

## Anti-graft body

Will it ever see the light of day?

ON the one hand, we blame the world for calling us corrupt and on the other, we move at a snail's pace to set up a mechanism to fight it. Everybody knows how important it is to set up an independent anti-corruption commission and yet how utterly callous and insincere the government has been in setting it up. It was BNP's election pledge which was repeated ad nauseam in every meeting with donors and on every occasion that the government needed to speak on the subject.

Today, after two years of dilly dallying, the ruling party led parliamentary standing committee has asked for three more months to present the bill to the Sangsad. A quick examination of the whole process will clearly indicate the basic insincerity of the ruling party to get this body operational. First, it took more than a year and half to get the draft bill right. Once the cabinet approved it in June 2003, the draft bill was placed before the House in July, which duly sent it to the Standing Committee on Law and Parliamentary Affairs for the necessary examination and vetting within 15 days. The Committee never sat within that allocated time and asked for 10 days more. In the meantime, the draft was subjected to widespread and vehement criticism because of the provisions of two ministers being members of the six-member selection committee.

Then the Committee met in September and decided to consult the civil society--for all this period the government did not bother to talk to anybody other than themselves--as there was so much criticism made of the draft. A roundtable was held on October 23 which made clear and elaborate suggestions as to what the public desired the draft to contain. Now, almost a month after that, the Standing Committee asked for and got another three months' time, meaning that the bill is unlikely to be placed before the next session of parliament.

There is an obvious gap between the government's proclaimed policy and what it does for fighting corruption. And if the delay in forming this body is any indication of its real intention, then we can forget about this extremely essential watchdog body for the foreseeable future.

Government's *monga* position

Burying its head in the sand is not a solution

THE government's response to the *monga* or famine-like situation in the north of the country has taken a depressingly familiar tone. Food Minister Abdullah al Noman told the press Sunday that the situation has been blown out of proportion by the opposition and the media and that the true situation was not as dire as they have led us to believe.

This comes on the heels of the commerce minister's statement that prices were normal for this time of year and the finance minister's dismissal of the Transparency International report on corruption in Bangladesh.

These are only the most recent attempts of the government to deny reality and pin the blame for bad news on media exaggeration or opposition propaganda. It seems that whenever it is faced with reports or accounts of bad news, the government's first response is to simply deny it or blame the media for it.

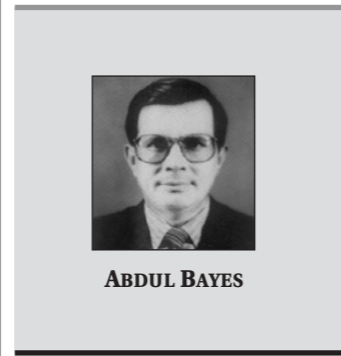
If there were any indication that these denials were for public consumption only and that the government was at least in private working to address the problems, we would not be so alarmed. But what is so alarming is that the government appears to believe its own propaganda and act accordingly.

We will be the first to admit that the media may occasionally be guilty of exaggeration and even sometimes, though rarely, of error -- but to take the position that any criticism of the government or its policies is false and politically motivated renders the government totally incapable of actually responding to the very real crises that this country faces.

This denial syndrome is self-defeating. If the government does not even acknowledge that a problem exists, how can it even begin to redress the situation? The government's refusal to even acknowledge when there is a problem in the country destroys its credibility and creates an ever-widening gulf between it and the public it is supposed to serve.

For its own sake as well as that of the country's, the government must snap out of this knee-jerk denial mode if it hopes to ever be able to effectively minister to the affairs of state.

## Rural roads and markets: Impact on economy



ABDUL BAYES

RESEARCHES on the role of infrastructure in raising income and reducing poverty are amply demonstrated in the available literature. I recollect one study -- seminal in a sense -- by Raisuddin Ahmed and Mahabub Hossain that used household level data of 16 villages of Bangladesh to show that infrastructures such as roads, markets, electricity and social services have profound impact on household income. There are also few studies carried out by BIDS, and a few driven by the donors. But the study I am going to talk in this column is perhaps the recent most by Dr Abdul Latif of BIDS and the paper is titled: "Income, Consumption and Poverty Impact of Infrastructure Development".

