

Not a sign of weakness

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By releasing Sheikh Hasina on "medical parole" and allowing her to go abroad for treatment, the government has done what is expected under the circumstances. Her release was based, as has been explained by the government, primarily on two considerations. One was humanitarian and the other was national interest.

She was a victim of the infamous grenade attack of August 21, 2004, that was aimed at killing her and her party workers when she was addressing a public meeting. The incident saw 26 of her party leaders and workers killed and several hundred injured. She narrowly escaped death, but her ears were seriously injured.

Whether anybody likes it or not, the fact is Sheikh Hasina is not only the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, but also, as president of Awami League, the undisputed leader of the oldest and largest political party of the country. By all accounts she is not only, at the moment, the most popular leader of the country, but also considered by many as the only leader who can steer the country out of the impasse.

The people at large wanted her release, albeit within a legal framework, on three considerations -- to

allow her to go to US for treatment of her ear, to pave the way for a successful dialogue and a free, fair and credible election, and because they think that the charges brought against her were not based on solid grounds. In any event, the charges were not enough to keep her behind bars. She should get bail and face trial in the normal court of law.

The government has, to its credit, listened to public demand and released her temporarily. It is also considering similar release of Begum Khaleda Zia for the sake of a meaningful election and smooth transfer of power to a truly elected democratic government. Begum Zia does not want to go abroad for treatment. She is not that ill. If the government still wants to send her abroad, it will be a mistake. It will give a wrong signal.

It is good to see that the caretaker government has at last been able to feel the pulse of the people and decided to take the political parties in confidence. That is why it has already released Sheikh Hasina on parole, sat with her to discuss issues of utmost national interest and is contemplating release of Begum Zia on similar considerations.

We are, however, concerned at the way Begum Zia is trying to negotiate her release. We hope that whatever the government decides to do it does keeping in mind the reality of the situation, without conceding to any demand that may



What next?

jeopardise its image or go against national interest.

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The decision of Awami League to join the dialogue and the scheduled local body election has cleared, to a great extent, the air of uncertainty that was looming large across the political horizon centering national election.

More importantly, it has, at least for the time being, helped in avoiding a head-on collision between the government and the major political parties on the issue of local body elections.

It must be borne in mind that Awami League was against holding local body elections before national election mainly on the following considerations:

Firstly, holding of local body elections was beyond the constitu-

tional mandate of the caretaker government.

Secondly, their experience of the two military governments in the past have for obvious reasons has created confusion about the intention of the present government to hold local body elections when their main responsibility was to hold the national election.

Thirdly, they did not want to see any issue raised that may hinder the progress towards holding the national election on time.

Still, if we go by their press briefings, they had to decide, rightly or wrongly, in favour of joining the local body election of August 4 mainly on the consideration that they were not prepared to be at loggerheads with the government at this moment, or give the government any chance to delay or postpone the national election either.

They are, however, still, and rightly so, opposed to holding of upazilla elections and continuance of emergency rule. It would be unwise on the part of the government to consider the latest shift of position of Awami League as a sign of weakness.

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TRIBUTE

The life of Govindo Chandra Dev

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN Govindo Chandra Dev was shot and bayoneted to death in the early hours of March 26, 1971, by the soldiers of the Pakistan army, it marked the end of one of the foremost intellectuals of the Indian subcontinent. For Dev was a scholar beyond measure; and beyond measure too was the personality that defined his being. A thinker in the extreme, he was yet an individual who drew from other individuals the feeling that he was accessible. There was little that was hard to fathom about him. Those who knew him, his colleagues and students alike, have consistently recalled the human qualities that endlessly underpinned his philosophy of life.

There was the old-fashioned about G.C. Dev, as he has come to be known. In him lay an abundant desire to explore the limits of thought, to a point where those thoughts could then be related to life as it was lived on the ground. His writ ran nearly everywhere, but that was again part of his worldview. Intelligence must be all-embracing and intellect had to be all-expansive, for him, if life was to have meaning. And meaning lay in an understanding of the basic tenets of thought that Shri Ramkrishna had propounded in his time.

