The Daily Star

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Huda's Confession

State Minister for Establishment Nurul Huda is no stranger to the affairs of the bureaucracy. A former magistrate, he has been looking after the ministry since September 19 last year. Not only that, the full cabinet post for the Establishment Ministry has been held by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia since March 19 last year, making the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's control over the bureaucracy's internal affairs a full 19-month old. Given that situation, it was a little disconcerting to hear Huda say on Sunday that the civil service "is in a total mess due to internal conflicts and groupings".

On the one hand, the statement could be read to mean a total condemnation of the senior civil servants of the country for a failure to comprehend the vital nature of their job; but on the other hand, Huda's comment appears to be nothing short of a frank admission of failure, on the part of himself and the cabinet, to assert political authority over the administrative machinery. In such situations, the truth is usually found somewhere in between, but in this case, it is a combination of both.

There is no dispute over the complaint that the bureaucracy has become a vested interest group, an entrenched power whose main traits appear to be institutionalised corruption, high-grade inertia and inefficiency, and a dedication to resist reforms and changes that might affect its position at the top of the establishment pyramid. Unfortunately, since independence in 1971, the administrative structure, which was designed to serve British colonial purposes and then bolstered to serve neo-colonial interests of Pakistan, has remained unchanged. Two periods of martial laws and quasi-military rules have allowed the bureaucracy to become even more powerful, with the political forces severely weakened and unable to effect any changes. However, Huda's statement that the machinery is in a "total mess" goes far beyond just a complaint about its power or the unaccountable nature of the exercise of such powers. The statement points to the fact that the present political government, despite its undisputed representative character, has not proved itself strong enough to exert the sort of control over the bureaucracy which would make the service efficient, development-oriented and accountable.

We would have been justified in expecting some concrete ideas, as forerunners to serious reforms, to have been formulated by the government after 19 months of being in control. The minister's comments, unfortunately, went some way to expose the rather helpless, and possibly idealess, position the government is currently in. It is imperative, for democracy as well as administrative efficiency, that firm steps are taken to make the service accountable. This is certainly an issue which ought to be tackled on an all-party basis since problems created by a faction-ridden, inefficient administration is a national one, and not only a problem for the government of the day. By forming a parliamentary committee, the minister would be able to tap a wide variety of opinions on how to reform and restructure the bureaucracy. More important perhaps, the direct involvement of parliament in this would weaken the ability of the vested interest groups from diluting the reform package. Now that the minister himself has admitted that the bureaucracy is too large a monster for him to tackle alone, he should have no qualms about seeking advice, support and participation from a wider section of the political spectrum. The idea should be to make the bureaucracy honest, active and accountable to the people through elected representatives, and involvement of those representatives in the early stages of the formulation of reform policies should be considered seriously.

Lalon for Life-giving Songs

In Kushtia they are now observing the 102nd death anniversary of Lalon Shah through holding a weeklong festival of his songs and talks and seminars devoted to evaluating his life and works. Considering his stature in the making of the many-splendoured Bengali culture the Lalon festival should have been held throughout the country and avenues opened for people to have a better glimpse of his teachings and his art and for some of them to take up as life's work the pursuit of the Lalon way. In our smallness in about everything we have reduced Lalon to certain pieces of songs given indifferently to an entertainment seeking audience and without having anything to do with the deep realisations of life that these songs couch and conceal more than they express.

We cannot talk much about Lalon's life. Perhaps it is good that it is so. In his teachings he soars above the small confines that society imposes on man. In life too he was not to be labelled by any communal or religious description— exactly as it has been the case with Rajab and Kabir— the great medieval savants. He sang the celebration of man— humanity— as did Chandidas centuries before him. Lalon was no freak and he carried on the great humanist tradition of Bengal in his art.

There is a sad trend among Lalon enthusiasts of striking very mean ways in order to raise the importance of that strange man who was, in all likelihood, so unlike them. It is foolish to make Tagore steal the ideas of Lalon so that the savant can be shown in a nobler light. If ever they met, or even if they didn't, it is our great fortune that our greatest poet have been seeded with the single yet deep Baul flashes into the meaning of life and the world and that through him the Baul visions of reality have spread throughout the community of man.

Some of the more familiar of his songs ridicule the separation of man from man through religious denominations. This has very great relevance to the needs of our day. Once we can transcend socially and emotionally the barriers of community, caste and creed, can we aspire to address the eternal question of man— as formulated by Lalon— how does the strange bird come and go in and out of the cage. Time was when the rural Bengal life was steeped in deep thoughts of high speculative philosophy that found so touching an expression in easy songs.

