

Pro-people Reform

Finance Minister Shah A M S Kibria has sought cooperation from the NGOs (Non-Government Organisations) in promoting a few reform programmes through creation of public opinion in their favour. NGO programmes currently benefit as many as 10 million people in 40,000 villages in the country. The programmes, primarily aimed at the most poor and vulnerable groups of society, have developed a rapport at the grass-roots level unseen before. The NGOs played an admirable role in making the people, among whom they work, aware of their right to vote and exercise it as a sacred duty.

Basically what the finance minister is talking about is to involve people — as many of them as possible — in the process of policy formulation and implementation. Instead of imposing decision from the top, here is an attempt to take people into confidence. No doubt the resulting sense of participation will work as a great boost for implementation of projects and programmes. The details of the programme are not available, but the finance minister has mentioned two specific areas — energy sector and the losing public enterprises.

Energy consumption in today's world is a most important indicator of the standard of living. Generation of both power and wealth is closely linked to reducing or eliminating poverty. It is clear that the finance minister is keen to address the twin problem. How he intends to do that is yet to be known.

The involvement of the poor is necessary because the impetus to economic growth lies on equitable share. Since the ultimate goal is poverty alleviation through resource generation, poor people's participation in the process more actively and meaningfully actually holds the key to success. On that count, the economic policies must be pro-people and it appears the finance minister is moving in that direction.

In this connection we certainly find merit in a complementary role between the government and the NGOs. Some of the suggestions put forward by the NGOs to facilitate the process are worth considering. The allocation of special funds as micro credit for the poor is very important. Then the reduction of heavy dependence on indirect taxes in favour of direct taxes can just work wonders. The rich will have to be prepared for paying more tax than they now do and the poorer segments will definitely get the benefit.

Equal Opportunity

Sons and daughters of parents having moderate to small income are doing poorly in the government jobs market. So say the Public Service Commission statistics released recently. In the old times, the farmer community used to supply bulk of the students in colleges and universities and it followed naturally that government jobs fell mostly to them. The farmers' and other low-earning families have for the past two decades been slipping off that perch.

The process first became evident when merit lists of school final and other higher level examinations started to show a nasty prevalence of children of parents with big money. The education and evaluation were such that favoured pupils who would hire the exclusive service of half a dozen well-known teachers. And showings in the examinations are closely related with the success or otherwise in the jobs race.

The statistics also say that it is the sons and daughters of the government job holders that are ever increasingly getting more berths on the government vehicle. Nothing unusual there, and there is no reason why it should not happen. But, indubitably, this is one sure path to elitism which is harmful to a balanced growth of the society.

Our social imperfections have built-in arrangements to ensure that the privileged and advanced continue gaining in both and the rear get further and further out from the race of survival. Opportunities must be distributed equitably so that competition be truly fair. Education creates opportunity and it must be available to all in the same standard irrespective of social, economic or cultural differences up to at least the SSC level. After that merit will matter. Balanced growth is the heart and soul of social and human development.

Is it the Right Reward?

The Railway authorities have announced a reward of Tk 2500 for Abul Khair, the nine-year old boy who on July 13 morning saved the lives of a thousand train passengers by his ready wit and sense of duty. The story is by now known to all. Two new facts add further to this achievement. Before acting on his own to stop the train from derailing, he had reached the news of the breached railway track to a senior person who responded by sending another youngster to the nearby Hajiganj station with the information. Abul Khair could not put his faith in this and decided to act on his own. This is extraordinary. In this place most adult persons would have thought his duty was done by reaching the informant as indeed the man to whom Khair had gone did.

Now where could he have got his piece of red cloth from? And, thank God, he knew it was a red signal that he must give to avert the danger. In these columns we had surmised he must have torn out a piece from some red apparel. But, in fact, he did better than that. He just took away a red petticoat. And Khair's travails were rewarded as soon as the rushing train stopped short of the breach.

The grateful railway-wallahs had to think up something and decided on that paltry sum. Our recommendation of funding the prosecution of his studies at least up to SSC went unheeded. Instead came something smallminded to a big-hearted little boy. What an irony! We still think improvement can be made on the decision, if at all the boy has to be rewarded.