And yet Ramkrishna was not the beginning and the end of experience for Dev. In his religiosity, which again diverged from the conventionalities that come entwined with faith, Dev sought the secular. He was, as the late Dewan Mohammad Azraf would say, always in search of a principle, on the lookout for a synthesis of thoughts. All thinkers are wont to do that. With Dev, the difference lay in his unending endeavour to draw

inspiration, and light, from such diversities in philosophy as those propounded by Spinoza and Buddha. He went looking for Copernicus and Kant. It was always the ethical that defined his view of the world around him, and the worlds beyond the one he inhabited.

Observe the trajectory of GC Dev's life and the clouds will clear away. Born in Sylhet, he would go on to attain academic feats that would swiftly and inexorably bring him in touch with the outside world. He travelled all the way to Bombay, to study Vedantic philosophy at the research institute there; and then made his way to Calcutta, where he had earlier been, to begin a teaching career at Surendranath College. The college would in time move to Dinajpur, in the war years, and then would be taken back to Calcutta. But Dev would stay back in Dinajpur and establish what would be a new Surendranath College. It was driving ambition at work, the goal being a dissemination of education.

It was a task Dev would continue at Dhaka University, all the way from 1953 to 1971. There was forever a higher purpose that underscored Dev's mission in life. Of course, that purpose received a knock with the partition of the country in 1947. Undaunted, however, he chose to stay on in a place he considered home. It was Pakistan, of course, but more importantly it was home in the ancient concept of the meaning. Home was everywhere -- in Calcutta, in the eastern part of a truncated Bengal, in distant Pennsylvania where he lectured.

Dev's evolution as a philosopher was a continuous affair. He explored Buddha's humanism and Vivekananda's philosophy, and dwelt on idealism and its place in life. Respected worldwide for the keen-

ness that interspersed his thoughts, Dev propounded his ideals all over Pakistan, a state that would not be his even if he gave his soul to it. The growing communalism of the state must have caused scratches on his sensibilities, but he showed no outward signs of his discomfort. Yet, quiet happiness was surely his when his fellow Bengalis moved towards a clear break with the past in December 1970 through opting for nationalism. Dev joined the multitudes and marched across town in defence of all those elements of politics that bound democracy to people, or the other way round. It was a season when everyone marched, for the cause was liberty.

In the early moments of liberty, for the genocide of the Pakistan

army had already led to a declaration of Bengali independence, life for Govindo Chandra Dev came to a quick, sad end. As Pakistan's soldiers, with murder in their thoughts, beat their path to his door and then called out his name, Dev, ever the gentleman, opened it. The next moment he was sprawled on his sofa, pushed into it by the men intent on taking the life of the Hindu, the "enemy" of Pakistan, they saw before them. Dev was bayoneted. And then was shot. Darkness descended on him, as it descended on an entire nation.

(The Department of Philosophy, Dhaka University, celebrates GC Dev's centenary of birth today.)

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Dr. Govindo Chandra Dev

Popular wisdom

Although there has been cursory mention in the Constitution of Bangladesh regarding the need for conservation of cultural heritage, detailed governmental programmatic action and practical strategy are still to come. Article 23 of the Constitution, for example, says that "the State shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the en-

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INTEREST in common people's wisdom and resource use technologies have moved to centre-stage in the recent years. The localised and socio-culturally bound knowledge and technologies are examples of cost-effective and sustainable strategies for poverty alleviation and rural development.

They are, thus, referred to as "best practices of indigenous knowledge." To call these activities "best practices" is to suggest they can and should be replicated, that ideas can and should be generated from them, and that they can and should contribute to policy development.

The current decade has witnessed an overarching interest in popular wisdom and traditional practices concerning resource management in the rural Third World. The growing emphasis and interest in indigenous knowledge (IK) and perceptions are partly due to the disillusionment with the so-called centralised development interventions based on the formal "scientific" and "expert" knowledge.

The need and the rationale for

increased research on IK have now been well established by scholars and practitioners in the field. There are a number of good reasons for systematic exploration of the present and the potential role of IK in development.

First, IK's main strength lies in the fact that it is deeply anchored in the local socioeconomic fabric and, therefore, enjoys wide social acceptability.

Second, indigenous practices generally have a problem-solving (down to earth) focus. These are often low-cost, time efficient, flexible and adaptive.

