

Time is Out of Joints, the Centre Cannot Hold

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Frittered Fellowships

There is such a wanton exhibition of wastage all around us that sometimes the obvious introspective jibe does hit the conscience: do we deserve to prosper? The answer may not be an easy one and might call philosophy in to play but what a leading national daily revealed in the first week of this month is not at all play but a pathetic display of self-defeatism.

Reportedly 50 or more fellowships for Bangladeshi physicians, in projects co-sponsored by Health Ministry, World Bank and some other international donor agencies, have gone a-begging primarily because of procedural delay in the selection process of the concerned ministry. It is probably irony at its height that in a country where diseases like tuberculosis and leprosy are still mighty scourges that stalk public health and even some of the less fatal complaints like diarrhoea which routinely mock at the strength of our healthcare system, fellowships offered in places like John Hopkins go unutilised. Perhaps only we are capable of this.

The reasons for such lapses are not difficult to trace though. With the string pulling of people in the corridors of power making light of meritocracy, a vital time is lost in preparing the list of candidates. Add to this the standard bureaucratic procrastination of the DG office and ministry. The recipe for disaster is more than complete. Hardly anything more is needed for the valuable opportunities for training abroad to be consigned to history.

Health is the most vital aspect of the nation. Unfortunately it is the most neglected, disorganised and inefficiently handled area in the whole gamut of our state governance. When would our ministers who are so glib about highlighting party programmes or the achievements of the party chief or, for that matter, airing loud and furious calls to people to prepare for the challenges of the Twenty-first Century wake up to their share of responsibilities? The authorities would do well to remember we don't have money or other resources to acquaint our doctors with the latest technology or the advancement of sciences. Under the circumstances every fellowship is a wonderful little bridge between the knowledge, expertise and experience of the developed world and us. We suspect that fellowships may be getting time-barred in other government departments also. We demand a committee be formed to probe into the irregularities and procedural bottlenecks which lead to the wastage of such precious opportunities.

Not a One-off Dazzle, We Hope

Board of Investment chairman Farooq Sobhan has waxed optimistic — almost to a point of painting a rosy picture — about prospective FDI flows into the country in a year's time. He has put these at 3 billion US dollar on his return from a series of investment seminars sponsored abroad by the BOI. It was an investment odyssey of sorts spanning March to early June period and touching such ports of call as Singapore, UK, USA, Canada and Italy. His meetings with both foreign and non-resident Bangladeshi investors have convinced him that Bangladesh can be regarded 'as the most favoured investment zone' in Asia.

All this is good news made all the more auspicious by the fact that the new projects lined up relate to generation of as much as 2000 MW of power, several joint-venture cement manufacturing plants, construction of private container terminals and mono-railway link between Tongi and Islampur and establishment of some modern hospitals. A string of cottage and small scale industries are also envisioned possibly with the NRBs in mind. The foreign investors have only evinced preliminary interest in these. This has to be followed up energetically now.

Even the signing of MOUs is hardly a guarantee for an assured inflow of FDIs as we have learnt by now. We must remind ourselves of what happened to former Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's loud claims after her US visit in incumbency that she had garnered an investment package worth US\$ 6 billion for her country. Very little came of it. There must be ocular proof of the money put upfront, all the preceding talk and courteous exchanges essentially awaiting vindication by what really works out on the ground.

Whatever it takes to unclutter the government's decision-making process and effect a radical improvement in the power sector must be done forthwith. A project is no more than a figment of imagination unless it is implemented.

In the Same Role as Ever?

Sani Abacha is dead. But military dictatorship in Nigeria isn't. General Abdussalam Abubakar, stepping into his boss's shoes, has said as much. "We remain fully committed to the socio-political transition programme of general Sani Abacha's administration, etc" said he in his assumption speech on Tuesday.