Our songs, specially those manufactured in the image of those gems, are the last words in crass falsity. Songs have ceased to be life-giving, instead they are sapping whatever has been left from the days of Lalon and before. Can a determinate harking back to Lalon and other masters save us from this peril?

Genuinely Sick Industries should be Identified for Rehabilitation

by A F Nesar Uddin

We welcome any idea to rehabilitate the sick industries but before doing so, the appropriate authority must ensure that genuinely sick units are identified and selected. Selection and identification of genuinely sick units are very essential to prevent dishonest and unscrupulous borrowers.

GENERALLY an industry is said to be sick when it incurs continuous operating losses, shows disproportionate financial ratios, fails to repay its financial obligations and finally its existence is at stake. Various studies reveal that reasons for sickness are many and almost different from one another both sector and industry wise. Usually factors leading to sickness are wrong project appraisal, cost overrun, time escalation, lack of managerial competence, machinery imbalance, under capacity utilization due to shortage of raw materials, both international and local market problems, defective policies, higher input costs, operational problems, etc. Actually capacity utilization is a significant factor to generate adequate funds for operation including debt servicing. Among all these factors, cost escalation and time overrun are the main reasons for non-implementation and delayed implementation of projects and these are the critical impediments for project sickness. Most of the sick projects are overcapitalised by borrowed fund and heavily pressurised with unbearable financial costs. When the project cost is gone, it will have to bear the burden of additional interests on the one hand and additional depreciation charge on fixed assets on the other hand. Some people may argue that turnover in terms of money will also increase due to inflation. But this increase is not proportionate as compared to additional and unusual financial burden of the project. As a result, a viable project is bound to turn into a non-viable or sick unit. This is very unfortunate that most of the projects having these problems will never see the profit in its entire life and have already acquired a permanent inability to clear the dues to banks/DFIs. As revealed by various studies, blame for this industrial sickness and financial disaster should be shared by sponsors, Government policy, banks/DFIs and also donor agencies. It may be mentioned here that most of the sick industries as identified through various reports are financed by banks and DFIs. Although the reasons for sickness are many as started above, these may be broadly categories as genuine sickness and artificial sickness for the purpose of this paper.

Our past experience on the country's industrial programme is not encouraging. It is very interesting and alarming to note that some borrowers are not at all interested to run the units because of the fact that banks/DFIs will force for repayment of loan if project is in operation. This is a peculiar situation and arise when a borrower is sure that project can never be brought back to a profitable position. Besides most of our industrialists have inherited some habits and culture which are very unusual. Some of these are — apathy towards repayment of loans as well as taxes, use of borrowed fund for huge consumption expenditures, dependent on subsidy, unjustified bargaining with Government for undue benefits, frequent threat to Government for closure of industry, demand for undue tariff protection, understatement of profit figures etc. In a competitive economic environment, these unhealthy aspirations and unjustified claims are not at all conducive to develop an industrial economy. Local industries require protection in some selected cases but the nature, duration and extent of such protection need to be defined. Things must move in its own way and business should run only on commercial consideration. An indsutrialist assumes the risk with the hope of earning profit or to get return on its capital. Usually, he should be simply given the guarantee of a market friendly environment and also be allowed to take out the profit and get back its capital on successful operations of industry. This should be a two way traffic. Government can create an environment conducive to industrialisation but can not share the risk of depleting national exchequer or can not put the depositors' money at stake for inefficiency or lack of experience of habitual defaulters. In the past, various types of concessions, exemptions and rephasements were allowed to borrowers in respect of their loan accounts on the understanding that loan accounts will be regular but the outcomes were very frustrating. Obviously, these steps discourage the good borrowers. On the other hand, losses, as a result of these special treatments, are compensated by charging higher interest on good borrowers. This is unfair and unjustified. How long an industrialist with these inherited characteristics will be financed from public or depositors' money?

We welcome any idea to rehabilate the sick industries but before doing so, the appropriate authority must ensure that genuinely sick units are identified and selected. Selection and identification of genuinely sick units are very essential to prevent dishonest and unscrupulous borrowers. It should be made very clear that a section of the defaulters are suffering from industrial sickness but it is very interesting that almost all the defaulters are resorting to industrial sickness as a reason for non-payment of their dues to banks/DFIs. Care should be taken while funding because additional funding means additional financial burden to the sick industry. Pouring fund into the artificial sick units will not help to achieve the desired outcome rather it will worsen the situation. Any decision regarding rehabilitation of sick units should address the particular problems directly.

