

In the Land of Poverty

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IN the land of poverty, everything else ought to be poor. However, what immediately attracts the attention (of foreigners) are inadequacy of food, profusion of dirt and enormous number of destitute. Lack of food, shelter and clothing are hallmarks of the land of poverty.

However, the dismal human environment fails to attract attention of the lucky few well-nourished locals since there is nothing unusual about it. On the other hand, such basic inadequacies of living give rise to other severe drawbacks so that everything else turns out to be poor as well.

Poverty is all embracing. An undernourished population lose out to everything else. Basic human intelligence and physical work capacity are both impaired. As a result, quality of output produced by limited intelligence and subnormal physical capacity are bound to be poor as well.

A remarkable feature of the land of poverty is that everybody is not so poor. Poverty creates a vicious circle of exploitation. The vast majority will struggle for existence and survive on the brink of a precipice. They are unable to move beyond the margin. This is because an infinitesimally small minority will exploit and extract their pound of flesh — even out of the destitute and the hungry. The present population of Bangladesh is 120 million with a per capita income of \$260 per annum. But there are at least 1000 persons or families whose income might be one

thousand times more and another 2,000 whose annual income would easily be 500 times more.

They are the Lords of the land of poverty. The tragic characteristic of the land of poverty is that more the poverty, the greater the disparity in income. Next to worst slums, gorgeous marble-clad apartment blocks are located. The disparity in terms of shelter conditions is at least 1000 times — if not more.

The rich and the poor coexist in the land of poverty. This apparently peaceful living together is the source of the most disquieting feature: poor would always tend to remain poor. In the land of poverty, everything else ought to be poor as well since everything else is geared to the needs of the very few.

Out of over one dozen banks, only one is engaged in micro-credit programme for the poor where the repayment rate is 98 per cent. From most other banks, billions of taka have been flushed away to unknown destinations without any possibility of repayment. Two specialised credit institutions have been so thoroughly ravaged that they are now in complete comatose condition. No doubt, news of rape and plunder are so numerous in the newspapers of the land of poverty which very few of the largely illiterate population can read.

The land of poverty is not a country poor in resources. It

has fuels and minerals underground. In the fertile plains, three to four crops can be grown each year. It is a land of water where fishes can be abundant. Yet it is a land of poverty. Otherwise, the privileged few with their enormous wealth cannot survive. In any other civilised society, they should have been in jails.

In the land of poverty, the ways of getting rich are always unique and one of its kind in the world. Perhaps in no other land, one can get rich simply on

cept education can be accomplished and every year a new bunch is added who believe in brown and not the brain. As a result, high school drop outs dominate both business and politics; while first class graduates fail to manage the economy of the illiterates.

In no other country, children are not growing due to lack of nutrition and the average height of the population is on the decline. In no other metropolis of the size of its capital city, rickshaws constitute

nation by the poor. They smell of perfume in spite of the landscape of open urinals and latrines. Their children study in English schools. Often they do not learn the mother tongue and move abroad immediately after the high school. By that time, they have grown up to become pseudo-expatriates in their own homeland. The rich mothers, in the meantime, pine for the silicon valley engineer to be the husband of their mostly English-speaking daughters at home.

Education used to be the great equaliser in the land of poverty. But not any longer. Even the language of the rich and the poor are different today. The former speaks Banglish, like the Anglo-Indians of colonial Calcutta; while, the poor speaks the local dialect which varies by a large pole from district to district.

Poverty has obviously attracted professional eradicator who must not be confused with other types of eradicator — for pest and insect in particular. These eradicator try to attract the attention of donors first with a huge shopping list. Consequently, the land of poverty has developed excellent conference facilities and hotels for the comfort as well as sustainability of high living standards of both donors and eradicator. Please note that there is nothing exceptional about it. The amount of caviar and champagne consumed at the

World Poverty Summit was phenomenal.

After the conferences and discussions, actual task of poverty eradication still remains far off. Poverty have to be defined and measured, since the emaciated women, clad in rags and begging for a living is not enough. That unfortunate women should now be defined and measured. We need printed evidence, written text in nice glossy papers which should first identify the poverty category of that wretched women. Is she absolutely or relatively poor? This is followed by the quantitative task of poverty measurement: the poor women is how much poor; what is her level of nutrition, asset value and literacy level? The answers are all known — she is undernourished, assetless and illiterate. However, the obvious must appear in the printed form.

This has given rise to the huge business of poverty consultants which together with seminars and hotels for seminars, amount to a multi-billion dollar global enterprise. What more we can expect? Poor of the land of poverty have made significant contributions to the welfare of those who live off the poor and thrive on poverty.

