

Is it Muhuri now?

Inter-state norm on test again

THAT New Delhi has had, up its sleeves, a plan to construct an embankment on the Muhuri river, with a pump-house to boot, is disquieting. First, it's a common river whose resources cannot be monopolised or inequitably utilised by any one of the co-riparian states. Second, the structure is contemplated to be put up at a disputed site along the Belunia-Nijalkapur border in Feni.

There are other reasons for the disquiet. The embankment on the Indian side is likely to cause river erosion into the Bangladesh territory. A spar on the Indian side has already had river erosion set in near Feni. Furthermore, the proposed Indian structure could interfere with the natural flow of the river thereby threatening to alter its course.

So powerful are the arguments intrinsically against India's unilateral decision that, at one stage, New Delhi herself saw a point in them. Otherwise, how could the 17th meeting of the standing committee of India-Bangladesh Joint-Rivers Commission decide for embankments on both Bangladesh and Indian sides of the river for the benefit of the two peoples? But, even such a mutually acceptable option had to be set aside in view of the 'disputed' status of the two-kilometre-long stretch where the structures were envisioned to be put up. The understanding was that until such time as the border is permanently demarcated the project would be put on hold.

Against this backdrop, an inter-ministerial meeting held in Dhaka recently has rightly called upon India to maintain *status quo* on the Muhuri river. Let both the countries benefit by embankments on either side of the border after the international boundary will have been demarcated in areas under dispute.

Earlier, in April, an Indian plan to unilaterally divert a substantial portion of the Brahmaputra river water to her southern region was brought up at a seminar organised by the Bangladesh Economic Association. While commenting on the resulting news item, we said, "India must discuss its plans with us" underscoring the fact that the two countries have not had JRC ministerial level meeting during the last three to four years.

We reiterate the call hoping it would be heeded now.

Traffic hat on women

A flash of light in policescape

THE city dwellers were greeted, indeed, with a different spectacle in the streets on Sunday. Forty traffic policewomen *mannig* the streets at various important junctions in the capital for the first ever time drew curious but admiring stares. Thanks to the government, home ministry and police department for the new-look traffic management dispensation, if only partially.

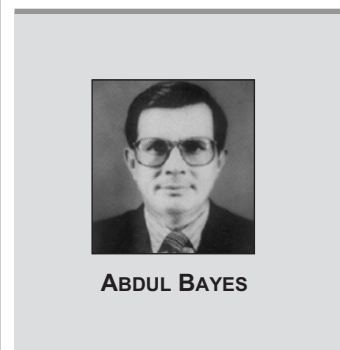
The positive reactions from the people show how well this has gone down with them. It is modestly just a step nearer global urban modernity standards, with Dhaka yet to be in the ivy league of world capitals in that particular sense.

There are quite a few expectations from these latest recruits in the traffic police department.

Minute attention to detail is the woman's forte. Traffic policewomen could be ideally suited for handling problems with greater attention to detail than their male counterparts. They are by nature likely to be serious in their new work. Traffic control in the capital is not fully and properly mechanised; human presence to bring order on the streets is still a primary necessity. And, there shouldn't be any gender gap there.

Playing a traffic-friendly role should come to the women cops rather easily. Let's just hope that they would be successful in bringing some discipline to the capital's traffic non-system. But to enable them to do a good job of it, there is one vital requirement to be met. They have been placed on duty after a very short orientation programme. They need training; and it has to be imparted on a continual basis. Furthermore, unless the experienced male traffic personnel extend a helping hand to them, the gender equality exercise is most likely to fail. Traffic policewomen have tremendous potential just waiting to be tapped. We only hope, higher officials have already instructed the male policemen to treat their new colleagues as equals, not as subordinates or lesser human beings. Though the step is not quite in the category of empowerment, it definitely is a clear indication of assimilating women into tabooed areas which is more than welcome. Let us wish the new entrants all the best.

