

## Voters' Nightmare

The Constitution obliges us to go for the election. The mainstream opposition parties urge us to foil it. What should we, the voters, do? The second 'democratic' election after the fall of autocracy would have marked a more secured stride towards accountable government, a maturing of our representative institutions, a growing up process for our members of parliament, a more assertive voice of the public at large. On the contrary, what we face is uncertainty, prospect of violence and further division between the political parties, whose consequences are likely to go far beyond the next election.

The challenge of the moment is how to navigate out of this mess without harming the nation and the political process too much. While we can blame the Election Commission for many shortcomings, we cannot, in all fairness, blame it for going ahead with the elections. We urge the opposition to examine as to what will happen if no election is held. With the expiry of 90 days, if no new elected government is ready to assume power, there will be a serious constitutional vacuum in which the country will be without a legitimate government, a consequence which is desired by no one, including, we believe, the opposition.

We believe that as a legal requirement elections must be held. We also believe that the opposition has the right to boycott the elections as a show of protest and to express its no-confidence in it. However, we do not believe that anybody or party has any right to prevent any voter from participating in the elections, if he or she should choose to do so. Therefore while the opposition should, and must, devote its total energy to convince the people to boycott this election, it should in no way intimidate, coerce or force people to follow its wish. In fact a voluntary boycott will go much further in undermining the outcome of this largely one party affair, than if the boycott is imposed. Opposition would do well to remember this point.

## Manpower Export

At the outset Malaysia was very open about recruiting manpower from Bangladesh. Then our own corrupt practices and inept handling of the process led to refusal by Malaysia to take any more of our labour force. Diplomatic fence mending, and the assurance that our government will handle things on our end led to an agreement that Malaysia will take an additional 70,000 workers. Requisition of 2,980 workers is already with us. But the government body responsible for processing this — Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Ltd (BOESL) — is not moving fast enough.

Just as we cannot allow unscrupulous businessmen to play with the destiny of our poor people and malign the image of the country by sending out illegal workers, so also we cannot allow bureaucratic bungling to force us to lose this lucrative earning opportunity for our people. Something needs to be done immediately.

In a recent review meeting of the concerned ministry, it was observed that as a government body BOESL had some inherent disadvantage. While this observation may be true to some extent, it can be immediately remedied through a closer cooperation between the government and the private manpower export agencies. We also feel that BOESL's role and terms of reference has not been clearly spelt out by the ministry. This is causing a lot of confusion. What is needed is seriousness on the part of Labour and Manpower Ministry to solve this problem. It should immediately clarify its TOR and also give proper leadership in bringing about greater cooperation between BOESL and the private manpower agencies.

## Endless Queue at JNC

Jagannath College is selling forms for students intending to enrol for the honours first year classes. We say college advisedly for these students would take the National University courses there and also take their final examinations with that university and not Jagannath University. The degree they would or would not get is National University's. The Jagannath College, one of our major institutions of the kind with enviable traditions and legacies has not at all been helped by its dubious upgrading into a university.

There are now 5,175 seats at the college in that category. News reports say already 80,000 admission forms have been sold against that accommodation, and this figure would go up to 150 thousand and beyond. This is altogether a silly situation. And Jagannath is not the only college offering honours courses. Why should so many come here and not go to other places? All these degree aspirants hope to get their thing of desire rather easily, depending on the reputation of the college. Now that the college would be awarding its own degrees as a university, things should be easier still. That's why the crowding?

It is an easy guess that when there is such a demand for a chance, 1:30 for a seat, some clever people would extend helping hands in exchange of cash. Forms have reportedly become a roaring business. This is no new business but J. N. has beaten Viharunissa and other such form-business places by miles.

In the academic businesses of all kinds, students have lately been proving their mettle. If you can get hold of a form at three times its price, you don't expect to submit it all by yourself. The student leaders would condescend to take it and submit the same after you have been able to soften them by another generous helping.

**T**HE role of women in economic growth and development is widely recognised but seems hardly recorded by official statistics. Especially, in agricultural productivity gains that swept countries over the past 30 years, rarely the role of women was properly appreciated. This negligence, allegedly, sprang from the ignorance of agricultural research scientists and programme implementers who apparently seemed to turn a deaf ear to the potential contributions of women in raising farmer productivity. However, time now is ripe enough, perhaps, to give due cognisance to the contribution of women to agricultural development, their capabilities and constraints so that necessary policies and programmes could be orchestrated to assist them and thus to augment agricultural production.

