

Lest we forget

On the third anniversary of death of one of our celebrated poets and a renowned national and international civil servant, AZM Obaidullah Khan, we recall his valued association as an esteemed columnist. In paying our homage we reproduce one of his weekly columns, published under his rubric 'Do I Dare' in The Daily Star on October 17, 1997.

They dare to dream and dare to act

AZM OBAIDULLAH KHAN

I grow old I grow old
I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled...
Do I dare to part my hair behind
Do I dare!

I never dared except for once. I was a mature seventeen then. Not me alone, but with my peer groups. Our elders advised caution. We said 'No'. Our language is our birthright and our culture. We spoke truth to power and power succumbed.

Seventeen, perhaps, is a magic age. Twenty-seven years back, it was the seventeen-year olds who flaunted death and agony in their face. They came from the cities and from the countryside. Together they won the freedom for their people to shape their own lives and the country themselves.

Power operates at various sites. A large number of autonomous darings or should I say, movements from below are required to transform the power-relations. An Asian minister of agriculture, herself a political and social activist once told me about the powerlessness of the peasant farmers and the marginalised women in rural Bangladesh. "Subvert authoritarian male ego at home, workplace and beyond," she said. "Subvert downward directed power at strategic sites where it impinges on the creative freedom of the farming communities and the disadvantaged. Subvert reductionist science alienated from social practice. Women and peasant farmers are helpless individually. Organised, they are empowered. They can then stand up to the establishment -- political, bureaucratic or pedagogic. And dependence is transformed into collective self-reliance."

As I was listening to the minister, I recalled what a grandfather peasant farmer told me in China long time ago. "We, the peasants, are like cherry-flowers. Red and beautiful to look at. But one gust of wind we are scattered about. If we get together in a bundle like the roots of a tree, come hail or storm, we shall overcome."

Professor Yunus, who dared to turn the banking system on its head, has proved it not only for the resource poor women in the countryside of Bangladesh but elsewhere. Peer-groups of the disadvantaged

have got together and claimed their fundamental right of access to credit. Today, they are the majority shareholders of the Grameen Bank. Power-relations are changing not only within their homes, but also in the community and the sophisticated banking institution.

In a similar vein, women farmers in Tangail and in the villages of Western Java, Jogjakarta, and Madras are standing up to the powerful pesticide-lobby and the conventional green-revolution wisdom. They are saying 'No' to chemicals and asserting community rights over seed-selection, preservation and germ-plasm conservation.

Ibu Sudaryanti is 45 years old and a mother of four children. She and her

getting together in their own field school, farmers were very dependent on pesticides dealers and government officials. If there are a few pests in the field, these farmers run to agriculture officers for help and spray pesticides. Now, they are able to think for themselves. They make their own observations and discoveries. They take their decisions and act on their own."

Another anecdote from Tonle Bate, a village approximately 35km from Phnom Penh: It was April, 1996. Farmers there were conducting their own field-school for growing poison-free rice. The minister for agriculture came to visit.

After his formal speech he sat down on the ground with farmers

Scientists: "Why do you ask?"

Farmers: "Because the short-horned grasshopper only eats small amounts of rice leaf. And the long-horn grasshopper, which is more common, eats the egg masses of stem-borers. Why should we kill them?"

Farmers learn to work with nature. They become experts. As a farmer-researcher in Kalensari village in Western Java told me, "Guests come to visit and learn about our story. I tell them we hold doctorates in rice-production."

Coming back to our neighbouring country, let me recount the story of a day in the life of Sreemati Radha, a one acre farmer in the village of Melgoltivakkam in Madras.

hills per pair.

A nearby group is observing the spider population while yet another is carrying out defoliation experiment against leaf-folders.

