

Land-grab at Gunpoint

THREE newspapers carried this stunning story yesterday. Land ministry officials bypassing all rules and practices leased out 1.5 bigha (about 20,000 square feet) of land, designated as a parking lot in the Gulistan area, for a shopping complex to a dubious outfit called the Bangabandhu Baboshayee Samabaya Samity (BBS). This group, in connivance with a minister, two secretaries, one state minister's son and several ruling party high-ups, brought about this highly illegal action. Providing active support to the whole process were several officials — both high and midlevel — from the land ministry and Rajuk. When a few conscientious Rajuk officials tried to resist it, firearms were brandished and some senior officers were dragged by their collar and forced to sign on the dotted lines at gunpoint. Tragically when the incident was brought to the notice of the Rajuk chairman, who was on the verge of retirement, preferred not to get himself involved and pretended not to have heard anything.

The land originally belonged to the Public Works Department (PWD), under the works ministry. During the autocratic regime of Ershad the management — not ownership — of this land was transferred to DCC for construction and maintenance of city parking lots. The land ministry had no claim on this land and had no business to give a 60-year lease on it at Tk 1.5 crore. The land value is estimated to be Tk 50 crore at the minimum.

We are convinced that this was nothing short of an elaborate scam to grab a prime land and cheat the public of its rightful asset. We demand an immediate inquiry into the whole episode and punishment of the people concerned. The minister, son of another state minister and the government high officials involved must be exposed and brought to justice. While criminal investigation is in process the land ministry and Rajuk officials must be reshuffled. As an immediate step the land in question must immediately be restored as a parking lot and all the papers signed with the so-called BBS cancelled. The government must also investigate the origin and membership of this body who had the audacity to get their plan approved at gunpoint. This is most important for the government. If it is once proven that government decisions can be procured by brandishing guns and that the perpetrators of such an act can get away with it, then no government official will be safe any more.

Our final demand is to the PM herself. Please immediately ban use of Bangabandhu's name by all unauthorised bodies. Many bodies, like the one above, use Bangabandhu's name as part of their organisations' name only to get some benefit out of it. PM's previous instruction in this regard is followed more in violation than in adherence. Now the time has come to severely punish those who use Bangabandhu's name in carrying out illegal and anti-people activities.

PAC's Plight

THE abysmal track record of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in reviewing and hearing the audit observations forwarded to it by the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) Office would indeed make one wonder whether there is any justification of having the parliamentary body or not. A backlog of 450 audit reports, which might take the committee at least 12 years to review and act upon, is representative of anything but a functional entity. The figures, however, do not reflect the committee's efficiency; these only highlight a set of poignant facts.

The PAC, one of the most important parliamentary committees, has been decimated almost into theoretical existence. It does not get the necessary state support — in terms of both finance and policy — to efficiently and effectively discharge its responsibilities. Budgetary constraints have obviously eliminated the possibility of having a research and analysis cell, without which effective functioning of a committee like PAC becomes an impossible proposition. What's worse, the members reportedly are not aware of the rules and procedures of the committee. As one World Bank official working on the Strengthening the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General pointed, the PAC "lacks the expertise and resources to deal with the issues and the volume of the audit reports."

Enhancement of budgetary, personnel and logistic support alone does not hold the key to an efficient and effective PAC. Empowerment is of crucial significance. Until and unless the PAC is given the authority to initiate corrective measures against institutions found to have financial irregularities, its very function and concomitantly that of the CAG would have no consequence whatsoever. It is surely undesirable that the whims and wishes of the ministries should dictate a watchdog body like the PAC. Why would the decision of an inquisition into financial irregularities of any public establishment, and prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators thereby, be in the hands of the ministry concerned?

That there are major irregularities in financial management of the public establishments goes beyond an iota of doubt. Seemingly, the CAG observations and subsequently the PAC recommendations lose way in the bureaucratic web. Such a stand-off shouldn't be allowed to continue.

To the Editor ...

Faulty approach to development projects

Sir, It appears from reports in the press (DS Nov 30) that huge contracts are awarded to single or limited number of printing firms for printing crores of copies of school text books. Instead of distributing the contracts to one dozen or half a dozen contractors (maintain a minimum pool for handling emergency situation), to take care of capacity handling and contingency situation, which are common in the developing countries including Bangladesh (failure to maintain the deadline). This is not a new situation, but we are not learning from the weak system in operation. Where are the official critics (the system analysts)?

