

# Building a Society for All Ages

by Dr Khalilur Rahman

*If we genuinely want to mean active old age for all, we have to think of an old rickshaw puller, an old farmer or an old worker and even an old retired clerk. We need to seriously consider their old age well-being. These people have not even tasted their lives during their youth; their potentials have not been utilised fully because of paucity of opportunities.*

THE United Nations is marking this year as the International Year of Older Persons with the theme "Towards a society for all ages". In 1991, the UN General Assembly agreed on a set of principles which state, among other things, that older people should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, social and legal services and health-care, through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help; that people of all ages are encouraged to take steps to ensure greater health and well-being in the later years for themselves and for their communities.

Nine years prior to the UN General Assembly agreed on these principles, the World Assembly on Ageing adopted the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing. This plan outlined the challenges and opportunities for development posed by increasing numbers and opportunities of older people. It recommended measures that can address issues that affect older people. These are health and nutrition, social participation, economic security, housing, environment, consumer protection, research and education.

## WHO and Ageing

UN Bodies and voluntary organisations are undertaking expert group meetings and public events to promote age-integration and counter social exclusion in light of the UN International Year for Older Persons. As a UN Specialised Agency, WHO is also taking steps in promoting active ageing. To mark this international year, WHO Ageing and Health Programme is initiating the Global Movement for Active Ageing. This is a network for all those who are interested in moving policies and practices towards active ageing. The Global Movement will be inaugurated by a global walk event — the Global Embrace, on 2 October this year following celebration of the UN designated International Day of Older Persons on 1 October. This is an around the clock around the world event to which all countries are invited. It is designed to inspire, to inform, to promote health and to provide enjoyment and good company. It will link local projects to a global community of similar concerns and to people all over the world.

The theme of the World Health Day (7th April) this year "Active ageing makes the difference", recognises WHO's commitment to this important issue and is the reflection of its commitment to promoting active ageing. To add, the Fifty-second World Health Assembly held in May this year noted with appreciation the successful 1999 World Health Day campaign which focused global attention on the benefits of healthy lifestyles throughout the life span in order to remain healthy and active for as long as possible in later life. It called upon the WHO Member States to



Active ageing makes the difference. Picture: Courtesy—WHO

show greater concern and to take appropriate steps to carry out measures that ensure the highest attainable standard of health and well-being for the growing numbers of their older citizens.

## Our Side of the Story

Ageing is not a disease but a normal process and dynamic process of life. It is in fact the inevitable alternative to premature death. Yet, one can prevent or delay many of the disabling conditions that often accompany ageing through regular, moderate physical activity. In opposition, a sedentary lifestyle certainly puts one at risk for reduced functional capacity. The concept of active ageing also goes beyond the physical domain.

The unfortunate part is that whenever we talk of older persons in our country, we tend to mean only those older persons who had always been better off throughout their lives. We talk about their well being during their retirement age, we advocate to engage them in different spheres of life, including in the policy-making level of the Government and in nation building. Nowadays most of these people are rather far better off than what they have been during their so-called active age before retirement. Most of them get lucrative salary from the international organisations, NGOs etc. Doubtless, there is no harm in it. For the greater interest of the country, we need to benefit from their life-long experiences and knowledge.

The reason for my mentioning this is that while we talk about this group of older persons, we very often forget millions of older persons who had, even during their youth, to struggle for their livelihood. This group of millions older people most of them suffer from minimum basic needs for their survival. Our enlightened society do not think considerably of them, they think only of those who are already better off, who have their own capabilities to engage themselves even without patronising from any quarter.

I saw a number of write-ups in a number of our national dailies on the occasion of this year's World Health Day (7th April) wherein most of the writers spoke for only this privileged group of older persons to

tally forgetting the group of older persons who need the help most. In deed, I decided to write this piece just to voice my concern for these people. If we genuinely want to mean active old age for all, we have to think of an old rickshaw puller, an old farmer or an old worker and even an old retired clerk. We need to seriously consider their old age well-being. These people have not even tasted their lives during their youth; their potentials have not been utilised fully because of paucity of opportunities. We are unable to extract potentials of these people when they are even young, able to contribute to the society. The problems of unemployment, illiteracy and other social vices always hunt them.

It was for the first time in our country that the Government introduced pension scheme for the older persons in last year's budget. It was a bold and time needed step. Our Government deserves sincere appreciation for this decision. Unquestionable, we have severe resource constraints. It is not easy for the Government to expand social safety net. Support from the private sector, international community and others, is needed to supplement Government's efforts in this regard.

