

Our Eroding Amity with Water

The Padma is eating up the heartland of the legendary Bikrampur Pargana. Vast tracts of land in the Louhajang thana has been lost over the last few days and things stood on Wednesday threatening doom to the main river-port bazar at Digholi any hour the next day or the next to it. The telltale Daily Star photograph of the ironical Padma cinema standing on the precipice as one already condemned and consigned to a watery grave brings out the savage tragedy of the inexorable erosion graphically. This is in sharp contrast to impersonalized reports of dams breached and villages engulfed published endlessly through the erosion season. It makes a point we are hard put to miss. Geographical, or more technically geomorphological, changes do not anymore take place in desolate expanses of land or water. In Bangladesh, with the densest population for a nation in the world, these occur right through the middle of a family's courtyard. This is the tragedy of Pompeii revisiting us ever so often albeit in smaller editions.

Cases of Noakhali and Chandpur and Sirajganj erosions are as old as they are notorious. Crores upon crores have gone into attempts to save towns and population centres there but to little avail. The one reason common to these sagas of continuing failures is half-hearted and ad-hoc approach lacking in farseeing knowledge of how best to come to terms with the rivers — rivers that grow in viciousness as they become more and more decimated.

Didn't anyone know that populous and historic Louhajang was threatened? That Digholi Bazar was going to be lost this very monsoon? The people were not told and even the populace on the very locale neither seemed to know nor care even as late as a month back. Aren't these very many experts kept by the government to know about things like this much in advance and tell the government what to do and the people to brace themselves for the eventuality? The Digholi tragedy very strongly suggests existence of pockets of irresponsibility and anarchy in areas of administration that can prove fatal to life and property of multitudes of people.

Chandpur and Sirajganj — two very important river-ports of the nation — are being mauled by the Padma and the Jamuna relentlessly for so many years. On the question of our seemingly given up battle in Chandpur we have more than once counselled in these columns a kind of take-it-or-leave-it approach. Want to keep the port and the town as-is-where-is? Please go and do that. This is decidedly not beyond the engineering prowess of man, the only thing to be discreet about in this job would be to be sufficiently deferential to the phenomenon and dynamics of rivers specially of the deltaic terrain. The Padma and Jamuna must be persuaded through gentle and nature-friendly engineering prodings to spare the towns we want to remain. Conversely, we can as well decide not to fight this formidable battle and the government mount a retreat to safer venues and the society follow it in building a new urban centre. There hasn't been any response to that and indecision still rules in the government's handling of the erosion of those towns. Now the tragedy of Digholi points to a general picture of ineptitude of the government's concerned agencies in the matter of the first among the important physical bases of this polity, namely, water.

Who can help this poor and peculiarly placed nation with every one of its endowments turning into poison at any next moment? Too much of water and too less flood and drought holding sway side by side. Too much of rain and unrelenting march of aridisation — facts at once. Land rising at the offshore regions at a phenomenal rate, and the green-house effect threatening to drown no less than half the nation's landmass. Callousness in areas where the knowledge and skill for sorting these out should reside, would be tantamount to crime against the whole nation.

The question of why wasn't there a notice of Digholi's imminent demise would keep on dangling putting all credibility of the concerned agencies and experts into grave doubt.

Preserving Architecture

When Prince Charles expressed his strong reservation about the architecture of London's buildings, particularly of the modern ones, it caused quite a furore. First, by making his comment public the prince somewhat broke with the tradition of the royal family and then he was not an authority on the subject. But instead of making him unpopular to the British public, this criticism endeared him with them. The architects also had no reply to his accusation simply because he pointed to a fault nobody cared to do. The prince may not be an eminent architect but his aesthetic sense was confronting the concrete jumble in London with shock and he had to come up with a statement.

Whether Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has also taken the cue from Prince Charles is beside the point, but it is a highly important matter that she is personally concerned about maintaining the architecture of the old buildings in our country. The way our proud possessions of the past are neglected simply manifests our lack of awareness about our history and tradition. Prince Charles's complaint was that the new structures have no respect for the style and form of buildings that have lent over the centuries a distinctive character to London — entirely its own. Our case is no different.

If conformity for London was in question, ours is a problem of this one plus our mindless drive for razing the old — historical as well — structures to the ground and erecting anything modern in its place. Our national press club building, a Victorian architectural beauty with so much to boast — where even world-renowned physicist Satyendra Nath Bose resided for a short period — was one such casualty. The Bardwan House, now Bangla Academy, has been expanded and renovated leaving much of its architecture unaltered. But not quite. Happily, the main building of the Brojo Mohan or BM College of Barisal will be restored to its original shape through reinforcement. A welcome decision on the part of the authority.

