

Portrait display repeal bill passed

A crisis created unnecessarily

WE feared the government was heading for this and now our apprehension is confirmed. The *Preservation and Display of Portrait of Father of the Nation (Repeal) Bill, 2002* has been passed. Although Begum Zia has promised a fresh bill to display the portraits of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman along with that of the head of the government it could perhaps go to only partially redeem the situation. However, since the bill was on the forefront of the ruling party's parliamentary agenda for sometime and it went through the committee stage we wrote the following editorial, the contents of which, we think, hold good as our overall response to the latest development marking the actual passage of the bill.

We had written that both our gut feeling and prognostic insights told us that it would be historically perverse, irreparably impolitic and viciously divisive if the government should go ahead with the legislation. It would have chain effects that might go out of hand.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's stature as the architect of our freedom struggle and the liberator of the country is far too transcending in nature to be put within a pictorial frame. From that standpoint, one might argue that the AL could have done without requiring the portrait's display by law. But the question is: since the AL enacted a law in this behalf and Bangabandhu's image needs to be preserved by the state, what purpose would be served if that law is now overturned? For, an annulment would lend itself to an interpretation of an affront being made to his image.

Besides, there are some mundane and worldly matters of overriding nature competing for urgent attention of the government. The priorities should lie there and not with the creation of new controversies. Our priority is citizen's security; our priority is lessening of traffic congestion and pollution; our priority is upgrading the utility services; our priority is alleviating poverty and squalor; our priority is resolving political and social conflicts -- indeed, the list of priorities is endless.

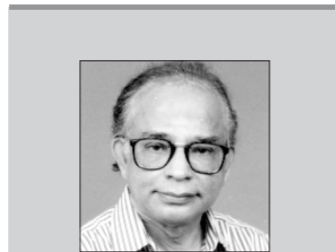
Overall, the thrust must be on the economy so that it cannot be held hostage to impetuous politics.

But Khaleda Zia government's focus on the photograph issue can obscure such priority concerns, if not throw them off-gear right-away. We believe it is not consistent with her electoral planks for better law and order and rapid economic development on which she got the mandate to rule.

We have expressed our vehement objections to the AL's boycott of parliament during the last six months since the October 1 elections. Thereafter, we have unambiguously rejected their decision to resign their parliament seats *en masse* in the event that the law on Bangabandhu's portrait is repealed by the government. We have roundly expressed our disillusionment against such Awami League moves and wouldn't want to justify these under any circumstances. At the same time, however, we feel that the government has kept to the path of giving one provocation after another to the opposition, which are all too known to be enumerated here. But just imagine the intimidation entailed in implicating Sheikh Hasina in a 1983 murder case at the instance of an Asst. Public Prosecutor. Without a nod from the government how could it have happened. And the final provocation will be in the form of the repeal bill should it be passed.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's role in the liberation of Bangladesh is of paramount consideration insofar as the portrait issue goes, the controversy over BAKSAL notwithstanding. So, if there is one person that this nation should honour it is Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. We need not have any confusion over it.

The other Japan



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

JAPAN conjures up the picture of Godzilla. Not the mutant animal emerging from the murky seabed with invincible primal force to overpower everything that comes its way but the industrial and technological giant which rose phoenix-like from the ashes of the Second World War. In less than two decades Japan left behind its legacy of a food deficient and cheap toy producing country and embarked on a relentless journey of technological transformation. It moved like a juggernaut adopting and adapting technologies developed in the west and beat them in their own game. What it could not achieve in war came spontaneously in peace. Japan's emergence as a modern industrial power is not one of the, but the most spectacular success story in economic development under capitalism and democracy.

The victors-turned-mentors of Japan became elated at first seeing the transformation of Japan more or less in their own image. The country retained monarchy as a symbol but adopted a democratic constitution modelled on the west. It broke up the behemoth of industrial complexes called Zaibatsu and introduced a competitive market where small- and medium-scale enterprises could thrive. A thoroughgoing land reform introduced equity and democracy at the grassroots level. Pacifism was enshrined in the constitution laying the ghost of war to rest. The allied powers and the rest of the world threatened by an aggressive Japan sighed in relief and exuded deep content. But soon a new threat shook the developed capitalist world. Japan, like

Godzilla, was beating them with its mighty force on the economic front. From shipbuilding to watch making the capacity of Japanese manufacturers and builders overwhelmed one market after another. Its car industry not only sent millions of units to Europe and America, it also set up plants in those countries to improve on competitive advantage. Japanese products became ubiquitous both in households and out of doors. It even purchased some of the icons of western capitalism like Rockefeller Centre and Hollywood

warlike nation with aggressive instinct has not helped improve this newly acquired sobriquet of "Japan Inc". To many outside Japan only a shift in the area of aggression took place, with the war changing from battlefield to the assembly line in factories.

