

## CSM: A Test Case

GIVEN the colossal liability of Tk 1,100 crore and the unpalatable proposition of adding nearly two crore more every month as workers' salaries and allowances during the projected two-year period for BMRE, the decision for a mass lay-off at the Chittagong Steel Mills seems to have been the only logical way out for the government. It not only does give the government the much-needed breathing space to direct its efforts towards revival of the dying establishment, but also opens up the passage for direct foreign investment. However, the way the government has gone about the task of implementing the decision appears somewhat amateurish. Prevailing tension at the mills bears a strong testimony to it.

That the decision is part of the national policy for disinvestment and not a move to stifle trade unionism is a fact that appears to have not been adequately projected before the workers. Consultation with workers' union leaders, a pre-requisite under these circumstances, it seems, has not been properly done. The workers' resistance against the government move suggests that either the safety net offered to them is considered inadequate by them or they are averse to privatisation in general. The government has to devise a way to avert the ominous prospect of a showdown between the law-enforcers and the striking workers through a meaningful process of dialogue. In doing that it must also take into account that there are people lurking to engineer a law and order situation at the mills.

The Chittagong Steel Mills is a test case for the government's disinvestment programme. If we can weather the storm of workers' resistance and make it viable under a completely new set-up following the much-needed BMRE, an example will have been set for more joint venture projects in the country. It holds the potential to be turned into an efficient plant. The issue of foreign investment for BMRE in exchange for certain percentage of shares should be settled without much dithering. On the whole, the revival of Chittagong Steel Mills should be treated as a top-priority undertaking. Rejuvenation of the CSM can give a shot in the arm of such ailing units as the Machine Tools Factory and even the Adamjee Jute Mills.

## Peak-hour Shutout

THE acceptance of demands of the striking employees of BTV by the State Minister for Information for officially shutting out package programmes, though temporarily, during the peak hours is not a decision in the right direction. This was possibly the most important demand of the agitating non-gazetted employees of the BTV to which the State Minister and the TV high-ups have surrendered without weighing the consequences of such a decision in the long run.

Since its inception in 1964, BTV has produced a number of interesting and highclass programmes apart from being the partisan mouthpiece of the ruling elite. Till today this vital electronic medium is very rightly accused of being the megaphone of the party in power, in spite of their election pledge to allow autonomy to Radio and Television. There has been lot of complaints from the viewers against the low standard of the programmes telecast by BTV in recent times. Perhaps BTV has forgotten they don't enjoy complete monopoly anymore. Since the skies of Bangladesh have been opened up for satellite channels, discerning viewers have started comparing BTV's programmes with those. Most of the programmes of these stations are prepared by private companies which are known as package programmes. Though late, the trade has also picked up in Bangladesh and we have now a number of houses producing programmes for BTV and satellite channels. Still in its infancy, top class productions should not be expected from them. But that does not mean they will be discouraged. This is a new area and a number of entrepreneurs have come forward with money and expertise and invested in men and material. They are offering not only programmes liked by viewers but also fair competition to the BTV producers to come up with better productions.

This is good competition from which both the BTV and the viewers will benefit. Why should the viewers be compelled to watch sub-standard programmes produced by BTV? Shutting out the package programmes in the peak hours will do harm to the BTV and the private entrepreneurs and the millions of viewers in particular will suffer. This is safeguarding the interest of public servants at the cost of private initiatives in a free economy. We strongly urge the ministry concerned to rethink their decision and find out solutions beneficial for all three parties — the BTV employees, the package producers and, above all, the viewers.

## Uproot Druglords

HERE'S a malignant mesh of drug bazaar destroying the country's core — the youth. The news of increasing number of drug addicts once again drives home the message that our aggravating law and order situation is showing little sign of improvement. The Department of Narcotics Control estimates that about 240 drug merchants in the capital city are netting Taka 1.2 million every day by selling phenylidol alone, not to speak of other stuff. It is outrageous that despite all the information required to swoop down on and uproot these merchants of death they are yet to be contained. Authority's ledger records 160 dens in the city and it also has the full knowledge about the border points through which phenylidol worth Taka 2.6 million is smuggled daily into Bangladesh. But the reported incidents concerning this dirty trade always went unheeded.