By 12:00 noon, the field work is over. Radha and her friends clean their feet in the water-channel and come to the makeshift discussion space, open on all sides with palm thatch on top. They squat on the mats covering the mud floor. One draws the sample plant. Another one looks at the insects she has collected through a magnifying glass and draws the same. Her little son sits beside her carrying the crayons she will use for colouring the insect. Another one struggles with the pentel pen to write the brief analysis



different parts of the body. The other participants agree. They also point out that because of spraying, mud-fish, cat-fish and frogs have disappeared from the rice fields, thus making pest-resurgence possible.

The women in Smt Radha's village have formed their own self-help group. Empowered by group-solidarity, they have eradicated alcohol abuse from the village.

From the woman-activist in Madras to 10-11 year olds in a rural primary school in Chaudhagram, Comilla. Led by the headmaster, they spend a day in the week wading happily through the paddy-fields of their parents and elders.

Knee-deep in mud, they observe the health of the plant and the presence of different insects. They collect specimens and wonder why nature is the way it is. Field trip over, they go back to the classroom. They draw up eco-system diagram and there are colourful insect art-works. The insect-zoos which they have put together themselves provide the basis for conducting hands-on experiments. They determine which of the insects are predators and parasites of rice-pests. They are intrigued with the infinite subtleties of interaction in Nature. They need to be cared for, cherished and encouraged. But encouragement is not enough. Science in field-schools provide them with the essential tools to think with.

And that brings me to the end of my story. I recall a passage from Carl Sagan's book, "Science in a Demon-haunted World."

"Among the Kung San hunter gatherers of the Kalahari desert," writes Carl Sagan, "when two men... would begin to argue the women would reach for their poison-arrows to put the weapons out of harm's way." And he wonders whether in our world today, "the women -- and the children -- will put the poison arrows out of harm's way."

Perhaps they will. Because they dare to dream and dare to act.

High cost of learning materials deter education

The question has been raised that it is no longer possible for the government to subsidise the cost of education. None is going to deny that there is a point in this policy. But what about the damage it is going to do to the national goal of spreading education?... If we really think that education must be assigned priority we must show this by our action.

DR M ASHRAF ALI

THE fact that we suffer from contradictions of many types is clear from the state policy of increasing opportunities for education in the country on the one hand, while raising prices of learning materials on the other, particularly of writing paper which is an essential item for learning.

The importance of paper, ink and pencils in aiding learning cannot be overemphasised. While we speak of all out effort for increasing enrolment and universalization of primary education in the rural areas, we conveniently forget to create conditions which might help achieve the stated objectives. Any one can say that the present price of papers, pencils and ink and other learning materials is working as a deterrent against the increase of enrolment in the rural primary schools and it is an easy guess that universal primary education is going to remain a far cry for a long time to come not to speak of achieving it within foreseeable future.

It is a matter of great regret that our planners fail to comprehend how the poverty stricken people in the villages with the lowest per capita income in the world can manage to pay for the education of their children. Already 24 small sheets of white paper sell at Tk 16, the same number of low quality newsprint sheets sell for Tk 10, a wood pencil costs Tk five a piece, a local made pot of ink sells at Tk 16. Add to this the cost of textbooks and the situation will be clear regarding what we profess and what we practice. It is not difficult to realise why it is impossible for a day-labourer earning less than Tk 50 a day to send his children to school. Unless something is done about the cost of schooling for the poor man of the country, the universalisation of primary education is going to remain a pious wish never to be attained. But there is no denying that at least education upto the primary level for all citizens is very vital for our survival as a nation.

While no one will deny the benefits of free enterprise as an economic practice, it should not be used with impunity. In this case, the example of recent local bodies election may be mentioned. Millions of taka worth of paper is used in preparing posters for electioneering. The sudden leap for demand of paper has increased the price of paper substantially causing hardship to the low income group.

While no one will deny the importance of publicity and electioneering to uphold the practice of democracy, it is at the same time to be mooted whether we should squander our meagre resources for election campaigning while adequate amount of paper is not available at reasonable price for our school children who need them for learning purposes. When commodities are not abundantly available for both the purposes, we have to decide which one is more vital for us in

the long run for the sake of the future for the country. The decision, no doubt, is not an easy one. However, one should keep in mind the question of priority and national interest and act accordingly.