From 'on-farm' to 'non-farm'



ABDUL BAYES

THE role of rural non-farm sector activities (RNFA) in propelling growth and reducing poverty is well documented in the available literature. With the passage of time and perhaps, riding on the wave of overall growth of the economy, this sector emerged as an important engine of rural employment and income generation. Being on the sideline for decades, RNF now seems very much at the centre of blood circulation of the economy. As M. Rosegrant and P. Hazell of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) rightly observes, "From relatively a minor sector, often largely part-time and subsistence-oriented at the early stages of development, the rural non-farm economy develops to become a major motor of economic growth in its own right, not only for the countryside but for the economy as a whole. Its growth also has important implications for the welfare of women and poor households, sometimes helping to offset inequities that can arise within the agricultural sector." Again, Sudha Narayanan and Ashok Gulati (IFPRI) remarks, in Latin America in the 1990s, as much as 46 per cent (on average) of rural household income of selected countries came from non-farm sources. The proportion is close to 45 per cent in Africa and lower than 35 per cent in Asia. But in Bangladesh, as revealed by household surveys, the share is reported to be 52-54 per cent of total household income.

Bailing out Bangladesh!

The RNF activities and their correlates are now widely discussed in academic and policy planks. There seems to be no dearth of data and deliberations on this score either. But of the available empirical works, none appears to match Mahabub Hossain's (of IRR) seminal results from repeated household survey carried out in 64 villages for two periods: 1987 and 2000. I take the opportunity of releasing some of the interesting observations for the readers.

In 1987, 34 per cent of the earning members of sample households

reported RNFA as the primary occupation and another 15 per cent as secondary occupation. By 2000, the share rose to 52 and 10 per cent, respectively. The figures to the fact that RNFA emerged as primary source of employment in rural Bangladesh. Surveys of available information in other countries show that the sector accounts for 20-45 per cent of full-time employment. Admittedly, the share is on higher side in Bangladesh.

2000 period. The secondary enrolment increased from 51 to 66 per cent. The proportion of adult workers with no formal schooling declined from 63 to 40 per cent and the average year of schooling increased from 3.1 to 4.3 years. Noteworthy, cultivation of crops are now being carried out by those without formal education (landless and marginal households) and the relatively educated ones have been leaving land behind lured by lucra-

manal non-farm activities like rickshaw pulling, mechanics and wage labour in trade and business. These phenomena of mobility and malleability of rural population could partly explain the allegation hovering around the shortage of agricultural labour in rural areas and the rise in wage rate.

Hossain further observes that participation in manual labour based activities (transport, construction, cottage industry and wage

more by *push* factors and in Latin America it is more on account of *pull* factors." *En passant*, one needs to note that agricultural stagnation pushes people out of agriculture while better opportunities elsewhere (e.g. RNFA) pull people towards dynamic activities with lure of a better livelihood. One of the indicators of the strengths of the RNFA is the productivity. If labour productivity in RNFA were lower than agricultural wage rate, it would

income to total household income came down from 58 per cent in 1987 to 46 per cent in 2000. But that of non-agricultural income shot up from 42 to 54 per cent during the same period of time. The growth in rural incomes over 1987-2000 was almost entirely on account of the non-agricultural sector. Disconcertingly, however, the income distribution in Bangladesh is fairly unequal and has worsened over time. For example, the income share of the bottom 40 per cent in per capita income scale declined from 17 to 14 per cent while that of the top ten per cent increased from 32 to 35 per cent during the period under comparison.

The rural non-agricultural income is more unequally distributed than agricultural income. In 2000, bottom 40 per cent in per capita income scale received 11 per cent of total non-agricultural income while top ten per cent got 39 per cent. Compared to 1987, the ninth deciles group and the middle 40 per cent have increased their share while the share of the bottom 40 and top ten per cent declined marginally. The findings further indicate that the most unequally distributed source of income is business followed by services and non-rice agriculture. Rice is income equaliser -- thanks to the advent of MVs -- and rejects the earlier apprehensions of rice being more rewarding for the relatively rich. The concentration of income for services and non-agricultural labour has declined over the period suggesting that relatively low-income households are being employed in these activities, albeit in lower productivity region.

Mobility and message

The message on income inequality in rural areas is clear. "The worsening of income inequality in rural areas is mainly on account of the increased share of income from business and services, which are more unequally distributed than the income from agriculture. It is a challenge to policy makers to devise and implement programmes and policies that facilitate the distribution of non-farm employment in favour of the land-poor households." Development of infrastructure, institutions and innovative technology seem to be the call of the hour.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

"The worsening of income inequality in rural areas is mainly on account of the increased share of income from business and services, which are more unequally distributed than the income from agriculture. It is a challenge to policy makers to devise and implement programmes and policies that facilitate the distribution of non-farm employment in favour of the land-poor households."

