

Manpower export: Our golden goose is sick

ABDUL ALIM

OF late, there is a growing awareness among 'think-tanks' of society to assign due importance to manpower export, hitherto denied to this Golden Goose of our economy. The backlash of the dwindling foreign currency reserve may have stirred this concern. More so, as the donor agencies have joined the team to prod the issue of streamlining development of this sector and reining in diverted remittances. May be these are good omens for the country, as our governments are more responsive to prodding by foreign donors. It is hard to believe that finance ministers avoid highlighting role of this sector in their budget speeches, let alone making any budget provision for its development. We choose to forget that total remittances by our expatriates are much higher than the combined flow of foreign aid disbursement and foreign direct investment. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) in its Quarterly Economic Update for December, 2001 report emphasized 'taking institutional initiatives to increase export of manpower and divert remittances from illegal channels to official channels' (The Daily Star, 18th January, 02). By culture, we wake up only when emergency knocks. If the newspapers are correct in what they say, we don't have even enough reserve of foreign currency to drag us for next three months!

This sector is suffering and needs major reform measures and visionary steps to reclaim its true role as the main economic engine

for development. The most formidable problem manpower sector faces today is the extremely unhealthy and unethical competition among the recruiting agents. About 99 per cent recruiting agents do their marketing in Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, through Bangladeshi worker-turned-subagents/middlemen. These middlemen procure manpower demand, rather negotiate/quote for it at very high cost from employers or employers' agents. They pay in cash for such demand either to employer or his agent. In the past, the scenario was the other way round. It was the employer who used to pay service charges to the recruiting agent for locating and sending the workers. In some cases, they used to pay for passage/air ticket too. The scenario is

Bangladesh. The documents change hands once the sub-agent receives money from recruiting agent through Hundi. The crux of the problem is that such middlemen operating in Middle East are too many.

Pressure of 1.50 crore people striving to go abroad on employment against a supply of three lac jobs every year leaves little choice for the incumbent recruits but to pay the price demanded by the recruiting agent. The recruiting agents virtually face no problem in selling a visa at whatever price they ask. On the other end, the middlemen operating there does not face any problem too as many eager principals are awaiting back home to take the demand at any cost. Currently purchasing cost of visa of salary range SR 300 to 400 (equivalent to

side of the problem is sliding salary scale. Our agents are compromising lower and lower salary for workers and offering higher and higher price for visa. Bangladesh happens to be the supplier of cheapest labour force in the world with the irony that we are champion in bidding highest price for visa, be it for skilled or unskilled workers. Inexplicably, the situation is not same with other labour exporting countries of the sub-continent. A Nepali recruiting agent never pays more than SR 1200 for a worker to Saudi employer/agent. A Pakistani never exceeds SR 2000 and an Indian remains well within SR 3000. Why is the case so different with us? Why are we not united on this issue or we are less patriot than our neighbours? Why our concern for workers' welfare is extinct? Or is it because we have no options other

procurement or supply of manpower can jeopardize the trade to non-returnable situation. Past experience in such effort through BOESL is pointer enough. The only choice is to find a pragmatic and compulsive system to restrain the migration cost to viable limits, without killing the drive of private enterprise.

Essence of the solution lies in making the role of middlemen redundant. One of the systems that can be implemented is to control it by a computer data bank. In addition to providing access of recruiting agents to instant information on availability of skilled and unskilled workers, the databank can be so designed to control visa purchasing by controlling selling price of visa to the workers. Recruiting agents will be compelled to recruit only from listed candidates of data bank. For example, rules can be formulated on salary slabs. Say, for a salary range of SR 350 to 400 per month, the price to be paid to employer/foreign agent must not exceed SR 2000. In that case, assessing the total cost involved and a profit margin for the agent, selling price of the visa can be fixed at, say Tk. 65,000. Likewise, higher the salary, higher can be the purchasing price. The controlling compulsions for the agent will be:

(a) that he has to recruit from only the list of workers provided by the databank; in such case there will be no pre-selection and prior interaction with incumbent recruits; (b) that he will get his payments at stages from the Payment Cell of databank; there will be no transaction of worker with the recruiting agent. Once the recruiting agent is confirmed that he can sell visa only through databank and at a price fixed by a system, he will never purchase visa at higher cost. This is only a broad outline. Lot of discussion, debate, general meetings of recruiting agents and seminars with all concerned must be held before we can arrive at a consensus mechanism. There is no point in enriching the employer by offering higher and higher price for visa. It's a never-ending vicious circle.

