

China Sticks to Reforms that Pay Off

Alan Chalkley writes from Hong Kong

Against a background of successive waves of political change in the USSR and Eastern Europe, China's concentration on economic advance stands out in conspicuous contrast

China, notably in the Special Economic Zones, where investment from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan is heavy.

These zones are in Zhuhai next to Macau, Shenzhen and Shantou next to Hong Kong, and in an area in Xiamen city in Fujian. Last year a similar zoning was announced for a huge Shanghai harbourside area which is to be cleared and rebuilt as an industrial and commercial city.

China's agricultural output has grown considerably since 1978 (grain output is up 25 per cent; cotton, tea and sugarcane have doubled and oilseeds have tripled). Rice yields rose by one-third over the last five years, and are now among the highest in Asia. The recent tragic floods in central and east China have halted this improvement. The north and south, however, are not seriously affected.

China enjoyed a foreign payments surplus of US\$6.27 billion last year, and its foreign reserves have been soaring recently, from US\$15.95 billion at end-1990 to US\$45.4 billion at mid-1991. Its foreign debt is about US\$43 billion and the debt-servicing ratio is a comfortable 18 per cent of export income.

— *Depthwise Asia*

Hoping and Praying for the Waters to be Good

Waters have engulfed more areas in the country and pushed much more people to more suffering than can be imagined by citizens sitting snug in the insularity of a capital's life and lapping up with morning tea what little the newspapers can purvey of the situation. Even that little has been enough to make the unaffected ones get uneasy with the thought — is it going to be '88 again? What of the affected broad masses? Millions in 22 districts have already been literally marooned. The question for them is how far will the water further rise and how long can they cope with it. Reports of death are already coming in.

Meanwhile more and more areas keep on going under water. The Ganges and the Brahmaputra river systems command almost all of Bangladesh's area, leaving some modest thousands of square kilometers to the influence of the Meghna. With dangerously voluminous discharges continuing from across the Farakka and Brahmaputra showing no sign anywhere of stopping its rise, the Ganges-Brahmaputra valleys are in for further worsening of the situation.

It is so far lucky that there hasn't been a comparable rise in the Meghna. And also that the Bay is low and calm although the approaching new moon should occasion a little swelling in two or three days' time. One keeps on hoping, putting the whole heart into it, that the rain-induced river swelling inland will by then take a turn towards ebbing with the cessation of downpour in the foothills of the Himalayan ranges. A repetition of '88 would call for conjunction of all the rain-induced spate at a time in all three major river systems, and the swelling of the Bay made double by another conjunction of heavy rain in the seas and lunar full rising. One keeps on hoping and praying that we shall somehow be spared such doomsday coincidences. We have no power to do anything beside that. The poor people waiting interminably for days on the village rooftops jutting out of endless expanses of water have been condemned to count only on God and nothing beside making a lie of society and government, science and civilisation.

Eighty-eight came and went. Hefty international relief followed. Some people got pats on the back for claimed good distribution. The story ended there except for leaving a bad taste in the mouth in the form of a predictable water trap called the capital protection embankment. What thoughts were given to the protection of the whole nation? The mindless inaction in the matter can be blamed on the autocratic nature of the then government. And the new representative government, yet to be made an accountable one, is hardly settled on its saddle. It's too early for it to decide on a response to the challenge. This is perfectly acceptable alibi for inaction. If we are good at anything at all — it is explaining things away.

As long as the waters are threateningly there let us remind ourselves of the two or three most urgent things dying for our active attention:

- a. How to help the monsoon water discharges from across the borders to better reach the sea. This would call for massive engineering and ecological programmes may be the size of tens of billions of taka and unified national initiative that continues to elude us even in our dreams.
- b. Forging a trilateral, or if need be quadrilateral, common approach in the matter aiming at containing the losses and channelizing the discharges.
- c. Introduction of changes in the habitation and housing patterns in the villages which would involve adjustments of social, economic and tenancy equations in the villages that would have repercussions on urban equations as well.

