The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Saturday, February 18, 1995

Seachange in BR

Bangladesh Railway is reportedly being made into a corporation very soon. Nineteen of BR's more profitable branch lines are going to be leased out to private parties. A chain of other matching actions are going to effect a radical change in the nation's railway transport for the first time since Lord Dalhousie introduced the revolutionary steam-powered communication mode. Why was the change needed?

BR, not to be confused with British Rail, successor to one of world's earliest as well as biggest rail systems, has been losing money steadily over the whole of our span of independence - some 1200 crore Taka - and is without any idea of recovery from its long bad patch. It is like a man who has lost all hope - which is perhaps worse than tlying. And this where we fear to reposit any hope on our part on the new and drastic changes bringing both life and health to BR. No act of desperation can deliver desired result unless through a miracle. If miracle we have to depend upon, why didn't we do it over the last two decades?

The whole point of the projected structural seachange seems to be making the railway costeffective and even profit-making. How can we be certain that even this narrow-focus target, to hit which the railway business-house will be needing to execute a vast array of improvements in efficiency and service and a lot of complementary and helpful government actions, will indeed be achieved without compromising further the role railway has in the economy of our nation and the potential of a far bigger role it must play in the fu-

While profit-hunting may very well do a lot of good to BR specially in heeling its obesity and related maladies, the nation must not forget that it has a national point — overriding the commercial and entrepreneurial one — to care for. Railway is a big and important economic tool of the nation holding a key to its material well-being and prosperity. That the railway still, as always, provided the cheapest and most efficient and environment friendly means of massive movement of goods and people is lost sight of by quarters failing to see the boon in its proper perspective and by investors having interest in other modes of transport. Railway is staging a grand comeback in Europe and US and has been doing magnificently in China, Japan and India for its intrinsic superiority as a national instrument of economic progress.

If we want to have this in view, on top of business success, we must enquire as to why and how railway failed so miserably in Bangladesh. We must take lessons from our poor and very expensive performance.

Biman's Responsibility

We are delighted to learn that Biman, our national carrier, has decided to do its own maintenance. This, as the civil aviation minister maintained, would halve the maintenance cost. We just hope that the step will not also halve the maintenance quality. We feel compelled to raise the point of quality here. There is no scope for national pride, bravado or meaningless self-congratulations in this case. Either we are good for il, or we are not, if we are, then nothing like it. It shows that after more than two decades of flying and competing in the international marketplace we have come of age and have matured to take over the maintenance of our fleet of aircraft. But have we? .To opt from total dependence on a foreign airline — Alitalia, in this case — to a total self-reliance in one go, does appear a bit ambitious on the surface. Isn't there any intermediary step? Could we not have graduated to total self-

In raising these questions, our intention is not to denigrate the capability of our national airline, but to put forward some legitimate concerns which Biman will have to face in the marketplace of competition for reliability and efficiency. In both these regards Biman's record is rather dubious. As for reliability, record of Biman's delays is now an accepted fact of life, for whosoever desiring to patronise our national carrier, or using it under force of circumstances. As for efficiency, how often is our experience to go to buy Biman ticket and find its computers down, and having to spend unnecessary hours before seeing it re-fixed.

Technical challenge in maintaining one's own air fleet is considerable. We hope that Biman is fully conscious of the responsibility that it is taking upon itself. There is no scope to falter here. There is no question of any margin of error. It has to be hundred per cent efficient. Even a fraction less, amounts to zero. While congratulating Biman for taking this bold step, we reiterate the need for the highest technical and professional performance that is required to meet the challenge of the task they have taken upon themselves.

National Immunisation Day

We congratulate the government, especially the health ministry, for hitting on the idea of observing two national immunisation days (NID) each year from now on. This year the days to be observed are 16th March and 16th April. The attempt will be to ensure 100 per cent coverage against polio attack, leading to coverage against measles in the future. As reported in the press, the immunisation drive will involve about 21,000 workers of the health ministry, who will supervise a massive fleet of 600,000 volunteers, including students and social workers. It will also involve Ansars, VDP and Boy Scouts. The programme will cover two crore children between 2-5 years of age, who will be given four doses of oral vaccine. The NID will cost Tk.25 crore, making for a cost of Tk, 12.50 per child, per immunisa-