The old-age issue is inextricably linked to social progress. It heavily depends on the capability of countries. A country like ours striving to provide basic needs to the population, Government has hardly any resource to devote to this particular problem. We can perhaps still do better even with the existing resources through their efficient use. In doing so, we can expand the scheme that can take care of well being of poor older persons. This special group of people really suffer severely from hunger, diseases, housing, clothing and overall social insecurity. We need to look into these issues.

To address this, we need resources. Unfortunate fact that ODA to developing countries is continuously declining. Commitments made by donor community at various international fora have not been translated into reality. The international community needs to perform their duty and fulfil their pledges if they really believe in WHO the slogan "Active

ageing makes the difference". When a country severely suffers from necessary resources to be devoted to the youth, it is not easy at all to do something better for her older generation. That is why it is also our duty to remind the donor community of their responsibility and commitment towards poor countries. In all international fora, we need to keep this issue alive and up.

Addressing ageing problem is certainly a big and much talked about issue now in the developed countries. In this group of countries, older people are often viewed as a homogeneous group who no longer contribute to their families and societies and may even be a burden. The scenario is not too different in developing countries. Certainly, these people are burden for their families since society hardly takes care of them. In developed countries, these people have, however, their social security — guarantee for food, house and health. In developing countries only a very few older people have these minimum basic facilities.

The most important for us to reflect on what we are doing or are able to do even for our active work force before they get older. Due to inadequate opportunities and basic care, they are already like older people even at their young age. Poverty is still rampant, people are yet to afford very minimum basics. What we need to make our development partners understand is that we need more assistance for our poverty eradication, for ensuring basic amenities and for overall economic development. If we can do this, we would be able to do something meaningful for all groups of our older population.

Likewise, it is not the time only to look back. We equally need to reflect on the present and to the future. We should not make ourselves isolated from the ongoing efforts of the international community for the older people. We need to associate ourselves with the UN and other Organisations' programmes designed for the older people. In keeping with the international programmes for older persons, Dhaka city authority may also consider celebrating the Global Embrace in co-operation with the Dhaka UNDP and WHO Offices in a befitting manner. Ministries of Health and Family Welfare and Social Affairs can also be involved in successfully organising this event. As we know, local communities are an important factor to promote any social event. This walk even is no exception to promoting healthy ageing. It can provide a useful occasion for health care workers, concerned activists and policy makers to initiate dialogue with the general population on healthy ageing.

The writer is Counsellor in the Bangladesh Permanent Mission, Geneva. Views expressed in this article are writer's own.

