

What an Error!

For so long we thought our problem was that we could not export enough. Now we find that was not the totality of our problem. We don't even know how to count what we export. What an impression to give to the arriving delegates to the Bangladesh Investment Conference! Commerce Minister M Shamsul Islam in a press briefing on Saturday said faulty Customs data resulted in the export figure being lowered by 277.84 million US dollars. A July-September export figure released by the Export Promotion Bureau earlier showed a 20 per cent decline in exports. There are two points in this story that we would like to raise. Was there no checking or counter checking of these figures before they were finalised? We can understand that at any level error can occur. But what we find strange is that the same error continuing through all the stages of finalising the data, and then being released to the public without anybody noticing this major discrepancy. The second question follows from the first, why did it take so long for the error to be discovered and corrected? The minister himself said that the error was noticed when the US Customs figure on garments export did not match with ours. Suppose there were such figures, then could we have found the error on our own?

We are not in favour of making too much out of this incident. But we are certainly against brushing this incident under the carpet as a minor oversight. We think that this massive error with export figures reveals how vulnerable government account keeping process is. There could be hundreds of instances where such errors got past everyone's scrutiny and we could have had governmental plans and projections purely on fiction. The minister said that Customs department was being computerised. That is good news. But the process should not stop there. Government accounting system of all types and categories should be computerised.

The importance of authentic data cannot be overemphasized. It acts as the foundation of projection, planning and at the end of the process, of evaluation. All this becomes futile, if at any stage, the data are found to be false. We would like to underscore the importance of drawing a serious lesson from the EPB mistake. Let us not have any more of them. But to ensure that, we have to computerise the system, train people to use the technology properly and take the task of data collection, compilation, analysis and presentation far more seriously than we are in the habit of doing.

Another Passing Show?

Better late than never. The Department of Environment yesterday mounted a five-day campaign against black-smoke-belching road-vehicles. As the job of identifying the culprit vehicles and proceeding against them is well beyond the physical capacity and competence otherwise of the DoE the services of the Metropolitan Police, BRTC and metropolitan magistracy have been made available to the campaign. Very heartening indeed.

Perhaps advisedly enough the news of the campaign was not publicised well in advance for that could have alerted owners of faulty vehicles. That the news, when published on Sunday morning, was not treated with any importance by any newspaper, however, speaks a volume. As The Daily Star has been pressing for effectively deterrent action against the poisoners of the city's atmosphere right from its inception, we stand apart and feel committed to wish the campaign a success.

But then we feel constrained to emphasize again that there is a serious crisis of credibility in the matter which stands to defeat the action even before it has been mounted. It is universal knowledge that the police and BRTC have fleets of faulty vehicles spewing their tons of carbon monoxide into the azure Dhaka sky. They should set their house straight first before qualifying to catch others. Any news reporting the two organisations as having grounded, say, 707 of their vehicles for giving of black smoke, could serve as a good impetus on the eve of the action. Now the bona fide of the campaign will seriously be in jeopardy and the DoE would be rightly held responsible for it. Do they indeed mean to curb black smoke emission? Why didn't they start the thing at home, compelling all faulty government vehicles and those belonging to its agencies and subsidiaries to be taken off the road and mended appropriately? Then they could go after the different organisations using automobiles, such as the NGOs, the business houses and the mills.

Perhaps the sceptics are right. This would just be another passing show. Still we would be looking with keen interest for the figure of punished vehicles and also for the scale of punishment dealt.

A Bloody Basant

Friday is not only a holiday in Pakistan, it is specially a holy day, very officially, in theocratic Pakistan. Any stereotype can be very misleading and it is not true that in Pakistan all kinds of fun and frolic stop for a day as Friday dawn. And now another prop of the stereotype falls with the news that in Lahore they celebrated this last Friday the spring festival — the Pakistani version of our homegrown and traditionally very Bengali Basanta-utsav. Can we not recall when in the early sixties Chhayanaut revived this ancient festival of songs and colour how rudely the Pakistani masters had reacted? All 'right-thinking' Pakistanis thought this was a sacrilege — a very Hindu thing to establish in society, patently to the detriment of the state's integrity and security. Then how to rationalise this Lahore spring festival?

