

REB woefully over-stretched

Higher generation capacity only answer

THE subscribers of the Rural Electrification Board (REB) are suffering as the REB has expanded its power distribution network without a corresponding increase in power supply. In the last five years, the consumer base of REB has grown from 1.5 crore to 3 crore, which is a huge expansion that the organisation is not clearly capable of handling.

The consumers are in dire trouble as the Palli Bidyut Samities (PBS) are charging for the power lines though they cannot provide power supply even for a few hours a day. The PBS have huge financial liabilities to the government, to the tune of Tk 100 crore, caused by the unplanned expansion. The REB's total requirement is around 1900MW a day, but it gets only 500MW. The deficit is big enough for anyone to conclude that the organisation's planning had gone awfully wrong. There is also an allegation that ruling alliance elements supplied overpriced power distribution equipment needed for installation of new supply lines, they being the monopoly beneficiary of the business. This needs to be gone into.

The picture is a grim one and the limping organisation is none other than the REB which had a good image in the past for its role in supplying power to people in the rural areas. It was considered a success story. However, the situation that has arisen due to over-expansion of its distribution network is an example of how poor planning, or motives other than the ones that are legitimate, could spell disaster even for a well-managed organisation.

The predicament of the customers is quite manifest here: they have to pay for the service that they are not getting regularly. So people have the right to know why things have been allowed to degenerate to this point.

A REB official has said that "the government should have complemented the growth by adding at least another 800 (MW) to the national grid exclusively for the REB consumers." His point is of course relevant, all the more so after what we have witnessed in Kansat where non-supply of power created a law and order situation and finally cost so many lives.

The decisionmakers cannot afford to leave matters where they are. They must make sure that expansion of distribution network is matched by increase in power generation.

Atrocious!

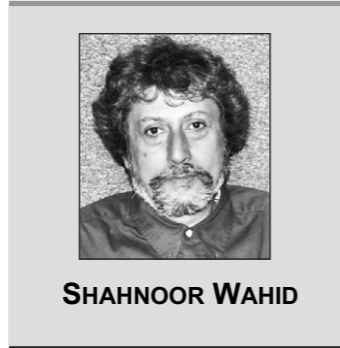
Such behaviour needs to be reformed

REGRETTABLY, police excesses are taking newer forms. This time some men members of the force were seen pouncing on women demonstrators, grabbing them indecently and hustling them without any regard for modesty during last Thursday's hartal. Instead of female police members why men members got involved at all beats both rationale and sanity. Undoubtedly, it was cross enfrontory to all norms we nurture to keep the institutions running in harmony in civil society. And we condemn such excesses committed by some members of the police force on little or no provocation.

The incident of the police contingent losing cool while confronting women political activists raises questions about the standard of training they have received at state expense. They seem to get intimidated too easily and too soon on the roads and become inexplicably violent and vengeful. Surely crowd control does not mean beating people up mercilessly to unconsciousness. People are apprehensive that unless vested quarters stopped using the police in their selfish interest the social fabric would fall apart very soon. Therefore, we feel it is time the political authority stepped in to intervene and infuse some sense of responsibility and discipline in the police if public confidence is to be restored in them.

We think mere suspension or closure of an official or two will not do. It calls for drastic corrective measures. It is time the police high ups talked more frequently on human rights and women rights to the members of the force so that such regrettable incidents can be avoided in the future. We also feel that to make the members more efficient the entire training module needs to be recast to instill sense of human rights in to the police force.

Punching to promotion, Sonia, and more



SHAHNOOR WAHID

DEAR Minister for Household Affairs, the critics are saying that your boys are doing all sorts of "hair-raising" things in the country. How dare they say so? If their hair rises so easily for simple reasons like killing two dozen people or beating the hell out of some photo-journalists then someone from your ministry better tell them to shave off their hair or put some gel in it. These ungrateful people are trying their best to deny your boys the "Heroism Medals" for keeping people's mouths shut, permanently that is. They never look at the achievements of your boys.

