

Horse-trading in Pakistan Politics

Induction of Asif Zardari, the flamboyant and controversial husband of Benazir Bhutto, into the cabinet of six-day old Mazari government, speaks volumes about the desperation of President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, and the hold of the PPP on him. It appears that President Ishaq wants the PPP's backing at any price and for that he is willing to go to any length. It was with his not so veiled blessings, if not direct instigation, that Zardari was put behind bars and all sorts of criminal charges instituted. For Benazir, to be able to force Ishaq Khan to make her husband a minister in the Mazari cabinet, prior to the proposed elections in July, is the most effective vindication of her position that she and her husband were victims of political vendetta, and all the talks about corruption against her and criminal cases against her husband were false.

With Benazir taking side with the President, the fight now becomes clearly between him and the ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. As pointed out in a timely and insightful piece by Star columnist Rehman Sobhan in this page yesterday, that unlike past ousted PM's, Sharif belongs to Punjab, the power house of Pakistani politics and the province from which lion's share of the army comes. Sharif is also the very first businessman turned politician to become prime minister. Sharif's strong support base among the business community is already clear. Army appear to back the President. But if public opinion in Punjab is on the ousted PM's side, then how they will behave, is not yet clear. So it is not likely to be plain sailing for the 78-year old president.

But the irony in all this is that the same people, under different labels, are playing havoc with the future of the country. If the saying 'old wine in a new bottle' was ever applicable to a political situation, it is so in the case of Pakistan. Twenty-nine months ago, President Ishaq, in connivance with Nawaz Sharif, ousted the then elected government of Benazir. Today Ishaq Khan is doing the same with, as is obvious from PPP's clout on the new government, Benazir's connivance. So where is the place of national interest in all this? Is politics in Pakistan to remain, forever, one of patronage and petty interest? Will 'palace clique' always determine the fate of elected governments?

Benazir's compulsions to get back at Nawaz Sharif is understandable. But does it have to come at such a high cost to democracy and constitutional norms? If, for example, Benazir wins the July election and returns to power, what guarantee is there that she will be allowed to rule without presidential interference? And we all know that the power behind the president's throne is the army. Hence by siding with Ishaq Khan isn't Benazir only strengthening the army's hand? Who will answer these questions? Do politicians care, as long as they can go to power?

On the other hand, if Sharif is able to galvanise mass support and turn the table around—and he just might do that because of being from Punjab and having the support of the vital and powerful business community of Pakistan—then the confrontation between him and Ishaq Khan will be intense and bloody. It will be such a confrontation that army will greatly benefit from. Through his action, whose motive was simple personal interest of getting reelected as the President, Ishaq Khan has laid open the door for Martial Law in the country. His action has already dealt a serious blow to democracy in Pakistan. It may even kill it, for some years, at least. And Benazir, again for very narrow personal reasons, is acting as a party to it. It is hard to imagine the people of Pakistan forgiving either of them for this horse-trading. But then politics in Pakistan has seldom been much else.

The Poor Fellow the Mayor is

A new-fangled but interestingly named association has told the press of a fascinating programme they are going to take up. On Thursday the Bangladesh Graduates' Association addressed a press conference to say that they would counsel the future mayor of Dhaka on how best to meet the challenges he or she would face as the city's top executive. The association said they would also hold public opinion polls to decide on the acceptability to people of candidates in the next mayor election.

What will they counsel the mayor on, 'through discussions on an expert level'? The list is short but weighty. First, very deservingly comes the mosquito menace. This is followed by waterlogging and uncovered manholes, sweeping and scavenging breakdowns, dust, the mastan suzerainty, the problem of a police force gone into a nirvana etc.

No one has any reason to doubt the good intentions behind the programme. But we have a hunch that, if indeed pursued, the thing will be an exercise in futility. How would the mayor make the city mosquito-free? Or for that matter, mastan-free? With or without counsel? What do the mayor need in order to succeed in those? An honest-enough and strong-enough intention to begin with, to be sure. There are problems if he or she wants to be so colossally intent on these two. However pious are his or her wishes, the mayor cannot cross other people's path in any way. And there lies the end of these honest wishes. The technology of killing mosquitoes is difficult to devise if only because that technology must be able to fatten the purses of ever so many people and perennially too—costing, say, ten Taka a mosquito a year. Those at the receiving end of this huge amount of money are expected to wisely put away some of the receipt to run hatcheries of mosquito larvae to be in business up to eternity. Mastans are a different story. According to the prevailing pharmacopeia, you need to become a bigger mastan to eliminate a smaller one. All the big ones are serving their stints at some higher levels than the poor mayor's. The city of Dhaka so far hasn't been able to stop one single vehicle from belching black smoke. A clear lack of right intent is showing on the part of whosoever is in charge of that. In such a situation it would be unkind to blame the mayor for anything, particularly the inaction of police.

