

Bringing WASA to Book

Dhaka's water problem is not getting any better. At present, the city's Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) can supply only 11.50 crore gallons per day to a population of over 60 lakh. The shortfall is an astounding 12.50 crore gallons. But that is only part of the story. Out of WASA's total supply, 45 per cent is lost everyday. Of that 25 per cent is classified as wastages, while the rest is said to be beyond WASA's account — meaning no revenue is recorded. In other words, WASA is currently managing to supply around a third of the city's requirements.

Water authorities are pressing ahead with installation of 60 new tubewells. Good news. But the new capacity will raise supply to only 14 crore gallons per day. Hardly a revolutionary impact since that will still be far from adequate. But as WASA simply does not have the facilities to produce enough, harping on that subject will be akin to bashing one's head against a brick wall.

The choice available is to make the best of what we have. That means cutting down on waste and instilling greater efficiency into WASA's administrative machinery. Much of the water is lost through open hydrants without taps, and through faulty supply lines. Although WASA says the various Ward Commissioners of the city are responsible for keeping an eye on hydrants, that kind of excuse will simply not do. The ultimate responsibility for supply of water lies with WASA, and not with any short-sighted Ward Commissioner. This is more so with faulty supply lines, leakages from which cannot be accepted as excuses for shortages. After all, why should supply lines be faulty in the first place? If WASA is having problems with an incompetent maintenance department, then urgent enquiries into its affairs are in order.

Rates for water was raised for the last fiscal year by 10 per cent, and it is set to rise again by another 15 per cent. But the quality as well as quantity of service is on a permanent downward curve.

But it's not all down to WASA, of course. A great deal of water is run literally down the drain by people not maintaining their taps or overhead tanks properly. This lack of a sense of civic duty, and administrative inefficiency have combined to make a bad situation worse.

As a public service, the onus is now on WASA to act.

But since we have embarked on the road to accountable government, it is now also imperative that people suffering from shortages tell their respective members of parliament (there are eight from metropolitan Dhaka) to put pressure on WASA, to put its house in order. Through parliament, WASA, like all other public utilities, must be made accountable to the paying public. And if the concerned MPs fail to act effectively, then city-dwellers (and sufferers) will know what to do with them when the next General Elections come around.

Film Industry

The dismal picture of the state of the feature film industry in Bangladesh, as presented in a special report published in this paper last Friday, deserves the immediate attention of our Ministry of Culture, indeed, of the government as a whole.

The Star report has identified a number of problems facing the industry. For one thing, there is a major rise in both the number of production as well as in production costs. This is a paradoxical situation. This is explained by the fact that certain types of feature films which rely on sex, violence and costume extravaganzas for mass appeal still attract crowds, but not the educated viewers. Meanwhile, a new breed of actors and actresses, producers and directors, exhibitors and distributors now dominate the industry. They appear to have little interest in changing the status quo.

Under any circumstances and, for that matter, in any country, this sad state of affairs in the movie world would have been a cause of concern to the authorities. For a number of reasons, it is particularly sad in the case of Bangladesh. Films provide the only form of entertainment for millions of people in the country's small towns and cities. One can easily imagine what impact some of these feature films which exploit sex and violence in the cheapest commercial manner have on our common people. We would not be surprised if a study should reveal a linkage between these feature films and the rising rate of crimes, especially the sex-related ones.

What makes a lot of people sad and a little angry is that a country as rich in culture as Bangladesh should put up with this kind of feature film industry. It is all the more sad because the country has its own share of talents which have made an impact on the theatre, on the art world and even in certain areas of the electronic media.

What should we do to set things right in our film industry?

In the special report, we suggested that, as a first step, the authorities should set up a high-powered study team to look into all the causes for the decline in our feature film industry. Once such a study which, we hope, will involve creative people from different fields, has been made, we would know how we should proceed. We are in favour of giving the private sector every opportunity to play its role as effectively as possible. However, we cannot let it treat this cultural medium purely as a commercial commodity.

In this context, the idea offered by some experts that the authorities should encourage young producers and directors to make short experimental films, perhaps by underwriting their distribution, certainly deserves consideration. There can also be a plan to promote joint ventures with some developed countries in the making of a few feature films as well as a training programme for our people involved in the industry. There is indeed a lot to be done. The important thing is to get started on the right track.

