

The Missing Link

The hard fact about Bangladesh-Nepal relations is the non-realisation of the full potential for cooperation between the two physically very close neighbouring countries. Looking at the outcome of the just-concluded JEC meeting between the two countries, their bilateral resources seem to have been stretched to the limit for an enrichment of Dhaka-Kathmandu ties. The only missing link now appears to be the vital Indian input that must be there to prise open the tremendous possibilities that geography has endowed the three countries with for durable and rewarding cooperation among them.

It is common knowledge that water management for flood control and hydro-electricity generation has to begin at the headwaters of the Ganges which lie in the Himalayan country — Nepal. Unless there is a definite consensus among the three countries to build suitable dams or reservoirs in the upper riparian Nepal, truncated pieces of understanding between any two countries — whether they are India and Nepal or Bangladesh and Nepal or indeed India and Bangladesh — can complicate matters by working at cross-purposes.

While we are gladdened by the agreed minutes of the JEC meet whereby executing agencies from both the countries are to put in place an early flood warning system for the benefit of Bangladesh, there is need for drawing India into a much broader arrangement for damming the Ganges to build water reservoir and generate electricity for the good of all the three countries. Nations have permanent interests that ought to override the ephemeral political exigencies — this being the dictum by which a group of nations rise while another blindfolded group gets stuck in the quagmire. Nepal and Bangladesh are at one in their vision of a collective water management system. India has only to say yes to it now, with the generosity expected of a big neighbour.

Landlocked Nepal has to get overland transit routes through India to be able to utilise Chittagong and Mongla ports, facilities Bangladesh has already offered to Kathmandu. Although it is a bilateral matter between the two countries, it is also a test-case for knowing the Indian mind on extended access for Nepal through Bangladesh.

Let the SAARC spirit come into play with India leading the way for solid and far-reaching cooperation in the region along the EU lines.

Towards Improved Traffic

A discussion on "Streets of Dhaka", organised by this newspaper in collaboration with the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) and the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), has provided a valuable input for streamlining the anarchic city traffic. Sure enough, identification of the problem in all its aspects is a first step towards its solution. But in no way does it mean that a complex and horrendous problem like the traffic jam admits of any strait-jacket solution.

Suggestions have been aplenty, some of them practical, others are less so. But one thing has emerged from the discussion that a single central coordinating authority should be entrusted with the responsibility of managing the city streets and the traffic therein. There should be no two opinions that such a coordinating body can do away with the waste of huge amount of time, energy and money. Frequent road-digging and other kinds of works by different utility agencies can be minimised to the benefit of traffic movement.

Our inability to construct link roads and overbridges, and refashion intersections overnight, does not mean we are doomed to put up with the present acuteness of the problem. Some of the indiscipline and chaos is our creation, thanks to our lack of civic sense and callous behaviour. Sensible parking and picking of passengers by different vehicles, mini-buses in particular, can help reduce the traffic jam as well as the number of accidents. The traffic police can enforce strict discipline and penalise the violators of traffic rules without any fear or favour. Then of course, in no situation should the hawkers be allowed to vend their wares spilling over to the roads. Measures such as these can surely improve traffic situation in Dhaka city.

Breast-feeding

There exist a lot of misconception and confusion about breast-feeding. The message was once again brought to the fore on the eve of observing the World Breast-feeding Day and Week. This year the thrust has been on empowering women. Many people by now have come to know that only seven per cent of our children get adequate and proper nutrition for their healthy development; but they are yet to know how many infants get the required amount of breast milk as such.

The damage wrought by insufficient nutrition is heavy — our children are growing with a low IQ and suffering from stunted growth. These are in addition to the high proportion of blindness and other diseases. Depriving children of breast milk owes to lack of knowledge and, in some cases, mothers' occupation elsewhere.

The Campaign for Protection and Promotion of Breast-feeding (CPPBF) holds that the country can save about Tk 300 crore a year if mothers breast-feed their babies. We do not know what the basis of this estimate is. But we know this much that it gives a clue to the huge number of infants who are growing up without breast milk. Apart from those who do not feed their babies with breast milk, there are certainly others who do not have sufficient milk to feed them with. The question inevitably turns back to the food intake of those mothers. Not many mothers can get the ideal diet they need during and after pregnancy.

