

Need for Consensus

Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan has brought good tidings from India after meeting with top leaders in the government and of the opposition in that most important neighbouring country of Bangladesh. While calling on Indian Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda and External Affairs Minister I K Gujral he absorbed positive vibrations of reciprocity and understanding from the United Front government.

In fact, a consensus has emerged in India across the whole political spectrum over the rationale for triggering a radical improvement in relations with Dhaka by an immediate settlement of the Ganges water issue. The BJP leader and former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, former External Affairs Minister in the Congress government Pranab Mukherjee and West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu have pledged their support for an early resolution of the water sharing problem.

That is the strength and texture of the emergent national will in India to see Indo-Bangladesh relations placed on an even keel. But we are yet to forge a national consensus of our own. It is of vital importance to us that what we are now putting across to India as our national concern is translated into a full-fledged consensus, basically a bi-partisan understanding between the ruling party and the opposition. Relations with India are so crucial to us that the thought of improving them on any ad hoc basis must not be entertained any more when the change of government in both countries has created the most opportune moment to set things right.

The Awami League government is expressly willing to seek an understanding with the opposition on the water and other issues affecting Indo-Bangla relations. It is time that separate dialogues with the political parties get underway without ado. That phase over, there would have to be a full length public debate with the participation of experts, media people and other professional groups sooner than later. Ties with India are a matter better not left to the politicians alone.

For the political parties, whose response is sought, they are advised not to regard consensus-building as mileage given to Awami League but a service done to enlightened and permanent national interest.

Investing in the Villages

The Finance Ministry statistics for 1995-96 provide food for thought. Agriculture, an activity exclusive to the villages, at present contributes 32 per cent of our GDP. How much capital support it gets from financing sources? It is 19.71 per cent, down 4.25 per cent from 1990-91. The towns got 80.29 of the loans in 95-96. Why? Do not villages repay well? They do that better than the towns, says the Finance Ministry figures. And, thirdly, the untenable one-eyedness of financial management has been continuing in spite of the deposits increasing in the villages with a steeper curve than in the towns. It is a Finance Ministry conclusion that there has been a net siphoning of resources from the rural to the urban areas resulting in a slowdown of economic activities in the rural areas. And this a prize for their good performance!

The towns vs villages dichotomy, always tinged unmistakably with a modicum of antagonism, has for long characterised the socio-economic aspect of our existence in Bangladesh. That the towns would be but concentrations of the better educated ones having better control of society was never contested before but now it is being questioned in forward-looking economic planning methodology. Because, for the towns to prosper, there is the precondition that the hinterland or the villages be economically lively and socially fulfilling and satisfying. In Bangladesh the towns have been killing clean the proverbial golden goose for ages. One had thought that with the achievement of independence the foolish hangovers will be gone and the villages would start living as in olden times.

With our march towards democracy gaining in momentum in the wake of a fair and free election, it should now be in order to reverse all this and stem the rot in the towns and make the villages thrive again. Invest in the villages — this is the best investment ground in the nation and possibly among the best in the world. For a beginning why not credits to villages rise to 32 per cent of total advances — at par with villages' share of our GDP?

Hydrocarbon Exploration

Preparations are afoot to attract foreign private company investments for hydrocarbon exploration, especially in the Bay region. The anxiety is the fast depleting 11 trillion cubic feet gas reserve in the country seems hardly a peg to hang our hats on when contrasted with an ever increasing dependence on our power and fertilizer plants on natural gas as their vital raw material.

The energy ministry is going in a big way for both 'solicited' and 'unsolicited' biddings. In the solicited category fall the preparations geared to organising two international investors' conferences in London and Houston in the first week of October. In the unsolicited one, the achievement level seems on the up, the latest news being that two US companies are about to sign an accord with the energy ministry to start exploring near the St Martins Island and the Sunderbans.

Earlier five similar agreements were signed with British, Dutch and US companies. The Cairn Plc and Holland Sea Search's success — in striking over one trillion cubic feet find in the shallow continental shelf of the Bay — has generated enthusiasm among the potential foreign investors.

Whether we go for solicited or unsolicited investments, at the end of the day, what will matter is a policy framework with a clear-cut statement on terms and conditions offered to foreign investors. And then, of course, we must have a well-developed negotiating skill to fend for our interest.

For Permanent Sharing of Ganges Water

by Amjad Hossain Khan

MR SALMAN HAIDER, Indian Foreign Secretary, came to Dhaka on a good will mission on 5 July carrying a message from Indian Prime Minister Mr Deve Gowda for the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. He stayed in Dhaka for two days. In his press conference he said that a ministerial level meeting between Bangladesh and India will be held shortly for a quick solution of the outstanding bilateral disputes. He invited Mr Farooq Sobhan, Bangladesh Foreign Secretary to Delhi in the middle of August.

