

Colonialism is Alive and Well, in Unsuspected Places

A well-known left-wing politician wrote in a newspaper article earlier this year that the newly acquired international recognition of 21 February as the epitome of the Bengalees' struggle for self-determination should be used as a weapon against the new fangled capitalism-imperialism. How this is to be done is not entirely clear to me. There is, however, no doubt in his mind about the seriousness of the threat that we face. Colonialism has only changed its spot and is now called globalism. And it is out to destroy our cultural identity as well as economic independence.

We as a nation have long declared our abhorrence of colonialism. The history of the Indian subcontinent in the first half of the twentieth century is largely a history of hatred of its people towards the British colonialists. Bengali revolutionaries expressed their anger against British rule in no uncertain terms. After the British had departed, we rallied against world imperialism in its various garbs. Denunciation of colonialism is therefore nothing new to us.

That was of course old colonialism. Come to think of it, things were simpler then. It was easy, for example, for one to be unequivocally opposed to colonialism when the British ruled over us. It is far less easy to denounce its new incarnation. This is largely because new colonialism, the bogy of the dwindling political left, is a rather amorphous creature. To make matters worse, many of those who were once opposed to it now see potential benefits in it, and this of course adds to the confusion of the left and the ultra-nationalists. Behold the spectacular change of popular perception of transnational corporations in recent times. Not long ago they were seen in most developing countries as unmitigated evil. The same countries now see a lot of good in them.

We Bengalees profess to despise colonialism, old and new, clearly definable or amorphous. And we show it, as do other nations. The nature of the new colonialism, is not, however, something that concerns me here. Let me instead take a quick look into the nature of our feeling towards it and how we respond to it. It will be seen that in our hatred of colonialism we sometimes bark up the wrong tree. More important, there is cause for serious doubts about the depth of

our feelings about it. Consider the matter of the wrong tree first. A couple of examples should suffice for the present.

One day, long after the end of British rule it dawned on us that the English spelling of the name of the capital city of the country smacks of colonialism. The English, for reasons best known to them, spelled it Dacca. My parents' generation and mine grew up with it, even though we never forgot that in Bangla the name starts with the fourteenth (or fifteenth in some dictionaries) alphabet of the Bangla consonant. And of course there was no ambiguity about the pronunciation of the name in Bangla. Then, one fine morning, we changed Dacca to Dhaka and congratulated ourselves for having got rid of another vestige of colonialism and getting the pronunciation right. By doing so, however, we also demonstrated our collective illiteracy. We thought that the addition of an 'h' to the 'D' gave us an equivalent, in English, of the Bangla alphabet in question. In the midst of self-congratulation we failed to realize that there is no such equivalent and an addition of a few more 'h's would not do the trick. The English has the habit and it is their language mind you of simply ignoring the 'h' in cases like this, so that in English Dhaka continued to be pronounced Daka. Look into any English dictionary and *dhoti* is still *doh* and *dhow* is still *doh* despite the 'h' in their spelling. This does not mean that the English are completely incapable of pronouncing the Bangla alphabet. They are often able to achieve that feat. But this does not need the prompting of an 'h', thank you. Do we need to list the thousands of words in the English language that are not pronounced exactly as they are spelled?

The two 'c's in Dacca were also seen as remains of British colonialism. Bangla is full of double consonants and we generally pronounce both, as in *adda*, that quintessence of Bengali gregariousness. In English, on the other hand, Chittagong or Calcutta is pronounced with only one 't' and there is the sound of only one 'c' in Dacca and Mecca. Why use two 't's or two 'c's if we are not going to use them both, we asked. So we got rid of the superfluous 'c' in Dacca. That of course presented a new phonetic problem. The indigenous solution was to replace the double 'c' with a single 'k'. I am still waiting for somebody to

A category of developing countries called the Least Developed Countries was created by the United Nations in the early 1970s. The main consideration behind the creation of a separate category of developing countries was that the economies of some of these countries have special disadvantages, partly reflected in very low per capita income, and therefore require specially favourable treatment by donors and partners in international trade. Arguments in favour of special measures for particularly handicapped countries appear fully reasonable and fair. But witness the zeal with which least developed countries guard their status as least developed. Bangladesh not only shares that zeal with other least developed countries, it prides itself with being a leader of the group.

by Mahfuzur Rahman

suggest that the extra 't' in Chittagong should go the way of the extra 'c' in Dacca and then face the phonetic consequence.

