

## Price barometer reading

Commerce minister draws flak even from ruling party MPs

ON Sunday something definitely out of the ordinary happened at the Jatiya Sangsad. The weather turned inclement for commerce minister Amir Khosru Chowdhury -- thanks this time to some ruling party MPs. They waxed critical of his weak handling of the price-hike situation. Was it so unexpected after all? Erratic prices affect everybody and importantly MPs of the governing party while visiting their constituencies have to answer for that. Hence, Khosru could not just expect to enjoy any immunity to criticism from treasury bench MPs on such a sensitive question. The story stands out given that we have been accustomed to kid-glove attitude by ruling party MPs when it came to criticising their ministers.

With some opposition members joining issue with their Treasury Bench counterparts the debate on prices turned out to be lively and useful. This was a welcome break in terms of an interactive parliamentary experience which we would like to see repeated in the near future.

The minister banded about the familiar open market theme contending that government neither fixes nor controls prices in a free market economy. Free market can not mean free-for-all with the buyers being irredeemably at the mercy of the sellers.

First and foremost, the government should be prepared to play a hands-on, proactive role in keeping the prices at rational and economically justifiable levels. Secondly, it should monitor the prices constantly with a focus around demand, supply and commodity pricing. Last but not least, the government has regulatory and supervisory functions to ensure that artificial scarcities are not created by market manipulation, hoarding and speculative trading. Only government can stem black marketing and price-jacking, none other can. The government is also in the best position to improve the supply side of cereals by recourse to timely offtakes from its godowns as a critical element to holding the priceline within an affordable range. Overall, it can provide fiscal support for imports when required to be made in a contingency situation. In fact, the government's responsibility towards the consumers is greater in a free market economy in comparison with that in a command market. They have to only look at the various regulatory commissions or bodies in the USA and UK, let alone in Malaysia, to realise this truism.

## Problem of malnutrition

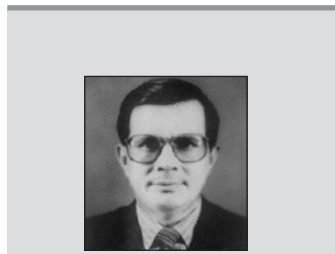
Determined efforts needed to tackle the crisis

IT is rather unfortunate that the issue of nutrition is not taken as seriously as it should have been in our country. We admit without any hesitation that even the media doesn't put enough emphasis on the topic. Malnutrition is a slow killer, and that's where the seriousness of the issue lies. By the time everyone wakes up to address the problem, it's already too late. In a nutshell -- it's an incipient danger. It can affect our IQ, our health, our welfare and, above all, our future. According to a UNICEF survey, the numbers of malnourished pregnant women and children under the age of six are among the highest in the world. In addition, almost 50 percent of children are born underweight and more than 90 per cent under five years of age are undernourished in one form or the other.

Milk is a very important source of nutrition. However, a recent survey says a large section of the population has little access to milk. We are amazed to learn that less than twenty per cent of the demand is met from local market, the rest gets imported from abroad. And that's also with a high tax component. The price of imported milk has shot up rapidly. No wonder, milk has gone way out of most people's buying capacity. We agree with the experts who say that the only way to provide milk to a bigger population is to increase its indigenous production. Here, the government, in tandem with the private sector, can play an effective role.

In some neighbouring countries, especially in India, we have witnessed the success in milk production and distribution through rural co-operatives. The government can provide support, infrastructural as well as financial, to entrepreneurs willing to set up dairy plants on co-operative basis.

# Rural Bangladesh: Changing mobility and malleability



ABDUL BAYES

FOR centuries, agriculture had been dubbed as the leading sector -- in terms of both output and employment -- and the farmers have been bracketed as the backbone of Bangladesh economy. The perception still prevails, more or less, despite the occasional onslaughts of natural hazards with its debilitating impacts all around and taking its toll. During the last two decades or so, the economy of Bangladesh witnessed structural changes -- thanks to panoply of policy shifts that prevailed over the years -- and agriculture seems to have been overtaken by the non-agricultural pursuits as primary source of employment and income generation.

In this column today, we shall attempt to discuss few of the aspects pertaining to mobility and malleability of rural working population drawing upon a survey conducted by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) on 62 villages in Bangladesh for 1987 and 2000.