The degree of the contributions of women would, nevertheless, vary across countries, regions and agro-ecological zones. Variations could also be caused in response to economic, demographic, political and other changes that seemingly influence the pattern of female participation in agricultural activities. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, a gender division of labour is reported to take place between cash and food crops. Women are said to be primarily engaged in and responsible for food or

**A** file in our government system consists of two parts, namely correspondence and notes. When sent to higher levels, it is generally presented in the form of a self-contained summary. A file serves two main purposes. On the one hand, it is the principal instrument through which decisions are arrived at and on the other, it acts as a repository of institutional memory. It is, therefore, of the highest importance that a file is disposed of both adequately as well as speedily, and then preserved properly for future use and reference. In this piece, I would like to focus on some important aspects of file disposal and preservation.

For adequate disposal of files, it is imperative that in the note sheet portion, and finally in the self-contained summary, essential facts and figures are stated accurately and all practicable options are spelled out precisely, with specific recommendations and their rationale. In order to make the task of the decision maker easy, references to the correspondence and the highlighting of the most relevant portions are also required. However, in practice, several inadequacies are frequently encountered. Firstly, in general a large number of queries have to be made from above before all facts and options are brought together. Among other problems, this causes considerable delay in decision making through several up and down movements of the file.

Secondly, there is a tendency, deliberate or habitual, to be wishy-washy and ambiguous in the notes, so that buck passing becomes the name of the game. An extreme example is to write nothing in the file except putting one's signature there. Avoidance of responsibility or inability/refusal to apply one's mind, or both, are perhaps responsible for this kind of file disposal. Thirdly, some senior officers dictate to juniors what they should write in the note sheet. In other words, the seniors can absolve themselves of any primary responsibility should some decision be challenged subsequently. Such dictation also smells fishy particularly if corruption or nepotism is the prime motive behind a particular line of decision making. Obviously, such dictation should be resisted, and junior officers should be encouraged to state what they feel is the correct position. After all, the seniors will always have the last say and the right to overrule the recommendation of the junior officer. Of course, there should be constant communication among officers during the various stages of file disposal, but in no situation should

there be any imposition from above. In fact, before recommending anything in the file, an officer should seek information, suggestion and advice from all relevant quarters but at the end of the day, he/she should apply himself/herself to the problem and independently suggest the solution. Finally, some officers have the habit of writing lengthy notes, often bordering on verbosity. The higher decision makers do not have the time to go through it all and hence these prove to be counterproductive. However, if in an exceptional case, a lengthy note or a summary has to be written, then at least the most relevant portions should be adequately highlighted through markings.

The most important challenge in dealing with files is to ensure their speedy disposal without being hasty. This is where the Bangladesh government record is rather poor. Red tape is endemic, and unless greased or an official is induced to act by *tadbir* or some other less innocuous method, sitting on a file is the norm. The joke goes that when an officer tells you that a file is a difficult one, it means that processing it will be made difficult, unless...

1. Make queries over the telephone rather than send the file. Otherwise, the file may get misplaced or there will be delay in decision making through to-and-fro movement of the file. If the file has to be sent set a time limit for its return. Do not make one query after another. As a senior officer, you may ask any number of questions but to save time, you should ask these at one go.

2. Regularly inspect offices under your disposal thoroughly prepared. Never hide facts stated in the file from your boss even if these are embarrassing, and explain all options and recommendations contained in it. Give your personal opinion politely and fearlessly, but only if asked for. Never try to impose your views on your boss, and do not arrogate all solutions to yourself, because in the final analysis, the boss has the political judgement which you as a civil servant do not possess. A wrong decision because of your wrong handling of the file will ultimately complicate and delay implementation if not decision-making itself. Try to prevent the placement of files before your boss by "unauthorized" persons without your knowledge before you have read them. This is necessary to protect him from being pressurised into taking rash and improper decisions.