The Water-sharing Issue and Indo-Bangladesh Relations

by Professor M Maniruzzaman Miah

India should, however, appreciate that non-resolution of the water-sharing issue of common rivers is acting as a stymie on the way of better Indo-Bangladesh relationship. And unless this juggernaut is removed, the road will not be clear for the two countries to march forward.

SALMAN Haider, Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India came here on 5 July and left for home two days later. He visited Dhaka as the special envoy of Prime Minister Deve Gowda carrying a message from him for Sheikh Hasina and another message from I K Gujral, the Indian Foreign Minister for the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh. Before his visit there was considerable flutter in the media circle here and it appeared as though some miracle was going to take place in matters of resolution of some of our long-standing problems, particularly that of water-sharing. But miracles happen, if at all, only miraculously. And in any case, a problem which has defied solution on a permanent basis for more than four decades now, could not be resolved at the bureaucratic level.

Although everybody was well aware of it, the psychology here was perhaps that of a drowning man catching at a straw. Since the Indian diplomat's visit took place closely on the heels of the Awami League government's accession to power, expectations were high. The visitor must have known it, all too well, beforehand. He, therefore, right on his arrival at the airport, made it very clear to the journalists present that he was coming only as a messenger and not to talk on any specific issue of our bilateral relation.

Be that as it may, his activities here do suggest something more than his being only a courier. Because, besides his courtesy calls on four ministers, who should be directly involved in Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations, he did have an hour-and-a-half-long meeting with his Bangladeshi counterpart and also held a press conference before departure which a simple messenger would normally avoid. This raises the question whether what he said to the press was a prefiguration of things to come.

One can make a few conclusions from the press conference and an interview Haider gave to a local daily. One, the new government of India is keen to settle all outstanding bilateral issues with Bangladesh. Two, India would like to have transit facilities of their merchandise through our country in exchange for a water-sharing agreement. And three, India expects us to support her candidature for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat. Thus, it appears that although India may like to settle bilateral problems with us it would be only on the basis of a quid-pro-quo.

Newspaper reports suggest that Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan will be visiting New Delhi in August. This will be followed by a visit by Gujral to Dhaka. What will ultimately come out of these upcoming meets is yet to be seen. One has to accept however that an agreement on water-sharing, whatever its nature, cannot be reached without a meeting at the political level, perhaps, at the highest political level.

We may recapitulate here, for a better understanding of the situation, that the first ever water-sharing agreement, strictly in the sense that the Ganges was signed in November 1977 between Bangladesh and India. Twenty-five years had elapsed before that in the name of negotiations.

One may recollect that in 1977 there was a new government in India, the Janata government, that came to power defeating the Congress. Interesting to note that Sri Jagjivan Ram who came here as the defence minister of the new government could come to terms on a sharing arrangement only days after the Janata government was installed in New Delhi. But the same person who was involved in negotiations for water-sharing earlier, as a minister of the Congress government, could never agree on the quantum of

water to be released by India below Farakka point. The conclusion is inescapable that the main reason was political will, among others that settled the issue, stalled earlier unreasonably by Congress hubris. From the same analogy, one may hypothesise that time perhaps is more propitious now than ever before. It is so because Congress with its pristine obduracy has again been replaced in India. A new government is likely to be free from any hangover from the past. And Deve Gowda, in particular is credited with conceding to the water-demand of the state adjacent to the one of which he was the chief minister.

This speaks volumes about the openness of mind of the topmost decision maker in India now. Here, in Bangladesh, the coming to power of the Awami League might create a better climate for negotiations. Whether it has any rational basis or not, this appears to be the general perception of the Indians and the Indian polity of our internal political matrix.

Be that as it may one should understand the Bangladeshi psyche in matters of Indo-Bangladesh relationship. People here, by and large, are wedded to the concept of regional co-operation under the umbrella of SAARC. They are prepared to discuss trade-offs in various areas in the interest of good neighbourliness. But they would like the water-sharing issue to be delinked from any other issue, as the minister for water has also expressed.

