

The Chewing Syndrome

Ever since we hit a jack-pot in green jute — experimentally only — some one and a half years ago, the story has been one of masticating the good news like a betel leaf connoisseur chewing his pan delight.

For all we know, newspaper ads appeared on behalf of the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation floating tenders for green jute purchases by mills from the farmers. What has happened to those tenders placed with the growers? We suspect the green plants hauled into the mills could have wilted to a yellowish hue of a deceptive ripening before rotting outright in the gutter.

Nobody needs any more convincing of the marvellous results obtainable from the green jute fibre. This excellent material with cellulose content can shore up a jute sector in dire strait, ease pressure on our diminishing bamboo, wood and bagasse resources, required for pulp-making, reduce our dependence on imported pulp and paper, and above all yield us a surplus of industrial grade paper and packaging materials for a chunk of export earnings.

With so much to accrue from it, most people are getting impatient with the lack of tangible progress on the green jute front brought to sharp relief by the tantalising advertisement of the bonanza. The question is: where is it all stuck up now? The answer should come from the horse's mouth. Either the Ministry of Industries or the Chemical Industries Corporation should feel obliged to come out with a progress report on the subject because they are the ones who bred high hopes in the public mind about the prospects of green jute.

To our understanding, we have hit the snag for want of the green jute processing equipment, called the digester, at our paper and pulp mills. The Khulna Shipyard and Chittagong Dockyard are capable of improvising the machine with guidance from the Steel and Engineering Corporation under which they operate. After the Sylhet pilot plant, devoted to the conversion of green jute into pulp, is commissioned in October this year, with assistance from the EEC, there should be no looking back. The green jute idea, as far as we know, can sell very well abroad.

Women's Education

When women and literacy are bracketed to make a subject for deliberation in a workshop, we are happy to note the underlying consideration in behind lumping the two issues together. In our case the thematic importance of the question grows against the backdrop of the dismal literacy rate of our population, which is far worse for the women folk. Adult education figure for the male is 43 per cent and for the female only 22 per cent, almost half that of the male. The government's abolition of tuition fees for girl students upto class VIII has failed to reap any definite advantage because they lagged behind the boy students at the time of enrolment. In 1992 the gap had been reduced only slightly; it was still 55 for boys and 45 for girls, per hundred.

A woman's educational benefits get reflected in myriad ways on her entire family unlike man's education which is mainly concerned with the enhancement of his skill and income. Apart from the economic power a woman earns for herself, she applies her knowledge to the family's health and hygiene, child-care, food and nutrition, and a lot more. Naturally, the social imperatives for investment in education in general and in the efforts seeking to meet the women's special needs, have to be recognised.

Women are paid less for the same labour they put in compared with men. The illiterate and mostly unskilled women stand a far greater chance of being deprived on the jobs than their educated sisters. Education gives women the much-needed empowerment by way of economic solvency. This is now universally recognised. So society must come to realize that before everything else, education has to be as much secular in nature as possible. Because it is a prerequisite for women to enjoy equal status with men. We are moving in the right direction in some respects but the pace must gather momentum.

Grateful Greetings

Hearty felicitations to Nagorik, the theatre group, on their 1000th presentation of proscenium plays. Although the figure was reached earlier on the 16th of this month, the group is marking the event today with a day-long variety programme. We join the celebrations, and as we greet the group we want to record our sense of appreciation of the company's many-splendoured achievements only one among which is this spectacular first.

When Shishir Bhaduri took out his troupe of players on a tour of the west, certain Indian peculiarities must have set their productions apart from standard western presentations already dominated by Ibsen and Strindberg and Shaw and Synge. After Bhaduri Bengal theatre moved and moved towards the international form and standard and, specially because of Tagore's unsurpassed plays, excelled even the best of the their nations' in certain areas. And the hero of this great rise of Bengal theatre was Shambhu Mitra. He and his team Bohurupi presenting Raktakarabi or Raja is in so many ways, up to now, the last word in Bengal dramaturgy.

It is very largely due to Nagorik's almost singlehanded pioneering in the early seventies that Bangladesh theatre has found for itself a godly niche on the subcontinental theatre scene and come abreast of the world movement in this great art form. Its great work cannot be comprehended without a historic and social as well as aesthetic perspective. We are indeed grateful to Nagorik for giving national independence some meaning at least in one area.

As with the selection of the plays so with their production, Nagorik has gone for quality — uncompromisingly. That has won them the day. And given us the whole society a wonderful cue to take in every sphere of our national life. What the post-Tagorean major poets did for Bangla literature, Nagorik has done for Bangladesh — reaching us to the modern times.