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4. Do not hurry overmuch with a file. Haste will not only affect the quality of your decision but may also ultimately force you to spending more time in disposing that file.

There were two aspects of file preservation that deserve to be particularly highlighted. Firstly, the present preservation procedure needs overhauling because it does not allow easy retrieval. In the Ministries, files are kept in the various sections, and one has to ultimately depend on one's memory to call for a certain file lying in a certain section. Perhaps, to begin with, updated computer read-outs of the headings of active and dormant files organized alphabetically and subject and section-wise should be regularly produced and distributed to all officers to serve as aide memories.

# When the Other Half Makes it Full

*It needs to be recognised that women are not only home producers but also farmers engaged in economic production in their own rights. The recognition calls for policy packages "that would minimise undermining their role and maximise their service and technology delivery."*

subistence crops while men are found involved in cash crops with a share of labour drawing from women. In many parts of Africa, according to available evidence, there are "female crops" (e.g. cassava, swamp rice, roots and tubers) and "male crops" (e.g. maize, cotton). In the region of Africa, women are reported to operate independently in their own plots farmed and managed by themselves and if not, occasionally, with the help of their children. They make their own decisions and have control over their own earnings. In addition, they also contribute labour on their husbands' plots.

The Conference of International Agricultural Economists, held in Harare in 1994, brought to the fore some of the issues above. The conference volume has one article on "Women and Agriculture" by Rekha Mehra that points to some important observations pertaining to the topic and the following deliberations are drawn from that volume.

Just look at the following statistics. According to estimates provided by some economists (e.g. Seager and Olson, Henn, Cloud etc), 46 per cent of the labour force in sub-Saharan Africa is con-

stituted by women. Women's actual participation in farm work is, however, considerably more than is reflected in region wide statistics. Surveys conducted in two villages representative of farming systems in Southern Cameroon, for example, showed that women, on average, contributed two-thirds of the weekly labour hours in agriculture. Another observa-

and unpaid) ranges from under 5 per cent in Jordan to nearly 50 per cent in Nepal. In Vanuatu, women constitute half of the total agricultural labour force.

Turning to the nature of works performed by women, one could note that, "in the rice field of India and Sri Lanka, women carry out 75 to 85 per cent of manual weed-

Nepal for example, one economist found that in HYV growing areas, "women are making 81 per cent of the decisions pertaining to seed selection, 60 per cent of these concerning the use of improved seeds and 40 per cent of decisions about fertilizer use." In rural Thailand and Philippines, women manage household budgets and are often responsible for financial decision making. Simeen Mahmood and Wahiduddin Mahmood of Bangladesh observed that "21 to 56 per cent of all wage labourers in rural Bangladesh, for example, are women. They represent from one-half to two-thirds of women from landless households."

"Women's participation in the wage labour force is, moreover, increasing in countries such as India, Pakistan and Indonesia, mostly as the result of male migration and increased landlessness, observes the conference volume.

In the absence of large-scale national and agricultural gender disaggregated income, production and consumption data, an accurate monetary valuation of the above contribution by women is hard to come by. On the other hand, the pervasive presence of unpaid family

contribution make it more difficult. Few of the available hard-done estimates should, nevertheless, be cited. For example, in some countries, women's earnings are shown to constitute a third of the expenditure on purchased food and their output represented three-quarters of subsistence food-consumption. In Egypt, 40 per cent of yearly cash income from an average size farm came from women. Agarwal (India) and Mahmood and Mahmood (Bangladesh) found that "women's earnings account for about half of household cash income in Bangladesh while in India, women farm wage labourers are often the main or even the sole income earners in landless or near landless households."

It, therefore, follows that women — the "other" half of our total population — need to be increasingly favoured by incentives, as done for men, to gear up production, especially in agriculture. It needs to be recognised that women are not only home producers but also farmers engaged in economic production in their own rights. The recognition calls for policy packages "that would minimise undermining their role and maximise their service and technology delivery." Women's access to credit facilities should further be expanded so that they themselves, like their counterparts men, can go for independent productive activities.