There is no sign yet of addressing these tasks that can hardly take any delay. The all-enveloping thing will go only to come back. Will it find us prepared the next time?

The rapid collapse of the anti-Gorbachev coup in Russia proclaims the strength of the political winds blowing through the world.

Eventually we can expect widespread economic change to follow in the wake of the political transformation — notably in Asia, where an upsurge of trade based on the region still known as the "Soviet Far East" can be confidently predicted. But this will not happen overnight; and in the meantime China continues to provide a most impressive example of economic reforms that, so far, seem to have paid off handsomely.

Unfortunately, the problems that afflict the economies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are far from solved, and may even have been worsened by the events in Moscow.

The two Communist giants, China and the USSR, have now both launched massive reforms of their systems. But not in the same manner: Beijing is pushing through economic changes first, but resolutely keeps the party monolith in full charge politically. In Moscow, the party's grip has been wrested away, but no one seems capable of introducing effective economic reforms.

Eastern Europe has also had a bad year. Enormous amounts of capital are needed to modernise that region. But not all the countries there are badly off.

Eastern Germany is being nursed by the West, and the three northern countries —

Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia — are doing relatively well. But the southern countries of Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania are in terrible shape, both politically and economically.

Turning to the Soviet Union itself, we see the final breakup of an empire forged by the tears over the centuries, and then expanded after World War II by Stalin. It now reaches from Bohemia in central Europe to some Japanese islands off the Pacific coast.

From this massive multi-racial complex, the first to break away was actually Mongolia on the northern border of China. The people there overthrew their hard-line government last year (in fact, Russian troops had started withdrawing from the country in 1988). A high-powered team from China recently visited Mongolia, proposing economic cooperation.

One after another, the Soviet states have declared independence from the rule of what used to be called "Muscovy," the central power of the tsars. Economically, there is bound to be further breakup as the economies of central Asia trade more with Asia and the Middle East.

Asian trade with Russia has been limited. India has been a large trading partner, but much of that trade is under barter conditions, both nations being short of foreign exchange. For a few years, Vietnam was a political partner of Russia, but trade was limited.

The most solid trade link has been between eastern Russia and Japan. The special modern port of Wrangel has been built several years ago on the Siberian coast to handle massive exports of wood-pulp to feed Japan's burgeoning paper industry. Now that the hitherto

Infusing New Life into Literacy Efforts-II

by Mahmood Aminul Islam

Abdun Noor of the World Bank in his paper "Proposing Another Dimension in International Adult Education: Availability of Basic Education" conceptualized basic education as learning three essential elements:

- (1) Communication Skills and General Knowledge which at the basic level would include literacy; numeracy; general civic, scientific and cultural knowledge; values and attitudes.
- (2) Living Skills and knowledge embracing health factors, sanitation, nutrition, family planning, the environment, management of the family economy and creating and maintaining home.
- (3) Production Skills, embracing all forms of activity directed towards making a living or the production of goods and service at whatever level.

According to Noor, the first objective of providing communication skills is fostered by two major instruments: primary education and literacy training. Of the two, primary education is considered the main instrument as it provides education to school age children thus cutting at the potential source of illiteracy. It is also considered basic for human development and improving the quality of life.

The second instrument, literacy training, which mainly caters to the needs of adult illiterates has been found to be uneconomic with high-drop-out rate and high incidence of relapses to illiteracy. Moreover, continuation of an adult literacy programme depends on sustained political

mediate priority may be to pick up at least one adult member from each family represented in the cooperative, and ensure that he/she completes the literacy course. This will be in addition to programmes which every co-operative must go through so that he/she becomes acquainted with living skills and knowledge without, in the first instance, learning how to read and write. Such an action will popularise literacy training and

create an atmosphere in the community conducive to education of the children.