The conditions as described seem to be ripe for a proletarian revolution. Unfortunately, spring time communists of the land of poverty are now busy enjoying their cool air-conditioned rooms and warm hot-water baths (depending on the season).

Exams and Education

A high-level meeting chaired by the minister for education and attended by the secretary of the education ministry and the chairmen of all secondary education boards decided in principle on Sunday that from now an SSC examinations would be held only at the thana headquarters. If the number of examinees cannot be accommodated in a single centre, more schools would be pressed into service in the thana headquarters.

This is a good decision coming in response to a demand made for the same in the press. We welcome this example of responsiveness to media suggestions. The decision, however, is an open admission of failure to cope with the problem of copying which is universal in the village schools.

The idea behind the decision apparently is that the centres now can be better supervised and controlled. In the interiors there are cases where the authorities, in charge of the exam centre, work as accomplices helping the pupil to copy. With the guardians mobbing the centres there remains no way to prevent copying. This has been so for pretty long. And schools and even colleges doing better with copying facilities used to draw a spate of examinees just before the exams. Such spurious transfers have been stopped but copying goes on as infamously as ever.

The first challenge to this state of affairs came when young magistrates and police officers, yet to be inured to the warped ways of the world, resisted. And expulsions grew in number in geometric progression. So increased the frequency of clashes — the young officers alone in the fray with guardians, their hirelings and the school goons all ranged against them. Retreat was the best thing to save the situation from further deterioration. A retreat to the thana headquarters is what the decision signifies.

Can this retreat, with better supervised exams now, prove good for education? It can be very helpful for the exams, and not education. The two are not the same thing. The schools that helped the copyist institutionally will continue to be there — doing what? And the parents and the well-wishers of the copyists would send in their wards to the thana HQ and bide an idle time in their village backwards? Those bent on beating the exams will always go for oneupmanship successfully. As long as questions continue to invite copying, that is.

When will the day come when no one would need either to memorise or to copy? They will learn from teachers who will teach and not slave-drive them or write copious notes for them to be copied. It is the schools and teachers who are primarily responsible for the pupil's recourse to copying. When will the education managers and policy-makers, besides making things tough for the copyist, give their energy to improving school education? With about nil monitoring of the schools, you cannot hope to do that, ever.

India's Disenchantment

Apparently in a huff has India decided to say quits to IJO, somewhat out of tune with her non-impulsive nature. Although she has cited lack of implementation of the IJO-announced goals and policies as her reason for seeking a withdrawal, many tend to regard this as an upshot of the tie in the election for Executive Director, held recently. India and France got equal number of votes in it with the result that none has been elected to the post this year. India is a jute exporting country while France is an importing one. Evidently, she has not been able to garner the majority vote of the jute exporting countries.

IJO being the joint forum of jute exporting and importing countries it is not totally unexpected that a representative from the latter group of countries might someday become an executive director of the organisation. In fact, without making light of the inconclusive results this year or any possible debacle of jute exporting countries in the future elections, it is time we prepared ourselves for working in concert under all organisational circumstances.

At a time like this it is inexplicable why India which is an important member of the IJO should like to leave the organisation. The IJO was created nearly two and a half decades ago basically to fend for jute against the onslaught of synthetic fibres. Both the jute exporting and importing countries have a common stake there. The jute market is depressive at the moment and it will be an act of irresponsibility on the part of any member of IJO to turn its back to it now. Moreover, if India claims to be espousing the cause of jute exporting countries then she should continue to be in the organisation to help them in their bargains with the jute importing countries.

Neither can India benefit from the world jute market by being a loner in it nor can she voice her concerns effectively by opting out of IJO. Let India reconsider her decision for withdrawal.

Diarrhoea Stalks in

Diarrhoea has surfaced with a vengeance. Out of the 64,000 reportedly affected across the country 64 have already given up their ghosts. Noakhali seems to have been hit the hardest. The southeastern district alone has registered 27 deaths so far. Patuakhali, Maulvibazar, Bhola, Khulna, Pabna, Pirojpur, Rangamati, Barguna, Naogaon, Sylhet and Netrokona follow suit with their share of victims.

No death has been reported yet in Dhaka, but ICDDR,B (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research), its lone specialised medical facility for gastrointestinal complications and disorder, has seen a beeline of patients in the last few days.

Given the simplicity of the treatment, it is shocking so many people die every year. The knowledge that the core aspect in the treatment of diarrhoea patient is retaining fluid in the body through unabated oral injection to offset its relentless draining — the most conspicuous aspect of this complaint — has always been in the possession of domestic wisdom but it got authenticity with the advent of the much-publicised Orsaline.

