

DWASA in Trouble

Far from being over, the endemic problem of the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) appears to be compounding. As the authority of this utility service is showing increasing nervousness and even at a loss how to tide over the crisis, up comes the ready answer from the world's premier financial institution, the World Bank. Its solution is simple: just go for water tariff increases twice — only 20 per cent each time. And the increases will have to be effected within a stipulated time — the first by the end of 1993 and the second by 1994, which means a 40 per cent rise in tariff during a year and a 55 per cent increase within two years, since the earlier 15 per cent revenue hike was imposed less than a year ago.

The DWASA's capacity to meet the water demand by its consumers is severely tested at present. With a supplying capacity of 150 million gallons of water a day, the agency can ideally serve only half of the city population. Then the uneven distribution of this precious commodity makes the situation worse than it should be. The crisis of water sometimes pushes consumers of those neglected areas on to the edge. The compulsion of the DWASA under pressure of the WB conditionality to swallow the prescriptions is now greater than ever before, for the bank has already financed three of the former's projects. A fourth project in collaboration with the French government is ready for implementation. Although this may give the DWASA some breathing space, the agency will have no choice but to bow to the pressure. The bank has been insisting that it will stop its next project appraisal unless the DWASA has effected the revenue increase as suggested by the bank.

To say that the proposed tariff increase will be a result of the WB pressure alone is an oversimplification of the complex situation prevailing in the system of water distribution. Like most other utility services the DWASA has never really tried to come to terms with the idea that much of the problem is its own creation. Efficiency is a term one may never find in the lexicon of such corporate bodies. Taking advantages of their laxity, on the one hand, and in trying to avoid the top-heavy bureaucratic procedures, on the other, the consumers also look for short-cuts, albeit corrupt. All this explains why water goes wasted while at the same time acute crisis of the same persists. What in technical parlance is called system loss has indeed been responsible for substantial part of the problem. Without slashing the cost of the commodity supplied by the DWASA, it does not stand a chance of running its affairs well.

Yet it has not given any serious thought to making it competitive, nor has it tried to manage its own business without being dictated by any international financial institutions. Admittedly, it has fallen in a trap from which its extrication will not be so easy. Its debt service liability accounting to Tk 24 crore to the finance ministry for the year 1992-93 alone, and the expansion of its programmes proving so pressing, the DWASA is vulnerable to suggestions that can bring about an immediate relief; but in the long term may prove highly injurious not only to its own health but also to the country's well-being.

If the WB does not soften its stand, will it be able to survive and look for other donors with both intentions and resources to give it a new lease of life? Or, does it have the willingness to look for any other alternative? In the answer to these questions lies the fundamental solution how the water problem in the city will be met. It will perhaps be too premature to make any forecast about the shape of the distribution system to come. But about one thing there is little doubt that the commodity is going to be more costly.

Reaching BRRI's Good Work to Farmers

Agriculture and Irrigation Minister Majid-ul Haq has called upon our scientists to evolve modern technology to augment the production of rice and to take immediate steps to popularise it among our farmers. On a visit to the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute, he made the appeal to the two hundred and odd scientists there. The minister couldn't have said more apt words to a more appropriate audience.

Unfortunately for us, all the good words of the world have a tendency to become cliché in a matter of no time, losing all import and meaning. Asking scientists to evolve technology, however well-intentioned, betrays a very innocent ignorance of the gulf that exists unbridgeably between science and technology in spite of there being dynamic developments in the twilight zones of applied physics and chemistry, biotechnology and the old areas of engineering and the so-called medical science. The BRRI is decidedly one of the more high-performance successful research institutions, evolving in its existence of 22 years no less than 26 strains of high-yielding rice. In spite of there being all the necessary paraphernalia and manpower for improving rice cultivation technology including soil management and agricultural equipment, the performance in this area cannot match the discovery of the new rice strains. The reason is simple enough — technology involving modification of cultivation technique and of the equipment together with better soil management calls for extension work on a vast scale getting millions of farmers into the act of the switch-over.

How can the BRRI scientists popularize their new strains and techniques among the farmers? What will then the Thana Agriculture Officer and the extension graduates passing out from the BAU do?

There is one time-tested killer of all good-intentioned tall orders, mostly of ministerial origin. Officers will be officers, marking and noting and signing and passing on files even if they are top engineers and agronomists. Scientists are a different breed, shut off from anything to do with a work-force or a crowd of farmers in the field. But those officers charged with application of laboratory inventions and discovery will be ever busy being gentlemen weighed down by worries over leaves and promotions, retirement and pensions. We have yet to see a top engineer wearing a helmet and a top agronomist going into a muddy field with true sweating and smelling farmers around him.

