

Can be a Golden Goose

ONE category of exportables we have been more talkative about than truly promotional relates to fruits, vegetables and cut-flowers. This is poor export sense. We have been incorrigibly flurry-oriented in matters of hatching export eggs. We fell for handicrafts at one time, and that too in an unfocused manner, it never for once occurring in our minds that Taiwan's concentrated toy sales gave the country a foreign exchange bonanza.

We could not be quite ecstatic with the handicraft export records, although ample scope remains to better them, as Arong, for instance, is striving to do overseas. Be that as it may, ready-made garments and manpower exports have been so demanding of our attention and energy that the lucre held by arboreiculture products could hardly ever be glimpsed with our squinted eye. Fakhrul Islam Munshi, President of Agribusiness Development Organisation of Bangladesh (ADOB) says that we can earn Tk 1000 crore per annum by selling our horticultural products overseas. On top of raising the export earning level, this will ensure value addition, something which can be passed on to the growers as a higher remuneration for their work. The current annual export earning from vegetables, fruits, and flowers is estimated at Tk 200 crore. If we could preserve what we produce then we would have been able to save agri-products worth Tk 200 crore per year. That is a potential advantage waiting to be used.

What we basically need to step up export in this area are: (a) preservation facilities at the grassroots; and (b) modern industrial units to process the produce on a wide scale. It is of vital importance to realise though that our market share for these items cannot grow rapidly until we have improved the quality of our output to an internationally competitive level.

A whole range of policy support has to be extended to this largely untapped sector such as would encompass agricultural inputs, fiscal concessions, credit supply and market networking to turn a corner. For all these to happen it is of seminal importance that a high degree of priority is accorded to this domain.

Felling Trees Again?

WHEN Osman Udyan was selected as the site for construction of the Bangabandhu International Convention Centre, the eco-conscious section of the society reacted very strongly launching an eventually successful campaign against the government's decision. The prime rationale for the movement was, construction of a concrete structure would mean elimination of the lone patch of greenery in the area. Anyhow the government gave up that idea but appears to have failed to take the right message in, so suggests its decision to fell 90 trees at the Chandrima Udyan adjacent to the under-construction convention centre at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. The land, it says, would be needed for a small power plant exclusively for the centre. But, according to one official of the Shanghai Construction Group, there was no need for compromising the trees, some of those 30 to 35 years old. Without encroaching upon the land marked for trade fair, he said, the plant could be installed to the west of the centre.

Why then this sudden onslaught on trees? Certainly, the money — reportedly 7,600 taka for the whole lot — cannot be the compelling factor here. In absence of any plausible explanation, one may well suspect some underhand deal behind the throw-away price. It seems there are people who always look for cuts.

The country's environment conservation record is dismal, to say the least. Although we are signatories to almost all the declarations and conventions on the issue, we have failed to make much progress in deforestation, decimation of water bodies, air pollution, etc. On the contrary, damage on the ecosystem appears to be gaining momentum by the day. Now, it seems, the state itself is playing party to such a self-destructive design.

The capital currently tops the list of most polluted cities in the world. Lead level in the air is already well above the danger notch, let alone carbon monoxide and other harmful inorganic elements. The few trees that we have within the city work as air-purifiers, albeit to a limited extent are constantly at a risk of poaching. Therefore, to maintain liveability of Dhaka and other urban areas in the country, the government would do better to maintain at least whatever like tree cover we have in them. In reality, it is doing just the opposite. It is a pity, isn't it?

It Happens, Once Again

DHAKA University correspondent of The Daily Star was threatened with dire consequences by a Chhatra League leader of Zahirul Huq Hall BCL unit on Saturday. This happened after our correspondent was beaten up along with his Bangladesh Observer colleague when they were covering the convention of the Pahari Chhatra Parishad being addressed by PCJSS leader Shantu Larma. Both these journalists are students of Dhaka University Journalism and Mass Communication Department.

Only the other day, the prime minister, who is also the president of the Awami League, had advised the students to mind their studies and desist from rowdyism and indiscipline. But it seems that her good counsel has fallen flat on some of the more hawkish elements in the student wing. This is not the first time that journalists responding to their call of duty have been manhandled not only by any member of the law enforcing agencies but also by that of a front organisation of the ruling Awami League. There have been instances of such incidents taking place at the university campus.