But the new ruler has posed to be caring for international support. He had to as so many international sanctions are now in force against Abacha-Abubakar's Nigeria. It is not a matter of goodness on his part but a hard necessity to soften up world condemnation of the Abacha coup and repression and of the continued denial of democracy. He must substantially prove his seriousness about returning Nigeria to normalcy before he gets a helpful signal from abroad.

There is one easy and effective way for him to do that. Free Abiola and with him all those who had been elected to Parliament but whom Abacha had thrown into prison. And thrash it out with Abiola as to how normalcy would return. The general has been very careful in avoiding that possibility. Even so, here is a new element and there shouldn't be any harm in expecting things to follow from his offer of an election in October.

Big and potentially very rich Nigeria is bogged down with ethno-political problems. The Hansa, Yoruba and Ibo peoples are doubly differentiated by their religions of Islam, Christianity and Paganism. Communalism, regionalism, tribalism coming to a head in a most unmanageable fashion have made Nigeria an ideal ground for oppression by the mighty among the natives. There is a lot to learn from Nigeria. But the point now is how to help it.

LIFE on earth is no longer linked to the transcendental, nor is human history "the sequel of a prologue in heaven." God has been challenged and Nietzsche proclaimed: God is dead. Freed from old absolutes, Julian Huxley envisaged an emergent religion of the future that would "define man's sense of right and wrong more clearly so as to provide a better moral support, (than the old myths) and to focus the feeling of sacredness on fitter objects." Sartre also insisted on the ethical imperatives for existence. But the contemporary utilitarian and instrumental value system of human kind have rejected those imperatives. Perhaps because "the existential ontology has no link with the essence."

Hence there is a sense of cosmic abandonment or, as Dr Krishna Chaitanya puts it, a landscape of utter desolation. For Kafka "living is encountering cruel and irrational riddles." Beckett waits in vain for Godot, for someone who can redeem him but never comes.

This moulding of contemporary psyche has been accompanied not by genuine science that integrates, but reductionist science that fragments. The brick of the universe is the atom or particle of matter which is dead, inert, incapable of motion and moves only when pushed or pulled by an external force. Ancient Greeks also reduced the variety of matter to the primordial particle, but this particle was ensouled. And the particle in quantum physics has a power of self-movement or internal determinism. However that may be we created our biology of reflex actions by helplessly reactive puppets. Species of living organisms have appeared by random and fortuitous genetic mutations that were weeded out by natural selection which later was conceived as a bitter, murderous survival struggle.

From these to the construction of an irrational psyche and "crafty rationalisation by a turbulent self-centred ego," is but a natural progression. So also the dominant economic paradigm that man/woman can only act from self-interest. It is true that contemporary psychologists, as Dr Krishna Chaitanya notes, have restored freedom to the self and Adam Smith has affirmed that a hidden providence, an invisible hand (the market?) could create the prosperity for all from the selfishness of each. But the fact

remains that this egotistic doctrine is the cardinal faith of all modern-day entrepreneurs. There are exceptions, but they do not prove the rule. The economics of self-interest captured politics and made it the horse trading (in the so-called democracies) or murderous strife (in fascist politics), of pressure groups and power blocs.

Any system that condemns human beings as mere consumers of goods allows dictatorship in the garb of democracy to flourish. As the eminent solar scientist, Dr J C Kapur notes, "There is nothing more hostile to the spirit than a democracy which evaluates all things by size and motion, and is devoid of egalitarian objective." Make-believe democracy is its assured subversion, already manifest in the paradoxes of affluence and human degradation, rhetorics on freedom of speech and disinformation, advances of frontier science and its extreme misuse or vulnerability.

Given this scenario, a rather presumptive and subjective one, of disharmony, how can the synergy be restored that will tie the family of human kind or a society or a village community together? Where is the glue that can bind the biological life with a life with meaning, dignity and fulfillment? How can we ascend from the domain of 'having' to the domain of 'being'? That, I believe, is at the kernel of human development, or should I say our ascendance? We need life enhancing values rather than instrumental values based on expedience. We need to be bound to the earth and to each other. As Henryk Slomowski puts it, we need an intersubjectivity based on "reverence for life, responsibility for all there is, fragility in our life-styles, and justice for all."