The NGOs have done valuable work during the past 20 years and have developed very useful and innovative teaching materials for mass education.

The next national literacy programme could be a rolling plan, instead of a project extending up to the year 2000. The programme could be designed on the principle of active collaboration between the gov't on the one hand and the NGOs, co-operatives and similar other institutions offering any form of economic programme.

The role of the government will be that of a facilitator assisting implementing agencies with subsidy, supply of primers and other teaching learning and post-literacy materials, teacher training, media support and monitoring and evaluation.

For co-ordination and control of literacy efforts a high powered autonomous authority may be created. The programme performance including demand for literacy will be periodically reviewed by this for issuing policy directives and allocation of resources. This will greatly reduce the overhead cost of the programme while maximising the output.

While intensifying the campaign for literacy we should

the schools have only 3 rooms for five classes resulting in staggered shifts and short daily duration of classroom teaching and dearth of other physical facilities, poorly motivated and ill trained teachers, inefficient management and academic supervision, lack of community participation, the policy of keeping large number of vacancies of teachers, supervisors and field administrators unfilled, and our inability to bring the non-gov't primary schools into the main stream of primary education.

The above weaknesses in primary education have to be removed through policy reforms, adequate funding and improving the planning and management process. Sooner this is done, the better!

The educational needs of the youthful population (8-16) who have never been to schools or dropped out have to be catered for so that they do not join the rank of illiterates. These boys and girls should be able to complete education equivalent to primary education by following a shortened course of instruction. This is currently going on by the name of non-formal primary education in Bangladesh. This has to be expanded and strengthened.

Primary education, adult education and non-formal education for the youth have to go hand in hand for increasing the literacy rate in the country to an acceptable level. All the three should therefore, enjoy top priority in development planning in the 90s.

Bangladesh is going without any mass education programme worth the name since after the death of President Ziaur Rahman in 1982. Valuable time has already been lost, and now is the time to act if we are to leap into the 21st century with a broad base of literate population who will take us on to the path of rapid development and progress.

Concluded

The writer is a former Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Education.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Referendum — ballot symbols

Sir, The selection of a 'cross' sign in the ballot (for putting the rubber stamp by it) in favour of Presidential system does not appear to be a wise decision. What impression this cross would create in the minds of majority of voters who are not educated enough to understand the significance? It would mean something negative and undesirable to the unlettered as well as to somewhat-literate people. Does it not mean that the voters are being subtly discouraged to cast vote in favour of Presidential system even if somebody thinks it more suitable for our country?

The Election Commission would do well to clarify their choice, of such a symbol, to naive voters and general public.

A Hashem
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Crime in Mirpur

Sir, For some time past, criminal activities in the Mirpur area (especially in Block F, Section 2, near the water tank of Section 2) have increased manifold. The number of various shops, road side rickshaw repair shops, video clubs, etc has increased enormously. Block F is a residential area and the lease agreement between the allottees and government specially stipulates that nothing should be done by either party to destroy the residential character of the housing estate. Instructions were issued by government to the Executive Engineer of Mirpur Division to remove the structures immediately, but nothing has been done by authorities. The residents of the locality are greatly disturbed. There is a small space allotted in the plan for children's park.

ATP flies again

Sir, ATP flies again after being grounded following an accident at Rajshahi eight months ago. Before resuming operation of ATPs the State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism in a press briefing, a few days ago, tries to dispel doubt about the aircraft's airworthiness by stating that they are safe and there cannot be any question regarding their airworthiness. If the ATPs are safe, as told by the State Minister, then it raises several questions in the public mind:

- i) Why the ATPs remained grounded for long eight months incurring loss of 30,000 dollars each day? And who will bear the responsibility for the loss?
- ii) Why futile attempts were made with British Aerospace to return the ATPs?
- iii) Why the order for third ATP has been cancelled even by paying penalty in foreign exchange?

