

# The Pope Walks into the Mexican Snakepit

The visit of Mexico by Pope John Paul II comes at a time when tensions are high within the Mexican church hierarchy. Gemini News Service reports that conservative bishops and liberation theologians are taking vastly different approaches to key human rights issues in the country. **John Ross** writes from Mexico City

**D**R Asuncion Garcia Samper, and anthropologist, is certain that she knows just where to find the missing bones of Juan Diego, the mythical Aztec noble to whom the Virgin of Guadalupe first revealed herself in 1531.

However, Dr Garcia tried with little success to obtain the necessary permits from the officially atheist Mexican government to begin digging for the bones ahead of Pope John Paul II's visit to Mexico.

Presentation of the bones would have clinched the Indian's canonisation during the Papal visit, said Father Enrique Salazar, director of the Guadalupana Centre.

Canonisation of Juan Diego was not the state reason for the Pope's fourth visit here, but it certainly was a sub-text. High on the Pontiff's itinerary: a meeting with Latin America's bishops at the basilica built in honour of the Dark Madonna, under which the bones are thought to be interred.

Officially, the Holy Father was to bless the conclusions of the Synod of the Americas, which sets the agenda of the Roman Catholic Church in North and South America for the coming millennium. By addressing the continent in the basilica, the Pope implicitly honours the supremacy of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who won Mexico's Indians to the Church and is considered the cornerstone of the evangelisation of the Americas.

Most of Mexico's Roman Catholics — usually given as 90 per cent of the 96 million population — fervently believe in the existence of Juan Diego. But whether John Paul would eventually elevate him to sainthood — with or without the bones — remains highly speculative. Debate over his historical existence has sputtered on here for years. No mention of the Indian is actually recorded until well into the 17th century and a garment with the supposed imprint of the Virgin proved to be hand-painted.

But tensions in the Church hierarchy are not limited to Juan Diego's bones. Within the Mexican Bishops' Conference (CEM) relations between conservative members and the remaining handful of liberationist bishops seem as icy as ever. A key sore spot is the con-

servative attempt to rid the CEM of pesky liberation theologians.

The Vatican has campaigned to oust 73-year-old Arturo Lona, long-time bishop of Tehuantepec on the Oaxacan isthmus and a staunch defender of the Indians of the region.

The late Bartolome Carasco, eremitus bishop of Oaxaca and an outspoken voice for the poor, was pushed aside by a coadjutor in 1993.

In 1996 Bishop Samuel Ruiz was assigned a coadjutor to neutralise the radical bent of the San Cristobal diocese. In his last years as shepherd of his flock, Ruiz remains under constant attack from both the Mexican government and his own Church hierarchy.

President Ernesto Zedillo last summer faced the Bishop of fomenting "theology of violence." However, Raul Vera, who will soon succeed Ruiz, has shown himself forthright in the defence of the Mayan peoples.

As if such conspicuous back-

stabbing was not doing enough to disaffect the faithful, the Mexican Church continues to lose substantial ground to the Protestant (largely evangelical) denominations. They have gathered so much strength in some regions they are talking of formulating a political party.

According to Cardinal Enriquez, the Roman Catholic Church stands to lose 30 per cent of its followers to the Protestants in the first years of the new century.

Flustered by Protestant inroads, chiefly in the southeast of the country, the hierarchy counter-attacks with an evangelisation programme funded by business people tied to the Jesuit movement Opus Dei.

Still another headache for the CEM, which seeks better relations with the government, is a shrill anti-abortion group of catholic zealots who relentlessly attack public officials for "murdering babies" by providing government abortion help and for advocating homosexu-

ality through condom giveaways.

The Mexican snakepit into which the Pope has plunged extends far beyond the ecclesiastical realm. It is the advent of an intensely political year in which the major parties will name their presidential nominees.

One man expected to be nominated, Mexico City chief of government Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, hosts the Pope in the capital. Cardenas, a Mason, flew off to the Vatican in October to discuss security arrangements with the Pope and his staff.

The photo opportunity upstaged outgoing Zedillo and was sharply criticised as political opportunism by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, which is thought to have deep support within the clerical community.