NEW DELHI: The walls are again screaming with posters carrying pictures of political leaders and slogans. City parks and village market places are again throbbing with crowds listening to speeches blared out over loudspeakers. The politicians are again on their routine rounds from one corner of the country to another with folded hands. The scenes are all too familiar to the Indian voters. Yet another national parliamentary election is round the corner. About 571 million Indian voters are expected to go to the polls sometime between the third and fourth weeks of May.

After what has been so far in the history of post-Independence Indian politics the shortest parliament — lasting only 15 months (from December 1989 to March 1991) — the various political parties are again girding their loins for a national contest staking their claims on the prospect of ruling India for the next five years. But judging by the trends, one does not see much hope of the new parliament, after the tenth parliamentary elections, lasting intact till 1996. Political observers are predicting another 'hung parliament'. The last elections, which also resulted in a 'hung parliament' with no single party winning absolute majority (the required number of seats being 258 in a house of 514) led to the installation of a minority government led by Vishwanath Pratap Singh's National Front, depending on the support of the Left parties on the one hand and the Hindu communal Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the other.

The precariously balanced government fell in November, 1990 following the BJP's withdrawal of support, and was succeeded by the most lightweight minority government that India had ever had — a government run by the rump of V.P. Singh's party, a rag-tag of 54 parliamentarians only headed by the over-ambitious Chandrashekhar who deserted the National Front in pursuit of his life-long aim to be the

Prime Minister, and fell back on the support of the same Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress (I) which he had opposed during the last elections.

As expected, Chandrashekhar's government fell within four months, when in March this year he was forced to resign after his supporter, the Congress (I) refused to continue back-seat driving and demanded to have its way (by asking for the dismissal of the state government of Haryana in north India — virtually a feudatory fief run by a gang of relatives and followers of

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Chandrashekhar's ally, the Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal.

This murky record of political skullduggery and opportunism of the elected representatives in Parliament during the last 15 months looms large over the coming elections. These politicians — many among whom are again being nominated as candidates by their respective parties will have to face an electorate which have grown cynical about most of the political parties which are in the fray. All these years, the Indian voters had been used to the cacophony of promises made by candidates during the campaign and their forgetting them soon after their election.

They have learnt to take this in their stride. They make jokes about candidates visiting them, displaying concern over their plight and promising redressal only on the eve of elections. Yet, they have been regularly going to the polling booths, whenever there are elections — probably hoping for some change to be brought about by one or the other political coalition that keeps on emerging every now and then

from the mercurial political scenario of modern India.

Since 1969, the Indian electorate had always been in the search for an alternative to the suffocating monopolistic rule of the Congress. That year, in the state assembly elections, they voted to power in many states coalitions of non-Congress parties. They failed there, thanks to the petty squabbles over personal rivalries and communal

disputes that dogged these uneasy coalitions and brought them down. Again in 1977, they elected the non-Congress Janata Dal coalition to the Indian parliament to give them a chance to run the entire country. It was a repetition of the same story, with the elected representatives this time indulging at the Centre in the same old petty fights over personal leadership (between Morarji Desai and Charan Singh), the same opportunistic alliances (between Charan Singh wishing to be the Prime Minister and his erstwhile enemy the Congress of Indira Gandhi, which he needed as support to gain his objective). Following this disaster, after nine years of Congress (I) rule the Indian electorate again sought an alternative in V.P. Singh's National Front government after the 1989 elections. But the same old snags cropped up again to bring about its downfall — personal rivalries among the leaders (between V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar); differences over handling the rising Hindu communal threat posed by the BJP and the anti-social forces rallied under its wing; and last,

but not the least, the manipulations of Congress (I) headed by Rajiv Gandhi who still smarting under his party's defeat at the last polls, is determined to bring down by hook or by crook any government at the Centre which is not run by his clan.

