. They formed a committee of 29 members to explore the possibility of fish culture in the beel which is purely a private property. They thought of leasing in the total area from the owners in favour of the cooper-

ative. The seed money for the project or the initial capital money came from issuing share certificates among villagers. They raised Tk 2,46,000 through share certificates. Initially there were poor responses for fear of deception, mismanagement and uncertain outcome. But as the project

rolled on, clouds got cleared, some people realised their mistakes. So they attempted to buy shares in the secondary market! Some of them succeeded to buy 100 Taka share at Tk 150/-. However, the total cost of the project stood at Tk 3,25,000 but the total revenue generated was Tk 10,00,000. The supply of fish in nearby market increased, people of the project area are now eating more fish than they ever had. The area is now a net exporter of fish.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

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depend with the committee to help capital formation (for buying boats, nets, pumps etc) and resource generation for social development (education, health etc). While I was in Gaibandha, I met a group of boys and girls who recently got training from Bogra Youth Complex. I was told that the training was funded by the Hunger Project and covered areas like fish culture, livestock/poultry rearing, sewing etc. The determination

and devotion of the trainees impressed me. They had already started their projects either individually or collectively. They are now living with the impression that while getting a government job is a forlorn hope, it is worthwhile to utilise domestic endowments and thus earn a better income.

Aaraful Khan Jewel (26) hails from East Ramchandrapur, Palashbari. He worked for two years in a garment industry. One day he decided to give up the job and come back home and pursue self-employment. To start with, he grew banana and potato on a plot of 19 decimals. He earned a net income of Tk 21,000. Jewel also grows vegetables which are not as much common in his area. Last year he earned Tk 17,000 from his pond. He grew fishings of Tk 500 and sold them at Tk 30,000. Jewel now believes that from a servant in a garment industry he has now become a master of his own destiny. I observed that few other youths were following Jewel to eke out a decent living through self-employment.

The experience that I have gathered during my visit to

Gaibandha is neither unique nor untold stories. In fact, cooperative ventures in villages are an old tradition in this country. Unfortunately, many of the cooperatives failed after few clicks. The pertinent question is: can the Sonali Beel or Velakoba experiment be sustainable? This is a million dollar question. But suffice it to say that even for a short run, participatory activities could result in immense benefits to the villagers. There are many resources in rural areas with substantial positive externalities. People standing together need to find appropriate ways to exploit those resources and extract the externalities to benefit themselves. The Gaibandha experiments should teach us everywhere how best villagers can mobilise themselves to ensure proper utilisation of uncared for natural resources. The youths trained from Bogra Youth Complex also appear to tell us the old adage that to turn a human into capital you need training and education. These episodes might sound to be small events here and there. But together, they could deliver big things. As Mother Teresa once said: "We ourselves realise that what we are doing seems a drop in the ocean but had that drop not been added, the Ocean would remain incomplete."

Indian Political Parties Swing into Election Campaign

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

BJP realises that to secure the majority that would enable it to form the government, it has to enlarge the support. Immediately after the new elections were announced, the party organised a convention of the Muslims in which party leaders said the Muslims were being used as "vote-bank" by some other parties for their own interest but BJP would give due importance to the minorities on equal basis.

FINALLY, president KRN Narayanan has dissolved the lower house of the Parliament — the Lok Sabha — and called fresh elections in India. Mid-term polls had become the only viable option after political instability gripped the largest democracy of the world much before even the lower house was midway through a five-year term. Generally, fresh or snap elections do take place in parliamentary democracies much before the term whether it is five-year or for any other period — but such polls are normally held not before the elected parliament has completed at least half of its tenure. Even if political compulsions necessitate fresh mandate much earlier, the electorate is seldom prepared to go for calling the polls and the authorities strive their best to prolong the life of the legislature as far as possible so that people could feel their elected house was in existence for the longest possible period in the given conditions.

In India too, all possibilities were explored to avoid the new elections since the polls had taken place only early last year and another election was due only after five years — little early or sometime later as permitted by the constitution and election laws. Instability was on the surface soon after the formation of the government after the polls was led by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which had emerged as the single largest parliamentary group but had fallen much short of the required absolute majority to govern the country. The BJP government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the briefest in the history of India as it bowed out of office before facing vote of confidence in the floor of the house as the party could never muster the additional support which was essential for remaining in power.