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Human rights, which the Pope staunchly defended in his New Year's message, are another touchy subject. Zedillo's human rights record has been under fire by international non-governmental organisations, particularly in Italy.

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POPE JOHN PAUL II  
Visiting Mexico

## Facing the Major Challenge in Basic and Continuing Education

by Md Waliul Islam

**T**HE curricula and syllabi of the secondary and primary school courses have to be modified and modernized to suit the present day need of the society. Technical and vocational courses are to be incorporated along with the conventional courses.

**T**HE main problem of Bangladesh is its population. The total land and other available resources are not sufficient to support this huge concentration of people. As such most of them are suffering from poverty, hunger, diseases and illiteracy. To improve the situation resource mobilization is necessary to bring back the balance between population and its GDP growth. For resource mobilization, along with harnessing of natural resources, human resource development can play a very important role. Here lies the real challenge in the field of education to convert the huge chunk of human burden into human resources. Studies and researches showed that people having basic and continued education up to secondary level are the vital part of this resource. In case of Bangladesh, it has been revealed that 40 per cent of the children belonging to five to eleven years age group never go to school and 60 per cent of those who initially enter into the elementary school do not continue their studies and leave the school within very short time.

So in the process of human resource development the greatest challenge is imparting the basic and continuing education. And the most important factor that influences (in the negative) the challenge is the poverty of the people.

In the process of calculation of unit cost of any type of education, three main components are considered: Namely, (1) Institutional cost, (2) Student's cost and (3) Opportunity cost. First two do not require any explanation, because they are self-explanatory. But the third one needs explanation: 'Oppor-

tunity cost or income foregone by the students' while they study, equals to the amount of money they would have earned had they not attended the institutions. Higher the level of education higher is the opportunity cost. At the elementary level opportunity cost component is zero, because the children of five to eleven years age group are not supposed to engage themselves in any income generating activities that might provide some financial support to their parents or guardians. But the opportunity cost at the level of primary education is not zero in case of Bangladesh, though, according to theory, it was supposed to be zero, as in the case of developed countries where research studies were conducted.

The opportunity cost for any level of education is the student cost that comes directly on the parents or guardians. The poverty-stricken people of Bangladesh cannot sacrifice the opportunity cost of educations — a financial loss due to the reason that the time their wards spend in schools, could otherwise be utilized for economic activities that could bring, directly or indirectly, some financial benefit to them.

As such the majority of poor parents do not show any interest to send their children to school. Even send their children to school, within a very short time, when they realize about their financial loss, stop sending their wards to the school and thus increase the bulk of drop-out problem in the system of basic and continuing education.

To face this challenge (dropout vis-a-vis poverty) in

the field of human resource development the authorities concerned must keep in mind the hard fact that poverty and basic education are inter-related. So mere universalisation of primary education through constitutional provision and enactment of law for compulsory primary education for every citizen will not solve the problem of basic and continuing education.

On the contrary some pragmatic and realistic steps should be taken so that the poor and distressed parents and guardians become interested to send their children to the schools. In this regard, to create the interest, properly identified poor and distressed parents and guardians may be provided with some material incentives for their school-going children, which they will consider as compensation against the loss they incur due to their children's absence — in some form of economic activities that they could perform during their school hours.

This incentive scheme could be a positive step towards solving the problem of basic and continuing education of the country. On this count Bangladesh Government is implementing two projects — 'Food for Education' for primary education and 'Stipend for Female Secondary School students' which, despite drawbacks and misuses, are giving encouraging results in terms of eradicating illiteracy and increasing the ratio of female education. Mainly it is the fundamental responsibility of the state to educate its citizens up to secondary level of education, to turn them into productive manpower. Investment on this count will not go in vain because it is now universally ac-

cepted that expenditure on education is good investment. From the studies, it has been revealed that national productivity of a country is very high when most of its citizens are educated up to secondary level.

Moreover, in addition to the incentive scheme for the distressed parents, the curricula and syllabi of the secondary and primary school courses have to be modified and modernized to suit the present need of the society. Technical and vocational courses are to be incorporated along with the conventional courses of the primary and secondary level education, so that students coming out from those system of education could acquire some vocational and technical skill, which would help them adapt mode of livelihood. Moreover addition of technical and vocational courses will attract and create interest among the students to get themselves admitted to schools and continue their studies.