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Our confusion about colonialism has also often clouded our sense of history. Fact got mixed up with fiction. Here is an example. Long before we liberated its name, our capital city had a nice little park named after the queen, Victoria. The park and its surroundings were once among the most attractive places of old Dhaka. Soon we dethroned the queen and named the park after Bahadur Shah, the last nominal Moghul emperor of India. That old man, it may be recalled, was a lyric poet of some stature. But he was hardly a fighting spirit. In 1857 Indians in the British army, Muslim and Hindu alike, rebelled, stormed Delhi and declared a feeble and reluctant Bahadur Shah as their leader and restored him to the throne of Delhi. The rebellion was brutally suppressed by the British and a trembling poet-emperor was exiled to Burma. There is every reason to pity the man but we also glorified him. He was not even a symbol of resistance to

British rule. The ordinary *sepoys* was. Here too we misplaced our anti-colonialism.

These are examples of our hatred of the remnants of British rule. Now, nobody expects a repeat of that kind of colonialism. We do not expect any foreign power ever to attempt to bring our country under its political domination. For example, not even the most rabid anti-Indian in the country believes that our big neighbour would some day try to gobble us up. And of course in the highly unlikely case of that happening we would fight the enemy tooth and nail.

The absence of threat of old-fashioned colonialism does not of course prevent us from being fervent anti-colonialists. On the contrary, its very absence forces us to come to terms with a more general definition of anti-colonialism. This can provide a litmus test of the depth of a nation's abhorrence of all other forms of colonialism. After all we cannot be selectively against colonialism without also being hypocritical. Once we force ourselves to accept a general definition of anti-colonialism which, simply put, suggests that we as a nation shall stand on our own feet, manage our own affairs in the way we think is right for us, and restore to ourselves the self-respect long denied to us, we can begin to ask how does our fervour against colonialism look. Take, for example, our attitude towards foreign aid and how we view our status as a least developed country. What we say and do in these areas come perilously close to suggesting that we rather like colonialism in some form or the other. If this looks like an exaggeration, look a little more closely.

We Bengalees share with people in other developing countries a desire to rid ourselves of economic dependence on rich countries. This follows directly from political independence from colonial rule. The nature of economic anti-colonialism is not always squeaky clean, however. Do we, for example, ever say no to

any offer of foreign economic assistance, because it smacks of dependency? Of course we do not. Not that all offers of foreign economic assistance are always driven by altruism on the part of the donors, but some of them undoubtedly are. And we do not object to them. On the contrary, an important objective of our foreign policy is to persuade donor countries not to be stingy with aid.

Neither does our professed anti-colonialism sit well with our stance as a least developed country. A category of developing countries called the Least Developed Countries was created by the United Nations in the early 1970s. The main consideration behind the creation of a separate category of developing countries was that the economies of some of these countries have special disadvantages, partly reflected in very low per capita income, and therefore require specially favourable treatment by donors and partners in international trade. Arguments in favour of special measures for particularly handicapped countries appear fully reasonable and fair. But witness the zeal with which least developed countries guard their status as least developed. Bangladesh not only shares that zeal with other least developed countries, it prides itself with being a leader of the group.

There is even a certain misgiving among the political leadership of some least developed countries about the possibility that a day will come when they will lose the special status. It is inevitable that a developing economy will someday cease to be least developed. One should have expected the leaders of these countries to look forward to that day. In general, such is not the case.

Witness this, for example. Earlier this year there was near panic in Bangladesh when a revised set of national income estimates was published. This showed that per capita income of the country was substantially higher than measured so far. If newspaper reports are any indi-

cation my source of information is a report in The Daily Star (March 31, 2000) there was widespread apprehension over the possibility that the upward revision might breach the income ceiling that principally defines a least developed country. In other words, Bangladesh could disqualify itself as a least developed country. The Finance Minister talked about it, as did eminent economist of the country (mostly reassuringly, Thank God). Not a voice was heard saying that a rising level of national income, even a mere upward revision of its estimate, was good news after all.

