

Tackling Trafficking

Sexual exploitation of women has been a major worry for Bangladesh for decades. Although such exploitation can take on many forms, from sexual harassment to outright rape, it is trafficking in women and their enslavement in prostitution that has exercised public attention most in recent years. There has been a debate over whether to legalise and formalise prostitution, in order to ensure that only consenting adults are engaged in this profession. Proponents of legalisation feel that use of violence and other forms of exploitation by pimps and clients can only be tackled as criminal offences if prostitution itself was made legal. Opponents, however, feel that legalisation would only give protection to the pimps and not the women engaged in the profession. There are strong grounds to feel that legalisation could encourage, rather than prevent, trafficking.

These issues were amply reflected during a three-day conference titled "Organising Against Sexual Exploitation of Women Regionally and Globally" which ended in Dhaka on Friday. The conference felt that de-criminalisation of women involved in prostitution and creation of a conducive socio-economic and cultural environment were necessary to prevent sexual exploitation and trafficking. There is little doubt that prostitution creates the demand for trafficking in women both within countries and across international boundaries. Therefore it would be logical to suggest that the evil of trafficking be tackled at its root. Trafficking is invariably found to involve a high degree of coercion or deception. Prostitution may not always involve coercion, and many adult women do engage in the profession on a voluntary basis. But this "voluntary" basis may not be anything more than an illusion, since the woman's choice may have been made under severe socio-economic duress.

Under the circumstances, the government does face a Himalayan task. Administrative measures alone cannot put an end to trafficking, but such measures, including tight policing of borders, remains a priority area. More important is the creation of sound economic opportunities in border districts, which have traditionally been a fertile ground for recruitment by traffickers. Without economic solvency, many families in these areas would remain under pressure to give in to the traffickers' tricks. It is debatable whether prostitution itself can be uprooted from any society, whether rich or poor. But what the government can certainly do is to offer rehabilitation opportunities to women wishing to leave the profession and provide maximum protection from harassment, violence and exploitation to those still engaged in prostitution.

Remittances Up

This is a pleasant surprise, more relieving perhaps than instantly enthralling us to throw up fists in outright celebration. Bangladeshis working abroad despite many odds that confronted them accounted for a rise in the remittance figure by close to 12 per cent in 1998 over the level recorded the year before. The total worked out to US dollar 1.6 billion which in Taka terms stood at 7,513 crore.

The devaluation of currency must have helped increase the flow a little; but, according to the Manpower Bureau, there was a more substantive reason that could be ascribed to the spurt: actually manpower exports to Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, rose last year, contrary to the impression of a general slump on the manpower front. This appears to have helped us make up for the losses sustained in the Southeast Asian job market which shrank from the worst economic crisis suffered anywhere in the last few decades. Even the Bangladeshis who retained their jobs could not remit enough money from their salaries which were basically reduced by companies working on shoe-string budgets.

Since the export sector, by and large, failed to grow at the desirable pace, the higher remittance from the earnings of Bangladeshi wage earners abroad comes to redeem the situation somewhat by way of balancing our foreign currency accounts. But it could be so much the better if we took the two following steps without ado: first of all, unhealthy competition among recruiting agencies ends up negotiating poor salaries for the Bangladesh workforce. This has to be streamlined at the administrative and inter-governmental levels. Secondly, it is necessary to offer attractive new investment packages and savings instruments to the Bangladeshi earners overseas, an agenda that certainly has not been adequately addressed to date.

Stop These Antisocials

In the light of political liberalisation following the signing of CHT peace accord, news of five Bengalees being kidnapped by unidentified tribal youths from Kauhali thana comes as a disconcerting piece of information. This is not the first such incident in the greater Hill Tract district, but a big one following the peace accord signed a year ago. It is obvious from the activities of a certain group of hill people that they are not satisfied with the peace accord between the government and PCJSS. They want nothing short of 'complete autonomy' and they never shied away from making their demand known from time to time through a variety of methods including abduction. It is still not clear whether any political group is behind the latest abduction drama, but it definitely serves as a clear indication of what is happening in the hill districts. The abductors have asked for Tk 2 lacs as ransom and suggested the nearest Nanihar thana as the contact place to make the payments. While talks between the government and the PCJSS are in progress to accelerate the pace of implementation of the peace accord, there are pockets of discontent and resentment making themselves occasionally felt. This is in itself a very tricky situation which is further aggravated by such kidnapping and occasional skirmishes. The local administration must be on its guard and put its foot down on such adventures by antisocials as the PCJSS took charge of the wayward elements in the tribal fold.

