

A TRIBUTE TO COMRADE ABDUL MATIN

Language hero and genuine left leader

DR. PETER CUSTERS

WITH the demise of Abdul Matin, Bangladesh has lost a great son of the soil, - the garlanded hero of the historic language movement, the architect of the 'red cap' forces of the late sixties, and a committed Marxist. Born in Dhublia village of Shirajgang in 1926, 'Bhasha' Matin on Wednesday last died after a life that lasted 88 long years. Completely dedicated to society's most deprived, Matin had to face prison many times. Though he had actively participated in guerilla resistance in 1971, he was arrested immediately after the country's independence and suffered jail for more than 5 years. To start, I wish to recall my very first encounter with Matin Bhai. This was in Dhaka Central Jail and symbolically occurred on December the 16th, 1975, i.e. on the very day the Bangladeshi people yearly celebrate their liberation from the Pakistani army's terror. Just about a month before that, Colonel Taher had staged his renowned soldiers' insurrection. In the wake of this aborted attempt to capture state power for the poor, thousands of JSD-activists and sympathizers were thrown into jail. Yet on December 16, the jail authorities felt obliged to open the prison's cells and allowed people to roam for a few hours. Thus, battered Leftists of all varieties used the opportunity to meet, exchange and fraternize. And all amidst a bustling crowd, I discovered the tall, but emaciated figure of Abdul Matin who stood out as really special. He immediately struck me as open-minded and profoundly sincere.



Section 144 on the provincial capital so as to pre-empt implementation of the hartal, the encirclement program and processions scheduled for the next day. At an evening meeting hastily convened, the leadership of East Bengal's political parties compromised and voted for abiding by the prohibition. The Student Action Council instead decided on defiance. It is Abdul Matin and his co-students who created history!

Again, in my view it does not suffice to recall Matin Bhai for his unique and lasting contribution to the language movement. He also and crucially helped in shaping peasant resistance against Ayub Khan's military dictatorship. The 1968/69 uprising against Ayub Khan in East Bengal was initially centered in Dhaka and other urban areas. Here students staged hartals and factory owners were encircled by angry industrial workers. But later on, after Martial Law had been declared in March of 1969, the centre of gravity shifted as militancy spread to the countryside. At the call of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, three consecutive 'Lal Tupi', Red Cap Conferences were held. Here we need to recall exactly how the initiative for the holding of these peasant Conferences got shaped. For it brings out how crucial Abdul Matin's contribution towards these events was. The point was described by Matin Bhai himself, when I visited and interviewed him at his home-village in Shirajgang, shortly after the fall of Ershad's military dictatorship, in 1991. According to Matin, in the wake of

the 1969 Martial Law declaration Bhashani held a cadres' meeting of the Krishak Samity at Santosh to discuss strategy. By then Matin had locally experimented with the formation of volunteer teams, which at the public's suggestion were armed with red caps and sticks.

According to Matin, a force of no less than 2 thousand mainly landless peasant volunteers had been built in just 20 days! At the Krishak Samity meeting, Bhashani got impatient with some of the Left leaders who failed to bring up concrete ideas. But when he met Matin eye-to-eye, Matin narrated his experiment in building village troops and suggested Red Cap Conferences be staged. Bhashani heeded his advice, and in due course three successive mass Conferences were held, - in Pakshi, Mahipur and Santosh. These Conferences electrified the East Bengal peasantry, they mobilized literally hundreds of thousands of villagers! They also occasioned the call for armed resistance, - witness the slogan 'Workers and Peasants, Take up Arms and Liberate East Bengal!' Sure, this was not the first time the rural poor of East Bengal expressed their readiness to take up arms. Sure, peasant opposition against exploitation is written large in the colonial and post-colonial history of Bangladesh. Yet the Lal Tupi Conferences formed the very pinnacle of rural militancy in the 25 years when East Bengal was part of Pakistan. Thus, interviewing him in 1991, I got convinced Matin Bhai helped shape history more than once.