Lahore is infinitely more Panjab than Pakistan. And the Punjabis, cutting across the communal lines of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim, had always felt very nationally about their cultural heirlooms, such as Heer-Ranjha. The Basant Festival is also a very Punjabi festival of old. Does the revival of this in Lahore signify a very healthy resurgence of Punjabi culture, secular all the way? Let us hope so.

What made Lahore to welcome spring one full month ahead of Phalgun? And the festival this time mainly featured kite-flying. Some kind of confusion seems to have crept in. Perhaps the kite-flying festival of Poush-Sankranti was being celebrated on the weekly holiday next to the ultimate day of Poush. And somebody wanted to turn this into that long forgotten Basant festival. One never knew they in Lahore were as martial as the Pathans. What a way to celebrate spring! Two killed by stray gun shots, one dead after falling from a roof. The colour of spring is red. Blood is incidentally also red. Was that why blood was spilled?

Industrial Labour Relations: The Missing Link

THE daughter of an aunt, who was my mother's sister, married the son of an uncle, who was my father's cousin. The couple had emigrated to Canada years ago. They came home recently on a short visit. They also brought a teen-age daughter along.

The mother was trying to explain to her daughter what sort of a relation I was. A witty girl, the daughter immediately picked up the texture of her relationship with me. "Oh, I understand," she quipped. "You are my macha." For a moment I felt lost. Then the light dawned on me. My quick-witted niece has combined mama — mother's brother (albeit a cousin) with chacha — father's brother — to coin a new word, macha, easier to tackle by a girl born and brought up away from home. Quite a linguist, she is!

That set me thinking about a way to tell the girl exactly what kind of a niece she is to me. Well, she is both a bon jhee — a sister's daughter and a bhai jhee — a brother's daughter. In the end, I gave up the thought of explaining it all to her. It would be too involved even for the bright girl my twice-over niece is.

There is too much "I" and "my" here, but how else to get to the word jhee, which stands for a daughter in our dialect? You see, the word jhee, a daughter, somehow appears to bear an allusion to labour relations. It seems to bring the relationship between employers and employees to focus. It might well be worthwhile to explore a bit further.

A housemaid used to be called a jhee. Was it the idea to treat her as a daughter of the house? Well, not exactly —

May be in a cottage industry or a small industrial establishment, the employer would know most, if not all, labourers who work for him. It's a different situation altogether in large industrial plants. In a virtually depersonalized environment there, employers are remote beings, running the production chain through tiers of control.

At least not always. All the same, she was regarded as a member of the household all right. A personal relationship did grow up between the maid and the members of the employer's family. Things keep changing, however. In urban areas nowadays, the term jhee denotes a maid almost exclusively. And in conjunction with chakor, the expression jhee-chakor stands for household servants as a class.

The word chakor owes its origin to chakur, which means just a job. Nonetheless, chakor conveys the meaning of a manservant only. We tend to differentiate between a white-collar worker and a domestic by calling the former, chakuria. Class distinction among job holders is assured thus.

Housemaids would have had no reason to feel pleased about the use of the term jhee in a derogatory sense in their case. They might even have remonstrated against being called a jhee, a daughter who is not. So in urban areas these days, a maid has come to be addressed as bua, meaning a sister. Her status has been raised from daughter to that of a sister, in recognition of the changing times perhaps. Likewise, the manservant would be addressed as bhai — a brother. Youngsters in the family he works for, would not call him by name but affix a bhai to it while addressing him.