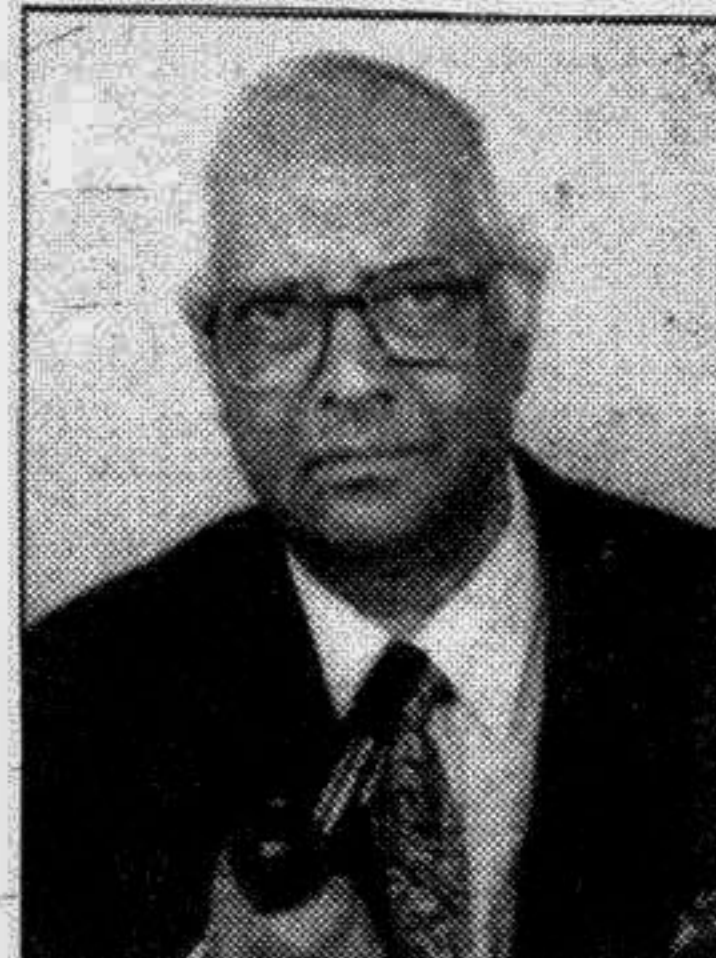
# Liberation and Beyond

by J N Dixit

(The Daily Star is serialising extracts from the book through exclusive contract with University Press Limited (UPL), publisher of its Bangladesh edition).

## War and the Birth of Bangladesh

Part V



UNDER instructions from Mrs. Gandhi, we asked our High Commission in London to convey to Mujibur Rahman that India would like to lay on a special Air India or Air Force flight to bring Mujibur Rahman from London to Delhi and then to take him on the Dhaka. Significantly, Mujibur Rahman refused this offer. He said he would fly back on a special 'British Overseas Airways' aircraft. The signal was obvious and logical from his point of view. He did not wish to return to Dhaka in an Indian aircraft which would symbolise his dependence on India and would be interpreted that he was under Indian influence. He chose to travel by a British aircraft to assert his capacity for independent decision-making and also to indicate his inclination to establish independent links with other countries beginning with the UK whose colonial influence still affects the sub-conscious of sub-continental political classes. Mrs. Gandhi and the Indian leadership were a little put off by this rejection of the facilities which India had offered.

Mujibur Rahman landed at the technical area at Palam airport early in the morning at 7:30 am on January 9 and was received by Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the entire Indian Cabinet. From Palam he moved to the Army Parade Ground in the Delhi Cantonment, nearly a hundred thousand people thronged the ground. Mujibur Rahman and Mrs. Gandhi addressed this public gathering. Mrs. Gandhi was moderate, thoughtful and analytical in her speech. She expressed her happiness and satisfaction at Bangladesh's liberation and especially at Mujibur Rahman's release. Mujibur Rahman was deeply moved by Farooq Ahmed Chowdhury who was wearing several hats in the emerging foreign office. He was Director General in charge of South Asia, and he was the chief of protocol. He was also functioning as Special Assistant to the Foreign Minister. I still recall the very pertinent inclusion of an ancient Hindu scriptural chant in Farooq Ahmed Chowdhury's draft speech. He made Mujibur Rahman "in-tone" the prayer "let Bangladesh travel from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality." It was a spontaneous flight of literary and spiritual feeling in which Farooq indulged.



Freedom fighters entering Dhaka

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman stopped over in Delhi for about three hours and then flew to Dhaka accompanied by his Foreign Minister, Abdus Samad Azad, and a number of Bangladeshi officials and politicians who had flown in to Delhi to receive him. Mujibur Rahman arrived at Tejgaon airport in Dhaka around 2:30 pm and was received by acting President Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and the Indian representative, AK Ray. He was taken in a procession through the city. Nearly two million delirious people welcomed his return home. He assumed office as President the same afternoon as he had remained the designated President of Bangladesh since the first day of the establishment of the Mujibnagar Government. In his public statements he affirmed that Bangladesh would make a new beginning as a member of the international community and would have no rancour or prejudice. He declared that he wished to have good relations with all countries of the world and he hoped that the international community would be sympathetic towards the needs, concerns and aspirations of the new state of Bangladesh.

## Might is Right?

by A Husnain

*What is wrong with Iraq for the sustained punishment by the West? The moral danger is of staggering proportion, where no arbitrators would be tolerated. Might has become right; take it or leave it. Conscience has been desensitized.*

fecting the borders in the area (the problems will increase, not decrease). The Balkans has once again been turned into an unstable condition (both the Great Wars had had its innocuous beginnings here). The human dust will never settle — it is a great diversionary occupation for the European administrations (except for what is separated by the English Channel). Edward Said has rightly accused the US of sophisticated terrorism of remote-controlled violence through stratospheric bombing; the ensuing business contracts for the physical reconstruction of the shattered infrastructure in Yugoslavia (plus a Yankee foothold in Europe), which will last for at least a decade; and the churning up of the human factors related to the millions of refugees af-