The commemoration of Comrade Abul Matin offers a very apt opportunity to relive and re-debate the enormously rich history of the Bangladeshi Left. Not with the aim of lamenting about opportunities lost. But rather to reflect on Matin's lasting determination, idealism and exceptional commitment. Even as society has dramatically changed and as new issues came to the fore, the aged Matin Bhai continued to stand by the Left. He became a leader of the reconstituted Workers Party in 1991 and later on took charge of the Bhashani Council as its President. Undoubtedly, today's generations will have to rely on fresh Marxist ideas appropriate to today's circumstances. Yet where other Left leaders tragically compromised or went over to the camp of the establishment, - Comrade Abdul Matin stuck to high principles. He continued living a down-to-earth life until he breathed his last. In accordance with his will, Gulbadan Nesa Monika, his wife, has handed over his dead body for medical research. We need to celebrate Matin as a leading representative of a powerful era, when Bangladesh' political culture was largely shaped by Left ideas of human equality and dignity for the oppressed.

The writer is the author of 'Questioning Globalized Militarism' (Tulika, New Delhi/Merlin Press, London, 2007). On October the 12th, a meeting commemorating Abdul Matin was jointly held in the Hague, the Netherlands, by five organizations representing Bangladeshi migrants.

Jute: The golden future that awaits

AZFAR HOSSAIN

ALMOST every government has had a soft corner for jute; perhaps that's why the government has a separate ministry for jute and textile out of all the industries. Today people from all parts of the world know the tag "Made in Bangladesh" because of the RMG sector; but it was jute in the first place that put Bangladesh on the export map of the world and created the path for apparel goods. If jute and textiles were Marvel's Avengers, jute would be "Captain America" and RMG "Iron Man".

As a part of the jute sector, I feel the love for jute is conditional, as demonstrated by the implementation of various government policies. For instance, the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act was enacted in 2010 and four years later we are yet to see its full implementation. When the government first took this step in 2010, like others in the industry, I welcomed it and waited for the golden future; but it never came.

The primary reason for the failure in implementation is the high prices of the jute bags compared to its plastic substitutes. The latter comes at one-third the price of jute bags. However, jute bags can be used four or five times while the plastic bags can be used once, making it cost-effective in the long run. Most of these feed mills have a large requirement of sacks per day for their packaging needs; hence, it's more cost-effective for them to run a small production line manufacturing PP woven or other plastic sacks.

According to a CPD report, if the act were implemented, there would have been an internal demand of about 850 million pieces of jute bags per year. The current production capacity is over a billion bags.

The environmental benefits should not be ignored either. Jute is environment-friendly and biodegradable. The government had allocated Tk. twenty-five crore to remove the deposits of polythene from the riverbed of Buriganga. There is no clear case for the government to do so if it is not able to ban the use of plastic bags.

It is in the greater good of the nation to protect and nurture the jute sector. The sector provides in excess of 4 million jobs to farmers and over 150 thousand jobs to factory workers. A collapse of this sector will have a disastrous effect on the economy, as 2.5% of the country's population is dependent on this sector for their livelihood.

The industry is already in a volatile and depressed state due to complete dependence on exports. Exports are already down by 20% for the year 2013-14 from the previous year. Turmoil in the Middle East and worries of a double dip recession has further worsened the situation. Arab spring movement in some countries and unrest in Thailand hasn't helped either. To top it off, the rupee depreciation against the dollar has hit the Bangladesh jute export (both raw and processed) industry hard.

The export of jute is dependent on the export of raw jute and spun yarn. The yarn constitutes the majority of the exports and because of socio political and economic situations there has been a decline in jute yarn exports. Although the worldwide demand for jute goods (not to be confused with jute yarn) is increasing at 5-7% every year, these goods are exported by very few mills. As the margins are razor thin, private sector mills are often unwilling to take the necessary R & D to develop jute-diversified products.

The government at the same time is trying to reopen many of the closed mills. It is a very premature step at this point. Without proper implementation of the packaging act, the government is simply creating excess supply in an already depressed market.

The government mills are in very sorry states; the technology of the mills has not been upgraded, which severely hurts the mills productivity. Mills, often after they are reopened, struggle to reach optimum efficiency due to labour union problems, past dues not being cleared, red tape and so on. Private sector mills have always been more efficient than the public sector ones and the job of running such mills should be left to skilled private sector management.