How to regulate control valves with ease and without harassment? What procedures to follow for payment from workers, to recruiting agents, etc.? How to constitute the control cell? Who or what bodies should represent the cell? Its terms of reference? These are but a few of the questions that need to be answered before designing the system. We must ensure that the system is fool-proof and there is no leakage through which a worker may be overtaxed. We also must take extreme care that imposition of such regulation does not affect this sensitive trade.

If we can implement Data Bank to control pricing of manpower export, it will be huge leap forward for this sector. Complete transparency in the trade will prevail. There will be no disgruntled worker, and people can go abroad at reasonable and viable cost. Unhealthy competition among recruiting agents will minimize. We forget one basic fact that foreign employers need workers as badly as we need to supply them. So, there will be no effect on manpower export due to reduced purchasing price. Touts and middleman will be eliminated. Every recruiting agent will agree that the main beneficiary of all his activities is employer. He not only gets the cheapest labour in the world but also earns huge money just by doing the favour of employing a poor man. We have no choice but to unite and find out a pragmatic solution.

Abdul Alim is Joint Secretary General, BAIRA

Lest we forget

Justice Murshed: A man with an inspired mission

MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

HISTORY becomes eloquent about the men she loves. The frosty barriers of time melt down to reveal the many splendoured colours of rainbow in warm radiance as the chronicles are related to men and women who boldly faced their restless times and yet retained their composure and visions that transcended their own age. Syed Mahbub Murshed was among them.

Like those of his generation and the one that followed them in the south Asian sub-continent, Murshed lived courageously under three flags. Born as a British subject, he lived to work for and saw the departure of British colonial rule from the sub-continent. As a citizen of the post 1947 two part state of Pakistan he fought, with quiet dignity to establish, protect and preserve the inalienable rights of the Bengali citizens of Pakistan even as he rose, by diligence and merit, to the high position of the Chief Justice of the High Court of erstwhile East Pakistan during the sixties.

During the post liberation period in sovereign Bangladesh of the seventies, he strived on for ensuring justice, human rights, democracy and national harmony. Retirement and failing health could not deter him from his relentless struggle for ensuring justice and equity in the context of a liberal, democratic society. In the final analysis, Chief Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed (1911-1979), an avowed spiritual and moral disciple of John Stuart Mill, was a democrat. As he himself stated in elegant simplicity:

"In my early youth, I was a Pan Islamist. I later became a socialist, until recently I used to consider myself to be a social democrat. Nowadays I think of myself as (merely) a democrat..... a democrat, pure and simple" (The Pakistan Monitor, September 1970).

The journey was not easy. Syed Mahbub Murshed's generation of Muslim Bengalis was confronted with daunting challenges. It grew to youth not only under demeaning foreign colonial rule but in a context of sharpening communal antipathy in a reawakened sub-continent straining to break free of British imperial control.

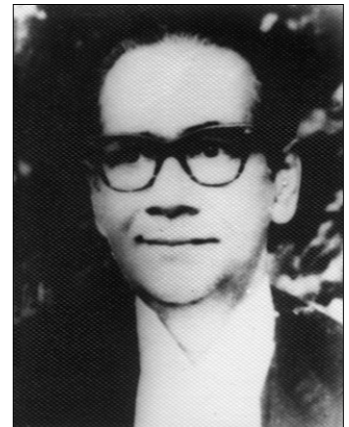
Scion of an aristocratic Muslim Bengali family, a brilliant student who entered the legal profession in the mid-thirties and was called to the Bar in England by the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn in 1937; he responded to the challenges of his time with a clear head and conscience. It was a mission fraught with countless difficulties. By the forties, the Muslim separatist movement that began humbly in 1906 under the leadership of the All India Muslim League, had gained tremendous momentum.