To protect life, further an empathy with all creation, recognise the integrity and beauty of the planet and of all our fellow beings is what is meant by life enhancing development. The recognition of the "other" and the interrelationship of all life, the imperative of interdependence of each other are at the core of reverent development. Respect and reverence for earth. Respect and reverence for the earth and all there is naturally blossoms into empathy with all creation, brings about dignity to the ex-

plotted and disadvantaged people and provides sustainability to the planet. This empathy is a form of spirituality and represents new values that are species specific and therefore intersubjective. These intrinsic values, as contrasted to instrumental approaches to values, bind us together and nourish us for further ascendance.

What does all this mean in terms of economic progress for all and an equitable political and social order?

First, what is considered economic must be combined with the ethical. There must be a consensus on the objective reality of available resources and considerations of long-run interests of the many. Pursuing economic policies that condemn large segments of population to deprivation and degradation are not only unfair, but also denies those who are thus condemned to act in their own long-run interest. That to a

and environmental decay persist is not because the problems are insoluble, but because they have not yet been seriously addressed. This is what my economist friend Robert Repetto calls attending to the basics. Examples abound in China, South Korea and in islands of Gramineen and other such initiatives in Bangladesh, that wider and equitable access to land water-bodies, credit, technology and other resources can transform the lives of the rural disadvantaged. Dispersed, quick yielding investment programmes that enhance employment opportunities in the countryside can result in faster overall growth in per-capita income.

Decentralising industries and improving living conditions and opportunities in small market towns and rural areas can help stem the tide of migration to already over-congested urban centres. There are

that takes advantage of natural predation is another example. Prevalent monocultures, in both irrigated and rainfed land in Bangladesh, for example, require heavy doses of fossil energy and chemicals and export massive amounts of top soil and chemical and organic residues to the surrounding environment. The demands of this ever-extending linear system on the environment is clearly unsustainable. What is required is, where relevant, to bend the linear design to the circular, to emulate the complex interactions found in nature.

Similarly, in industry, there must be continual reduction in generation of waste and the use of virgin material per unit of output and continual substitution of more abundant materials for those which are scarce. Much of the fuel consumed in industrial boilers goes right up through the chimney through incomplete combustion, resulting in low energy efficiency, high fuel cost and unnecessary environmental pollution. Valuable materials that could easily be recovered and toxic effluents are dumped into rivers and canals thus poisoning the water and endangering both human and aquatic life. The buses and trucks that spew black smoke in our cities would run better, use less fuel and last longer, if the engines were tuned occasionally and maintained better.

There may also be policy distortions. Sometimes investment incentives and credit policies encourage capital-intensive industrialisation. Over the long run, a fiscal system (encompassing taxes, tariffs and interest rates) that promote employment growth will encourage energy efficiency as well. In this sense attending to basics, particularly the need for faster job-creation has pay offs in resource and environment conservation as well.

Industrial growth can be sustained with markedly lower energy inputs and these, as I have written in an earlier column, can be supplied by a mix of sources that do not imperil the climate, nor pollute air and water. The environmental impacts of economic activity are no longer only local in scale but are capable of altering the planet's climate and primary productivity.

It is true that, as population grows and economic activity accelerates, there will be some changes in the current stock of natural resources. What we should be careful about is that certain losses are irreversible, like the extinction of species. Scientists estimate that more than 20 per cent of all species will die out within the next generation. The primary danger is the destruction of habitats, both terrestrial and marine, as highways, embankments and commercial avarice encroach upon the same and as the growing impoverished population seek the means of their survival. Any attempt at conservation requires extensive consultation with the fisher-folk and forest-dwellers and those who live around protected areas. Customary usages must be respected, and community systems of resource management, facilitated. Alternative opportunities for those whose livelihood will be affected by conservation measures must be provided.