That is the best value for money we can ever expect to get, and that also for a cause, whose value cannot be counted in money alone. The NID will build on the success of earlier immunisation drives, and will lead to total elimination of poliomyelitis. What we find rather impressive about the programme is the large mobilisation of volunteers. It is indeed laudable that we are able to bring together such a large voluntary force to perform this social task. May be we can take the lesson of such drives to address other public health issues as malnutrition, childhood blindness due to Vitamin A deficiency, iodine deficiency, and prevention of leprosy. If we can mobilise a force of 600,000 for this purpose, can we not mobilise half or one fourth that number for the other issues? We would highly encourage the health ministry to think about it. We from the media, and this newspaper in particular, pledge our full support in any such effort.

Whither the Growth Rates in Rice Production? OTWITHSTANDING its The burning question is whether the recent deceleration is a "transitory" phenomenon or something that is hooked on to our agrarian structure. An answer to this question would, obviously, need more in-depth analysis and careful juxtaposition of factors than a mere glean from statistics.

declining share to the overall GDP in recent years, the agricultural sector (especially it's rice sub-sector). still continues to be the linchpin of sustained economic growth and development of the country. Over the years, in fact, the robust growth of the rice sub-sector seemingly induced an element of dynamism in the whole economy. The robustness is being ascribed to the advent of modern irriga tion-led technology, both mafor and minor, and to the massive growth of consumptions of complementary inputs like chemical fertilizers and HYV seeds. A surge in rice production and the higher rates of growth, thus taken place, led us to today's moments of celebrating the arrival of a "self-sufficiency" in

rice production.

Better and Bitter Statistics So far so good. Of late. however, the notion that the trend growth rates of rice production in Bangladesh have been facing a down-hill turn is beginning to gain currency Even available government statistics on acreage and production of various types of rice seem to substantiate a decline over the last four years. We are not sure whether such a deceleration could make our policy makers wary who are expected to search for the reasons and run for solutions to this important phenomenon of national interest, or, whether the deceleration is deemed too feeble to warrant any sympa thetic considerations. Of cou rse, the falling prices of rice witnessed earlier, might have increased the "opportunity cost" of thinking over the issue and hence our policy makers had little to be scared of. If this is assumed as true, then the recent rise in prices of rice, amidst a quasi-selfsufficiency, should be a clear pointer to the urgency of a more seriousness to this vital issue. Needles- to mention

here that all of these conundrums seem to emanate from the apparent connivance of our policy makers at the highest citadel of agricultural affairs. Dr Quazi Shahabuddin of the BIDS, one of the ace re-

searchers in the field of agriculture, endeavoured to closely examine the trend growth rates in rice acreage, yield and production that spans over a decade or so. According to his preliminary estimates, the trend growth rates in rice related variables have, in fact, been showing a down-turn for the last four years. For example, during the most recent period (1990/91-1993/94). trend growth rate of total rice production is estimated at 0.4 per cent. This compares much lower with the preceding (1984/85-1989/90) period's estimated trend growth rate of 3.1 per cent. Even if the last decade (i.e. the period 1984/85-1993/94) is compared with the last four years' performance, then also the recent trend rate of growth appears lower (2.8 vs 0.4). In terms of acreage under total rice, the growth rate during the last four years is estimated at (-) 1.4 per cent as against 0.1 per cent of 1984/85-1989/90 period and (-) 0.3 per cent of 1984/85-1993/94 period. In other words, the growth rates of total rice production and acreage during the last four years show a distinct downward move compared to the preceding period and to that of the decade's average

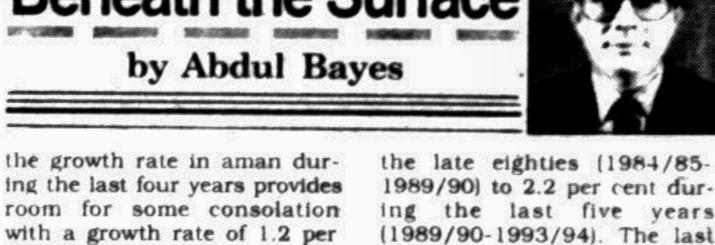
At disaggregated level, the hero seems to have turned into villain. The trend growth rates of the HYV boro production the hero of our Green Revolution — seems to have gone down substantially. For example, the last four years' trend growth rate in produc-

tion of HYV boro is reported to be 2.1 per cent. This compares unfavourably with about 13.0 per cent of the preceding (1984/85-1989/90) period and the decade's average of 10.6 per cent. This sharp fall in production could be adduced to a significant decline in HYV boro acreage that grew at less than 1 per cent in recent years as against about 14 per cent in the preceding period (1984/85-1989/90) and about 9 per cent of the period 1984/85-1993/94. While the scenario relating to aus crops tends to show no exception.