### Sunset for agriculture?

In 1987, about two-thirds of the working members of sample households reported agriculture as their primary or principal occupation. After 13 years, in 2000, only about half of them reported agriculture as their primary occupation. At disaggregated level, the proportion of workers taking up crop activities as the first occupation declined from about 42 per cent to 36 per cent. The most puz-

zling point, however, hanged around the agricultural labour households -- the poorest of the poor in villages. In 1987, agricultural labour was primary occupation of a quarter of working members; it was reduced to only one-eighth in 2000. Other agricultural activities also seem to have lost the preference of working people as primary occupation. Arguably perhaps it can be said that the choice set in terms of occupation expanded and both mobility and malleability of sample households

workers reporting wage-labour (in both agriculture and non-agriculture) as the principal occupation. The next was farming. The incidence of multiple occupations was the least for workers engaged in trade and business.

There are apparently three implications of a reduction in multiple occupations and the subsequent impact on livelihoods. First, instability or fluctuations in income of rural households especially of poor labour selling households, seem to have lessened over

agriculture. Data further shows that agriculture is mostly the 'mainstay' of workers with no educational attainment. Only this group of households has been increasingly dependent on crop cultivation. On the other hand, their malleability is low due to educational backwardness and hence mobility is also lower than others with education. Thus, we find that the share of workers in this group taking up non-agricultural income as the main source of income, increased mar-

traces. The influence of age structure in the choice of occupation of non-agricultural activities is apparently more interesting. It seems that relatively younger workers are moving towards activities like mechanics, cottage industry, transport, rickshaw pulling and other transport activities while the mean age of those in business, trade and services is almost the same over the period. It can possibly be hypothesized that older population in rural areas embrace

occupation than in the past. As wage labour, the proportion of women increased from four per cent in 1987 to about 27 per cent in 2000. This compares with reduction of male wage labour from about 23 to about 12 per cent during the same period of time. This implies that the growing gap in the agricultural wage market as a result of male labour's departure in villages is partly filled in by the entry of women. But women's share in non-agricultural pursuits declined from 73 per cent to about 68 per cent during the same period of time. Thus while male workers growingly preferred non-agricultural activities -- at the cost of agriculture -- as primary occupation over the years, the trend was just the opposite for female workers. However, increasingly women have been taking up services as primary occupation.

Again, while the intensity of multiple occupations for male workers reduced from 37 to 29 between 1987 and 2000, it remained almost at the same level for women workers: 51 vs 48. It suggests that between 1987 and 2000, development in rural areas hardly reduced the risk and fluctuations in women's income earning sources while for male workers we notice a reasonable decline in the risks and insecurity.

### Final words

By and large, the IRRI-initiated 62 village survey data indicate to increasing mobility and malleability of rural population across gender and economic strata of households. The introduction of modern technology and the development of rural infrastructure might have enhanced the choice set for freedom of rural people. To sustain the mobility and malleability of rural people, one needs to go beyond Green Revolution. Hope we are not back to square one!

Abdul Bayes is professor of economics, Jahangirnagar University

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

While male workers growingly preferred non-agricultural activities -- at the cost of agriculture -- as primary occupation over the years, the trend was just the opposite for female workers...While the intensity of multiple occupations for male workers reduced from 37 to 29 between 1987 and 2000, it remained almost at the same level for women workers: 51 vs 48. It suggests that between 1987 and 2000, development in rural areas hardly reduced the risk and fluctuations in women's income earning sources while for male workers we notice a reasonable decline in the risks and insecurity.

increased over time.

### Sunrise for non-agriculture!

As a primary source of livelihood in 1987, non-agricultural sector could attract only 34 per cent of the working members, the share rose to about 51 per cent -- an increase by 17 percentage point in 2000. Both poor and rich households shifted positions on primary occupation and embraced non-agricultural activities at different productivity scales.

### Multiple occupations

Generally, insecurity of occupation and severe swings in earnings invite multiple occupations as source of livelihood. In 1987, for example, about 39 per cent of the workers reported engagement in several occupations. By 2000, this decreased to about 29 per cent. The multiple occupations were high for

time. And second, the earning members of rural households have been shifting to jobs where marginal productivity of their labour is higher than previous occupation. And finally, multiple occupations are inversely related to the level of educational attainment. The raison d'etre could be that education provides access to better job opportunities where the earning is high and hence there arises no need to take up another job.

### Education and occupation

The tendency of multiple occupations is relatively less for those with high school certificate and above than, say, those with no formal schooling. As one moves up the scale of schooling, one comes across lower intensity of multiple occupations. It could be due to the reason that insecurity and fluctuations in earnings are higher in occupations that poor and the uneducated mostly rely on e.g.

ginally between 1987 and 2000. As one moves up the schooling scale, the rate of shift to non-agricultural activities also goes up implying perhaps that during the period under review, relatively more educated people left land and opted for non-land activities.