Of course it is easy to find a rationale for foreign economic assistance to developing countries. A kind of moral obligation of the rich countries towards the poor is one. Righting some of the past wrongs done by the colonialists is another. A more sophisticated rationale uses the concept of world solidarity, meaning that rich and poor countries need each other. And one can combine all three considerations to make a case for foreign economic assistance as well as for special assistance to the least developed countries.

The above arguments in favour of economic assistance to developing countries have carried considerable weight in international economic and political relations in the past half a century. They have been used not only by developing countries but also by many liberal thinkers and political leaders that have helped mould public opinion in western societies in favour of economic assistance to poor countries. The use of the same arguments by recipients of aid is, however, another matter. When they come especially from countries that have remained hooked on foreign aid for long and still show no sign of being able to do without it, these arguments appear a little too thin. They smack of continuing satisfaction with what is essentially a dependency status. In Bangladesh they certainly do.

Some might see these as merely an asymptotic fondness

for benign colonialism. We have our political leaders on hand to make sure that this is not mere illusion, that indeed, the fondness is quite real. Nobody familiar with the political scene in the country over the past decade can fail to notice how vigorously our political leaders have been kowtowing to western leaders in affairs that are ours alone. Foreign diplomats, American, British, and leaders of the Commonwealth and the European Union have all from time to time lectured our political leaders on the folly of the latter's ways. They have told our leaders, not in so many words, to grow up, offered to mediate in the interminable wrangling between politicians in power and those in opposition, and tried to persuade them to settle their differences in parliament rather than outside. Politicians from the opposition have sought audience with foreign dignitaries to tell them how bestial the government of the country has been towards them and how it has been ruining the country. The length of time President Clinton spent with the leader of the opposition during his visit to Bangladesh earlier this year was compared with the time he stayed with the Prime Minister of the country, and satisfaction openly expressed.

To stay with this sorry tale a little longer, a few months back a foreign diplomat was reported (apparently, by the main opposition party) to have pronounced on the neutrality of the Speaker of the country's parliament. And only the other day a European Union (EU) parliamentary delegation urged Bangladeshi politicians to find a solution to the opposition's continuing boycott of parliament. According to press reports, the delegation "heard" both sides and urged both to have a dialogue so that the opposition could join parliamentary proceedings. The EU's Dhaka envoy concluded a press briefing with the following statement: "We will go on urging them whether they listen to us or not".

All this looks rather like the goings-on between the ruling classes of a colony and their colonialist masters who have graciously granted a certain degree of autonomy to their political freedom, and not like the kind of relationship that one expects between democratically elected representatives of a sovereign, and fervently anti-colonialist, country and their foreign counterparts. To some members of my generation this may hark back to the days when our British rulers were trying to bring the feuding factions in Indian politics to some kind of understanding, before

they finally left the colony. It is saddening to reflect on this some half a century after the British left and a quarter century after we liberated ourselves from Pakistani rule. The sadness deepens when one notes that no foreign country dares tell India how to run its affairs. It turns into anger when one witnesses the absence of external political overlordship even in Pakistan where democracy never took hold.

Our political leaders might well protest that they are after all products of society. Except for the rather important fact that it is the duty of the leader to lead and not merely to be part of the herd, they would be right. Our politicians' fawning on western leaders probably reached its high watermark during the visit of the US president. The leaders were not alone in this, however. In an open letter published in a Bengali newspaper, a professor of applied physics at the University of Dhaka had this to say, among other things: *I believe that you [Mr. Clinton] have a moral responsibility to save the people of this country from the clutches of corrupt politicians* (Translation mine).

In reminding rich countries of their "moral responsibilities" our politicians can go too far. In a poem (The New Colossus) by the American poet Emma Lazarus, the Statue of Liberty speaks thus to "ancient lands": "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore..."

That is indeed a noble gesture by Lady Liberty. But it sounded particularly odd to me when our Prime Minister quoted these words in a speech at the United Nations in 1996, by way of pleading with the Americans to let more immigrants into their country. What is noble for the almsman, neither the Prime Minister, nor probably the bureaucrat who helped write that speech, realized that they were calling their own countrymen "wretched refuse" who had been "yearning to breathe free". Does such thoughtless fawning reflect a mind that is terribly anti-colonialist?