There is mainly one reason that I have been prompted to pull the pen about the paper. And that is, it tends to discuss the impacts of transport and trading networks in stimulating growth and reducing poverty. In other words, it delves into the development of roads and markets in rural areas. Reportedly, there are 2,100 local

assembly and secondary markets which are the principal centers for wholesale and retail transactions of both agricultural and non-agricultural commodities and services in rural areas. The secondary markets are connected with the regional and national arterial road networks and with the upazila (local administrative unit covering 100-150 villages) headquarters through Feeder Road Type-B (FRB). The existing poor state of the secondary markets and the FRBs, says

ing of 65 secondary markets; and (c) construction of 3,700 linear metres of bridges and culverts.

Panel data of two time periods, collected through sample surveys conducted by BIDS, were used in the study. Eight project roads and six control roads were selected. Again, three villages were purposively selected from arch project and control road by taking two villages from roadside area and one from remote area.

seasons. Third, development of infrastructure help unhindered movements of inputs to ensure lower prices to farmers. The author noticed that the changes in the urea and TSP prices were more favourable in the project villages compared to control villages. Likewise, infrastructure helps diffusion of irrigation technology at a faster rate. Transportation of machinery for drilling shallow/deep tube wells is easier in the areas where road network is well developed. Not surprisingly,

of agricultural wage-work has fallen but at a faster rate in project villages. But as elsewhere in Bangladesh, the proportion of earners in non-agricultural activities surged. "Thus a larger shift from low-wage agricultural work to better remunerative non-agricultural jobs (wage-work and/or self-employed) has taken place in the project villages compared to control villages during the inter-survey period".

uted in reducing the incidence, the depth and the severity of poverty.

We can imagine that besides the impacts on income, consumption and poverty, development of roads especially of markets could have caused a change in resource allocation at farm level. The shift could be from low to high value agriculture, from subsistence mode of production to commercialisation and also from low productive non-agriculture to high productive non-agricultural activities. I am told that the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) already initiated a study on the impact of the Bongabandhu Bridge in the transformation of rural livelihoods in some selected villages of northern districts. But whether completed or ongoing, a priori reasoning would suggest that development of rural roads and markets is likely to cause positive impact in terms of income generation and poverty alleviation. The policy conclusion is simple. Turn rural areas into growth centres or semi urban areas by building roads and other infrastructure. That would enhance the productive capacity of the poor and the potentials of the sources from which they are likely to eke out their living. This would mitigate the migratory movements. Let our policies have at least some element of pro-rural bias -- just the opposite of what Michael Lipton lamented long before to have observed: "urban-bias".

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

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the author, suggests that the rural economy is likely to get a boost if these markets are developed and are made accessible year round through hard-surface all-weather FRBs.

There are several projects undertaken by the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) of the government aimed at improving the rural transport and trading networks across the country. But Latif picked up Rural Development Project-7 (RDP-7) implemented in eight northwestern districts: Rajshai, Naogaon, Natore, Chapai Nawabgonj, Bogra, Joypurhat, Pabna and Sirajgonj. The project comprised the following components: (a) improvement of 500 km of FRBs to bitumen-surface standard; (b) upgrad-

In this context, we need to know the ways infrastructures tend to maximize the objective function. Admittedly, the immediate impact is on employment and income -- especially of the landless households -- not only in construction and maintenance but also in transport

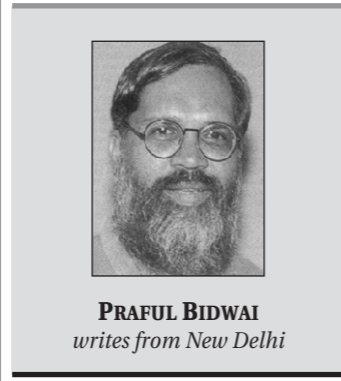
and ancillary activities. Second, improvement in infrastructure is likely to make labour market more flexible and thus enabling greater mobility and malleability. Latif observed that the nominal wage of male agricultural workers has increased during the inter-survey period at a slower rate in the project villages compared with control villages in both peak and slack

perhaps, the researcher observed more tube wells in project villages than in others. What is more important is the reduction in irrigation cost that should follow from good transport, good maintenance and good care. The author of the paper found that irrigation cost increased by 24-36 per cent in control villages but declined by 3-17 per cent in project villages. Fourth, the output prices were relatively more favourable (higher) to farmers in project villages compared to control villages.