CONGRESS has been rejected, nearly. It has been pushed from three-fourths of India. Even the states the party retains are far from secure. Arjun Singh, who has challenged Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, can pull down the government in Madhya Pradesh as can A K Anthony, the conscientious objector in Congress, in Kerala. The Congress-ruled Punjab does not have a representative government because most voters had boycotted the polls. The credit for continuance of Congress in Assam and Harvanya goes to resourceful chief ministers Hitendra Saikia and Bhajan Lal respectively, not to Rao.

Indeed, the party's hold has been shrinking, particularly after June 1993, when Rao completed two years of his government. He was found out. He was neither decisive, nor above the taint of graft and manipulation that gets associated with wishy-washy rulers. The fallout was evident from the Congress defeat in UP and Rajasthan. The party's rout in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka underscored the point. Whatever doubt was there it got removed by the defeats in Maharashtra and Gujarat.

These six states command 254 Lok Sabha seats. If the three other large non-Congress states, West Bengal (42), Tamil Nadu (39) and Bihar (54) were to be added, Congress would be minus 389 in the 546-member Lok Sabha. Presuming that the assembly elections do not necessarily reflect the pattern of voting for parliament, they do indicate the alienation of the electorate. How does a defeated, divided and dispirited party propose to retrieve them?

Rao's image has got another drubbing. It may be difficult for him to even hold the party together. To imagine that he can stop the decline of Congress is sheer wishful thinking. In fact, he has a bumpy weather ahead of him. If he could only survive between now and June 1996,

when the Lok Sabha's five-year term ends, it would be quite an achievement. But then how does the mere survival help the party? True, the era of charismatic leaders is over. But in Rao's case, it has been proved again and again that he has no hold over voters. In Andhra Pradesh, he toured 21 districts but the party came a cropper. In Orissa, where Congress has wrested power from the Janata Dal, the candidates for whom he campaigned have lost. Unless he drastically changes his style of functioning and governance, he can make no difference to the party's fortunes.

Indeed, people's disenchantment with politicians is wide and deep. They are ousting rulers to register their disgust. They are anti-establishment. They defeated the BJP in UP, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh in 1993, then Congress in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in 1994 and now the Janata Dal in Orissa and Congress in Maharashtra and Gujarat. The economic factor is overemphasised. Both Maharashtra and Gujarat have made an impressive progress in industry and business; still, the Congress got no credit for it.

Muslims, 12 per cent of the electorate, are angry with the Congress. They have voted for secular parties wherever the choice was available as was seen in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka last time. But many of them have even voted for the BJP-Shiv Sena combine in Maharashtra and the BJP in Gujarat because the third alternative to Congress was not available. They have come to

believe that the known devil is better than the one which says one thing and acts the opposite. What happened to the Muslims in Bombay during nearly one week of communal orgy in January 1993 is difficult for them to forget or forgive. Congress may continue to pay heavily for the Babri Masjid's demolition and the killings in Bombay. It will be simplistic to infer that the weakening of Congress is strengthening the BJP. Besides Rajasthan and Delhi, it has gained Gujarat and Maharashtra, thanks to its misrule and tainted administration of the Congress. But that is, if at all, a negative vic-

Mathura and Varanasi, they will have to follow the RSS or its adjunct, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which wants to demolish them. The RSS is determined to polarise the society, as it did during the agitation against the Babri Masjid. No wonder, the RSS has intercepted the BJP's victory in Maharashtra and Gujarat as "growing assertion of Hindu consciousness by the people." Congress as such is no match for the BJP. The impression that its economic programme will help it get back the lower half, once its misrule and tainted administration of the Congress, but that is, if at all, a negative vic-

tor of the BJP. Their claim of a saffron wave is the usual rhetoric. Except for three and a half states, where is the party? If you were to travel by train from Ghaziabad right up to Dimapur in Nagaland and return through Trivandrum, Madras, Hyderabad and Patna, there is not a single state from the 20-odd you travel where the BJP has any showing, much less a government. The party's malady continues to be the anti-Muslim bias. It is irretrievably linked with the RSS, which emits Hindu chauvinism.

Even if some in the BJP have their own ideas to settle the temple-mosque dispute in

After the Second Debacle

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Sabha elections. It issued a circular which said: "Our emphasis is on a strong and stable government that can provide speedy economic transformation leading to prosperity for all." Still the party did not win more 190-odd seats despite the sympathy wave in the wake of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination.