It is this hopeless experience of the last several years that emburdens a helpless Indian electorate which are going to face the coming parliamentary polls. The record of almost a decade of continuous Congress (I) rule — under Indira Gandhi from 1980 to 1984, and Rajiv Gandhi from 1984 till 1989 — does not inspire much faith in the party among the general public, what with Indira Gandhi's failure to solve the secessionist trends in Punjab, her authoritarian and repressive measures which were continued by her son, Rajiv, who to boot, during his regime acquired the notoriety

of suspected corruption over the deal with Bofors on the purchase of armaments. The corruption charges — yet to be proved — still cling to Rajiv like mud, and he will have a tough time during his election campaign to cleanse himself of that muck. Besides, his party is no longer the cohesive organization as it used to be during the days of his grandfather and mother. In almost every state, it is ridden with factions, which might put up their own candidates against the official candidates, thus dividing the Congress (I) votes. Some are already

deserting the party, like rats escaping the sinking ship, to seek nomination from other parties. But the Congress (I) is still a force to reckon with. It won 212 seats in Parliament during the last elections, emerging as the single largest party. On the basis of this claim, Rajiv in his election campaign is projecting his party as the only political force which is able to give India a stable government, and is appealing to the voters to give him a few more seats in Parliament to enable his party to reach the absolute majority status to form a Congress (I) government.

The other political groups in the fray are mainly three — the V.P. Singh-led National Front in alliance with the Left; the BJP and its Hindu communal allies; and the Chandrashekhar-led Janta Dal (Socialist). Among them, the National Front-Left alliance and the BJP are the only groups which appear to project some ideological stance. The former — in its first election rally — reiterated its commitment to the

protection of minorities (the Muslims in particular, who had been victims of communal riots during the last several months) and of the depressed and backward castes (a proposal to reserve seats for them in government services by the V.P. Singh government provoked a furious Hindu upper caste reaction during the last months of his regime). This promise of protection is being projected by the National Front as evidence of its ideological concern for social equity and democracy, although cynics suspect that it is aimed at garnering the votes

of Muslims who constitute about 12 per cent of the population, and the depressed castes and tribals constituting about 24 per cent of the population. The BJP, ideologically, is consistent in its assertion of a 'Ram Rajya'. In order to compete with the National Front, the BJP has added an economic dimension to its religious priority by coining the slogan: 'Ram and roti', thus promising the voters a religious utopia with abundant food! Since the BJP is mainly influential in the Hindi heartland (it runs state governments in Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan), where the Congress (I) will also have to contest, Rajiv Gandhi's party has come up with another slogan, which seeks to placate both the Hindus and Muslims as well as accommodate economic demands: 'Ram-Fahim, Roti-Roti'.

As for Chandrashekhar's Janata Dal (S), it has no ideological pretensions whatsoever. In a desperate effort to scrape through in the elections, its politicians are seeking alliances with all parties — with the BJP in Rajasthan, with Congress (I) in Uttar Pradesh, with the regional AIKDM in Tamilnadu in the south.

It is this assortment of incompatible political parties and groups which the Indian voters will have to face in the parliamentary poll in May. None of these parties and groups can claim an all-India basis (barring the Congress-I, which again is fractured by organizational disputes in almost every state, which is likely to frustrate its attempts at emerging as an absolute majority on the basis of the claim of a national party). By all indications, as of now, the 1991 mid-term parliamentary poll will lead to another 'hung parliament' with no single party gaining absolute majority — or a wafer-thin majority — followed by the installation of a precariously balanced government dogged by the same imponderables that had been the fate of Indians during the last several years.



V.P. SINGH CHANDRA SHEKHAR RAJIV GANDHI

Maranaws Fighting NPC Hydro Project

Azan, the Muslim call to prayers, stirs up new fervour among the 92,000 Maranaws in this southern Philippines city.

"Allah Akbar", or "God is Great", might become a war-cry of the Maranaws who are convinced it is their religious duty to wage an Islamic holy war against the government's National Power Corporation (Napocor) for the destruction of Lake Lanao.

Almost 11 years ago, the Napocor conceptualised a Lake Lanao-Agus River Development Project comprising of seven hydroelectric plants (HEP) with a total generating capacity of 944 megawatts.

To date, five of the hydroelectric plants are already in operation and are now the major source of energy for the entire Mindanao Island. All the hydroelectric plants are located along the 36.5-kilometre stretch of Agus River which provides the only water outlet of Lake Lanao to Iligan Bay, north of Mindanao.