But we are keeping track of the deeds of your golden boys. After a fantastic bout of target practice shooting in Kanshot, your brave boys in khaki and blue practiced punching on the talkative photo-journalists at Chhotagong. Oh, what a spectacle it was! Look at the expression on the face of the police officer as he is punching on the face of that old photojournal-

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

The cynics are of the opinion that Sonia Gandhi needs to come to the Land of Hope and stay here for some months to learn all the tricks under the sun to amass crores of rupees within a couple of years. It is guaranteed that no one, no intelligence agency of her country, will be able to track the source of the money she will accumulate. She will also learn how to evade the income tax inspectors and get away by paying only two thousand rupees every year as income tax.

ist. The anger and hatred mixed together to create an expression on his face so terrifying that the ungrateful people of the port city ran to hide under chokirtola (under the bed). I heard, sir, that even the Australian players got so scared that they were looking for some chokis to hide under.

We have come to learn that before beating up the journalists at Chhotagong the brave police officer had beaten up scores of people in the capital and elsewhere and that's why he got his meteoric "punching to promotion" as a reward. He is a great son of the soil. We are proud of him. Since he is such a good wrestler and boxer why don't we send him to the "WWF" competition?

Then the lathis came into the play. The traditional, seasoned and oiled bamboo lathis (sticks) of Bengal. The lathis broke the backs, legs, and heads of some photojournalists that day in Chhotagong. Good for the nosy newsmen. Now the media will think twice before talking to your boys in uniform. Those bamboo

sticks are so useful on such occasions! You can crush a skull with such precision! Amazing!

We share the pride of your ministry, sir, when the men in uniform jostled with women picketers and grabbed them by the waist in broad daylight on the roads. How courageous your boys were! They endangered their dear life by coming so close to the enemy in the battlefield! We must appreciate their strong determination: "Let dangerous criminals slip away, we must get hold of the women picketers. These women picketers are greater threat to the nation than the hired killers, armed snatchers, rapists, acid throwers, and killer bus drivers." Yes, we also agree. Let the criminals and murderers roam the streets with total impunity; they do not throw bricks at the police. But, women picketers? No. Hats off to our uniformed brothers!

That's all about the glorious performances of the uniformed boys in the Land of Hope. The other news item that profoundly amused the cynics in this country

is on and about Sonia Gandhi of India. It says that she does not own a personal car and that she only has Rs. 20,000 in cash and property worth few lakhs only. Ridiculous, isn't it? Many lady politicians of the world, including some in the Land of Hope, were horrified reading about her condition. It is said that many of them felt to have been let down, in fact embarrassed, by Sonia. "How could Sonia remain so poor being so close to power when we have become billionaires within a decade? We have money in foreign banks. We have property abroad. We have money invested in foreign projects. We travel abroad with thirty family members and thirty-five suitcases four times a year. But look at her!" they thought.

One report said that Imelda Barcos had laughed for one hour after reading the news. She tried to contact Sonia over telephone to tell her what a fool she was. Finally, she decided to send Sonia twenty pairs of her shoes and one hundred party gowns as a token of

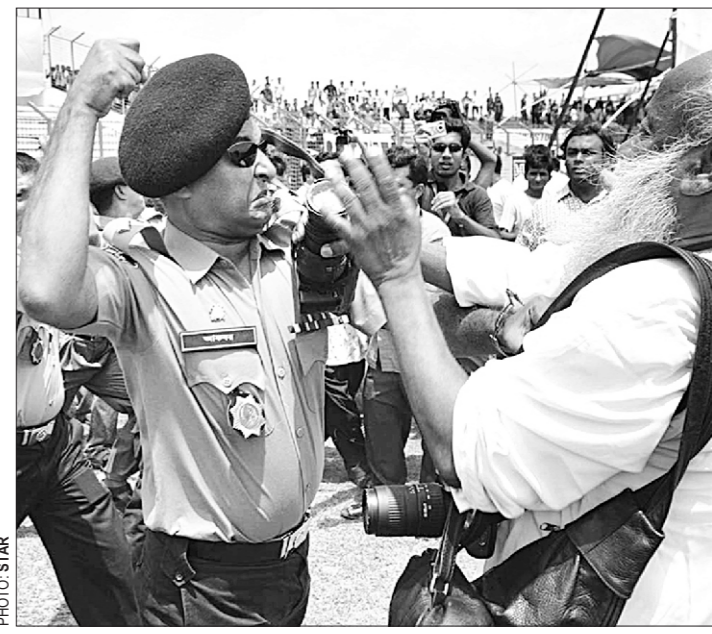


PHOTO STAR

friendship. And Benazir Ditto offered her a room in her London house for free.