So much about the wastage of paper. How about the availability of other learning materials like writing instruments as pencils, pen and ink which are essential learning aids besides the textbook? It has already been mentioned that their price is also very exorbitant. One can now easily surmise how much costly it is for the child of a poor villager to have and education.

It is surprising that we talk of universal enrolment for the augmentation of primary education and at the same time we cannot ensure the availability of the learning materials at a reasonable price which the poor parents can afford.

Now the question of textbook prices may be raised. One may recall that immediately after liberation, the prices of primary and secondary school textbooks were substantially reduced for the justified reason to give relief to the poor parents. However, due to reasons known only to the authorities concerned, the prices of textbooks have been increased five to ten times from that of the post liberation period.

The question has been raised that it is no longer possible for the government to subsidise the cost of education. None is going to deny that there is a point in this policy. But what about the damage it is going to do to the national goal of spreading education?

While we are subsidising higher education where sons and daughters of the affluent class are enrolled, there cannot be any valid argument for not subsidising the cost of primary education which is one of the fundamental rights of a citizen.

If we really think that education must be assigned priority we must show this by our action. I suggest, that for the spread and progress of primary education, the following steps should be taken for making available essential learning materials to the children of poor parents in the rural schools.

Textbooks should be supplied to the poor pupils free of cost depending on the income of their parents.

Fair price shops should be opened on the school premises for supply of writing papers, pencils, pens and ink.

Those who are extremely poor, they should be supplied these materials free of cost. Obviously, implementation of these steps is going to cost the government heavily, but the ultimate benefit that will be gained by making a literate nation with functional knowledge will offset the initial investment in education in manifold returns.

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Regime change in Haiti

A.H. JAFFOR ULLAH writes from New Orleans, USA

PERHAPS everyone on the earth knows by now that Mr. George W. Bush is very big on regime change. Oh, yes! He removed both Mullah Omar and Saddam from the catbird seat. The third one he has engineered is that of Haiti's Aristide. In his zeal to straighten out some democracies, Mr. Bush hastened the departure of President Aristide. The trouble, however, is that Aristide was an elected president who wanted to bring reform to Haiti. Mr. Bush did not want to help Aristide to achieve such a noble goal. Talk about Bush's fairness!

The island nation of Haiti, which is located about 140 miles from the eastern edge of Cuba in the Caribbean Sea, has been in the news since mid-February 2004. As political violence escalated in Haiti, the elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, left Port-au-Prince on February 29 aboard a US-chartered airplane bound for the Central African Republic. To justify the departure of Aristide, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Peter DeShazo told the reporters, "The chaos in Haiti is obviously not the work of the US government. This was the direct result of president Aristide having armed and empowered gangs and groups of thugs."

However, Aristide later said from his exile that he had no desire to leave Haiti and he was the victim of a political kidnapping by the US military, and he blamed the US for the chaos that had erupted in Haiti after his departure. The US however denies these allegations. It is a mystery as to why Mr. George W. Bush did not support President Aristide when President Bill Clinton went out of his way to reinstate President Aristide to power in 1994. Mr. Bush claims that he is a champion of democracy and to prove his point he even ordered soldiers to Iraq a year ago in late March 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein, who he claims to be a despot. Mr. Bush's political philosophy clashed in Haiti. After all, President Aristide was elected democratically in Haiti.

President Aristide had to dismantle Haiti's corrupt military because he thought they would topple his government as the military had done in the recent past. But in the process, Aristide had given arms to his loyalists to maintain law and order. Some of these armed men, for whatever reasons, had joined the ex-military men who were hiding in the countryside and they finally challenged Aristide's authority. Mr. Bush should have supported Mr. Aristide in this conflict even though we knew that his policy to arm some civilians was a mistake of monumental proportion. Mr. Bush is yet to tell the world

the reason he favoured Aristide's forced exit from Haitian politics.