Mr Abdur Razzaque, Water Resources Minister in his press statement (The Daily Star, 8 July, 1996) expressed his optimism that the Government would be able to reach an agreement with India on sharing of the Ganges water soon. The reasons for his optimism are that the present Government of India had already pronounced its commitment to resolve various problems with the neighbouring countries. Secondly, the Indian External Affairs Minister I K Gujral before taking office had on record showed positive attitude towards resolving the problems. The Minister further said that the ruling Awami League Government wanted to run the govt on the basis of national consensus.

The leader of the opposition, in Bangladesh Begum Khaleda Zia made a statement in Feni (Janakantho, 9 July, 1996) that our legitimate share is 38,000 cusec of Ganges water and this cannot be compromised under any condition. Mr Dev Mukherjee, Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh in a press statement on 26 July stated that India is now prepared to discuss with Bangladesh a permanent water sharing arrangement covering all 54 rivers including the Ganges. In a major shift in policy, the Indian High Commissioner said that the problem of sharing of the Ganges water will be solved on the basis of the water available in the river without looking into the issue of augmentation of water either link canal proposed by India or by construction of storage dams proposed by Bangladesh. He is confident that given the political will on both sides, this can be achieved. He remarked that the water issue had been politicized to such an extent that often there was an inadequate understanding between the two sides particularly on the water problem.

Mr Mukherjee negated the concept of regional cooperation by including Nepal on the plea that inclusion of a third party is not desirable as it takes longer time to find a solution. He also commented that involvement of any outside agencies or discussion on issues between more than two countries would not lead to a quick solution. According to him, further agreements by India with Nepal will not create any problem with any other countries in future. Mr Mukherjee also said that India had no intention to link water issue with transit facilities.

Mr Mukherjee's statement coming prior to the visits of Indian Foreign Secretary is very significant. While agreeing to a permanent sharing of all the 54 rivers including the Ganges, he has clearly outlined the Indian Government views on water sharing and other bilateral issues. His comment on the Tipakush Dam on Barak river and his clarification of the difference between Dam and Barrage is interesting. His press statement is timely or preemptive, time will tell.

Mr Abdus Samad Azad, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh in a statement in Jatiya Sangsad on 4 August, 1996 said that the new Govt had taken a bold attempt to realize the right share of the Ganges water and would be able to resolve permanently the water sharing problem with India. He further said that the Govt would finalize its position on the issue of water sharing with India only after discussing the issue in Jatiya Sangsad. He assured the

benches to resolve the water sharing issue with India. It further quoted him as saying "The solution to this problem is essential — instead of going into a debate on who had brought what quantity of water in the past, let us reach a consensus on this kind of national issue".

Mr Kuldip Nayar, a noted Indian Journalist in an article (The Daily Star, 26 July, 1996) "Mutual relations: An opportunity in Bangladesh" said that the sentiment of liberation war has returned and there is a overflowing feeling of friendship that was dyked for more than 21 years.

The Indian Foreign Secretary was struck by the friendliness of the Bangladesh Government. The same bureaucrats who were rigid earlier were now forthcoming. He also mentioned that the Government in New Delhi have played in the hands of hawkish bureaucrats. He mentioned the adverse impact of Farakka Barrage on Bangladesh. He recently talked to Mr Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal who favours a new agreement on the basis of the earlier agreement. He further said that flushing the Hoogly by diverting Ganges water has proved to be a myth. The Calcutta Port is dependent on

Bangladesh including sharing of the Ganges water as noted in recent statements. Bangladesh must capitalise on this opportunity.

Foreign Secretary Mr Farooq Sobhan along with team of officials visited Delhi on 7 August, 1996. The Foreign Secretary called on the Indian Prime Minister Mr H D Deve Gowda and handed over a letter from the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The Prime Minister of India is reported to have said that the GOI was keen to settle all outstanding issues with Bangladesh in the shortest possible time. On sharing of the Ganges water, Mr Deve Gowda proposed that the Foreign Secretary level meeting in New Delhi could create the ground for Foreign Minister and Water Resources Minister level meeting. He also said that there could be a heads of Government meeting to settle the issue permanently.

For the last half a century (46 years exact) the water sharing problem has been discussed. Voluminous data and information were exchanged. Before liberation of Bangladesh, the discussion were held without any results. After liberation, the water sharing talks were again resumed.