The victims filed a written complaint with the vice chancellor and the university authority has formed a one-member probe body with the proctor to investigate the incident and submit its report with recommendations so that action can be taken against the offenders as per Proctorial Rules of the university. The committee has already served a showcause notice on Kajal asking him to explain within three days why he should not be given exemplary punishment for his unruly behaviour. So far so good. But the leaders of BCL must ensure safety and security of the students on the campus and dissuade their cadres from interfering with the journalists performing their duties. Free flow of information and the right to perform one's professional responsibility are indispensable for the functioning of a democratic society.

CHINA is closer than ever before in its quest for joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Earlier this week, the European Union concluded a bilateral treaty with China which removed one of the last barriers to its entry. Until this week, all but eight members of the WTO had reached bilateral market access agreements with China. After the signing of the EU treaty, completion of the protocol of entry to WTO should be done before the end of the year.

However, one last snag still remains. Next week, the US Congress will vote on whether to grant China "permanent normal trade relations" (PNTR) status. The issue before the US Congress is whether it should end its annual review of China's trade status in order to normalise trade relations — a condition of China's entry to the WTO. Under the existing US law, Congress must vote every year on whether to grant China normal trade relations status — previously known as Most Favoured Nation trading status — that the US gives to nearly every other country.

A negative vote in the Congress is not likely to prevent China from entering the WTO. It could still do so provided the US administration didn't oppose it. The benefits of China's entry would then be reaped by the other members, but not the US.

I believe there is absolutely no rationale for rejecting the PNTR status for China. In fact,

By joining WTO, the international norms that China will be willing to accept in the economic arena would eventually translate into increasing adherence to international standard in basic freedoms and the rule of law. By integrating into the world economy, China will undoubtedly prosper and this will have an eventual beneficial effect on human rights, labour conditions and environment.

Moreover, a defeat in the Congress would cast a deep shadow over US relations with China and over US global leadership. Clinton realises the gravity of this vote and has said that he regards the trade deal with China as one of the centre pieces of his presidency.

Although in previous years the Congress has never failed to approve the measure (inevitably by the narrowest margin), the run-up to the vote has often divided its ranks, provoked a tug-of-war with the White House and strained Sino-US relations. It is traditionally an occasion for fierce debate not only among the members, but also among politicians, academics and different interest groups. The exchange within the Congress allows right wing Republican members to raise their concerns over security issues and religious persecution in China, while the ultra-liberal Democrats air their grievances about workers' rights and surging Chinese imports to the US.

body. The vote, in fact, underlines the US dilemma in reconciling international commitments with domestic political constraints.

Politics makes strange bedfellows. In opposing this bill, ultra-right conservatives and religious bigots have joined hands with ultra-liberal human rights and labour union activists. Their opposition is based upon three main contentions: that US could reap the

contrary to what some in the Congress seem to say, the vote is not about whether to admit China to the WTO or about the merits of last November's trade deal with China. Rather, the purpose is to align US law with WTO rules by giving China PNTR status once it joins the

benefits of China's WTO entry without granting PNTR; that after WTO entry, Chinese imports would flood US markets; and that granting PNTR would compromise a necessary tool for influencing China's policies on human rights, labour standards, and the environment.

relation to China. Without the WTO, US would have to rely on bilateral treaties that are invariably narrower in scope and harder to enforce.

Second, there is no reason to believe that China's imports to the US would be different with PNTR than without it. China's current import is based on the Most Favoured Nation status. The PNTR will simply make the status permanent.

Third, the argument that denial of China's entry would keep the pressure on China to improve its human rights performance and records on labour standards and environment is simply not credible. What makes anyone think that it would be easier to make China succumb to pressure through trade sanctions? The US Government has used trade sanctions for decades in order to bring Fidel Castro's Cuba to its knees. But to no avail! And as in Cuba, it is very unlikely that other countries would join the US in its effort to isolate China.

Opponents of PNTR who think rejecting it would punish China are fooling themselves. The more likely result would be

to impede US business and economic interests. Rejection would not amount to a veto on China's WTO membership, nor hurt its US exports. Under WTO regulations, it would simply provide China an opportunity to give US companies access to its markets on terms far less favourable than those enjoyed by business from other countries.

Efforts to lock China out of the WTO would hinder the reform process that has generated new hopes for the Chinese economy. An exceptional opportunity to integrate China into the global economy by subjecting it to binding multilateral disciplines would be lost. This would, at the very least, compromise the advances achieved through economic reforms in China and undermine the future stability of its international relations. The global economy could only lose such an outcome.