That Japan is not only about industrial production, money making and salesmanship in the global market was driven home artfully and with aplomb during the celebration of the thirtieth year of diplomatic recognition with Bangladesh.

onslaught of globalisation the leveller.

The beauty about Japanese culture is that most of its manifestations are integral part of day to day life. Take the case of ikebana, the various artistic ways of arranging flowers. There are both religious and aesthetic aspects of this ancient art form. But it is so ubiquitous in Japanese home, office and public places that one cannot think of it as art detached from daily life. Similar is the case with bonsai, the art of making stunted trees. In both,

past. Except in offices Japanese men and women wear their traditional dress. Their homes do not ordinarily have the western style sofas, carpets and showcases. Instead one finds tatami-matted floor, pillows and slanting doors with transparent rice paper. Interior decoration in Japanese household is minimalist with as much space left open as is possible. The tokonama is tucked into a corner with a long scroll hanging above a slender collection of flowers. This is a form of aesthetic which later

sions become ode to nature as well. This adoration of nature reaches its peak at the time of cherry blossom, and turning of colours of maple leaves in autumn. Even bare branches of trees with flecks of snow draw their attention. Japanese aesthetics is infused with Zen-line meditation and tranquillity.

In performing arts colourful and gaudy kabuki is as popular as the abstract and minimalist noh theatre. Along with modern plays staged these traditional performances draw houseful of audiences. Traditional puppet theatre or bonraku has rich repertoire based on well-known historical incidents involving ronins (retainers), their masters and samurais. There has been very little attempt at changing the thematic representation over the centuries indicating the drawing power of tradition for the Japanese. In literature, Japan can boast of having the first novel, *Tales of Genji*, written by Lady Murasaki. Though to the outside world only a few Japanese writers like Kawabata, Mishima and Kanazaburo Uwe are known, there are many writers of world-class talent. Unfortunately, even English translations of their books are not easily available outside Japan (except a few by Haruno Murasaki and Banana Yoshimoto).

Taking the whole gamut of culture Japan has a very rich fare to offer to the outside world. It does not mainly comprise the romanticised figure of geisha only though this class of cultured entertainers is a class of their own. In its preoccupation with global competition there was little time for Japan to present the cultural side deliberately. If the celebration of thirty years of diplomatic relation between Bangladesh and Japan is any indication Japan may be turning a corner and giving serious thoughts to this neglected aspect. Cultural Japan may take many off the rough edges of Japan Inc. More importantly, its publicity and projection will assure many countries nervous about the feasibility of combining tradition with globalisation. This is the most potent message of the other Japan.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

If the celebration of thirty years of diplomatic relation between Bangladesh and Japan is any indication Japan may be turning a corner and giving serious thoughts to this neglected aspect. Cultural Japan may take many off the rough edges of Japan Inc. More importantly, its publicity and projection will assure many countries nervous about the feasibility of combining tradition with globalisation. This is the most potent message of the other Japan.

studios.

Japan morphed into an unstoppable economic powerhouse through both machines and human resource. Modern Japan throws up the image of a highly mechanised workplace, home and transportation. People outside Japan have come to regard the Japanese as programmed workers undifferentiated from the assembly line of production. They became the mirror image of the Americans and Europeans in almost every sense of modernisation. But this is an incomplete picture of Japan. The other face of Japan, steeped in tradition and history, remained intact throughout this breathtaking journey of change. Nowhere is modernity and tradition in such peaceful and productive co-existence as in Japan. Unfortunately, in the rat race of competition the Japanese forgot or de-emphasised to project the traditional tranquil image of Japan. As a result their culture has remained relatively unknown to the outside world and they have come to be ridiculed as a faceless workaholic nation and even looked down upon for their worship of mammon. The past memory of Japan as a