We would like the Graduates' Association to think up ways to really help the poor fellow that fate will condemn to be the next mayor. Fending for more than a crore of men, women and children—mostly miserably poor—will be most of his job—whether he likes it or not.

While writing on the black economy, I referred to the case of the metal welder who in his own very small way is trying to contribute to the gross domestic product. There are millions like him engaged in micro enterprises, struggling from sunrise till much after sunset, in a world which does not offer him much beyond survival at best.

They are subsistence producers constituting the backbone of our least developed economy. They are submerged within vicious circle of poverty; neither counted in terms of their contributions to the national economy, nor considered a source of considerable potential for future development. On the other hand if we really mean business, these poor non-farm artisans should be assisted to come out of the submerged economy and emerge as lead elements of small and medium scale manufacturing sector of the economy. The submerged economy reflects the true human dimension of industrialisation and manufacturing growth in Bangladesh.

Our emphasis is on the man with influence in his white sedan who, at ease, enters the Shilpa Bank, bring out from the folder laser-printed proposal of a shining modern enterprise and ask for a project loan of 'only' 50 million Taka. Everything looks so neat and tidy. Yes, the entire developing world with surplus labour is going in for labour intensive manufactured exports. So we must assist such bright young people, well-groomed, heavily

perfumed and the crocodile leather briefcase shining beside the chair. The place is the office of the bank manager.

In the midst of glitter, we forget dirt and sweat of the poor metal welder of the slum. The argument in favour of the sedan man is irrefutable. However, problem arises when capital import out of the proposed loan has been over-invested. If it is 20 per cent of import value (equal to the loan amount of Tk. 50 million), then in the very first opportunity, Tk. 10 million in convertible currency is deposited in an interest bearing account of a bank abroad. If the sleek operator is genuinely interested in setting up the enterprise, then he would bring back the money and show it as his equity investment. The more greedy kind would be interested only in the over-invoiced part as a net gain and let the industry go to hell. The outcome of the latter case is a clear disaster but in case of the former as well, the earnings from the enterprise in a competitive market cannot be that high to keep up with repayments of the inflated bank loan at fairly high (compared to outside world) rates of interest.

Of course there are honest investors who borrow as little as possible, set up enterprises and put in hard work to maximize gains both for himself as well as for the country in terms of increased export

The Submerged Economy

earnings. Otherwise, garment industry would not have become the leading export industry of the country. But like bad money driving good money out of circulation, spurious investors spoil the game for others. When there are too many spurious, industrial investment funds tend to become looters domain for quick gains of solid cash. It is almost like winning a huge lottery: tax-free and in convertible currency. Inevitably, the intention is not to

chinery and equipment, training and centralised marketing. Each employing 10 to 20 workers, they can also enter the garment export business since the size of the market can be enormous.

Similar, if not stronger, is the case of streetside welders. They know metals and are conversant with rudiments of metallurgy. Why cannot we supply such primitive micro entrepreneurs with training, machine tools and raw materi-

work and sweat at their micro establishments within a small space useful only as the garage of the loanees of Shilpa Bank.

Grameen Bank thus far has managed to cover over a million loans with small doses of vital capital assistance enabling the poorest of the poor to secure an income which often meant the difference between life and death. It has now come up with a new scheme to organise weavers, again through capital loan in small doses, in order to engage them in the weaving of cotton fabrics good enough to be supplied to the garment makers of the country for export.

This is the step in the right direction. As a complimentary to Grameen Bank, we need Nagar Bank combined with related hands-on training programmes. Following Grameen Bank style management practices, organise artisans, craftsmen and other skilled groups and extend skill training and capital aid to organise the micro enterprises who are modern and skilful enough to manufacture products that can stand up to the export competition. If Madras cotton can be made by our weavers for the garment industry, why not other products as well.

We can draw inspiration from the SPARK programme of China which has been successful in setting up millions of small scale manufacturing establishments all over China making significant contribu-

tions to export and GDP. Why cannot we envisage one million such family based enterprises each employing 5, 10 or 15 workers mainly drawn from the family. And, from the ranks of the vast number of micro enterprises should emerge the true Bangladeshi entrepreneurs of small to medium scale in size. Eventually few of them would climb up further and become successful founders of large-scale enterprises. Let us not forget that small time operators of 1950s are now presiding over huge conglomerates in many Asian countries. If not in one generation, then from the next generation of such micro entrepreneurs will emerge the well known 'Captains of Industry'.