Third, in the face of the gradual disillusionment with the mainstream development and planning models (e.g. modernisation, transfer-of-technology, blueprint planning), a more humane, democratic and participatory mode of development has become increasingly popular. IK as a development paradigm fits smoothly into this current orthodoxy.

Fourth, the recent governmental policies in Bangladesh (in line with many other developing countries) have given increased recognition and attention to indigenous wisdom and prac-

tices. The New Agricultural Extension Policy, for example, notes: "It is recognised that farmers own indigenous technical knowledge is often environmentally sustainable, and efforts should be made to support and learn from farmers, as well as the formal research system." The Forestry Master Plan (1993-2012) and the National Forestry Policy (1994) also underscore the need for promoting rural peoples' traditional forestry practices, including homestead plantations.

Fifth, academic research on IK is still at a nascent stage. Because of the above reasons, one can convincingly argue that it is clearly an opportune time for us to advance in indigenous knowledge work.

Despite the growing enthusiasm about IK, the concept still defies a universal definition. Its relationship with "modern" or "scientific" knowledge is also ambiguous. One commonly cited perspective on the nature of IK is the following: "IK, which is also referred to as 'traditional' or 'local' knowledge, is embedded in the community and is unique to a given culture, location or

society. The term refers to the large body of knowledge and skills that has been developed outside the formal educational system, and that enables communities to survive. Human beings have been producing knowledge and strategies enabling them to survive in a balanced relation with their natural and socio environment. As IK is closely related to survival and subsistence, it provides a basis for local-level decision making in food security, human and animal health, education, natural resource management and various other community based activities."

The key scholarly literature on the subject alludes to the following major characteristic attributes of IK:

- IK is knowledge of rural people themselves and, therefore, is grown and developed in relative independence of external or exogenous influence.
- IK is not generally codified or written down in formal language or form.
- It refers to the whole body of knowledge, including values, concepts, perceptions and beliefs of a particular local community.
- It is inherently a diverse and multi-faceted knowledge system with varied expressions.
- It is socially and culturally specific, constructed, and bound.
- IK is typically developed in the process of local people's experiments with varied livelihood, survival and coping strategies. Traditionally, popular wisdom has most effectively been used in

mitigating the problems and difficulties which surround popular lives, i.e. the life and living of disadvantaged local (rural) communities in the developing societies. Rural people's knowledge exists in innumerable forms among innumerable groups of people in innumerable environments.

The above analysis and reckoning are expected to instigate and prompt further research and widespread public interest in this vital area of knowledge that is so intimately connected to, and remarkably manifested through, common people's day-to-day survival.

Research in indigenous knowledge (IK) is at a nascent stage in Bangladesh. Although occasional references to local "native" and "tribesmen's" knowledge are found in the literature of the British colonial period (e.g., T.H. Lewin's *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein*, 1869 (translated into Bengali by H. Chakma), Tribal Cultural Institute, Rangamati). Apart from these early writings, systematic academic research on IK has a very recent origin.

It was towards the end of the 1980s that increased focus on IK could be observed in Bangladeshi literature. Two notable volumes on IK are Paul Sillitoe's edited work on *Indigenous Knowledge Development in Bangladesh: Present and Future* (University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2000) and Naz Ahmed Khan's *Of Popular Wisdom: Indigenous Knowledge Research in Bangladesh* (Bangladesh Resource Centre for

Indigenous Knowledge, Dhaka, 2000, edited).

Although not comprehensive in coverage and analytical rigour, these books offer a useful overview of IK research in the country. A recent effort to compile and collate the academic studies on IK and associated topics has so far been able to identify and record some 77 articles. This figure brings home the fact that this important area of knowledge has received very little attention so far, and popular wisdom remains a generally ignored subject.

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Article 23 of the Constitution, for example, says that "the State shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture."

Along the same vein, Article 24 states, "the State shall adopt measures for the protection against disfigurement, damage or removal of all monuments, objects or places of special artistic or historic importance or interest." These provisions may provide a framework for designing detailed strategies for preservation of local culture and knowl-

edge.