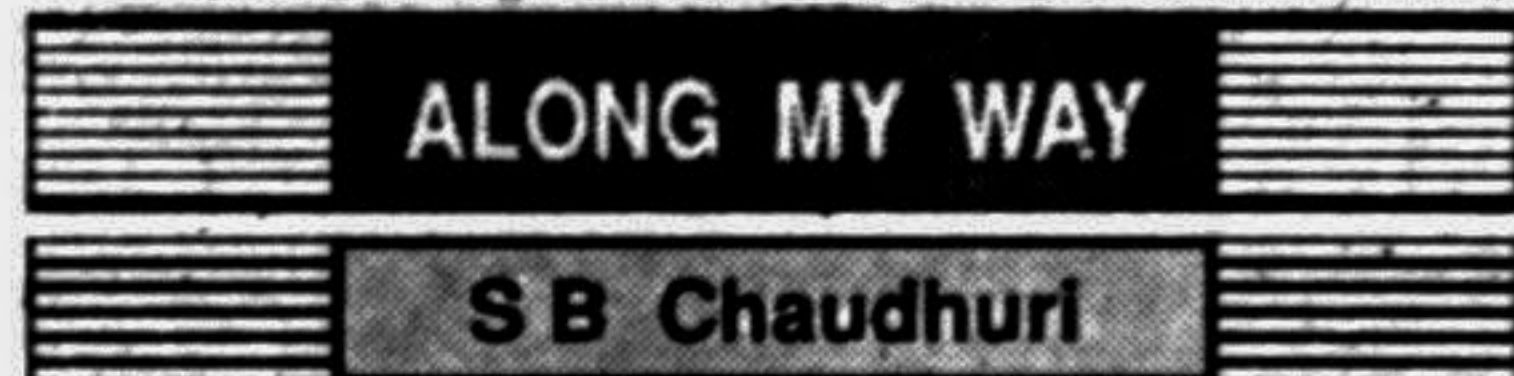
The term jhee-chakor has not disappeared altogether but is not aired about openly. The commoner expression these days is — kajar lok — household workers. Through all these, the domestics have retained a niche in the household they work. Perhaps they also imbibe a sense of belonging to the families they work for. Personal relationship between the employer and the employee subsists.

Ties of personal relationship between the employer and the employee appear to be, if anything, stronger in the rural economy. A farm labourer is not just a hired hand but also an uncle, a cousin, a nephew or, for that matter, an aunt, a sister, a niece. Perhaps the rural workculture also helps breed intimacy between the employer and the employee. Most farmers and their families work on the field alongside the hired hands and often share the same food while on the job. A farmhand turns into a co-worker.

Such easy relationship between employers and employees is hard to come by in the industrial sector. May be in a cottage industry or a small industrial establishment, the employer would know most, if not all, labourers who work for him. It's a different situation altogether in large industrial plants. In a virtually deperson-

alized environment there, employers are remote beings, running the production chain through tiers of control. The worker sees the employer not just as a provider of jobs but also as a symbol for exploitation of his labour. To the employer, labour is only a factor of production.

It might be instructive at this stage to take a look at some of the characteristics of our industrial labour force. The World Bank document (1994)



entitled Bangladesh Privatization and Adjustment, is highly informative in this regard. What follows now has been drawn largely from this publication. It bears noting at the outset that the findings relate to the formal sector industrial labour. The first thing to note about this labour force is that the workers come from marginal farming families. They have taken on industrial employment to supplement farm incomes. It is not exactly a poverty-driven permanent migration to urban areas. Rather, they continue to maintain their rural connections assiduously, visiting their village homes regularly, working on the field during planting and harvesting seasons, and looking after their families, of course. In fact, a near-

total absence of rural connections occurs only among 10-15 per cent of these industrial workers. Then, only 10 per cent or so of the workers reside in industrial areas with their families. Rest of the workers' families continue to live in their village homes. The metamorphosis of once-peasant into industrial worker is thus far from being complete, so notes the document.

Could be that farmhands are generally docile because they do not belong to organised labour. It could also be that farm labourers see no need to turn militant because they have ready access to their employers. The close personal relationship obtaining in rural areas between the employer and

I embarked on the foregoing liberal paraphrasing of a section of the World Bank document (hopefully, the Bank will not take me to task for that) to underline the change that occurs in the attitude of a farmhand when he joins the industrial labour force. The farm worker engaged as an industrial labourer, pines to go back to his land. He has been brought up in the rural workculture. He had been a responsive worker while engaged on the land. Yet, he quickly takes on a confrontational attitude when he joins the industrial workforce. Working for a depersonalized employer, he turns militant.

Could be that farmhands are generally docile because they do not belong to organised labour. It could also be that farm labourers see no need to turn militant because they have ready access to their employers. The close personal relationship obtaining in rural areas between the employer and

the employee holds each of them back from coming to confrontation. The industrial worker deals with a distant employer through intermediaries — union leaders and collective bargaining agents. Attitudes turn tense, confrontation leads to aggressive bargaining and to militancy.