Globalisation and Bangladesh

by Habibur Haque Khondker

We now live in a world of nation-states with national flags, anthems, constitutions and other markers of nation-state which are remarkably similar in many ways. So when the self-declared defenders of national values identify globalisation as a threat to nation-states miss the point completely. Yet, there is no denying that there is a tension between the forces of global and those of the local.

THE world we live in today is being haunted by the spectre of globalisation. What does globalisation mean? To most people globalisation immediately conjures up the image of an economically integrated world being driven by a common set of economic rules and principles of homogenisation.

The rules of the game entail the free flow of transborder trade in goods, services and ideas. For Omaha, globalisation means a borderless world. Globalisation, for many, is the celebration of capitalism. No wonder, the rise of the rhetoric of globalisation timed with the collapse of the "really existing socialism". But this is only a partial understanding of globalisation. The notion that the logic of capitalist development would engulf the entire world owes to Karl Marx, the 19th century theoretician of capitalism and the prophet of socialism.

It may be recalled that socialism too emerged as a global — in the sense of a worldwide — movement. In a simple sense, global refers to phenomena that are worldwide. And we are all implicated in this process of globalisation through our consumption and imagination. Sociologists have been trying to understand the

processes of globalisation long before the contemporary economists joined the chorus.

One of the issues of great interest for them was cultural diffusion. Cultural ideas, beliefs, religions and artifacts have been slipping through geographical boundaries of the self-contained communities for centuries. Ideas such as national culture or nationalism are of recent creations in historical terms. It is interesting to note that the ideas of nation-state and nationalism are the results of the processes of globalisation.

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that there is a tension between the forces of global and those of the local. The issues here are more complicated than they seem to be at face value and there is no way we can avoid turning to history for a clearer understanding.

Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "global village" in 1964 to highlight the role of information in the creation of a worldwide community. Since then the information revolution is sweeping the world portending the coming of the information society as a hallmark of globalisation. The implications of the information revolution on the local culture are still being evaluated more often with great emotions than cool reasons.

While economically Bangladesh became integrated into the world system with the onset of colonialism, the cultural and religious incorporation with the Islamic world be-

gan much earlier. The political ideas that moved the local elite to initiate social reforms and champion political emancipation came often as unintended consequences of colonial rule. The role of modern education was crucial in this regard.

One of the most important, though often unrecognised, markers of globalisation today is the uniformity of curricula worldwide. Students from Albania to Australia, from Bangladesh to Brazil all have to spend a good deal of time memorizing the third law of thermodynamics. Before all the hype of McWorld and computer revolution came, science and especially, scientific thinking was at work laying the foundation of globalisation.

Our exposure to science is bound to challenge some of the deep cultural beliefs that we hold so dearly. Local culture is an ensemble of our taken-for-granted assumptions of the

world we live in. It also provides us with certain resources to live by. Globalisation does not mean erasure of local culture; it reconstitutes local culture. Sociologist Roland Robertson, a pioneer in the studies of globalisation, suggests that "local" or the image of local is often shaped by the forces of globalisation. We often borrow and adopt cultural resources as well as beliefs from elsewhere as long as they help us collectively. We do not live in cultural cocoons now, nor did we live in the past.

Deep-seated local cultural values might extol the virtues of large family but the exigencies of our time lead us to limit our family size. Not that there is no cultural or emotional cost to it but we cannot escape from these preponderances. While limiting family size is being accepted as a norm, we continue to frown upon children who refuse to look after their elderly parents.

Our friendly village Maulavi should be reassured that he is not alone in opposing family planning. Pope John Paul II, the leader of the Catholic world is on his side. In the same way, a parent in Dhaka may be reassured that like her a mother of a teen-age daughter in Bratislava is also worried that her daughter is watching too much television and neglecting her studies.

Some of the cultural battles are being fought on a much wider plain and not to be viewed as conflicts between global and local. The puritans of Bengali nationalism may be reminded that some of the quintessential ingredients of Bengali culture such as chili and tea slipped into the repertoire of our culture from elsewhere without anyone noticing.

In the same way, before anyone notices we will claim "Spaghetti and Jazz" and "Cybercafe" as our own as we have incorporated cricket in the fabric of our culture. Paraphrasing Ashish Nandy, one could say that not only cricket is a Bengali game invented in England but also tea, a Bengali beverage was first tasted in China.

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Kumaratunga in Troubled Water

Kumaratunga has made firm decisions on many matters related to important issues and has certainly shown maturity in dealing with the Tamil issue even though no substantial headway could be made on the seemingly intractable problem. But her decisions to use powers for suppressing popular right to vote or to defer exercise of this right and allegations of vote rigging have sent wrong signals to the democratic world.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has displayed firm leadership in dealing with the Tamil problem but the complexity of the imbroglio is such that it is really a Herculean task to find a way out.

