For All These Years, Computerization Has Been A Myth
(And It Continues To Be So)

by Sayeed Ahmed

ALTHOUGH Bangladesh is a late entrant (!) into the computer age, there seems to be much enthusiasm in adopting this technology by government and other agencies. Several departments of the government have already installed PCs for secretarial work and nicely formated laser-printed letters, memos and reports are being produced. One can easily see the benefits of having computers in the office and feel upbeat about it.

Attempts are being made to introduce computers also for other types of activities, not all of which are as computer-ready as that of producing letters and reports. But surprisingly enough, the approach taken for introduc-

ing computers has been the same irrespective of their intended use. In most cases, the concerned agency (government and others alike) gets a specification of computer hardware which is used to float a tender.

The specification includes type and number of PCs and their detailed configuration, number and type of printers, digitizers, plotters and scanners along with airconditioners, furniture and all relevant or irrelevant items that can be accommodated within the allocated budget. Sometimes it includes training from the supplier of the computer.

With all these items, the specification looks very technical and complete in all respects. It goes for bidding and after the required for-

malities are performed one vendor is selected for supply of the specified items. The computers finally arrive. And up to this point everything appears to be all right.

Immediately after having the equipment installed, however, the management of the organization starts expecting results. The pressure mounts on the middle level staff who are dealing directly with the operation of the equipment and production of anticipated outputs. They are the ones who, with assistance from some junior level staff, undergo the cumbersome and tedious process of transferring all paper data and information to computer formats (e.g. digitizing, data entry etc).

The line of command, responsibility, assignment, working procedure remaining totally unchanged, it takes them a considerable amount of effort to make the high ups understand that computers don't do anything automatically. At the same time, they start feeling the need for organizational development, training and restructuring for making effec-

tive use of the computer hardware and software they have already acquired.

There are two aspects to this issue: the equipment and software may turn out to be inadequate to serve the purposes of the organization in question; the personnel on whom new responsibilities are assigned may not always qualified enough to carry them out. It may very well lead to a situation where nobody will know who is doing what (maybe one is too burdened and another is doing practically nothing). Two groups of people might be doing the same thing resulting in duplication of effort.

For large projects with big budgets, the consequence of taking such an approach can be even more disastrous. The most classical example of this is perhaps the Election Commission's endeavour for computerization of voters list and ID card printing which has been rightly pointed out recently by Dr M Kaykobad of BUET (The Daily Star, 5 July 1995).

It is difficult for an outsider to figure out what the EC's present approach is but apparently they have realized the complexity of the project and revised thoroughly their original plan. However, EC are not the only ones who have taken similar paths in computerization of their respective organizations. The results obtained in most cases can be easily guessed: the computers are severely under-utilized, workload on the personnel is not reduced as anticipated and there is no increase in the efficiency of the organization concerned.

Any observant citizen of the country would find no reason for such an unprofessional approach towards computerization projects. Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) was formed by the government willing to introduce computers in their respective organizations.

Besides, there are several academic institutions, commercial organizations and individual professionals in the relevant areas. All of them are equipped to provide the required systems analysis, design and supervision for implementation of any such project. They can be approached for the necessary advisory services for computerization projects, not only by the government agencies but also by private organizations.

When the request for such services are made, an individual or a team may be assigned who is fully conversant with the technological options available, and the future trend in the market, and who has adequate experience of working on similar projects. With such competence, much better results are sure to be obtained from the project.

The recommended steps for acquisition of a computerized system are listed in the box. It is to be mentioned here that the steps listed in the table are general and may be modified depending on the type and nature of a project. The required activities may be performed either by in-house staff (if such expertise is available) or by some other agency or person having required expertise or by a combination of the two.

However, the most important issue is whether the management understands the organizational impacts of computerization and is committed to making the necessary changes. Without these, computerization will continue to be a myth and public money will continue to be wasted.