Though Bangladesh was reminded of the various fields where Japan has given assistance generously, the celebration mainly centred around cultural activities. It is a change that cannot escape attention. Exhibition of industrial products and of technology was conspicuous by its absence. Even its accomplishments in the new age technology of IT were underplayed. Through the fortnight-long celebration of bilateral relationship Japan was single-minded and focused on projecting its cultural image. It is about time that this shift in emphasis took place. This is not only necessary to redress the imbalance in her present external relations on the basis of trade and diplomacy only. Slowly but steadily, culture seems to have regained its rightful place to represent the past and present of the country. This augurs well for global culture. Japan has a rich reservoir of cultural activities that can entertain, edify and enthral the outside world. More importantly, the survival and continuity of the cultural heritage in the midst of the breakneck speed of modernisation has a message for other countries which are now recoiling from the

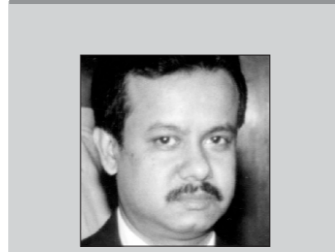
The Japanese love and attraction for nature is brought out vividly. Japanese calligraphy is both an art form and a style used in advertising, on bill boards, newspaper ads and in office. There are of course art forms that are presented in designated places where people go singly or with family for entertainment. Noh, kabuki or traditional music with koto or samisen have not changed either in theme, style or presentation. Commercialisation or impact of other cultures (not even Hollywood or foreign TV channel) has detracted anything from their purity and quintessential beauty. Even in a western dominated medium like film Japanese sensibility is unmistakable. No one will mistake *Ran* to be a blind adaptation of *King Lear* or *Throne of Blood* by Kurosawa to be a copy of Macbeth. They are Japanese in essence using a foreign theme and technology. Seven Samurai, on the other hand, has given rise to imitation elsewhere like *Magnificent Seven* in Hollywood.

In the broader area of culture, food habits, clothing and household furnishings Japan has remained more or less unchanged from the

inspired Le Corbusier to postulate his "less is more" theory in architecture. In food, though western fare is popular and available in restaurants, the Japanese mostly enjoy their own dishes at home and also out of doors. In fact, the food habit of the Japanese is one of the most permanent and unchangeable features of their culture. When they rail against withdrawal of subsidy to small farmers it is mainly to protect an important institution of Japanese culture.

Eternal Japan comes into its own in observing seasonal festivals and commemorating historic days. There are few countries in the world where so many colourful events are celebrated coinciding with change in seasons like cherry blossom or solemn occasions like ancestor's day. Whatever the nature of the occasion, solemn or celebratory, collective spirit of joy and happiness suffuses them. But there are no excesses in giving vent to revelry and fun making. From dress worn to movements and conversation made there is unmistakable touch of sobriety, moderation and artistic sensibility. Most of the celebrations being outdoors, these festive occa-

Of human bondage



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE middle-aged man read out from Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* that a traveller through life must cross a wide country, arid and precipitous, before he comes to an acceptance of reality. His portly wife, who was rubbing scented oil in her hair sitting next to him, twitched in opprobrium, and retorted that study of literature was not going to bring food on the table.

This is the story of his life on a Friday, the man grumbled, staring at the creature, who was beginning to smell like a spilled can of jasmine oil. He looked at her for a while, her hairs chaotic as a bird's nest. There was no makeup on her face, and her skin was dry and rough without lotion or cream, her lips dull and anaemic in the absence of lipstick. A length of her right leg lay bare on the bed, its thick hairs showing that its owner has neglected it for quite some time.

Even few years ago, he would have pointed out all of these to his wife, telling how the romantic buds in his heart withered if she didn't take care of herself. But he has

given up on her over the years, ever since she started to gain weight and chew betel leaves. She believed that only a grotty mind could think of physical appearance at her age, when children were grown up and one was nearer to death.

This Friday the man felt particularly annoyed as he raised one foot to wear his trousers, and stood in the middle of the room like a brooding stork in the marsh. It occurred to him that he was responding to his wife as reflexively as a soldier does to his drill sergeant. He looked at his

and sports!