But, of late, President Kumaratunga and her administration came in the limelight on another count, which has nothing to do with the Tamil issue directly but is inextricably linked with the powers of the chief executive and the question about the rationale in use of this power. A landmark judgement that limits the power of the Sri Lankan president, the most constitutionally powerful leader in the world, will set the precedence for nations grappling with human rights issue.

The ruling by the supreme court last week censuring Kumaratunga for using a nationwide state of emergency to cancel elections called in August, 1998, has come as a big embarrassment for the president. This has put her in a limbo since the historic 21-page judgement brought into focus the irrationality of the authority of the office of the head of the state which combines also as the head of the government.



For the first time, the judiciary has defined the limits on the all powerful executive presidency and made it clear that officials who carry out wrong executive orders will not have immunity enjoyed by the head of the state.

Sri Lanka, unlike its South Asian neighbours India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal who practise parliamentary democracy, has a presidential form of government. Nepal had been a constitutional monarchy until a few years ago with all powers vested with the King before going for a parliamentary democracy with the monarchy retained in the ceremonial head. But the Sri Lankan president wields much more power than the presidents of the United States and France. Under the 1978 constitution, the president is above the law and

had Bill Clinton been the president of Sri Lanka he would have not been tried on charges of perjury and obstruction to justice.

But that the presidential power cannot be used to deny the rights of the people has been vindicated in the supreme court judgement which said that the cancellation of elections by the president using the state of emergency is indefensible. For the first time since the introduction of the universal adult franchise in Sri Lanka in 1931, the right of vote has been equated to freedom of expression by the ruling. The three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice G. P. S. de Silva has also recognised the vote as a fundamental exponent of free expression guaranteed by the constitution.

Experts on constitution said that the ruling could be cited by

activists in other countries to strengthen voting rights in their countries and used in cases challenging disruptions to electoral processes. The supreme court censured both the president and Election Commissioner Dayananda Disanayake for putting off the August 28 elections using the cover of state of emergency, and ordered fresh polls within three months. The judges said President Kumaratunga's orders in last August cancelling the elections were "arbitrary and unreasonable". They have made it clear that the officials cannot carry out wrong presidential orders with impunity and said presidential immunity does not transform an "unlawful act into a lawful one".

The state has also been ordered to pay legal costs to two members of a media organisation who petitioned the court over the indefinite suspension of the elections. The opposition was obviously emboldened by the court verdict as key opposition figure Ranil Wickremesinghe said the momentous judgement of the supreme court will go a long way towards upholding the voting rights of the Sri Lankan people and will have repercussions in other countries as well. For the president, the lesson is that the powers given by the constitution which are by any standard wide in democracy should not have

been used to deprive the people to exercise the right of franchise. This has come as a serious discomfiture to Kumaratunga who otherwise has made her mark as a firm administrator.

Another issue that might come as an embarrassment for the president is that the Sri Lankan supreme court will soon decide the fate of a provincial election that observers say, the ruling party rigged. The court has agreed to hear an opposition party member's challenge of the results of last Monday's elections on north-western province, one of the country's eight regions.

President Kumaratunga has made firm decisions on many matters related to important issues and has certainly shown maturity in dealing with the Tamil issue even though no substantial headway could be made on the seemingly intractable problem. But her decisions to use powers for suppressing popular right to vote or to defer exercise of this right and allegations of vote rigging have sent wrong signals to the democratic world.

In South Asia, where democracy is flourishing and is yet to take firm roots, it is all the more disturbing. Sri Lanka's quest for solidifying democratic institutions will be further strengthened if people's wishes are more valued within the democratic parameters. After all, the nation has produced several notable world-class leaders whose passion for democracy are well known. The current president can also fit in the same category, given she doesn't exercise her power as the president recklessly.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Moony moon-watcher

Sir, We wait eagerly to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr with our families. This Eid is observed in all Muslim populated countries as one of the main religious festivals. In religious events, observance of Ramadan fasting and Eid depend specifically on the sighting of the first crescent phase of Ramadan and Shawal moon respectively.

In ancient time, at sunset, people used to gather to locate that crescent by scanning western horizon with naked eyes (As telescope was invented by Galileo, about thousand years after our holy prophet departed). They, on such sighting, made joyous sound and exploded crackers; others got the message from that the ritual would be on the next day. For Ramadan and Eid, our ancestors too had watched the same way (even after British period onwards).