I intend to place the following burning problem to the highest authorities of the country to save our children from disaster. The results of the Dhaka Board SSC examinations 1996 have been published on July 6 within an unexpectedly short span of time. A large number of brilliant students is reported to have failed in the examinations for mistakes in writing 'Set Code' on the answer scripts which, according to the Board authorities, was a part of the examinations.

It has created a big humanitarian problem. The Board authorities seem to be very rigid not to do anything to solve this sensitive problem. But this does not appear to be justified both on technical and humanitarian grounds.

'Set Code' carries no marks and that should not swallow the entire examination of a student. Even last year, mistakes were made both by the Board and the students and were corrected manually.

I wish we may have a much less corrupt, extortion and mugging free society in the country. Good luck to the Prime Minister. Shamim Ara Islam, 133 Tilpa Para (1st floor) Dhaka.

Sir, It was disclosed by Dr Abdur Razzak, Secretary General, Krishibid Institution, Bangladesh (KIB) in a recent meeting of the agricultural organisations' heads, senior Krishibids and other representatives that when approached the newly appointed Agriculture Minister, Begum Matia Chowdhury with a request to attend a reception to be accorded by the KIB, the minister declining the invitation said she won't like these formalities and that she had even asked her area people not to arrange any such unnecessary ceremony. She had however accepted the invitation to visit the KIB and share views on different matters relating to agricultural development strategies with the Krishibids.

It appears that the present agriculture minister believes only in work, not in ceremonial talks and deliberations. It is sincerely hoped that the minister will continue to act as a public representative of strict principle. A poor country like Bangladesh badly needs the services of such personalities.

We are sincerely looking forward to receiving the agriculture minister both at KIB and BAI premises. M Zahidul Haque, BA, Dhaka-1207

Sir, The restoration of AL in the throne makes a noticeable furor around our country. Now, people from all walks of life are very much optimistic that this historical party will rebuild our nation as per their responsible background. AL chief Sheikh Hasina has already announced that we are going to usher a novel trend in the constitutional history of our country. Her other mentionable announcements are: (1) there would be no room for terrorism and corruption; and (2) the autonomy of mass media, specially the electronic media.

Now, we are to wait and see, as we yearn for the implementation of AL's election manifesto spelt too often everywhere.

Choudhury Shahid Ahmed Dept of English, CU

That being so, the way out now is (a) to declare the promotion made in 1992 (Feb) as illegal in line with the ruling of the High Court made in late 1994, and (b) to review the promotion (as of officers according to usual promotion rules and constitutional provisions and give promotions according to seniority, etc. This will ensure restoration of right of all, since it is not done so far despite repeated requests through representation/press etc.

It is expected that the new Prime Minister will do justice and regularise the irregularities done by the ex-government.

Abu Imran, 34A, Sukla Das Lane Dhaka-1100

got to be defined. In the international arena different countries are putting across various ideas including that of a rotatory membership. What shape things will ultimately take is yet to be seen. But many believe that Indian desire to run for non-permanent membership is a stepping stone towards a permanent membership later. To that end she has mended fences with China and has been moving cautiously but steadily everywhere.

In any case, now that the South Asian region is moving ahead with the idea of forming a common market in about a decade from now, we should have no reservation in discussing any scheme that may be of mutual benefit to both the countries.

India should, however, appreciate that non-resolution of the water-sharing issue of common rivers is acting as a stymie on the way of better Indo-Bangladesh relationship. And unless this juggernaut is removed, the road will not be clear for the two countries to march forward. Bangladesh policymakers should however take note of the fact that the present government in India is a minority government.

They should, therefore, move quickly to take advantage of the window of possibility that has been opened. Any delay may find a changed situation in New Delhi. Even tergiversation of New Delhi's South Block bureaucrats may neutralise any political goodwill that might have been created.

The author is former Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University.

The part of the article 'Government of National Consensus: Some Thoughts' scheduled to be published today will be published tomorrow.

To the Editor...

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

Anti-Corruption Bureau

Sir, During the BNP government it was mandatory for the Anti-Corruption Bureau to seek permission from the Prime Minister's office before conducting any sort of investigation against any high official for corruption charges. This was criticised by all section of concerned public and the political parties including the Awami League.