There are renewed stirrings of unrest in the industrial labour front. The umbrella organization of workers, employees and labour, known as Sramik Karmachari Oikkya Parishad (SKOP) appears to be getting restive again. Last week, the government had succeeded in getting the threatened strike and rail-road barricade by the jute and textile workers postponed by a few days only. Garment workers are reported to have formed a national trade union and are now threatening greater agitation. Here, globalization seems to have overtaken trade unionism in our garment sector with a vengeance. Labour-rights activists from abroad are said to be teaching the garment workers how to develop their skills for trade unionism. Would these activists also tell the workers about the importance of amity in employer-employee relationship?

Could the absence of closer liaison between the employer and the employee be the missing link for fostering amity and understanding in industrial labour relations? Should I ask my sprightly niece about it? Ah, she is too young and uninitiated in such matters. Still, I am sure even the little girl will not hesitate to assert that conciliation is better than confrontation.

Performance Evaluation: Bangladesh Context

by Md Azizul Hoque

In Bangladesh, the oft-repeated political jargon that 'money is no problem' is a stupidity. Here investment performance of projects is marked by time over-run of 3-4 years and cost over-run of 40%-50%. Manna does not fall from the Blue except in very exceptional cases...

around 4% economic growth rate and (vi) around 75% reliance on foreign assistance.

In Bangladesh, the oft-repeated political jargon that 'money is no problem' is a stupidity. Here investment performance of projects is marked by time over-run of 3-4 years and cost over-run of 40%-50%. Manna does not fall from the Blue except in very exceptional cases like those of Kuwait, Brunei etc. In the sixties, Kuwait was referred as example to be the poorest country of the world, and now Bangladesh is the last among the least developed.

There is a Bengali adage: 'Shikhechho kothhai? — Thekechho jethai.' (How have you learnt? — I learnt where I fumbled). Nothing succeeds like success, and success comes out of failures if properly recognized and timely taken care of. We need a really hard look at the evaluative performance of our plans. Programmes and Projects both at macro and micro levels and to whatever sector (s) they belong. There is a popular prevalent notion that we are tolerably good policy makers and planners but intolerably bad administrators and executives having no steadfast mechanism for transparent accountability at all justifiable levels — political, judicial, administrative and executive. We Kinta Kuntas run for vain glorious levels, and not for conscience awakening roots.

On the threshold of launching another medium term National Plan (1995-2000) in the context of a clearly outlined Perspective Plan (1990-2010) and specially in the context of changed global politico-economic scenario of Open Market Economy and New Development Strategy based on increased self reliance, performance evaluation, both at macro and micro level, need be undertaken at the earliest lest we forget the recent harsh but palpably true utterances by the newly elected President of FBCCI, S F Rahman that even the 'darwans', the walls and the watchdogs in the well-furnished class buildings in the posh areas of the capital will not be able to safeguard and withstand the onslaught of the surrounding nearby 'huggis' of the country which is on the brink of taking the tragic position more and more like Rwanda, Somalia, etc. [Lest also, on the other side of the coin, we forget S F Rahman's subtle artifices like (i) self-centered stupendous game played through Asiatic Society's History of Bangladesh (1704-1971) edited by a timer-serving Board Chairman/Historian and published in 1992, and (ii) co-terie-centred one-eyed game for rock-solid unity of businessmen for business-friendly atmosphere to propel 'Boniker Maandanda'.]

having deep performance evaluative significance is mentioned here. Because this is in reference to the writer's personal experience, it is narrated in a humble apologetic tone.

The writer participated on request and as a resource person in a 3-day seminar on Dinajpur District held at Dinajpur from 4th to 6th December, 1977 as a part of the programme/project, Regional History and Heritage' by Bangladesh Parishad of the Mass Communication Department under Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

However, prior to Dinajpur seminar, The Bangladesh Parishad held three other similar seminars at Sylhet, Comilla and Bogra respectively with the declared aim of compiling and publishing in book forms district-wise good lot of materials of the painstaking subject-matter specialists relating to respective fields of geography, history, economy, education, culture, literature, demography, minority communities, tribes etc.