The mothers should not only enjoy some preferential treatment in this regard but also the right to decide when to take a baby and when not.

BY ASEAN or East Asian Standards of 6 to 8 per cent, Bangladesh have had hardly any economic growth in the recent past. Even before that, the decade of 1980s had been clearly recognized as the period of deindustrialization since the sectoral contributions as a proportion of GDP went down. Truth is stranger than fiction: we are regressing through reverse development. All this time, population growth, though claimed to have slightly declined in the recent past, did not stop growing. In fact, the demographic time bomb is ticking ever louder in the land of utter poverty and destitution.

Therefore, which way are we heading — growth or disaster?

Of late, the only item of growth has been seminars and talk-shows on the subject of economy and its growth and this article would further contribute to that verbal inflation. It is not bad however. After all, information is the vital ingredient to design the strategy, policies and programmes relevant for moving the economy onto the path of expansion.

In this respect, the Centre for Policy Dialogue has been carrying out certain useful task; although the work so far remained at the level of aggregates. Certain basic conclusions on the cause of failure in promoting growth need to be firmly established. Thereafter, specific recommendations, practical and implementable, are necessary. These would then constitute the vital building blocks for the Annual Development Programme and Budget of fiscal 1995-96.

The government, the Finance Minister in particular, have been justifiably praised for introduction of

Growth or Despair — which Way?

The broad conclusion one can draw is that without growth we are heading towards a disaster. The macro-economic reforms and market liberalization measures were necessary but not sufficient to promote sustainable economic growth.

market reforms as well as related macro-economic policies. Unfortunately, these have not been translated into desirable economic growth. Low investment was obviously followed by low growth. But why low investment? Finance Minister had tried every means at his disposal to cajole and harangue the private sector to come forward and invest in manufacturing enterprises, particularly in labour intensive manufacturing but, if at all, equity investment increased only very little. On the other hand, foreign investors have hardly come. Obviously, when domestic investors are hesitant, it would be utterly naive to expect large inflow of investment from outside.

The broad conclusion one can draw is that without growth we are heading towards a disaster. The macro-economic reforms and market liberalization measures were necessary but not sufficient to promote sustainable economic growth. But what is to be done? Is it possible to identify a set of policies and programmes which might reverse the trend and the tide would turn in our favour?

Expansion of Irrigation

First, in agriculture sector we ought to make massive efforts to expand irrigation, beginning next dry season for the next five years, so that four-fifth of the cultivable land area of Bangladesh is brought under irrigation. This can be done by reviving, after appropriate modifica-

tions, the practices and procedures of Thana Irrigation Programme (TIP) which successfully promoted irrigated agriculture in the 1960s. The rural and food works programme combined with the enormous design and management capacity of Water Development Board as well as the Local Government Engineering Department, and above all, people's participation, involving Local

1960s — why can't we do it now?

The prevailing policy and programme of expanding irrigation through private sector purchase and installation of pumps and tubewells fail to recognize the realities of water resources development. There are limits to such private sector initiatives at household level. Already, overuse of ground-water caused drawdown of the wa-

tant task by the year 2001 ought to be electrification of four-fifth or 80 per cent of the 65,000 villages and 100 per cent of the Thana headquarters in terms of transmission and distribution; while adequate generation capacity should be installed in order to meet the demand from expanding manufacturing sector. Presently, expansion of the power sector is stalled due to three factors: (i) system loss, sometimes accounting for half the electricity generated; (ii) vested interest against privatization; and, (iii) consequent lack of foreign funding. The first and foremost task is to enhance the public sector management capacity so that productivity of the installed system is enhanced by as much as 30 per cent without requiring any additional investment. The present government seems to have given up the task. Plain and simple, it has failed. Let us see if the general election would make any difference. If not, then please remember that we are heading for the certain disaster. System loss must come down — otherwise we are doomed. If Government is firm and determined, there is no reason why electricity generation and distribution programme should suffer which is retarding the entire process of economic growth. Government must act and act as soon as possible on the electricity front.