Rao has no magic wand to make a visible dent in unemployment or the rising cost of living. Not a trickle of economic reforms or whatever goes by that name has reached the countryside, where 75 per cent of people live. They are upset and even angry that the scherwala (city folk) is again appropriating all the gains. Rao's assurance that the stabil-

ity factor will ultimately bring back voters does not rekindle hope in the Congress. This factor will be further diluted by the confrontations and challenges the party will face in the next few months. This has naturally depressed the party MPs. They want to win at the next polls. But they doubt Rao's capability to do so. The crisis within Congress is not that of rivalry between Rao and Arjun Singh but of nervousness, that the party may go down with Rao. That is the reason why Congressmen await Sonia Gandhi's move on their tiptoes. She may possibly revive the appeal that the dynasty generated once. This is the hope they nurture.

Rao rejected the Janata Dal's offer to join the government as a coalition partner when he assumed the prime ministership. He wanted the party to merge with the Congress. That remained his attitude till the other day. Now there is reportedly a change. His think-tank believes that the modalities can still be worked out to accommodate the Janata Dal in government

and have a joint front for the 1996 parliamentary polls. This is probably a bit late. Even if the arrangement is effected, the initial sheen of both parties has worn off. They do not have even a common personality whom they can accept. And what do they say fresh even if they have no new face to project? Voters are sick of hackneyed ideas, the same old promises and the usual excuses for non-performance. People are getting disillusioned even by the system, which has neither improved their lives nor given them any sense of participation in the governance. They continue to be as distant — and strangers — as they were at the time of independence.

It seems that the vacuum is making India's politics parochial. Voters will increasingly look to state leaders to pressurise the Centre to deliver the goods. If New Delhi's economic management or Centre's corruption is going to be an issue in the state elections, as has been the case, then why not see that provincial governments have the necessary clout. They are closer. The demand for decentralisation is inevitable. In the circumstances, the nation should go back to the original practice of holding the state and the Lok Sabha elections at the same time. The Centre's problems impinge as much on the states as the states' on the Centre.

Agents of Change : Go or NGOs?

by Nasreen Khundker

Institutions such as Gram-teen Bank have so far limited their credit operations to the functionally landless, those owning less than 0.5 acres of land. This leaves the government with unlimited terrain in which they can show their effectiveness. Unfortunately, this has not happened.

THE Finance Minister Mr Saifur Rahman is a gregarious person. His speeches and comments rarely fail to draw attention and sometimes they are indeed thought-provoking. Let's take the most recent example, as reported in The Daily Star, March 20, 1995, under the heading, "WB charting \$ 100m micro-credit programme for the rural poor," the Honourable Minister made the following connection between NGOs and poverty alleviation: "Providing Tk 2,000 or 3,000 to a poor fellow or planting some saplings here and there without even ensuring who will look after them will not durably remove poverty."

This somewhat belittles the honest efforts of some NGOs in the last decade or so, to address the problem of poverty alleviation. The NGO approach has evolved through a process of trial and error, and their success may not be as spectacular as one would have wished. However, one should remember that it is in the context of massive poverty and a situation where the government alone did not have the capacity or will to do anything about the problem, that NGOs came into the scene.

To this failure was added the search of various donors for an effective conduit through which aid monies could be transferred to the deserving poor. If successive governments had effectively utilised the foreign aid they received, and if there were no allegations of leakages and corruption, there would probably have been no role of NGOs in terms of poverty alleviation. They might have existed on a small scale, mobilising local funds, and as a result of the indomitable spirit of their founders, fuelled by the spirit of the War of Liberation. I must remind the readers that my comments apply to only those NGOs whose goal is primarily poverty alleviation. They do not apply to similar organizations who are there for charitable purposes or with some other motives such as promoting religion, or some other interest.

It is interesting that the Minister recognises the failure of government because he condemns himself by saying "How to reach credit to the poor — that is a question I have

been facing as Finance Minister during the last four years. In fact, credit delivery to the government has been the hardest task of the government." This is an interesting comment. Upto now one was under the impression that the Finance Minister was preoccupied with many other things. What about structural reforms? Or for that matter privatization, liberalization of imports, reforming the bureaucracy? Surely all these matters were dealt with some urgency.

The goal of these measures were to achieve greater economic efficiency and boost growth in investment and output. Have this been achieved? I feel that we have a right to know. Similarly, there are other matters that should have attracted the attention of the Honourable Minister. What about the default on loans from the National commercial banks or specialized institutions such as the Krishi Bank? There are reports that in Northern districts of the country marginal and medium farmers cannot cultivate their land because of inability to purchase inputs. Institutions such as Gram-teen Bank have so far limited their credit operations to the functionally landless, those owning less than 0.5 acres of land. This leaves the government with unlimited terrain in which they can show their effectiveness. Unfortunately, this has not happened.

I may also mention the latest fertilizer crisis. Can this mismanagement be applauded? Surely not. The Minister mentioned the sizeable expenditure of the government on education. This is indeed laudable. I just hope that this expenditure is being efficiently utilised. Looking at only the expenditure side of the accounts will simply not suffice. The educated may want jobs. A sluggish economy will not be able to provide this. I hope also that the government is paying

attention to the quality of the education. As we all know, investment has both a qualitative and a quantitative dimension to it. It is the latter which generates growth. The same applies to investment in human resources.

Despite my critical comments, I am truly appreciative of the Honourable Finance Minister. He has shown a good deal of boldness in recognising that the major responsibility for poverty alleviation lies squarely with the government. If the NGOs with their modest efforts can catalyse the government into action, what more can we want? But before that we need to know much more about the specific government programmes addressing the poverty problem. In that case, not only will we be able to compare the programmes of different NGOs and evaluate their effectiveness, we can also compare these with government programmes. The world has much to learn about poverty alleviation. Hitherto, in the economics literature, this was thought about only in two respects, growth and equity.

The NGOs and other institutions have demonstrated that there is a third dimension to the problem — the right institutions and organization as a key input in development of the human potential. The Grameen Bank could successfully organize weavers in rural areas to substitute imported cloth with "Grameen Check." BRAC has also extended its marketing outlets for rural products to Western countries. This type of institutional development make us proud, especially since they are being emulated abroad. These developments have also revived the faith in rural crafts as marketable products.

This is not to say that NGO programmes are without fault or that they do not leave any room for questioning. I merely

think that the government can play a similar game and focus on developing institutions and organizing ability. There are vast areas left untouched by NGOs and at which government initiative can be directed. For instance, NGOs target households, but there are already existing small enterprises in rural as well as urban areas which are starved of inputs, including credit.

These can be developed. However, this needs the design of the right set of policies and incentives. This may be hard given that economists, planners and the government are trapped amidst the received wisdom. For instance, we need not parrot the virtues of the market nor be dogmatic about the role of the State. There is room for initiative and challenge. True knowledge must also be rooted in empirical reality. In this context, I would like to point out that straight forward injection of credit on an expanded scale may not work unless time and effort is spent on learning the institutional aspects such as the lending rules of Grameen Bank.

Again, the Finance Minister's comments leave one with a sense of optimism. There seems to have crept in a spirit of competition amongst the government and the NGOs. I hope that this is healthy. On the other hand, these two actors need not compete at all. The impact of NGO programmes ultimately depend on the success of macro policies. Otherwise the proper linkage effects will not be created. After all people respond to opportunities. Technology development, industrialization, stimulating agricultural growth, are indisputable areas in which the government can make an impact. If on the other hand, the macroeconomic scenario is such that it creates unemployment rather than employment, this will mean more work for NGOs with less effective outcomes.

Some NGOs have undoubtedly showed the way with their novel approach. Let's be proud of them. But it is for the government to follow.

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To the Editor

"Gram Kendra" Sir, A huge number of voluntary organisations popularly known as Non Government Organisations or NGOs are working for bringing about socio-economic development in the rural Bangladesh. Recently I had the opportunity to learn about a different type of national voluntary organisation called "Gram Kendra — Village Research and Service Centre". Gram Kendra is operating on the assumption that the village represents the basic community in rural Bangladesh and as such major development actions pertaining to agriculture, health, family planning, education and literacy etc have to be based at the village level. To attain its objectives, the Gram Kendra (GK) is working

with the following strategies: (i) using the dynamics of village community as a positive force; (ii) using family mechanism for poverty alleviation and social development; (iii) using land as the base resource and recognising access to minimum land as a human right; (iv) focusing on the rights of the poor, landless, women and children; (v) increasing productivity level of men and women; (vi) social mobilisation for family planning and removal of illiteracy; (vii) using technology as a vehicle of change and development; (viii) promoting voluntarism and participatory actions. Currently the GK is working at Araihasar thana of the Narayanganj district and expanding its activities to Sulla

Thana (Sunanganj) and Compaenyganj (Noakhali). The achievement of GK in the selected area is said to be significant; the people of the area are moving towards attaining self-reliance. M Zahidul Haque, Assst Prof, BAI, Dhaka. Bifurcate Rajuk Sir, Rajuk has too much power (letter, March 12). Planners should have no executive function. Collectors will only collect. Those who allot should not do anything else. Land and building should be separated. Rajuk's and DCC's function may be reviewed and ambiguous areas rectified. UN experts may join a local Restructuring Committee for

system analysis of Rajuk, followed by bifurcation. Rajuk has become a big white elephant. It seems Rajuk is suffering from administrative and structural weakness. It has become too big and unwieldy, therefore influential negatively. The government is setting over refund of deposits, even as old as ten years. The minister may sit openly once a month to hear grievances. Rajuk should become a live issue. Get it out of routine and give it marching orders. If needed, wholesale transfer of officers and staff may be made both inside and outside the organisation. MMA Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN



Hello out There

MRS. Leola starting of Ribrock, Tenn, had a serious telephone problem. But unlike most people she did something about it.

The brand-new \$10 million Ribrock Plaza motel opened nearby and had acquired almost the same telephone number as Leola.

From the moment the motel opened Leola was besieged by calls — not for her. Since she had had the same phone number of years, she felt that she had a case to persuade the motel management to change its number.

Naturally, the management refused — claiming that it could not change its stationery.

The phone company was not helpful, either. A number was a number, and just because a customer was getting someone else's calls 24 hours a day didn't make it responsible. After her pleas fell on deaf ears, Leola decided to take matters into her own hands.

At 9 o'clock the phone rang. Someone from Memphis was calling the motel and asked for a room for the following Tuesday, Leola said, "No problem. How many nights?"

A few hours later Dallas, Tex, checked in. A secretary wanted a suite with two bedrooms for a week.

Emboldened, Leola said the presidential suite on the 10th floor was available for \$600 a night. The secretary said that she would take it and asked if the motel wanted a deposit.

"No, that won't be necessary," Leola said. "We trust you."

The next day was a busy one for Leola. In the morning she booked an electric appliance manufacturers' convention for Memorial Day weekend, a cottage prom and a reunion of the 82nd Airborne veterans from World War II.

She turned on her answering machine during lunchtime so that she could watch the O J Simpson trial, but her biggest challenge came in the afternoon when a mother called to book the ballroom for her daughter's wedding in June.

Leola assured the woman that it would be no problem and asked if she would be providing the flowers or did she want the hotel to take care of it. The mother said that she would prefer the hotel to handle the floral arrangements. Then the question of valet parking came up. Once again Leola was helpful. "There's no charge for valet parking, but we always recommend that the client tip the drivers."

In a few months the Ribrock was a disaster area. People kept showing up for weddings, bar mitzvahs and sweet 16 parties and were all told that there were no such events.

Leola had her final revenge when she read in the local newspaper that the motel might go bankrupt. Her phone rang, and an executive from Marriott said, "We're prepared to offer you \$200,000 for the motel."

Leola replied, "We'll take it, but only if you change the telephone number."

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OPINION

Grim Realities of Poor Administration

M M Ahmad

It is heartening to find The Daily Star doing some investigative reporting, and going behind the scenes to present the grim realities of poor administration in almost every sphere of public service. I am referring to the Star staff report of the state of affairs behind the drug industry — the abject helplessness in enforcing rigid regulatory practices, as the increased demands for prompt services have far exceeded the administrative resources available to cope with the situation.

The core question is: How to cope with the developing demands? How far was Parkinson serious with his famous formula "Bureaucracy always expands" never diminishes? We have a bloated, inefficient civil service suited for a leisurely colonial regime, and not for today's fast and dynamic open and competitive market strategies.

While it gives any administration the smug satisfaction to gloat over its development activities, the stark fact remains that in any and every sector some invisible supportive exercises have to be carried out quietly to meet the increased workloads, namely the infrastructural facilities and the required linkages which will keep the expanded system going at the expected pace.

without bogging down. Such exercises require early planning, quick implementation, short teething period, and smooth routine operation. Funds, personnel, and training come up. And we have seen it in the livestock sector; now the drug industry has been exposed. The power-wallas are not willing to give up the power sector, and the telephone-wallas are still fond of eavesdropping.

Structure and infrastructure are the major weaknesses in a developing environment, and Bangladesh is not immune to it. The Planning Commission and the ministries are doing their jobs, but the quality and updating are slow processes which are invisible to the outsiders. Therefore, at the minister's performance before the microphone, the background orchestral music must be in tune and appropriate to the occasion.

We can order the breakfast egg "sunny side up", but ordinary alone cannot run the administration. The proof of the pudding lies in the eating, not in the hearing. This is the greatest weakness of most of our politicians coming from a have not background, and trying to cater to the same Point also to the mole in your own eye.