Having said that, the government still has a vital role to play. To ensure a flourishing jute sector, the government should create a fostering culture. Instead of reopening mills, which have had a history of losses, the government should focus on establishing more research and development centres in collaboration or partnership with other stakeholders. These centres would focus on product development and provide new technology to increase efficiency and productivity.

The government needs to take steps to encourage the use and production of diversified products. For example, blended yarns with jute and cotton/silk/viscose for a variety of indoor applications such as blankets, shawls, home textiles and lightweight materials.

R & D efforts have been made by various organisations that allow the use of jute-reinforced composites in the form of flexible semi rigid and rigid boards to substitute wood, timber and plywood. Jute pulp has also got the potential to make paper. The technological advancement and know-how required to do so must be provided by the government to the mills. There is the potential for use of jute fibre in the replacement of glass/synthetic fibre for plastic reinforcement. The openings exist for both compress and injection molding. Even 10% of jute use would create a market demand for several hundred thousand units of fibre.

The government has a big role to play in order to restore the golden fiber. It, however, must take the right steps that support a long-term strategy for the development of the jute sector. Only then we can hope for the "golden future that awaits!"

The writer is co-owner and executive director at NAM jute mills.

ASIA-PACIFIC INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

The next leap for regional connectivity

DR. SHAMSHAD AKHTAR

ADVANCES in regional connectivity have generated substantial economic and social gains in terms of growth, trade and people to people connections. The global explosion of new technologies, especially in information and communication technologies (ICT), points the way to the next big leap for regional connectivity: an Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway.

The countries of Asia and the Pacific are already well-recognized for their success in structuring cross-border global value chains which, backed by infrastructure corridors, have helped to boost trade within and beyond the region. There is great potential, however, to further deepen connectivity and maximize socio-economic gains, by more effectively integrating ICT across all core infrastructure.

The urgency for this in Asia and the Pacific is apparent from the growing digital divide: in the developing economies of Asia and the Pacific, less than 15 per cent of people have high-speed Internet access. The situation is worse in many of our least developed, landlocked developing and Pacific island countries - where less than 1 per cent of people have broadband connectivity. And for women and girls, regardless of location, level of income, or age, access is lower still.

Recognizing the significance of ICT in promoting efficiency, productivity and opportunity, the newly-proposed UN sustainable development goals target universal and affordable Internet access for all least developed countries by 2020. By using ICT to augment and enhance connectivity, economies and businesses will be better-equipped to access the benefits of global markets, the Internet can be leveraged to broaden access to education and training, and new tools can be harnessed, such as advanced early-warning systems to better prepare for the natural disasters whose frequency and impact have eroded many of the region's development gains.

It is imperative for the countries of Asia and the

Pacific to more fully benefit from the opportunities of affordable and accessible broadband connections. The way to generate this leap, being deliberated by the member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), is the creation of an Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway.

Connecting the Internet backbone of each separate country, into a cohesive 'meshed' regional superhighway, will enhance competition in telecommunications markets, and open new opportunities for large-scale investment in fibre optic infrastructure. Seamlessly connecting land- and sea-based fibre networks will lead to economies of scale and lower Internet prices, particularly for the countries and communities who have so far remained excluded from the advantages of ICT.

The biggest barrier to any new infrastructure is cost. Yet the actual costs of fibre optic materials and conduits are almost negligible. The real challenges are the labour costs of excavation, the costs of securing rights of way, especially across borders, as well as the implicit costs of disruptions and delays in the areas under construction. In OECD countries, for example, these costs together represent an average of between 50-80 per cent of all spending on optical fibre deployment.

ESCAP believes that our region should take a different tack. We boast the world's widest system of seamless physical connectivity - 143 000 km of the Asian Highway and another 117 000 km of Trans-Asian Railway networks. Cemented by intergovernmental treaties and administered by ESCAP, they offer an unmatched opportunity for 'co-habitation' of ICT and transport and other infrastructure networks - synchronizing optical fibre conduit rollout with land transportation construction. Unexpected, yet perfect partners, in building better connectivity.