### Age and occupation

At aggregate level, we notice that the mean age of the working members engaged in agriculture ranged from 36 to 38 years between 1987 and 2000. On the other hand, the mean age of non-agricultural workers centered around 32-33 years. Thus it appears that, for livelihood, relatively younger people lean on non-agricultural sources while relatively older ones cling to cultivation. Again, within agriculture, relatively young workers sell labour in others' farms and work as waged workers, while relatively older people devote in crop cultivation and other agricultural

traditional activities like crop cultivation or even 'traditional' non-agricultural activities like business, trade and services whereas younger workers are mostly engaged in 'non-traditional' non-agricultural activities.

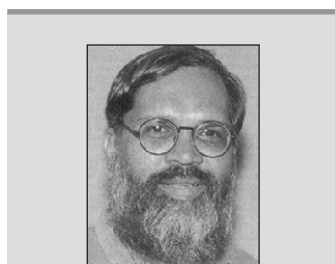
### Occupation and gender

The changes in occupational status of women that we are going to address here concern women of mostly distress-driven households. They are mainly from functionally landless and marginal and small households.

It appears that, in 1987, about 69 per cent of male workers reported agriculture as their primary occupation. In 2000, the proportion dropped to 50 per cent. During the same period, the proportion of female workers was about 27 and 33 per cent, respectively. This means more women workers embraced agriculture as primary

# Atlantic divide and cow politics

Striking out for peace and sanity



PROF. BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

THE Indian situation is surreal. As the world lurches towards a war which could radically alter Middle Eastern and global power balances, the country remains mesmerised by cricket. Its politics are mired in medieval temple-mosque disputes and cow worship.

India's political discourse is further degenerating. The Centre has again raked up the Ayodhya issue. While self-appointed *sadhus* hold *dharma sansads* in Delhi, rampage in Bhojshala in Madhya Pradesh, or distribute *trishuls* in Rajasthan, the BJP and Congress are competing with each other over, of all things, the holy cow!

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh, considered a dynamic leader, has launched bizarre "cow protection" politics. He has compromised with the VHP/Hindu Jagran Manch by wrongly allowing Hindu devotees entry into the Bhojshala structure -- although there's no divine image inside.

This repeats, on a smaller scale, the opening of the Babri mosque

for Hindu "worshippers" in the mid-1980s, which culminated in the 1992 catastrophe. Appearing rank communalists can only stoke dangerous fundamentalism.

Equally unseemly is Congress-BJP competition on "cow protection". The BJP is threatening a Bill banning cow slaughter. And the Madhya Pradesh Congress is glorifying bovine waste products. Congress-ruled Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh too seem headed for

is considered sacred by some Hindus, but beef is widely eaten in India, especially by low castes and Dalits, *irrespective* of religion.

For the poor, beef is a cheap source of high-grade protein. Surveys show that three-fourths of its consumers are Hindus. There's no case for a blanket ban on killing cows -- no more than for vegetarians.

But the present debate isn't really about protecting cows. India

contestation, the world stands at a crossroads. The coming weeks will determine the shape of the world for years. If the United States, with a handful of allies, invades Iraq -- without authorisation by the UN Security Council, or by bludgeoning and manipulating it --, there will be a new global tyranny.

If the vast majority of states and peoples prevail, there will be a chance to make the world better -- less violent and unjust.

The US pursues a jingoistic nationalism and imperial, hegemonic notions of power...The EU, despite flaws, is attempting something new: a union with open borders, shared currency, common foreign policy. It has put behind centuries-old feuds. The criteria for EU membership include democratic governance, human rights protection, and unthinkability of war between members...The Iraq crisis has polarised world opinion. It confronts Indian policymakers, and the public, with new challenges and choices. It's time we shed our insularity and cow fetishes, and related to the larger world -- to strike out for global peace and justice.

cow promotion.

The attempt to invest "cow protection" with sanctity is misconceived. The Constituent Assembly debated this at length. Rather than prohibit cow slaughter constitutionally, it included it in the (non-enforceable) Directive Principles -- *within* a larger pledge to "organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines" with "steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle" -- including buffaloes.