Lake Lanao is the meeting place of 23 rivers and streams occupying an area of 360 sq. km. It has been the traditional landmark of identity for the Maranaws, a Muslim ethnolinguistic group, whose name literally means the "lake people."

Last October, concern over the preservation of Lake Lanao was revived when members of a radio club on frequency 359 decided to organise themselves. In Marawi City, two-way radios are substitutes for telephones, as a means of communications within the city and its vicinity.

The "Save Lake Lanao Movement" or SALAM, an abbreviation which literally means

"Peace" in the Arabic language, was established. The broad coalition comprised of the 28 Royal houses of Lanao, the Moro National Liberation Front, local government officials and non-governmental organisations.

Last December 1990, this predominantly Muslim city saw the biggest mass mobilisation in the region—about 50,000 people gathered to demonstrate their disapproval of the Napocor's Agus River hydro-electric projects.

"We are demanding the dismantling of the Regulatory Dam built by the Napocor to

Maranaws are against the destruction of Lake Lanao, their major source of livelihood and cultural identity

regulate the outflow of the water from the lake," said Adelaide Dituacan, an officer of SALAM. She added that "this was the main culprit in lowering the water level of the lake."

Since the start of the hydroelectric projects, the water level has been reported to have receded by 50 metres. This has hindered Muslims from performing their daily prayers and chores. Muslims who traditionally wash before their prayers have now abandoned many of the 100 or so mosques which used to be conveniently located on the shoreline of Lake Lanao.

Environmentalists have also reported the depletion of aquatic resources, hampered usage of water for agriculture, and the possible closure of Marawi City's lake port due to lowered water level.

Ch Jei writes from Marawi City, Philippines

According to a report of the Kinayahhan Foundation Inc. (KFI), an environmental group, the change in depth of the lake is also due to other factors like the siltation problems caused by intensifying dry spells over the past few years.

It was reported that by April 1990, an equivalent of only 30-35 centimetres of water depth was flowing into the lake. About 90 centimetres of water depth was needed to run the existing five hydroelectric plants in one month.

Over the years the production cost of the hydroelectric project increased 2.5 times, from 800 million pesos (US\$28.5 million) to 1.9 billion pesos (US\$67.8 million).

Despite such factors, the Napocor is adamant in the launching of the latest of the Agus River projects, the Agus 1. The controversial project was the major catalyst which sparked off the December protests.

The Agus 1 project has a capacity of generating only 80 megawatts. It has two underground tunnels 1.3 km long. Residents doubt the safety of the tunnel as it is alleged that substandard construction materials were used to build the tunnels.

There is strong seepage in the ground, and since the tunnels were constructed with

weak materials and no grouting (filling in the vacuum in the earth around the tunnel) was done, they will collapse when there is water pressure," reveals the former project supervisor of the Agus 1 underground tunneling project.

Despite strong assurances from Napocor officials of the tunnels' safety, the former project supervisor insists that independent technical experts should investigate the project because he believes that some phases of the project were not done according to design.

The Napocor argued that with Mindanao's projected power consumption increase of 14 per cent for 1991 and the disrupted opening of the Agus 1 project, there would be longer periods when electricity is cut-off.

But the Maranaws are convinced that increased electricity supply can never justify the destruction of Lake Lanao, their source of livelihood and cultural identity.

Protest actions against the Agus River projects were not sustained over the years but this time the Maranaws seemed to be ready more than ever to fight for their lake.

"The people have never been united except for now," said Ms. Dituacan. "We know our legal basis for struggling against the Napocor and we prefer non-violence and peaceful means to do it."

But the Maranaws, who view the struggle to save Lake Lanao as a holy war, seem to be prepared to do so either through

peaceful means or even otherwise. "We are prepared to fight,"

an elderly Maranaw said, "even if it is required for us to die."

—Depthnews Asia.

OPINION Kuwait Scene

This is with reference to a specific aspect of a sensitive issue focused in the editorial of The Daily Star entitled "Human Rights in the Gulf" (March 28). The specific aspect concerns the situation in Kuwait. It appears that some fragmentary accounts emanating from certain quarters have taken them at their ipsissima verba and inevitable incidents in a particular scenario are given an arbitrary slant with exaggerated overtones. This is exemplified by the conjectural allegation that there has been a systematic campaign of repression against Palestinians, Jordanians, Yemenis living in Kuwait and other "non-Kuwaitis" whose governments were sympathetic to Iraq during the Gulf war. Sweeping generalisation like this is apt to lead to conclusions devoid of substance.