We probably are not as fervently against colonialism as we think we are. There are exceptions to this, which supports the general case. The left-wing politician this essay began with must be among the honourable exceptions.

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Whither Political Leadership?

Today politics has become a business; but others have to realise that it is not necessary to become a politician to succeed in life. We are facing a tough basic aberration while approaching politics as a way of life.

by A M M Aabad

A WAMI League, the ruling party, is always talking big and powerful, whether in power or out of power; perhaps enveloped in the mystic lobaan (environment of incense) of Bangabandhu's name. How long this mantra will hold with due respect to Bangabandhu's name if exploited in this manner? How the pre-qualification of a flag-bearer is drafted?

The quiet advice (aside) is to stand on one's own feet. A leader is a leader, not a follower. A contemporary leader (in any sector of the society) presuming to lead the nation cannot safely rely on external reference points of history, colleagues, and field workers.

Topical leadership is a lonely field in this changing world. The sun does not need light; others go by the sunlight. A leader gives away more than he receives. A leader sits in the Control Room, and not in the Store Room. A developing society is fond of inventories. Numbers denote quantity, whole quality cannot be quantified.

The election preparations have started. AL has to analyse its own weaknesses, without beating the negative drum, but the public monitoring is qualified enough to read between the lines, and arrive at its own conclusion.

There are two broad areas to examine: the weaknesses within the party; and the weaknesses within the leadership (at different levels). The integrated weak points adversely affect the outward image and credibility of the leaders and the party. The continuity in the maintenance of a positive image is more tricky than the quick erosion of the current image. Personal ego and desires have to be relinquished; through action, not oratory.

The leader has to lead in the correction programmes inside the party; while at the same time

project the right image of leadership and the party outside, for proper public response. Both are delicate operations in undisciplined, developing societies; specially those with lower standard of living, and where the majority of the people live just above the poverty line and are illiterate.

The internal improvement of the systems loss (both human and strategic) has to be carried out quietly in low-key style, so as not to attract attention from the critics inside and outside. A party out of action for several decades have an additional job in hand, namely the overhauling stage, which later changes into modernised BMRE. This type of exercise is usually not carried out as a planned project, but it is subject to ad hoc contingency measures from time to time. The role of opportunism in politics needs further spotlight.

What is noticeable in Dhaka is the political fatigue due to the forces of history. This background is retarding the improvement of the system efficiency (management, operation, and maintenance) due to lack of experience and practice. All parties in a democratic political system are adversely affected; and we see behaviour patterns such as the boycott of the parliament by the opposition parties in successive new parliaments.

Thus there is a heavy burden of responsibility on the top leaders of all shades of opinion to create an environment for political consensus on national issues. This climate is still not predictable, much to the dismay of the electorate. A politically workable system is an exercise at the top level of the society; and the masses must not be disappointed, as their tolerance factor is far below that of expected from the leadership level. There should be no leader fatigue during a period of political fatigue;

otherwise voter fatigue will set in, worsening the situation.

The leader has to have a transparent agenda, and extra energy and sense of direction to steer the nation in the right direction. Most of the extra energy will be directed towards inside the party to provide better public service. Public support is difficult to obtain as the media run repeated stories of political godfatherism. The man in the street also tends to believe that the present day violence is largely due to political nepotism. It is difficult to introduce reforms facing a hostile public opinion.

The internal chain-of-command influence has become diluted and lax, encouraging splits and internal factions. Thus the party growth curve does not ascend, as the seeding operation lacks the right type of fertilizing action. Thus control is transferred to outside points and the established institutions star getting politicised, and soon a vicious circle is created, and political transparency is seriously hampered.

In this hurried commentary, only a few areas have been cursorily noted. It is for the specialists to present a more comprehensive picture for general reading at the popular level. Politics in Bangladesh today is badly in need of help from the other professional sectors; but this cooperation and coordination should not encourage professional migration to politics.

Today politics has become a business; but others have to realise that it is not necessary to become a politician to succeed in life. We are facing a tough basic aberration while approaching politics as a way of life. With the wrong type of foundation, the political future of the country is not bright.