And that brings into fore the imperative of hard political issues like patterns of resource control and levels of democracy within the decision-making groups. More decentralised democratic polity is, the greater is the participation and openness in community decision-making processes. Both are essential to ensure the opportunities for those whose livelihood-security depend on such resources to assert their rights. True democracy, should I say people's democracy, is not afraid of any vested power structure and has an inner strength of survival.

Ultimately it means a political and social order that upholds the well being of all by unleashing their creativity to proclaim their own destiny and their own way of life. Society's role as, Dr Kapur notes, is not just to provide guns and goods, but a sense of purpose not in physical well being alone, but in an ascendance of the human spirit. As biological beings we are only half finished. The other half is spiritual sustenance and quest for deeper meaning. So I invoke Paramahansa Satyananda:

"Just as a bird needs two wings
in order to fly in the sky,
similarly
in order to experience freedom
an individual needs to integrate
the dual aspects of
material and spiritual life."

To the Editor...

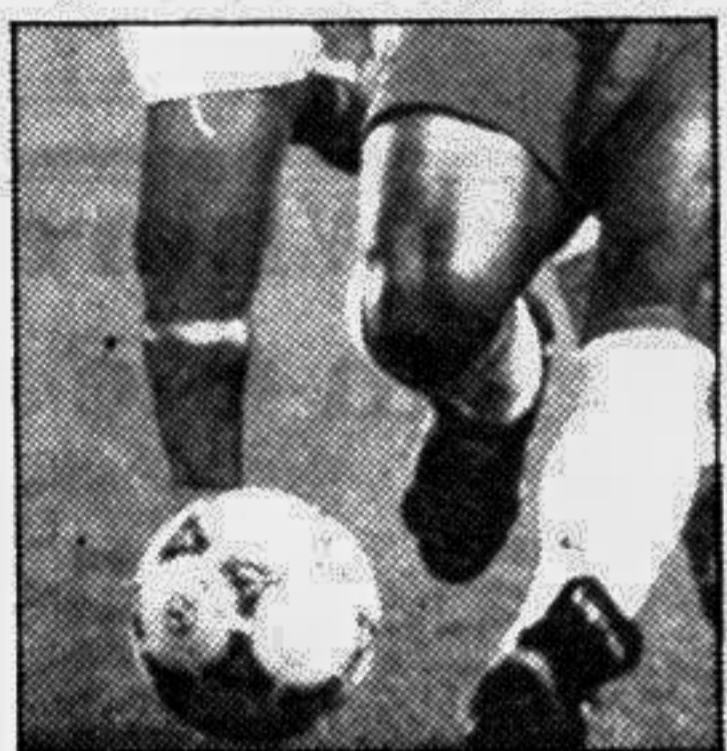
Rescheduling NU exams

Sir, The routine of 1st part, 2nd part, 3rd part honours and pass course exams under National University have already been announced and are going to be held from the first week of July of this year.

On the other hand the World Cup Football '98 has already started from the 10th June and will continue up to 12th July. Since World Cup Football is a four-year extravaganza and a very interesting game, most of the students will be busy enjoying the World Cup.

In this situation, it will very tough for them to appear at the examination. Considering the interest for the students, I urge to the National University authority to reschedule the date of examinations, say, from 1st week of the September of this year.

Tanvir Mahmud and Sheikh Shahjahan
Jagannath University, Dhaka.



Enjoying the World Cup, students!

Sir, So the World Cup Football matches give precedence over education and economy in Bangladesh. And this has been confirmed by no less a person than the Prime Minister of the country when she issued special directives to PDB and DESA people to keep the power situation improved during the matches.

