

Tell-tale project approval *At whose cost?*

WHEREAS people are reeling in the backdrop of frequent power outages and there is a universally felt palpable need for building new electricity generation plants, the government has hastily approved a project for expansion of the power distribution network. An ECNEC meeting on Monday, among other things, decided that Tk 953crore will be spent in installing new electricity poles across villages ostensibly designed to expand the existing power distribution system in 67 rural electrification association areas under Rural Electrification Board (REB). 10,500km of power distribution lines have already been laid out under a previous expansion project without a matching growth in the power generation capacity. The explanation behind the new addition seems to be, to quote the finance minister: "We approved the project so that people would get electricity as soon as power is available." Can anyone give credence to this idea when there has been only a unidirectional expansion in the supply network without this being preceded by any addition whatsoever to the existing power generation capacity?

Actually, the unjustified prioritisation of distribution network over power generation capacity stems from money spinning motivation with a short run gestation period. Raising power generation capacity is time consuming whilst installing supply poles is a short term project capable of yielding money in quick time. Our report on the subject referring to planning ministry sources states that "there is a pro-government syndicate of businessmen who manufacture electricity poles in the country and the project will benefit them only."

The approach is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it milks money for a coterie of people (mind you, there is a cost overrun from Tk 553crore to Tk 953crore on the original project!); and on the other, voters in the areas being covered are sought to be wooed with the prospect of power lines above their heads, however empty of electricity these might be.

Pitiable state of the railways

One more wake-up call

THE story of our railways is indeed a deplorable and sad one. Just consider this, since independence if anything, there has been no increase in the railway lines even by a metre. On the contrary, there has been a decline in the network by about six kilometre. There has also been a drop in both the number of passengers and volume of cargo handled by the railways since independence.

The railway network is considerably widespread in the country. It has always been a comparatively cheaper means of transportation for the public at large. But unfortunately it has not been able to meet people's aspirations for a number of reasons. Over the years, the trains have failed to reach destinations on time. The upholstery and other physical amenities inside the bogeys are rather poor and there has been no real improvement in services over the past decades. The engines are in worst possible condition. While there were 486 engines prior to our independence it has now come down to 286.

As a result, people are using the buses more and more despite the fact that often it costs more to travel by road than by train.

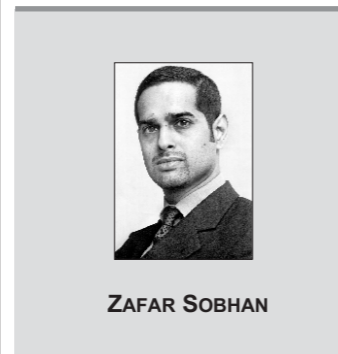
We thus strongly feel that the entire railway system should be revamped. It could still be the major mode of cheap and safe travel for the people. We could gain from the experience of our neighbour, India, that has one of the largest railway networks in the world used by millions of people and operating reasonably efficiently.

There should be a two-pronged remedial action plan, the short term and the long term one -- both running simultaneously. To begin with, we could embark immediately upon improving services both over the counter as well as in terms of customer facilities within the compartments. A large number of engines need to be repaired. Maintenance which has been a chronically weak area needs to be strengthened.

An all-out effort must be made to increase the number of speedier trains, refurbish the rolling stocks and railway lines and have modern signaling systems in place. If the whole management system is reformed and restructured, there will be no dearth of soft-term loans for the railways' radical improvement.

As the bulk carrier of people and commodities, the railway is second to none. It is truly the people's transport.

Imagine



ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHEN I look back at Dhaka in 1980, the year I returned to Bangladesh after an absence of half my young life, I see a city of wide open spaces, dotted with lakes, ponds, and canals, and ringed by paddy fields and more water.

Dhaka was then, to my mind, a still sleepy little metropolis, just waking up and acquiring the trappings of a bustling, modern city. Industry was still in its infancy, the roads were uncluttered, and the migration of the population from the villages to the cities was a trickle, not a flood.

Bangladesh as a country was then still in its infancy, less than ten years old, and the air was filled with promise, with freshness, with the hope of bright tomorrows, of better days ahead. It was a country on which one could dream.