Reaching the achievements of the BRRI to the farmer in field should precisely be the job of Mr. Haq's ministry and not BRRI's. How we would like to see him to set an example to his irrigation engineers and agricultural technologists — teaching his officers how to be acceptable to the poor farmers.

Tariffs on Items Freed from Control Need Scrutiny

NEARLY three months behind schedule, the import policy for the ongoing financial year was approved by the government earlier this month. The import financing programme so approved, covers the beginning on July 1, '93, while the two-year import policy itself goes one year beyond to encompass 1994-95. The financing programme projects imports covered by it at 3,125 million US dollars during the current financial year which is said to be about 19 per cent higher than that of the preceding year.

The import policy financing programme does not, of course, cover all the imports into the country during a given year. For instance, there are development imports funded by donor agencies which do not figure in the financing programme. By way of illustration, it could be mentioned that according to the provisional data, total imports into the country during the last financial year came to about 3,900 million US dollars, out of which roughly around 2,600 million dollars came under the import policy financing programme.

More important perhaps is the fact that import policy, as reflected in the Import Policy Order (IPO) lays down the framework under which import trade in its entirety would be carried out during the ensuing year. It tells you of the conditions for obtaining authorisation to import, for opening letters of credit, for shipment of goods — in fact, the whole gamut of do's and don'ts. Of more topical interest, the IPO lists the items which you cannot import or import only under

certain specified terms.

This year's official announcement on the government's approval of the import policy is terse in the matter of details. It merely hints at withdrawal of restrictions on imports of certain items and easing of some conditionality in the existing IPO. The official announcement does not spell out what these changes are. So, you have to wait till the new IPO gets printed in the form a priced booklet — may be by the end of the month — to know for sure what it is all about.

None are the days when the new import policy would be announced with a fanfare over TV, radio and newspapers. There were reasons too why the announcement was awaited eagerly. Till the ongoing reforms in trade and industrial policies set in, the IPO would list items that were permissible for import. In other words, it was a positive list, telling you only the items that you could import. Any item not covered by the list was prohibited for import. Import liberalisation in those days spelled an expansion of the positive list, making more items importable. These days, the IPO contains only the negative list, telling you of the items prohibited or restricted for import. It follows, therefore, that items not figuring in the negative list can be imported freely. Contrary to the earlier practice, import liberalisation entails contraction of the list appearing in the IPO these days. A contraction of the negative list means that you can now import some of the hitherto prohibited items too.

In a restrictive trade regime, an expansion of the facility to

import would be greeted with welcoming noises, not only by the trade but also by the industry. Removal of restrictions on the import of its raw material and other essential input was the reason why the industry too would take a benign view of import liberalisation in those days. The industry has long ceased to face restrictions in the matter of import of essential inputs. Now, the import substitution industry in general, tend to view each fresh dose of import liberalisation with dismay. To them, the

instance, the value ceiling of your import would be prescribed in advance. Some of the items, selected by the authorities, would be made eligible for, what came to known as, repeat facility. In other words, if you utilise your quota within a given time, you could lay a claim to import the same item again, up to its full value ceiling or a percentage of it, as announced by the authorities.

Things have changed now. You are allowed freedom to import items not covered by the

among the policy makers. The media initially reported that 46 items were sought to be removed from the negative list this time and then changed the count to 54. Latest reports in the press now say that the number would be 24. Well, the IPO will show.

The interregnum between the decision on the negative list and its publication in the IPO, should provide the authorities an opportunity to take a look at the tariff structure of the items being freed from control. There are at least two reasons which should prompt them to do so. First comes the question of any possible tariff anomaly. Secondly, if the existing rates of items on the freed items offer any inducement for smuggling these out.

As it is, bovine animals are permissible for import. However, import trade in cattle continues to follow unauthorised channels. The flow of the trade also appears to be quite substantial. A Calcutta daily recently reported that at least twenty trucks loaded with over six hundred cattle heads from Orissa, destined for Bangladesh, were being transported through Khargapur everyday for months now.

If true, the latest move to let cattle from the neighboring country to be brought in without observance of necessary import formalities, would have been guided mainly by practical considerations and might even appear as a sensible one. Although purists might scoff at it, all that is being done is to accord official recognition to existing border trade in an item permissible for import. Who knows, such a move could also promote open border trade in other importable items and help diversify unauthorised transactions into official channels.

But there is little overall passion for Islam in this country. Influenced by the Russians long ago, the Kazakhselite wear European dress and follow European lifestyles.

"You'll find more real mosques in Mongolia than you will here," says Makhabat, pointing to the only mosque in Talgar, located in a former kindergarten building.

Most of the returnees, however, have managed to maintain the Kazakh language and traditions despite their years of living in a faraway land.

"I was amazed to find that the Kazakhs here add Russian words to their own language," says Adaskhan Xisekhan, a 40-year-old Kazakh woman who was born in Mongolia and has just returned.

The Kazakhs from Iran are while they have had relative ease in taking on the ways of their motherland, many of the returning Kazakhs say they may have more difficulty finding their real identity.

Says Makhabat: "People here will need 20 to 25 years to become real Kazakhs."

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

move spells competition from abroad.

Uncertainty over availability of funds and modes for financing imports, added to the importance of the IPO in those days. The positive list of importable items would be divided into several segments — telling you which are the items that could be imported in cash for foreign exchange, which under the wage earner's scheme (WES), aid/loan/credit and barter. Imports under WES would cost more than in cash, because of the premium on foreign exchange and higher margins demanded by the banks. Imports against aid/loan/credit and barter, on the other hand, would entail more formalities. However, IPO left you no option as to the source of funds for financing imports. There were other complications too. For

negative (or controlled) list. Foreign exchange is available freely. With the unification of exchange rates, the differential on that score also has disappeared. In point of fact, nowadays the composition of the negative list supplies the main point of interest in the IPO. The reticence of the authorities to make public, immediately after a decision was taken, the items shed from the list this tie, attests to the sensitiveness of the issue. The last revision of the IPO had reduced the number of items on the negative list by another 100 to 94. It was generally thought that the reform programme deadline required most of these 94 items to be taken out of the negative list this time, retaining only a handful on such grounds as religion, security, health. Apparently, differences on the issue surfaced to correct the situation will not

Kazakhstan: Home Unsweet Home

Return home proves painful for displaced Kazakhs. Nadira Artykova of Inter Press Service reports from Talgar, Kazakhstan

After decades away from their motherland, thousands of Mongolian Kazakhs are trying to readjust to life in Kazakhstan.

More than 2,700 families have been repatriated from Mongolia to Kazakhstan this year and regular Kazakh Airline flights are helping to swell that number.

Victims of decades of Soviet oppression, the Mongolian Kazakhs are being re-settled in villages around Talgar, some 100 kilometres northeast of Kazakhstan capital Alma-Ata.

They live in relative poverty in decaying houses, with some having little more than coloured rugs and a TV set — trucked in from Mongolia — as their only worldly possessions.

But most of the new arrivals are glad to be back despite the hardships. For example, the three-roomed house Zhanas Makhbhat shares with his wife,

It is believed that some 3.3 million Kazakhs currently live outside of Kazakhstan, including an estimated 150,000 in Mongolia.

Makhbhat says there has not been a single complaint against the Mongolian government on their treatment of the Kazakhs. But, he adds, "We felt there would eventually be pressure applied against us. If not in 20 years, then in 100."

Kazakhs believed there was no future in Mongolia for their children, he says.

Makhbhat, whose grandfather was a cattle-breeder and

fled to Mongolia in 1933 to avoid the famine, has formed his own small enterprise in Talgar which produces traditional Kazakh yurts' tents.

Most of the newly-arrived Mongolian Kazakhs are cattle breeders and are being placed into new schemes devised to help the Kazakhstan economy.

No special treaty has been signed at a governmental level between Mongolia and Kazakhstan to effect the current repatriation. But the move has been encouraged due to recent labour agreements.

Mongolian returnees are being offered jobs, accommodation and temporary loans by the Kazakh Government and are also offering truck facilities to transport personal belongings from Mongolia.

The flurry of activity has

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.

WASA water supply

Sir, Some years before Public Health Engineering Deptt/WASA used to supply water with such a pressure that it used to reach top of 3rd or 4th floor water tank. But later on they decided to supply water at ground level. So every house owner was forced to construct under ground water tank and fit a pump to lift the water to roof top water tank. Even single floor house owners needed to construct ground water tank and fit a pump to lift water. Millions of Taka was spent to undergo this change by the action of WASA.

Though WASA assured to supply adequate water at ground level, but the authority miserably failed to meet the water requirement even at ground level. With the increase of population the per capita water supply ratio came down very rapidly. The abnormal 'system loss', probably highest in the world, created all the more problems. I fully agree with Mr Hassan Sharif's letter on 'Water Supply' published in the Daily Star on 19-8-93. How long WASA will take to implement any fruitful plan to redress the sufferings of the citizens?

I do not know about the posh areas. But in rest of the city every other family had been facing acute water shortage. In a city where there is neither any pond nor any other water source the citizens are completely dependant on WASA water supply. Without other essential services like Telephone or even Electricity, one can try to manage. But without water it is impossible to manage even for a few hours. So, to overcome the water shortage every one started to construct deep underground water tank with deep underground water connection as per advices of the WASA employees. Every body is going for deeper and deeper line. How deep one can go? Some one started fitting water pump with supply water line, though it is unlawful. Necessity knows

'continuity', he looks correctly forward to Ershad's time to bring about an otherwise dimly black picture that the whole nation has been helplessly watching. The seeds of chaos sown by the predecessors of the present government would one day serve as a boomerang. Our history is replete with many such events and pity we do not take lessons from.