It shows how many miles media in general still has to go to sensitise people on health issues. But a bigger challenge lies elsewhere: government's commitment to provide the citizen with a basic need like safe drinking water. Diarrhoea being a waterborne disease authorities need to go the whole hog to make sure people do not fall easy prey to contaminated water.

Tall order but there is no other way out.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

borrowed money which are never repaid. Money seems to come out of the toilet flush for the lucky few. And for everybody else, it is as scarce as water in the desert. In no other country, tailoring has become the major source of foreign exchange earnings while the major export commodity fetches a poor return. In the industrial sector, workers Raj has been so thoroughly established that if factories remain closed, losses will be less. In the schools and colleges, student Raj is so dominant that everything else ex-

cept education can be accomplished and every year a new bunch is added who believe in brown and not the brain. As a result, high school drop outs dominate both business and politics; while first class graduates fail to manage the economy of the illiterates.

The Lords of the land of poverty are a class by themselves. They remain isolated — deliberately keeping themselves away from the contami-

It is Audible, but is it Translatable?

by Chandra Shekhar Das

Campus terrorism has reached a point where we can hang fire only at our own peril. It is no longer an intangible worry of a clique of nostradamic intelligentsia. It is the opinion of the general people.

any tune of the power hungry unscrupulous political bosses. Capturing halls of residence has become a trial of strength for the front enjoying the blessings of the party in power. When BNP was in power, JCD was in control of most of the halls. With the return of AL, BCL has turned the tables on its younger but more powerful rival. With police sticking to its traditional way of shielding the pro government group, BCL has driven JCD activists out of the campus and are currently enjoying absolute supremacy.

But supremacy for what? For all practical purposes, it is not a victory for either BCL or JCD, rather it is a matter of one reign of terrorism being replaced by the other; one group of mavericks or criminals holding sway over the other. That there is little or no element of party spirit or camaraderie in these 'dorm capturing battles' became evident in what happened following Partha Pratim Acharya's death. A BCL activist was actually punished by his own party cadres for attending a condolence meeting on Partha! No wonder it seemed to newsmen covering the incident that there was an air of celebration (possibly from the delight of stealing a march on the rivals with the corpse) than grief over a premature death.

This continued brutalisation of the student community and the desecration of the campus has led to the increasingly audible suggestion, almost picking the decibel of a demand now that student politics be banned from the educational institutions. Because it is clear the political parties will never gather the courage or the appreciation of country's interest to dissociate themselves from

their student fronts. To the confirmation of what most feel President Shahabuddin Ahmed has categorically said that campus violence will never end, for that matter normalcy will never be restored in educational institutions unless this nexus between parties and student fronts is snapped. Things have been on course of a rising crescendo since then. Because President's last pronouncement on the issue during the convocation ceremony at Shahjalal University has been followed by a significant statement by the Prime Minister, who not only called for consensus among parties to ban student politics but also proposed to give a shoot at sight order against terrorists on campus.

Not unexpectedly Sheikh Hasina's proposal has created considerable furor. Senior BNP leader Badruddoza Chowdhury said that student politics can't be banned because that will be tantamount to dishonouring its glorious legacy. Perhaps nobody knows it better than Mr. Chowdhury that there is very little realistic and neutral relevance of what he or his party is saying to defend student politics. Actually the rationale lies the other way round. Banned student politics has disintegrated into petty contest for power and threatens to smear all the glorious gains of the past, that it should be put under the lid for the time being.

Actually the shoe pinches elsewhere. The BNP cannot afford a ban on student politics. Ever since late President Ziaur Rahman won over the student community with his brand of nationalism and 'get smart' philosophy, students have remained the livewire of BNP's

politics. But if Chowdhury's remark does not do any favour to our optimism, one can't help saying, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's proposal was not emblematic of political maturity either. She sounded like a cheeased off guardian who has lost control over her intractable children. Indeed despite her repeated assertion of neutral enforcement of law, Sheikh Hasina has given every indication of being unable to control her party's student front. It is natural at a time when BCL ascendancy is on the rise as its 'absolute control' over the Dhaka University dormitories would show, opposition would find it difficult to accept her plea for a ban on student politics as a very honest and sincere solution to the problem. Also she seemed to have given little thought to the legal, social and political implication of a shoot at sight proposal and quite unnecessarily allowed herself to be mired

in misinterpretation and propaganda.