Recommended steps for acquisition of a computerized system

Stage 1: Analysis of Requirements

1. Definitions of objectives
 a. Review overall objectives of the organization
 b. Develop objectives of computerization

2. User requirements analysis
 a. Assess existing information, process and data
 b. Identify users
 c. Define information products
 d. Analyze data requirements
 e. Estimate workloads and required performance

3. Preliminary design
 a. Develop preliminary functional specifications
 b. Develop preliminary system models
 c. Survey the market for potential system

4. Cost-benefit analysis
 a. Estimate all costs
 b. Identify all benefits
 c. Estimate economic value of quantifiable benefits
 d. Assess impacts on organization and staff
 e. Assess risks
 f. Analyze results

5. Pilot study
 a. Design the pilot study
 b. Select a pilot system
 c. Acquire pilot data
 d. Produce pilot products
 e. Analyze results

Stage 2: Specification of requirements

6. Final design
 a. Finalize functional specifications
 b. Finalize performance specifications
 c. Specify constraints
 d. Specify generic system requirements

7. Request for proposals
 a. Specify contractual requirements

 h. Specify evaluation methodology

Stage 3: Evaluation of alternatives

8. Shortlisting
 a. Perform preliminary evaluation of proposals
 b. Score functional requirements
 c. Prepare initial shortlist

9. Benchmark testing
 a. Design the benchmark
 b. Develop the benchmark data and documentation
 c. Execute the benchmark
 d. Analyze results

10. Cost-effectiveness evaluation
 a. Analyze costs for each configuration
 b. Compute benefit-cost ratios
 c. Analyze results

Stage 4: Implementation of system

11. Implementation plan
 a. Identify priorities
 b. Define and schedule tasks
 c. Develop a resource budget and management plan

12. Contract
 a. Negotiate general and special contractual conditions

13. Acceptance testing
 a. Install the system
 b. Test functionality
 c. Test performance
 d. Test reliability

14. Implementation
 a. Train users of the system
 b. Perform initial data capture and product development
 c. Continue performance monitoring

The Mainsprings of Laughter

by HR Luthra

IT is amazing the ease with which those who have never been anywhere near a battle-front, and hope inside their hearts will never have to in future, talk about putting this, that or the other on a war footing. A man dissatisfied with the standard of teaching at the school, where his child is studying, does not think twice before shooting off a 'letter to the editor' urging that the efforts to reform the education system should be placed on a war footing forthwith.

One imagines that something similar must have provoked an otherwise mild-mannered don at one of the universities in the Punjab, unhappy about the prevailing quality of light writing some years ago, to beseech all those whom it may concern, to step in and put humour on a war footing.

It is difficult to say whether what followed at another university in northern India had anything to do with the above drastic proposal. There, a post-graduate student took the matter seriously and started research work on the history and development of humour in ancient India. He got a Phd for his efforts. Encouraged by this recognition, he pursued this subject further for three more years, extending the scope of his investigations to medieval and modern India. This time he had a Doctorate of Literature conferred on him. I happened to meet the man at a gathering last year, and was pained to find him laughing at his own jokes.

About that D Litt business, it must regretfully be mentioned that although humour is supposed to be communicable and infectious, the virus did not spread to other seats of learning in India. Humour has not yet been recognised by the University Grants Commission as an approved 'discipline' for higher education; not even as an 'optional' subject for School Leaving Certificate examinations. No big industrial house has so far endowed a Chair of Humour at any university, despite the fact that the donation made would have been tax deductable.

That humour is subversive, and its uncontrolled dissemination can have dangerous consequences, has long been recognised in authoritarian regimes and times. The story is told of a Mughal ruler who was so stern in temperament, and so averse to humour, that anyone in his realm who dared to crack a joke did so at his own risk. In desperation, the irreverent fun-lovers in his capital took out a mock funeral procession, and passed below his window. The king, looking down from his balcony, asked: 'Whose coffin is that?' The pall bearers replied: "Of humour, Your Majesty." The king thereupon commanded them: "Make sure to bury it so deep that it never stalks the earth again."

Some other kings in our history have been different. Akbar, for example. He elevated Raja Birbal, the irrepressible raconteur and practical joker to his Court, designating him as one of the Nine Jewels ('nava-ratna'). In contemporary terms it was equivalent to holding a Cabinet rank, without any specific portfolio. Birbal is credited with cracking hundreds of jokes, as the central figure in many anecdotes. I shall relate only one, which is perhaps not very widely known. Akbar once asked Birbal to cite an instance where anyone committing a foolish act might offer an excuse which would be worse than even the original misdemeanor. Birbal remained deep in thought for a moment, and then stretching his arm, placed his hand, palms downwards, intimately on the emperor's thigh. "What rudeness is this, Birbal, an unpardonable liberty." Birbal, thereupon stood up, bowed low, and said, "A thousand apologies, sir, I thought it was the empress sitting next to me."

Unfortunately history knows of few humorists gifted with such a nimble wit, or kings as appreciative as Akbar. Many rulers were veritable tyrants, and being a court jester in their Durbar must have been a hazardous occupation. The king would suddenly order his wazir to send for the jester straight-

away. 'Tell him that we are tired and sad, and want to be amused. Also, warn him that if he fails to make us roar with laughter, his head would be chopped off."