The Tea Story: Fighting Heart Diseases and Cancer

It should, however, be borne in mind that tea cannot alone ensure good health or cannot fight heart disease and cancer. A balanced diet, healthy living, regular exercise and restraint from smoking with regular cups of tea, can bring effective and desired results. Let us look to this inexpensive, affordable and available drink to develop a useful healthy habit and to strengthen our efforts against heart diseases and cancer.

by Dr. Khalilur Rahman

health benefits of tea drinking that I shared with my wife. The main purpose of this article is to disseminate that information among the readers, though most of them, if not all, are perhaps already aware of this.

Next to water, tea is the most commonly consumed beverage in the world. Not only a cup of morning tea revives, relaxes, refreshes mind and body, but more importantly, hundreds of recent studies have proved that "tea drinking" is a useful and inexpensive healthy habit that helps fight heart disease and cancer. In fact, the antioxidants contained in tea do this. Black tea consumption may reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke caused by blocked arteries.

Antioxidants natural biochemical compounds contained in plant foods, protect the body from harmful effects of free radicals which can cause damage to cell that eventually may lead to chronic conditions such as heart diseases and cancer. The best known antioxidants in diet are vitamins C, E and Beta Carotene. Recent studies reveal that tea has more antioxidants than most fruits and vegetables although it is not a substitute for fruits and vegetables in a balanced diet.

There is a continuous oxidative

stress in our body due to free radicals resulting in body imbalances. The antioxidants in tea, called flavonoids, generally help to restore these imbalances. They also protect low-density lipoprotein from oxidation, inhibit plasma lipid peroxidation, platelet aggregation and thromboxane formation. These are the factors that are important in the maintenance of a healthy circulatory system of arteries and veins. Tea may help prevent or delay the formation of tumours, specially in the skin, lung, oesophagus, stomach and colon. It generally inhibits the growth of cancer cells. Traditionally tea is prepared with milk and sugar in our country, habit of consuming raw tea is coming up though. Milk and sugar may have just some taste value. One cannot get real flavour of tea if it is mixed with these stuffs. On the other hand, at households, some savings may be made from the expense to be incurred for milk and sugar for tea if habit of raw tea drinking can be practiced. Drinking raw tea is specially important for those who takes tea a few times a day. Milk and sugar mixed with tea 4/5 times a day, can create imbalances in body bio-chemistry in many ways specially in older persons. These imbalances may

lead to some other health problems. Drinking raw tea is just a matter of habit and it can be a very good healthy one.

The incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCD) like heart diseases, cancer is on the rise all over the world, including in our country. Now-a-days, we see so many people dying from NCD in our country. While policy makers are busy formulating appropriate strategy to fight this emerging health menace, at individual level, every person can reduce the chance of being a victim of NCD by maintaining a healthy life style. Good news is that the majority of the informed, better off section of our population have now become health conscious. Wide dissemination of information on healthy life style among the vast majority of general and poor people is, however, also needed on a priority basis.

Tea drinking can be one of the best habits one can adopt. It should be made popular among the low income group of population since it is an inexpensive beverage. This habit may also encourage them to give up many other harmful habits like smoking, drugs etc. The incidence of NCD is not gauged among the poor since most of them do not have means to get them diag-

nosed. A recent WHO study reveals that the incidence of cardiovascular diseases is more among the poor and that they are more susceptible to these diseases than the better off people. Mass programmes for popularising tea drinking across the society may be worked out by the Tea Board and by the association of the tea producing companies. I saw a number of tea producers and Tea Board officials from our country touring the world for enhancing our tea export. True, tea is one of our important export items. While efforts in enhancing export should continue, suitable arrangement may also be made to enhance domestic consumption of tea. Enhanced domestic consumption can help flourish tea growing and tea industry bringing overall economic and health benefits to the society. Information highlighting health benefits of tea drinking may be widely disseminated through advertisements in print and electronic media.

In conclusion, we should appreciate that healthy life style is a must for better health of one's heart. It should, however, be borne in mind that tea cannot alone ensure good health or cannot fight heart disease and cancer. A balanced diet, healthy living, regular exercise and restraint from smoking with regular cups of tea, can bring effective and desired results. Let us look to this inexpensive, affordable and available drink to develop a useful healthy habit and to strengthen our efforts against heart diseases and cancer.

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TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

James Bond

BY IAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY HORAK