In 2000, a third of rural employment was generated in business enterprises and service sector activities. The proportion of workers in these activities rose by 60 per cent over the 1987-2000 period. The service sector activities are, by and large, full-time while business activities are mostly part-time occupation. However, rural towns and cities -- and not the villages -- were the sources of service sector employment. In Bangladesh, 6 per cent of rural households reported one or more family members working abroad to send remittances on a regular basis.

The changes in the composition of rural employment show increased occupational mobility from farm to non-farm activities. In Bangladesh, the proportion of cultivators declined over the compared periods and the share of agricultural labourers reached almost half between 1987 and 2000. Interestingly, agricultural wage labour has growingly become a part-time occupation. The trend seems to be the same in other countries also. For example, in Asian countries such as China (*a la* Narayanan and Gulati) part-time farming is widespread while in India and Thailand, urban centers are receptacles of seasonal labor from the countryside.

Needless to mention perhaps, that the *mobility* from farm to non-farm has been facilitated by the improvement in the communication system and the linkages that agricultural growth generated over the years. But the *malleability* of workers across occupation has been helped more by the improvement in the quality of education. For example, primary enrolment increased from 59 to 89 per cent over 1987-

opportunities. In 1987, 44 per cent of workers from the functionally landless households (owning less than 0.2 ha) were engaged as agricultural wage labour but by 2000, the proportion dropped to 22 per cent. But the proportion of functionally landless households as cultivators rose from about 13 to 18 per cent. As literate people are leaving land for eking out a better butter elsewhere, illiterate functionally landless households are entering into the tenancy market. The proportion of land under tenancy cultivation increased from 23 to 34 per cent and that of the tenant farmers from 44 to 55 per cent during 1987-2000 period.

But there is a difference. For the large and medium farmers, the mobility meant an exit from farms and an entry to business or services with good education and credit-worthy capital. Whereas for the landless, it meant from agricultural labour to cultivation or labour based

labour) seems to be poverty driven as shown by the negative association of participation with size of land ownership, non-land fixed assets and the level of education workers. The most important factor influencing participation in the service sector is education while the major determinants of participation in business activities are accumulation of non-land assets, large number of workers in the household and access to developed infrastructure.

Push or pull

What drives rural households to participate in RNF activities? Are *push factors* at work or *pull factors* dominant? Sudha Narayanan and Ashok Gulati notes, drawing upon several studies, that they have different implications as far as welfare is concerned. "Studies in Africa and Latin America suggest that although rural non-farm income and employment are important for both, in Africa they tend to be driven

support the hypothesis of "push factors" behind the expansion of RNFA. Higher productivity, on the other hand, would indicate a pull factor.

The estimates of labour productivity from a resurvey shows that productivity is 10 to 40 per cent higher than agricultural wage rate for non-farm activities that need very little of human and physical capital, and skill. These are, for example, construction work, rickshaw pulling. In service and business enterprises, the average labour productivity was found to be two to 3.5 times higher than agricultural wage rate. The labour productivity was however lower for functionally landless households than for large and medium land owners. Thus, the resource poor are at the lower end of the ladder of business and services than the rich presumably due to the lack of capital and education. Any way, the evidences support the hypothesis of pull factors. This is quite contrast to what we observed in the decades before when people used to be pushed out of agriculture and grab low productive employment outside agriculture. The phenomenon, perhaps, also tends to suggest that Bangladesh agriculture no longer saddles with lingering unlimited supply of labour where marginal productivity of labour is zero or negative.

Income distribution?

Hossain also dealt with the issue of income and its distribution across income scale. In agriculture, land is the predominant source of income and hence inequality since land is not equally distributed and a large army of landless labourers exist. The eminent researcher observed that the share of agricultural



Is Nepal heading for a political instability?

THE Himalayan kingdom of Nepal seems to be heading for political instability unless the King succeeds in reaching some kind of understanding with the major political parties on the national elections as well as other political problems that are haunting the country for some time past. Another key issue that hangs on the nation is the complex and somewhat intractable subject of Maoist insurgency, which has rocked this impoverished nation for last several years. The government and the Maoists have initiated a dialogue in recent times to find a settlement on the vexed demands of the ultra leftists like setting up a Republic in Nepal in place of the monarchy, but new political unrest appeared to have scuttled the process of negotiations for the time being. Peace with the Maoists is the key to hold new elections since the ultras may go back to the path of violence breaking the current ceasefire with the government if their 'cause' fails to make any headway in the near future.