On this issue, it was pointed out in BTV's Sabinaya Jante Chaiti programme. The BNP leaders fumbled on the issue and could not give a satisfactory answer.

In their pre-election campaign, the Awami League promised that if they were voted to power, they would free the Anti-Corruption Bureau in conducting investigations on any person of the Republic. But now we hear that the sources from the PM's office has revealed that although no permission would be needed to conduct any investigation for corruption charges but the Bureau will have to take permission from the PM's office before filing any case on corruption charges against any VIP.

So what is anything new or what we gain out of the new changes? Nothing at all. Earlier the Bureau sat idle and now they will give their time and energy (and public fund) on a case and will not be able to file a case until they get NOC from the PM. Then how will the corruption cases of the PM's office (if any) and her close associates and relatives be brought to light?

Abul Hasan Mohammad 28, Green Road Dhaka

Nagoreen — PHS mobile telephone

Sir, Last year, around this time, a news item appeared in the business page of The Daily Star regarding the revolutionary development of mobile telephone system called PHS (Personal Handy System). It is developed in Japan and also is in use there. Few days after that a local Japanese firm arranged a presentation on that in a local five-star hotel. BTB top brasses also attended the presentation.

So far I recall, the salient advantages over the present system are: A — Fax machine can be plugged with PHS (present mobile set does not). B — PHS to PHS there will be no charge for a call (rate will be on NWD and ISD and that too only 10 per cent of present rate charged). C — Price of each set quoted as around 5000 taka or so. This year, on 29 June, a news appeared in The Daily Star that Grameen organisation is going to set up some type of mobile telephone system at affordable price. Obviously cheaper than all existing rates.

Your editorial, 'Cellular Hope' (July 1) has also advocated some such system — Nagoreen for our time and space conscious city folks. This will certainly save our roads from indiscriminate digging for underground cable networking. It will also reduce road side poles and overhead meshes of drop-wire networking. By this, illegal accesses and over-billing will be controlled fully. In view of the above, the new government should consider similar system for our country as soon as possible. Because, any means of good communication is a pre-condition for progress and development.

A R Choudhury, House No:39, Dhaka-11 Section: 4, Uttara, Dhaka-1230

Good luck

Sir, Your editorial on Prime Minister's over exposure on TV seems to have some salutary effect. I think people will soon realise that people will be during last many years people automatically shut off BTB when news time came. It was nauseating.

I hope the Prime Minister will be extra cautious about appointing, her relatives. Appointment of Mr Abdulla as Chief Whip was not wise. There were many news items and gossip about Mr Amir Hossain Amu's inclusion in the Cabinet as a technocrat. I am not an Awami Leaguer and do not know what great service he had rendered to the party to be a member of the president's life. I know is that in 1991 election he was defeated in two constituencies and lost deposit and in 1996 12th June election he was again defeated by a candidate from a different district. It is astonishing that a person who has repeatedly been rejected by people, can be considered for national leadership. He should be advised to work with and for the people in his constituency and try to win their support and trust.

Your suggestion to publish assets etc by ministers and MPs of government parties should be accepted but the same should apply to all MPs. Necessary law should be enacted at the earliest.

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Unnecessary ceremony

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AL manifesto

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Choudhury Shahid Ahmed Dept of English, CU

OPINION

Computerised Guillotine

Abdul Dattif Mollah

Within a year we cannot expect both ends to become absolutely perfect. Our system of examinations is not so perfect and secured that we can put the blame only on the students.

There were investigators to check it. There could be tampering after the students submitted the papers. There could be damages during transit and also we cannot exclude the possibility of mistakes or damages by the machines and the men behind the machines. So there exists logic to allow benefits of doubt to the students who wrote their roll numbers correctly.

The students are children — prone to make mistakes — and vulnerable in all respects. We must not cut their throats for a mistake which can be rectified with possible efforts. How much is it justified and ethical that a student who correctly answered 50 or 40 or even 20 questions should be

deprived of the entire marks only for not writing the 'Set Code' correctly and the student would fall in the examinations securing pass marks in all the subjects? How can we accept the fact that there is no way to help them out when only last year it was done? We must appreciate that they are our children, not our enemies. We must not cut their throats so mercilessly under the Computerised Guillotine.