Once the desirable level of efficiency have been re-



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

Bodies and NGOs, on a broad-front, should enable us to initiate the desired massive effort beginning 15 November 1995. Sixteen million acres of irrigated land should be the target and it has to be done primarily by tapping all available surface water resources first and then ground water potentials are to be exploited. The present shortfall in foodgrains production due to drought should provide the incentives to sustain the biggest ever irrigation expansion programme and not through billion dollar barrage programmes but a million micro-level water augmentation works — labour-intensive in nature and largely involving earth works. Remember, we initiated such programmes in

Electrification

The second most impor-

DISPITE the best of efforts by the government and people, the economy of the country continues to be mired in recession. Main causes of the slump appear to be sagging exports, stagnating manufacturing, antiquated tax system and high government spending in uneconomic ventures.

Unsurprisingly, the country's economic woes have been tied to a series of disasters both natural and man-made. Cyclone, drought and right now flood are added to the crisis. For thousands of impoverished Bangladeshis huddled in slums, pavements, alleyways, bus and railway terminals in the city and also the rural populace living in the rugged houses, "hope" has wings but no feathers. The flood that is sweeping over the country following the drought will complicate the situation. Almost every year the monsoon seems to produce devastating floods and when disasters become annual events virtually a fixture on the calendar, the outside world also becomes a bit jaded. But this does not in any way diminish the human tragedy. It is quite evident that the Western nations, in such a catastrophe have almost washed their hands, putting themselves on the side line. The "donor fatigue" suggests the West's increasing frustration over trying to assist the problems of the Third World countries like Bangladesh that instead of diminishing over time, simply grow more massive year by year.

The sudden cataclysm that has overwhelmed this country is no doubt quite alarming. But the disaster that will be unfolding in the wake of the flood triggers further consequences. This flood which has marooned so many people at so many places will certainly take a toll of human lives and livestock. Water will be contaminated. There will be serious shortage of food supply. People are also worried about

Post-flood Priorities: Both Short Term and Long Term Actions Needed

by Md Asadullah Khan

The country with its tenacious people that managed to defeat the military might of Pakistan in 1971 and then hold other inimical forces at bay appears to be losing the battle to weather and chronic economic mismanagement.

an outbreak of cholera that may wipe out many of the already weakened survivors. People will start dying unless relief aids in the form of food and medicines can be reached timely.

The calamity has overtaken the country at a time when Government and people were fighting hard to offset the effect of the food crisis sweeping over the country as a consequence of the loss of production of Aman crop in the early part of 1995. The country with its tenacious people that managed to defeat the military might of Pakistan in 1971 and then hold other inimical forces at bay appears to be losing the battle to weather and chronic economic mismanagement.

After the flood water has receded, people will start working to help themselves and it would be an onerous job on the part of the Government and NGOs to provide material support to these flood-stricken people in the form of agricultural inputs, such as seeds, fertilisers, insecticides and even livestock if needed.

The Government has to mount an aggressive policy in agriculture and food production both on short and long term basis. It wouldn't be enough that better agricultural policy by our government would automatically translate into self-sufficiency in food production unless western aid-projects are geared up to this area. There is no second thought about the truth that Western aid is very much needed in debt-distressed and disaster-ridden

country like Bangladesh. But the aid should not be in the form of food-relief packages only. It should take the form of giving our farmers the needed technology and scientific information to boost agricultural productivity. Those who are genuinely interested in ending hunger in this region should promote self-sufficiency in food production providing material and technical support through organisations like FAO, IFAD etc.

Things that stand in the way to our self-sufficiency in food and meeting the nutrition gap must be addressed properly. It is a happy augury that a major contributor to world hunger is beginning to disappear as communism loses its credibility as a viable economic system. The next contributor that must go is religious fundamentalism. Many of the protagonists of religious fundamentalism do not till now, reckon population explosion as a problem in the Third World countries like Bangladesh. No wonder, future population explosion will be halted either by modern contraceptive techniques and devices or by periodic mass starvation, as perhaps we are experiencing now despite the big leap in agricultural productivity in recent times. Sardonicly speaking, may The Merciful God help religious leaders see that if they do not actively promote the former, then they promote the latter by default. A simple statistics will reveal the seriousness of the problem that poses a challenge to our existence. Population in-

crease in a poor country like Bangladesh now hovers around 2.1 per cent annually whereas in the most developed country like Japan this figure is 1.57 per cent annually. To be more precise, Bangladesh had nearly 80 million inhabitants in 1974, nearly 90 million in 1980 and more than 120 million today. This must be a very grim scenario that is unfolding with each passing day.