Till today, we do the same, whereas, in the last couple decades, science and information technology have advanced so much that movements of celestial bodies can be predicted with pin-point accuracy. But amazingly, still today, we are in stone-age.

This year (1999) to know the sighting of Shawal moon, we had to wait about 4 hours after sunset (to receive a news from someone) some where we watched the moon for us and someone else had to take some time to decide to announce this news officially). Whereas, for the benefit of few, we installed powerful telescope focused on the path of meteoric shower. I think, it is high time for us to get out of moony state and accept reality.

A R Choudhury
Uttara, Dhaka

I'm rather afraid

Sir, Over the last two or three years, a strange phenomenon came to my notice. A section of young people has grown an intense passion for crackers (popularly known as potka). I can remember that it was only the night of Shab-e-Barat that had been marked and celebrated with blasting various types of crackers mostly in old Dhaka. I am, however, absolutely ignorant about the origin of this sort of practice and equally unaware

whether or not potka-blasting has any religious or traditional or historical significance.

However, for the last two or three years this cracker-blasting has no more been the only companion of the Shab-e-Barat but has been associated with many other occasions. These days, December 31, nights before the two Eids, December 15 (the night before Bijoy Dibosh) have been included in this potka-blasting custom(?). I am afraid at the apprehension that these cracker-lovers will go on making the list longer by adding the remaining few occasions of different significance (such as 27th March, Pohela Baisakh and who knows may be even Pohela Falgun).

I wonder what kind of physical or mental or aesthetic pleasure can be derived by producing so loud, heart-shaking terrible sound. On the December 31 night very recently when the clock struck twelve, the very first day of a New Year was welcomed with thunderous, ceaseless, ear-deafening blasts from every possible side conceivable for a long hour. Dhaka appeared to be a nightmarish city and we got the feeling of experiencing the war-time bombing from the enemy planes.

May be, I am yet to learn the definition and source of 'pleasure'.

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Wanted crash project: "telephone on demand"

Sir, The public is greatly disappointed on the scarcity of new telephone connections. The waiting list is long. How long is the waiting list should be publicised officially (take cognizance of the passive demand). Negative exposures should not be avoided, to ensure transparency.

The previous regime was not up to the task of meeting the huge demand for new connections and the present regime is dragging its feet, and corruption and back-door methods appear to be rampant when trying to get a new line. Bribery needs a team inside a system, it is never a one-man operation.

Digital conversion schemes have taken up a lot of time, and the expansion projects have slowed down, adding to public

misery. Further, line telephone system needs underground cables and overhead wires running into hundreds of miles, involving huge labour and time.

But the government is not clarifying the policy on expansion, whether to go for fixed wireless cellular, which appears to be cheaper and quicker, saving thousands of man-hours, with less maintenance, involving fewer personnel for operation and maintenance.

There is lack of transparency on telephone development schemes, otherwise the supply-demand ratio would have come down since 1992. Some groups are making tainted money on the side (how to explain satisfactorily the fact that a number of linesmen buy and own houses)?

The government need to come out with a clear policy statement on introducing a crash project to make available more telephones than the current demand, and meet the expanding demands for the next five years.

The continued delay in introducing the right policy cannot be due to shortage of funds. It may be due to deliberate go-slow tactics by vested interests within and outside (we have a surplus of opportunists monitoring the mail).

The picture depicted above is not at all unusual in Bangladesh, as similar bottle-necks are or were visible in other sectors (the power sector took many years to be opened up, and the FSCs in the gas sector have been bungled up).

The people's governments are not interested in the people's demands, and go about introducing small projects with a lot of fake fanfare, which cannot meet the demands for many years to come. There appears to be a lot of beating about the bush. When opposition-bashing is popular, why not bash the administration when they cannot cope with public demands for urgent services, and fail to deliver.

Business cannot develop with a huge shortage of telephones. Telephones should be available without begging or bribery. The line rent should be reduced (or subsidised) to enable the middle class to rent telephones; this move will open up a huge sector of the market. The target is clear: telephone on demand.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Silent zone

Sir, According to a news published in the DS on Jan 4, as part of a drive to free the residential areas from sound and air pollution, the Dhamond residential area will be declared a 'silent zone' in the first phase. This must be cruel joke, for

when I first came to live in my own house in Gulshan in early 1974, it was then a 'no-horn' or a silent zone in the real sense and there was also hardly any air pollution in the area, but not any more.

Today, after about 25 years, Gulshan is no better than any other noisy and air-polluted parts of the metropolis. With numerous trucks, lorries, staff buses and vintage motorised vehicles of all types spewing black smoke and blowing horns with deafening noise which could well be disturbing the dead in their graves, Gulshan is now a sick area in terms of both noise and air pollution.