I just wonder how the student community can demand deferment of their exams in order to be able to watch the football matches!

how the Prime Minister, who never gets tired of saying that poverty-alleviation is the top-priority programme of her government, can become serious to the load-shedding situation for the first time in two years only when the games are on! For the last two years, the newspapers have been full of reports about the sufferings of the students due to load-shedding. The industries, especially the garments sector, have been crying hoarse over their losses due to load-shedding.

But except for some routine directives, no serious action was taken. And now the PM gives stern warning to the relevant officials to improve the

Char Zaber College

Sir, Char Zaber college is the highest seat of education in this area — twenty-five kilometre away from Noakhali town. It was established by the inhabitants of this area in 1993. Comilla Board approved it same this year. There are arts and commerce faculties in this college.

The HSC result of this college has been very well for the last three years. This year, it introduces BA (Pass) course. National university permitted it.

But, there is no English teacher in this college. So, the students are suffering from the lack of knowledge in English. Not only that, there are numerous problems in this college. So, the attention of the government, the local people and the philanthropists is drawn to the pitiable condition of Char Zaber college.

Mr Shahid Ullah (Bashu)
Char Zubly, Sadar,
Noakhali.

From bangs to dust

Sir, The nuclear dust in the Pokhran desert may not yet have settled down, and we hear bangs in Pakistan. The temperature shot up both in the political and the climate sense as well in the capitals around the world. The laymen in the neighbouring countries did not have any clue to what really led to this sudden rush of adrenaline. Words of caution, sanctions may not have their desired effect but, at the end of the day, the brunt will have to be borne by the teeming millions, who will be hit the hardest — the chips are down.

The initial euphoria may last longer in one country than in the other. The question remains if this new path chosen by the two neighbours will not lead them over the precipice. The security paradigm gaining over the development paradigm does not augur well for either country since they both have almost infinite problems to be tackled with finite resources. Reactions from the neighbours of the two countries have been at best insignificant for the leaders of the two countries as they were more concerned about what the big players thought about and wanted to do to them because of their "disposition".

Where do we, in the immediate neighbourhood, stand? This region of South Asia, home to one-fifth of the world population with the highest concentration of poverty now has to face the threat of a nuclear war. The imminent danger is to the budding regional cooperation and the first casualty, it seems, could well be the tenth SAARC Summit. The current Chairman, the President of the Maldives has been careful, so were the Sri Lankans so as not to jeopardize the possibility of holding the Summit in Colombo, something which is the most sane course for the moment.

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For whatever reasons, Pakistan and India have created for themselves a problem with far-reaching implications for their

national as well as international life for a long time to come. The whole foreign policy apparatus in both the countries is no doubt geared to managing the fall-out with minimum damage to their national interest. Their obvious focus is on the big five nuclear powers and their main business/economic partners. The fate of regional cooperation in particular the well-being of SAARC could be bothering them the least.

We have our legitimate concerns, concerns of a next-door neighbour of a nuclear power. The asymmetry in international profile now accentuated threatens to stand in the way of the trend of improving relations. In such a situation, haste is to be avoided. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's concern for the deteriorating security situation in the region is quite in order. What troubles us is her abrupt decision to impose herself as a peace-maker between India and Pakistan. No other SAARC country hastened into such a venture. The move does not seem to be well-advised, if at all she was advised on this. Does India or Pakistan at the moment have time for Bangladesh playing dove?

Such a sudden graduation from our known brand of reactive, tardy diplomacy to a proactive, fast-track adventure in international mediation runs the risk of being roundly misunderstood. Even if her proposed visit to the two capitals materializes, but the effort at mediation fails, as it seems to us, we will have undermined the SAARC process having contributed so much in its genesis and nurturing all these years.

Have all these factors been considered? If yes, then what is this exercise about? Is the PM playing to the gallery?

A Concerned Citizen
Dhaka



The third party and arms race

Sir, The five permanent members of the UN Security Council have also decided to impose economic sanctions on India and Pakistan to stop the nuclear arms race in the sub-continent.