As far as employment is concerned, the proportion of self-employed earners engaged in crop production has mainly fallen in both project and control villages. Also, the proportion

Latif also landed with an eloquent exposition of how there occurred changes in consumption pattern since the start of the projects. Finally, he took resort to the famous regression analysis for determining the relationship between the dependent variables (e.g. income, poverty, employment) and the explanatory variables e.g. development of road, proximity, household characteristics etc. He observed that his empirics accept the hypothesis that the development of transport and trading infrastructures has independent positive impacts on income, consumption and poverty reduction. Especially, development of infrastructure has significantly contrib-

## Jaya's media misadventure: Defending and extending freedom

PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

WHEN an idea really catches the people's imagination, even its detractors start paying lip service to it. That's what has happened to *The Hindu's* campaign to defend itself against the vindictive punishment given to four of its journalists by the Tamil Nadu Assembly.

This has drawn support from all sections of journalists, and even from BJP leaders who have been politically cultivating Ms Jayalalitha. Even her close friend Mr George Fernandes terms her vendetta worse than the Emergency.

The Supreme Court has stayed the Assembly's sentence. In response, Ms Jayalalitha has filed another defamation suit against *The Hindu* for an April 13 article. She will either escalate the confrontation and invite more trouble, or eat crow.

Her assault on *The Hindu* is the culmination of a series of vindictive actions, including 17 defamation or

libelsuits. She has subjected her media critics to censorship, political coercion and physical harassment, as well as 130 defamation cases.

Ms Jayalalitha was convinced she would get away with her attack upon India's most reputed daily. She reckoned that recent divisions within the extended family that owns the paper would prevent a concerted response.

Second, she feels the BJP needs her as a spoiler. The BJP is distancing itself from her rival, the DMK. Ms

Hindu. Mr Arun Jaitley, who vehemently defended the Prevention of Terrorism Act and other draconian laws, suddenly turned a crusader for freedom.

Nothing in the *Hindu* articles condemned by the Tamil Nadu Assembly's privileges committee is remotely scandalous. Their descriptive phrases such as "stinging", "diatribe", "incensed" and "high-pitched tone" give a feel of Ms Jayalalitha's speeches. They don't constitute breach of privi-

the medieval period when the still-weak English Parliament was struggling itself against an all-powerful monarchy. "Privilege" was the MPs' sole way of protecting themselves against the Crown.

This bears no parallel with today's India. Privilege makes sense now as strengthening the independence of legislatures. It cannot mean protecting MPs from public scrutiny or fair comment.

The privilege power has been

agements often apologise to them to avoid confrontation. This encourages the abuse of privilege.

No code was ever drafted to ensure that the privilege power would be "exercised with restraint and within the scope of 'life, liberty and due process of law'", as recommended by a House of Commons report in 1967 and reiterated in 1999. This must change.

Equally important is abuse of the judicial power of contempt. Two years ago, the Supreme Court sentenced

accountability --not defend judicial dignity. This Holy Cow must be sacrificed at the altar of truth, freedom and democracy.

The right to free expression is fundamental. But even more basic is the right to life, without which other rights become meaningless. This all-important right stands menaced by a number of laws and practices like police excesses, arbitrary arrests, custodial deaths, etc.

At least 23 draconian laws exist on India's statute-books, which seriously infringe the citizen's right to life and freedom. Many hold her/him guilty before proof or trial. They mandate detention without trial.

Nine pertain to border states like Punjab, the Northeast and Kashmir. Five pertain to states like Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra. Nine are all-India laws like Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967; Maintenance of Internal Security Act, 1971; National Security Act, 1980; Essential Services Maintenance Act, 1981; and POTA.

Such laws encourage the police to evade collecting evidence. They sit ill with democratic rights. Democracy doesn't *only* mean voting once every five years. It involves the rule of law, parliamentary norms and procedures, and fundamental rights, along with institutions like a free press.

That's where our *democratic deficit* lies. We will never be able to fill it unless we acknowledge our failures and honestly undertake reform.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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Jayalalitha is the only politician outside the *sangh parivar* to support the Babri demolition and the Gujarat pogrom.

Differences within *The Hindu* became manifest four months ago when Mr N. Ram was appointed editor-in-chief, eclipsing editor N Ravi. But Ms Jayalalitha wrongly assumed that intra-family differences would irreparably divide the group, and a journalist of integrity like Ram wouldn't defend his colleagues. If anything, her vendetta could reunite the family.

Politically too, Ms Jayalalitha underestimated public opinion. This impelled even the BJP to support *The*

lege.