The failure of the then sub-continent nationalist platform -- the Congress -- to convince the leading Muslims of its secular character led to emergence of what could be called 'Muslim nationalism' and the Muslim League exploited it to the hilt. The liberal elements among the leading Muslim Bengalis tried their best to find a practical way out. Syed Mahbub Murshed was a young activist of this group. Through the All India Muslim Majlis formed during mid-forties, Murshed tried to bridge the Hindu-Muslim political chasm and challenge the dominance of the All India Muslim League. The Majlis said that the Muslims should ask for 'Pakistan' only if it became an unavoidable necessity (Dr Shela Sen. "Muslim Politics").

As the time for the final parting of ways drew near, Murshed joined those who enthusiastically supported the 'Cabinet Mission' plan of 1946 in its last ditch effort to keep the sub-continent together. The Cabinet Mission led by Sir Stafford Cripps proposed a near confederal sub-continent with autonomous Muslim majority groups of provinces in north-west and east of undivided

India and a Hindu majority group in the rest. It did not work.

When the partition of the South Asian sub-continent (United India) seemed inevitable during early 1947, a group of Muslim Bengalis led by late Abul Hashim, persuaded the then Premier of Bengal, H S Suhrawardy, to start negotiations with leaders of Bengal Congress, Sarat Bose (brother of the legendary South Asian nationalist leader Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose) and Kiran Shankar Roy to explore the possibility of a sovereign independent Bengal, out side both post-British Raj India and Pakistan, Syed Mahbub Murshed and his father-in-law AKM Zakaria, a Congressite and Mayor of Calcutta in 1936 actively participated in these pro-



Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed Yesterday was his anniversary of death

cesses which were defeated because of intransigence of the Congress leaders, Nehru and Patel. The dream that Murshed shared with many who wanted to keep Bengal intact even in the divisive days of 1947 was not to be realised. The "Congress decided upon the partition of Bengal which their forbears so bitterly opposed" (Hodson, The Great Divide P. 275). Consequently East Bengal (today's Bangladesh) became one of the five provinces of Pakistan in August 1947. Separated by a thousand miles of hostile Indian territory from its western half, East Pakistan (East Bengal) appeared a "manifest proof of the absurdity" that pre-1971 Pakistan was.

As a relatively young member of the Dhaka High Court Bar, Syed Mahbub Murshed was drawn into the Language Movement of East Bengal. He thus participated effectively in the successful process spearheaded by the Bengali youth to gain recognition for Bangla as one of the two state languages of pre-1971 Pakistan.

He also participated actively in the more comprehensive and long-term process of ensuring the political and economic rights of the Bengalis in Pakistan through a radical transformation of political and economic power within the state. Along with Late Abul Mansur Ahmad, noted political leader, thinker and writer, who served in the fifties as a central cabinet Minister of Pakistan, Murshed helped draft in 1954 the 21-point manifesto for the autonomy of East Bengal. The 21-point programme constituted platform of the United Front coalition of the autonomist Bengali political forces of Pakistan which routed the ruling Muslim League in the 1954 provincial elections.

Despite the restlessness of his time, Murshed was faithful to the tectonic trends of time. That loyalty to profound principles and his benighted people remained intact during his exacting and splendid years in the bench of the Dhaka High Court (1955 -- November 16, 1967). Even after the imposition of Martial Law in Pakistan in 1958, Justice Murshed worked coolly and resolutely to ensure the dispensation of justice according to the rule of law.

As Chief Justice of erstwhile East Pakistan (1964-67), Murshed faced his times with the raw courage of a

romantic idealist. That was the heyday of a successful military dictator, Ayub Khan. His rule was garnished by apparently constitutional trappings. The boldness of Murshed's judgements during these days became legends of judicial history. These judgements encompassed the so-called Minister's case (which made President Ayub Khan change the constitutional provisions relating to Ministers), the Mahmood case, the Dhaka University Convocation (1962) case and the Basic Democracies case. These proved that his commitment and loyalty to the rule of law was unflinching. He realised the essence of justice; that laws were for human beings and not vice versa. That realisation of the timeless truth antedated and followed his years in the elevated height of the bench of the High and Supreme Courts.