In India the humorist suffers several handicaps which his counterpart in the west has mercifully not to contend with. There are too many sacred cows around. This, I must hurry to say by way of explanation, is an imported English idiom, and no interpretation of it in literal swadeshi terms need to be made. We have altogether too many themes that cannot be touched; too many religions, sects and cults, castes and sub-castes, languages and dialects, gods, saints, holy places, ancient heroes whose stature grows with every anniversary or centenary, too many leaders, past and present, whose deeds cannot be recounted except in respectful terms because their followers and admirers become

more vocal with every passing year. Our newspapers are lucky enough in that over the years their cartoonists, writers of 'middles', and columnists have acquired a special licence and a degree of immunity, but even they have to tread with caution, and know where to draw the line when certain over-sensitive and self-important personages are involved. Politicians may crack jokes against their opponents (seldom against themselves) in Parliament, but these are regarded as privileged utterances on which any light-hearted comments could attract the provisions of the 'contempt' rule.

In every country there are 'types' and places associated with ignoramuses as figures of fun. In the Punjab of old, the weaver ('joolaha') was the butt of many jokes (much as the 'penny pinching' Scotsmen were in UK, and the Carabinerie, the police

chaps in Italy). But the weaver is now on the prohibited list because of political overtones and the tug of war for backward class votes. In the State of Uttar Pradesh in North India, there is a certain town traditionally synonymous with people of very low IQ. I would rather not name it even lightheartedly for fear of being put on someone's hit list.

While resort to war footing is regarded as an extreme measure to be taken only in an emergency, protagonists of light writing have of late taken some alternative steps to maximise the output of that commodity, such as holding seminars, symposia and 'workshops' to help budding humorists. It was quite an event when some years ago an All India Humour Conference was held at Hyderabad. Later, the organisers were able to rope in a few delegates from abroad also, and thus became legitimately entitled to add the word 'international' in their letter-heads. An eye-witness has told me that when any 'paper' was read by a participating humorist, it made good practical sense for the others to laugh at the jokes told. This ensured that when it was their turn to go on the rostrum, they would be paid the same compliment.

One wishes success to all those who take it upon themselves to amuse us, because there is today altogether too much seriousness in India, as elsewhere. It is not often that one gets to hear the sound of uninhibited laughter, and of people enjoying themselves. The problems of day to day living are too much with us. The pace of life, and the race for survival tells on everybody. Even in villages where there used to be leisure and healthy earthy humour, the deadening hand of struggle for existence and socio-political rivalries cast their shadow. Where, one would like to know, are the bhands, the roving entertainers of old, who used to go from village to village, tilting lances at all and sundry, not excluding the officials? They took particular delight in settling scores with the most dreaded of the lot, the police

inspector, the 'thanedar sahab', in charge of the local lock-up.

One longs for the re-emergence of humour to ease the prevailing tensions of existence. To quote a limerick by an anonymous poet:
No matter how grouchy you are feeling,
You'll find the smile more or less healing.
It grows in a wreath
All round the front teeth,
Thus preserving the face from congealing.

One would like our humorists, in search of authentic material, to look around and observe life closely in all its variety, its light and shade, misery and happiness, human weaknesses and motivations of behaviour. Humour is best when it stems from an 'honest obliquity of thought', is free from malice, and cuts sharp and clean instead of hacking with a blunt instrument. Also, as Max Beerbohm, himself a distinguished practitioner of this art, said, "Humour undiluted is the most depressing of all phenomenon. Humour must have its background of seriousness. Without this contrast there comes none of that incongruity which is the mainspring of laughter."

If the war footing does not work, perhaps a commercial footing might. In this respect, one thinks naturally of the Americans. I recall that long years ago when I once went to meet a businessman friend quite early in the morning, I was pleasantly surprised to hear peals of laughter emanating from his bed-room. He explained that it was from a gramophone record (made in USA), three minutes on each side. On the label the manufacturers had advised the person playing the disc, to join in heartily himself also. My friend said, "I find it great fun; a very good way to start the day, with all the gruelling hours at the office ahead."

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Courtesy — India Perspective

GO-NGO Relations

by Mahmood Aminul Islam

THE term NGO which stands for non-government organisation and usually formed for non-profit making purposes, came into use after independence in 1971. The close parallel to NGOs, as we can recall, are charitable institutions like dispensaries, schools and public libraries run by philanthropists as well as social action and cultural groups run on voluntary basis. These institutions date back to the British days.