Ms Jayalalitha compounded her original sin by misusing the Tamil Nadu police who turned up at *The Hindu's* Chennai offices without warrants, and intercepted Mr Ram's car in Bangalore the next day.

Shocking as this episode is, it demands a hard look at the privileges claimed by certain institutions. Three issues arise: legislative privilege; the power of judicial contempt; and certain constitutional freedoms.

Discussing these issues threadbare offers us a *historic chance* to strengthen the rights-based foundations of democracy.

Legislative privilege goes back to

repeatedly abused. Some of the worst instances come from Tamil Nadu. In 1987, its Assembly ordered the jailing of *Anand Vikatan's* S. Balasubramanian for demanding -- perfectly reasonably -- that legislators' privilege be codified.

In 1991, *The Illustrated Weekly's* K.P. Sunil wrote an article headlined "Tamil Nadu Assembly Fast Gaining Notoriety". The Speaker issued a warrant for his arrest. The Supreme Court stayed it. But another five years passed before the proceedings were dropped.

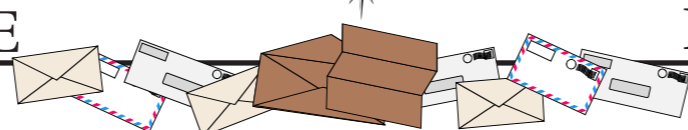
Many Speakers have issued breach-of-privilege notices to newspapers over the past quarter-century. Man-

writer Arundhati Roy, without giving her an opportunity to be heard. It thundered: "Judicial process and institution cannot be permitted to be scandalised... in such a blatant manner in which it has been done..."

In India, even truth is no defence against contempt. The judiciary's "dignity" can be defined arbitrarily, and a writer punished even for a fair comment not intended to malign the judiciary. Judges are human and make mistakes, sometimes grave ones. A fifth of India's higher judiciary is corrupt too -- according to former Chief Justice S.P. Bharucha.

The contempt power is typically used to stifle criticism and evade

## 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.

## Everyone except politicians in Bangladesh believes in democracy

I refer to the above quotation from a letter written by a gentleman from Dhaka on 12 November 2003 under the heading, "is democracy facing a danger?" I lived in UK for more than two decades which is the birth place of modern democracy. I have learnt the real values of democracy and seen how the political parties over there respect and follow the true principles of democracy. I agree fully with the gentleman that a democratically elected government can only be brought down by democratic and constitutional means. In a democracy everyone has the right to express grievances by peaceful means of protest, procession and strike etc and use the final power of vote to elect or unseat a political party from the government. The prescription of movement given by AL with the ultimate intention to unseat the democratically elected BNP government before its term is completed is undemocratic, unconstitutional and harmful for our future of democracy. This will create a dangerous precedent for others to follow when their time will come and this vicious scenario will

continue for foreseeable future.

Many years ago when I was in UK the Conservative party was in the government and the Labour party was in opposition, the leader of the British trade union council urged its member to start a movement to unseat the Conservative government from power. Though the TUC is Labour party's tradition but all the leaders of the Labour party immediately condemned the call for this movement by TUC and distanced themselves from the movement.

To undermine each other did not the AL and BNP have already damaged enough the economy and democracy of our nation? They have created enough monsters of Frankenstein from which they themselves will not be immune and innocent masses will suffer enormously again.

Mohammed Iqbal Hussain  
Dhaka

## Harassment of customer by Electricity Authority

Recently we are getting a notice in our area from DESA, printed on the face of our electricity bill. The notice says all customers are required to get clearance certificate of bill payments by certain date. When customers went to the electricity office with last six to

twelve months paid bills they were told they were required to have clearance certificate until end of December 2002. But when the customers asked to have their clearance certificate for that period they were told they owed the authority thousands of taka for unpaid bills dating back ten to fifteen years depending on when the meters were first installed in different households.

As the authority cannot find those payments in their ledger book they consider these are unpaid and shift the burden of proof to the customers. The authority would not bother to look into the original advice slips containing customer references sent by the bank which received the payments of the bills in the first place. If they look into those records they will find that it was their employees who did not post those paid bills in the ledger due to negligence.

Now if you ask the authority to trace those bank advice slips they won't be able to trace them. There is no penalty if they lose their documents. But if a customer can not show a ten years old bill listed as unpaid that customer has to pay the bill again within 21 days or the electric line will be disconnected. I saw a lady went back home

and produced it to a clerk. The clerk immediately started to post those bills in the ledger book. The lady was lucky to trace her very old bills. This incident proved that, the authority's claim of those unpaid bills was false. This cannot be isolated incident as majority of customers were informed they had some old unpaid bills.