Lastly, as domestic passengers have no other alternative (unlike in many western countries) but to fly by Biman, I have a suggestion to the concerned authority to double the compensation amount in case of fatalities or injuries in the event of an accident. This would also match the enhanced price of the ATPs and might give an aura of dignity to some passengers flying by valuable ATPs!

Zavad Hasan
Kalabagan, Dhaka.

OP-1 winners

Sir, The American authorities have suddenly stopped issuing visas to OP-1 lottery winners in Bangladesh. This has created serious dissatisfaction and problem among the Bangladeshi genuine OP-1 winners who have been anxiously waiting to migrate to USA. Many have sold out their properties to arrange for their travelling expenses while others left their jobs or even returned from abroad for availing the chance.

Washington's decision to suspend OP-1 programme in Bangladesh has deeply hurt the feelings of Bangladeshis. We actually never expected such action from the side of the American government.

We would request the US government to kindly reconsider the cases of selected op-1 winners who are being refused visas even after completion of all other formalities.

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Primary Education

The education sector was recently dubbed a "clinically alive patient" by a senior official of the government. The official, a joint secretary at the ministry of education, also acknowledged that 75 per cent of our primary school pupils drop out well before finishing their five-year stint. Rarely has a sorer state of the country's education been portrayed by an official. And that during a speech given on the occasion of World Literacy Day too.

The irony was quite stark. But perhaps the saddest part is that government figures — whether ministers or officials — have become (or have always been) too adept at dishing out statistics to illustrate the problem, but hardly ever do they decorate their speeches with policy guidelines which would be implemented to solve the problem.

Against such a backdrop, what do we really expect from our primary schools and teachers? Or the five-year olds sent to those schools? We should expect a lot, because primary education is the foundation stone of not only the education sector, but of the whole nation.

One look at the phenomenal success of such Asian countries as Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia and others would reveal a simple fact: these countries put in greater resources and effort behind primary education than they did for secondary or higher education. The result? Illiteracy has been virtually wiped out, the overall level of education has improved and the ability of its people to acquire and use more advanced skills enhanced greatly. By putting greater emphasis on primary education, South-East and East Asian countries have raced ahead of South Asia in economic development, without sacrificing much in the way of human resource development.

What we need now is less talk, speeches and ribbon-cutting, and more concrete action. We are still waiting for an education policy which will set out our priorities for the next 10 to 20 years. Top most priority naturally should be given to efforts to enroll 100 per cent of the country's five-year olds at primary schools. The system of teaching should be made interesting and rewarding enough to reduce the number of drop outs. People at the lower end of the social scale have to be convinced that it would pay in the long run to keep their children at school than to send them out to work at an early age. But before any of that can come about, we need an imaginative and positive action plan from the ministry of education.

OPINION

Government and Party

A. Mawaz

The Star's bold and innovative proposal (editorial, Aug 29) to visibly separate the party activities of the party in power, and the activities of the Government, calls for serious consideration by our esteemed leaders.

The man in the street (whose profession is not politics, and he is not expected to think as a politician) is firstly interested in what is being done by the government. Secondly he puts a judgement tag on the performance: good or bad, acceptable or condemnable. Third on his checklist is who are doing the job (good or bad — curiosity value). The Government acts anonymously. Ideally, it should not be necessary to know who are governing — like the air we breathe, the way the body works, a child grows up, or watching the sunset.

Politicians and political parties think in the reverse order: first the party interest; then the job (or policy) — of interest to the party; and then the functioning of the Government, or governing the country.

The people's representatives running the administration are supposed to talk about the government policies and activities most of the time; and the party workers should be doing the propaganda for the party activities. There should be a visible demarcation of these two functions (although not water-tight), for greater credibility in building up a clearer and better image of how the country is being run (not how the party is being run). Party propaganda and government actions are not to be mixed up, especially when the vast majority of the voters are not enlightened enough to separate the two.

A lawyer looks at situations from the legal angle, a politi-