On March 11, 2004, we learned from a Jamaican official in Kingston that the ousted Haitian president Aristide would like to visit Jamaica, which is located only 140 miles to the south of Haiti. This news does not bode well for the US-backed newly appointed government of Haiti. Mr. Aristide has a huge following in Haiti who are considered a formidable political force in the country. This recent uprising in Haiti is the work of armed militia and ex-soldiers who have no broad public support. Notwithstanding

Sudaryanti explains. "Before

Haiti, the US marines occupied the country from 1915 to 1934. After the troops were withdrawn from Haiti, the islanders fought with the next-door nation, the Dominican Republic.

In September 1957, after considerable unrest and several provisional presidents, a native doctor by the name Francois Duvalier, who was a former US employee on a medical aid project, took control of Haiti. He promised to end domination by the mulatto elite and to bring political and economic power to the black masses. Violence continued, and, after an unsuccessful attempt

by October, but renewed military violence prevented the transition.

In 1994, President Clinton mobilised some twenty thousand American troops to Haiti to restore Aristide to power. Many Clinton haters in the Republican Party criticised this action of Bill Clinton. It was not fashionable then as it is now to do regime change in support of establishing democracy in other countries. Later, Aristide abolished the Haitian armed forces to bring stability to Haiti. However, the ex-army never did reintegrate to Haitian society. Many ex-army officers fled to the countryside and

seemed designed to help free Haiti from the logic of its own history. But the return to power of an elected President -- a priest who raised his voice on behalf of Haiti's legions of poor people -- simply put a mild, bespectacled face on the traditional way of running the country. Aristide always showed a tendency toward demagoguery, and the poor have fared at least as badly under him as under his predecessors, who ruled on behalf of the rich. Democracy depends in part on the political culture in which it grows, and Haiti's is poisoned."

As of March 11, 2004 I read news

By siding with armed rebels in Haiti, Mr. Bush showed his double standard for democracy. In case of Iraq, Mr. Bush opted for a regime change to bring democracy to Iraq. However, in Haiti, he did quite the opposite. Aristide may have made some mistakes by giving arms to his supporters, but that should not be the ground to punish him. After all, he was elected democratically in a fair election.

Mr. Bush's dislike for Aristide, the supporters of the deposed president will rally in Port-au-Prince and other cities. Therefore, Mr. Aristide's presence in Jamaica may cause some concern to the US and French governments who appointed Gerard Latortue, a Haitian who lives in Miami, Florida, to the position of Prime Minister of Haiti.

During the campaign for the White House this fall, Mr. Bush's opponent will surely ask him the reason for deposing Aristide. Aristide now openly says that the US army kidnapped him and put him on an airplane bound for the Central African Republic. Knowing the turbulent history of Haiti, one may predict that more is yet to come, and Mr. Bush's policy towards this impoverished nation is bound to fail. Aristide is no aristocrat and because of his humble background and popularity among slum dwellers, he is a force everyone in Haiti has to reckon with. Only time can tell whether Aristide will return to power one more time. Lest we forget, he was ousted by the military in 1990, but he returned by a popular demand. Mr. Clinton was there to help the leftist preacher to come to power in 1994.

To analyse what is happening in Haiti, one has to know the turbulent history of this island nation. Spaniards collectively named Haiti and the other nearby islands Hispaniola when Columbus first discovered them in 1492. Later, both the Spanish and French settlers controlled the eastern and western part of Hispaniola. In 1804, the islanders revolted against the French colonists and declared Haiti an independent nation. By the early twentieth century, the US had gained commercial privileges in Haiti. Because of the instability in

to overthrow Duvalier in July 1958, he organised a gang of violent adherents -- the Tontons Macoutes -- who terrorized the population. In 1964, Duvalier, also known as "Papa Doc," was in firm control in Haiti, and had himself elected president for life. Duvalier was a quintessential dictator who turned Haiti into a police state. Before his death, he designated his 19-year-old son Jean-Claude Duvalier, who was affectionately called "Baby Doc," as his successor and made him president for life in 1971.