Apart from cost savings of up to 80 per cent, this 'dig once - use many times' approach expands and diversifies the revenues generated by infrastructure construction: a win-win for governments, private sector invest-

tors and newly-connected communities.

In partnership with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), ESCAP has recently mapped existing fibre optic infrastructure connectivity in Asia and the Pacific. Our online, interactive map is the first to feature integrated terrestrial and submarine backbone networks, as well as cross-country connections on a single consolidated platform. Our goal is that this will lead to greater coordination between countries, and also between governments and the private sector, in making the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway both a concrete and a virtual reality.

This is also why policymakers from across Asia and the Pacific are convening this week in Bangkok, for the first-ever joint session of ESCAP's Committees on Information and Communications Technology and on Transport. They will identify best practices to unlock synergies between the ICT and transport sectors. They will also examine the benefits of amending the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway intergovernmental agreements, building stronger ICT connectivity on the success of the existing cross-border transport networks.

One option will be to include, in the agreements, recommendations that encourage the cohabitation of ICT and Transport infrastructure. The establishment of a group of experts will also be considered, to pave the way for more affordable Internet in the region, based on common principles for cheaper, more efficient and reliable Internet infrastructure - the foundations of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway.

The time for policy action is now. Our region must capitalize on this opportunity to build the inclusive and sustainable Asia-Pacific we need, taking the next big leap in regional connectivity to ensure future prosperity for all our people.

The author is an Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). ESCAP's Committees on Information and Communications Technology and on Transport will convene at ESCAP from 14-17 October.

QUOTABLE Quote

My grandmother started walking five miles a day when she was sixty. She's ninety-seven now, and we don't know where the hell she is.

Ellen DeGeneres

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS
1 First name in home-making hints
7 Masticate
11 Unconcerned with ethics
12 Valiant one
13 Romeo kills him
14 Bring home
15 Store door sign
17 Escapade
20 Houston player
23 Commotion
24 Like some bridges
26 Large snake
27 Impress greatly
28 Rink surface
29 Picked from the menu
31 Butter bit
32 Fashionably dated
33 Nile serpents
34 Increase
37 Singer Redding
39 On cloud nine
43 Aspiration
44 Incense
45 Base meal
46 Store visitor

DOWN
1 Proch sight
2 Writer Tan
3 Hold up
4 CD segment
5 Foyer
6 Choir voice
7 Burger topper
8 Mind-blowing experiences
9 Make mistakes
10 Took he title
16 Was frugal
17 Repair bill line
18 Find charming
19 Long drives
21 News summary
22 "Golden Boy" playwright
24 Billiards shot
25 Need to pay
30 Clears
33 Isolated
35 Chick sound
36 Radius partner
37 Resistance unit
38 Bunion spot
40 Road goo
41 Sense of self
42 Fox hole

Cryptogram puzzle: BVNJR NA UQEC NA FIQ ENR TCKBV FIQ NVJ FIQRD, AKREV BKWV YVEIUVX XII YQAF BNXXVI. - ONRN AXVTNIX AEIXX

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE: LOVE IS THAT CONDITION IN WHICH THE HAPPINESS OF ANOTHER PERSON IS ESSENTIAL TO YOUR OWN. - ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Yesterday's answer

Word search grid with words: MESA, SPEAK, ERASE, PARMAS, TIGHT, BUDGET, SEA, SIRON, BUNNY, TAGUP, SOBER, ALEX, WOVE, DEMOS, MIXED, MAMIE, FIB, YAK, ACE, LOSE, CANNON, OWNER, DATED, WADES, OPENS

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

Cartoon panel: I THINK IT'S GREAT THAT THE GENERAL'S USING A GOLF CART TO GET AROUND. YEAH, IT'S FUEL EFFICIENT AND LESS POLLUTING THAN A JEEP.

HENRY by Don Trachte

Cartoon panel: MAY WE HAVE SOME MILK, MOM? HOW OLD ARE YOU, HENRY?

Cartoon panel: BUT WHY DOES HE ALWAYS HAVE GOLF CLUBS WITH HIM? IN CASE A GAME BREAKS OUT.