The independence brought with it the urgent task of providing relief and rehabilitating thousands of returnees who took shelter in India during the War of Liberation, and rebuilding the war ravaged infrastructure and economy on a top priority basis. It was clear that the government did not have the capacity or resources to tackle the huge problem of rehabilitation and reconstruction single handedly. This led to the spontaneous formation of NGOs which extended helping hand to the government. Different donor countries and agencies were found ready to fund the NGO activities within the knowledge and approval of the government.

This charity and welfare orientation of NGO activities continued till 1974. Thereafter, the NGOs were getting involved in various development activities with the objective of alleviating poverty of the rural and urban poor. Besides, they started providing various services ranging from training, credit programme mainly for income generation, legal aid, literacy and non-formal education, and health and family planning.

With all the involvement of the two in developmental activities, a sense of real partnership between the government and the NGOs for achieving the common development objectives should have grown. But this does not seem to be happening, although it must be admitted that GO-NGO collaboration in relief work and providing services like health and family planing, literacy and credit have had a history of success.

At this point, we may examine what are the known impediments standing in the way of development of closer GO-NGO complementarity of relations for the overall development of the country. While, on the one hand, the government appreciates the importance of NGO participation in national development, their participation has, nonetheless, been made easier. NGOs have to be registered under the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (Registration and control) Ordinance of 1961, and in addition under the Foreign Donation (Voluntary Activities) Registration Ordinance of 1978 if they are to operate with foreign grants and donations. The regulatory powers under the second ordinance is exercised by the NGO Bureau in the Prime Minister's Secretariat. The Bureau has to be approached for registration and obtaining approval of all project related expenditures against foreign funding. For projects continuing beyond one year, the Bureau has to approve yearly release of fund. Observance of these formalities takes time, often beyond the allowable time

limit of 45 days for registration and 14 days for fund release.

The regulatory powers are thought necessary to guard against misuse of fund by the NGOs as well as prevent them from indulging in any undesirable activities. But even after all these restrictions, the government does not feel secure about the intention and activities of the NGOs, taken as a whole. Despite two decades of operation, there are NGOs which fall suspect on the questions of transparency and accountability. Some of them are run without any formal organisational structure and a sound personnel policy, do not follow modern management system of effective planning and intervention, and lack a democratically instituted governing board/executive committee which permits participatory planning and decision making. There are NGOs which show a tendency not to collaborate with one another in exchanging programme experience and resources for their mutual benefit.

On behalf of the NGOs it must be said that inspite of bearing with all the regulatory requirements, they feel that they do not always get a fair deal from the government side. For example, in a programme jointly implemented by a government agency and selected NGOs, the latter are treated as just implementors (i e outsiders) with very little or no involvement in the planning of programme objectives and operational strategies. Moreover, the terms and conditions which bind the NGOs in executing such a programme restrict their operational flexibility and curb their initiative.

The lack of the desired level of interaction between the government and NGOs often results in the submission of project proposals (by NGOs) which may not correspond with the sectoral or spatial priority as given in the national plan. I am told that in the Philippines the government determines the above which the interested NGOs comply.