Only then the submerged economy will surface. Instead of the vicious reality of pseudo entrepreneurs, trying to vitiate themselves through the ecstasy of black money, let us evolve an innovative strategy, much more vigorous rather than vulgar, that effectively reach critical inputs to subsistence entrepreneurs of the submerged economy so that instead of empty shells of so-called modern factories, we establish a million strong small-scale family working units who together constitute multi-billion dollar export business for the country.

There are about one million weavers in the country. Number of potters, blacksmiths, carpenters, jewellery makers, metal welders and others—all groups together—would run into millions. They are our assets—not liabilities.

WINDOW ON ASIA

Shahed Latif

promote productive capitalism but luxury living and hedonism of the worst kind.

However, slush money come quick and go out quick as well. While searching for ways and means to safeguard industrial capital funds from the prying hands of the fake and the fraud, let us also try to extend a strong helping hand to the artisans, craftsmen and other skilled people struggling within the submerged economy. Take for example thousands of tailoring shops that exist in every nook and corner of cities, towns and market places of the countryside. Their only capital is age-old sewing machines. Why do not we try to modernize 100,000 such tailoring shops with ma-

als. Very soon, they should be able to manufacture a wide variety of products from fabricated metals. Numerous categories of such skilled people—carpenters, goldsmiths, potters, cane and bamboo workers and, above all, weavers exist in our country. In most instances, their skill is too out-dated to manufacture products that can compete in the world market. What is required is training followed by capital assistance, appropriate design and centralised marketing of their products.

In the present context of our country, these people are the true entrepreneurs. They neither care for the perfume nor the crocodile leather briefcase. They are used to hard

A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

Jute and Synthetics vis-a-vis Environment

by Dr A B M Abdullah and Dr Z H Prodhan

fertility of jute fields due to rotting of jute roots, left over plants, green leaves etc. Moreover, long roots of jute plants act like stirrers by penetrating impermeable areas of the cropland. The green leaves containing vitamins and proteins are also edible.

In the process of rotting, fibrous web of jute plant is separated from jute sticks by complex microbial actions. Here pectins and gunny materials are dissolved by enzymic action. The rotting water is then full of various microbes which are congenial to cat fishes but noncongenial for crabs and human uses. However, by organic and ribbon rotting this also can be controlled. Drying of jute fibre is done by exposure to sun light easy, in a tropical country like Bangladesh.

Jute and various parts of jute plant have been used by local people as weaving and house building materials in indigenous way for long time. The green leaves and roots are used as vegetables and medicines respectively. But the present use of jute as commercial packaging commodity had started at the time of the Crimean war in Europe particularly from Dundee based industry. Twine, hessian, gunny bag, carpet blanket and various furnishing fabrics, felts and jute geo-textiles are the major jute products. However, jute is mainly used as packaging material.

Batching, carding, spinning, warping, weaving are the major mechanical processes involved in the production of most of the conventional jute products like twine, hessian, carpet backing and gunny bags. Jute batching oil, petrochemical derivatives are generally used for the softening of jute fibre. This batching oil emulsion contains hydrocarbon and their derivatives which, however, cause nonhygienic hazardous toxic effect. But recently this unwanted effect was solved by using vegetable

oil. In warping, starchy materials, are used but these are also biodegradable and have got no residual effect on the products. Sometimes very little microresistive chemicals are used but they are below toxic level. Only environmental problems that affect workers and environment are dust particles and sounds generated in spinning and weaving machines but with the application of effective measures and developing effective eco-control techniques, these problem of mechanical processing of jute mills can be controlled or minimised.

Wet processing technologies are hardly used for the production of major jute commodities like hessian, gunny bags, twine etc. Because packaging materials do not need any involvement of wet processing technology. Only very recently with the development of nonconventional jute products like carpets, blankets, wall covers, furnishing fabrics and coarse apparels, wet processing technologies like scouring, bleaching, mercerizing, dyeing printing and finishing are required. All the wet processing technologies involved in cotton and other textile materials can be used in jute processing. Only some changes are required for jute as it is more acidic in nature. There is no special dye for jute. All the commercial dyes which are generally used in cotton, wool, synthetic, silk and papers are applied in jute products. And these dyes are licensed and certified by national and international bodies as regard their compatibility towards human body and environment. Considering the amount of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers used in rice, cotton and wheat, the same agent in jute fields are very small as the farmers grow jute as a rotating crop for increasing field fertility and crop diversification. Moreover, it has been observed that no residual toxic element in jute

fibre is present when above materials are used in jute fields.