small farmers, might have resulted since the HYV package is said to be preponderantly labour intensive. The ramifications of a deceleration in boro acreage and production could. thus, turn out to be wider than we can possibly think of.

The concern that heels next is whether there has been any such deceleration in the adoption of the technology in agriculture. It appears from Shahabuddin's preliminary estimates that there has been substantial drop in the growth rate of use of chemical fertilizers - from 8.4 per cent during

Beneath the Surface



growth of the last four years still trails behind the decade's The major concerns, however, hover around the trends in HYV boro production and acreage since it is this winter crop for which modern technology in agricultural production, led by the leading input irrigation, swept across the country. A priori, a deceleration in the growth rates of boro production, in fact, goes to lash out at the use of modern technology and hence the acreage under boro. Also, in

the sequel, a deceleration in

employment generation,

mostly for the landless and the

cent as compared to 0.03 per

cent of the preceding period.

However, in the case of aman

production also, the rate of

ing the last five years (1989/90-1993/94). The last five years' trend rate also falls far short of the decade's trend rate of about 8 per cent. This in turn is due to a significant decline in TSP and MP consumptions in recent years..." A deep peep into the statistics provided by Shahabuddin further points to another emerg ing disconcerting event as far as Bangladesh's agriculture is concerned. Although trend growth rate of total fertilizer use depicted a decline with significantly less TSP and MP intakes. Urea consumption seems to have heaved substantially implying that a serious imbalance in the NPK ratio is being observed with all of its attended adverse impacts on soil fertility and hence on varietal yields of rice crops in the country.

Likewise, a considerable deceleration in the growth rates of STW irrigation - from 20 per cent in the late eighties to 9 per cent during 1989/90-1992/93 period — is also being observed. This is aggravated by a fall in the capacity utilization rates of DTWs over the same *period.

Moot Concerns and Root Causes

Suffice it to note here that all these disconcerting discomforts occurred during the period when natural hazards like flood,' drought etc did not make their "usual" visits to Bangladesh. Had there been a single jerk during the last four years, like the one (drought) experienced this year, the magnitude of costs could, possibly, be beyond our imagina-

However, the burning question is whether the recent deceleration is a "transitory" phenomenon or something that is hooked on to our agrarian structure. An answer to this question would, obviously, need more in-depth analysis and careful juxtaposition of factors than a mere glean from statistics. Dr Shahabuddin is reported to be assailing for an

appropriate answer to this. in the meantime, discussions with some of those related to agricultural development lend some points to ponder with. First, it might appear that this deceleration owes itself to policy shifts over the years. This hypothesis could, possibly, be subject to a rejection since the trend growth rates were up even during the periods when hefty privatization and liberalization took place, say, during 1984/85-1989/90. Or may be that the cumulative effects of the past policy shifts are being felt now. To sell this proposi-

Let us, therefore, evolve

strategies which can help a

child to be freed from school

phobia. First of all, unless a

child shows real symptoms of

an illness parents should insist

gently on his going to school. If

there is some emotional

upheaval at home, the child

would be better off at school

where life is normally consis-

tent and normal. A change in a

child's life does not have to be

upsetting and parents can do

much to make school-going or

transition from one school to

another smooth and easy. Par-

ents must visit, rather at times

spend half a day or so in a

class, talk positively about the

school during the after-school

ysis of a general equilibrium nature. Second, and possibly more plausible, reason relates to agronomic factors. Had the land productivity gone down over the years? This is ported to have taken place in many an East and South East Asian country where yield/acre is alleged to have fallen after reaching a certain peak. Third, it could be such that land is being now utilized for the production of non-rice crops and if that is so, then the wounds so inflicted by a falling growth rate in rice could be healed to some extent. But available statistics do not seem to correborate to this event. Fourth. it could be that the irrigation equipment that were commissioned during early eighties outlived their capacity and new equipment were not in place so much so that the acreage under boro crops declined significantly. And finally, the deceleration could also be the result of a strong base remaining with the base period used for comparison.