It is important that no unnecessary, energy sapping destructive controversy is built around the issue so that an excuse can be made to put the problem on the backburner. The general students who bear the brunt of frequent campus violence and unscheduled holidays most seem to favour a blanket ban on student politics. A recent survey conducted by The Daily Star showed 64 per cent of the university students feel politics should go from the campus. Their teachers in majority however do not seem to share the view. Only 16 per cent of the educators backed a moratorium. No wonder again. More than seventy per cent teachers are actively involved in politics. There is nothing wrong with teachers being involved in politics. But in a situation like this where myopia and partisanism obliterate vision and neutrality it makes matters all

he more complicated. It may not have any necessary link with the general slide in the standard of education and the moral erosion afflicting the student community but the truth is, most, if not all, teachers are just not prepared to pay for upholding the high moral standard which sets them apart from the rest in the society.

Campus terrorism has reached a point where we can hang fire only at our own peril. It is no longer an intangible worry of a clique of nostradamic intelligentsia. It is the opinion of the general people. The heads of the state and government have given their moral sanction to do whatever it takes to extirpate violence from the campus. But a lot remains to be done to put the fight on the wheels. And the onus lies with the ruling party. There is not only the problem of the opposition not responding to its call for a decision on the basis of consensus but also the stiff challenge of overcoming the insidious intent within the party.

Will the desire to uproot campus violence overcome so many odds?

OPINION

Ban Student Politics

The prevailing unhealthy situations in the educational institutes, President Shahabuddin's recent address at Sylhet, and the Prime Minister's proposal for ban on student politics, have encouraged me in writing this letter.

The students participated and played significant role in 1952, 1969, and 1971 in the politics of Bangladesh. Nation really wanted their participation at that time, even in 1990. We do respect their glorious role. Rest of the world is also probably aware of this bright history. But, at this moment, is there any necessity for student politics in the country?

Although I was a kid in 1974, just arrived in Bangladesh, I can still remember the sombre incidence of seven students' killing in a residential hall at Dhaka University in 1973. Since my brothers and sisters started going to colleges and universities at that time, my parents were worried, and the contemporary politics became a common issue of debate in our domestic lives. Perhaps I asked my elder brother, a uni-student, "Why they have been killed?" "You are too young to understand," he replied. I was really too young to understand the complexity of student politics, but during the subsequent years, I possibly started understanding the glorious curve of student politics moving down-track from that time. The current incidences at the universities are the legacy of that brutality.

Student politics is a good business in Bangladesh today. A good number of so-called student leaders have become millionaire using muscle, political liaison, and position. I know one leader who bought a flat in Dhaka before he could graduate. After being graduated, the leader and his wife managed to get jobs in the same place, using their godfather in 1994. This fact is a chip off the whole block. Student wings of the ruling party and the opposition, both are same. The clash or rivalry between them is only for muscle show and opportunities. There is no issue regarding political ethics or principles.

This is not stunning that university teachers do not want the ban on student politics (The Daily Star 25.4.1998). In Bangladesh, after the bureaucrats, university teachers are having good time. Since, the universities remain closed most of the time, they (not all) can do other business, particularly, consultancy. Frequent closure of the universities does not create any problem in respect of their promotion. The

length of service, number of publications (some are really obscure), and support of the departmental head, are the factors. Quality of teaching, research, and project management, are never the driving forces. In a single syndicate meeting, more than hundred teachers can be promoted to professor level. We can perhaps beat the whole world in terms of number of professors, (certainly) not in quality of education.

Strong political backing is often required to become a Vice Chancellor, Dean or Director. The student leaders liaise between the interested teacher(s) and ruling party. Here is a fact for the readers: The then Vice Chancellor (sorry, I've forgot his name) of Bangladesh Agricultural University died in 1993. For some reason, I had to visit the university the day after the VC had died. In the lift, I met one gentleman, circled by the several students. One of the students asked him, "Sir, who is the next VC?" The reply still resonates into my ear. "Let Chanchal retire from Dhaka, he will bring the decision," did not know who was Chanchal. Virtually, Chanchal was a student leader. More surprisingly, that gentleman (a professor) became the VC of Khulna University later on. I think, I will have the similar experience now as well.

The political parties of our country are greatly responsible for this situation. They do not have faith on their ability, principles, aim, and objectives. That's why the parties are heavily dependent on the student wings. They give shelter to the culprits. The nation is well informed of the roles of many politicians in this regard. To be in the power, is the only motto. The professional integrity of the politicians is at stake, and it is blinking. It is good to talk less about them, because they are lawmakers.