Successful implementation of these steps will help us face the major challenge in the field of basic and continuing education. However, all these steps to improve the prevailing situation will go in vain, if strict and close monitoring is not adopted at all levels. In this context national and international NGOs may be involved to supervise and monitor the activities relating to identification of poor and distressed parents and in the process of distribution of financial or material help to the enlisted parents or guardians.

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# A Curiosity Called 'Car'

by Sonia Kristy

Fifteen years back it was definitely an occasion for a middle-class family to celebrate. At that time, private car drew the line between the upper and middle class. Now fifteen years later, car is no longer the signature of the upper class.

I WAS a tiny tot then, a student of class two, but still I remember that day in the early eighties to the minutest of details. Every member of my family was excited like anything. Friends and relatives were invited over. My brother and I were curious and, at the same time, thrilled.

My mother had this huge smile written all over her face. We waited in anticipation. Something ecstatic was about to happen. My father was to bring the car he had bought home. A private automobile of our own.

We were about to cross the middle-class boundary into the world of the rich and the aristocrats.

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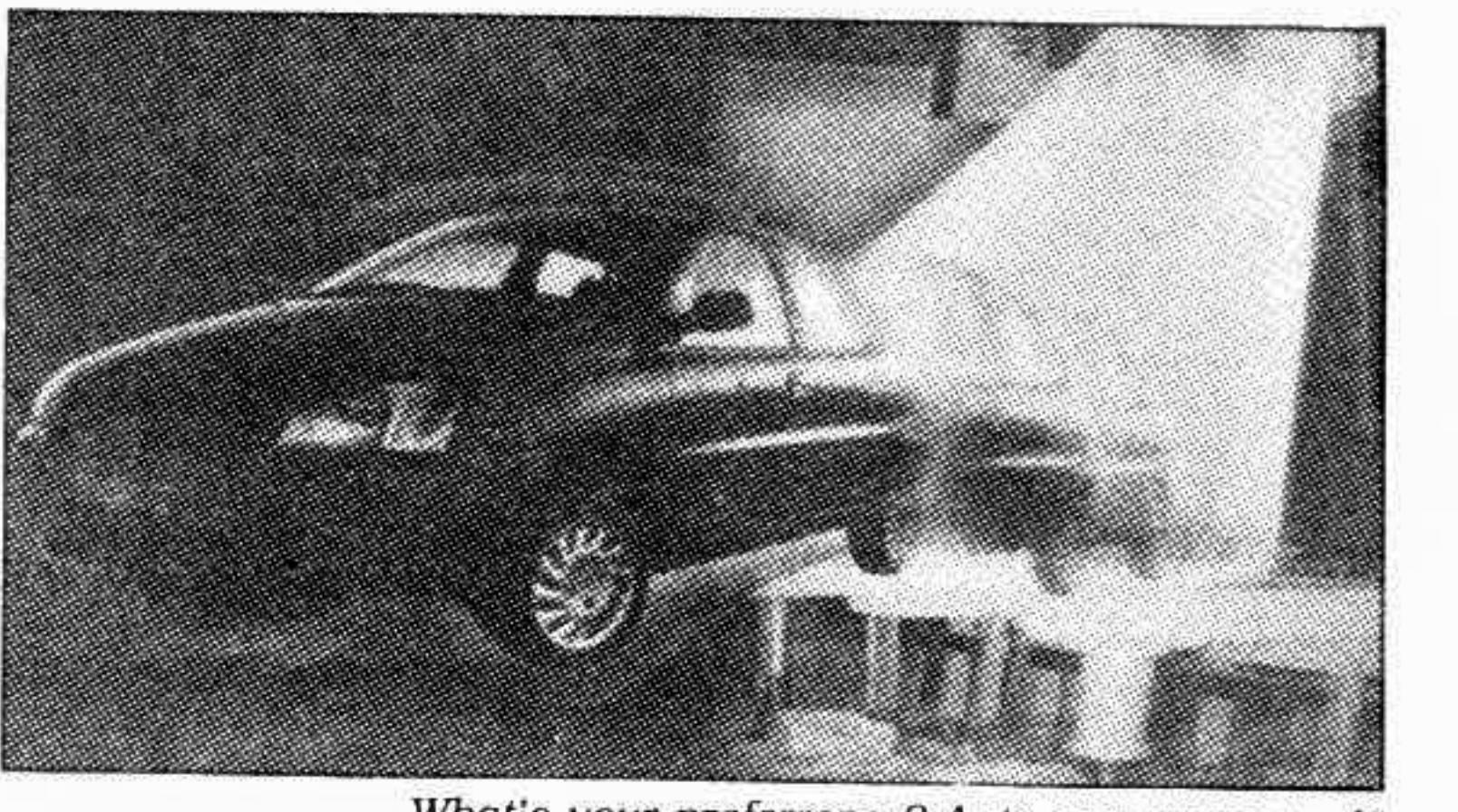
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What's your preference? Auto-gear or manual?