The procedure for evaluation of the tender offers may be reviewed so that the contracts are awarded keeping in view the ultimate public interest, instead of splitting hairs over the technical requirements of the tendering terms and conditions. It appears that vested groups are able to influence unduly the tender committees to award dubious contracts to firms, which simply cannot

undertake the offers they make. This is the symptom in all departments, including the inability to spend the donor foreign exchange allocations in time for projects in Bangladesh (report on SEMP projects in Bangladesh).

The planners have to be careful to ensure that all development projects carry provision for mini development projects at the routine daily work level also (logistics and manpower; the latter with provision for training and orientation courses). Several examples may be cited. The number of inspectors are too few in the garment sector, and for checking of medicine shops (30,000 of these are unregistered DS Nov 30), and other shops and the bazaar. The police work force (including the traffic police) cannot meet the increased demand for extra duties.

The political decision-making must ensure that bureaucracy is updated along with a new project (including BMRES). On the other hand there are too many government employees working in the old and outdated methods. The Planning Commission and the government's planning department need to be revamped with new synergy, to be able to assist the other ministries with

IN a moral example of self-abnegation in India's power politics Jyoti Basu, the world's longest serving elected communist politician has, on November 6, called it a day and also stepped down from his post of Chief Minister. One of India's leading English weeklies has likened his legacy to that of a 'Wasteland' while the media in general treated his retirement with ill-concealed contempt and dismissivism. The lack of grace on the media's part could have grown out of its crude prejudice against the ideology and politics of the left of which Basu was, for decades, the best known symbol. But how should one estimate a man who has been, beyond his party label, a byword for intellectual, political and personal integrity and a perfect embodiment of political conviction in an age of blatant opportunism and expediency? Who would deny that with his straight-forward cool but unperturbable style Basu whether a communist or otherwise made a profound long-term difference in Indian politics? The media's miserly assessment of a genius of his proportion fell well short of bringing in full focus the interesting and difficult interface of ideology, vision, theory, activism, polemic and organizational resources which Basu mastered during his long political career.

His opponents are equally uncharitable in giving him his due as a politician of purpose. He did not want to drag on indefinitely in his plum appointment; neither did he accept the offer when he was unanimously elected the United Front's prime ministerial candidate in 1996. Because both lacked purpose. While Basu wanted the young generation of leaders in the party to come out of his shadow, his detractors saw him to be running

Basu forged ahead in left politics with flying colours when it was on the wane the world over and the creed he upheld was dead at long last. But how did he make it? It will be a subject of great interest for the posterity to delve into his enormous personal qualities that made all the difference. In a region like South Asia where the politics is criminalised and smeared in sleaze, Basu's politics, works, and compassion for his people are bound to be rare source of hope.

away from 'looming disaster'. They also mocked at his colleagues' obsession with preserving the high-backed office chair of Basu as museum piece but refrained from giving space for Basu's commendable humility in refusing the idea. Basu is blamed for introducing a kind of mediocrity in the high places of administration and education by 'confusing meritocracy with elitism' which the left parties loathed. His government was lambasted by the critics for rural aggrandisement creating formidable organisational bases for the left parties in the countryside.

The subtle but widespread hostility to Jyoti Basu's person and party in saffronised India may not allow an objective evaluation of one of India's most respected politicians and a living legend of Indian politics. It will however be pertinent to put in perspective some of his outstanding achievements. The wasteland theory attributed to Jyoti Basu's rule of West Bengal is in the first place, highly intriguing one, because at independence the state was already a wasteland. The industrial decay of Calcutta, the state's capital, began at partition when the port city once regarded as India's Manchester lost much of its hinterland. Any effort for the state's industrial revival had to be conducted within the framework of India's declared policy of a command economy. However, when Delhi started opening up from the mid-nineties Basu also, by breaking with communist dogma, began to



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

search in earnest for private investors. In the meantime he concentrated on the state's countryside and brought about momentous changes in rural life.