The picturesque land of Nepal has been in international news for last few years for a variety of reasons but unfortunately mostly in negative perspective since political problems and a gruesome massacre of the mainstream royal family during the period have virtually put this South Asian nation on the vortex of an unstable situation. The country is the host of the headquarters of seven-nation South Asian Associa-

tion for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since the regional forum was launched in 1985 and more remarkably, the effective monarchy took a back seat there since 1990 when democracy was introduced following a pro-democracy movement that achieved its avowed objectives. However, the functioning of the parliamentary democracy has not been smooth as politicians from rival parties and those belonging to factions of main political party Nepal Congress squabbled forcing

stage politicians failed to live up to the expectations in providing a clean and welfare-oriented administration. As such, when prime minister like Girija Prasad Koirala was forced out of office following corruption charges involving aircraft of the Royal Nepalese Airlines, few shed tears for him but biggest casualty was the credibility of the politicians. Then again, when Koirala and Sher Bahadur Dubei, both from Nepali Congress, quarrelled over ascendancy in the party and the later

still remains shrouded in mystery. The killings brought King's brother Gayendra to the throne as the crown prince had also reportedly shot himself to death after killing the King and others.

But present King's time is being viewed with increasing controversy mainly for the reason that an impression is gaining ground that he is seeking to take back the executive powers to the monarchy. He dismissed the elected government of prime minister Sher Bahadur

ble prime minister till new elections are held but the King opted for his own choice. This has further sharpened the differences between the monarch and the political parties. Consequently, the future course of developments in Nepal seems unhealthy unless the monarch takes fresh steps to bridge the differences with the politicians.

It is also important that the King also assuages the feelings of the Maoists, who have criticised the appointment of the new prime

minister Thapa has vowed to continue contacts with the rebels. The long-running revolt has earlier claimed more than 7000 lives.

Political instability is sadly stalking the South Asian nation which is struggling to establish a democratic edifice. True, strain on the inexperienced democracy causes occasional problems for the country and the role of a section of the power-hungry or money-hungry politicians only help to impede the development of the representative government. But there is no alternative to democracy as the system was gradually growing through experiments and trials in Nepal. Popular monarch Birendra remained steadfastly committed to democratic system after he quit executive power in 1990. If the new King, in this or that form, wants to enjoy more executive powers, as alleged by the politicians, it will be a big mistake. Nepal must exercise democracy with overdue fresh elections taking place as soon as possible and a more vigorous effort be made for a settlement of the Maoist problem which has been crippling the country. Otherwise, political instability and other problems loom large for a nation which can ill afford myriad difficulties in quick succession.

Zaglul A Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

MATTERS AROUND US

Political instability is sadly stalking the South Asian nation which is struggling to establish a democratic edifice. True, strain on the inexperienced democracy causes occasional problems for the country and the role of a section of the power-hungry or money-hungry politicians only help to impede the development of the representative government. But there is no alternative to democracy as the system was gradually growing through experiments and trials in Nepal.

midterm polls. Alleged corruption by the persons at the helm also contributed to the waning confidence of the people in the new democratic pattern even though there is no iota of doubt that it is the representative government that is wanted by the countrymen who remained for long under the single person monarchy rule.

Late King Birendra did not try doggedly to cling to power when mass commotion was clear for democracy in Nepal but at later

became the prime minister, the country suffered further political setbacks. But it was the royal massacre more than nearly three years ago that left King Birendra, his wife Queen Aishwarya and most members of the family dead in ghastly incident that stunned and shocked most in and outside Nepal. The official account that crown prince Dipendra killed all in a fit of anger as a sequel of altercations with his parents is hardly acceptable to an ordinary Nepalese and the matter

Dubei and installed royalist Lokendra Bahadur Chand as prime minister, who, however, had to step down recently as political parties continued an unremitting agitation describing the developments as unconstitutional. The King then appointed Surya Bahadur Thapa, another royalist as the premier turning a blind eye to the nominees of the political parties. Five of the six major political organisations had chosen Madhav Kumar Nepal from the Communist party as the proba-

minister as "at the influence of the United States and India". The Maoists, fighting since 1996 to topple the constitutional monarchy, shot into prominence in last two years because of a series of battles with the government forces in which both sides suffered heavily. However, they agreed to a truce and have so far held two rounds of dialogue without much progress though. The third round is due soon but the new developments are casting an uncertainty on the future talks although

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.