This obeyed the sound principle that the state shouldn't legislate on religious faith or customs. The cow

doesn't look after them -- witness the millions condemned to forage through refuse and plastic or left to die in *gaushalas*. The debate is about scoring political points.

This cynical politics involves levelling filthy charges against Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee and Ms Sonia Gandhi, accused of eating beef. Here, deplorably, the Congress fired the first shot. The BJP reciprocated.

This is a horrible diversion from people's vital needs, like water, power, housing and education. Worse, it spells descent into vacuous identity politics, which privileges one community and legitimises *Hindutva*.

As India sinks into this wasteful

The Atlantic divide is growing, as differences between the US and Europe widen. Almost all of Europe's 46 sovereign states reject the US argument that Resolution 1441 automatically mandates the use of force (principle of "automaticity").

Twentyeight of them oppose war on Iraq. The rest are either ambiguous or depend on crumbs from the US, entry into NATO, EU, etc. The bulk of these are former Soviet bloc countries, disoriented and highly susceptible to pressure.

Western Europe is different. Of the European Union's 15 member-states, nine oppose war, including France and Germany. The governments of the rest -- Britain, Italy,

and EU over the global order.

After the Cold War, Washington has bypassed the UN (e.g. Bosnia and Kosovo), or bullied it. Today, it behaves as if the UN were a nuisance. That's what "automaticity" means.

US leaders insult and lampoon the UN. Mr Bush rails against the Security Council for not enforcing "its own Resolution" on Iraq for 12 years. But he is silent on Israel's violation of the far more important Resolution 242 on Palestine *right since 1967* -- with American complicity.

The US wants to undermine the UN's integrity, credibility and effectiveness -- even if that produces instability, chaos and brig-

andage. By contrast, EU states believe that undermining the UN isn't right. Even the mighty states need it.

In the system of balance-of-power politics, the great powers' objective is not to vanquish rivals with overwhelming force, but achieve a degree of military and political advantage. Europe largely accepts this system's constraints. The US doesn't.

Mr Donald Rumsfeld's derogatory term "old Europe" insinuates that countries like France and Germany remain stuck in "old", outmoded thinking, while the US represents "new", forward-looking values, as the leader of the "coming" world.

The opposite is true. The US pursues a jingoistic nationalism and imperial, hegemonic notions of power.

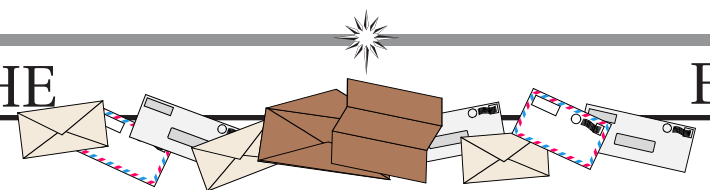
The EU, despite flaws, is attempting something new: a union with open borders, shared currency, common foreign policy. It has put behind centuries-old feuds. The criteria for EU membership include democratic governance, human rights protection, and unthinkability of war between members. That, surely, represents progress.

The Iraq crisis has polarised world opinion. It confronts Indian policy-makers, and the public, with new challenges and choices. It's time we shed our insularity and cow fetishes, and related to the larger world -- to strike out for global peace and justice.

Prof. Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

## EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Bangladesh's World Cup performance

Bangladesh was the ICC champion in 1998 and Kenya became the runners-up. In ICC World Cup 2003, Kenya goes to Super Six and Bangladesh loses all the match including the one against the novice Canada!

Namira Khan Dhaka

In the Kenya vs Bangladesh match, our fielding was so poor that any local neighbourhood team would have been able to perform better.

Aminur Rhaman Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Kenya vs Bangladesh match was like India vs Pakistan match to us. By losing the match in such a poor manner, the team has humiliated the entire nation. I hold every single member of the team responsible for this insulting defeat.

Shuvro Shourav Dhaka University

We didn't send the team to humili-

ate us this way. How could they lose an easy match like the one against Kenya? Our fielding was so poor that anybody could beat us. Didn't the coach train the players anything? Why should we pay our hard-earned money for the training of such incompetent players?

Anamika Aman Dhanmondi, Dhaka

The performance of Bangladesh cricket in the World Cup was absolutely devastating and the players as well as the BCB officials should feel ashamed of themselves for the team's poor performance. The time has come to reshuffle the entire team including the captain. I never considered Khaled Mashud as the appropriate candidate for the post. Then, the selectors should have been wise enough to choose the correct players but instead, they picked all the youngsters who failed to perform. What sort of selectors are they? I guess, none of them has good knowledge about cricket.