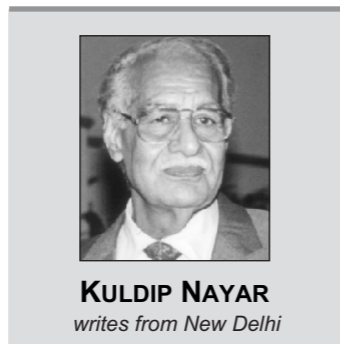
The cynics are of the opinion that Sonia Gandhi needs to come to the Land of Hope and stay here for some months to learn all the tricks under the sun to amass crores of rupees within a couple of years. It is guaranteed that no one, no intelligence agency of her country, will be able to track the source of the money she will accumulate. She will also learn how to evade the income tax inspectors and get away by paying only two thousand rupees every year as income tax. Then she will be able to invest millions of black, brown, and yellow

money in business or take them out of the country. This way she will ensure the financial well-being of her next fourteen generations.

The Asian Lady Politicians Association is all poised to invite her to the capital of the Land of Hope to present her the "Guidebook on How to Amass Money." You see, they cannot let one of their own kind humiliate them by being so close to power and yet be so poor. They do not want other women leaders to emulate her. They have their pride to defend!

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Modi doesn't give a damn



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

DIPTI, a Narmada Bachao Andolon (NBA) activist, rang me up to inform that their office at Vadodara had been ransacked and the furniture destroyed. The police force, she said, was on the side of the vandals. The police chief did not want to be disturbed and suggested to the NBA workers to call 100 to lodge their complaint.

Obviously, the Gujarat police would not want to take notice of anything that state chief minister Narendra Modi did not approve. If the police could connive at the ethnic cleansing and continue to sustain the anti-Muslim environs, how would the force dare to save the NBA office when Modi considered such places an affront to his authority? The situation in the state is so vitiated that the chief minister turns anything which he does not like into an emotive issue and a question of state's pride. The Gujaratis, too, lap up his antics. Sometimes, I wonder whether Gujarat is part of India or India is part of Gujarat.

The entire debate on the Narmada Dam has been debased and distorted. The thesis that

BETWEEN THE LINES

Atal Behari Vajpayee should have reacted and assured the oustees that he would himself see to their proper rehabilitation. This would have been in the spirit of federalism. Why can't political parties take the states run by them to task for rehabilitating the uprooted? Were they to do so, they would go up in people's estimate. At least, the mess created in the wake of the Narmada Dam would have been lesser than what it is today. But then the BJP has to reckon with Modi who doesn't give a damn.

Modi and his party, the BJP, have built it is that the dam's height has been challenged. But this is not true. Had this been the case, the dam would not have gone up to 110 metres.

The point at issue is about the rehabilitation of those who are ousted in the process. Every additional slab placed on the dam submerges some land and throws out a certain number of families. What about them who have to move elsewhere? Don't the Gujaratis, leave the authoritarian Modi aside, have any moral obligation towards them? Poor they may be, but they are human beings and as much Indians as the Gujaratis are.

This is not the first time that the Gujarat government has gone back on its obligation to resettle those who have been ousted from their places because of the Narmada Dam. Gujarat is responsible to rehabilitate even those whom Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, the two beneficiary states, cannot settle. There are umpteen numbers of awards and judgments on this point.

As recently as March 5, 2005, the Supreme Court said unequivocally that "submergence would not be allowed to take place until complete settlement and rehabilitation of oustees is done."

When Medha Patkar, the NBA leader, went on an indefinite hunger strike, her case was that the new height of nearly 13 metres, from 110 metres to 122.9 metres, had been sanctioned despite the fact that the families who were ousted because of the earlier increase in the dam's height had remained unsettled.

It is estimated that the additional height will add 16,000 families to 14,000, already waiting to be rehabilitated. This would mean 30,000 families. These are facts which even the Supreme Court said it might check through its own team.

Mehda Patkar's fast forced three central ministers to visit at least one state, Madhya Pradesh, to find out what was the truth. They found her contention true. In their report, they have said that the Narmada Control Authority (NCA) gave permission to raise

the height on the basis which "has largely been based on paperwork and it has no relevance to the situation on the ground." The Madhya Pradesh government acted in haste and allotted the land which was totally uncultivable.