However, there is a silver lining in the face of all these disastrous situations. This enigma of population problem that poses a challenge to development and survival can be overcome by stringent effort. The education and liberation of women is the single most important thing to do. There is a lot of evidence that if we empower women, give them a good education, material and health care and political rights, we can bring the birthrate down in our country too. Costa Rica reduced the average number of child birth from 7 to 3. The country has no army and invests in education and good health care. Looking at the global scenario, we see that in 1968, the world's population was 3.5 billion. A report from the United Nations Population Fund warns that world population has increased during 1990 and onward by 100 million a year. At that rate the current 5.5 billion will double by the middle of the 21st century. To reduce the population figure down to 7 billion needs a gigantic effort on the part of all countries in the world. As long as the production

of basic foodstuffs does not increase with the number of people, and as long as the GNP remains stuck at less than 200 dollars per person a year, nature will simply correct the problem of overpopulation in its unpredictable way without respect for human suffering. On the other side, Western countries who are pouring help in times of disaster have often ignored the fact that the best way to help these disaster-ridden people is to empower them especially the women folk, with education, and knowledge of health care. That calls for a situation in which love and the spirit of integration will solve the problem. Unless the world opens to allow free movement of people and resources, famine and suffering will worsen.

A careful observer of world events has never failed to see that almost traditionally, military and other aid was lavished on oppressive regimes to halt the spread of communism in the Third World countries. But the situation these days are completely different. Communism has taken its wings and Cold War tensions among the superpowers are on the wane.

In the backdrop of such a comforting scenario and healthy environment, problems of the Third World countries like Bangladesh are not being addressed. As the West's attention moves toward rebuilding the economies of the Eastern Europe, Bangladesh's problems loom ominously. Real income here is dropping. Poverty takes its toll on the

stored, funding for generation of electricity may be largely left to the private sector, provided there are enough interest; and government may concentrate on transmission and distribution. The immediate task in fiscal 95-96 may be rehabilitation and restoration; while between 1996 and the year 2001, the massive development on the power sector ought to come through.

Transport

The third and the final priority area to avert the disaster and usher in the period of high economic growth is transport which for decades to come is likely to remain within the domain of the public sector. There may be opportunities for private financing of toll roads but those would be major national highways and that major cities of the country are already well connected. Transport sector development, considered as one of the three essential prime movers of economic growth would imply that all cities, towns and thana headquarters except those in the outer islands, are well-connected by all weather roads by the year 2001 at the latest. This should be easiest of the three tasks since a very large part of the national road network has been built already.

Irrigation, electricity and transport — the intensive development of these three infrastructures within the next five to six years would determine whether we stagnate on the path of economic growth. On the eve of the general election, I hope major political parties would ponder if this should form the blue print of their election manifesto.

unfortunate people as a result of disastrous, unfair and deteriorating terms of trade, population increases and low foreign investment as evidenced by the fact that the region's only viable export, earnings from the garment industry is now declining. On the other hand, World Bank and IMF loan to these regions are drying up and whatever small amount is available, it can't be utilised fruitfully because of it being tied with strings. Along with infusion of loan to boost agricultural productivity, loans from the donor agencies could be funnelled to livestock and fisheries development. It is fitting to recall the important contributions veterinarians have made towards increasing the world's meat and milk supply through their work with livestock. Milk and protein shortage have reached a critical phase. By importing cattle of healthy breed, it could have been possible to increase the efficiency of livestock production and help meet the challenges our growing population and limited resources.

It is worth recalling that to meet the milk shortage for the growing children and others, we have to import powder milk costing about 400 crores taka in foreign exchange. As revealed by a statement of the Finance Minister at Moulavibazar in Sylhet, incentive to dairy owners in the form of loans has yielded very positive results and the country could at least save Tk 200 crore in powder milk purchase during the last fiscal year.

More encouraging, in the backdrop of losses by all the public sector companies in the country, Milk Vita, the lone dairy product firm in the realm, reported to have earned a profit to the tune of Tk 2 crores. That brings a glimmer of hope against a cloudy and ominous news of losses in jute, steel industry, textile goods, shipping, rail communications, etc.

To the Editor...