When a sovereign state, after being devoured by external aggression, is liberated through a grim war, there is bound to be a period of vengeful spurt against the zealous collaborators of the occupation forces in their acts of torture, killing, rape and pillage. A symbolic bit of what Saddam's army did in, and left behind after seven months of occupation was reflected in on-the-spot newsreports following the entry of multinational liberation forces into Kuwait. A special correspondent of the daily Saudi Gazette witnessed at the skating rink in the centre of the Kuwaiti city mountains of stinking corpses so that instant polaroid photos of the bodies had to be taken for record before burial as they were too decomposed to wait any more days outside the grave. Other first-hand reports describe the terror and rape chambers set up by the occupation forces where ghastly torture instruments, blood stains and photographs of the victims were found side by side with pornographic videos, obscene printed material and pictures of Saddam Hussein.

Killing people after torture in front of their near and dear ones, physically lifting the citizens to unknown destinations (thousands are still untraced), criminal destruction of mankind's huge resources through the torching of Kuwait's 600

oil wells, widespread pillage; grievous damage to Kuwait's economic infrastructure; stealing tens of thousands of computers, cars and sophisticated equipment; cultural vandalism in ransacking the National Museum, the Historical Documents Centre and parts of Kuwait University; obliteration of valuable scientific research on human ecology at the prestigious Kuwait Institute of Scientific Research — the tale is endless and elaboration is horrifying. Now, what treatment is deserved by the perpetrators of these heinous acts or their collaborators? Does it require an answer in so many words?

Yet the Kuwaiti people have displayed their traditional magnanimity for which they deserve admiration. It may be noted that there are still about 200,000 Palestinians in Kuwait, and had there been a systematic campaign of repression, the casualties would have run into five digits. But the figure of 40 or so quoted in your editorial, or maybe the lower side of three digits, does in fact testify to the wonderful sense of restraint in the given perspective. Moreover, it is known that large sections of Palestinians were not happy with the ill-advised official policy of PLO in supporting Iraq. I personally knew some good Palestinians (and Yemenis) who strongly disapproved of the Iraqi aggression. Kuwait has always helped Palestinians and Yemenis with jobs, shelter, etc. So there is no question of any indiscriminate persecution. Of course, the PLO, notwithstanding its sympathy-arousing performance over the last two decades, can no longer claim the same credibility now after its less than graceful role during the last seven months.

As for war crime trials, it is an internationally accepted norm. Can any just person have objection to the Nuremberg trials following the second World War? After emerging anew from an inferno that almost quenched its very existence, Kuwait has a right to take appropriate measures to ensure its security.

Dr. Azim Haider
Dhaka

To the Editor...

Responsible citizen

Sir, The other day, I had the good luck to witness a very interesting and unique scene in the streets of Dhaka. It has brought back some of the confidence which, I had lost, about our people.

I was out after Ifar for the last leg of my Eid shopping. The road was naturally clogged with vehicles, both private as well as public. The traffic was moving quite slowly. Suddenly from somewhere came a microbus at a great speed, knocked a rickshaw and without even giving a second look proceeded on.

The rickshaw was in a turtled position, with both its rider and the puller beneath the vehicle. The most dangerous part of the scene were the other vehicles coming from behind which, if not well controlled, actually becomes the main cause of most accidents.

This happened so suddenly and in a matter of seconds, that everyone on the road was stupefied.

Then the interesting thing happened. While some were helping those fallen on the road to properly straighten themselves, a gentleman on a motor-bike continued pursuing

the microbus and finally caught up with it and handed the driver of the vehicle to the traffic police on duty.

This was indeed a very responsible thing to do. The gentleman did the right thing, he handed the accused to the proper authority, without taking law into his own hands. This

incident took place on Mirpur Road, opposite Dhaka College.

This once again reminded me of the fact that all is not lost yet. We are a civilized nation, though we often tend to forget it and commit acts not quite befitting members of a civilized community.

An observer.

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.