Now my question is what happened to the original payments of the lady who produced her old paid bills listed as unpaid and how the books of the authority were reconciled. Why so many discrepancies were not detected in the audit process? Why the customer should pay a very old bill again if it is lost. Why the authority should not be compelled to prove conclusively producing original bank advice slips of the paid bills containing customers reference numbers.

I am drawing attention of the higher authority in this matter to intervene and investigate to find out those who created this mess in the first place and take necessary action against them and do not disconnect innocent customers line just because someone has lost his/her very old bill.

Iqbal Hussain  
Dhaka

Drugs concern!

Your editorial dt. 15/11/2003 titled "Spurious drugs-The menace must be eliminated" has focused on an important public health issue. Indeed, spurious drugs are as much threat to public health as to the local drug manufacturing industry. The authorities concerned should intensify their drive against illegal drug trade.

Meanwhile in one place of your editorial you have quoted the claim of the local drug producers that they meet 96 per cent of our total drug requirements. This is, no doubt, an assuring news. But the point is, whether all the drug manufacturing industries are producing drugs of genuine quality and international standard. If all of them are producing the same quality drug, then why such a big difference in price? For instance, 'Ceftriaxon' injection is produced by a number of local drug manufacturers and marketed in various trade names. But their price are not the same. Price of some brands are even 2 to 3 times higher than the others.

In my opinion, the authorities concerned should also ensure strict quality control and appropriate pricing of the locally produced drugs.

Prof. M. Zahidul Haque  
Director, Outreach Program  
Shere-e-Bangla Agricultural  
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## Sound can make you silent

The sound pollution is now a burning question of Dhaka city and it is increasing day by day at an alarming rate. As a result, the city dwellers are being the easy prey to different diseases. There is hardly any area of Dhaka city which is free from sound pollution. The atmosphere is being polluted either by the hydraulic horns of vehicles or microphones or by the industrial units. The residential areas, hospitals, educational institutions are now enduring the high sound of hydraulic horns of the vehicles, unbearable sound of different factories and unbridled playing of mikes.

The Dhaka city is now being called the city of pollution. The city has already crossed the limit of pollution to a far extent. Playing of hydraulic horns of vehicles, advertising through mikes, machining of mechanical parts here and there irrespective of residential or campus areas and near the hospitals and clinics are some of the very common and frustrating

scenarios of Dhaka city. But it is a matter of grave concern that nobody is coming to take a stern action against the menace of sound pollution which is gradually coming to the city dwellers as a monster. And we are only observing the situation to advance from bad to worse.

The experts are saying that the level at which the sound is being created in the city is far higher than the tolerable limit of the city people and the high level of sound is causing a severe harmful pressure on the heart, kidney and the brain of the inhabitants of the capital city. This high pitched sound is also one of the causes of deafness, gastric and diabetes. Everyday the sound pollution in Dhaka city is destroying the audible power of thousands of children. The sound pollution also causes peevish temperament, hampers the intellect of the children and makes them apathetic towards their studies. Any sort of sound pollution seriously affects the expecting mothers. At the worst, this may lead to the losing of one's mental balance.

But now the question is what could be the solution of this problem? Proper actions should be taken against random use of mikes here and there without significant causes, playing of

very old vehicles in the city thoroughfares, operating mills and factories in the residential areas and using of hydraulic horns in the vehicles. According to the Forest and Environment Preservation Law of 1997, Hospitals, Educational institutions and some other institutions selected by the government are marked as the silence areas up to 100 meters from their positions. But nobody is going to heed that. How long this will go? People's awareness is highly desirable here. We like to make high sounds in various negligible causes. But we ourselves are the victims of the sound pollution. If the people are made aware of the harmful effects of sound pollution, the height of sound pollution will obviously come down. For that, we only need to be dutiful and responsible and the authorities concerned to put utmost stress on creating consciousness among the people to prevent sound pollution. At least we must not put heavy pressure on our ears and we must remember that everything has a limit and crossing of that limit i.e. excessive pressure on the ears which help you to hear may turn them into a part which can make you only feel silent!

Dhatri Sarkar Sabuz  
Mechanical Engineer, MBA, Dhaka