fecting the borders in the area (the problems will increase, not decrease). The Balkans has once again been turned into an unstable condition (both the Great Wars had had its innocuous beginnings here). The human dust will never settle — it is a great diversionary occupation for the European administrations (except for what is separated by the English Channel). Edward Said has rightly accused the US of sophisticated terrorism of remote-controlled violence through stratospheric bombing; the ensuing business contracts for the physical reconstruction of the shattered infrastructure in Yugoslavia (plus a Yankee foothold in Europe), which will last for at least a decade; and the churning up of the human factors related to the millions of refugees af-

starting with the war of genocide in Bosnia. The White civilization is fighting for its very existence (some talk about the virtues of secularism, which glitters only in black and white). Some basic issues have cropped up: the very definition of war has been torn asunder; and, secondly, no country anywhere is safe from the arbitrary judgement of the lone super power, misusing power in large or small doses. What is wrong with Iraq for the sustained punishment by the West? The moral danger is of staggering proportion, where no arbitrators would be tolerated. Might has become right; take it or leave it. Conscience has been desensitized.

At the millennium, the

global conflicts are deep and wide, with no theoretical solutions or options in sight. Looking at the picture nearer home, it appears that the same powerful coterie is obsessed with a quick solution of the Kashmir dispute, to provide a seamless regional trade border for the multinationals, to control the market of one billion consumers during the 21st century.

The dispute has lasted half a century, and cannot be 'allowed' to continue indefinitely (the interested quarters are saying indirectly). It should surprise none if conditions are created stealthily for enforcing the old UN Resolution. It might mean one day of employment of UN peacekeeping force in the affected area, to bring about a 'peaceful' solution. The situation is such that no option can be ruled out. Once the superpower is interested or obsessed with something, the situation goes out of local control.

Another potential hot spot is closed Myanmar, where the eagle is circling. Further developments will not take long to emerge. Till then, the fingers can be kept crossed.

(Continued)

# Privatisation: A One-point Action Plan for the Sugar Industry

by William Morrison

*The evidence from around the world is that the sugar industry flourishes in countries where it has been transferred to private ownership such as Malaysia, South Africa, Brazil. It is those countries where the state still holds a commanding position, such as India, Cuba, and Bangladesh, that the industry is in long-term decline.*

INTERNATIONAL experience has shown that state attempts to restructure state-owned industries before privatisation rarely solve old problems and usually create new problems. The private sector, driven by the need to increase productivity and make profits, is the best judge of how industries should be restructured. Not so says the inter-parliamentary Task Force on the future of Bangladesh's sugar industry submitting a 70-point action plan to resuscitate the sector under government control.

The Task Force has been charged with putting together an action plan for turning around the state-owned sugar industry. The facts are sobering.

The Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC), the umbrella under which the state-owned sugar mills sit, has suffered an aggregate net loss of Taka 140 crore over the three-year period between fiscal 1996-97 and fiscal 1998-99. This loss is a sharp increase on the losses from the previous three-year period which stood at Taka 55 crore.

As losses have mounted the production of the sugar mills has fallen by nearly 50 per cent since the early 1990s.

The drop in production is due in part to a rapid rise in imports of sugar (above board and smuggled). The rise in imports is the result of two factors. The first is that Bangladesh's sugar mills now cannot produce enough sugar to meet domestic demand — the annual deficit stands at 150 thousand tonnes. The second factor is that Bangladesh's sugar industry is deeply uncompetitive; it is cheaper to buy foreign sugar in the international market than it is to buy domestically produced sugar.

Finally, despite a theoretical liberalisation of the sector under the government's Industrial Policy, there have been no major private sector investments in the sector. Hidden and open subsidies to state mills, price controls and a tangled web of regulations make the sector deeply unattractive to the private sector. So the current deficit is made up by purchasing sugar from foreign companies. Can the government buck this downward trend?

The solutions tabled by the Task Force include a 40 per cent reduction in manpower, tighter control of corruption and pilferage, stopping illegal payment of overtime allowances, reducing inefficiency and curbing trade union activism.

But the problems for which these solutions are proposed are not specific to the sugar industry. Mismanagement, corruption, low productivity and over-manning are symptoms of state ownership all over the world. If a doctor wants to cure an illness he must look beyond the symptoms and treat the root cause.

The Government must consider whether the state, with its long record of mismanagement, is qualified to undertake the task of implementing a 70-point restructuring plan. There is a real alternative, a one-point action plan: to transfer the responsibility for restructuring — through the process of privatisation — to the private sector. Privatisation first and let restructuring follow.