In its early days in power the Left Front, an agglomeration of left parties dominated by Basu's communist Party of India (Marxist), carried out a series of credible land reforms that is still

paying dividends for the bulk of the state's population. Over 23 years of Basu's helmsmanship the Front established India's first comprehensive system of democratic decentralisation through an elected body of Panchayets. By extending rural electrification and irrigation to remote areas of the countryside agricultural production was raised to all time



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high during the period when West Bengal showed one of the highest rates of agricultural growth in India. As a consequence of the new institutional changes and agricultural growth, the nutrition level improved and rural poverty declined in the state. The poverty rate declined from 52 per cent in 1978 to 26 per cent in 1994. According to the World Bank it was the fastest rate of poverty reduction in any of India's big states. The female literacy jumped from 46 per cent in 1981 to 72 per cent in 1994.

Surprisingly, in democratic India a communist West Bengal has set the best paradigm for grassroots democracy. There have been elections to Panchayat institution every five years since 1978. The Panchayets have taken on responsibilities that were earlier vested with district level bureaucracy. The elected members of the Panchayets are overwhelmingly from land-poor and landless households. The democratic experience with local government in West Bengal provided impetus for 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian constitution, which made regular elections to local bodies mandatory in all states.

Jyoti Basu consciously made rural Bengal his citadel of power by empowering the village poor but he certainly did not write off urban-based industrial sector. West Bengal's industrial experience under Basu's rule has been far from the 'Wasteland' as depicted by the motivated quarters. The industrial picture in the

state has been a complicated and mixed one since independence with signs of stagnation created for industrial sector by exceedingly strong trade union movements. However, since the adoption of a new industrial policy since 1994 some bright spots did appear in a complex industrial scenario. The experience is not much dissimilar from that of several other states.

Basu made his most significant contribution at national level by building up an effective bulwark against the rising tide of Hindutva. In politics, he was not just another chief minister of a state and was looked upon more as a chief minister-statesman. With his followers he had been the uncompromising defender of secularism in India. His 30-plus MPs from West Bengal formed the foundation of a consistent, coherent and influential Left presence in Parliament. He also has been an outspoken critique of stabilisation and structural adjustments. It is not surprising that none except perhaps Prime Minister Vajpayee commands so much respect at an Indian level as Jyoti Basu does. It will be a gross underestimation to view Basu as mere chief minister. He was much more than that.

Basu forged ahead in left politics with flying colours when it was on the wane the world over and the creed he upheld was dead at long last. But how did he make it? It will be a subject of great interest for the posterity to delve into his enormous personal qualities that made all the difference. In a region like South Asia where the politics is criminalised and smeared in sleaze, Basu's politics, works, and compassion for his people are bound to be rare source of hope.

Corruption Catches up with Asian Politics

In Bangladesh, people are familiar with "Janata Tower" case. Former president H.M. Ershad is currently in prison for the conviction in the case and many believe his career as a politician has been seriously jeopardised... It is shocking when leaders indulge in the malice as people's representatives. After all, politics in democratic society is meant to serve the people.

The otherwise respected and elderly politician is facing unrest although his position has not been threatened. He has vowed to try former dictator Gen. Suharto, who is alleged to have plundered state wealth and siphoned billions of dollar out of the country while he with his family members were engaged in massive financial wrong-doings during the long 32 years he was in power. But how can Wahid bring the corru to book if he himself is accused for same offences even though of much lesser degree!

Former Indian prime minister PV Narasimha Rao was some time ago sentenced to three-year imprisonment in a sensational corruption case which caused a storm in Indian political and other circles in 1993 when the issue had come to the fore. He was then the prime minister and completed his five-year term in 1996. Because of the lengthening judicial process, the case has been disposed of just the other day. Mr. Rao along with former home minister Buta Singh were found guilty in 'buying members of parliament from other 'shade' of opinion's in a desperate bid to ensure majority in the house and save the Congress government. When the judge announced the sentence, PV Narasimha Rao happened to be the first Indian prime minister to be indicted and sentenced to imprisonment in a corruption case. The verdict has not come as a surprise since it was widely believed that the ex-prime minister resorted to serious wrong-doings to save his position and the government at a time when the required majority had hung in the balance. The ruling of the court has made the heads of many hang in shame in India where still honesty and probity in public life is considered a great virtue and corruption a big sin. Rao and Singh have appealed to higher courts but the message is too bold and clear to the effect that corruption in pub-

MATTERS AROUND US

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury



lic life must not go unpunished.

