

Global Gender Gap

Tailor made for the biggest ever UN Conference on Women (its fourth) to be held in Beijing early next month, the UNDP's Human Development Report (HDI) for 1995 makes a very strong case for equality of women. The conclusions of the report, as the UNDP's Administrator James Gustav Speth says, "are a major indictment of the continuing discrimination against women in most countries." The Pakistani chief author of the HDI, Dr. Mahbubul Haq, puts it even more strikingly, "Nations that sit back and ignore the disparities between men and women in their society do so at their own risk. To deny women full participation in economic and social development is to rob future generations of the opportunity to reach their full potential."

What we all had an idea about, and all of us believed to be true and tried to project through our columns, has now been most forcefully articulated in the HDI. The Report most powerfully puts economic argument — an argument that 'sells' best in the era of the market — behind the demand for gender equality. Women, especially the poor in the developing countries, have been found to be far more productive, diligent and dependable workers and managers compared to their male counterparts. Investment on women have many more side benefits, such as better education and health for the family, compared to investment on men. The HDI for the first time, at least to our knowledge, puts a figure of US\$ 11 trillion on the "undervalued, underpaid and unpaid contribution of women in the world economy."

HDI '95 will obviously add a lot of economic teeth to the moral, cultural and social arguments for gender equality. But will it make any difference in the thinking of the political leadership? This is where the real challenge lies. We have to build a national consensus behind the five-point strategy that the Report suggests. The five points are: 1) setting a timetable — say 10 years — to end legal discrimination; 2) taking concrete actions to restructure social and institutional norms; 3) moving towards 30% share of decision making positions for women; 4) implementing programmes for universal female education, improved reproductive health and financial credit for women; 5) work for greater access for women to economic and political opportunities. This five-point strategy will no doubt get further strengthened at the Beijing summit, and we will have to start mobilising nationally to implement it.

Taking Up a Good Job

The Dhaka-Aricha road which connects the capital city with 28 districts is so accident-prone that it is universally dreaded. Not a week passes without several lives being sacrificed to this silly stretch of the highway.

Now there is good news about this vital road link: Work starts seriously on its wholesale reconstruction in October. The Government of Denmark is re-doing the 61-kilometre Savar-Aricha section, broadening it for the most part and rebuilding most of the bridges and the culverts. We congratulate our authorities for addressing this communication challenge on such a scale. At the same time we cannot but censure them for taking up the job too late.

Now that at long last this has been taken up, is it possible for the government or, at their behest for the kind foreign government, to venture beyond re-making the road and set about righting its fundamental flaws, mainly the endless meanders and the too-many hump-back bridges?

One sure-fire good way to relieve pressure on the Dhaka-Aricha highway was to commission the Dhaka-Mawa road which cut the distance to all places served by the Daulatdia point substantially. One is at a loss to understand why government is being half-hearted in making full use of this road for which doing some patchwork here and there would possibly suffice. The Jamuna Bridge would of course take some load off Dhaka-Aricha. But that will take time. In the meantime, a better use of the Bhuapur crossing to Sirajganj could come in handy if only ferrying there could be developed beyond present capacity and efficiency.

The two things must go together — improving the Dhaka-Aricha link and taking load off it. At the same time, let Dhaka-Mawa be built as the great reliever it can be. And let Bhuapur also take some load off.

The Radiant Minor Season

Sharat has in it certain hidden associations that hardly go with any other season. The dawn, the dew and the morning light taking on a certain tinge are patently sharat things. And how about the very special autumn clouds and the glorious sharat full-moon, the *kojagori*?

How then could we be oblivious of the advent of this herald of light and romance, of fragrance wafting through the air, nightly and each morning? It was the wet spell with sky falling down and water shrouding the city with a metre-thick sheet, that played the dirty trick.

It was Rabindranath who so promoted the image of the *nabakundadhavaladala shushitala atishumirmala* — or the autumn as the paragon of light and cool and purity. His songs celebrating this minor season are couched in morning melodies and paint only a world rising freshly from the hold of night. And it was Tagore again who married sharat eternally with the idea of an abandon or *chhuti* never known to man before. *Megher koley rode heshechhey bado gaechey tuti* — so? This day is all ours and all frolic.