The BJP was far short of the required support of the 273 members in the 545-member Lok Sabha but then president Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma had given first chance to BJP to form government because it had the maximum single party or group strength. The fall of the BJP did not bring the second largest parliamentary party — the Congress — which lost power in the elections. Instead, several parties — centre-left and regional — cobbled together to form a united front (UF) took over the authority but on the crucial support of the Congress since the coalition also lacked the necessary support of a large number of MPs.

The Congress did not try to form a government for two reasons: it was rejected by people in the polls and the electorate may not like its bid to return to power so early taking advantage of the political instability. Secondly, in any case, it would not have succeeded to garner the support of additional members as it had only 140 whereas the need was for 273. The UF government fell as Congress withdrew support, but was formed in a new shape after H D Deve Gowda had to quit making way for I K Gujral as the prime minister. It was assumed that the Congress would continue its support to the Gujral government for at least up to a time that the parliament completes three years of its five-year term. But unforeseen developments drastically altered the scenario.

The findings of the "Jain Commission" investigating into the assassination of

former prime minister and Congress chief Rajiv Gandhi, indicating an important partner of the UF government sparked off such a crisis that led to the current political situation warranting fresh polls. The UF preferred to quit the government rather than conceding to its backer Congress's demand that three ministers belonging to the regional DMK party of southern Tamil Nadu state be dropped from the government as M. Karunanidhi, current chief minister of the state, had been indirectly accused of assisting a Tamil guerrilla group from neighbouring Sri Lanka to kill Mr Gandhi in a remote area of Tamil Nadu in May, 1991. Congress said it would like to continue support to the UF government but cannot accept a condition where DMK remains in authority at Centre.

Mr Gujral and his UF government resigned but what was remarkable is that he did not recommend to the president immediate dissolution of the lower house. The largely ceremonial presidency acts on vital matters only as advised by the government or the cabinet. The advice by the cabinet to the president to dissolve the house came much later — only after giving sufficient time to contending parties or groups and opportunity if they can form a government. It was done for two factors — let contending key players of the political spectrum get a chance to govern the nation if they succeed in forming a government and secondly, if the life of the house

could be lengthened. But Congress and the BJP, which were keen to have a government of their own with support from the allies and others failed to come up with the required support. Even "horse-trading" — a politically unethical phenomenon to win over legislators of other parties through lure and kickbacks — also failed and only then the interim cabinet of Gujral recommended the dissolution of Lok Sabha and fresh polls. The elections anew were the only alternative but the decision came after all efforts to form a new government were exhausted.

This has sent all the major political forces to the election fray. The main contender for power through the next elections is obviously the BJP which shot into prominence in the Indian political scene in an amazing quick time from a strength of mere two seats in the Lok Sabha less than 10 years ago to 163 and was the largest group in the last parliament. It seeks to cash in on the "Hinduvta" sentiment which is the communal overtone of attracting the overwhelming Hindu majority whereas other main parties like the Congress and those are combined under the UF are avowedly secular.

The BJP is an aggressive political organisation seeking to storm to power in the centre of India this time with a comfortable support. It has moderates like former prime minister A B Vajpayee but the party has more hawks in the form of Murlidhar Manohar Joshi, Madan Lal

divisions that saw departure of several leaders like Arjun Singh who have, however, returned to the fold after Mr Rao made way for Mr Kesri. The Congress always looked to Rajiv's enigmatic widow Sonia Gandhi for leadership. But she only a few months ago formally joined politics by becoming a member of the Congress party. It remains to be seen if the reclusive Sonia comes for campaign or takes up more serious role for the Congress in the coming polls. Her active participation will certainly boost the Congress chance. And the UF will of course try to keep all the partners of the coalition together and come back to power with greater majority. The front had 191 seats from its 15 constituencies which was larger than the BJP and the Congress and it would try to remain a major factor for power in the next elections. The UF has such leaders like I K Gujral, Deve Gowda and VP Singh who are from the Janata Dal. It has solid base in several states including West Bengal and Kerala where the CPI (M), CPI and other leftists are very strong. The regional parties like the DMK and the Telegu Desam in the south are also key partners of the UF.

The elections will see all these major contenders of powers spare no efforts to seat in the south bloc i.e. New Delhi. Elections are to take place some time between third week of February and first week of March so that a new house must be constituted by March 15. The election scenario in India is heating up and it remains to be seen who can really make dents among the electorates in the coming days.