The following is a list of some major problems and constraints in IK documentation in Bangladesh:

- IK is mostly found in rural areas in unwritten form and in informal conventions. It is difficult to trace and track these "soft" traditional sources and translate them into formal, written and (so-called) scientific language, codes and methods.
- There is serious gap in communication and contact among the (limited) persons and institutions working in the fields of IK exploration and documentation in Bangladesh.
- Owing to the general scarcity of funds, logistics and equipment, it is difficult to publish and publicise the findings of IK research and exploration.
- The number of suitably qualified (and skilled) researchers and activists in the field of IK is clearly insignificant.
- The general level of awareness about IK among a majority of the academics and development activists is still low.
- The government's policy support and commitment in this respect is visibly inadequate.
- There is considerable prejudice and stigma concerning IK in many quarters. When compared to modern scientific knowledge, IK tends to be looked down upon. Many of us -- the formally educated urban professionals -- still find it uncomfortable, undignified and less prestigious an exercise to follow and recognise rural people's knowledge. The con-

cept of IK suffers from analytic imprecision and ambiguity. The concept is open to varied interpretations and has, therefore, instigated widespread debate among both academics and practitioners.

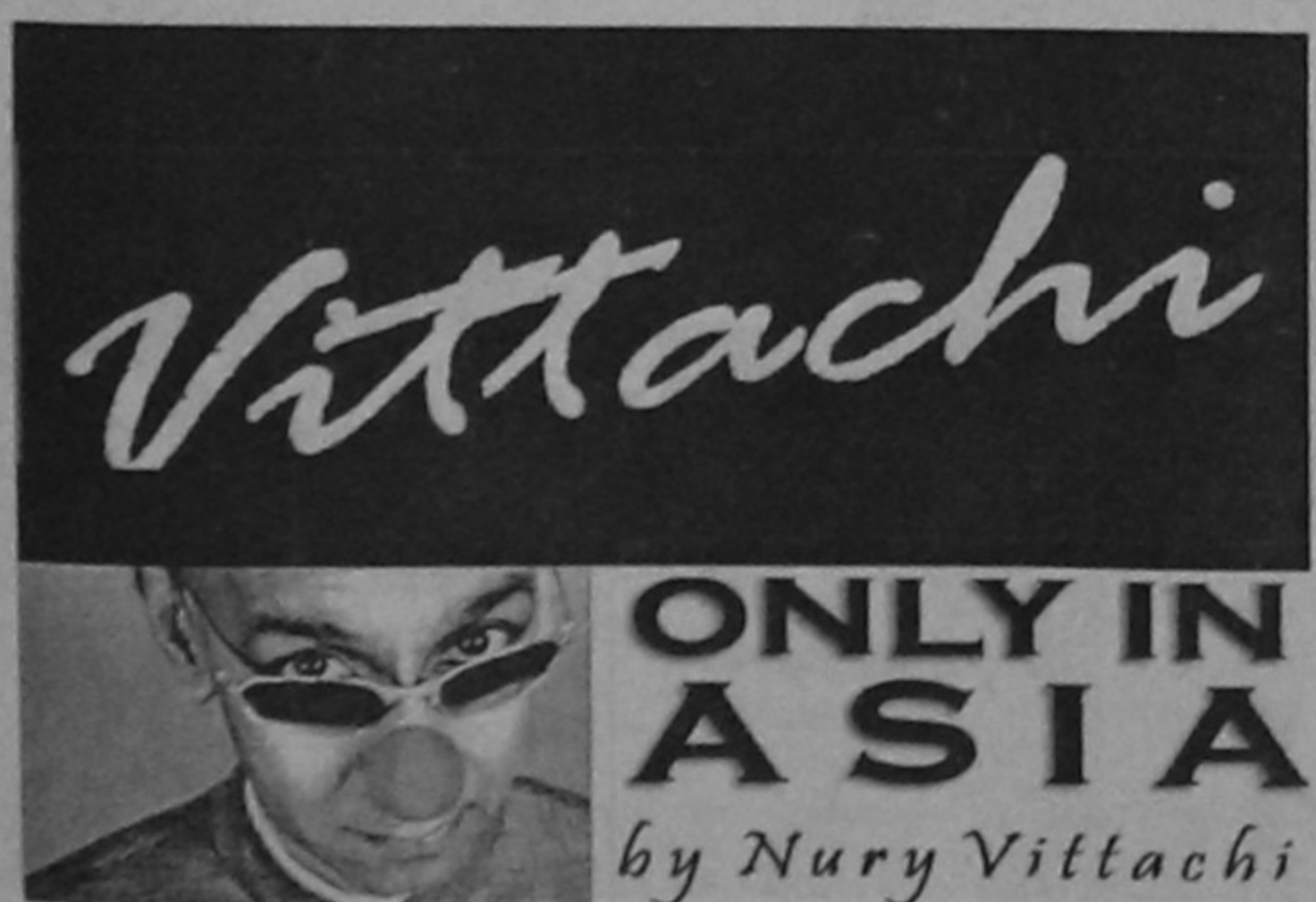
- The instruments of documentation of IK, for example the news media, are still concentrated in the larger cities of the country and the (rural) local people have only marginal access to them.