He remained faithful to life and, therefore, its essence, human beings. In the final analysis, Syed Mahbub Murshed was a people's man. That was why even as early as 1961 when it was neither convenient nor fashionable, he took the lead in organising the centenary of the birth of the Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. He steadfastly stood by the essential cause of the people. He was at once an epitome of the best and noblest of the people to whom, as a constituent unit, he was unflinchingly loyal. That was why even after his resignation as the Chief Justice of erstwhile East Pakistan he played an active and leading role in the mass uprising against autocracy and forcefully advocated the case for meaningfully establishing Bangladeshi rights at the Round Table Conference convened by the Pakistan dictator Ayub Khan during the fag end of his regime.

In post liberation Bangladesh he was instrumental to projecting the voice of reason and justice until his demise in 1979. After the emergence of Bangladesh he was the first prominent public figure who pleaded for a general amnesty for all political prisoners. He also urged the then government to start immediate negotiations for the repatriation of Bengalis stranded in Pakistan since December 1971.

Syed Mahbub Murshed was a romantic realist. He lived with his times and yet never failed to link beyond the transitory and superficial elements of contemporary years, however tumultuous and exacting those might have been. That was why along with H S Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim he fought a seemingly losing battle to keep Bengal united and preserve the historic separateness of the Bengali people.

Syed Mahbub Murshed was certainly the epitome of a nationalist citizen of Bangladesh. He was more. He was at once a participant in and observer and analyst of life as it was lived during his times. He was at ease with several languages, besides his mother tongue Bangla, including English, Urdu, Persian and Arabic. A gifted writer, he wrote on cultural and social themes with elegance. I had the privilege of publishing, as editor of the Dhaka English monthly Concept, several of his thought-provoking and superbly written articles during 1964-67. Exacting responsibilities of the top position in the High Court could not prevent him from sparing a few moments for us, Mr Mosharrif Hossain, Mr Zakuddin Ahmed (the publisher and managing editor of Concept) and myself, whenever we went to see him and collect those writings. We were all younger then and I was a fresh teacher of the Dhaka University. Yet, he treated us as equals with whom he shared some of his fondest thoughts and dreams and depressing frustrations.

Beautiful dreams, like, good human beings such as Syed Mahbub Murshed, do not appear in vain. A noble dream inspires humanity to strive to be humane. So do the life and work of men like Syed Mahbub Murshed.

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reversed not only for Bangladesh but also for other labour exporting countries. Now we pay and also supply cheap labour. Our self-employed sub-agents procure and sell demands to recruiting agents in

Tk. 4500 to 6000) has gone up to SR 6,000 to 6,500 (equivalent to Tk. 90,000 to 97,500). Add to this the cost of air-ticket and other incidentals plus a profit for the recruiting agent and the ultimate price paid by the worker is pushed to Tk. 1.30 to 1.40 lacs. One important fact is that actual profit of recruiting agent remains as before, the same profit they used to get in eighties when the cost of visa was one-fifth of today's.

In fact price enhancement by competition is immensely benefiting the employer or his agent. Nowadays, many Saudi contractors take into consideration expected revenue from sale of visa while quoting for government jobs. Disregard of ethical business norms and cut throat competition among sub-agents are all pervading. This has earned a bad name for the trade. The worker becomes desperate when he finds that his expectations are not matching the cost he paid for the job. Such disgruntled worker creates problems for the host country. In addition to job-hopping he creates social problems. The situation is alarming! Malaysia has already stopped issuance of visa on Bangladesh primarily for this reason. No sooner a new market is opened it is spotted by competition among recruiting agents or rather the worker-turned-middlemen, vying with each other to procure business at any cost. The scenario is no different in Korea, where very limited number of renowned agents are allowed to operate, presumably in an orderly manner. But price an expatriate paying to go there is not less than Tk. 3 lacs! The other dark

than marketing in Middle East and they have other markets to fall back upon? We are handing over tons of money to foreigners and also the worker with lowest salary in the world!