It seems the wise lady yore, namely Khona, had the last word in everything. It was she who said *Bhadra* should bode well if it is dry and shiny exactly as *Shravan* is a boon only when it is extra wet. This year *Shravan* seems to be tarrying too long causing all kinds of premonition in the minds of the vulnerable. But this may change and Rabindranath's sharat take over any day.

The Child Labour Issue: Ethics versus Economics

When economic imperatives are so preponderant, the laid-off children might end up in prostitution or in more dangerous jobs than going into schools and if that continues unabated the cost of ethics and human rights might turn out to be lavish.

ENVIRONMENT and Ethics, now-a-days, seem to occupy the important agenda on any discussion relating to socio-economics of a society. The concerns had long been there but, perhaps, were not as seriously aired as it is being done now. There is nothing wrong in tagging environmental or ethical judgements into economic discussions but one should be very much careful and observe that the concerns do not tend to kill those for which the mounting concerns are thrown. It is alleged that much of the environmental and ethical degradation, the concerns of which are now in the air from Western quarters, in fact, originated largely in those countries and that most of it are allegedly directed to protect western producers from the cheap supplies of the North.

The most recent "jerks" seem to be surrounding the use of child labour in developing countries. It is reported that in many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America "millions of children, some as young as six, tall long hours of low or no wages in back-breaking or dangerous jobs deprived both of schooling and of the pleasures of conventional childhood." The Western consumers could soon discover that their favourite jeans or brightly coloured hand woven rug in

the living room are the products of such sufferings and, therefore, their ethics forced them to warn their retailers to contain or block purchase from those countries which pervasively rely on child labour. Thus, Levi Strauss (the famous jeans retailer), according to The Economist was forced to cut off supplies from 5 per cent of its 600 suppliers and exact changes from 25 per cent. It severed links with Myanmar and China. Poor Bangladesh also became a prey. The NBC TV Network is reported to have showed a video tape of children working in a Bangladeshi factory that made Wal-Mart shirt under contract. On the same set of reasoning, the Wal-Mart ceased to sign any contract.

Harkin's Bill

The American department of labour investigated into 19 countries who supply goods to America and where 46m children are reported to be working in those countries' factories. It noticed that in South Asia (including India), "where about half of all these children live, children were working 14-hours days in crowded factories and unsafe conditions." Senator Tom Harkin, since then, intro-

duced a bill to ban American imports from those countries and that bill visibly terrorised American firms who, unnerved by the future consequences, began to stop supplies of products. Adding grist to the mill, the celebrated Economist argues, "ethical funds such as NPI and Franklin Research now

thrown out of factories because suppliers feared losing their business if they keep the children on." The same report says, "the majority of these children, because of penury, have been forced to turn to prostitution or other industries like welding where conditions pose far greater risk to them." This is,

economic assets for millions of poor families who tend to groan under abject poverty. The pervasive poverty forces these families to be lured by the most urgent need, income — at the expense of educating their children. Families can only afford to be pro-education if, side by side, children could be offered employment opportunities.

Thus, when economic imperatives are so preponderant, the laid-off children might end up in prostitution or in more dangerous jobs than going into schools and if that continues unabated the cost of ethics and human rights might turn out to be lavish. Therefore, one needs to find complimentary routes to the solution of child labour either in Bangladesh or elsewhere.

Way Outs

One possible way out could be that consumers in western countries should be ready to pay extra bucks for the enhanced costs following the replacement of child labour by adults. It should be mentioned here that the so called comparative cost advantage emanate from low priced child labour. What many of us do not know, perhaps, is that, allegedly, the retailers

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



want firms they invest in to put human rights into their corporate ethic. The leading retailing issue, of late, is assumed to be human rights. Human rights are now tagged with price in retail shops.

Costly Ethics

Needless to mention, perhaps, that millions of children who eked out a living from working in industries, such as in garments, are thrown off the job. An Oxfam investigator reports that "between 1993 and 1994, around 30,000 to 50,000 children working in textiles firms in Bangladesh were

perhaps, the tip of the iceberg and many more children could be found involved in some other income earning opportunities which are, no less unethical.

No reasonable person on earth can, possibly, support the use of child labour. Enhanced human sufferings apart, use of child labour deprives children of education, and thus ensures that they would continue to be in darkness as their parents were. However, the economics of child labour, that attract producers to pool child labour is worth consideration. Children are eco-

Only Force Against the Serbs will Solve the Balkan Crisis

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Events of the last few days should have convinced President Clinton that the best way to shorten the war in the Balkans without using American ground troops was not to veto the Senate and House Bills requiring him to lift the arms embargo, but to ensure that the Bosnians have arms of the same quality as the Croats.