Any tinkering with the architectural marvels of the days of yore is a crime because through this act history is distorted or simply obliterated, neither of which can be helpful for developing a sense of respect for one's own culture and heritage. The Prime Minister has drawn attention of the nation to a much-needed task. But to do full justice to the matter a government policy will be in order. Allocation of special fund for renovation of such buildings throughout the country is necessary.

A trip to the island of Phuket in the south of Thailand takes about one and a half hours by plane from Bangkok. There are six to eight flights a day shuttling between Bangkok and Phuket. Regular flights are also available from Singapore, Penang, Hongkong etc, and chartered plane load of tourists flock to the island round the year. It is called 'Pearl of the Andaman Sea'. Indeed it is a tourists' paradise. Made out of a fairly large island, from east to west it stretches for about 100 kilometres.

Driving from Bangkok westward along the coast, popular resort areas like Cha-Am, Hua Hin, Chumphong etc, come into view before one reaches near Hua Hin from where the road straight south leads to Phuket and the other highway in south-eastern direction connects Thailand with Malaysia. The south-west coastline of Thailand with the Pearl of the Andaman Sea on one side seems to be enjoying rapid economic growth because of coastal tourism and its spin-off effects.

An excellent dual carriage way with four lanes on each side constitutes the major artery of transportation for the region. The coastline here is now dotted with resorts, hotels, apartments, holiday homes, golf courses, sea-food centres and shopping complexes. Only ten years back, fishing villages and one single town giving the appearance of a tourist centre (Hua Hin) could be found in this coastal part of Thailand. I was at Cha Am last week and drove down upto Chumphong. This week, I flew to Phuket after a gap of only five years. I found the developments simply awesome — so massive and intense that very soon we will be talking about a Thai Riviere. The huge apartment buildings, bought over by rich Thai families and foreign business companies for use as holiday homes, country clubs concentrating on golf, luxury hotels and resorts — all together give the impression of a string of gems, like a necklace when lights are switched on in the evening. It is a fantastic view from the gulf very similar

Coastal Tourism : The Money-spinner

to the Mediterranean coast of Spain, France and Italy.

Well Tested Strategy

Coastal tourism, as the basis for economic growth is a well tested strategy of economic development. Beginning in the 1960s, when air travel became cheap and affordable to ordinary middle-class families, going out on holidays for up to few thousand miles became commonplace. As a result, real boom in development came forth to Mediterranean countries due to European tourists and in the Caribbean because of Americans. Further, expansion of air travel in view of long-haul wide-bodied jets allowed even low cost budget travellers to come over to Thailand, Malaysia or Bali Island for a week to 10 days of relaxation consisting of sun, sand and fresh sea food. Golf, promoted primarily for the Japanese, has also become the big attraction.

The boom in tourism in Asia during 1980s started with the Japanese so much so that even in the recession year of 1993, practically one out of every three Japanese would be taking a holiday away from the country. Their first destination is Hawaii followed by Guam, Tahiti and Thailand in order of number of Japanese tourist arrivals recorded in earlier years. These are big time business involving billions of dollars of transactions over the season. A million tourists, each spending a thousand dollars would mean a billion dollars tourist revenue excluding the revenue earned by the airlines. Last year, over five million tourists visited Thailand and foreign exchange earned exceeded other sources of such earnings. If total revenue from tourism along in Asia-Pacific region is taken into account, the figure could easily exceed the gross domestic products (GDP) of Bangladesh.

What is the big attraction to millions of peoples crowding the airports all over Asia? There is a false impression that it is wine and women. The sea itself is the

primary factor for the boom in coastal tourism. People love the sea and the foods derived from it. We Bengalis are a different matter; we neither like the sea because of our colour prejudice and therefore hate the sun: nor do we have any preference for sea food. But let us look through the window on Asia — there the world is fast changing and becoming so different from us.

Economic growth in the Pacific rim countries have led to the generation of new tourism traffic from Singapore, Hongkong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand and Republic of Korea but the latest trend of 1990s is emergence of tourists from mainland China — plane loads of them are visiting neighbouring countries for rest and recreation. While from recess-

the only piece of coastal real estate where inspite of vast potentials, tourism has hardly developed so far.

On the other hand, imagine a capacity for 10,000 tourists at a time, an occupancy rate of 200 days per annum and a daily expenditure (on the average) of 100 dollars per tourist. The tourism from Cox's Bazar alone would have generated 200 million dollars of revenue, around 20,000 new jobs and a sharp rise in demand for local goods and services. Together with airline revenues and various multiplier effects, the benefits in aggregates could easily run upto half a billion dollars each year. If this basic tourism infrastructure was in place by the end of 1980s, then sustained efforts at doubling tourism capacity every two to

WINDOW ON ASIA

Shahid Latif

tion-ridden Europe and North America, tourist flows have dwindled. Intra-regional tourism from within Asia enabled the boom to continue.