An idea of the extent of NGO participation in national development can be had from the fact that in FY 1994-95, 919 NGOs were engaged in executing 579 projects at an estimated cost of over Tk 1762 crore (over US$440 million), as gathered from the NGO Bureau. Besides, many NGOs are implementing government sponsored programme in partnership.
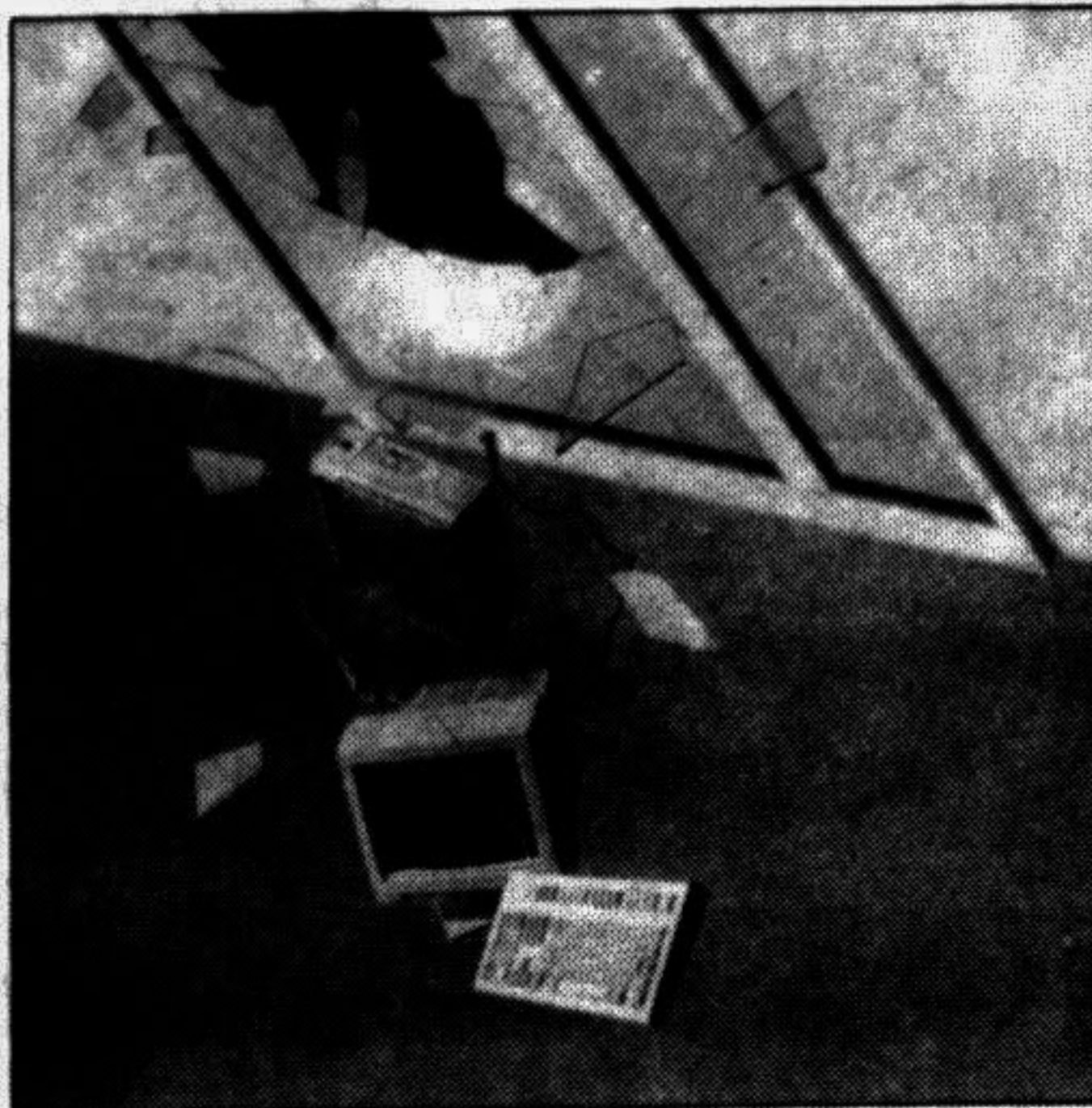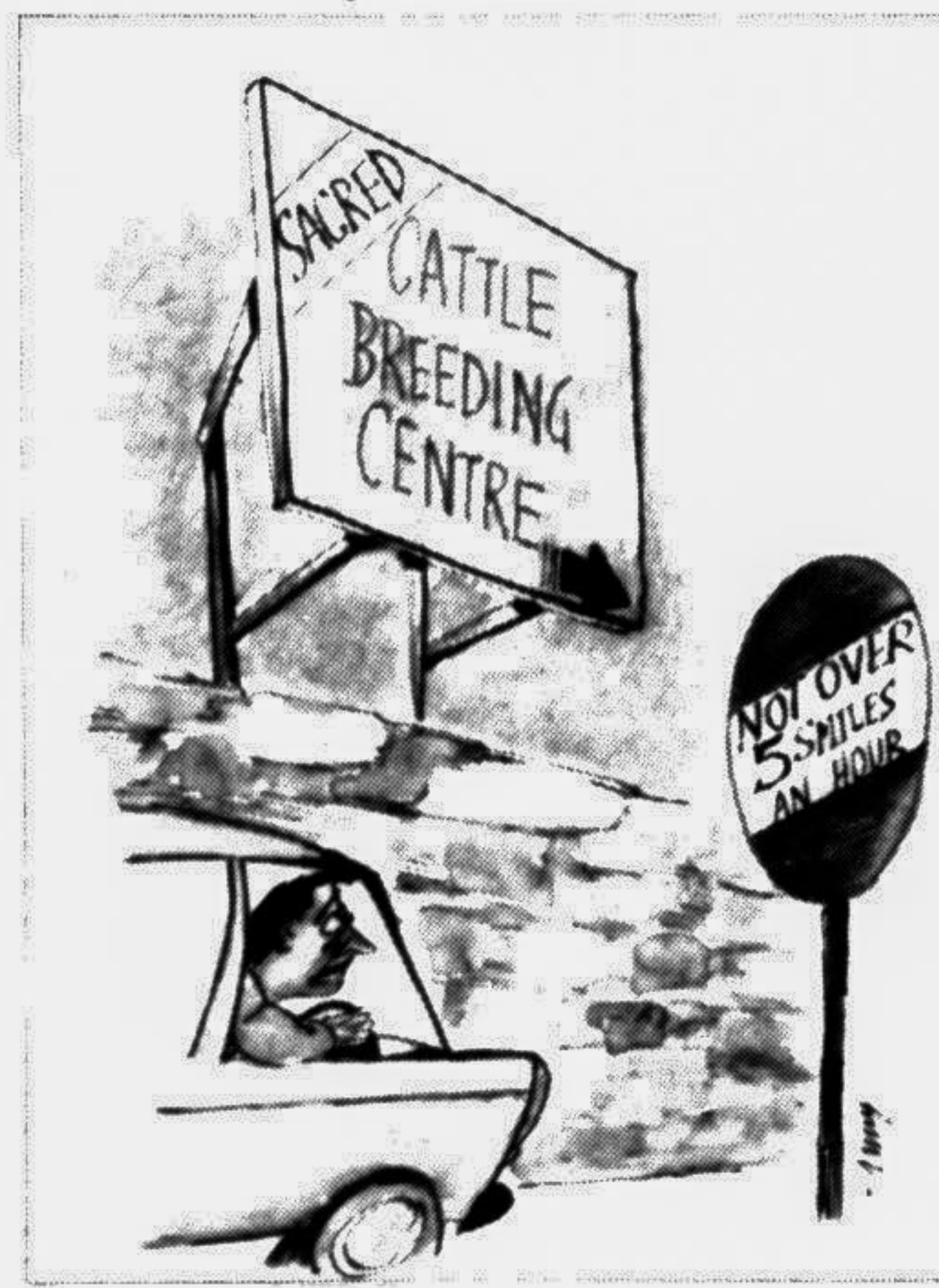
With the above substantial involvement of NGOs in development activities, it is apparent that the government and the NGOs need each other and work together to improve the quality and coverage of services to people. There cannot be any conflict of interest, if this objective is understood by both the parties.