On the other hand, by joining WTO, the international norms that China will be willing to accept in the economic arena would eventually translate into increasing adherence to international standard in basic freedoms and the rule of law. By integrating into the world economy, China will undoubtedly prosper and this will have an eventual beneficial effect on human rights, labour conditions and environment.



Connecting the Dots,
Dr. A. R. Choudhury

Challenges and Opportunities

In the drought affecting both Pakistan and India, a large population in the border areas of both countries are in deep trouble bereft even of drinking water. Can we offer the Indians access to drinking water in locations where we can whenever we can, conversely can they do the same for our affected people on priority basis wherever and whenever? Can we rise beyond our base emotions, even temporarily?

traveller-friendly airport to the drive into the heart of the city, one can only marvel at the evergreen splendour, the architecturally beautiful buildings so designed that the proliferating concrete blends beautifully with the natural environment. So modern and yet so inexpensive, except for real estate, that is. Malaysians do not cross the Johore causeway to shop in Singapore anymore, now it's the other way around. Our wonderful host, Adi Naidu Abdulrahman and his delightful spouse Siti, took great pride in showing us around, from the twin towers that are the highest buildings in the world to the Sun City Resort, an exact replica of the one near Johannesburg in South Africa.

Was it only three years ago that George Soros, egged on by the media, was hurling muck and contempt at Mahathir and Malaysia, leading speculation against East Asian currencies that seriously undermined the economies of Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, South Korea and to an extent the Philippines and Malaysia? Today Soros is a victim of his own gambling, having lost US\$3 billion in betting on the Euro. Tens of millions of Asians were beggared beneath the poverty line because of him. The only reminder of his opportunistic and callous "raid" is the unfinished Light Rail Transport (LRT) which was temporarily suspended while Malaysia, without any external help, fought back to shore up its economy, even lending a hand to its neighbours. Obviously we cannot compare our potential to the vast oil, mineral and natural resources of Malaysia, however we wish our leaders

would mean it when they say they will stand up to the IMF, not have dual personalities, one face for Washington, another one for Islamabad. The height of their corporate ambitions seems to be an eventual job with the IMF, or even the UN, who knows? Pakistan comes only as a convenient stepping stone for their CVs. In the 21st century economic environment Pakistan needs committed people with permanent addresses in Pakistan to clean up its act, it badly needs a Mahathir-clone.

If Kuala Lumpur was impressive, so was Shanghai but in a far different way. This former

levels starting from the top, with plenty of maturity too, that the Asian countries survived in 1997-98 is only because despite pressure (and temptation) China did not devalue its currency.

We were privileged to hear the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji give his keynote address on "China and Asia at the turn of the century and opportunity for world business". Among the 1000 delegates and 43 speakers were Ambassador Nicholas Platt who is the President of Asia Society, Foreign Minister of Indonesia Aliw Abdurrahman Shihab, Thailand's Finance Minister Niemannhaeninda, Deputy PM of Vietnam Nguyen Manh Cam, Mayor Xu Kuangdi of Shanghai and Chairman China Charter of International Trade Yu Xiaosong. Delegates from Canada, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, China, Philippines and Thailand also spoke. Australia, Cambodia, England, Germany, Malaysia, Uganda, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore and Taiwan were represented. Pakistan's Ambassador in China, Riaz Khokhar represented official Pakistani presence. Not one mention was made of Pakistan in any of the speeches, neither good nor bad, we might as well have not existed.

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AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

commercial capital of China pre-1949 does not have the actual beauty of Malaysia's capital, the present airport being not at all impressive but the vast ongoing construction in this city of 14 million people is equally stunning. If you were lucky to hear the Mayor and his Deputy, you would know why no rhetoric or bluster in their speeches, only the down-to-earth pragmatism of leaders with ideas and integrity. The Malaysians have a distinct advantage in sophistication and beauty but the sheer size and volume of Shanghai is awesome, the new development of Pudong is high tech and futuristic. Every time one visits China one sees the continuous unfolding of the Chinese miracle, brought about by leadership of outstanding quality at all

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over us in this respect. In absence of a strong recruiting agency working mainly for the Bangladeshis, I would suggest that those IT professionals who are interested to take the advantage of H-1B visa can contact the consulting firms here in the USA through the Internet. I am sure that through patience and perseverance prospective candidates would definitely get a job in the USA.