In view of the above situation, the programme of rehabilitation of sick industries should be taken up after examining and considering various aspects of industrial sickness in Bangladesh. In order to identify genuinely sick units followings aspects may be looked into carefully :

1) Sectoral problems should be identified through a broad based study and should be given priority while individual problems should be addressed separately. Where industry capacity is unutilized due to shortage of sectoral demand for product, rehabilitation of such units by further financing is useless.
2) Repayment habit of the borrowers of the sick units should be studied particularly in the cases where projects have been put into operation for a considerable time.
3) Repayment performance of projects should be looked into carefully where projects were previously allowed number of rephasements and concessions.
4) Projects under litigation particularly those which were placed for direct sale action should not be included under rehabilitation scheme.
5) some borrowers have expanded their business and trade keeping the sick units unattended. This clearly reflects the borrower's apathy towards the industrial projects and, in that case, rehabilitation efforts for those projects will be useless.
6) Cost overrun in a number of cases has exceeded the tolerable limit and has become more than 100%. In those cases, rehabilitation will not possibly be successful to bring back the project to a profitable unit and to salvage the same from the burden of overcapitalisa-tion.
7) Studies reveal that there are projects which were not completed for lack of intiative of borrowers even after funds have been disbursed fully or substantially by banks/DFIs.
8) Some projects are facing peculiar problems, such as, business discontinued, defective machineries imported, borrowers do not admit liabilities to funding agencies, conflict in management resulting closure of operation etc. These items deserve special attention before deciding for rehabilitation.

Persons involved in sanctioning and monitoring of sick units should not be involved in rehabilitation programme for obvious reasons. Besides if change of policies are helpful to reactivate the sectoral activities and to remove generalised sickness, then further funding should be avoided under rehabilitation package. To start with, some selective cases (at least one from each sector) should be taken up.

Some selected units after proper scrutiny and in-depth study should be given moratorium which will be helpful to bring back a sick unit to a financially viable unit. Cash infusion should be restricted to only deserving cases selected after proper scrutiny.

Sick industries obviously deserve special attention for its rehabilitation. Government is also trying to salvage the sick industries with the active co-operation of banks and financial institutions.

Ours is an agricultural economy while industrial sector is taken up as economic priority for economic development particularly for import substitution, employment generation, contribution to GDP and export growth. But our industrial sector has not been able to achieve the minimum expected level of performanee even after channelizing huge funds to this sector since liberation. Our overall prospects appear to be really bleak. With these experiences, this is the proper time to identify and select the genuine sick units to salvage them under a rehabilitation scheme. At the same time steps should be taken so that we do not repeat such mistakes in future. We are a poor country and as such we can not afford such repeated mistakes.

Conservatives Oppose Seat Reservation for Women

Ayesha Khan writes from Islamabad

Dramatically underrepresented in the National Assembly, Pakistani women will gain 20 reserved parliamentary seats if a newlyannounced Government plan bears fruit. While the new seats may help to strengthen the weak ruling alliance the proposed legis-lation may also drive conservative factions out of the Government coalition.

IN theory, it is a simple piece of legislation supported by both Government and opposition. In practice, it is becoming a difficult and sensitive issue.

Such are the plans for the Government of Pakistan to restore the system of reserved seats for women in the National Assembly.

In the past, a constitutional provision ensured that 20 separate seats for women were kept in each National Assembly body. In 1989, the provision lapsed with the election of Benazir Bhutto's government.

He government is criticised for not having restored the provision, but Bhutto's premature dismissal by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan after only 18 months may be one reason why action was not taken.

Recently, the issue came up in the Senate when Deputy Chairperson Dr Noor Jehan Panezai proposed a Bill to restore the reserved seats.

"I think reserved seats are important because there is a lack of education among women, and they are not financially sound enough to fight in the general elections," she explained.

The provision worked like this: twenty seats were reserved in the National Assembly, and members from the general seats elected women to the reserved seats on the basis of proportional representation to provinces.

Today, without the constitutional provision, the only women in the National Assembly, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and her mother, Nusrat Bhutto, were elected to the general seats. Dr Panezai is the only woman in the Senate, the upper house of parliament, but hopes that eventually there will also be reserved seats there.

Dr Panezai acknowledges that power politics between Government and opposition parties may prevent any legislation on the issue. The ruling coalition recently lost two parties of its Islamic Democratic Alliance, and now lacks the requisite two-thirds majority in the National Assembly to pass legislation.