He does not find his wife attractive anymore, and on this Friday while wading through the crowd in the fish market, he realised that he didn't love her either. She was no more than the disfigured relic of a delectable past, a fond memory that has become stale and worn. If people wished to have fresh fish and vegetables every day, he wondered how could they stay in a relationship, which has grown musty and lost its vigour?

Does his wife feel the same way

around him, but determined that his own life should have significance. The irony of life, the middle-aged man concluded during the bumpy ride to his house, was how each person failed to see that his own life could not have any meaning when the long line of lives before him had gone futile and wasted.

The lunch was elaborate and heavy, but the thoughts circled in his head like buzzards, occasionally interrupted by wife and children who complained that his mind was not present at the table. What if his

She rapidly chewed it, her face pouting and puckering as her jaws grated against each other. Soon her mouth filled with juice, rolling between her cheeks like water inside the hull of a rocking boat. She squirted the red liquid into a spittoon under the bed.

Ugh! The middle-aged man shuddered in disgust as he thought that the leaf-eating, juice-squirting creature was his wife, who was meant to be the jewel of his heart. But he knew it would be the best time of the day to talk to her, when

The husband was not convinced with what he heard. So he prodded again telling the wife in straight words that her obesity and habit of chewing betel leaves bothered him a lot. His heart cringed when he said it, as though all its blood was abruptly withdrawn. But then he overcame with a sense of relief; the festering wound inside him healed all too sudden.

The wife looked puzzled and angry. She said everything was pulled by the sardonic string with which destiny directed the motions of its puppets. If she turned hefty and chewed betel leaf, which disgusted her husband, she never complained that he snored at night, and a maddening miasma of the woods drifted from his armpit while the rumble of wind in his belly kept her awake night after night.

In *The Summing Up*, Somerset Maugham said that truth, beauty, and goodness gave man the illusion that through them he could escape from human bondage. The middle-aged man realised that both he and his wife had spoken the truth on this Friday, and they had warned each other that beauty was no longer the best part of their marriage.

Only goodness, he said to himself, could keep this marriage and he closed his eyes to think of it until next Friday. Meanwhile, the wife was snoring hard, bringing into the room the sound effect of an engine boat running in the shallow waters.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

On the way home, he thought of a character in Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, who was dismayed by the absolute futility of life around him, but determined that his own life should have significance. The irony of life, the middle-aged man concluded during the bumpy ride to his house, was how each person failed to see that his own life could not have any meaning when the long line of lives before him had gone futile and wasted.

wife again, who was still sitting on the bed, massaging her scalp with scented oil. She frowned at him and asked him to hurry up before others took away fresh fish and vegetables from the market.

In the market, he perfunctorily bargained for all his purchases as he mostly thought of his wife. This woman has been the Spinozan dilemma of his life, which forced him to follow a destructive course even while he had recognised a better one. How this woman once romantically and sexually attracted him like a siren! How she removed him from everything he once coveted in life, his parents, hobbies, friends, food

about him, he asked himself while waiting for a rickshaw. Is she also tired of him, of his sagging muscle, droopy skin, falling hairs and the callous wind growling day and night in his decrepit bowels? But then he watches his weight, regularly shaves his face, dyes his hairs, tastefully dresses, and sprays himself with colognes and deodorants to kill odour. He gurgles with mouthwash at least three times a day, and carries peppermint in his pocket even to the fish market.

On the way home, he thought of a character in Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, who was dismayed by the absolute futility of life

wife was equally disenchanted with him, he worried as the family passed rice pudding around the table for desserts. He drank a glass of cold water, and belched and burped to the horror of his wife and daughter. The son came to his rescue by saying that the sounds they heard were the ecstatic voice of a contented stomach.

After lunch, his wife sat on the bed with her tray of betel leaves, and fixed herself a treat with many ingredients. She picked up the folded leaf between her thumb and index finger and squished it into her mouth as her sinking teeth made crunchy noise crushing down on it.

her mind was inebriated with the bliss of tobacco chips she had put inside her betel leaf, mixed together with the drowsiness of siesta.

He moved closer to his wife, while she cautioned him not to fancy anything wicked. He copied the opportunity like an adroit fielder, and acerbically threw the question at her whether it was because he no longer looked young. The wife lay on her back, her mouth still under the inertia of chewing, and said with the flourish of a yawn that look didn't matter to her. A marriage couldn't endure on the faces alone unless the hearts agreed to the tune of love.