CROATIA'S recent successful blitzkrieg in the Krajina region should lay to rest some fallacies perpetuated by Britain and France for inaction in the Balkans.

First, that when the principals fight, the UN peacekeepers will be in mortal danger. In Krajina, the Croats and Serbs carefully pushed the peacekeepers out of the way before squaring off. Second, only negotiations will bring peace to the Balkans. The Croats gave negotiations four years, before recovering most of their lost territory from the Serbs in less than three days, through military means. Third, lifting the arms embargo on Bosnia will escalate the war and result in more killing. The onslaught by well armed Croats have resulted in far less killing than the merciless Serb massacre of the poorly armed Bosnians at Srebrenica and Zepa. Serbs know when to run for their lives and when to bully. And although there has been some sabre rattling from Serbia and Russia, no outside power has entered the war. And it was not UN and NATO's bluster, but military action by Croatia and Bosnia, that finally, after four years relieved the pressure on Bihac.

While one must feel a measure of sympathy for the Croatian Serb civilians fleeing

the Krajina region for Serb-held Bosnia, it has to be stressed that the Croatian army left wide corridors open for those who wanted to leave Krajina safely. The only two exits out of Serb-occupied Srebrenica and Zepa read, "Rape" and "Execution."

It was amusing to hear Carl Bildt, the principal European Union negotiator for the Balkans compare Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, who is merely attempting to recover Croatian territory forcibly taken by the Serbs, with Milan Martić, the Croatian Serb who has been charged by the United Nations international war crimes tribunal in the Hague for crimes against humanity. Next time Mr Bildt visits President of Serbia Milosevic in Belgrade, he must insist that Milosevic hand over Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladic, a frequent visitor to Belgrade, to the international war crimes tribunal where he has been charged with crimes against humanity, before lifting of sanctions against Serbia can be considered. The Balkan war has been prolonged needlessly by

the attempt of apostles of appeasement, such as Mr Bildt and Lord Owen, to deliver Bosnia to Serbia.

President Clinton makes a colossal mistake as he vetoes the Senate and House Bills urging him to unilaterally lift the illegal arms embargo on the Bosnians. Not only he has bailed out the Europeans and their failed Bosnia policy, the President and his administration, not the Congress, will have to shoulder the entire responsibility should more catastrophes befall the hapless Bosnians, because of lack of arms to defend themselves.

Thus far, the Europeans have played the Clinton administration flawlessly. Every time the US Congress was about to act on the arms embargo issue, they would rush senior officials to Washington to beseech Senators, and Congressmen and Congresswomen not to act, arguing that they, the Europeans, had better plans to contain the Serbs. As soon as the Congress deferred, they were happy to sit back and maintain the status quo.

which is the slow strangulation of Bosnia. As the over-running of Srebrenica and Zepa showed, the Europeans had no plans whatsoever to counter the Serbs. Yet, rape of Bosnian women and massacre of children in Srebrenica notwithstanding, the Europeans are as determined as ever to keep the Bosnians at a weapon's disadvantage.

The stated reason for the rapid reaction force, created in the aftermath of taking of UN peacekeepers as hostages by the Serbs in May, is only to protect the peacekeepers.

not the Bosnian civilians, who continue to be shelled and maimed mercilessly by heavy Serbian weapons in the so-called "safe havens" of Sarajevo and Bihac, with the UN peacekeepers looking on. Krajina operation makes it clear that cajoling does not work with the Serbs, force does!

Even if one is to take the UN and NATO's promise of protecting the remaining four "safe havens" seriously, in spite of such promises not being kept at Srebrenica and Zepa, these constitute only a

tiny fraction of the territory

under the Bosnian govern-

ment control. Who is going

to protect the Bosnian civilian

men, women and children

from the Serbian artillery in

95 per cent of Bosnia the UN

and NATO have pledged not

to protect?