Things improved a bit in Haiti during the 1970s and 80s, but political freedom was nowhere close. In fact, the secret police Tontons Macoutes (estimated at 15,000 men) were let loose to torture and kill Duvalier's opponents. A popular upsurge in Haiti brought down Duvalier's despotic regime in February 1986, and the deposed ruler left Haiti with US assistance for France. Haitians saw the military take control of the nation for the next four or seven years. In December 1990, a leftist Roman Catholic priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, contested in a free election and won the presidency by a landslide. Two months later in the parliamentary election, Aristide's supporters captured a majority of the seats. After barely 7 months in office, the military sacked Aristide via a coup. The Clinton Administration did not support the military coup and imposed a trade embargo. Thousands of Haitians attempted to flee their country in small boats bound for the US, but the US government insisted on returning the vast majority of the refugees to Haiti. The US, together with the UN and the Organisation of American States (OAS), sought to negotiate Aristide's return to the presidency. A peace agreement in July 1993 promised Aristide's return to power

to Dominican Republic to bide their time. Aristide was fearful that the newly created police force would not be strong enough to maintain law and order in Haiti. Thus, he created an armed militia loyal to him. Members of these gangs are known as chimeres, which means a fire-breathing monster as per Haitian legend. A section of the chimeres in a countryside started calling themselves the Cannibal Army. Aristide gave the Cannibal Army rifles to protect polling places in a Presidential election in 2000 in which no opposition candidates had contested. Once Aristide was reelected, the armed Cannibal Army moved on to new territories such as extortion, drug running, and terrorism the opposition.

In fall 2003, allegedly a supporter of Aristide killed one of the leaders of the Cannibal Army. This changed the entire scenario. The Cannibal Army instead of supporting President Aristide revolted against him and took up the name of the Artibonite Resistance Force. In the meantime, the members from the dark past -- death-squad leaders who just returned from Dominican Republic, joined the turnout militiamen. The ex-military men saw the opportunity to destroy their arch-enemy, President Aristide, and to seize power. The nation of Haiti had other problems as well. A near famine-like condition now exists in Haiti while the economy is stagnant due to an American-led block on loans.

In the aftermath of Aristide's forced departure from Haiti, the New Yorker published an article entitled "Ten Years After" written by George Packer. Mr. Packer wrote, "Politics in Haiti is an all-or-nothing contest. Personal relationships and power determine the winners. The American intervention in 1994

in the Internet that in Port-au-Prince more than 1,000 supporters of ex-president Aristide demonstrated in the capital city demanding Aristide's return. The demonstrators from the slum districts of

the capital were chanting, "Aristide must return" and "arrest (US ambassador) Jim Foley for kidnapping" and "Bush terrorist." Suffice it to say, violence may continue in Haiti because many of the Aristide's supporters have firearms.

By siding with armed rebels in Haiti, Mr. Bush showed his double standard for democracy. In case of Iraq, Mr. Bush opted for a regime change to bring democracy to Iraq. However, in Haiti, he did quite the opposite. Aristide may have made some mistakes by giving arms to his supporters, but that should not be the ground to punish him. After all, he was elected democratically in a fair election. As the news about Haitian debacle spreads worldwide, tales of Mr. Bush's erratic foreign policy unveil. It will be interesting to hear how Mr. Bush justifies the removal of a democratically elected president of a weak and meek nation. Sad part is, however, the immediate suffering the Haitians have to endure. Democracy should be given a chance to flourish in Haiti, a nation ruled by some despotic regimes for over half a century. Mr. Bush, in my opinion, erred a big time by facilitating the removal of Mr. Aristide from power.