Certainly, in many ways it was backward and behind-the-times. Certainly, the entire country was still mired in poverty and underdevelopment and lack of access to basics such as education, healthcare, safe drinking water, and electricity. This was before the social and economic revolutions engendered by the non-governmental sector and the garment industry.

But the sense was that we were at the beginning of something. That

STRAIGHT TALK

This is the essence of the gift that Dr Yunus has given to the nation. He has rekindled our national ability to hope, to dream, to imagine that we, too, can be more than we are, he has given us the courage, the audacity, to believe that there is nothing we cannot accomplish, nothing that is beyond our abilities.

there was a clear path ahead that if we followed would take us as a nation to where we wanted to go, that the country that we all dreamed of lay just over the horizon.

In 2006 that Bangladesh seems as remote to me as the memory of the faces of the girls I used to admire from a distance as a young boy, of my cousins' stately white house by the lake-side, of the imposing pair of date-palms outlined majestically against the sky in our once capacious gardens; these things don't exist any more, or at least not in the same form. So complete is the transformation that one wonders sometimes whether they ever existed at all.

The Bangladesh I returned to again in 2003 was very different from the one I returned to as a child in 1980. The last time I had lived for one year continuously in Dhaka before my return had been 1985, before my pursuit of higher education, adventure, and the unknown had sent me on my long, rambling journey through Indian hill-stations to small college towns and then pulsing cities on the other side of the planet.

Bangladesh had changed. In some ways for the better, some for the worse. For the better: Dhaka was a vibrant, buzzing metropolis, with excitement in the air; there was a can-do, entrepreneurial spirit among the population who had

realized that if they wanted anything done then they would have to do it for themselves.

But the changes for the worse were more readily apparent. Dhaka had transformed into a choking, crowded, polluted nightmare of traffic and concrete monstrosities, and seemed to be slowly sinking beneath the weight of the thousands each day who had been forced to leave the villages and farms of their ancestors and migrate to the city in the hope of earning a meager living on the pavements of what had become one of the mega-cities of the world.

Nothing worked the way it should have. Corruption was endemic, crime a daily hazard, everything, from justice to education, was up for sale to the highest bidder, the shimmering waterways of the city were clogged with filth, and no respite to these or any of the other ills that beset the country seemed open to view.

Most distressing of all was the change in people's attitude towards the country and the national inability to imagine a bright future for the nation as a whole.

It is this inability to envision a bright future for the country that has sent millions overseas to try their luck and seek out their fortune. The poor are so desperate that they are prepared to mortgage their very lives for what they hope will be

a better life as an indentured servant in the Middle East, they are willing to brave rough ocean crossings in cramped and leaking death-traps, and to put their lives in the hands of the most unscrupulous and cold-blooded of traders in human misery. Even our best and brightest are to be found every morning in long queues outside foreign consulates, waiting patiently for the inky blots in their passports that will allow them to leave home, never to return.

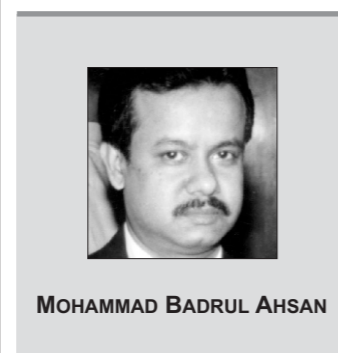
I have seen the best minds of my generation teaching in community colleges in wind-swept prairie towns in the middle of nowhere or manning the computer help-desks of small suburban insurance companies.

These are the lucky ones. The unlucky drive taxi cabs and wait tables, their Masters certificates and scholarship awards gathering dust on the walls of their humble outer-borough apartments.

But they are all where they are for a reason. To make their lives better, to ensure a better life for their children than they could ever imagine for themselves. And, by and large, they are able to eke out happy and fulfilling lives. Lives on which they can dream.

They are doing right by their children and they send money to their families back home, often making the difference between comfort and penury for those who anxiously await their checks every month.

The pride of a Nobel Prize



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

DR Muhammad Yunus has won a Nobel Prize for peace, whereas he should have won two prizes in physics and economics. In physics for his invention of the chain reaction which can release a huge energy when the neutrons of hope is fired at the closely packed atoms of the human spirit. The case for economics is obvious. He has successfully formulated an innovation which has the potential power of an explosive to knock down the walls of poverty.