Late last year when the writer managed time to collect old materials and further relevant materials, he could fortunately contact one of the high officials of the then Mass Communication Department who was directly connected with the then Bangladesh Parishad's said seminar(s) and publication(s). The writer was

unfortunately gives clear understanding that all the materials of the four District Seminars are now really hard to lay hands on and that no attempt was ever made by the authority to compile and publish those materials district-wise or otherwise. [A TV drama based on Shaikat Osman's story is remembered wherein the theme was that a govt. servant is as a matter of right paid salary because he is a service holder, and that because he is a service holder, he is as a matter of right paid salary. Dazzling Jewel Aichian equation between service and remuneration indeed!]

The added misfortune is that if those materials could be duly refurbished and updated, those could have enriched the efforts of the Editor's office of the Bangladesh District Gazetteer(s). Establishment Division, Govt. of Bangladesh and also the Line Ministries and Planning Commission in the formulation of the concept and policy papers for the people oriented Plans, Programmes and Projects. Al! all labour of love and dedication invested went in vain.

Let us however revert back to our original theme of 'Performance Evaluation: Bangladesh Context'. The above-mentioned instance of

the 1977 performance of the Mass Communication Dept. (Bangladesh Parishad) is a clear pointer to a gross national negligence due to sheer absence of accountable monitoring and evaluation on the one hand and feedback/retrieval system on the other — at the executive level, administrative level and policy making level. The writer is yet to look into how far the (Greater) Dinajpur District Gazetteer, 1991 published after its last publication, in 1975 is a real improvement, at least in the writer's main field on 'economic front'. Minus all these and other further down-step vibrations taken cognizance of, the writer really fails to comprehend the implications of 'Participatory bottom up planning', 'Mass awakening' and 'Performance evaluation' inspite of his, apologetically speaking, domestic and foreign academics.

In nutshell, a badly felt urgent need is the beacon light focus by policy makers, planners and programmers on the performance evaluation of all conceivable activities undertaken in the past involving scarce investible resources, foreign and indigenous, so that we learn from our past lapses, bottlenecks and incapacities for onward march of our economy timely, economically, efficiently, effectively and equitably in a civil society which crucially rests on the shoulders of the vast toiling masses who can be rightly termed, in one ward, as the 'Destination Man'.

The writer is a former Joint Chief, Planning Commission, Government of Bangladesh.

OPINION

Train Accidents in Western Zone

Md Anwarul Afzal

The train accident at Hilly station in Dinajpur district on 13.1.1995 is, undoubtedly unacceptable to all. Signalling was reported to be defective and was not functioning for 11 days. Accident has no definition. But when it takes place due to the fault of Administration, certainly it does not qualify to be an accident.

In Western Zone i.e. Rajshahi and Khulna Divisions, unfortunately, fatal train accidents had become a common phenomenon. Hundreds of lives reportedly were snatched away by rail accidents particularly in 1980 and on 12.6.1984, 13.1.1985, 19.1.1985, 15.5.1986. In Western Zone rail function can never be improved without proper maintenance of Railway establishments, optimum utilization of available Railway workshop facilities, drawing up and execution of an integrated mechanical maintenance programme, rational distribution of available trained manpower.

As a former member of the National Railway Consultative Committee, I have two vital suggestions to offer. The present rail-function is completely dependent on heavy foreign purchases. So, corruption, bribery etc. may be ruled out. To avoid defective purchases, and to have them at competitive price, a pragmatic approach is a must. In addition to the Government audit, in a few countries audit by private firms is being practised. Simultaneous use of private audit may improve the rail function.

Now-a-days there is a ten-

dency to amalgamate the Railway budget with the National Budget. There should be a separate Railway budget with more disclosures in detail. The Railway budget should consist of two separate chapters — one for the Western Railway Zone and the other for the Eastern Railway Zone. The Railway budget should show distinctly the income, expenditure, foreign assistance, aid allocated and used between the two zones. It is reported that in respect of the allocation of funds in the Railway budget the Eastern Zone has always been the recipient of the major separate foreign assistance. But it is never shown in the Railway budget.

Bifurcation of railway function into two zones — the Western and the Eastern — will not yield any fruitful result unless both the zones are equally treated, particularly in respect of allocation of funds, foreign assistance, authority, delegation of power, supervision etc. The Western zone always shares 30% to 33% of the railway budget. To remove this glaring disparity the Railway budget should deal with it in a separate chapter.