Sea Beach of Pristine Glory

In the south-east corner of Bangladesh, there is a sea beach of pristine glory — stretching for as much as 80 miles. It is an unbroken virgin strip of gold from sun and sand, with lovely sea food not appreciated by the local people. In fact, we tend to look inward and towards Middle-East and Europe but hardly ever towards the sea which to us seems to appear as an empty void. In addition, the dangers from an often violent Bay of Bengal further whittled our interests in maritime affairs in general and coastal development potentials in particular.

If we look at the rest of Asia, Cox's Bazar coast is perhaps

three years would have created the new Riviere on the Bay of Bengal by the turn of the century.

Importance Overlooked

The importance of coastal tourism in generating rapid economic growth can be enormous — a fact often overlooked by planners of our country, more concerned with our innate cultural and religious conservatism negating the potentials of a multibillion dollars business on the coast. The decision-makers have been unnecessarily apprehensive of local backlash; while the enormous benefits from jobs and incomes to the coastal population have always been understated or not mentioned at all. I was SDO Cox's Bazar in 1966. After 27 years tourist facilities and hotel capacity has hardly improved there. Phuket or Hua Hin were better known in those days when Cox's Bazar could have become the holiday destination

of the region.

Nobody realized that tourism could be such a big business. However, can it be done now or have we missed the boat forever? Personally I consider that Asian tourists other than Japanese would be the phenomenon of the next two decades and the volumes of such tourist flows could be enormous. Imagine one out of every 100 Chinese mainlanders travelling abroad each year. It would mean eight million tourists and add to it wealthier overseas Chinese from Taiwan and ASEAN countries who have already started enjoying their vacations by the sea. With large families and travelling in groups, the new Asian tourists prefer destinations near home — close to the paddy lands, and smell of spices. Europe is rather remote to them and bland to their taste. Since the above trends are likely to prevail upto the near future (if not longer), coastal tourism of Cox's Bazar is bound to succeed as a family destination as well as a place for golf and fresh sea-food.

Let us therefore, not waste our competitive advantage in coastal tourism. We have waited and wasted such opportunities in the past. Time is of essence. We realise that the demand for anything like tourism as a service is bound to be elastic in the long run.

Investment Support

Coastal tourism, the billion dollar money-spinner of Cox's Bazar, calls for limited public investment support in certain specific infrastructural projects which could initiate the much sought after spinning through a virtual gold mine. First will be preparation of a comprehensive physical plan for tourism development covering the coastal belt starting from Cox's Bazar town to the southern most point called Badar Mokam including St Martin's Island as well as other islands near Mokeskali. The major infrastructural investments by the Government would consist of expansion of Cox's Bazar airport so that non-

stop flights for tourists are possible from London, Sydney and Tokyo; improvement of existing roads and construction of several access roads to the beach running in-between the sea beach and Cox's Bazar-Teknaf road, going through the hill range at suitable picturesque locations like Himchari, Unani, Baharchara, Monkali etc; provision of electricity to pre-selected hotel/resort sites, development of public facilities at beach-sites and expansion of the golf course upto international standards.

The rest of the development will be taken care of by the private sector including investments in hotels/resorts, telephone/fax services, transport, chartered flights and all other ancillary facilities where commercialisation is feasible. To begin with, our tourism organisation should give up management of hotels at Cox's Bazar and hand them over to international hoteliers in order to initiate the private sector to new tourism opportunities in Bangladesh.

Our coastal tourism venture would only be a repetition of the same success story of Spain in the 1960s, Caribbean in 1970s and Thailand/peninsular Malaysia in 1980s. Tourists each year look for new places to visit. Cox's Bazar as a new found destination, unspoiled beaches and excellent weather in season (much better than humid south-east Asia) should therefore succeed. Imagine, for example, direct flights from Tokyo bringing in plane loads of golf enthusiasts on a Friday evening and a fabulous sea-food dinner waiting for the guests, costing them hardly ten per cent, of its price in Japan; next, two days of excellent golf, more sea-food and for non-golfers — the sea and the sun are always there. If such weekend package tours could be organised at reasonable costs, then profitable tourism should attract plenty of foreign direct investments for the purpose, and, the plan should include golfers not only from Japan but from all over South-east and East Asia — crowding the greens and the beaches at Cox's Bazar.

Human Rights must be Universal, Says New Head

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington

Abdullahi An-Na'im takes over as the head of the US-based human rights group Africa Watch at a time when human rights are high on the international agenda. The 47-year-old Sudan-born attorney was forced to flee his country in 1985 for political reasons. Gemini News Service profiles the man who will be monitoring human rights violations in Africa.



AFRICA WATCH CHIEF ABDULLAHI AN-NA'IM

'One has got to be an optimist' human rights in Africa. 'In this business,' he remarks, 'one has got to be an optimist.'

