

## Grateful acknowledgement

*Presence of those foreign friends inspiring*

ONLY when we can say thank you from the core of our heart can we savor the delight for which we say so. And the GOB did just that on 15 December this year, once again. It was the fourth such ceremony, awarding our foreign friends. It was an acknowledgement of their help and support to our war of liberation. And in honouring them we have honoured ourselves. We congratulate the government, and especially Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for this initiative.

As a famous French novelist had said, "Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom." And those foreign friends, to whom we have said 'Thank You' for their help in our fight against an occupation army and their cohorts in Bangladesh for nine months of 1971, had indeed made our life blossom. But for their help, a fledgling liberation war might have continued much longer than the nine months that it did.

More than 200 men and women have been honoured so far, and there is an interesting array of personalities of different callings. There are soldiers who helped train and fight side by side our valiant freedom fighters; there are singers and musicians who projected our plight to the world, there are politicians who moved the world's conscience, and international public servants who gave up their job in support of our cause. There is even a Pakistani who was dubbed a traitor for mobilizing public opinion in his country against the genocide in Bangladesh.

Although there are certain acts for which nothing that we do, as acknowledgment, can ever be enough, what the government of Sheikh Hasina is doing is the least that we can do as a way of demonstrating a grateful nation's thanks. This, as we had said earlier had been long overdue. However, for every one such person that we know as having contributed in our war, there are scores that we know not of, and will not even be able to be recognised. It is to them that we also say "Thank You."

## An eco-friendly RMG sector

*Key to saving, competitiveness, sustainability and workers' right*

IT is puzzling to note that garments industry, a prime foreign exchange earner, has been left to its own devices to grow listlessly without sustainability built into the sector. As long as it minted money, the government and the industry owners were lulled into a complacent mode, thinking their position in the world market is invincible. But we have been rudely awakened by the Tazreen factory fire disaster. It has literally opened a Pandora's box as safety standards and environmental issues came under a closer scrutiny world wide.

In this backdrop, an International Finance Corporation sponsored study has come out with very useful recommendations. It has concluded that taking to eco-friendly production methods in textile and clothing industry could enable it to save up to \$150m per year in cost-cutting terms. At the same time it will make the sector competitive and sustainable.

Basically, the process is sought to be introduced on a wider scale through adopting efficient use of water and energy. Of course, cleaner, environment-friendly production techniques, need to be only underpinned by effluent treatment plant in every factory.

Already, Kenpark Bangladesg apparel (pvt.) Limited has led the way in Chittagong Export Processing Zone by implementing 'green measures'. These have had benefits by way of improving energy and water efficiency systems together with developing a recycling process to reduce pollution of air, land and water. Vegetation in the factories helps reduce emission of carbon monoxide and cool the environs.

Obviously, it would require more than a study to prevail upon all concerned to try and reap the multiple dividends of greener production techniques. First, the stakeholders will have to get their act together; second, the government and the BGMEA should engage each other towards preparing a working plan; third, a facilitating role of the government will be welcome; and last, but not least, the workers will have to be retrained in the new ways of production.

In the ultimate analysis, worker's rights hold the key to taking the garment sector forward to the next step in a

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 17

**1398**  
Sultan Nasir-u Din Mehmud's armies in Delhi are defeated by Timur.

**1927**  
Indian revolutionary Rajendranath Lahiri was hanged to death in Gonda jail of U.P. in India 2 days before the scheduled date.

**1928**  
Indian revolutionaries Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Shivaram Rajguru assassinate British police officer James Saunders in Lahore.

**2010**  
Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. This act became the catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution.

## KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

WE fought and defeated our enemy, the Pakistani occupiers, 41 years ago. The reason we fought for independence from Pakistan was that their ruling class had deprived us of all our rights as people -- socio-economic, democratic, individual and human.

Since March 25, 1971, they began to treat us like animals. And that was the last straw that broke the camel's back, the state of Pakistan, of the day. People of this part of the world became totally disillusioned about Pakistan, where they found no future; neither of their own nor of their future generations. So, they decided to change their lot, rose up in arms and drove Pakistan's occupation army out of the country. The victory was won.

Nationalist aspiration of the Bengali people that crystallised during the language movement, in 1952, did play the key role in rallying the entire Bengali people behind the cause of independence. But the common people's aspirations were not limited to only the nationalist slogans, devoid of any programme to free the peasantry and the working classes from the age-old bondage of feudal exploitation as well as the domination of the traditional forces of reaction including landlords, the village gentry and representatives of international capital.

The leadership of the time, due to its class limitations, was not capable of carrying through its promises in taking the programme of independence deeper and free the entire masses of the people from all kinds of exploitation and subjugation. Had it been able to garner that kind of representation from all the political and social stakeholders during the war, the war of independence could have become a war of total national liberation. But the lack of maturity in leadership of the working masses of the time, together with the predominance of coterie interests among the nationalist leadership, deprived the people of the great opportunity that opened

SANCHITA B. SAXENA

THE fire that killed 112 workers at a garment factory in the suburbs of Bangladesh's capital last month was a stark reminder of the human costs of producing and consuming cheap clothes.

While American officials have condemned poor safety conditions at the factory and have urged the Bangladeshi government to raise wages and improve working conditions, the United States can do much more: It should bring down high tariffs on imports from Bangladesh and other Asian countries, which put pressure on contractors there to scrimp on labor standards in order to stay competitive.