May I, therefore, request the authorities concerned to take steps to cure the sick first by re-making Gulshan a silent zone and then take in hand any similar new project.

A Quayyum
Dhaka

Kosovo has a cause

Sir, I was very happy to read the articles on Kosovo titled "Kosovo's Independence" by Dr A R Choudhury and a letter from America titled "What NATO Really Tells Slobodan Milosevic" by Dr Fakhurridin Ahmed. I would suggest articles of such sort should be printed more often. The facts spelled out in the articles are true and very illuminating to the general readers in Bangladesh.

What do we learn by reading the above said articles? A simple fact: the West led by the USA is bent upon destroying the back-bone of any Islamic nation which is trying to assert itself economically and militarily. It will assist any nation which would fight to defend any Islamic movements.

They bombed Iraq killing innocent women and children, and destroying residential areas for what the West called containment of Iraq. They are still doing the same with impunity. The articles speak of the double standard of the West in regard to their position in the Kosovo crisis. The West never bombed the Serbs in Bosnia, and they will never do that to the Serbs in Kosovo. The ethnic Albanians have to fight it out for asserting themselves. And they know very well that the West is being, and the threat of NATO is no more than empty threats.

Our government must condemn the Serb atrocities committed against the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, and our media should also come up with supportive articles favouring their freedom.

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OPINION

Operation Traffic Mess

Abu Khair

Traffic mess in the city forced the chief executive of the state to take the wrong lane on January 11. This has happened as she had no alternative but to skip total disarray of the traffic. I hope that after experiencing this problem our prime minister by now has taken a pragmatic decision as to how this problem could be solved.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is a worthy decision maker as well as a problem solver which she has proved in the past, and I am sure that she will not look back in the case of easing traffic problem and find a solution as to ascertain how far this problem has been hurting the common people. In fact no conscious citizen will disagree that we are experiencing a tough time as far as the traffic in concerned. Army, BDR and police are frantically trying to tackle this mess. Daily office goers surely have noticed and will agree that our traffic does not follow the indication of traffic signals. On my way to office, I am yet to anticipate as how long will it take me to reach my destination.

On the same day (Jan 11) the DS published another photograph of traffic jam on its back page, indicating brief scenario that over 6 lakh rickshaws are plying the city streets. But DCC does not agree — as estimated by police — and says at the most 3 lakh rickshaws are the city streets. It is appreciable that DCC official admitted that being the sole authority of issuing of rickshaw license, since they have limited scope to perform their duties due to lack of any firm policy. It is worth taking into considering here the RAJUK's point of view: the way vehicles are increasing in the city, roads/streets are not widened/increasing proportionately.

A few years back authority concerned undertook an ambitious programme to build flyovers and earmarked the points keeping in view to reduce traffic congestion of the city. But unfortunately that programme had been abandoned by the authority for reasons better known to them.

Questions arise: under who's direction this type of project had been undertaken and what was the justification of cancelling work order in spite of spending substantial amount of money?

I would like to suggest some points which might help to ease traffic problem in the city.

1) If it is true that we are not rich, and Magic Lamp is not working any more, hence a over night change cannot be expected, but what we lack is patriotism and pragmatic decisions in time.

2) To have better traffic system, a special committee should be set up headed by the communications minister.

3) Excavation of city roads even now and then by the service-oriented organisation/corpn. without having any coordination is one the main problems of traffic jam. Though this problems are discussed/pointed out by authority concerned in order to avoid re-excavation throughout the year, but coordination is not possible due to time bar, framed by the donor agencies, which does not match with our time schedule for repairing/development activities.

4) Unauthorised structures of the city should be demolished without fail for easy movement of vehicles. DCC took an initiative in this respect but it stopped the work which is beyond our knowledge.

5) Since Dhaka is being called a mega city and being expanded without keeping any provision for parks, play grounds, parking places and sufficient number of pavements for pedestrians. As such it would be a wise decision to convert open spaces into parking places around commercial areas against which government would also be able to earn revenue. Simultaneously employment opportunity could also be created.

6) Emphasis should be given on the rehabilitation of the rickshaw-pullers before phasing out rickshaws and autorickshaws. If in need be authority concerned may seek help/suggestions from NGO/World Bank etc.

7) Lorry/trucks should have a time bar in plying on city streets unless emergency commodities carried by those like food, medicine etc.

Since the city has developed in an unplanned way, it is therefore imperative for the policy makers to find out alternatives as how to mitigate the sufferings of common people. This is a vital issue which cannot be turned down by any means.

If we fail to take the right decision now, I am not sure what step our PM will take if she is to face the same problem again?