This is best practise. The evidence from around the world is that the sugar industry flourishes in countries where it has been transferred to private

ownership such as Malaysia, South Africa, Brazil. It is those countries where the state still holds a commanding position, such as India, Cuba, and Bangladesh, that the industry is in long-term decline.

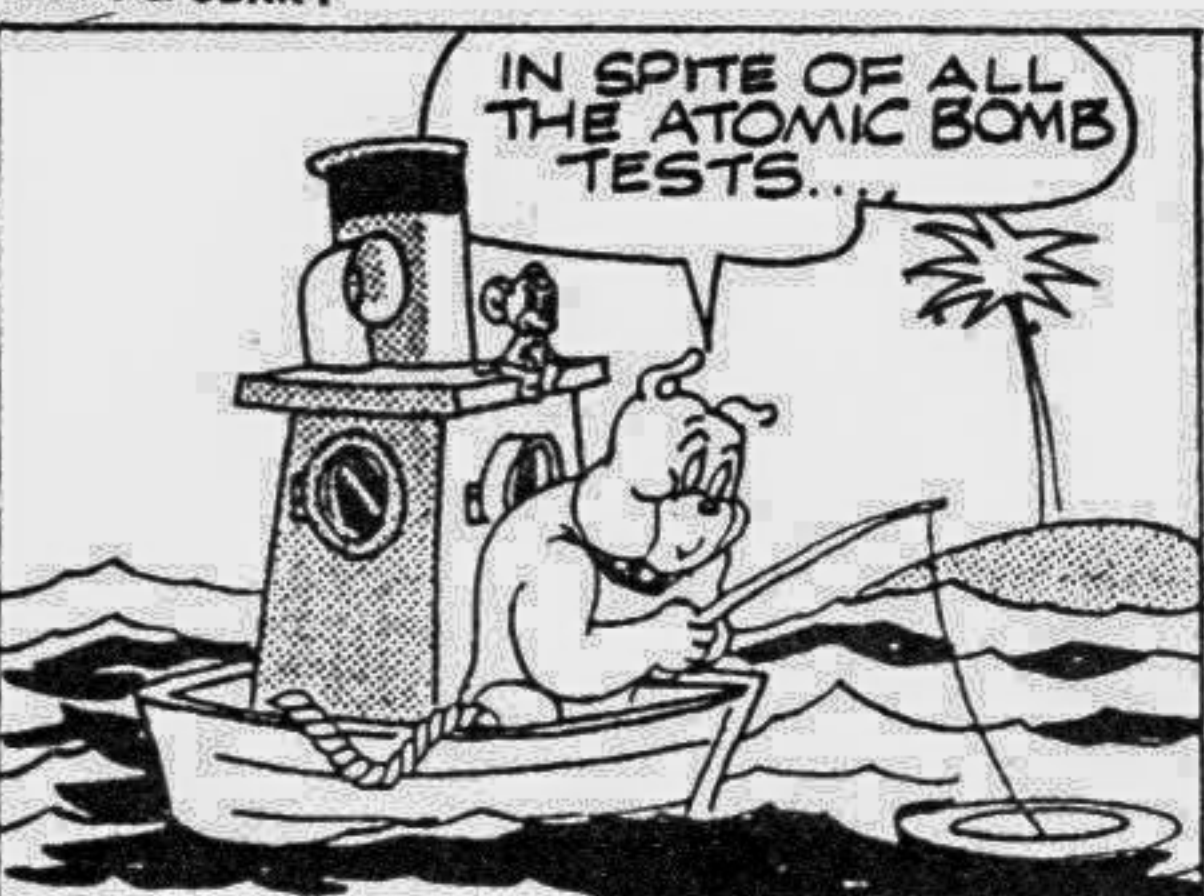
A clear signal from the government that it intended to privatise the mills and plantations would kick start private sector investment in the sector as investors saw an end to special treatment for state mills and the beginning of real competition in the industry.

Following privatisation, the private investor will have a real incentive to tackle mismanagement, corruption, low productivity and the other symptoms of state ownership. Only then will the decline in production and turnover be halted.

The bottom line is that the state has had its chance to create a successful sugar industry and failed. It is time to hand over to the private sector.

The writer is Policy Advisor (Economic), Adam Smith Institute, London and Consultant, Privatisation Board, Bangladesh.

TOM & JERRY



James Bond

BY IAN FLEMING  
DRAWING BY HORAK