In addition to above facts, live green canopy of jute plants covering huge area uses up atmospheric carbon dioxide and releases fresh oxygen in the atmosphere.

Another outstanding property of jute fibre is the capability of jute and jute products to absorb U-V radiation now coming to earth surface in huge amount than previous time due to depletion of ozone layer by green house effect. This U-V exposure causes skin cancer and cataracts in large number in both developed and developing countries. But jute and jute products can shield it and save both biotic and abiotic materials from degradative effect of U-V radiation.

Synthetic and plastic materials, from their production to uses, are not compatible to environment. Various parameters were studied as regard energy consumption, nonbiodegradability, photochemical decomposition, waste disposal, emission of various toxic gases, heavy material additives. In this respect, following information in regard to plastic and synthetic materials may be noted for comparison. These plastic materials are produced through polymerization by various methods that include (a) solution polymerisation (b) gas based polymerization (c) suspension type of polymerization (d) fluid phase polymerization. In all cases, in addition to monomers, various types of additives are included in processing sequences for advantage and imparting different properties on the plastic materials. These are catalysts, stabilizers, fillers, colours and pigments, sensitizers and deactivating agents, antioxidants, U-V absorbers, different proofing and brightening agents. Normally this additives are about 6-10 per cent of the total material. These additives are mostly chemically heavy

metal oxides, chelates, carbon black, chalk and various poly-functional compounds like benzophenone, benzotriazole kindred phenols, amines, nickel complexes etc. Stabilizers are used to improve technical properties of polymer-plastic materials. They are chemically kindred amines, phenols, sulphides and phosphides. They are working as peroxide decomposing on chain breaking mechanism to stabilize the products against thermal, mechanical and photodegradation processes. In addition to above stabilizers, nickel complexes are also used as stabilizer. These stabilizers and nickel complexes have got sensitising action depending on availability of oxidizable compounds present in the media. Moreover, nickel dust and oxides are carcinogenic in nature. Sometimes antimony oxides are used as flame retardants in combination with bromium, chlorine and aluminium compounds. But antimony, bromium and chlorine compounds are not compatible to environment.

Bangladesh is a least developed country. Over-population, unplanned urban development, short-sighted industrial and development strategy and overall illiteracy may be identified as the principal causes of our environmental pollution. With the development of science and technologies every day, better and sophisticated new building materials are being produced around the world, particularly in developed countries.

Geotextile, agro-textiles, geo-membrane, geogrids, nursery sheets etc may be printed

in textile field. These materials are used as stabilizers in various constructions like embankments of rivers and canals, roads and highways, rails and runways, hill slopes, land seepage. In controlling desertification process and moisture control of soil. Though synthetic and man-made geotextiles are dominating as constructional materials currently, yet due to environmental hazards as described above, natural geotextiles are getting priority in construction works.

Recently scientists, technologists, engineers, sociologists, planners and leaders of the world also upheld the necessity of environmentally compatible constructional materials for environmentally sustainable development works. Moreover, in highly dense, over-populated, riverine, flood, prone tropical climate like Bangladesh where agriculture, communication, urbanization and living occur in an integrated almost continuous similar ecological area, all flora and fauna exist in close proximity to each other, the use of synthetic geotextiles as stabilizers in embankments, river training, flood control, roads and highways might cause a high degree of environmental pollution. Because various toxic and carcinogenic chemical monomers from synthetic geotextiles are produced by hydrolytic reaction within the soil due to high temperatures, pressure and contamination with sensitizer types of materials. Therefore, prior to further use of synthetic geotextiles in various construction works, the long term national interests and the reality of possible irretrievable harm to the environment and habitat of Bangladesh should be very carefully considered.

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OPINION

Of the Word "Montri"

From our early childhood, days we are used to hear faty tales about Kings and Queens which in Bengali we call 'Raja Ranir Golpo'. Kings in those stories used to reign a piece of land inhabited by subjects with the counsel of 'montris' who, most of the time, used to give bad advice resulting in the loss of the kingdom. And ultimately the prince with the help of friends somehow used to reconquer his own land. In most of the stories these ministers who are called 'montris' had a bad role to play. Also in history we notice that role of the 'montris' of the kings was very prominent and effective in the administration of a kingdom.

The kings were completely dependent on the 'montris' who used to run the administration in the name of the king by keeping him ignorant of the real condition of the subjects. Their main duty was to extract money from the people to please the king. The montris, virtually, were more powerful than the king in their manoeuvre as they had direct contact with the people. Sometimes it seems to me that it is only natural that the kings were not supposed to work, think and even they were not to have any intelligence. If they worked, thought and used intelligence, then, what was the use of having 'montris'? He hired the montris to work for him, think for him, live for him and, maybe, die for him!