OPINION

Crisis over a portrait

ZIAUDDIN M. CHOUDHURY

THE inevitable is about to happen. The revisionist attack on the legacy of Bangladesh has begun. It started with wiping out the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from school textbooks as the founder of Bangladesh. This is now to be followed with a legislative move by a member of the ruling coalition to remove his image from all public buildings which was put up first by another ill-conceived legislation by the previous government. Newton's law is in full motion.

It was sad enough reflection on a nation that mounting the image of its founding father in public buildings had to be legislated. But it is sadder still to find that after more than thirty years of its birth, there are people in the country who are in self-denial over its founder. It is also ironic that the party claiming to carry the legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is unwittingly aiding this denial process

by its impulsive decision to resign en masse from the parliament.

Madness is met with madness. An act of complete lack of political sagacity is matched by an equally inane response of complete lack of responsibility.

Perhaps no other nation has quibbled over its past, its legacies, and above all its founders as we have. The closest to look are India and Pakistan. Gandhi had his share of detractors one of whom was angry enough to kill him. But his detractors never had any influence either on his image or his stature. True, Gandhi was a non-partisan colossus, but Jinnah of Pakistan was not. Jinnah's party, the Muslim League, was ripped asunder within ten years of his death, beaten out of shape, and in last fifty had gone through several incarnations.

At least twice in Pakistan's history of democratic elections, Jinnah's party was defeated. Yet, Jinnah was never identified simply

Gandhi had his share of detractors one of whom was angry enough to kill him. But his detractors never had any influence either on his image or his stature. At least twice in Pakistan's history of democratic elections, Jinnah's party was defeated. Yet, Jinnah was never identified simply as a Muslim Leaguer. He always remained the founding father of the nation. Kamal Atatürk is still revered as the deliverer of modern Turkey even after eighty years of political change and turmoil. Ho Chi Minh is venerated now and will remain to be venerated in his country by generations to come for what he did for his country. Only in Bangladesh that we have so much anguish in recognizing those who brought us into existence; those who made us who we are today.

Explanations for this self-annihilating behaviour of our political leadership are not far to seek. The seeds can be found in the utter lack of respect that our political leadership has shown to each other at any given time, in a political agenda based on perpetuating narrow self-interests, in actions guided by jealousies, and in the use of political office to settle personal scores. The leaders of the two major political parties see themselves

more as flag bearers of their own parties than as nation builders. To them it is more important to undermine the contributions to the nation of the opposing party's founder than to have a positive work agenda that builds on these contributions and move the nation ahead. Therefore, a deliverer of the message of independence becomes more important than those who laid down their lives for independence itself.

Legislation becomes necessary to post the founding father's portrait

on the walls of public offices. A counter legislation becomes mandatory to bring the portrait down even only to settle a personal score.

Is there some hope for sanity? Not until our political leadership shows some maturity and greater statesmanship in handling our national affairs. The country is mired in a myriad of economic woes. Our governance is in such low ebb that our development partners have put change of the current state of affairs as a prior condition for future assis-

stance. Yet our parliamentarians are busier at legislating on whose portrait we should or should not have in public buildings than at solving other issues of greater national priority.

They are intent on giving more focus on the past misdeeds of the previous government than looking forward and having a workable agenda toward building a better future.

Lamentably the opposition is also occupied with a myopic vision of its role and responsibility. It's decision to resign from the parliament to protest the counter legislation on Bangabandhu's portrait only betrays its disrespect for the political system of parliamentary democracy that the party's founders dreamt of. The party never joined the new parliament. But if there was any opportunity time for the party to join the parliament it is now. If it really believed in the founder and in his dreams, it ought to ask its parlia-

mentarians to assemble in the house now and raise their voices in support of the man whose banner they so vociferously claim they are carrying. There could not be a fitter tribute to the founding father than a return of the members of his party to the parliament to fight for democracy. The fight is in the parliament, and not in the streets and back alleys.

Mark Twain once said, "It is better to deserve honours and not have them than to have them and not deserve them". We wish if only our political leadership adhered to this famous statement. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman already has his place in history. He deserved it, and the world has given this recognition to him. To have his portrait in a public building through legislation is something he may not need.

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