other colours. Most of the cars are imported from Japan. The Japanese, the Americans and the other western buyers don't prefer white cars that much. Therefore white cars are exported to countries like Bangladesh at a reduced price. So, indirectly western world dictates our preference over colours.

Though the present government has increased tax over imported cars, it has become almost a necessity to possess an automobile. Bank loans at flexible rates have made buying cars easier. Nevertheless, there has been a decline in the market. Centres, who used to sell seven cars a week only a couple of years back, now sell seven in a month. The dealers aren't worried, though. The other, the middle class has developed a habit of moving around in cars. The automobile culture has certainly settled down in the country.

## Marriage Made Easy

by Masroor Ahmed Deepak

ONE of the most fascinating Bengali customs is marriage. We tend to make this procedure, which is one of the important events in one's life, the most complicated yet attractive customs known to us. Yet, marriage still is a top priority in our society. As far as our society goes, arranged marriage is still considered to be top of the list. As ours is a very patriarchal, dominating and conservative society, anything apart from arranged marriage cannot be tolerated, is very much not encouraged to be considered a taboo instead.

Those who are brave enough and deviate from this noble path are labeled an outcast and very much looked down upon. If there are any bumps along the route of a love marriage, then automatically the guilty party is forced to hear comments as 'we told you so', 'you see what happens when you do not listen to elders', 'without your parents' blessings what can you expect', etc. etc. Therefore the Bengali love marriage society tends to work as hard as they can to not jeopardize their extremely sensitive marriage life. But today I shall not discuss about love marriage (as that will definitely attract all the fundamentalist groups but discuss on the lines of a typical arranged marriage instead).

When a man or a woman is physically, mentally, financially, socially or academically matured enough, then one is a prime candidate for marriage. As parents are highly in-

client to sign the matrimony contract for their own children, therefore outside mediation is necessary. This is the place where mediators (ghatiks) spring up from all walks of life. These mediators normally range from family members, friends, neighbours or even well-wishers. Sometimes mediations as such can be more troublesome and complicated than the peace talks between Palestine and Israel. The first part of this extremely long voyage begins from the matchmakers. The needy party gets hold of this group and has a heart to heart chat with them. This is when a huge list is drawn up. It contains the 'conditions' from the other party. Matchmakers then start searching for the good matches. Numerous cutting, pasting and editing is performed. At this stage of the 'draft' the best ones are drawn up. The top ten choices are paid a visit. The proposal is put forward. The typical conversation between a matchmaker and a lottery won girl's mother somewhat goes on like this:

Matchmaker: My, what a wonderful daughter you have. She looks great. Just like her mother (notice the extremely clever flattery). What is your name again? Ma! Mother of the girl: You are so-o-o sweet. Yes, her name is Rose. Remember the one in *Titanic* (so this family is ultra-modern). Matchmaker: Rose ma, come to uncle. Yes, she is extremely precious.

Both sides

Shall give what to whom? What class are you in now? What colour hair do you have? What class are you in now? What colour hair do you have? What class are you in now? What colour hair do you have? What class are you in now? What colour hair do you have? What class are you in now? What colour hair do you