Montri in Bengali means someone who gives counsel to somebody. Rajas used to hire them and call them 'montri'.

But why, and how we call the 'minister' of a democratic country a 'montri' is not understandable to me. In a democratic country where people are sovereign, elect their own representatives to run the administration; a prime minister, with the help of other ministers, in charge of different departments of the Government, run the administration of the country; the ministers are completely responsible of running their ministries with the help of Govt. officials—a 'montri' is not to give counsel to anybody. Even the Prime Minister—Prodhan Montri—who has the overall responsibilities of running the Govt. and usually is in charge of some ministry or ministries—is not to give counsel to anybody as the person himself/herself is the number one in the administration of a democratic country.

So, why use the word 'Montri' in Bengali when we use the word Minister in English? This may not be an appropriate translation when the connotation does not represent the work they are doing for the people of the country. The word 'montri' brings a different image in my mind and also I believe in the minds of many. Why can't we find an appropriate Bengali name to use for the ministers, who administer, but do not have anybody to give counsel? In my opinion, when there is no 'Raja' there should be no 'Montri' as such.

Munira Khan
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To the Editor...

Rape of Dhanmondi roads

Sir, At one time, roads of Dhanmondi Residential Area had no footpaths, although the roads were well laid with rows of flowering and scented trees planted along both sides. The roads were just gravelled, but not 'paved' in the modern sense.

Not too long ago, nice footpaths were made on both sides and roads were tar-macadamized with smooth surfaces all through. This was true about most of the roads starting from Road No 1, to Road No 27. In very few cases, the task was either not taken up or left unfinished upto the time of the ouster of the autocratic regime of Ershad. I am referring to the old road numbers, hoping that the old system will be restored without further delay.

But the above scenario is no longer there, much too sooner than was ever expected. The beautiful roads are now disfigured in many places, footpaths slabs uprooted or cut through mercilessly. The disfiguring of roads is the direct result of dumping of bricks, sand or construction materials of different sorts. In some areas, the entire road surface has been turned into a construc-

tion yard with M S rods being cut and bent for roof centering or foundation pillars, sand being screened or mixer machine being operated—all on the wide road surface, without caring for the inconvenience of vehicular traffic or passers-by.

TV announcements are after heard prohibiting such practices as noted above, but there is no positive action on the part of Municipal authorities to enforce the order instructions announced on Radio or Television. It reminds one of frequent TV announcements aimed against plying of motor vehicles emitting black smokes highly injurious to health, but anyone with his eyes open would find such vehicles plying freely in the city every day, everywhere.

It is not known whether the merciless cutting of roads or footpaths in Dhanmondi Residential Area—whether for laying of sewerage lines or telephone cables—is being done unilaterally or jointly by WASA and T&T as per any agreed plan or whether the Municipal authorities have any role to play in the matter. One who lives in the area would naturally have serious doubts about this, because after the work is completed, it becomes nobody's business to restore the

original condition of the roads and footpaths desecrated in a crude way. More often than not, the ugly canals created by the indiscriminate diggings are left as they were or only half filled up, causing terrible inconvenience to passers-by using these footpaths or to vehicular traffic using the roads.

This spectacle becomes even more pitiable when one sees early morning squads of young girls of the nearby 'bustees' extracting and plying, apparently for a sort of living, bricks from inside the ditches formed out of the said diggings of the roads and footpaths. Obviously, these practices take place under the very nose of municipal sweepers and their supervisors, not to speak of the patrolling police. Vain attempts are sometimes made by morning walkers, who are either retired government employees or others hungry for social service in their spare time, to stop the wily youngster from trying to make a ready earning.

Alas! The Dhanmondi roads, once a matter of joy for walkers, motorists, rickshawpullers, are fast reverting to their earliest status—at least in respect of some of them, where the rape is complete. Will the

concerned authorities took into this ugly picture?

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Noise-pollution

Sir, Last December, the Bangladesh Society for Conservation of Environment (BSCE) released a sticker depicting the irritating effects of horn abuse and loud noise on human beings. Abuse of vehicle horns, loud-speakers etc. has become a common practice in our society. None bothers about the problems of others.

Recent studies have proved that 'phonopollution' or noise-pollution can impair an individual's intellectual ability. Excessive noise damages hearing, causes hypertension, even heart ailments.

Under this circumstance, the BSCE made appeals to the concerned authorities and the members of the public to take united measures against noise-pollution through effectively checking abuse of horns, microphones and by controlling other sources which are causing noise pollution. But actions are yet to be apparent.

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