This throws up the question of credibility of the NCA. An inquiry should be ordered to verify the credentials of officers who constitute the body.

By running down Saifuddin Soz, Minister for Water Resources, who did an objective, bold and honest job, non-rehabilitation does not become rehabilitation. It is like comparing Modi's soap opera with Medha Patkar's fast. All the three governments in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have indulged in fabrication. When pointed out by the central ministers' team, Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan has brought in the federal structure of the constitution. The lawyer representing the Madhya Pradesh government also tried to raise the dust on this point at the

Supreme Court.

Big river valley projects are on the Concurrent List of the constitution. Even otherwise, the Narmada Dam is supervised by two committees, one comprising central and state bureaucrats and the other of ministers from New Delhi and the states. The Supreme Court was frank enough to say that the divisions in the central review committee were "on political lines. You have to accept it."

It is shocking that the leaders of the BJP, which rules the three states, have not uttered a word on the shoddy job done even after thousands of complaints.

They can ignore the central ministers' report but not the ground reality. Atal Behari Vajpayee should have reacted and assured the oustees that he would himself see to their proper rehabilitation. This would have been in the spirit of federalism. Why can't political parties take the states run by them to task for rehabilitating the uprooted? Were they to do so, they would go up in people's estimate. At least, the mess created in the wake of the Narmada Dam would have been lesser than what it is today. But then the BJP has to reckon with Modi who doesn't give a damn.

The larger question the Narmada Dam has thrown up is about the oustees from different projects, whether connected with industry, mine, jungle or water. Lakhs of people are being displaced in the name of development. None is against development but what happens to those who have lost their land, house

and, more importantly, neighbours? For centuries they have lived together at a place but displacement has meant that they have to plant themselves at new surrounding and environment. The government should be generous, not niggardly.

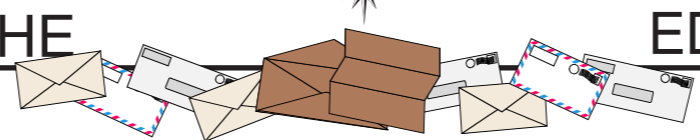
That development at the expense of social justice has far-reaching consequences. The Naxalite phenomenon is only one of them. Medha Patkar has warned that a bigger movement, not confined to the Narmada oustees, is inevitable. It is equitable as well as necessary that people ousted from a place to make room for a project are fully rehabilitated before they are disturbed. Already in some tribal areas the slogan is:

No displacement without prior rehabilitation. This may well become a war cry if the government in the states or at the centre is not mindful of the sufferings of the people who are disturbed.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said that the cost of development should not be borne by the weakest section of the people and a credible rehabilitation policy should be in place. But he must set up some machinery for that. Understandably, ministers and bureaucrats have to be part of it because they possess the authority. But if the past is any guide, such machinery becomes too mechanical. Human rights activists should also be engaged in the process because their contact with grassroots is direct and intimate.

Kuldeep Nayar 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.

Police atrocities

Because of busy work schedule it was not easy for us to enjoy the Test matches between Bangladesh and Australia. So we had to depend on newspaper or online, which partially fulfilled our enjoyment. This was the 2nd day of 2nd Test cricket match. I was searching different newspapers' online versions to get the details of the 1st day. But what was it? There was no news on sports. Instead of any memorable moment of the first day, there was a photo where a policeman was punching an old man and in the next photo the old man was on the ground, several young policemen attacked him. The photo hurt me a lot. I can't express it in language. In detailed news I see that the old man is a photojournalist, and about 25 journalists were injured in this police attack.

Last week our eye was on KANSAT, where people were fighting for electricity. In exchange of their blood, they established their rights. Here also the main villain was the police. They

attacked the general people, looted their houses and forced them to leave.

At least 20 people were killed in this case.

Considering these two news reports, some questions come to my mind.

Is their any record around the world where 20 people were killed just for electricity, are we living in an independent country?

Why police attacked journalists?

Have they forgotten the contribution of the media to development of our cricket team?

What types of people are appointed in police? Do these people have morality or common sense?

S.M.Zaberul Islam
Kamal Ataturk Avenue, Banani, Dhaka

Thanks to the electronic media now we can follow all daily events in Bangladesh. The recent events in Kansat and tragic loss of life touched me very deeply. Police atrocities remind us how far we

are from practice of democracy in our behaviour.