Rao, the only Indian prime minister from the south of the country, is erudite and known for his scholarly qualities. But his record as a clean politician was always in doubt and he found it going tough in elections in his Andhra Pradesh state even when the Congress was popular. His son Prabakhar Rao, also once a member of parliament, faced many corruption charges. Narasimha himself was in the midst of a controversy as prime minister when a Bombay stock broker claimed that he paid one crore rupees in cash to him for a favour. However, the charge was not proved. Former slain prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, a charismatic leader, was accused by opponents of accepting pay-offs in the 'Bofors' arms purchase deal. His wife, presently the main opposition leader in India, Sonia Gandhi, has also been accused in the same deal by the critics. Rajiv once lost elections and consequently, power, mainly for these allegations. However, this could not be proved as yet. Another lady politician in southern India, Jayalalitha Jayaram, known as 'Indella Marcos' of South Asia for her lifestyle was convicted a few months ago for massive corruption.

In Pakistan, the present army ruler General Pervez Musharraf seized power last year citing "massive corruption" as a pretext for his action. His dismissal of an elected government cannot be accepted under any circumstance and the act has been condemned by many countries but the point that is being driven

home is that when important politicians resort to corruption, it erodes public confidence on their being public leaders. The misdeeds of Nawaz Sharif and his family members are well known and so is the case of another popular leader and former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, whose

husband Asif Ali Zardari was known to interfere in almost every big state deals and earned the infamous title 'Mr. Ten per cent'. Similar cases existed in Sri Lanka although of lesser scale.

In Bangladesh, people are familiar with 'Janata Tower' case. Former president H.M. Ershad is currently in prison for the conviction in the case and many believe his career as a politician has been seriously jeopardised. Then there are allegations of corruption in the 'Air Bus' deals against former prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia and some of her cabinet colleagues and cases have been filed against

them. Opposition parties also charge prime minister Sheikh Hasina and her government leaders with similar corruption in the MIG, frigate and some other deals.

There is no denying that there are corruptions in other countries of the world as well. But Asian countries seem to be in the lead in this regard. When corruption occurs in undemocratic regime, little scope exists to bemoan since there is no question of accountability in such governance. But it is shocking when leaders indulge in the malice as people's representatives. After all, politics in democratic society is meant to serve the people. Many Asian leaders including quite some in the South Asia have set glorious examples as such. Democratic leaders must emulate them and not serve themselves in the name of serving the people.

OPINION

Student Politics—without Students and Politics

Faruque Hasan

There is neither students nor politics in 'student politics' of Bangladesh. That said politics in this country, which has a glorious past, is now imprisoned in the hands of a handful of 'cadres'. These so-called cadres are neither students nor political activists in true sense of the terms, but unfortunately they control the student politics. The real students have been gradually driven away from the political activities on the campus. They are now only the helpless on-lookers of the 'politics' performed in their name. Sitting on the sidelines, most of them have lost interest in the so-called student politics. The general students have turned into mere pawns in the hands of the godfathers who control student politics through the cadres who are armed with lethal weapons.

A cadre is supposed to be an ardent member of a political party who being imbued with the party's ideology dedicates his life for the fulfillment of purposes of his party. But present day political cadres of Bangladesh have little interest in party ideology. They carry illegal firearms, ride motor bike for storm mobility and perpetrate all sorts of misdeeds. They act as cadres of their respective party in the sense of hooliganism. These cadres are terrorizing the general students to their bones.

In the past students were the force behind driving away tyrants and undemocratic governments from power. Each and every time the politicians and a few student leaders have enjoyed the fruits of success of arduous and bloody struggle of the students. But whenever a group of politicians has ascended to power as a result of a successful student movement, the members of that group tried different devices to break the backbone of the inherent power of student politics. It can now be asserted that at last they have been successful in this regard through infiltrating miscreants in the name of party cadres into student organizations. As student politics now has become 'lucrative' in terms of money, the hooligans have themselves got enticed to be into it for their own benefit.

To become a VP of the student union of a college means to get a

license to collect illegal tolls from people having business establishments in the neighborhood of that college! "..... was a VP indeed! He collected tolls to the tune of 22 lac taka in six months" was a soliloquy of an admirer of a VP who was killed by his rivals over the dispute on sharing collected tolls.