We have so much reason to be proud of him as we have to feel embarrassed about the ravages of poverty. We are still the lowest amongst the low, a nation where most people live under the poverty line, eking out their living on an income of less than \$2 per day. So, here comes a messiah-like man who rises like a Phoenix from the ashes of our misfortunes, and blossoms like a lotus in the murky waters of our ignominy. Right now, he is the only bright spot in a benighted country which is detested abroad for corruption, and

CROSS TALK

But it will be immensely more helpful if he goes around the country and talks to us, telling us about the redeeming power of dreams. The Nobel Prize is the result of a young professor who believed in his dream and reposed his trust in the infinite energy of the human spirit. Can he not give more time to unlock our minds so that we can be infected by more of these dreams?

despaired at home for contentious politics.

Needless to say, we are fortunate to have him as our own Nobel laureate, one whose intellectual capacity has won global recognition, yet one who can speak to us in our own language. This is a homegrown Nobel phenomenon, one which has been spun with the threads of our own dreams by the son of this soil into a tapestry for the economic emancipation of the people of this country.

But what can we do with this phenomenon, the man himself and the genius that he embodies? The first things first and we have done them already, the congratulations, jubiliations, the outpouring of love and respect to celebrate a celebrity who has done us proud. He has visited his father's grave, the Shaheed Minar, the Savar Memorial, his hometown, the village where he had started his work thirty years ago, the civic receptions, media frenzies, handshakes, and embraces. He has already gone through the rigmaroles of success, the rituals of glory, which raise a man on a pedestal and turn him into divinity. The celebration is going to

last for many more days.

Still the question is what can we do with him? What can we do with a larger-than-life man in a country full of paltry interests? Perhaps it has the pathetic irony of an idyllic island standing in the middle of shark-infested waters. Of course, he will be busy in his own rights, doing the lecture circuits, traveling most of the time, attending receptions, dinner parties, invited to sit on boards of companies, endlessly hounded by media for his comments on national and international topics.

Some people might even want to drag him into politics. He might win a seat, even as many as five seats, if he decides to contest in the elections. He might be asked to become the head of the caretaker government, arbitrate national disputes, lead national and international missions, write his autobiography, memoirs, etc. Dr Muhammad Yunus has attained his height and he doesn't have to look back again.

It is amazing that people from all walks of life converged on him to rejoice over his achievement, even crooks bending over to touch his feet in a rare display of un-

gratifying respect. For the first time since Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had rallied this nation, we have got an institution-like personality or a personality-like institution that has turbocharged our dimming hopes. Dr Muhammad Yunus is more than a name, more than a Nobel laureate, more than an economist. He is the architect of optimism, the archangel of aspiration, who can give a second chance to this divisive nation.

But how? When the fanfares subside and the nation returns to normal, what will be his role amongst us? Will he be a reformer, revolutionary, teacher, guide, philosopher, an emblem of national pride or just an aging doyen relishing the resplendent afterglow of his astounding fame? Will he step aside from Grameen Bank, like Bill Gates did from Microsoft, to give more time to nation-building and social upliftment?

Often the political climate doesn't suit the Nobel laureates. Camilo Jose Cela, who won Nobel Prize in literature in 1989, was made a senator of the Spanish constituent assembly by royal appointment. He

But they, like the rest of us, have given up on the project of nation building. Their aspirations, such as they are, are purely personal and not tied to any vision of building a better Bangladesh.

Why is this? It is not as though Bangladeshis care passionately about their homeland, the placid beauty of the countryside, with its green fields and banana trees and still ponds, our simple, unhurried way of doing things, the little old-world courtesies of every-day life, the subtle grace of our poetry, the melancholy of our songs, the tastes and scents and sights and sounds that make up Bangladesh.

But there is a strong sense that the nation is heading down-hill, that things are getting worse every day, and that nothing can be done. The problems we face today seem so intractable, the long-term future so hopeless.

It is into this void that Dr Yunus has stepped and given us all reason to believe, in ourselves, in the country, in the future.

He has reminded us that the door to a bright future is never closed. It is never too late.