Police excesses in Chittagong Stadium on the unarmed journalists, who were there for performing professional duties, stunned the whole world.

We, the expatriates from Bangladesh residing in different corners of the globe, are waiting to see what action our present democratic government takes in this respect.

Dr M.M Islam
On e-mail

Barbaric assault on the journalists at the stadium in Chittagong reinforced the fact that the police have still been in the colonial frame of mind that is vividly reflected in their activities. They haven't conformed to the postcolonial norms of free thoughts and the democratic fabric of society. That police officer's action on the elderly person was simply demonic that revealed their corrupt and colonial mindset. Their brutality that day was more than medieval and such acts are a common phenomenon these days.

The brutal attack not only defamed the whole system, it also put the whole nation to shame. The whole world watched the awesome act.

It is regrettable that despite violation of human rights and putting the nation to shame no tough measure has been taken against the culprits.

We strongly condemn the barbaric act by the police and demand stern and exemplary punishment to the persons responsible for it.

Rafiqul Islam Rime
Agrabad, Chittagong

My recent visit to Bangladesh

The purpose of this letter is to provide a brief overview of my latest visit to Bangladesh. My wife who was born in Bangladesh, but is a US citizen now, and I arrived on November 04, 2005 at Dhaka airport approximately at 0900 hours and the adventure began. I say adventure, because one never knows what problems one will have to experience just to

leave the airport. After going through customs, we proceeded to the baggage area. As luck would have it, I was missing one piece of my luggage. So we go over to the lost luggage area to file a report. The individual that tried to assist us appeared to be very inexperienced in filling out the required forms; however from looking around at all the lost luggage, one would get the impression that he would be very experienced. For approximately 28 minutes, he continued to try to type in the information on what appeared to be a first generation computer. Finally, I asked if there was a supervisor available and reluctantly, he called his supervisor. The supervisor arrived talking on his cell phone to one of his family members. He continued to talk for approximately 20 more minutes. When he finally found time to assist, he took our information and said we would be contacted when to come and get the luggage when it arrived. This upset me because it has been my experience as a

courtesy to the traveller, once the bag came in, the airlines brought the bag to my place of residence. Not in BANGLADESH! Next we had to clear customs. As we approached the customs checkpoint, I got the feeling that I was an International Terrorist the way I was approached by no less than four or five customs officers. During their questioning, they asked about electronics and I stated that I had a 14" TV that I was bringing to my father-in-law as a gift that we had purchased in Dubai in the Duty Free Store. We even showed them the receipt but we were told that we had to pay a customs fee. When I started to question them, more customs officers arrived. Reluctantly, we paid the customs fee and were about to leave when I noticed a Bengali traveller approaching the same checkpoint that I had confronted and he had a customs officer with him. I assumed he would experience the same type of reception that I received because he had a 27" TV on his cart; however, he just kept going

by the checkpoint, escorted by the customs officer all the way to the exit. When I inquired as to why this individual was not required to pay, I was quickly dismissed and later I learned that this individual was a relative of one of the customs officers. I inquired about this type of treatment and was told that it is very common. After four days, we learned that the bag had arrived. After an hour drive by taxi to the airport, another adventure began because it was the day before SAARC summit and airport people wanted to make a great show on the earth that they had a strong security. If my brother-in-law had not been with me, we would not have been let through the gates of the airport. Given that he is an officer, he was able to get us up to the airport. Once at the airport, it took another thirty to forty minutes to locate the bag.

We were unable to locate a taxi at the airport entrance so we had to walk to the front gate where my brother-in-law was able to get a taxi. Once we arrived home, my wife and I had a wonderful time

visiting family and making new friends and rekindling old friendships from a previous visit. Finally after a week, after saying good-bye to our family, we headed for the airport and on the way, we were stopped by the traffic police twice and they asked for "Tea Money". Our driver being a quick thinker stated that we were foreigners and we were sent on our way without paying the bribe. We arrived at the airport and I felt that we were finally safe from anymore request for "Tea Money"; however, once through the gates, we were stopped once more and asked for "Tea Money". The driver once again stated he was carrying foreigners and we were allowed to pass without a bribe.

In closing I would like to state that Bangladesh is a beautiful country with wonderful people. If the country could eliminate all the corruption (Tea Money), and promote tourism, the country could have a booming business.

Mr. Lacy
On e-mail