Assessing current conditions in Africa is like trying to decide whether a glass is half-full or half-empty, An-Na'im explains. 'I choose to see it as half-full. Looking at where we have come from, I can see tremendous improvements in Africa in the past few years.'

At Africa Watch, An-Na'im will try to extend those gains by assisting non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in countries all over the continent. He intends to give priority to

'capacity-building initiatives' that will enable human rights monitoring groups to function more effectively.

Africa Watch cannot provide funding for these endeavours, the new director said, but it can offer technical assistance in the areas of data-gathering and communications. His ambitious overall aim is to promote 'a human rights culture in Africa'.

An-Na'im in turn locates this mission in the broader context of the South's efforts to end its dependency on the North. Human rights groups in Africa,

he observed, still rely on their counterparts in Europe and North America for financing and other resources.

To be truly effective, An-Na'im added, 'human rights work should be a partnership of people throughout the world.' He wants to help develop the capacities of African groups so that they can 'act as partners.'

Progress in that direction is already being made, An-Na'im says. NGOs in Africa have attained a greater degree of sophistication, he noted, while those in the rest of the world are becoming more politically influential.

That much was clearly evident at the United Nations conference on human rights, held in Vienna in June. And the strengthening of NGOs is seen by An-Na'im as an important element in a debate that raged among delegates at the Vienna meeting.

This argument basically pits those who believe in the universality of human rights principles against those who favour a relativist interpretation, whereby human rights standards reflect differences among cultural traditions. An-Na'im himself firmly upholds the universal position. 'I believe universality is the objective,' he declares, 'and it's what human rights are all about.'

An-Na'im subsequently founded a London-based group

known as African Rights, which recently issued a report charging United Nations forces in Somalia with human rights abuses.

An-Na'im said that Africa Watch has not modified its position in support of military action to defend humanitarian workers in Somalia. He added, though, that his organisation had recently expressed its 'strong disapproval' of UN offensive actions that have killed scores of Somalis — civilians as well as combatants.

Africa Watch has also called on UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali to establish an international commission that would investigate the conduct of all forces in Somalia and bring to account those responsible for human rights violations on individual countries.

An-Na'im, married and the father of five, approaches these issues from an activist as well as a scholarly perspective. He came to Washington from Egypt, where he served as scholar-in-residence at the Cairo office of the Ford Foundation. He holds two degrees from Cambridge and has been a visiting professor of law at universities in Sweden, Canada and the US.

Those affiliations have not caused him to become an apologist for established authority. 'Governments, North or South, never relinquish power,' says An-Na'im, 'so it's a question of people asserting their rights rather than waiting for government to concede them.'

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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.

Wage earners' remittance

Sir, I am a poor woman whose husband mortgaged his (our) small piece of land and took loan to go to Kuwait. He regularly sends some money by Demand Draft to enable me to pay the debts and maintain myself.

Unfortunately, the DDs sent on nationalised banks are taking a long time to be cashed. This has become more serious in the last few months. On 25.5.93, I deposited a DD on Umar Exchange Co Ltd, Kuwait to my bank, Uttrika Bank Ltd, Satmaejid Road branch, who sent it to Agram Bank for encashment. For two months Agram Bank sat on it and only released after I incurred some unwanted expenses.

On 7.7.93 I again deposited a DD for \$326 to Uttrika Bank who sent it to the payable bank, Janata Bank, head office, Motijheel on 9.7.93. Till early

in Bangladesh that the candidates are allowed to apply without any guidelines. It is also for the first time that candidates applied in one field and are selected for other field. In a few cases, more than one candidate were selected from the same department. Reportedly, some candidates virtually having no contributions in a particular field were selected in the relevant field, although excellent candidates were available. Some of the renowned scientists applying for this fellowship have been dropped out. Some of the selected candidates have not eligible 3rd divisions in their academic careers. Age, total publications, previous postdoctorate training, service-bond in the institutes etc mattered little in the selection of candidates.

Regarding this EC postdoctorate fellowship nominations, now there are hundreds of complaints among the scientists in the country. Even a gold-medalist scientist is said to have been rejected.

So it is requested to reevaluate the bio data and contributions of candidates under appropriate guideline so that such scientists can come up in his/her field as to contribute more for progress of the nation. It is also suggested that EC head office may collect applications under an appropriate guideline so that they can select

the proper ones from the list. Otherwise, it is requested for total stoppage of EC postdoctorate fellowship for 1993 until a right guideline is developed.

Dr P K Ahmed and Dr J Musa Dhaka

Road traffic planning

Sir, It appears that 20-30 years of family planning campaign and expenditure of billions of taka from the public exchequer have met with a fiasco. In 1993 we have more than four times larger population in our country than what we had in the year 1947.

Today we can hardly move from one place to another by motor vehicle