This is the essence of the gift that Dr Yunus has given to the nation. He has rekindled our national ability to hope, to dream, to imagine that we, too, can be more than we are, he has given us the courage, the audacity, to believe that there is nothing we cannot accomplish, nothing that is beyond our abilities.

This has been his simple message to the people of Bangladesh for these past thirty years. This is the simple philosophy behind the revolutionary idea of micro-credit: believe in yourself and you can do miracles.

Patience, hope, and courage:

that's all we need.

Patience to understand that the world will not change in a day, that it might take a life-time, hope that we can indeed do it, and courage to take that chance.

Imagine a Bangladesh where there is no poverty, where each man, woman, and child goes to bed with a full stomach, where each of us can expect safe water to drink and electricity and a decent place to live, where everyone has the chance for an honest and dignified living.

These are not wild, extravagant fantasies. Just the very basics. And they are within our grasp.

It is not too late. It will never be too late. To get rid ourselves of the crooks and the cheats and the rent-seekers and their hired muscle that we have lived in fear of for so long.

It is not too late to build a clean and safe environment for our children to grow up in. It is not too late to build schools and hospitals and roads.

It is not too late to build a government and judiciary and civil administration and police force that is dedicated to the common good, that will ensure the security of all, that each citizen can look up to and respect and take comfort in.

It is not too late to heal the poisonous wounds of the bitter hatreds that have torn our society asunder.

Let us dream. Let us believe. And then let us get to work.

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used to frequently fall asleep during the deliberations and earned a reputation for his bad mouth.

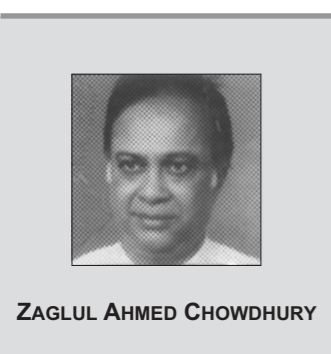
Another Nobel laureate in literature, our very own Rabindranath Tagore, drew flack for his political views. He was accused of being lenient to the British rule and was compared with Goethe who had stood aloof from the German war of liberation. The expatriates submitted a telling letter during his visit to San Francisco, which stated that although the Indians were justly proud of the poetic achievements of Tagore, they didn't care for his social-political philosophy. The matter went so far that a plot was hatched to have two men assassinate Tagore, who was subsequently given overnight police protection and moved to Santa Barbara for his safety.

At some point Dr Muhammad Yunus will find himself caught between pride and prejudice when the baser instincts wake up like the revelers after a night of drunken spree. He might even get sucked into the maelstrom of political controversies, because the same people who are proud of him for the Nobel Prize might grow wary of his political propensity.

Nonetheless, a Nobel Prize has come to us like a pauper wins the lottery. We have many grave issues but one great man, and we might want to stretch him like a limited budget trying to meet too many needs. May be we should keep him on the pedestal instead, and just admire him. May be he can be a role model who can remind us that greatness is when one life is dedi-

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Nobel will help poverty elimination in South Asia



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

IT may be sheer co-incidence that the announcement of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, on issues related to the eradication of poverty, almost synchronized with the International Day for eradication of poverty on October 17.

However, the award, in a critically important field like micro-credit for improving the economic life of the poor, has added a different dimension since a large number of people across the world remain mired under the curse of abject poverty.

Relentless efforts to reduce the scale of poverty have met with mixed fortunes, but there is hardly any option other than continuing such efforts with greater vigour and

MATTERS AROUND US

Yes, we are now the "peace-makers" at the global level, since elimination of poverty is inextricably linked with true peace, and Yunus and Grameen Bank have been universally recognized as being great contributors to this noble mission. The Nobel Peace Prize will definitely provide inspiration for the daunting task of poverty eradication all over the world, particularly in the poverty-ridden regions, including our South Asia.

determination, both at government and non-government level.

There was speculation, before the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize award, that the 2006 prize was likely to go to political leaders or statesmen because of their contributions to establishing peace and harmony, and in resolving international conflicts that caused tensions and violence. Some names were also being mentioned, and one could assume that the focus was riveted on them for obvious reasons.