The opposition Pakistan Democratic Alliance (PDA), led by Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, approves the restoration of reserved seats in principle. But Omar Asghar Khan, of the PDA component party Tehrik-e-Istaqlal, thinks the Government actually has its own needs in mind.

"Given the Government's tradition of blatantly rigging elections, it is confident that it can get its own members elected to the reserved seats," he said.

The thinking behind the provision was to bring women slowly into the mainstream of Pakistani politics. Not only did that fail, but politicians admit that the extra 20 seats were always filled with women who would bolster the support of the government in power.

"No doubt reserved seats add to the strength of the ruling party," says Dr Panezai. "But I don't blame women for that. I blame the men who brought in women who increased their political strength, and not women who would do something for the country."

Women activists strongly urge the government to restore the reserved seats. Shehla Zia, a lawyer and member of the Women's Action Forum, argues:

"Had women been at the judicial, administrative, and at the various legislative levels, perhaps we wouldn't have reached a situation today where all these (religious) laws, highly discriminatory towards women, have come into existence. We would probably not have reached this stage at all or not to this extent anyway."

Legislation in the name of Islam, begun in the late 1970s under the martial law of General Zia ul-Haq, has been resisted with minimal success by activists like Shehla Zia.

Under the existing Huddod Ordinances and Law of Evidence, a woman cannot serve as a witness in cases of rape, and her evidence is "halved" in financial cases.

Shehla Zia believes that, denied of political representation and access to the judicial systems, women have no access to relief.

"And once laws do come into being under the name of Islam, in this country it becomes extremely difficult to dislodge them afterwards."

In this situation, even limited political representation would be a step forward for women, Shehla Zia insists that reserved seats are important because they increase women's visibility in the political process, and give them valuable political experience.

Although they may not have played a critical role in national politics thus far, the reserved seats could help to give women insight in to how to improve the political system from within.

These, however, are not the motivating concerns for the politicians in the National Assembly who will ultimately decide whether or not to restore the seats.

Recently Maulana Qazi Hussain Ahmed, of the religious Jamiat-i-Islami party, allegedly announced his opposition to reserved seats for women — saying that women should not be elected to special seats by men.

He later clarified his statement, saying that he was not against reserved seats for women, rather he opposed women entering the National Assembly on the general seats.

If women depend on male votes to win a general seat, he argued, then they will be bound by them and remain obligated to their male voters.

Even the PDA has not decided whether it will support the restoration of the reserved seats. The opposition interprets the Government's interest in reviving the issue as a move to gain public support at a time when the right-wing Jamiat-i-Islami and the ethnic-based Mohajir Qaumi Movement parties have both left the fold.

The PDA is unlikely to cooperate with the Government unless its primary demand, the holding of a free and fair election under a new, neutral government, is met.

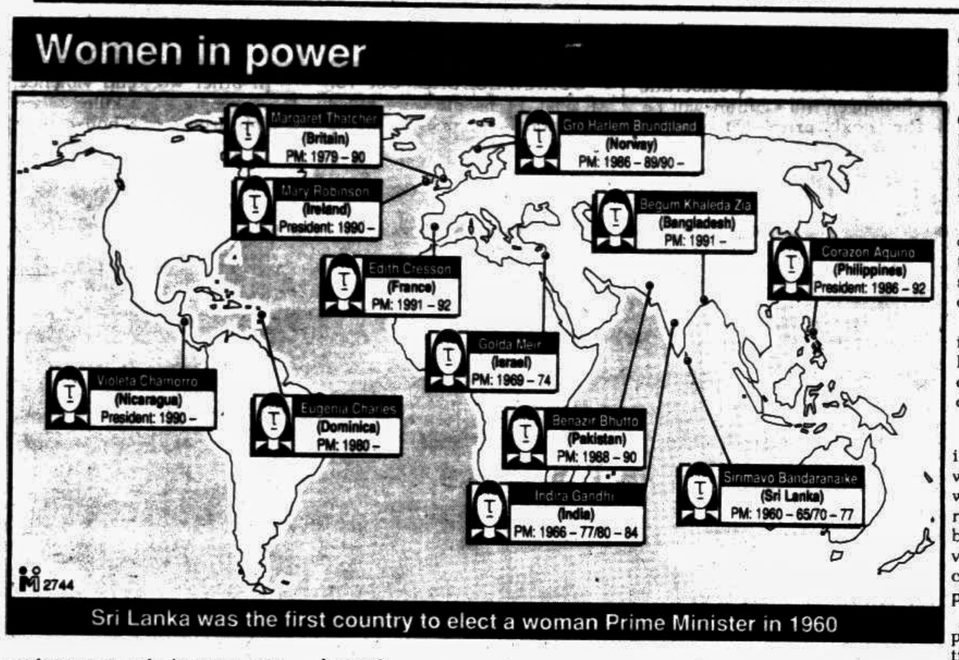
Meanwhile, the IJI government does not wish to make itself vulnerable by risking defeat on any parliamentary Bill. If the Bill were rejected, it would only deepen doubts among the public and political analysts that the IJI still maintains solidarity within its own ranks and has the ability to negotiate meaningfully with the opposition.