Fortunately awareness has dawned on our agents. In a recent meet of BAIRA in a local hotel welcoming the new State Minister for Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment Ministry, almost all the speakers voiced their concern. Unless high purchasing cost of visa is controlled and brought into a cohesive ethical norms and effective compulsions imposed, there is no scope for sustainable growth of manpower sector. Annoyed governments of labour importing countries may choose to close import from Bangladesh, as happened in Malaysia. Recruiting agents have to be brought under a transparent system. Instances are aplenty where a worker could not even retrieve the capital he invested in working abroad. Frustrated workers create social problems, resort to job-hopping, do unauthorized odd jobs, and ultimately end up getting caught by police and put in jail or deported back. The issue is a vast subject and needs introspection, policy formulation, broad based debates, scrutiny/study of systems followed by neighboring countries, political and bureaucratic will with the ultimate aim to streamline growth of the sector without jeopardizing it by unwarranted check valves. Government must only work as facilitator of both promotion and regulation. Any attempt at direct involvement of government in



All health information to keep you up to date

Around the world

Surprises are good!

American researchers have discovered that, surprisingly, humans like being surprised.

Certain areas of the brain have been identified as 'pleasure centres' and it is possible to measure activity in these parts of the brain.

In the experiment, volunteers had pleasant tasting substances squirted in to the mouths. For some this was done according to a predictable sequence and for others what came next was totally unexpected.

The study showed that the pleasure centres did not respond equally to pleasant substances, but reacted more strongly when the pleasure arrived unexpectedly.

Unfortunately the study did not examine the response to unpleasant experiences. But it does show that surprises, when they are nice surprises, are good for us.

Regular meals can help prevent premature births

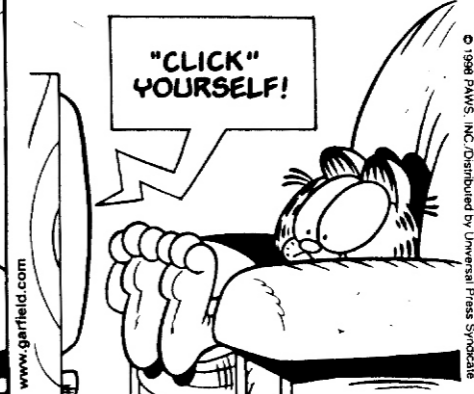
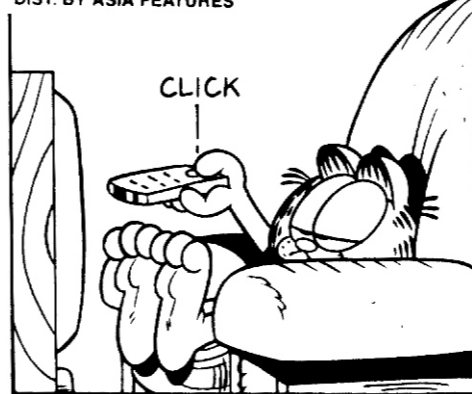
It is recommended that pregnant women eat regular meals. Three meals a day plus two or more snacks is ideal, according to some experts.

In a study of more than 2,000 pregnant women in USA, 11 per cent of those who followed this advice went into labour earlier than expected. But for those who ate less frequently the figures were much higher. In women show only ate one meal a day the premature birth rate was 19 per cent. A frequent small amount of food appears to be the best policy for pregnant mums.

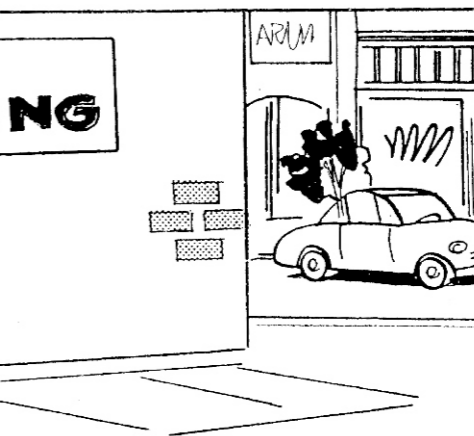
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TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera