

## How to Make Bus Journeys Safer

Mohammad Hanif couldn't stand the sight. He fainted and never recovered. The sight that killed Hanif was the laid down row of 19 bodies of people killed on Wednesday in the Shibalay bus plunge tragedy. Although of the entire nation shocked by the news, very few will have Hanif's empathy. These incidents of collective dying on the roads must be stopped to save the society from dangerous lacerations inside its soul.

Hanif's extremely sensitive reaction would be approximated by all users of inter-city buses who without fail would say on viewing the bodies in the print media, *it could be me*. And the number of such would run into tens of thousands. Who would care about their resulting trauma and their gradual submission to anti-life fatalism?

If only we could be certain that here was a case of a genuine error of human judgement and/or a machine gone haywire, we could dismiss the unfortunate deaths as accident and finished it up all with appropriate feelings and expressions of condolence. But, as in the case of most other similar incidents, there are compelling reasons on the contrary to suspect that the Shibalay deaths have been caused by negligence and rash driving. Negligence because the driver took out his vehicle on the route amidst a thick shroud of fog. The mishap occurred at 7.30 in the morning. Some passengers got panicky at the way the driver was speeding in a condition of very poor visibility and asked him to decelerate. According to survivors they were shouted down by a jeering driver. He himself could not survive his fit of rashness.

It is a wonder that more people do not die on the roads. But whoever do and in whatever number, do so because of there being literally no control on fast intercity bus service and, on the part of the operators, a mindless indifference permeating the question of passenger security. Are the long-haul bus trips, fast because of the distances to be covered and time to be consumed, subjected to any kind of supervision by any kind of government or public body specifically charged with during so? No, but why?

Such bloody and violent deaths in such big numbers warrant going into the causes leading to the mishaps and determining the responsibilities thereof. A deep and circumspect probe could tell the government and the operators and the people making bus journeys how to minimise the risk of such mayhem reducing buses into veritable death traps. Such a probe is yet to be set up by the government patently because they take these for 'accidents' built into the business of bus service. That is wrong and government should, without waiting for a hundred or a thousand more to die, institute an enquiry seeking from it recommendations aimed at making bus journeys safer.

We have one recommendation to make, unsolicited but dictated by what killed Hanif. Do not allow any bus to cover the distance between Gabtali and Aricha in less than two hours. Now they do it in one and a half and even less. Very close to a kilometer a minute or 17 metres a second. Considering the meandering road and the nightmarish bridges, this is a remarkable feat by any standard. But the bus operators must be ordered out such fun and the government must exert itself to enforce it.

Over the last few years fog has been bedeviling road and river communication very dangerously. Can we not go for a fog warning system making it binding on commercial transport operators to obey the signals?

## Ministerial Mien

A Jessor-bound Biman flight was delayed for long eight hours at Kurmitola airport on Tuesday. On the silly pretext of a heavy fog, the 8 o'clock domestic flight was detained until 4 pm, report says, deliberately to give chance to two ministers to avail themselves of it. Sounds unbelievable! Then another incident of the same day reported in a different vernacular daily, concerning the carrying of eight cars from Natak Sarani (Bailey Road) by a mobile crane to Ramna Thana gives a glimpse of what some men in power are capable of. In this case, the order to take away the cars parked near the Mahila Samity Manch was reportedly given by no less a person than Home Minister Abdul Matin Chowdhury. The owners of the cars — themselves prominent personalities who were attending a theatre show — had their vehicles released later on from the thana paying a fine of Tk 250 each, but without receipt.

This is not the first time that a regular commercial flight has been delayed for ministers, or a small inconvenience of someone in high position has led to a reprisal for respectable people. Ministerial hiatuses express themselves in confoundingly myriad ways. In a manner of speaking, what happened at Kurmitola airport saw exactly the opposite to be enacted at the Natak Sarani with the difference that the administrative response to the few minutes' delay suffered by the Home Minister due to traffic jam was prompt in that the private cars were punished because of their part — albeit indirect — in causing the trouble. The passengers of the Jessor flight, on the other hand, achieved nothing through repeated protests against the wilful delay. Those who caused the delay went unscathed.

Now the question is: why the differential treatment? The ministers are supposed to set the standard for others to follow. If they can go as far as exerting their influences and using their positions in total disregard for rules and other citizens' rights, the system is bound to smack of anything other than the democratic. A commercial flight of a public sector airline — in contrast to that of a personal or government airliner — after all has to be as businesslike as any other services on offer. If the commercial principles are breached, the passengers can legitimately claim compensation. That it was an outright lie that fog at Jessor airport made the delay was proved by the fact that the planes of the air force were very much in their training session on the day at that airport.

The excesses done in both cases underline a dangerous mentality not suited to a democratic dispensation. The ministers concerned know better why they went beyond the parameter of their rights. Since in the name of ministers, their minions sometimes overstep limits, it is all the more necessary that they are careful about it. One of the cardinal principles of democracy is accountability. When wielding power in excess makes a casualty of that accountability, democracy loses its meaning for the people, which is undesirable.

# Bangladesh-India Economic Relations: Reducing Trade Gap

by Abdul Bayes

THE Bangladesh-India Joint Economic Commission was established under an agreement signed by the two Governments on 7 October, 1982. The main objectives of forming such a Commission were to promote and foster economic and technical co-operation between these two neighbouring countries interwoven by the thread of many commonalities. The first two meetings were held in a consecutive order in New Delhi and Dhaka in 1982 and 1983 while the third one was held after a big gap in 1990. The recently-concluded fourth session of the Bangladesh-India Joint Economic Commission (JEC for short) in Dhaka stood out with special ramifications on more than one count.

First, both the economies were inward-looking once and, at the moment, are edging towards an outward-looking strategy for economic growth via a plethora of reform measures adopted during the last 5 years or so. Inward-looking economies as they were, production and trade patterns, in many cases, conformed to a notion of self-sufficiency without taking so much into account the domestic resource cost of producing goods and services. The change of status from the inward to the outward, quite obviously, necessitated a revision of thoughts on bilateral trade and production policies keeping the emerging imperatives in mind.

Second, the trade deficit of Bangladesh with India has been monotonically increasing over the years and of late, heaved to Tk 4427 million. The underlying factors contributing to this built-in trade imbalance needed

to be identified to come to grips with these on the ground.

And third, the waves of regional economic integration all over the world tended to localise global markets where a small economy such as Bangladesh or even a big one like the Indian, badly needed to explore more avenues for trade within the region, especially between SAARC partners.

### Layman's Lament

A layman's error tends to haunt many of our minds. Since Bangladesh is a very small country and economy, as compared with India, economic transactions between the two are said to result, always, in an unfavourable outcome for Bangladesh. And the apparent 'truth' in the error seems to be furthered by the yawning trade imbalance between these two countries.

However, text book economics, on many occasions, tended to reject this notion. The theory of comparative costs suggests that a 'big' and 'small' economy might gain from trade if there is free and fair trade between them to take advantage of the optimum resource allocations.

In practice, the trade among the members of NAFTA and EC with varied geographic, demographic and economic sizes, the existence of a small country like Chile with growth and investment rates surpassing its big neighbour Brazil, the expressed fear of the Arabs of the economic muscle of tiny Israel etc. appear to support the hypothesis that, *ceteris paribus*, the favourable outcome might occur to both the trading partners. The relative share in the incre-

mental pie, of course, would depend on factors such as: (a) productivity of the factors of production; (b) pace at which the constraints bedeviling investments are done away with; (c) ease with which religious and political fanaticism in the countries are relegated to make room for economic imperatives to be at play; and (d) political will of the leaders to work for economic emancipation of the people. Each of these factors tends to have little relevance to the size of an economy.

### Bangladesh Imperatives

The burning issue, as far as trade with India is concerned, is how to reduce the existing trade gap. It should be mentioned here that such a high imbalance exists, in our trade with some other countries also and even as between other countries of the world e.g. US vs. Japan. But the irony here is that since 1972-73 to 1992/93, i.e. within two decades of trade relations, the balances with India never turned positive and is therefore, something that calls for careful probing. With a view to reducing the trade gap, we can consider both short and long run measures.

### Short-run Measures

At present, as far as goods are concerned, Bangladesh's comparative advantage appears to lie in the production of newsprint, Jamdani Sari, Jute Carpet, Urea, writing and printing papers, finished leather, sanitary wares, insulators, fish etc. which seem to have promising markets in India but, at the same time, are subject to higher levels of tariff.

Bangladesh should be given, following the Bangkok agreement, duty concessions to these products and, as the least developed country's privilege, tariff concessions on a non-reciprocal basis.

Second, Bangladesh should increase the supply base of commodities with promising potentials in Indian markets. And to increase the supply potential, adequate incentives need to be provided to local manufacturers of some of the items like spare parts for agricultural equipment (including diesel engines), jute and textiles etc. which are now being imported from India.

Third, the credit lines offered by India should be used not only for import of goods but, as far as possible, for the production of import substitutes and exports.

### Long-run Measures

It should be clearly borne in mind that the above-mentioned measures would marginally affect the trade imbalance but to make a real dent in this, serious efforts need to be made to augment supply of products and services having demand in both the countries. Needless to mention, India is a vast market in this sub-continent that has been witnessing a flood of foreign investments from different parts of the world. With rising per capita income, the prospects in India are placed just below China where the world would see a surge in consumer demands. To capture just a nut out of this vast consumers' preference would mean much for Bangladesh. And for this to happen, not just

Bangladeshi-made goods would be sufficient but exploring the possibility of joint ventures and joint co-operation appears to be the need of the hour.

For example, Bangladesh could not develop its package tours due to various hindrances. India, with its good marketing network all over the world could help Bangladesh in this regard. Tourism activities between these two countries could be furthered through joint marketing, joint publicity etc. facilitated by exchanging experts, tour operators and travel writers. Similar collaboration could be sought for hotel industry. Again, joint efforts to share the world jute market on the basis of some criteria are needed. On the other hand, business and industrial circles argue that bright prospects for joint ventures and collaborations do exist in such areas as composite textile mills with spinning, weaving and finishing facilities, electrical and electronic goods, cement, machine tools, spares and instruments, fish processing, leather goods including shoes, upper and foot wear, luggage, sports goods etc.

India is endowed with scientists having worldwide renown and market value. Technical assistance for agriculture and industry could be of immense importance to Bangladesh. Bangladesh can meet the demands for many products in the North-eastern states of India through improved infrastructural facilities or, else in the short-run, earn revenues by allowing transit facilities for movement of Indian goods.

### Indian Imperatives

In all the meetings held so far, the Indian side hardly

showed any disagreement with the need for reducing the trade gap and more often than not, shared the views relating to the imperatives. However, many of the agreements could not materialise due to unknown reasons. The moot issue now is to give a relatively more energetic attention to areas where joint ventures and joint co-operation could be worked out.

However, at the out-set, the tariff level on commodities that Bangladesh exports to India should be reduced. Given zero or very low nominal tariffs, Bangladesh could, probably at a competitive price, supply cement, iron and steel, machinery for export to eastern states of India. On the other hand, Bangladesh's claim as LLDC, to enjoy non-reciprocal tariff reduction should demand due respect. There is no denying the fact that Bangladesh has been moving at a relatively faster pace with tariff reductions, so much so that Indians good are allegedly flooding Bangladesh markets.

### The Last Word

Since politics has a definite say on economic relations, much of the imperatives discussed above could fall prey to political considerations. In the past, the relations between these two countries seemed to be strained by political and religious factors. It is assumed that politicians of both the countries understand the economics of a relatively wider market for trade rather than the trade of religion and politics for domestic markets.

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Thus the question posed today, "What is the future of the Paediatric Neurosciences in Bangladesh?" needs an urgent reply. On the one hand, there are the vast millions of children whose future as non-disabled individuals needs to be assured. On the other hand, there are major technological advances that have been made in developed countries, that would definitely strengthen the diagnostic and rehabilitative aspect of the work. The neurosciences also needs to attain legibility within each national health institution of the country as a multi-disciplinary subspecialty.

Dialogue between all these various groups of professionals is urgently required to provide both a futuristic and realistic approach the policy-makers and health professionals of Bangladesh, on how to develop this discipline in the mainstream health institutions of the country. Let's give the physicians of this country a scientific break!

The author is Associate Professor, Child Development and Neurology Unit, Dhaka Shishu Hospital

## Let's Give Our Physicians a Scientific Break

by Dr Naila Z Khan

are being applied regularly for the treatment of intractable epilepsy and other traditionally 'non-surgical' cases.

In developing countries the nature of presentation of neurological disorders, especially in children, is confounded by problems of general and specific malnutrition, infections, poor perinatal care, large families, poverty etc. Epidemiological survey of childhood disabilities has revealed that about 15 per cent of children have 'impairment' of some function related to the nervous system, with possibility of future disability. In the same survey, 8 per cent of children had some disability in walking, seeing, hearing, speech, comprehension, behaviour, or related to epilepsy. With the present size of the child population of Bangladesh, the numbers affected may stretch into millions.

What is not readily obvious to us all, is the long-term effects of chronic environmental deprivation of nutrients (including micronutrients and trace elements), psychosocial deprivations and chronic underfeeding of the brain and the mind, all of which are now proven to have deleterious effects on the growing child. Are we then headed for a whole generation of developmentally and intellectually less able children?

In clinical practise 10-20 per cent of all admissions in general hospitals are related to some form of neurological insult. Commonest are fits (febrile and non-febrile), epilepsies, intracranial infections, peripheral neuropathies, head injuries, etc. Many of the children admitted to the neonatal units have neurological signs, and on discharge are certainly at 'high risk' for developing some form of disability. Needless to say, there are thousands of 'birth asphyxiated' children never brought to any centre.

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with children from all parts of the country. A multi-disciplinary team of professionals comprising of developmental neurologists, neurosurgeon, psychologist, social worker and therapist has been set up, with the aim of giving comprehensive service to the child and the family. The limited diagnostic services available in other institutions are being utilised in the field of neuroradiology, neurophysiology and neurochemistry. Even such limited services is proving to be a great help in preventing disability in many children, and also the families are getting relief, reflected in the high compliance rate of follow-ups. From the numbers of children coming, it is time that more such units are set up within other national health institutions of the country.

Unfortunately, many problems are faced by professionals working in this field today. Firstly, the children come late, when damage is already irrevo-

cable and disability a certainty. So problems of 'early identification', a domain of the public health and primary health care sector, remain. Parents have no access to information as to where to take their children, and go door-to-door for help. Secondly, there is no institutional acknowledgement of paediatric neurosciences as an important subject for study, training and research. This makes it difficult for young and enthusiastic physicians to take a long-term interest in the subject. Thirdly, it is difficult to impress upon authorities the multi-disciplinary nature of the work, which goes beyond the subject of paediatric neurology into surgery, neuropsychology, therapy and social work. Fourthly, diagnostic back-up services are rudimentary, especially in radiology, neurophysiology, and neurochemistry. There seems to be 'missing links' between the specialised laboratories and service industry, that need to be bridged. But these are only few of the vast problems faced.

Thus the question posed today, "What is the future of the Paediatric Neurosciences in Bangladesh?" needs an urgent reply. On the one hand, there are the vast millions of children whose future as non-disabled individuals needs to be assured. On the other hand, there are major technological advances that have been made in developed countries, that would definitely strengthen the diagnostic and rehabilitative aspect of the work.

They have rejected 63 per cent claims on flimsy grounds: inadequate documentation and lack of certification by doctors of the victims' exposure to toxic gases that fateful night nine years ago.

But it is well known that the victims, many of them illiterate and powerless, lack individual medical records. A veritable racket operates in concocting documents and getting doctors to make false and favourable depositions.

The courts have also been remarkably niggardly. In general, only the earliest deaths have figured in the compensation awarded so far. The average compensation has been

USS3,000 in the lowest end of the range indicated by the Indian Supreme Court.

Activists campaigning for the gas leak victims say it is imperative that the government must treat Bhopal as a national disaster and set exemplary medical and psychiatric standards and combine them with an economic rehabilitation programme.

They say it should lend full support to the proposed non-government organisation sponsored International Medical Commission on Bhopal, which will include eminent epidemiologists, toxicologists and specialists.

Activists also say the government must honour the Indian Supreme Court's mandate to prosecute Union Carbide and its executives criminally.

Punishing those who caused the victims so much suffering and pain, they say, is part of society's obligation to atone for one of the most horrifying events of our times.

## Bhopal's Poisoned Legacy : Victims still Wait for Justice

Justice has yet to come to the victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster and no lessons have been learnt, says Praful Bidwai in this report for Inter Press Service from Bhopal, India

squalor despite the roughly US\$70 million that has been spent there, that is because the money has been neatly and efficiently recycled out of the pockets of the poor.

Consider this: more than US\$30 million have been spent on "medical relief". But the special Nehru Medical Hospital near the Carbide plant is without adequate equipment in functioning order. The doctors there and in other public clinics are indifferent to the victims.

Roughly US\$7 million have been spent on "economic rehabilitation". But less than a hundred gas victims receive gainful employment under official schemes. Even the sewing centres that once employed 2,300 women have remained closed since July last year.

If Bhopal City retains all its

"Everything the government runs here in the name of relief is a racket," says Abdul Jabbar Khan, convenor of the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (Gas-Affected Women's Association), which has waged a relentless battle for justice.

"Most of what reaches the real victims is quickly taken away from them by the same vested interests that caused their suffering: multinational corporations, unscrupulous bureaucrats and corrupt doctors and lawyers," he adds.

Khan estimates that once the average victim has paid the cost of documentation, the local touts' charges, the lawyer's fee, the doctor's bribe, the bank clerk's commission, and other levies, all that is left is a tenth

of the relief money.

The 3-year Savings Certificate which has been withdrawn is most upsetting for the small savers and for the retired. The banks have reduced their interest on term deposits and, overall, I feel the government appears no longer keen to give any further encouragement in this area.