Victory, on the other hand, could potentially add 20 pro-government seats to its dwindling number, and also win the approval of activists and the public at large.

In this context, the restoration of reserved seats for women seems likely to remain an urgent demand of activists alone. An increase in women's political representation is certain to take a back seat to the worries of a government losing control of its coalition-based powers and an opposition intent on pressuring what it dubs an illegitimate government out of office.

— GEMINI NEWS

AYESHA KHAN was born in Pakistan in 1965. She is now a freelance writer on social and women's issues.



Sri Lanka was the first country to elect a woman Prime Minister in 1960

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.

Democracy

Sir, The French great thinker Voltaire said, "I may disapprove of what you say but I will defend to death your right to say it." This principle must exist in a free, ideal democratic society. The great sacrifices of innumerable martrys of liberation war were to uphold this democratic value. This spirit of liberation struggle had motivated our valiant masses and students to free our beloved motherland from oppression, deprivation and exploitation. But what happened after the achievement hard-earned independence? Within a few years, the golden deer of long-cherished democracy, was slaughtered on the sacred floor of parliament. One party rule was established to bring so-called economic emancipation through socialistic system. That blunder perhaps prepared the background for the bloody 1975 tragedy in Bangladesh history . Maybe one misdeed bred another.

However, after long 15 years of untiring struggle, foundation of democratic institution was laid through an unprecedented free and fair election in 1990. The historic understandings and bold role of the leaders for switching over to parliamentary democracy was, no doubt, a appreciable initiative. The nation would remain grateful to them for their sacrifices and contributions. But then the enemies of democracy are again out there to destroy the institutions through anarchy, terrorism and campus violence.

Ignoring many burning issues, much time and public money has been spent to discuss rather a non-issue in the parliament. Through propaganda, provocative speeches and statements, embarrassing the administration, attempts are being made to drag the nation to unholy confrontation. Democracy, people's welfare, Socio-economic developments seem to be trifling matters before petty party interest. Realities of Bangladesh have revealed that climbing to power-throne by the stairs of democracy is quite, impossible yet many. Therefore, destabilising the democratic environment may be felt mandatory for them, who knows. Hence our hard earned democracy in vulnerable to anti-democratic forces. The patriotic forces should, therefore, be alert and vigilant against any evil design and protect the flourishing democracy.

(Dr) MA Hanif
Halderpara, Bangladesh.

Nationalization of schools and colleges

Sir, The Government has decided to nationalize a school and a college in each thana of the country. This is a commendable step which will undoubtedly promote the cause of education in rural areas. In each thana there are a number of schools and in many Thanas there is more than one college. There is a good member of thana level Govt officials in each thana these days. In the absence of good educational institutions at thana headquarters education of the children of thana officers also suffers a lot. Hence it is felt that as a matter of policy, school and college situated at thana headquarter should be given priority while nationalising schools and colleges.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury,
Dhaka Cantonment.

New Elephant Road

Sir, During the month of June '92, WASA performed a part of Dhaka Storm Sewerage Project and laid some RCC pipes after digging the New Elephant Road almost all along its length and in some places across the road. Three and half months have passed, but unfortunately the road at the locations of pipes has not been brought to its previous condition. For the longitudinal trenches almost one third of its width has become useless. For the cross sectional trenches it has become risky to drive.

It is to mention here that we, the inhabitants of this area, specially the morning walkers, have observed how these deep trenches were filled by a mixture of huge pieces of asphalt, brickbats and earth. No proper sand filling with compaction was done for back filling. When the representatives of contractors were asked why they were not following the specification, the reply was that they were just trying to free the road before the peak traffic hour and the arrangement was "temporary".

I hope that this "temporary" arrangement of backfilling will thoroughly be investigated soon by the authorities concerned.

Zafar Shaheen
Elephant Road, Dhaka