I don't know whom to approach as the Education Secretary has, reportedly, closed his doors saying that there is no way to help the students out as that was a part of the examinations. Other officials of the Board are firing 'squads'. Now it is only the highest authorities of the country, i.e., the Prime Minister who can save our children from this dire catastrophe. I on behalf of the afflicted guardians appeal to them to interfere into the matter and take sympathetic actions.

Selecting Civil Servants: Omission and Commission

Firoj Alam

The PSC civil servants are the driving force behind the government physique. Efficient civil servants are the pre-condition of a good governance. And the efficient civil servants can be found through an effective selection process. The objective of the selection process should be to choose those persons who meet the organisational goals in a particular job, i.e., merit should be the only criterion by which the best candidates should be selected. But the BPS selection system, merit seems to be the secondary consideration.

Actually, the selection philosophy in the civil service of Bangladesh is the philosophy of equity: Equity implies public sector positions are distributed approximately, proportionately to or representative of the population at large. This system is inconsistent to the Weberian concept — 'the legal rationality authority in bureaucracy'. In this regard, I want to focus on a few loopholes in the selection process of the civil service, of which, selection by quota is the main.

Quota System: Before discussing demerits of quota system I want to briefly discuss the history of civil service through which this system has evolved. For about 200 years, Bangladesh was administered by the British. In Indian civil service, posts were reserved for a 'section' of people. In 1947, Pakistan got separated from India and according to Two-Nation theory of Jinnah, we joined with Pakistan and thereby went under the administrative system of Pakistan. In Pakistan civil service (1947-1971), 80 per cent of posts were reserved for a particular class to ensure their adequate representation. The remaining 20 per cent of the posts were filled in on the basis of merit alone.

After independence, Bangladesh civil service system was introduced and the posts were reserved 10 per cent for women, 30 per cent for the freedom fighters, 5 per cent for the women who were oppressed by the enemy during the Liberation War, 5 per cent for the tribal people, 10 per cent for regional and the rest 40 per cent of all the positions were filled in on the basis of merit. After a few changes, at present only 45 per cent of

employment or office in the service of the Republic'. 'Syllabus of the exam': After crossing the hurdle of 100-mark preliminary test, candidates have to sit for 800-mark written test of which 500-mark is compulsory. Other 300-mark are optional which is chosen by the candidates as per their wish. The student having the science background can secure almost 90-95 per cent marks or about 270-285 marks out of the 300 mark. On the contrary, the persons having academic career of humanities and social science groups can hardly get 195 marks out of that 300. This wide gap of marks is an obstacle to select the right person for the right post. This problem can be solved by abolishing optional subjects from the system.

Standard of the exam: To fill the vacant posts, the examinations arranged by PSC is not satisfactory. The ineffective management of the PSC gives wide scope to adopt unfair means in the written test. The invigilators in the examination hall often do not have enough courage to check it. Besides, the mobile inspectors sent by the PSC is not adequate in number and the time they spend in a hall is not enough too. The examinees do not obey the code of conduct printed on the admit card. The routine prepared by the PSC gives advantage to a section of examinees allowing wide gap between exams, whereas other sections sometimes do not even get a gap for a single day. In some cases, they are forced to sit for two examinations in one day. Besides, the prevailing process of psychological test and viva should be reformed. Public service should be made more attractive to the students to attract the most brilliant. The government is not eager to create new posts, besides, the retired bureaucrats are being given ad hoc or contract appointments which disturbs the normal flow of promotion and consequently hinders creation of new posts. In 1985, the vacant posts and applicants ratio was 16 which in 1993 stood at 1:51.

In this context, if we want ensure, that only talented and qualified persons get the chance to join in the civil service, we must change the existing recruiting system.

Critics of the system point out the constitutional guarantee that there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic'. It can only be ensured by spreading education among all classes instead of continuing the present method of quota system. Only the birth place should not be the excuse for, depriving anyone from occupying an important position in the service of the Republic. Besides our Constitution ensured saying 'No citizen shall be ineligible for or discriminated against in respect of any