But, finally, it was Bangladesh's micro-credit pioneer, Dr Muhammad Yunus and his famed Grameen Bank who were chosen, setting at rest all such speculations. It was a surprise, although not a total one, since even though

Yunus's name did not figure much this year while he was certainly a strong contender before.

According to former American president Bill Clinton the Bangladeshi social and economic reformer should have won it earlier, since his concept and the Grameen Bank had earned laurels in the outside world long ago. Several countries, as well as Clinton's home state Arkansas, are familiar with the Grameen Bank and Dr Yunus, so much so that the person and the institution have become somewhat synonymous with Bangladesh there.

As such, the winning of the prize was expected for Dr Yunus, even though it came somewhat as a surprise, and this gave added jubilation to the people. The devel-

opment has made the nation proud and the extent of the pride and glory is so enormous that it has hardly any parallel. This is a gain which has been acclaimed all across the world without any controversy.

The Nobel Peace Prize has made this country known when it was, hitherto, largely unknown. It has given us a new height and status despite our manifold failures and limitations. For this, we all remain tremendously grateful to the person and the institution which have made untiring efforts over the last three decades to bring innovative methods to help the poor, starting from a program in small and obscure Jobra village in Chittagong.

The expression of joy by the

ecstatic crowds, both at home and abroad, is only the fitting demonstration of the state of mind of a nation, which, unfortunately, only seldom finds scope for national rejoicing, let alone for something of such unbelievable magnitude like the greatest award in the world, and that too in the most talked-about and important area like peace.

Yes, we are now the "peace-makers" at the global level, since elimination of poverty is inextricably linked with true peace, and Yunus and Grameen Bank have been universally recognized as being great contributors to this noble mission. The Nobel Peace Prize will definitely provide inspiration for the daunting task of poverty eradication all over the world, particularly in the poverty-ridden regions, including our South Asia.

It is also probably just a coincidence that the Congress, led by Sonia Gandhi, which is the main partner of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) alliance in India, announced that it is bringing back the slogan "Garibi Hatao" which its leader the late Indira Gandhi coined, and which helped the party win resounding victories in the early seventies.

Over the last three decades, India made remarkable progress in many areas, ranging from information to nuclear technology, but progress in the field of "Garibi Hatao" has been disappointingly scant.

This is one reason which contributed to the defeat of the previous NDA government, led by charismatic Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in the last election when "Shining India" failed to attract the voters in the rural areas to the glittering urban development that is really spectacular. The present government is attaching more importance to rural development and poverty alleviation.

Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and chairperson of the ruling UPA alliance Sonia Gandhi have profusely congratulated Prof Yunus on his winning the Nobel prize, while praising the micro-credit progress of the Grameen Bank. One may be inclined to believe that this award might have encouraged the Congress to revert to the "Garibi Hatao" slogan.

Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, known as a successful administrator in the field of

economics, while congratulating Yunus said that his country is following the concept and wants to enlarge its application.

Other South Asian nations, struggling to improve the socio-economic conditions of the vast multitude in the rural areas, are expected to be encouraged by the award. The Saarc and the Cirdap (Centre for Integrated Rural Development in the Asia and Pacific), which have already swung into the task of eradication of poverty with all seriousness, will also find new encouragement in their work from this award since it has come to this region and in the field relevant to their work.

The Grameen Bank program of micro-credit is now familiar to many countries since there no dearth of poor people even in the developed nations. It has been considered in the last few years as a commendable idea in the developing countries -- notwithstanding some confusion associated with it.

In 1989 was present at a seminar in Kuala Lumpur where Dr Yunus was the key speaker on the micro-credit issue. After a long lecture he replied to several complex and delicate questions on the

subject, since the Grameen Bank concept in some ways also countered conventional banking systems, like giving loans without collateral -- however small the loan. A Malaysian professor of Chinese origin, sitting next to me, also asked questions, and later observed that he felt that this gentleman from Bangladesh was likely to get some "big" award someday for this new concept that would help the poor rural people -- mainly women. His comments now ring a bell in my ear!

The concept was followed in Malaysia several years ago and gained wide acceptance. This year's Nobel Peace Prize will provide new stimulation to the unremitting struggle for poverty alleviation in the world at large, and particularly in densely populated South Asia of 1.4 billion people, a large segment of which is cursed with the vicious cycle of poverty.

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