Khurana and others. It also receives the backing of such communal bodies and parties as the "Bhishwa Hindu Parishad" and the "Shiv Sena" which rules the commercially important Maharashtra state. The BJP has also varied allies including those leaders like George Fernandes of Bihar, once known as a great socialist. The Akali Dal of the Sikhs and some other regional parties support it.

However, the BJP realises that to secure the majority that would enable it to form the government, it has to enlarge the support. Immediately after the new elections were announced, the party organised a convention of the Muslims in which party leaders said the Muslims were being used as "vote-bank" by some other parties for their own interest but BJP would give due importance to the minorities on equal basis. The BJP has some Muslim leaders, like its vice-president is Sikandar Bakht.

To the Editor...

"President Says It Again, but Who Listens?"

Sir, I must praise the timely editorial. I think majority of Bangladeshis/Bengalees want to see a government and an opposition as envisioned by our Honourable President. We feel that something good will come out from the present chaos, as we had experienced after the fall of the then government in 1990. We want all the parties to work for the people of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has come of age but the politricks of politicians seem to be self-destructive. We hope the President in all his powers could bring some sense to all of them. Sincerely,

Kaiser Mattin (By e-mail) USA

BUET Convocation '97

Sir, I had the privilege, as a guardian, to attend the 5th convocation of the BUET on 29th November, 1997. Grand arrangements made for the ceremony were apparently for everyone else other than the graduates who were supposed to be the main attraction of the day. The graduates with their convocation gowns were seated at the tail-end of the huge "pandal" erected for the purpose and the vast majority of the guests occupying the front rows remained indifferent and hardly turned round to look at them while their much coveted and hard earned degree was being conferred on them collectively. I feel that the graduates, for whom this ceremony was meant, should have been seated in the front rows. This would have given them the honour and respect they deserved on the occasion. Instead, they were given a place where hardly anyone would like to sit given a choice.

Secondly, a souvenir published and distributed on the occasion did not contain a single writing from the students — past or present. Their contribu-

tion would not only have enriched the magazine but given them a flair for writing on such occasions.

Thirdly, among the invitees, graduates' guests were most insignificantly treated. Graduates were issued invitation cards for one person only and told not to bring more than one guest each which meant any one of the parents could attend the ceremony. Nowhere in the world the parents are ignored in the manner the BUET authorities did in a graduation ceremony of his/her ward which is supposed to be a big event for the parents as well. By inviting only one, the BUET authorities have shown total disrespect to the parents. About their sitting arrangements — the less said, the better. Most of the persons seated in the front rows except the BUET teachers had hardly any connection with the ceremony except for their decorative values.

Outside the pandal, at the entertainment venue where a bit of informal exchange between the teachers, graduates and their guests was desirable, the arrangements made belied that expectation. VIPs apart, even the teachers' tables were segregated from the graduates and their guests giving us a feeling of absolute unwanted intruders there. I would like to request the BUET authorities to show due respect to the graduates on occasions like convocation which, for all intents and purposes, is meant for them. By doing so they will earn more respect of the students and perhaps, a place in their heart.

H R Chowdhury Ispahani Colony, Moghbazar Dhaka

All-bright?

Sir, Pre-requisites for an American Secretary of State's visit to Bangladesh. The list below has been fulfilled by Pakistan.

- 1. Kill American diplomats on the streets. 2. Kill American employees of Oil Companies. 3. Indulge in drug trafficking. 4. Harbour terrorists when they flee America, after killing American citizens there; not once, but twice. 5. Have your Prime Minister dragged to court on contempt charges.

We still have a long way to go, to have the honour of a visit by an American Secretary of State!

Najma Parveen 77-D, Uttara Model Town Dhaka.

IIT service rule

Sir, Is the IIT, a subsidiary organ of the OIC, run by the service rules? If so, how one is given retirement on the plea of reaching 60 years of age while others are allowed to serve the Institute beyond 62 years of their ages? Even someone given normal retirement at 62 years of his age, has now been given appointment again at/beyond 65 years of his age! Why is this favour to some and step-motherly treatment to the other? Islam means equal treatment to all. How then the service rules vary from person to person depending on the mercy of the authority in the Islamic Institute of Technology (IIT)?

Will the OIC Secretariat probe into and take immediate measure to stop all the malpractices and do justice to those who had been victimized by the way of having premature retirement?

Mia Hossain 47/2, Narinda Road, Dhaka-1100.