On Egyptian situation

Sir, This refers to the editorial on Egyptian situation published in your daily recently. I appreciate your genuine concern over continuing depressing situation in Egypt. However, it was transparent that the true picture of Egyptian problem has not been reflected in the editorial. To substantiate, I would like to add that the present regime of Egypt is one of the worst dictatorship around the present day world. Democratic institutions like freedom of press, free election and freedom of movement/speeches have been suppressed since General Abdul Nasser's days. Ikhwanul Musliman the most popular party of the Egypt is banned for past 50 years. This has led to the growth of extreme and underground groups. The recent assassination attempt on Hosni Mubarak is the consequence of such situation. The voice of the Egyptian people cannot be heard through Western media who are continuing to

side with Hosni Mubarak who succumbed to the Western pressure since Camp David Treaty.

M M K Khan
Banani, Dhaka

"Architecture sans Humanity"

Sir, I am known for my taciturnity and lack the appetite to affront an Anglist, and also belong to a generation where incivility is not in vogue. However, I am constrained to retort to the anoxic response by Naz Shafiq in the 'opinion' column (24 July). Her sapience is understandable, but the retrogressive response and exacerbation which induced the diatribe is unacceptable. Her 'opinion' is interspersed with irrelevance and displays a marked confusion about meretricious. Her factitious and presumptuous remarks are mere prestidigitations.

I retort to my previous letter to straighten out a few points: (1) Compared to the 283 lines of 'opinion', my 35-line letter can hardly be

termed a 'tirade'. (2) My response to Hannan's article may have been retaliative, but definitely not rude. (3) I mentioned that it is expected that a writer "be conversant with the subject matter", and not that he needs to be a cook, artist or architect. (4) The 'time-frame' of my practice and my degree were mentioned, not to convey my calibre or proficiency but my incompetence at criticizing the renowned architects. (5) Without any contradictions, I had mentioned that Hannan's comments were "grossly generalized and exaggerated" and that does not make me an opponent of "freedom of expression."

Munirul Haque
DOHS, Dhaka

Of BCS candidates

Sir, BCS (Bangladesh Civil Service) exams take place to select a good number of candidates to fill up posts in different government capacities. One thing I cannot, personally, accept when I see doctors or engineers are se-

lected for service foreign, police service, etc. These services are not at all related to the field they have actually come from. If they would have really wanted to pursue careers other than doctors/engineers, they could very well study subjects according to their choice. As a result, many students are deprived of studying in medical/engineering — the top two subjects of choice for the students to get admitted into.

Motius Samad Chowdhury
Phultala Tea Estate, Sylhet

Of air-conditioned coaches

Sir, Introduction of air-conditioned coaches between Dhaka and Chittagong came as a great relief for the middle as well as lower-middle income group which provided them standard and decent travelling at a reasonable cost.

Unfortunately, when 50 per cent footpaths of Dhaka city has been occupied by vendors and shopkeepers —

at Baitul Mukarram and Gulistan area even parts of the main road have gone to their occupation — it is strange that authorities became very strict and vigilant in removing these AC buses from Fakirapool area without making an alternative arrangement. This has caused a great inconvenience to the passengers travelling between Dhaka and Chittagong.

Further, these buses used to come to city centre bypassing the main congested city roads through Syedabad-Kamalapur area thereby shortening the travel time. But it is observed that after the eviction they are made to operate through busiest Motijheel area to come to their privately owned departure points at the speed of rickshaw causing further suffering to the passengers.

The owners of the buses informed that they have been asked to run their buses from Syedabad terminal. As these buses are quite expensive naturally no owner would volunteer to put them at the mercy of musclemen in

Syedabad terminal. These musclemen occasionally enter into group feuds for the supremacy at the terminal keeping the helpless owners and their property as hostage.

When Government is encouraging the private sector to come forward and when this segment of the sector is really providing a public utility service one ponders why there is so much apathy. We request the authorities to solve this problem and once proposed Kamalapur BRTC bus depot as an alternative can very well be used as terminal for these buses. It was reported that there is a serious objection from the employees of BRTC. Facts remain that simply working for an organisation does not give authority to any one to pass opinion and create obstruction when people-oriented projects are initiated. Authorities should give a serious thought to it vis-a-vis the problems of public utility service.

A K Khan
Sumibagh, Dhaka