The underlying note is dreadful. Apart from healthcare strain on the addicts, mostly youths, the society becomes exposed to criminal activities like mugging, extortion, toll collection etc. The druglords often with chequered history escape either allegedly in connivance with the law enforcers or through the loopholes of the law itself. Reportedly, the police are singularly lacking in commitment in addressing this issue that has already assumed a dangerous proportion. The apparent negligence only speaks of the establishment's unwillingness or inability to perceive the consequences.

Reaction against these law-breakers is bound to have long term negative effect on our people at large. We don't want any more casualties and regrets. While we want the drug abusers to correct themselves with the help of non-governmental efforts, we urge upon the government machinery to act with integrity to uproot the druglords from the country and save the nation from an impending scourge of anaesthesia.

# What is Sovereignty?

*Our politicians are interested in securing the charity for the people so that they can be tied down to the begging bowl for the rest of their lives or at least until the next election time. No politician has ever launched a micro-credit programme even within their constituency so that the poorest may become less poor within three years and not remain poor at all within another two years. Please note that the tenure of a member of Parliament is five years.*

WHAT is sovereignty? Political parties in the Opposition are relentlessly pursuing the thesis that government through its policies is deliberately subverting the sovereignty of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. After the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) peace agreement, it was even alleged that the south-eastern segment of the country had been sold away to another country. The loose talk often made it so simple. It appeared to be exactly the same as buying and selling of land, if not selling of animals in the open cattle market.

We all know very well that everything has remained as it is. Our borders remain intact. There have been no unauthorized intrusion except for smugglers. Peace has prevailed all over the hill tracts. In fact, incidence of arson or terrorism in general have been more rampant in the capital city than anywhere in the hill tracts during the recent months. However the ardent patriots of opposition political parties cannot rest in peace since they are not in power.

It is necessary for them to keep the dead but politically highly sensitive issue like freedom and sovereignty very much alive and kicking in public space so that repeated slogan mongering at public gatherings and meetings can swiftly inflame public mind against their opponents.

This in fact has been the pattern of politics ever since the partition of 1947. The Pakistan Muslim League during the election of 1954, was loudly preaching that unless they continue to remain poor, we will lose our Pakistani identity. So even at the cost of speaking a foreign language (Urdu), misrule and exploitation, we must tolerate the party in power. Otherwise we lose our sovereignty and therefore everything else.

History has proved that we have gained everything and lost nothing so far. The aftermath of the partition of 1947 is fully known. We had jumped from the frying pan to the open fire of oppression and exploitation.

The victory of December 1971 truly established the sovereign state and therefore the independence of the people of this country. Curiously enough, those who were against the sovereign and independent Bangladesh in 1971, are now most vocal and concerned about the loss of sovereignty in 1990s. What happened in the meantime for such dramatic transformation or perhaps they have remained as they were before in which case we may conclude that they are actually referring to the truncating of Pakistan till today.

There is no need to be unduly concerned with this small vanishing breed. It is far more important to realize the true meaning of sovereignty and to what extent we have realized it since December 1971. We must appreciate that what we had achieved was only political sovereignty followed by a democratic government, rights of the people to vote, freedom of the press etc. These are basic and fundamental and we should be proud of our achievements.

But this is not all. A country where the majority of the people are poor, in fact very poor, is neither free nor sovereign. To a hungry man or woman, freedom as we possess today has hardly any meaning. This is what our political leaders must fully realize. No other country is going to take us over. They should rest in peace and tranquillity over this issue. What is necessary is to fully appreciate the agonizing reality of how people live and survive. They are neither free nor sovereign.