Local cases and examples of popular wisdom or IK need to be documented and disseminated for designing appropriate developmental policies and actions on a broader (regional, even global) scale. These wisdom and practices are noticed in varied sectors -- spanning over biodiversity, health, agriculture, water, watershed, housing, and disaster management.

IK remains a most useful tool and resource for all who have an interest in facing the challenge of development of the rural poor -- irrespective of discipline, profession, philosophy or institutions. The underlying argument and thesis that I have attempted to bring home in this discussion are basic yet crucial. Knowledge and practices of local communities may offer valuable lessons for policy discourses, and therefore, deserve to be integrated into the mainstream developmental agenda.

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World's earliest blogger had his work cut out for him



THE world's first blogger has been found. It's an Indian nerd. (What a surprise.) Stand up and take a bow, Ashoka Piyadassi of northeastern India. Yay!

Well, actually, he can't stand up and take a bow because he's dead. Ashoka started (and finished) writing his blog a long time before any other rival claimants to the title: 2000 years earlier, to be precise.

Now I know what you are thinking. How could this guy have written a blog so long ago, two millennia before the invention of the key elements of on-line diary-writing,

which are, of course, abject self-centredness and atrocious spelling?

Well, historians now believe that self-centredness is actually a lot older than most people think. It was invented by a woman named Eve, who looked at a fruit tree and thought: "Rules, schmooles, I need a low-cal snack that won't go to my hips."

And bad spelling? William Shakespeare, often described as the world's greatest author, frequently misspelled his own name, sometimes writing it "Francis Bacon."

For Ashoka, 2000 years ago, the

big challenge was equipment. Wi-Fi was in short supply, so his blog posts were literally posts. He chiseled them into rock pillars and delivered them by hand to vast numbers of places all over the Known World.

Now you may well be thinking: how come I never heard of this guy? Few people have. I reckon it's because historians have listed his inscribed pillars in their dusty tomes as *The Edicts of Ashoka*.

But I've read the things. They are no more edicts than my laundry lists are (and I write great laundry lists). No, Ashoka's posts are a self-serving list of personal achieve-

ments ("I dug some wells") interspersed with idle thoughts on how to fix the world's problems ("let us all be vegetarians"). His posts run on a casually egomaniacal assumption that the rest of humanity will benefit from access to his unedited thoughts: the unmistakable stamp of the blogger.

Of course, Ashoka lived in a different era so his interests differ from ours. In one posting, he tells us his household has gone vegetarian "except for one deer and two peacocks every day." In my house we barely get through a deer and two peacocks a week, unless we're really hungry.

Today, there are 120 million blogs. Fears have been expressed that they may sound the death-knell of newspapers. But then every invention, including radio, television, the hula hoop, peanut butter, the deodorising insole and the padded brassiere have been credited with sounding the death-knell of newspapers.

We're still here. Some Asian newspapers, such as the rivals of this one, can be pathetically dull, but even they are interesting compared to what you read in today's blogs.

Possibly the dullest blog ever can be found at wiblog.com. One entry,

entitled "Standing in the Middle of the Room," reads as follows: "I was standing at a central point in the room. The walls were all at approximately the same distance from me. I continued to stand there for a few moments."

Best still, my heart. Thrilling stuff. One guy in my office tells me that there are some bloggers who are not rampant egomaniacs. I'm impartial enough to be willing to record his point of view.

But I should also point out that he also believes in the tooth fairy.

For an example of a really dull blog, try www.vittachi.com.