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Overseas telephone calls

Sir, In Bangladesh the charges for overseas telephone calls are simply exorbitant. A three-minute call from Calcutta to Dhaka costs Indian rupees eighteen only but a call of same duration from Dhaka to Calcutta costs several times more. Of course value of Indian rupee is more than Bangladeshi Taka. Even after making allowances for that, charges in Bangladesh are extremely high. A three-minute call from Calcutta to Japan costs rupees thirty-five but a call of same duration from Dhaka to Japan costs a few hundred Taka. Examples can be multiplied. Hence there is urgent need for rationalising rates of overseas telephone charges to save the callers.

What is most shocking and surprising is that even after such fantastic charges, T&T Board is incurring huge losses! Regarding quality of service provided by T&T department, the less said about it, the better. Reasons assumably may be corruption, pilferage and plunder by people within the T&T itself. This calls for the urgent need to privatise the T&T Board. In the part whenever any move towards privatisation was made, that failed because government bowed down to the pressure of the beneficiary staff and the trade unions. But it is the duty of the government to act in public interest and not in the interest of a small pressure group. It may not be impertinent to mention here that after privatisation of British Telephone, it is not only making huge profit but quality of service also has improved tremendously. Will the Parliamentary Committee on T&T go into it?

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OPINION

Cadet Colleges

The article by Abul Ashraf Noor titled 'Critical Assessment of the Bangladesh Cadet Colleges' published in the Education Page of The Daily Star on September 08, is everything but a 'critical assessment'.

The article begins by asserting, 'After 35 years of their existence we firmly believe that the Cadet Colleges in Bangladesh are the mainstay of the country's academics and discipline'. Who are these we, who firmly believe' this assertion? Has the issue of Cadet Colleges in Bangladesh, its impact and desirability, ever been open to any process of public debate? If not, one can safely assume that these 'we' are none but the actors within the 'cadet college domain'.

I attended a seminar organized by the Old Faujians Association (OFA) on 'Cadet College Education in Bangladesh' recently with the hope that at last the issue will at least be opened up from its mask of mist. But, I was frustrated to note that it was nothing but an attempt to take a break from the regular picnics and parties that these organizations are often busy in. The speakers all belonged to the 'cadet college domain' and the representation of the newer pass-outs in terms of having their voices heard was nil (they were of course 'actively used' for organizing the show). This is a reflection of the cadet college education system's practice of excluding the 'junior's participation'. Strong assertions like those voiced in Abul Ashraf Noor's article were made leaving no space at all for criticism. If such instances are cited as examples of 'public debate' then it would be ridiculous.

The whole article by Abul Ashraf Noor is full of plain rhetorics and popular jargons. What does he exactly mean by 'mainstay of country's academics and discipline'? Does cadet colleges follow a radically different educational programme? Or is the mainstay of the country's academics only being judged by academic results? Even if that is the case, I

do not think that admitting students through one of the toughest entrance tests and producing top results out of them is a great achievement to be so proud of. And what is 'country's discipline' by the way? How can an appropriate sense of 'discipline' be inculcated keeping the cadets insulated from the people and appreciating their views? Or does the author mean keeping shiny shoes, obeying orders without question etc as the prerequisites for the country's discipline? An insulated sense of discipline may be appropriate for the armed forces and the like, but not for the country where civil society exists at large, where questions have to be answered even to the Juniors'.

The author talks about 'educational viability'. This word viability has become one of the many present day buzz words which is being applied indiscriminately, sometimes even out of context. Cadet colleges having one of the highest operating costs cannot but be 'educationally viable'. Viability is a concept that cannot be divorced from cost considerations and such an analysis of cadet colleges' viability has not been done till date.

Cadet colleges apparently are the last places that provide an atmosphere for the building of intellect. Intellect breeds in an atmosphere where one is allowed to question, disagree and voice his/her opinion. All these are considered 'evil' within the cadet college framework. One might talk about the various co-curricular stage activities in the cadet colleges. These events even up to their contents are preset in which the cadets have no say at all. Even the scripts of the participants are scrutinized by the House Masters before being produced on stage. Topics of current affairs' display, a popular inter-house stage competition, like 'India's hegemony for power' or 'Bleak Shri Lanka' and so on are nothing but attempts to hegemonize the cadet's intellect with official news and views. The examples of a few 'intellectuals' who were

ex-cadets in no way proves that the cadet colleges per se have provided the necessary intellect growing atmosphere.