The cadres in student politics are being used to occupy students' halls and hostels, to deter activities of opponent student organizations. They do all these on the instructions of their political godfathers in exchange of having protection to be rendered by their mentors against their other misdeeds. They also use the students' halls and hostels as free sanctuaries.

It is often heard that such and such college or students' hall on university campus. Even a student organization has different groups in it, and often these groups turn into enemies at daggers drawn. They get involved in gunfight for establishment of their group supremacy over a college or students' hall.

A few years back hockey sticks, knives and cut-throats were the weapons used in fighting on university and college campuses, now modern firearms are being indiscriminately used by the cadres to fight each other.

Before Monam Khan, the governor of the then East Pakistan, the people in power always tried to quell student movements using brute police force. Monam Khan initiated the move of infiltrating hooligans in student politics. Since his time the political situation on the campus has been gradually deteriorating.

Why should the students get involved in politics? Politics by students is not needed at all, if national politics is on the right track. But unfortunately national politics in the third world countries like ours lacks integrity, quality, patriotism etc., which necessitates student politics in these countries. But what is going on in our country in the name of 'student politics' is no at all what had been meant by the term.

Every year Bangladesh is losing millions of dollars as the direct consequence of violence related to the so-called student

politics. Being fearful of violence on the college and university campuses most of the well-to-do parents of the country have been sending their children abroad for studies. Every year these parents remit thousands of dollars abroad to their children to meet their expenses there. Now-a-days parents are helpless to give protection to their school, college and university going children. Nor the teachers can protect their pupils from the so-called party cadres. The management authorities of educational institutions are themselves afraid of them and run their institutions through compromise with these cadres.

It's not the students, but the political leaders determine who will lead their party's student organization. Student leaders thus selected may not originally be students, may even have proven track of criminal records, but who cares. It seems the political leaders have rather vowed to break the backbone of education in this country for the sake of their self-interests.

In a recent students rally a leading political party leader advised the participants to be serious with their studies. The irony was that the leader knew well that most of the participants were not students, they were hired to participate in the rally.

In Indonesia fierce students' movement forced President Suharto to step down from power. In Myanmar the students often give tremendous jerk to the foundation of the successive military regimes. Hundreds of students of that country have sacrificed their lives for the establishment of democracy. Korean students played a great role for democratization of politics in that country. The Language Movement, which realized recognition for Bengali as one of the two national languages of Pakistan, was solely a student movement. Then the students were the leading force in the popular movement of 1969. The efficacy of that student power in Bangladesh is now a fact.

The unscrupulous politicians may now boast that at last they have succeeded in crushing down the inherent power of the students, if not for ever but at least for the time being.

post-project teething problems.

Also required is more realistic monitoring of projects with fast feedback mechanism. One of the tools is the phased introduction of computer network in the Secretariat (our local computer industry is quite capable of installing and maintaining such systems). The effect can trickle down to the lower levels, once the top starts barking at the unusual delays. Our top management must be all the time displaying gathering storms and lightning effects, to awe the undisciplined in the bottom tiers.

AMA
Dhaka

Mismanagement in garments factories

Sir, The recent fire incident in a garments factory in Narsingdi in which over 40 workers have been killed is a burning example of mismanagement in the highest foreign currency earning sector of our country namely the garments sector. From the news media we came to know that the only exit of this knitwear garments factory was locked when the incident took place. As a result most of the victims died due to suffocation

and in stampede, but only a few from burn injury.

Prime Minister and other leaders conveyed their deep shock and urged the factory owner to provide proper compensation to the victims' families. However I feel, with compensation, they should emphasise on proper management system as well. The management problem has already engulfed our national life and mismanagement has become the order of the day. We demand that from now on strict safety measures be followed in all factories and establishments. Only proper management can reduce such pathetic incidents.

Mr Faridur Rahman
Rajshahi University

Post office needed

Sir, More than four lakh people reside in the north-western side of Purana Pallan, Nava Pallan, eastern side of Shantinagar and Motijheel residential area where thousands of commercial establishments and shops are situated as well. However, it is a matter of great regret that there is no post office in these areas although postal service is a dire and daily necessity for civic and commer-

Mrs Khairun Nessa
Dhaka-1000