Begging and working

Sir, Both in the Holy Quraan and the Hadet, it is mentioned that begging and alms-giving are prohibited. There was an incident where our Holy Prophet (PBUH) asked a one-armed beg-

gar what items he had in his possession. The only thing the beggar had was an axe. Our prophet then advised him in such a way that very soon that beggar was earning money by doing something that he could do. This is a simple but effective example of what is nowadays known as "rehabilitation".

During the time of Ayub Khan in the then West Pakistan, the beggars used to be rounded up in vans forcibly, taken outside the city limits and thrown inside rehabilitation centres. According to Ayub Khan, these beggars had no right to disturb peace-loving and hard-working people. There they worked, sold the products they made, and the income that was generated was spent on them. A system like that should be implemented in our country as well.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak (By e-mail) Dhaka

Shifting of Degree Examinations

Sir, The National University has shifted all the ongoing degree examinations of 1997 scheduled from 3 to 31 December to the next year. The reason is that the Local Govt. (Union Parishad) elections might be hampered by the degree examinations.

The government and the NU should clarify how the election might be affected by the degree examination. We understand that voter examinees would have enough time after their examination (i.e., 1 pm to 5 pm = 4 hours) for casting their votes.

We also understand that the government and the NU are more intelligent than us. They, perhaps, did this to ease the masteen members of the examinees to perform their political works during the election! What is the government's explanation?

MAS Molla Member, BAAS, BC/SIR Laboratories, Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN It's Turkey Time Again

ONE of the most important holidays is Thanksgiving Day, known in France as the Jour de Merçi Donnant. The Jour de Merçi Donnant was first started by a group of pilgrims (Pelerins) who fled from France before the McCarran Act to find a colony in the New World (le Nouveau Monde) where they could shoot Indians (les Peaux-Rouges) and eat turkey (dinde) to their hearts' content.

They landed at a place called Plymouth (now a famous ville Americaine) in a wooden sailing ship named the Mayflower, or Fleur de Mai, in 1620. But while the Pelerins were killing the dinde, the Peaux-Rouges were killing the Pelerins and there were several hard winters ahead for both of them. The only way the Peaux-Rouges helped the Pelerins was when they taught them how to grow corn (maïs). The reason they did this was because they liked corn with their Pelerins.

In 1623, after another harsh year, the Pelerins' crops were so good that they decided to have a celebration and give thanks because more maïs was raised by the Pelerins than Pelerins were killed by the Peaux-Rouges.

Every year on the Jour de Merçi Donnant, parents tell their children an amusing story about the first celebration. It concerns a brave capitaine named Miles Standish (known in France as Kilometres Deboutish) and a shy young lieutenant named Jean Alden. Both of them were in love with a flower of Plymouth called Priscilla Mullens (no translation). The vieux capitaine said to the jeune lieutenant:

Go to the damsel Priscilla (Allez vite vite chez Priscilla), the loveliest maiden of Plymouth (la plus jolie demoiselle de Plymouth). Say that a brave old captain, a man not of words but of action (un vieux Panfan la Tulipe), offers his hand and his heart — the hand and heart of a soldier. Not in these words, you understand, but this, in short, is my meaning. "I am a maker of war (Je suis un fabricant de la guerre) and not a maker of phrases. You, bred as a scholar (Vous, quietes pain commm un etudiant), can say it in elegant language, such as you read in your books of the pleadings and wooings of lovers, such as you think best suited to win the heart of the maiden."

Although Jean was fit to be tied (convenable a etre emballé), friendship prevailed over love and he went to his duty. But instead of using elegant language, he blurted out his mission. Priscilla was muted with amazement and sorrow (rendue muette par l'etonnement et la tristesse). At length she exclaimed, breaking the ominous silence, "If the great captain of Plymouth is so very eager to wed me, why does he not come himself and take the trouble to woo me? (Ou est-il, le vieux Kilometres? Pourquoi ne vient-il pas apres de moi pour tenter sa chance?) Jean said that Kilometres Deboutish was very busy and didn't have time for such things. He staggered on, telling her what a wonderful husband Kilometres would make. Finally, Priscilla arched her eyebrows and said in a tremulous voice, "Why don't you speak for yourself, Jean?" (Chacun a son gou.)

And so, on the fourth Thursday in November, American families sit down at a large table brimming with tasty dishes and for the only time during the year eat better than the French do. No one can deny that the Jour de Merçi Donnant is a grande fete, and no matter how well fed American families are, they never forget to give thanks to Kilometres Deboutish, who made this great day possible. By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB.