

## Old Sylhet in a New Division

Sylhet becomes a division, formally, exactly a month hence. Congratulation to all the people of the former or greater Sylhet district for their successful return to the old fold although in a new form.

We want to welcome the event. For the Sylhet region to have its administrative needs, specially relating to revenue etc, done in far Chittagong was never a practicable thing. That way this is a very good decision. Apart from this, Sylhet which was the Bengalee-populated Surma Valley in the Assam province of British India, had a distinct ethnico-cultural identity of its own for centuries.

After Barisal, Sylhet. If we accept that both new divisions came as acts of good judgement, we must, to be fair, acknowledge there are other cases as convincing as these. In British India, for the whole of its 16,00,000 square-mile area — Mymensingh was the most populous district. Why shouldn't the government create a division out of greater Mymensingh without anyone's asking for it. Or is it that Barisal and Sylhet got their way by forcing it down a government's unwilling gullet? If Barisal can be a division, so can many. Maybe about a dozen of the 17 greater districts do deserve to be divisions, by the token Barisal became one. And having Rajshahi to continue as a division with four greater districts and treating it at par with Barisal can mean only one thing — that divisions mean really nothing.

If it does not result in any benefit for Barisal as well as for the nation as a whole — why have you made a division of it. There seems to be a body called NICAR — National Implementation Committee for Administrative Reorganisation — and it is this body that made the Sylhet Division decision. What else does this body do? Are these divisions being created within a well thought-out plan and under wise criteria? How many divisions should we have, ideally?

Governance, in the fifth year of a duly elected government's dispensation of all of this state's power, continues to be purely of an ad hoc nature. This is dangerous. The government must take our people into confidence about its thoughts on administrative reorganisation and the working of the NICAR.

## A Vicious Attack

There are some parties who are always using religion for political ends. But when an MP of the ruling party starts using religion for the same purpose, then we should start to worry. According to press reports Farida Rahman, during budget discussions, criticised some section of fundamentalist groups for calling poet Shamsur Rahman and other intellectuals 'murtad'. This is a new term, given currency by a section of fundamentalists, who use it to attack any person or institution they are opposed to. Farida Rahman demanded that government take action to prevent such use of religion by groups who want to realise their political and ideological agenda by exploiting the deeply held religious belief of our people. In response, another MP from BNP, Mashur Rahman, went on — what we think to be a deliberately misleading and dangerously provocative attack on Farida Rahman — accusing her of 'speaking against Islam'. It is one thing to oppose a parliamentary colleague for her views, and engage her in a lively, or even confrontational, debate. However, it is something quite different to accuse her of denigrating Islam, and questioning her own religious faith.

We decided to comment on it not only for the content of the debate between one ruling party member and another. But more so because of the insidious and volatile nature of it. Why didn't Mashur Rahman attack the substance of Farida Rahman's contention? He could have easily tried to, if he wanted to, prove how incorrect Farida Rahman's position was, and that whatever was being said against poet Shamsur Rahman, or other intellectuals were correct. No. Instead of attacking her for what she had said, he accused her of working against Islam, and attacked her faith in religion, and questioned her loyalty to BNP. How and why should a question raised about political exploitation of religion be made to appear as an attack against religion itself. This is precisely what pseudo religious leaders, whose main agenda is politics, do when their political use of religion is questioned. Whenever these people are opposed, their views questioned, their motives exposed for what they are — self-aggrandisement and use of people's sentiment and respect for Islam to capture political power — they raise the cry that "Islam is being attacked."

We condemn now, as we did in that past, the vicious attack on our greatest poet, Shamsur Rahman, and by the same token we condemn the attempt to stifle the demand for government action, as made by Farida Rahman, against those who misuse religion and exploit religious belief of the people to push forward sectarian political agenda.

## Pro-poor Budget

Proshika, one of our outstanding NGO, organised a very innovative and important seminar on Thursday. It focused on finding out what there was, if anything at all, for the poor in the budget, and if the poor were ever consulted in the preparation of the budget. The findings of the main paper, prepared by BIDS' senior economist Atiur Rahman, showed, as expected, that the poor were not involved in the budget-preparing process, nor were they concerned much about what was in it. The workshop brought home the fact that there is too much lip service and too little real emphasis on poverty alleviation. This newspaper itself had organised one of its roundtable on pro-poor planning about a year ago, whose findings clearly showed that without a more serious emphasis on our poor, Bangladesh cannot create sustainable growth. We need to pay attention to poor not out of charity, but out of a sense of self-preservation. Because the poor produced much more wealth per-capita of investment than did the rich. Thus, as a society and as a nation, we are likely to get far more 'bang for our buck' if we divert necessary funds towards both rural and urban poor.

There was another very important suggestion that came from the seminar. That was to simplify the budget. We think it is a very important proposal. We know budget is a serious document, but yet we are convinced that it can be made more understandable for the general public. After all, if it is meant for the general public, then it should be our duty to present it in a format and in a language that is easy for all to understand, interpret, analyse and use in their work, trade and business.

# Whither Non-Farm Activities in Rural Bangladesh?

Major constraints to the development of rural industrial enterprises are identified as shortage of finance, deficient entrepreneurship, traditional technology, scarcity of raw materials etc... The Fourth Plan focused more on appropriate policies than on institutional development for promotion of the rural non-farm sector. However, all such wishes failed to materialise due to lack of proper political will.

It goes without saying that the capacity of absorbing the incremental labour force in agriculture is extremely limited because of (a) a limited scope for expansion of the land frontier; (b) an almost saturation point in cropping intensity and (c) a low employment elasticity of output. Generation and promotion of non-farm activities (NFA) in both rural and urban areas, therefore seem to emerge as the potential sources of furthering employment opportunities in rural Bangladesh. In fact, over the years, there has been in evidence some structural changes in the composition of the labour force with a decline in agricultural employment level. Nearly half of the non-agricultural labour force in rural areas are reported to be employed in NFA's like trade, processing, manufacturing, transport, construction and various types of personal and community services. (An investigation into the issues surrounding NFA in Bangladesh has been made by Dr. Mahabub Hossain, A Bayes and Mustafizur Rahman in an ILO working paper.)

It is said that the growth in rural nonfarm employment can signal good or bad news. If agriculture prospers, increase in wages and expansion of markets tend to stimulate growth in increasingly productive NFA. But in stagnant rural regions an expansion in non-farm employment may

only reflect that population growth forces the non-farm sector to soak up excess workers in marginal, low-productive jobs. For Bangladesh, the popular hypothesis is that sluggish agricultural growth tends to push labours out of agriculture into various NFAs mostly of a residual variety characterized by low labours productivity. The rapid growth of NFA is, thus, considered to be a sign of weakness for the economy. "Unless it is supported by an increase in the demand for their goods and services, the swelling of their rank will merely increase competition among the poor to eke out a living from a stagnant market for non-farm goods and services and hence would lead to a decline in labour productivity and accentuation of poverty."

However, beside the "push" factor from stagnant agriculture sector as implied above, a strong "pull" factor in accelerating employment growth in NFA activities is also adduced by many. First, the recent growth in crop production in Bangladesh has been achieved mainly through diffusion of the HYV-technology. The trend towards specialisation in crop produc-

tion increases the ratio of marketed surplus for a given level of crop output. Thus, even a moderate increase in crop output could lead to a substantial increase in the demand for trade and transport services. Second, the increased demand for agro-chemicals and irrigation equipment and spare parts produced in urban areas or are imported from outside. Higher levels of marketed

This can be compared to 20 to 45 per cent full time employment generated in NFA in rural areas in developing countries. The employment in rural NFA has been growing at 8 per cent per year since independence. It is found that it is not only the landless who tend to flock to NFA but also nearly half of the land owning households have same non-farm occupations. Households with better re-

cent of the rural transport operators have labour productivity lower than the agricultural wage rate. The average productivity in trading was 80 per cent higher than the agricultural wage rate. Rural services have strong markets and with technological progress in agriculture the market expands to a large extent. Nearly 18 per cent of the rural incomes in technologically progressive village are spent on rural services compared to 8 per cent in backward villages.

In rural industrial sectors, a significant portion of employment is poverty-induced. These are enterprises which employ traditional technology and are done by female labour. Enterprise in which the returns to family labour are lower than wage earnings, employ nearly one-third of the total labour in rural industries. With increase in agricultural incomes and development of rural infrastructures, the market for these industrial products shrink as they are exposed to competition from higher quality products of urban origin.

It would be naive to conclude that the entire non-farm rural sector in Bangladesh is a

sponge for absorbing surplus labours. A part of the rural industrial sector would also be characterized which would decline as the economy achieves progress. But this segment accounts for a small proportion or total non-farm employment. A large part of the rural non-farm sector does have the potential for increasing productivity and incomes through occupational mobility for agricultural wage labour to self employment in non-agricultural.

Major constraints to the development of rural industrial enterprises are identified as shortage of finance, deficient entrepreneurship, traditional technology, scarcity of raw materials etc. The Government of Bangladesh also recognised the importance of NFA and took necessary steps to cut the constraints. The Fourth Plan focused more on appropriate policies than on institutional development for promotion of the rural non-farm sector. The policies proposed include (a) appropriate reforms in exchange rates and tariff policies to remove bias against rural industries; (b) restructuring the licensing system; (c) integrating credit with training etc. However, all of these wishes failed to materialise due to lack of proper political will. It is expected that due cognizance should be given to the importance of NFA in Bangladesh and required policy interventions should follow the suit.

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



surplus would increase the demand for rural processing activities. At higher levels of income, the capacity of the rural population to pay for improved education and health services would improve which may induce expansion of the rural services sectors and so on.

NFA constitutes an important part of Bangladesh economy. It is reported that nearly 60 per cent of the rural households have one or more members engaged in NFA.

source position i.e. more land and better human resource skills are also found engaged in rural trading and service activities which account for three-fifths of the total non-farm employment.

A large portion of the resource-poor households are engaged in trading and transport operations. Although these employ relatively low amount of capital, the average productivity is much higher than the agricultural wage rate. Only three to four per

country will have to import substantial amount of fuel for the future power plants. Options for imported fuel are limited to coal, oil or nuclear.

Coal has environmental problems through emission of Green House Gases. Other problems like logistics of its handling, transportation (3000 Tons per day for a 300 MW plant) will not allow its use as the only fuel in meeting of our incremental demands. Price and availability of oil in the international market are uncertain, as adequately demonstrated by the energy crisis. In such a situation, the future energy-mix of the country has to incorporate the nuclear option. Inadequacy of energy resources, cost economics and environmental issues were duly considered in all the feasibility studies conducted so far on the Roorpur Nuclear Power Project, and it was concluded that the project is technically and economically viable for Bangladesh.

It is not true that growth of the nuclear power has been stalled altogether. At present about 430 nuclear plants are in operation contributing about 18 per cent of the global electricity generation. However, some countries in the west particularly in the USA are not now proceeding with expansion of nuclear power generation. If critically analysed, it would appear that

the demand for electricity in such countries have attained a saturation level or even have excess generation capacity in some cases. On the other hand, in countries like France, Japan and Korea, where the indigenous primary energy resources are not adequate, nuclear power plants are being built as planned earlier. It may be noted that contribution of nuclear power in overall electricity generation is already about 78 per cent in France about 54 per cent in Belgium, 40 per cent in Korea, about 31 per cent in Japan and about 30 per cent in Germany.

Safety is definitely one of the main concerns of nuclear power. In about four decades of its use, nuclear technology has shown an outstanding track record of safety. It has been possible due to the approach to safety adopted at all phases of a nuclear power project. The high investment cost is due to the various safety systems and engineered safety features incorporated in the design on the basis of design basis accidents with a probability of one in a million or less. The accident at Chernobyl happened in a design which is not licensable in any other country and that country, contrary to the internationally acceptable criteria, had chosen to compromise some of the safety features. Even this worst type of acci-

dent did not cause damages as apprehended in the media at that time. Safety will be one of the main criteria in selection of technology in case of Bangladesh and all international criteria are to be followed in its design, implementation and operation.

We noted that some of the information contained in your editorial, deviate, in cases substantially, from the real situation. These include the following:

a. Money spent so far (from 1961 till to date) is less than Tk 7,000 crores. It has been quoted in your editorial under reference that Tk 140 crores was spent up to the year 1969.

b. Bangladesh is looking for a reactor of size 300 or 600 MW.

c. We agree that nuclear power will be accepted only if it is cheap. The capital cost of a nuclear power plant is higher than its conventional alternative. On the other hand annual operating cost of a nuclear power plant is much lower than its alternatives. For example, the annual savings on fuel in case of a 300 MW nuclear plant will be \$ 40 million when compared to coal or \$ 80 million compared to oil. This annual saving will make it easy to recover the initial extra investment cost.

d. Countries, like France,

Japan, Korea or Belgium where a major share of electricity is generated in their nuclear plants, are not surely operating the plants as show pieces. It is unwise to think that such plants would be built or operated unless they are found economically acceptable.

e. Many countries (for example Canada, Belgium, Korea, Sweden, Finland, Hungary etc) are known to have no aspiration for nuclear weapons, even though they are operating nuclear power plants for quite some time.

f. Technology for waste management is available and the problem is more political in nature. It may be borne in mind that radioactive Uranium and Thorium are naturally occurring substances and all are exposed to varying degrees of background radiation from the earth, cosmic rays etc; not to speak of the all deposits of nuclear minerals.

It is now a common practice in many countries to use a facility within the plant premises for intermediate storage of spent fuel generated over the entire plant life. In the meanwhile, suitable locations, such as abandoned mine faces of the Hard Rock deposit at Madhyapara may be investigated for use as potential site for final storage of wastes.

## "Why Nuclear Power"

by M A Quaiyum

In response to The Daily Star editorial of 2 June '95, the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission writes...

THANK you very much for your above mentioned editorial dated 2 June '95, on nuclear power in Bangladesh. We appreciate objective debates and discussions at all levels, especially in the mass media on the subject. This is one of the effective ways to create public awareness, which is an important and integral part of implementation of nuclear power programme in any country.

Such discussions should, however, be conducted keeping in view national needs, constraints and other conditions. Electricity generation in Bangladesh is only about 81 kWh per capita, which is roughly one-fifth of the consumption in India or Pakistan, and one-thirtieth of the world average. Thus, when we talk about the need for a growth of the energy and electricity in keeping with the economic goals in long term perspective, the need for annual electricity capacity additions per year would work out to be in hundreds or even

in thousands of MW. Viable technology/fuel options in this situation are limited to conventional fossil fuels such as natural gas, coal and oil, hydro, and nuclear.

The known reserves of indigenous primary energy resources for electricity generation are limited to natural gas, the lone hydro plant at Kaptai and the future coal at Barapukuria. Recoverable reserves of natural gas, which now accounts for about 87 per cent of total electricity, is inadequate for meeting the growth in demand. Only a part of it (45-50 per cent) can be used for the electricity after meeting its demand in other end-uses such as fertilizer, industries, domestic and commercial sectors. Barapukuria coal with an estimated annual production of one million tons will be sufficient for a 300 MW plant. If Bangladesh wants to attain a modest target of about 350 kWh electricity per capita in the year 2020 (which is the present level of consumption in India and Pakistan), the

## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Government offices

Sir, Government offices and public sector corporations are basically and essentially meant for the welfare of the people and rendering necessary services to the members of the public. But unfortunately the performances (duties and responsibilities) and the standard of services in most of the government establishments and corporate bodies are deteriorating day by day.

It is alleged that large-scale irregularities, inefficiencies and negligence of duties are being committed in some government offices and public sector corporations. The officers and staff come to their offices late and go early. Most of the time they pretend and show that they are awfully busy in 'file works' and 'attending their superiors'. They can hardly spare any time to listen to and attend the members of the public to get their various works done and to help them solve their different problems and difficulties for which a particular government office of a public sector corporation is meant for.

It appears that an entire government office or a public sector corporation is meant for the welfare and personal works of the officers and staff employed therein and not for any outsider or the member of the public.

Letters, applications or complaints submitted by the members of the public seeking various information and enquiries, help and assistance and remedies on various matters, problems and difficulties are seldom acknowledged or responded rather misplaced

and lost. There is no proper supervision, control, accountability and transparency of various government offices and public sector corporations. Further there are often abuses of administrative and financial powers. No proper organisational set up, no set system and procedure of work, no checking of misuse of office transports, no proper repair and maintenance of vehicles, telephone, other office equipment, furniture and store, even cash book and cash in hand.

For the success of democracy and good governance in the country streaming of works and functions of different government offices and public sector corporations, job description and allocation of duties and among different levels of officers and staff and their proper supervision and control are an imperative.

Year after year we hear about assurances of administrative reforms in the country from the public leaders but unfortunately nothing practical is being done.

We would request our Prime Minister and the Ministry of Establishment to immediate take necessary steps to improve the working and standard of services of government offices and public sector corporations in the greater national interest.

O H Kabir  
Dhaka

### Telephone tariff

Sir, Nothing appears to be transparent these days. Some time back I was relieved to read in your esteemed newspaper that at long last the T&T Dept had decided to in-

roduce cheap rate telephone calls for overseas and minimum unit charge of 30 seconds instead of one minute. This was no doubt a relief for many who have children and near and dear ones abroad.

Although the cheap rate seems to have been introduced (though only 25 per cent cheap as against 50 per cent in western countries), it appears from ISD bills that still the minimum unit remains one minute i.e. for even a second or two full tariff rate is being charged (which is Tk 60 for UK and Tk 80 for USA). For those who use ISD facilities have to pay for a full one extra minute's charge for a second too long a conversation. Similarly, when due to service failure at times the line gets disconnected and repeated dialling is made to get the line — every time the line gets disconnected the ISD bill is made on full one minute for each dial i.e. Tk 60 or Tk 80 plus VAT 15 per cent.

In other countries there is a system of claiming refund for service failures but our T&T does not have any such system. A few months back, I had booked an overseas call through the trunk operator, the dialling was done by the operator but from the bill it appeared that there were two or three additional calls for 1/2 seconds to the same number in rapid succession and were charged causing unnecessary monetary loss to me. I have a non-ISD digital phone, I did not request for conversion to ISD because of fear of service failure charge, but I see that I have to pay for the service failure even if it is done by the operator. What is the remedy? There is customer service in T&T. Can't they have an effective customer service number manned by knowledgeable persons for helping subscribers?

It will, however, not be fair on my part if I do not mention that notwithstanding the shortcomings, there has been appreciable improvement in overseas trunk service. The operators are polite, and prompt except that at times one has to wait on a queue and hear the recorded sweet voice "all lines are busy, please dial again after a while."

In accounts matter, I was pleasantly — indeed very pleasantly — surprised when I got a reply by post from the office of the Accounts Officer, Teigaon in response to a query made by me by a letter. So, on this count, let us congratulate the T&T authorities, the operators and accounts office for their improved performance and hope they as a team will perform better befitting a decent organisation.

P G Muhammad  
New Eskaton, Dhaka

### Privatize the Govt Transport Pool

Sir, I strongly support the suggestion (Analyst, May 14) that the government transport pool be privatized (or semi-privatized) to run on a marginal profit basis (within 10 per cent). There will be a substantial saving of public expenditure and a vicious area of corruption and malpractice, will cease to exist and thrive.

There is a vernacular saying 'sarkar ka maal darya may dhaal' (who cares for the government's losses); and government assets have no 'maabaap' (custodian). The moral state of the society being at the lowest ebb (not only in Bangladesh), it is time to take measures suitable to the occasion.

The pool contractors may be with foreign tie-up — a million unsold cars of recent back models are readily available at heavy discount, at least until we can economically assemble cars) must maintain their own 24-hour service centre, cellular telephones, and have a computerised billing and requisition

system, reducing human interface to the minimum (despatch the requisition through the office fax for direct entry into the computer at the other end). It is not difficult to run such an agency similar to rent-a-car services operating in the developed countries.

As analyst has suggested, alternatives must be offered, such as facilities for owning small private cars on hire-purchase basis. Since bureaucracy has to be trimmed in the developing countries, the work loads have to be distributed through decentralization schemes, which include bringing in the private sector where necessary and feasible.

One concept has to be mentally accepted: to encourage the nascent private sector to take on more and more responsibilities in the service sector (the BRTC is now making money after leasing out the buses to private operators). The power and the telecom sectors are also slowly giving up the state control. Move with the times.

A Husman  
Dhaka

### 'Closure of the Dhaleswari river'

Sir, This has reference to a letter under the above caption published in your esteemed daily on 30.3.95. The writer Mr S M A Rashid of Nature Conservation Movement (NACOM) brought to light the fact that the river Dhaleswari had been closed down as a ground work for constructing the lamuna Multipurpose Dam (JMB).

The Dhaleswari is one of the big rivers of the country. It branches off as a distributary from the lamuna at Katali (at about 24°12' North Latitude) of Tangail district and falls on the Meghna near Munshiganj. The Dhaleswari has a tributary (perhaps also Dhaleswari by name) which is

a distributary of the lamuna branching off the Ajiuna (at about 24°30' N Latitude) under Bhuapur of Tangail district. The JMB joining Matikata of Bhuapur, Tangail and Syedabad of Sirajganj is situated at about 24°20' N Latitude. Thus it is simply impossible that the Dhaleswari proper would be closed for the JMB and the closed river would obviously be the said tributary of the Dhaleswari. Even if this is the fact, the flood plain of the closed tributary would be badly affected due to want of water and the areas downstream of the Dhaleswari proper in Tangail, Manikganj, Dhaka and Munshiganj districts will get less water. As a result the ecosystem (not 'ecology' as described by Mr Rashid, Ecology is the study of ecosystems!) of the area concerned will have more or less negative impacts.

The authorities of the JMB project should have in mind that the project, though partially financed by same international agencies, is a national one inside our territory. If we ourselves close down our own rivers and think it to be justified, then what is the fault with others?

The JMB is yet to be built. So there is time for correction. The proposed spillways on the said river must be constructed on priority basis without delay. If the authorities overlook our urges (the common authoritative attitude), the naturalists (including the environmental lawyers) of the country are to be united to defend our stand and protect the already affected environment. We are for sustainable development, not for short lived so called developmental measures that further degrade the biosphere of our only one earth.

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