The United States imported more than \$4 billion worth of apparel and textiles from Bangladesh last year. So it has an interest in giving the country's garment industry some financial room with which to improve conditions for the 3 million employees, most of them female, who work in the industry.

Monitoring systems have, in many cases, achieved progress at the higher levels of the industry: the contractors that deal directly with American retailers. But oversight is lax, and conditions particularly dire, in factories run by subcontractors, like the Tazreen Fashions factory, the site of the deadly blaze on Nov. 24.

up before them.

Small wonder the political leadership that assumed control of state power after the liberation lacked that kind of vision due to its class limitations. The pre-independence general election of 1970 that was held under the Pakistani dictator Yahya Khan was still the point of departure for the Awami League, the post-Independence claimant to state power. It could not draw all the political forces that supported and took part in the Liberation War into the fold of power. And that was enough to sow the seeds of future discontent in the nation's political landscape.

So the political history of inde-



pendent Bangladesh is one of uprisings and instabilities. In the interregnum, military rules banished constitutional politics out of power. A semblance of constitutional democratic governance rose for a short while on the political horizon in 1991 following the overthrow of the last military dictator. But constitutional democracy in its truest spirit has again sunk in the maelstrom of mean and violent rivalries for supremacy and power among contending political forces.

Four decades plus years after the independence, the nation is now divided into two hostile political blocs under Awami League (AL) and

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). To all appearances, their sole aim is to destroy each other.

Of late, the two major groups of the ruling class, the Awami League (AL), now in power and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), in opposition, have been able to rally different coteries of political aspirants in two fronts under their leadership. The AL claims that the front it leads represent all the pro-liberation social forces, while the other front led by the BNP as anti-liberation, since Jamaat-e-Islami and different Islamic parties are its partners.

But such compartmentalisation of pro and anti-liberation forces hardly

leaders or supporters of either party participates, or in the street confrontations, in which their activists engage.

The recent killing of a youth named Biswajit Das, during such a street confrontation between the supporters of the two camps, during a road blockade enforced by the BNP-led front, exposes the height of such hostility between the two camps. Biswajit was brutally beaten and hacked to death by the activists of one camp, who mistook the victim for a member of its rival camp. The killers did not care to listen to the dying youth's appeal that he was an innocent passer-by.

**The killing of Biswajit exposes the height of hostility between AL and BNP. What message does the 42<sup>nd</sup> Victory Day convey to Biswajit's parents and other near and dear ones?**

The blood of the youth, who had no stake in the power rivalry, was spilled on the eve of the Victory Day.

What message does the 42<sup>nd</sup> Victory Day convey to Biswajit's parents and other near and dear ones? Does the pro and anti-liberation discourse of politics bear anymore significance to Biswajit's family?

What the politics of the day was able to achieve is only a robbing of all modest hopes of a family of small means. Biswajit's death has again brought to the fore the pointlessness of a prevailing narrative of confrontational politics.

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# American tariffs, Bangladeshi deaths

A bill introduced in Congress in 2009 by Rep. Jim McDermott, Democrat of Washington, could have improved the situation by including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka on the list of developing countries, like Mexico, that receive duty-free access to the American market as a result of free-trade agreements.

But the bill never even made it to committee, and Bangladesh still faces a cost squeeze that is ultimately felt most acutely on those lowest on the production chain, especially the lowest-paying subcontractors, among whom corruption is endemic. It takes its greatest toll on workers. The distortions created by the current trade policy are striking. In the United States federal fiscal year that ended in September 2011, Bangladesh exported \$5.10 billion in goods to the United States, of which less than 10 percent were eligible for exemption from import duties. On the rest, Bangladesh had to pay at least 15.3 per-

cent in tariffs. The tariffs were equivalent to imposing a \$4.61 tax on every person in Bangladesh, a country with a per-capita annual income of \$770.

This year, according to news accounts, Bangladesh will have paid more than \$600 million annually in American tariffs, even as the United States Agency for International Development said it was committed to \$200 million in development aid to Bangladesh. Of course, no free trade legislation is controversy-free. One argument against reducing restrictions on Bangladeshi imports is that it might hurt even poorer countries, in sub-Saharan Africa, that enjoy duty-free access under a 2000 law, the African Growth and Opportunity Act. But studies have shown that extending duty-free access to South Asian goods would have negligible costs, yield huge benefits for Bangladesh's economy and have minimal negative impact on African exports.

Bangladesh's government and

industries have a moral duty to prevent catastrophes like the November fire from ever occurring again. They need to insist that factory operators meet safety standards, that inspections are conducted honestly and that recommendations are enforced.

But leveling the playing field of international trade could advance all of these goals. International brands like Tommy Hilfiger, Gap, H&M, Target and Walmart demand low prices and fast turnaround. In that context, high tariffs work against the goals of fair-labor standards and factory safety.

In the fire's aftermath, it's tempting to focus only on local corruption and lax labor standards. But there have been positive changes in recent years; labor groups, businesses, nongovernmental organizations and even some international buyers have formed coalitions to improve safety at many factories. In a survey I conducted of garment workers at established factories, 62 percent said labor conditions had improved.

But for improvements in workers' well-being to have lasting effect, tariffs on exports to the United States, the world's largest consumer market, must be eased.

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