At the same time, it is very difficult to believe that political leaders do not appreciate the overwhelming poverty of the country since they are seeing thousands of malnourished people, almost daily, in course of their frequent long marches and huge public meetings. Seeing is believing. Perhaps it is not true since the poor are so many

though Iran initially had reservations to the peace deal (Oslo Accord of 1993) with Israel by the Palestine leader, it now appears to have reconciled with the view that if the Palestinian people want that way, Iran would not create any difficulty in the implementation of the peace accord.

Iran is holding at present the prestigious position of the Chairperson of the Islamic Conference and in that capacity Iran has the responsibility of coordinating policy with the issues confronting the Islamic countries. One of the weaknesses of the solidarity of the Islamic countries appears to be the wide differing opinions between the conservative and moderate countries on the strategy to be pursued in the interest of Muslim community. A few Islamic countries hold the view that the peace deal with Israel does not derive any benefit to the Palestinian people including the refugees in Lebanon and in other countries. They feel that the issue of Palestine refugees has been sidelined and furthermore Chairman Arafat should not have concluded a separate deal with Israel while Israel continues to occupy other Arab lands after the 1967 War.

Added to this is the growing influence of the West in the region after M. Khatami was elected as the President in Iran in May, 1997. He was known to differ in his views with the conservatives of the country. He was able to bring fresh and liberal ideas in governing the country. He wants to turn Iran into a free and transparent government, accountable to his people. The first thaw in relations with Arab countries came when Iran held the Islamic Conference Summit on 9th of December, 1997 in which all the heads of states/governments of Arab countries including Chairman Yasser Arafat attended.

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Iran's common bond with Saudi Arabia is that both are major oil-producing countries and the low price of oil in the international market is a concern for both. Iran and Saudi Arabia are members of OPEC and recently their joint support for the reduction of quota of oil

# Limping Industries Limit Growth

*The industrial sector needs a jerk... limping industrial growth limits overall economic growth. Proper policies, policies and premises — all need to be knitted together for a limping growth to jump up.*

THE fountain of wealth of the wealthy nations of today — so it is said — receives the perennial flow from trade in manufactures. Manufacturing is considered to be the key to increased employment, income and standard of living. About three-fourths of the world's merchandise trade is reported to be dominated by manufacturers and demolition of the tariff wall against trade in manufactures had been at the top of all agenda pertaining to international trade. Again, "export-led" growth strategy emerged in the backdrop of the lack of adequate purchasing power in domestic market as well as in the presence of pervasive inefficiency in a protected regime. It is now widely recognised, however, that the successes of the export-led development strategy is contingent upon the development of a viable manufacturing sector.

Such important manufacturing sector in Bangladesh is limping, so to say. Over the last

decade of the private sector in competing with the world market would be determined partly by these policies and also partly by developing human resource base. A timely tuned liberalised trade regime is a sine qua non for export oriented industrialisation. A liberalised trade regime helps to keep costs of production down on the one hand and promotes adoption of new technology on the other.

In the newly floated industrial policy, some of the issues seem to have been given serious thoughts. The policy pronounces a private sector-led export-oriented industrial growth keeping in view the imperatives of the global market. That special attention to be given to small and rural based industries with the assurance of necessary support services is a laudable statement. A firm political commitment is also enshrined therein. Thrust sectors have rightly been identified with due disposition of incentive schemes.

But a paper of policy intent as it is, the success of the new industrial policy would depend to a large degree on the enabling environment for the growth of industries.

Among the determinants of that environment, looms large the question of political stability and political consensus on the ways and means of industrialisation. We can only hope that major political parties — with avowed objective of a market economy — would see that such consensus is on board. The country has already lapsed a large part of the opportunities available for industrialisation. Welcoming moves are in sight also. For example, establishment of Rin Adalat, tracing loan defaulters under the judgement of the court etc. seem to have dawned on to signal the demise of loan defaulting culture. It is expected that in the future we would expect much of "quality" rather than "quantity" investments.

The industrial sector needs a jerk, with the view in mind of course, that a limping industrial growth limits overall economic growth. Proper policies, policies and premises — all need to be knitted together for a limping growth to jump up.