Arundhati Roy on the new American Empire

The two quotes below are from the full text of the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR)-sponsored lecture delivered by Arundhati Roy at the Riverside Church in Harlem, New York, on May 13. Historically known for its social activism, this is the church where Nelson Mandela spoke and where Martin Luther King Jr. first protested the Vietnam War. This speech was also published in OUTLOOK, India in their May 26, 2003 issue.

Perhaps you will seriously consider printing the whole text by some arrangements for your readers whose only source of such information is *The Daily Star*. The

quotes are given below:
"When a country ceases to be merely a country and becomes an empire, then the scale of operations changes dramatically. ... I speak as a subject of the American Empire. I speak as a slave who presumes to criticise her king." -- Arundhati Roy
"If you join the battle, not in your hundreds of thousands, but in your millions, you will be greeted joyously by the rest of the world. And you will see how beautiful it is to be gentle instead of brutal, safe instead of scared. Befriended instead of isolated. Loved instead of hated." -- Arundhati Roy
AC
Dhaka

Traffic policewoman -- It's wonderful to see Bangladesh's

first traffic policewoman on duty. Perhaps (men) drivers will now behave better and have more respect for the law.
But for heavens sake - get the police commissioner to change their caps to a more suitable 'pith' helmet design that is used in other hot weather countries around the world. Can you imagine the heat these cops will absorb with their present caps!
Keep up the good reporting - we look forward to your Internet paper every day.
A. Ahmed
London, UK

Of forums, dialogues and seminars
For quite sometime now I have been closely following the news coverage both in the print and the

electronic media of the various dialogues, seminars and discussion forums taking place over the country particularly in Dhaka. Bengal by nature love to talk and deliberate at all public and private places high and low. There is nothing wrong in it as far as the element of the so-called democratic traditions are concerned, but what is of most concern is that I for one have often been frustrated with the fact these have resulted into little or no benefit for the teeming millions of poor and the disadvantaged of the country.
Well one is therefore sooner than later likely to question the benefit of all such exercises. In fact there are some "real" benefits for a specific group of people. These "exercises" serve as most effective tools of personal image builders

beside creating a smokescreen of "living democracy" in the country including creating of credibility bridges for both individual and organisations for donor fund flow etc. The other benefit is that they also help in sales of the dailies which deal with such news coverage particularly their specific target group of the expatriate community and donor agency representatives.
Shamsher Chowdhury
Dhaka

Genesis of the Kashmir conflict
I beg to differ with Mr AK Azad (June 07) that Kashmir issue was a diplomatic double standard.
The All-Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference took place in October 1932 in Srinagar. The president was Sheikh Abdullah. He

was the undisputed leader of the Kashmiri Muslims, who opposed joining Pakistan. His reason being that the Muslim League was a party of feudal land owners and they were going to sell out the people sooner or later (how prophetic!).
Mr Jinnah ordered a military invasion of Kashmir in September 1947. The invading army was heavily accompanied by irregular Pashtun marauders led by Khurshid Anwar, a protégé of Mr Liaqat Ali Khan. These tribesmen entered Kashmir and started a rampage of looting, rape and destruction. The Maharaja appealed to Mr Nehru for help and signed away Kashmir to India. The Indian forces entered Kashmir and drove the invading army out and Sheikh Abdullah, leader of

Kashmiri Muslims, stood with Mr Nehru on the same platform in November 1947 and hailed joining India.
So much for the beaten-to-death parallel with Hyderabad.
Yahya
USA

Price hike
One Government goes another one comes. Each time a new government comes with a mouthful of words to quench the suffering of the general people. As soon as they sit on the chair, their eyes become bloomy and are sparked out of its hollow in search of self-seeking. They come and go on increasing the image (a non-stop claim) of the country abroad and also go on preaching the increase of GDP in paper from 5 to 8 per cent every

time. Increase of GDP they do by increasing the price of most essential items for which livelihood of every people specially the poor who lives on hand to mouth become unbearable. Once the price of fuel could be increased by the government, the price of rice, pulse, fish, meat, vegetables and even water goes up by leaps and bounds. While the government increases the price they do not have the time to see or realise that, with the increase of fuel price, the price of consumer items go up as well.
On one hand, the government propagates to keep price stable. On the other hand, it goes on increasing the price of fuel, electricity and water and so on.

Nur Hossain
Bangshal, Dhaka