The cricket board president, Ali Asghar should consider himself guilty for being the lawmaker of the ruling party otherwise he would have been in big trouble. He

should have been sacked in the first place.

The players should consider themselves lucky that our cricket fans are not as fanatic as the ones in our neighbouring countries otherwise god knows what would have happened to them. The players never seemed serious in their performance and probably they never will be.

Minhaj Ahmed Uttara, Dhaka

From the miserable performance of the team it became obvious that the players had no intention of winning the match! Probably their only interest lied in visiting a foreign country with public money! I feel ashamed to consider myself as a Bangladeshi!

Turjo Chowdhury Gulshan, Dhaka

Politics is supposed to be for the betterment of the people. But in our country it is used for the very opposite purpose. Politics is used in ruining each and every institution and the latest victim is cricket.

Thank you Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia for ruining probably

the only arena where we could have achieved any success.

Adib Anam New Eskaton Rd, Dhaka

Kenya goes to Super Six and we come back empty-handed. Who is responsible for this?

Samia Khan Banani, Dhaka

I don't mind losing to Kenya, we even lost to Canada! But how can you drop three catches, give countless extra runs and misfield in the poorest manner! It seemed that even if a football was used instead of a cricket ball the performance of our 'golden boys' would have remained the same.

Chandra Chandra Dhaka

We should send our team to Canada. We have a lot to learn from them -- how to make the nation proud, how to give world class performance with the least training and how to defeat a 'Test playing nation' in the very first appearance.

Abbar Khan

Dhaka

Thank god Bangladesh's World Cup performance is over. The humiliation was becoming too much to handle.

Rana Dhaka

When the World Cup tournament began, I was so excited. I thought that the entire world would see how Bangladesh, a poor third world country has succeeded in their own to perform side by side with top class teams like Australia, West Indies etc. I was so sure that Bangladesh would win at least two matches -- against Canada and the archrival Kenya.

Never had I thought they would perform so poorly! Haven't they learnt anything in these years? Was the funding insufficient? Was the Coach inefficient? Or were the players not motivated enough fight like true Royal Bengal Tigers? Don't they care a bit about the prestige of the country? We, the people don't deserve to be humiliated this way.

Whatever the reason behind the disastrous performance of our

Team, it has to be pointed out and taken care of. We spend a lot of money for the improvement of cricket. But from their latest performance it becomes clear that all the funding has gone down the drain. All we asked for was a competitive performance from the team. Was it too much to ask for?

Asifur Rahman Khan Dhanmondi, Dhaka

To increase our chance of winning a World Cup, I say it is time to change our tactic (concentrate on the sport we are good at) and introduce our beloved and much respected national sport to the international community, the *Hartal*!

The good thing about this game is that, you can have any number of players as you like. No formal uniform or referee is required. We Bangladeshers are so passionate about *Hartal* that, this is the only sport which allows us to overcome our age, gender, religion and every other barriers you can think of. According to Hanif Sanket, it is even good for your health as it provides light physical exercise. The players can perform with

hockey-stick, machete, AK-47, bamboo, brick, stone and many other instruments available in the market at reasonable prices. If things do get a bit tough, then of course you can always throw couple of bombs without causing much harm. And finally, if we still lose the game, we can always blame it on the previous government or the opposition!

What do you say?

Azad Miah Otdham, UK

Bangladesh's pathetic performance in the World Cup has thrown our cricket in a sort of disarray. Lots of doubt arises about our ability to compete at the top level of cricket. The onus of the dismal performance lies on the management and the selection committee of BCB. Though it is the players who go out in the middle and play the game, it is the selection committee that selects those players.

Exclusion of some experienced players like Javed Omar Belim and Akram Khan did more damage than good. In spite of their better averages, they were ignored by the

selectors who justified their decision with some 'childish reasons.' There are serious doubts whether these people in the management have ever played cricket. There is also a big leadership crisis in the team itself. To get positive results the captain must lead his team and rescue the team during crisis. Khaled Mashud has failed to come in aid of the team when it was badly needed. It might be agreed that Khaled Mashud Pilot had played some anchor role innings and have helped the team to avoid some embarrassing defeats. But those were lost matches anyway.

In matches against Canada and Kenya, Bangladesh had the golden opportunity to win and it was an ideal situation for the captain to deliver the goods. But he failed miserably. It's about time the authorities concerned looked closely into the problems and searched for the remedy. There is still time to salvage our pride.

Zahid S Atcha Ontario, Canada