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OPINION

"... A Stitch In Time": A Motorist's Point of View

Ashraf Matin

As a motorist who has to tackle the streets of Dhaka on a daily basis, I was keenly interested by the article which appeared under the "Opinion" column in The Daily Star on the 19th of July. I couldn't but agree when Mr A R Choudhury, the writer of the piece, says: "...at red signal, vehicles get clustered slowly forming a tangle of heterogeneous mass..." which eventually slows down the flow and chokes the City's arteries. Mr Choudhury has suggested the use of Roundabouts — "Traffic Circle" in American English — which he prefers to call Go-Round-Traffic-Islet (GRTI).

The use of Roundabouts in the city's intersections is all very well if some pre-conditions are met: (A) Basic knowledge of traffic rules, in particular, understanding of the flow-control mechanism of the roundabout — which I am sorry to say I find absolutely lacking in 99.99% of the drivers on our streets; and (B) adequate size of the roundabout in a particular intersection which is able to cater to its normal traffic flow.

Now, I am no expert on urban planning but, as a victim/user of the system, I will attempt to explain what I have just mentioned, along with a few suggestions of my own.

AA. The safe use of roundabouts pre-supposes the acknowledgement of the right-of-way of the vehicle on the roundabout by the vehicle coming in to join the roundabout. I'll try to make it clear with an example: Suppose at a four-street intersection with a roundabout, a vehicle coming from the East road wants to go to the North road, it will have to slow down/stop at the end of the East road and check to see that there isn't any oncoming traffic on its right on the roundabout, and only then can this vehicle proceed towards the roundabout. Once this vehicle starts following the curvature of the roundabout, the right-of-way belongs to this vehicle over others trying to join in from the South and West roads. At the exit to the North road the vehicle will show indication (left indicator lights) and move on to the North road without hindrance. At the same time the vehicle waiting to join in from the North

road can do so because our East-to-North vehicle has already indicated its intention of leaving the roundabout. This system of traffic regulation is in extensive use in the United Kingdom, where I had the opportunity to observe this system at work as an interested outsider. Needless to say that the motorists there are well-tutored in traffic rules and the absence of cycle-rickshaws, "Mishuks" (strange species of public transport discovered so far) and freely roaming pedestrians on the crossroads (always trying to follow the shortest route) can only make for safer and better management of traffic. Here, the system (if you can call it that) is an entirely different ball game as the motorist who slaloms through Dhaka traffic knows only too well.

BB. Now we come to the second part of the problem, viz. the size of the roundabouts. As we may recall, most of the roundabouts existing in Dhaka today used to be larger in diameter, traffic volume also used to be significantly less — thus the roundabouts served their purpose satisfactorily. However, in recent times, due to the widening of the roads and/or the whims of the city fathers the size of many roundabouts has shrunk to the extent of negating their raison d'être. As can be inferred from the discussion in "AA", the size of a roundabout should be such as to be able to handle the requisite number of vehicles in order to maintain a smooth flow through a particular intersection — in short, the bigger the diameter of a roundabout, the better — which, I am afraid, under present circumstances is impractical.

Mr Choudhury has rightly stated: "It is a reality that the rickshaws will stay on the Dhaka streets" — probably the rickshaw will outlive cockroaches. But still we have to devise ways of keeping the traffic moving — even creeping flow is better than absolute gridlock, which so often happens in various parts of the city. It is towards this end that I venture a few suggestions of my own, which I feel may be implemented without additional disruption or massive expenditure.

1. The traffic policemen

managing the busy inter-

sections should have the facility to manually over-ride the automatic light signals in order to maintain the flow, when the situation so warrants. In fact they have been doing so (using hand signals) while tackling rush-hour traffic — but this alongwith the automatic lights sometimes only adds to the confusion.

2. Attempting to instruct the lacs of rickshaw pullers of Dhaka on traffic rules would be a futile exercise, and to expect them to obey those rules would be moronic. Therefore, only strong-willed traffic policemen are our only hope. I suggest that the traffic constables be given significantly more powers to enforce the rules. The traffic constables should be given low-power radios to communicate amongst themselves in a busy intersection — so that they know what's going on and can control the traffic accordingly. It there's a transgressor they can radio the guys manning the next point so that the violator can be caught.

3. Refrain from creating any more nightmares like the utterly confusing Sonargaon roundabout at Kawan Bazar, where absolutely no thought has been given to how the traffic would merge from five different thoroughfares. Still, the traffic moves only because the police are doing a commendable job.