I'll advise the students not to be involved in the politics. Some of you or your friends/politicians use your shoulder and chest in the name of politics. You lose your life, putting the entire family in distress, for no reason. You are supposed to complete your course within less than four years. Unfortunately, you can't make it even within seven years. Who is paying for this extra three years? Why are you spilling golden three years for nothing? You may argue that students are frustrated; they are worried of their future, as there is no job guarantee after the study. Then no one forces you to go for higher study. You know

how tough it is to get an opportunity for admission to the universities better than I do. Then why are you not taking the chance to build yourself? Think thrice, before jumping into the rubbish bin! If the situation does not improve, taxpayers may ask the government to abolish the universities. Taxpayers may not be interested to invest in the dumping centres any more.

I dare to talk about the teachers in Bangladesh. This is really a sensitive issue. Why the teachers have to contest for different positions under the pink, white, blue, or khaki banner (basically political)? This is rubbish. Teachers should not bear any colour. They lose their professional integrity, and respect, due to this earmarking. Unfortunately, this is quite rampant in our society. I must say, this banner/grouping encourages the students in creating the unfair situation. The teachers can play a key role in stopping the hooliganism and anarchy.

Our President realises the situation. He is our apex guardian, and has called the political parties several times to ban student politics. Recently, the Prime Minister has also made a proposal to bring a ban on student politics. Should we be hopeful?

If the government has an honest intention in putting the students on the right track, they should start it now. Since it is a political crisis, the politicians should come forward. A special Parliamentary Committee, represented by all parties, may be formed to investigate the entire situation. They should try to realise the problems of students and teachers, and try to get their say. Consent from the members of different professional groups should be valued. According to the recommendation of the committee, a bill may be placed for consideration before the parliament.

If the incumbent Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition cannot make it, no angel can make it for us. You should keep in mind, if you really want to halt this deterioration, you have to break the egg, otherwise you cannot make the omelette. If you do not take further practical initiative in this regard, we have the reasons to believe that, you are Machiavellian; appearing to be pious.

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To the Editor...

BUET teachers

Sir, Let me correct the factual error contained in the letter 'Au revoir, Architecture' by Muntalr Haque (The Daily Star, May 1).

The BUET authority did not act on the basis of joint letter of resignation submitted by 15 teachers of the Architecture Deptt., on March 15. The said joint letter of resignation was placed in the Syndicate meeting (immediate) on 16.3.98 and the Syndicate after proper deliberation passed a resolution to the effect that letters may be issued to the resigning teachers individually asking them to let the university know by 25.3.98 as to whether the resigning teacher wanted to resign from the services of the university with or without voluntary. Only two teachers, in compliance with the resolution of the university syndicate indicated in separate letters addressed to the Registrar and Secretary to the Syndicate that the joint resignation letter that contained his name and signature was not voluntary. But the rest 13 teachers in the name of withdrawal of their resignation brought about a long list of accusations and allegations against their own colleagues and the university authority. There was hardly a word of withdrawal in that long letter (5 pages) termed as 'withdrawal letter' by them.

In absence of any clear indication from them that they really wanted to retain their job, the university Syndicate in its meeting on 26.4.1998 accepted the resignation of 13 teachers with profound regret. Could Mr Muntalr Haque explain to the readers as to how better the university Syndicate distinguish between these two groups: one law abiding and the other non-law abiding? Could one who knows the developments remind him that it is a gross lie and distortion of facts that resignation of these 13 teachers was accepted before the Syndi-

cate meeting. I can't fathom how Mr Haque could discover some childish logic and blatant double standard when the BUET authorities went by rules and regulations.

There is no scope to interpret it as a punitive measure. If that was so, then two teachers who were staying in the camp of these aggrieved 15 teachers would not have been allowed to withdraw their resignation and restored in service. They can be taken back in service as and when the university advertises for the vacant posts. Instances are there that in the past some teachers of BUET who in defiance of the University Syndicate order overstayed in some countries outside Bangladesh were removed from the services of BUET. Subsequently when the University advertised for teaching posts and when these teachers applied they were taken back in service and some of them even became Vice-Chancellor. Even if they feel that the action has been malafide and unjust, they can go to court for redress of their grievances.

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Unholy Alliance?

Sir, on 27.4.98, the BUET Syndicate in an unprecedented and one-sided move accepted en masse resignation of 13 architecture teachers when the reason for their resignation was already removed due to an intercession by the Hon'ble PM and the Chancellor. The issue was amicably resolved in the presence of the Education Minister, Principal Secretary, Education Secretary, members of the Syndicate and President of the BUET Teachers Association on 23.3.98. In light of this settlement, the 13 teachers unconditionally and categorically withdrew their decision to resign according to the instructions given to them by the Syn-