Besides, in a country like ours, 85% of the Budget is financed by foreign aid and loan; 60% or more of it goes back to donor countries or catered away by administrative and other agencies. Much of these funds is spent on unproductive projects. As a result the benefit does not trickle down to the lower level and fail to benefit the national economy. In view of it, a realistic approach is a must.

To the Editor

Vital need for unity

Sir, The unity of the government and the opposition on the basic question of evolving a system of polling in which the electorates could exercise their right of franchise in an atmosphere of freedom to choose their representatives in vital, while, at the same time, the process of democratic system be evolved so as to institutionalise a polity based on the will of the people reflecting the hopes and aspiration of the broad masses.

The government and the opposition must break this so called impasse or else the nation disintegrates into a shamble of chaos as this constant dislocation is bound to cause disarray of despair and dependency.

The attitude of both the government and opposition must not be rigid and intransigent on the part of either the government or opposition is definitely going to deepen the crisis.

The nation will not forgive them if they falter in this critical juncture of our history.

Al-Haj S M Khalid Choudhury Dhaka.

Shab-e-Barat and crackers

Sir, On the holy night of Shab-e-Barat, frighteningly loud explosions were repeatedly heard in our area. Friends and relatives also confided experiencing similar continuous bangs of bombs and crackers in their areas in many parts of

Dhaka. Now, I didn't have it in my knowledge that Shab-e-Barat was night of such hilarious merry-making. Rather a Muslim is supposed to say prayers and read the Quran to please God because in this night the fate of every human being for the next one year would be written. Perhaps these jovial celebrators had already got a secret message of God acknowledging their good fortune over the next year and so thought that they could do with a gay, noisy and showy celebration.

But the fact that their act may be highly disturbing and offending to neighbours somehow failed to cross their minds. These mostly young people who were indulged in this affair, I think, seriously need to rectify their notion about the religion so as not to cause this kind of public nuisance which is actually irreligious. Perhaps their guardians could provide a helping hand by kindly doing some religious preaching forbidding running into such a frenzy on such a solemn night.

Isma Haseen Old DOHS, Dhaka.

Let's be just

Sir, Some people are always blaming and criticising others without admitting their own faults. I hate to admit but rather unfortunately I happen to belong to this category of people. We often accuse others for doing wrong. We speak ill of others for using slangs. The

other day, a car nearly bashed mine from the other end. Instead of acknowledging our mistakes like civilised people, we could not check ourselves and our mouths went wild open.... but the question is where did our lips go? We often blame people for dumping waste from top floors but a few days ago one of my counterparts had a neighbour's head and face nicely washed with rubbish! We boast about maintaining a good hygienic atmosphere in our cities and curse anyone for making road sides and street corners open public toilets. A chap well known to me, could not control the urgency of answering the nature's call, so he was compelled to take a corner of a street (no public toilet nearby). Then, most of our officemates complain about the Government office workers that "they do nothing but talking politics and reading newspapers." But so is the case with our office, complain a few visitors. And then there is the common complaint of "backbiting," well it's the irrefutable four walls of every home which can tell who does not?

It is not wise or just to blame others until and unless we care to rectify ourselves, and that goes with the saying "look before leap."

A citizen, Dhaka.

Democracy and accountability

Sir, A pointsman and the Station master of Hill have

been held responsible for the recent tragic train accident causing death to 25 people and injury to hundreds. This was in recent times, a major accident, but minor ones are taking place every now and then. The communications minister who is there for three years now does not feel himself to be responsible.

Ansar rebelling took the nation to the brink of a near disaster. Two army officers have been retired and many Ansar officers are being tried. The home minister who has been in charge for three years did not feel himself to be responsible.

Major accidents have also taken place in Biman. Aircraft sustained damage due to negligence in maintenance. The minister incharge has never felt himself to be responsible.

Sir democracy is more a culture than a system. It is a gentlemen's society where people own their responsibilities. In a less cultured democracy people are responsible. In civilized democracies ministries own up their responsibilities and resign gracefully. For instance, we can cite the case of resignation of a South Korean minister after the Seoul Bridge collapse. In our case, clinging to the chair seems to be the common practice. It seems our ministers put self before responsibility. If such trend continued the culture of democracy will never take root in Bangladesh.

S Haque Barani, Dhaka