It is, therefore, essential to make determined efforts to develop more cordial GO-NGO relations in the best interest of national development.

[The writer, a retired additional secretary to the government, heads a development NGO and a non-profit company devoted to removal of illiteracy]

Suggestions to Improve GO-NGO Relations

The GO-NGO relations are guided by government notification issued by the PM's secretariate in July 1993. The provisions in the notification may be reviewed for any policy change that may be warranted in the light of past experience. The review should aim at giving the NGOs a sense of belonging and make them more responsible. A bi-annual tripartite meeting between the government (NGO Bureau and concerned Ministries/Divisions), donors, and NGO representatives will greatly facilitate this exercise.

2. Development projects submitted by the NGOs (to NGO Bureau) are sent to the concerned Ministries/Divisions for their opinion causing unnecessary delay. This may be avoided if a mandatory provision is made to have such projects processed through them (Ministries/Divisions) on a priority basis. In cases where NGOs want to implement government sponsored programmes, their involvement should start from the planning stage. This will give them a real sense of participation.

3. For the above reason, the Bureau may encourage the NGOs to form into groups according to their field of interest (sector/sub-sector) and mode of operation including funding arrangements. Each group may select its representative who would take up with the Bureau any matter of mutual concern.

4. The need for systematic monitoring of over 900 NGOs working in different fields and in different areas is keenly felt. The NGO Bureau should be enable to introduce (computerised) MIS to assess the programme performance of each NGO in terms of accountability, transparency and effectiveness.

5. A sound personnel policy is vital for good administration. The NGO not having any, should be encouraged to frame their own personnel policy so that each of them can be run more efficiently.

6. Some vested interest groups feel threatened at the growing influence of the NGOs active in providing services and investing human dignity to the poorer sections of people and women, and have, in the past, made attempts to vandalize the good work being done by the NGOs. These anti-people activities have to be firmly dealt with to inspire confidence both in the NGOs and their beneficiaries alike.