tion, one would require mam-

moth data generation and anal-

Concluding Remarks

It is, perhaps, a forgone conclusion that the trend growth rates of rice are decelerating and there could hardly be any one available to contest the view. Why is then there no public concerns and pronouncements? May be that the falling rice prices, as mentioned earlier, made us oblivious of this crisis. Or may be that the deceleration in the growth rates could not yet upset the calculus of per capita availability and consumption. But the fact remains that both of these syndromes should not or cannot simply preclude us to rise from the womb of a complacency in "rice self-sufficiency" and face the crisis prevailing.

The author is a Professor of Economics and Dean of the Social Sciences. Jahangimagar University.

In response to the increased number of letters we are receiving from our esteemed readers everyday, we have decided to devote half a page every Saturday to the letters column.

"Is DCC Blind?"

Sir. The letter of Vigar Moinuddin "Is DCC blind?" in your 8 February issue was read by me with interest. In fact we share a building at 52 Motijheel Commercial Area. with the publisher of your paper. We sometime feel awestricken while going on foot, from our office, specially with a foreign client/friend to Bangladesh Bank or Sonali Bank in this beautiful winter sun. One has to wade through the shops crowding the footpath. You can buy everything, including flower pots and plants and dry fish in an area stretching from Pubali Bank building to Sonali Bank building at Shapla Chattar. If one wants to have lunch on the wayside, he has only to step in to one of the lanes (behind Sonali Bank Building or behind BCIC Building) where he can have a homely lunch with fish, meat, dal, vegetable and rice. He can also choose another menu with paratha. These wayside cafes are definitely unhygienic. They are also washing the utensils on the wayside creating the environment stingy and muddy.

Some of the lanes including the one in front of our office was cleared twice during the last three years with the active support of the DMP but the traders and the hoteliers repossessed within days with greater zeal and numbers. I am positive all these are in the know of the DCC and the Mayor. But what really can be done? Does DCC has the authority to clear the Motifheel' Commercial Area or any other area of Dhaka without the help of DMP etc? I think it has. Taking the advantage of DCC's inaction, nothing really prevents these small businessmen from using the city street as their shops! Are the staff and workers of DCC free from involvement in settling these. traders on the footpaths? hope they are and the Mayor

can take steps if they are not. As it is known to the Dhakaites, the Mayor Bhaban i.e. the official residence of DCC Mayor is on the main Gulshan Avenue. This you can tell from the interest and activities of DCC staff in keeping the vicinity of the Mayoral House shipshape although half of the park on the southernmost Guishan Avenue (opposite National Shooting Complex) has long been surrendered by the DCC to unauthorised users. I remember reading a letter in your letter column 3/4 months back urging the DCC to take steps in recovering this park for use of the residents of the area. But alas! no action has yet been taken by the DCC although more bamboo houses are coming up every month to cover the whole park soon. Can we blame the DCC or the

Mayor for this inaction? I really doubt whether the DCC will ever rise to its duties and requirements. Perhaps the city dwellers have a right to

know if DCC is competent enough to leave the footpaths and lanes for use and comfort of the pedestrians and not for the business of the traders and hoteliers.

A N A H Siddigui MCA. Dhaka

BTV's 'Mati o Manush"

Sir, BTV programme "Mati o Manush" (land and people) is very popular among all sections of the viewers. It is telecast once in a week. If it is missed by somebody for some reason or other, there is no scope to watch it again.

It is, therefore, requested that the programme may be repeated on Friday morning at a convenient time when most of the people remain in the house due to holiday. This will be highly appreciated by the

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantonment

Women oppression vs men oppression

Sir, A lot of thanks to the government for taking necessary measures to establish women's rights. For the development of a country both its men and women are equally important. And for this reason government has given much importance to hitherto backward female education. It's a thing of great pleasure that our ladies now-a-days have enough moral courage to approach anywhere of the world to vanquish evil powers. But this pleasure often dwindles when some ladies apply their courage excessively to prove their 'unthinkable brutality' even for the most trivial affair.

Prof Bharat Banerji while commenting on the nature of the fair sex said, "Woman, the linest flower that blooms ppder the sky, the most beautiful rose that exhales the finest fragrance of sacrifice, service and devotion, and winnows its overpowering smell across every horizon to enthral even the. most fastidious of hearts also turns at times to be the most wicked and vile." And Shakespeare in his play said. "Frailty thy name is woman" They wanted to mean that majority of the women are fatal. Having agreed with their comments I don't like to keep the matter concealed that feel about our ladies.

Men who are destitute of humanity and rationality are very often heard oppressing their wives on the pretext of dowry or some other tussles. Actually they cannot regard their wives as their better halves and so they are changed into unruly hooligans over their wives. But they cannot escape the severe punishment that they deserve if they are proved so. Actions are taken against them under the women oppression act passed

by the government. But it's a matter of great regret that allegedly some slattern ladies garrulously oppress gentlemen under this act not bothering about their own character. They don't stagger to gain a queer emancipation by harassing gentlemen since the word men oppression is not imprinted in our dictionary. To extinguish the fire of cu-

riosities stored in my heart I met people of different ranks including university teachers. lawyers, magistrates and judges. It is the opinion of all that 'women oppression' is an obvious scene in our society. And at the same time 'men oppression in the name of women oppression is becoming crystal clear in the society. Because of the heinousness in both men and women so many families are being broken now-a-days in the country. Gratitude to God for dawning the idea women oppression act in the mind of the government. But why is the women oppression act' made? Certainly not just to edify gentlenien and give ladies an exclusive privilege to exercise 'capriciousness'. Is it not supposed to maintain smooth relationship between men and women? The real objectives of the act are very noble. To convince our women about the real objectives of 'women oppression act' a 'men oppression act' should also be there. To have a balance, I think 'men oppression act' should be kept in force in the country. Would the powerful high-ups of the society and country pay heed to this?

Ilias Ahmed Lecturer in English Govt V M College, Manikganj

Morshed Committee

Sir, I am a regular reader of your esteemed newspaper which, to my judgement, is the best national daily in English language. I would particularly commend you for recently publishing a series of articles on the Morshed Committee which has been constituted to restructure the Foreign Ministry. The articles by Mr Kibria and Mr Imam are worth mentioning for their quality. objectivity and application of

Committee restore profession-

alism and vigour in our diplo-

macy that we saw immediately

following our independence?

Recently, two BNP leaders are

known to have been selected

as ambassadors for Saudi

adgement. As an ordinary citizen of the country and a retired person. who has no axe to grind. I believe in professionalism in all spheres of activities - diplomacy, defence, police, finance, administration, education, etc. Our Foreign Ministry is full of heterogenous elements, including some killers of the Father of the Nation. I am sorry to say that it has become somewhat like a dumping ground for some worthless. undesirable and politically or professionally unsuccessful people. How can you conduct ing from the child. diplomacy as the first line of defence with these kind of people? Can the Morshed

not going to school, it is more about laving the home. This habit do not grow overnight and parents are the ones who sow the seeds of bad school attendance in the early stage of a child's life. Some parents see their child's 'distress' and decide to Jeave the complaining child at home. They feel that if the child is reprieved of going to school the symptoms will disappear. This makes many parents more protective and more unsure about the wisdom of attending classes. This way of thinking gradually make the parents anxious about separat-. In case where the parents

consider schooling at the early age not necessary, they are apt to be rather relaxed. When families oversleep or the child wakes up late and shows unwillingness to go to school, they normally don't bother. The silent message conveyed that school is a dismissible op-

Arabia and South Africa in tion and not very important, preference to career diplocreeps into the child's mind and the child slowly avoids mats. Again, a news item was going to the school. Again, published a few days ago in your daily that another General some children are able to go to is being tipped for foreign asschool in normal days, but the signment. All these give disproblems show up on Sundays or the days immediately after a turbing indication and cast a shadow on the Morshed holiday break. Even as adults it Committee. is a case for study.

Mr Morshed Khan has been given a heavy responsibility and we hope he can live upto the expectations of our people who think about the future of this country. Morshed's report. il objective, should not die unimplemented.

Matiur Rahman Malibagh. Dhaka

School phobia

Sir, For one child in every 200, school becomes too terrible a thing to bear. Imagine a child who refuses to get out of bed in the morning, sometimes develops headaches, and nausea, as time goes by becomes panicky and then finally refuses to go to school. He locks himself in the bathroom. starts screaming, crying and even starts vomiting. His mother gets him into the car but when at the school, he clings to the door crying hys-

terically and would not let go. This scene happens daily in front of all nursery, and primary schools. School phobia, as the psychologists call it, is not a common condition but when it happens it causes great anguish in children. Strictly speaking, it is hardly a true fear of schools, rather some aspects of the school which most children would take in their normal stride. causes panic in a particular

child. These aspects could be: When class arrangements are changed without apparent reasons/suddenly.

When a new teacher is introduced during the term. When a teacher unwittily

threatens another student. If there are certain unhygienic situation — bathrooms.

Again, there are certain

dirty furnishing etc. Over-crowding

complex family process at work that can make school phobia more akin to a separation anxiety. The problem is

the scene as if they were there to protect the processionists land encourage them in their activities!). Then a man of about 35 years age came out of the procession with a stick and property of the tax payers life and property?

away from her car. What a

noticed that the police contin-

gent took shelter inside nearby

park and were rather enjoying

shame?

gossips, particularly explain about the positive values of education etc.

Some children could be helped by asking for a list of situations they in general, fear most. The children could then be taught techniques for controlling panic in real situations. It is often best to allow the children to face the situations gradually with constant support from the school and family. If any child has a specific worry or fear about the school. we should take serious note of the case and solve the case mutually after discussions.

Whatever approach is decided upon, the problem must be tackled jointly by the school and the family. Once the child knows what to expect, and has been taught to develop a few personal strategies for dealing with such fears, he is far less likely to panic in a new school

environment. Col Mirza Shafi (rdt) Administrator, MIT Banani,

OPINION

Police Inaction: An Eye Witness Account

A K Fazlul Haque

On Tuesday (14 February) and law abiding citizens of the at 12 noon, I was going to the country. It was a matter of Police Headquarters at Fullbaria great regret that police did not on an urgent piece of business fire even a tear gas shell to in my office car Dhaka Metro disperse the rioting mob. KA 02 1975 through the VIP I started pendering, why Road. When I reached the and how this is happening in Bangla Motor Crossing, sud- presence of a police contindenly I found that a police con- gent? Why the police is not tingent posted there was. in taking any action even though vain, fighting a procession of they are equipped with sounruly mob. We, therefore had phisticated riot control arms to stop our car and wait just to and munitions? Have they been see that the police contingent told not to take any action just was retreating towards the to save the popularity of the Sonargaon Hotel under pres- so-called democratic governsure from the processionists. ment? Have they been advised The processionists were not to take action just to blame throwing stones towards the the opposition activists for all police and the cars. But unfor- these anti-state activities and tunately, the police was not damages? taking any action to disperse the unruly mob although they were well equipped with all sorts of anti-riot equipment. Suddenly a stone landed on my wind shield made a big dent and innumerable cracks on it. I also observed that a lady passenger of a car had a head injury from her wind shield glass splinters and she was profusely

bleeding while she was fleeing After about five minutes, I disperse the rioting mob? All the above actions were abiding citizens. How long should this go

WHAT POLICE COULD DO

(1) Police knew that a procession was coming from PG Hospital side towards Sonargaon Hotel. Why did not they close the road for traffic at the Sonargaon Hotel cross

(2) Could not the police fire tear gas shells to block the road by tear gas smoke?

(3) Could not the police fire rubber bullets from their antiriot shot guns to scare and

possible by the police without destroying the popularity of the democratic government. That could possibly save the life and property of the law-

(branch of a tree) and started on? Are the public going to beating all the cars waiting tolerate all these mismanagethere. The man was beating ment of the government functhe wind shields of the cars in tionaries. How long? As the front of the police and broke police has failed to protect us. the wind shields of about 50 should we not ask the govern cars including mine in pres- ment to allow us to use arms ence of the police who are and munitions to fight the evils supposed to protect the life of the society to save our own