We however are surprised and shocked as to why a plebiscite is not being held in Kashmir for last fifty years under the supervision of the UN to help solve the problem consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? How and why India dares not hold a plebiscite in Kashmir under UN supervision? Why not stronger disciplinary and punitive measure like UN economic sanctions against Iraq has been taken against India as yet?

India always insists on solution of Kashmir problem through bilateral discussion between India and Pakistan. But time and again India has been intimidating, threatening and terrifying Pakistan to accept the illegal occupation of Kashmir by India and so far over five decades the Indo-Pakistan bilateral talks on Kashmir have ended in a total fiasco due to arrogant, dishonest and impious attitude of India. And now these two countries have plunged into a nuclear arm race.

Under such circumstances we wonder how the five permanent members of the UN Security Council expect India and Pakistan solve Kashmir problem through bilateral discussion?

We strongly feel that without further wastage of time and energy and without further aggravating the already-tense situation the five permanent members of the UNSC should now directly exercise their influence, trade and economic policy and diplomacy and compel India to accept a third-party mediation and solution of Kashmir problem through a plebiscite under United Nations supervision consistent with Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street,
Wari, Dhaka-1205

Monsoon and "Greenhouse Effect"

Sir, As a layman, it beats me why our monsoon visits are not affected or changes as per scientific predictions of the so-called "Greenhouse Effect", over-developed by the scientists of the developed world ("First World") for the guidance of the notorious "Third World" or LDCs or "emerging economies".

I have been noticing that our Bay of Bengal monsoon greets us regularly and punctually in the second week of June every year since the last half a century.

Either something is wrong with the western scientific propaganda, or our monsoon has the notorious Bengali aptitude of defiance.

Similarly the earlier colonialism has been changed by WTO to economic colonialism, and the then white man (civilization) is scared of a Muslim country possessing an atom bomb (newspapers report of what Israel TV broadcast). We are losing faith in the First World.

A Zabr
Dhaka

Fall-out of N-tests

Sir, The immediate reactions after India and Pakistan have conducted their nuclear tests cropped up in my mind are as follows:

1) Democracy is in danger as state of emergency has been declared in Pakistan which may tend to suffocate the voice of the opposition, and similarly, BJP in India the reaps the benefit of nuclear test which comes out of the emotion of people cornering the opposition parties.

2) Flow of economic development will be seriously hampered due to shortage of fund as the defence of both India and Pakistan has been made costly with the inclusion of nuclear bomb in their defence strategy.

3) In South Asia, particularly between India and Pakistan arms race, it's a beginning of jeopardising the climate of peace.

4) The security of comparatively smaller neighbouring countries of both India and Pakistan is threatened.

So, I as a citizen of Bangladesh which is signatory to Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), condemn strongly both India and Pakistan's wild desire of becoming nuclear power states at the cost of teeming million.

Mahbub Ali
41, Abdul Hadi Lane, Dhaka.

Code for private medical service

Sir, The government is reported to be agreeable to allow senior medical specialists from foreign countries to practice in the private health service sector.

A local private medical body, is sceptical about the idea without a proper independent monitoring system firmly in place. The current practices are not patient-friendly, especially those in the middle and lower-income group.

The authority may immediately print and distribute the "Code" for private health service for reference by all concerned, before expanded and enhanced services are introduced.

No ad hoc measures, said the Prime Minister.

Abul M Ahmed
Dhaka

Hurray!

Sir, The DS of 31-5-98 says in its eighth column of the 1st part: "50 BNP MPs may join govt. of consensus: Zillur".

We are happy that both Pakistan and India have reached a consensus to test and blast nuclear bombs.

Mr LGRD minister, are you ready to give ministership to all 50 BNP MPs who are nurturing the wish to join your consensus government?

Dealing in opposition MPs may give you a sweet bite on your face.

Nur Hossain
151, Bangshal Road
Dhaka-1100.