The bleak scenario begot in the backdrop of a vast pool of easily trainable manpower resources and the prevalence of a relatively low wage level. To make things worse, the weak base of technological, lack of dynamic entrepreneurship, managerial expertise and developed workforce played the devastating role. The Fifth Five Year Plan is poised to raise the share of manufacturing to about 13 per cent of GDP by the terminal year of the plan. Is the target achievable?

The answer to the aforesaid question would hinge much on the crucial and logical transformation of the economy needed for an acceleration of the pace of industrialisation. There are many contributing factors to that targeted transformation but allow me to cite a few: a necessary enabling environment, an upbeat efficiency of the private sector so that it can compete in the global market, and a well sequenced and timed liberalised trade regime.

The necessary enabling environment springs mainly from political stability, credibility of policies, de-regulations and privatization. The effi-



## Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

Germany no longer belongs to Germans. It has been taken over by the Jews. They run the economy. History may repeat itself. So Bangladesh may also be taken over by non-Bangladeshis. Vote for me and save the country. Indeed, it is an excellent vote catcher. The innocent people can be easily hoodwinked.

I think the time has now come to vigorously pursue an honest campaign and bring to light the hidden agenda of the politicians behind all their sovereignty in danger campaigns as well as their utter lack of interest in pursuing a genuine anti-poverty programme. People should be told and convinced that politicians are determined to keep us poor since it serves their interest. If people are poor, their aspirations will remain limited. They will not have the energy to protest all the wrong doings of the politicians. They will remain subservient if only they just manage to keep their body and soul together. Nothing more. Therefore small amounts of charity is an excellent way to enable them just to survive. The vulnerable group feeding programme also has no positive effect after the food have been digested within couple of hours.

There is a Chinese proverb which says: "Give a man a fish, he will eat it for a day; teach a man how to fish, he will eat for the rest of his life". Our politicians are interested in securing the charity for the people so that they can be tied down to the begging bowl for the rest of their lives or at least until the next election time. No politician has ever launched a micro-credit programme even within their constituency so that the poorest may become less poor within three years and not remain poor at all within another two years. Please note that the tenure of a member of Parliament is five years. It is possible to substantially alleviate poverty in each of the 300 constituencies of the country, if members of the Parliament themselves sponsor three hundred Grameen Banks out of their own resources since it would not cost more than the amount they had to spend and win the election. Moreover, support from Bangladesh Bank can be secured: it is not charity but credit which is repaid by the poorest.

This will definitely lead to the achievement of economic sovereignty and the true freedom. Unfortunately, our politicians are not interested in the realization of true sovereignty. It may not ensure them the votes. Quite a few members of the Grameen Bank are now members and chairpersons of Union Councils. In future, they may be elected to Upazila Parishad and eventually to the parliament. Thus new leaders may emerge from the grassroots. What would then happen to existing politicians?

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though OPEC formula has led to the modest rise of oil price. This is an area where the cooperation of both countries will have an impact on the price of oil in the market.

Another important issue appears to be the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Iran considers the Taliban's brand of Islam as medieval. Iran was almost on the brink of a war late last year when Taliban soldiers killed Iranian diplomats while occupying the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia became cool to the Taliban leadership after it allowed the refugee Osama bin Laden to operate terrorist activity against the US embassy in East Africa. Iran might discuss with Saudi Arabia to put pressure on the Taliban to implement the power-sharing agreement in Afghanistan with its opponent, Northern Alliance concluded in March this year under the auspices of the UN.

Another issue of discussion appears to be Iraq, a neighbour of Iran with whom Iran had to wage war for 10 years. At present Iraq is under the UN sanctions as the West is not satisfied with Iraq's destruction of biological and chemical weapons. The UN inspection team is barred from Iraq after the US launched air strikes in mid-December. Furthermore Iran and Saudi Arabia might discuss the presence of troops from Islamic countries in Kosovo once the Muslim Albanian refugees are able to return to their land under international protection.

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