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



tion states "Women in Africa contribute, on average, 90 per cent of the labour force for food production, 100 per cent in food processing, 50 per cent in animal husbandry and 60 per cent in marketing." It may be mentioned here that official rates of female participation in the agricultural labour force in Asia posits a lower figure and for Latin America much lower. Empirical evidence showed that within Asia and Pacific region, estimates of women's participation in agricultural activities (paid

ing and almost all the works in transplanting rice" in Madhya Pradesh of India where researchers in the past saw no contribution of women in agriculture, half of the labour used in rice production is reported to come from women. However, unlike in Africa, women in Asia hardly go for independent works, rather, their contributions mostly originate in terms of unpaid family labour and hence tend to impart varying degrees of influence in overall decision making. Interestingly enough, in

## On File Disposal

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In this period, the exchange rate rose from 6.5 to 8.5 pesos to the dollar. Interest rates, which had approached 30 per cent in mid-September, hit 60 per cent by early November.

For the government this speculation was the result of the shortsightedness of the market with regard to the correction of problems like the 1994 current accounts deficit.

The sharp devaluation of the peso in December last year, after numerous government assurances that it would not devalue, was seen as a betrayal by investors and depositors and they have not stopped withdrawing resources from the country without any concern for the real condition of the economy. Many market analysts warn that the scars from this rapid devaluation will remain for many years.

There is no doubt that liberalisation has made the Mexican economy more vulnerable. The government already lacks instruments to control financial and trade flows as it did in the past. Political opening, on the other hand, has weakened the governing party and for the first time ever investors and Mexican citizens will have to calculate what an opposition victory would actually mean.

These changes have made Mexico a country more like the rest of the world. The present financial and political turbulence should be seen as the inevitable price of changes that Mexico would have had to undergo sooner or later. SERGIO SARMIENTO is a columnist for 12 Mexican newspapers

5. If you are in rapport with the final authority, give verbal approval in anticipation, but only on routine matters, and then obtain written postfactual approval on the file. This will save a lot of time.

6. Always use special messengers instead of the normal despatch for important file movement. In such cases, inform the recipient over the telephone and keep a photocopy of the file being sent. You should personally carry files even to your juniors, if these happen to be particularly sensitive.

7. Do not send files up if rules do not require that. This means, you have to be precisely aware of you level and the authority you have.

8. If you are the officer placing files to the boss, remember that while he has limited time and hence cannot be expected to read files from cover to cover, he would nevertheless like to know all the essential aspects. This means you should begin by introducing the subject briefly and precisely and then be prepared to answer all his queries. Failure to promptly answer his questions will mean delay in the file disposal, so come

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**Risk of life on polling day?**

Sir, It is most unfortunate that Madama Sheikh Hasina president of the Awami League and former leader of the combined opposition parties in the national parliament has advised the people not to go for voting in the ensuing general election because she apprehend the voters may even be killed under the BNP rule. This statement has been made by her while she was addressing a memorial meeting at Sonargaon Degree College ground on 19 January.

I am at a loss to understand why the voters be killed and by whom? If the people go to vote this will be a gain for BNP, as such the question of killing them by the BNP does not arise. Then who may be the killers?

I have had great respect for her as, after all, she is the

leader of the biggest opposition party, but in my opinion such statements are not expected by the people from any political leader worth the salt.

K.R. Zakhrni  
Khalua

## Monograms, trademarks — lack of ingenuity

Sir, Whenever you go round the city in a rickshaw, quite many a sign hoarding would be an eye-sore when you observe the producers/advertisers put anything anyway they like, ethical or unethical.

I get highly disappointed when I see some foreign popular monograms/trademarks are rampantly used by the local entrepreneurs/advertisers one would only pity

their dearth of knowledge and know-how! They should strive to produce something original.

To cite some of the 'creations' without originality — monogram of Prime Bank seems to be adopted from the 'ATN' India; monogram used by a B Alam Chowdhury group appears to be copied from 'Hewlett Packard' USA; A & A Autos Ltd projects almost the same insignia of 'Osaka Meter Co. Ltd'. Some types of monograms are even copied by more than one concerns. The monograms of 'Barnal Advertisers' by Pacific Associates Ltd, General Business Co are so similar in appearance. This list of such piracy can be made longer if you have space.

Won't you pity these 'ingeniousness'? I pray "let there be light" in our society.

The guardians  
Dhaka