H-1B visa. For example, in one of the offices of a telecommunication company in Atlanta where I joined two months ago, there are about two dozen IT professionals from India against only me from Bangladesh. Besides the lack of information among the Bangladeshis about various facilities that are now available, the communication (language) problem is a big hindrance. Our universities and colleges imparting technological education must give stress on students to learn and use English. The Indians have a very clear edge

in the Middle East and the west, we are used to a constant measure of difference, journeying eastwards one sees this gap widening, both a sickening and frustrating situation. Unless we break the shackles that stifles free enterprise with a mixture of bureaucratic vested interest and sheer ignorance we will be put at a disadvantage that will eventually Somalia-ise us, at least relatively. The city of Shanghai alone has attracted US\$40 billion investment, even New York will be eventually dwarfed by the developing skyline. In a significant vote of confidence after 50 years, Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (now called HSBC) has moved back its HQ for mainland China operations from Hong Kong to Shanghai. On a personal note, my mother-in-law was only 7 when she was interned by the Japanese in 1941 in Shanghai during the Second World War, along with her father, he being British India's Trade Commissioner based first in Osaka and then Tokyo.

The present regime represents our best chance to effect real change, unfortunately they do not have the luxury of time to give civilians in the various Cabinets On-the-Job Training (OJT). A national crisis demands that nationally the best talent available is tapped for service to the country. Now that the Supreme Court has given a three years mandate, national considerations require one to rise above petty animosities. One cannot have economic emancipation without breaking the logjam of our relationship with India. India may relish in temporary advantage, but with 400 million plus people below the poverty line out of a popula-

tion of one billion, it is going nowhere. At best their progress will be uneven, deepening social polarisation.

Riding on a high of world opinion the Indian leadership has not shown maturity by spurning our overtures for reconciliation. The intelligentsia has no love lost for Pakistan but seeks rapprochement anyway because of economic considerations. The broad spectrum of the Indian masses, particularly in the South and the East, have priorities other than Kashmir. Individually there is an easy camaraderie with the Indians, the deep suspicion and apprehension of each other at the State level has been aggravated by the BJP leadership. This mistrust may result in total breakdown of communications, eventually leading to complete erosion of normal human contact. Such a void becoming permanent, the children of South Asia will face a bleak future, the meltdown could escalate into a nuclear catastrophe. That is certainly not going to solve the Kashmir problem.

Why not take advantage of straws in the wind, the drought affecting both Pakistan and India? A large population in the border areas of both countries are in deep trouble bereft even of drinking water. This poses both a challenge and an opportunity, that is if we have the courage to confront the demons that befall us with pragmatic solutions, ready to take calculated risks for the sake of lessening tensions. Can we offer the Indians access to drinking water in locations where we can whenever we can, conversely can they do the same for our affected people on priority basis wherever and whenever? Can we rise beyond our base emotions, even temporarily?

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Test of Mom's Love

MOTHER'S Day is not all chocolate pudding and apple pie. There comes a time in a mother's life when a child says, "I hate you."

The mother says, "Why do you hate me?"

"Because I couldn't find my soccer shoes, and I'm going to be late for the game."

"I told you to keep them in your closet so you would find them the next time you were going to play."

"I knew you would say that. That's why I hate you."

"But you shouldn't hate me. I cook your dinner, I wash your laundry and I fight your battles with your teachers. Hate is an awful strong word."

"You don't love me."

"That's not true, I love you very much, except when I can't get chewing gum out of your Levi's."

"All my friends' mothers love them."

"How can you be that sure?"

"They let me sleep over at night and offer me waffles and French toast in the morning and they don't ask me to make up my bed."

"I don't believe that is a true test of motherly love. When your friends come to my house I give them a choice of doughnuts and breakfast."

"If you really loved me you would let me see R-rated movies that I am not supposed to see."

"That has nothing to do with affection. Your mind is not big enough to absorb R-rated movies."

"Why is my mind too small to watch an R-rate movie?"

"Jack Valenti says so. Is there any other reason you hate me?"

"Every time I say I hate you, you don't take me seriously. Why should I say I hate you when you don't believe me?"

"I know you can't hate me because if you did there would be no one to pick you up after your soccer game."

"Well, if you love me, why don't you let me skate on Queens Boulevard?"

"I'm more concerned with your mind than how you feel about asking. Every child is permitted a certain amount of hate, but not a lot."

"You make me be home by 8 o'clock. Is that enough reason to hate you?"