4. There are a hundred other traffic congestion problems which can be solved if the will is there: illegal parking, illegal occupation of streets, street corners being used as bus stops and thus encouraging rickshaws, "Mishuks", autorickshaws and their prospective customers to clog the intersection, creating a bottleneck and ultimately a jam.

5. I have one final suggestion in view of all this: The big shots of our country — senior bureaucrats, senior military officers, senior police officers, ministers, politicians and CIPs should at least once a month attempt to drive to their places of work and back during the rush hour on their own and without their respective chauffeurs and only then will they be able to grasp the flaws in our road planning system and hopefully also get ideas for possible remedies.

To the Editor...

Punishment for parents!

Sir, A news item published in your esteemed daily on 7.8.95 under the above caption reported that a law in Singapore is going to be enacted to make parents failing to discipline their school-going children liable to court action. The Education Ministry and schools would be allowed to take action against parents who refuse to carry out their duties as disciplinarians for children at home.

We think such law should be enacted in our country too. In our days we used to go to school at 10 am or so. After school hours we went to playground and returned home before evening. And then got ready on the table for studies. We could not go out from home after evening for the control of parents/guardians.

Nowadays most of the school-going children remain busy in gossiping instead of playing. They enjoy VCR at night and some of them even involve in anti-social activities. They hardly care their guardians and elderly people. The parents/guardians also do not or cannot take care of their children. Often, reportedly, parents allow the children who can earn money at any cost to do and undo whatever they like. Sometimes some guardians overlook their anti-social activities.

But it should be noted that character is built up stronger in school days and it must. This will enable them not to be deviated from the just path. The parents should be more careful to look into the activities of their school-going children. So enactment of such law is necessary nowadays and it should be enacted without further delay.

A M Kais Choudhury
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Health Complex

Sir, Sattaria Health Complex is the only hospital in this thana. But it is beset with manifold problems causing untold suffering to the patients.

Patients from far-flung areas of the thana come to the hospital in the hope of better treatment but they have to go back disappointed as, in the first place, they find no scope of admission to the hospital because of the shortage of beds.

The hospital has only 31 beds — 16 for males and the rest for the females. But it is found from the hospital register that every day 40 to 45 patients are treated there on an average. The excess patients, out of seat capacity, are found lying on the floor or verandah and the space between the beds.

Toilets are not cleaned regularly and these emit bad smell vitiating the whole atmosphere of the hospital. Bed sheets, pillow covers and mosquito nets that are supplied to the allottees of the beds are found dirty.

Besides, the foods supplied to the patients are below standard; moreover the drinking water supplied contains high proportion of iron often causing intestinal trouble among the patients.

Here only outdoor patients get some medicines, but the patients admitted do not get any medicine from the hospital. They have to purchase the medicines from the market often at an exorbitant price.

Most of the patients seeking operation are refused even the labour patients, and are advised to take admission elsewhere — the district hospital or clinics.

The hospital campus is not so peaceful either. There is a minibus terminal just off the main gate of the hospital. It remains always crowded and noisy. Cows and goats move into the hospital compound in the day time. At night dogs

come barking. And during the loadshedding time, the atmosphere simply turns to be ghastly not to speak of the extreme inconvenience of the ailing human beings.

We would only request the proper authority to please solve these problems for the sake of humanity.

M Khan
Sattaria, Manikganj

The streets of Dhaka

Sir, As a layman and long time resident of Dhaka, I have read with much interest the recommendations of a panel of enlightened technocrats on the streets of Dhaka published in your paper on 4th August 1995.

The suggestions are all praiseworthy especially ideas to construct new roads, mass transit system, flyovers etc. but what strikes me as odd is that the panel has taken for granted the existing railway line going from Khilkhet to Kamalapur station having no less than twelve railway crossings inside the city which create immense traffic jams and also delay to passengers who need to catch flights at ZIA.

In my view, a new railway track should be laid from near Khilkhet going east of Joar Shahara, Baridhara, Bhatara, Badda etc on to Kamalapur. This will involve a detour of about 10-12 KM. This track can be laid running parallel to the proposed Tongi, Jatrabari, Dhaka Bypass Road. Where there are large water masses and marshy lands, we can have the tracks laid on concrete pillars.

An aerial view of the route will give a good idea as to what is the involvement and feasibility. Let us think big and move our capital city Dhaka into the 21st century.

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