The Joint declaration of the

and desertification of the northern region, affected irrigation and the navigability of the rivers and brought destruction to fish resources and Sundarban, the largest mangrove forest in the world.

It is very interesting to note the recent developments on Ganges water issue since the new Government came to power in both the countries. The matter which could not be settled in the last 46 years can not be solved overnight unless there is a political will to resolve the issue.

One hundred and twenty million people of Bangladesh have suffered a lot due to acute shortage of water of the Ganges and other rivers. The flood which is a recurring problem could not be solved as yet. The recurring floods destroy our economy and infrastructures.

In the backdrop of all these developments, let us analyse the situation. With the change in Government in Bangladesh and India the political leadership has changed — not the bureaucrats in the either country. Are the bureaucrats in the same wave length of the politicians? Experience has shown that the bureaucrats play a role in deciding the policy. A strong political will in both the countries are needed to arrive at a solution of the water sharing problem.

The statement of the in-

more is also confusing. In this connection the statement of Foreign Minister that there should not be any debate on who brought what quantity in the past is welcome. He wanted the water issue to be discussed in the Sangsad soon.

Water is a national issue — not a party issue. So the people expect a national consensus of this problem. Mere discussing the matter in Sangsad may not be enough. The Government has not utilized the National Water Resources Council on the issue so far. More over there is no national water policy. There is no plan to maximize the use of surface and ground water in Bangladesh. These are some of issues to be considered by the present Government soon.

The problem of Ganges and other 53 rivers are not similar. It will be better if the Ganges water-sharing is solved first. Firstly there is an agreed data of the availability of the Ganges at Farakka (1948-1973). Secondly, during discussion for the last 25 years, the position of both sides are known. It is no use repeating the whole issues. Thirdly, once Ganges water sharing problem is solved on equitable basis, this will create the confidence building process between the two countries.

As we are talking about permanent sharing of the Ganges we must remember that Bangladesh sacrificed 40 per cent of the Ganges water for Indian use. Naturally the question of augmentation comes. We should define the two issues but India must compensate the shortage of water in the long run. Only source available is construction of storage dams in Nepal. To utilise the water resources of the Ganges, Nepal must be included for tripartite discussion. The dams will not come in a day or two. These must be provision in the agreement as was done in the side letters of the Ganges Water Agreement to include in the discussion on augmentation.

Regarding sharing of other rivers particularly Brahmaputra, Teesta and other rivers the question of agreed availability is essential before sharing is done. Recent data of the dry season availability has been tampered in the upper reaches in some major rivers. If discussion are held with open mind, the solution may not be difficult. There must be political will of the Government of India to solve the problem.

Given the good will, understanding and cooperation as shown by the Government of India, it may not be difficult for the present Government to find a permanent solution to the water sharing problem. (The author is ex-Chairman, Bangladesh Water Development Board)

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Sangsad that not only the water from Ganges, they have taken initiative to realise water from all the other rivers and they will be able to arrive at a permanent solution.

A news item published in Dhaka (The Daily Star, 5 August, 1996) states that the officials of Bangladesh and India will meet tomorrow in New Delhi at Foreign Secretary level to discuss the whole range of bilateral issues including the water sharing, trade imbalance and economic cooperation. Mr Farooq Sobhan, Foreign Secretary will lead the delegation and leave on 6th August. The news item further said that talks this time will open new area of cooperation and likely "to break new grounds for understanding and cooperation". The consultative takes are expected to create "grounds for political visits between leaders of the two countries".

Another BSS news item published on 6 August, 1996 said that the Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad was to sit in a camera session to reach a consensus between treasury and opposition

dredging as was done earlier. He suggested that water sharing agreement should done before the next dry season from 1 January, 1997.

Since liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, 25 years has passed without a solution of equitable sharing of the Ganges water. During these long period the Government was run by Awami League (4 years), Bangladesh National Party (10 years) and Jatiya Party (9 years).

The Ganges Water Agreement 1977 came when Janata Government came to power in India. The Congress Government stalled the issue for a long time. When Congress Government came to power again they allowed it to continue till 1982. It refused to sign any fresh agreement. Instead a Memorandum of understanding was signed in 1982 for two years with some minor changes in the share of water. The 80 per cent guarantee clause safeguarding the interest of Bangladesh was deleted. The change of Government in India in 1996 is favourable to improve relation with its neighbours and resolve all outstanding issue with

Prime Ministers in May, 1974. He suggested that water sharing agreement should done before the next dry season from 1 January, 1997.

The Farakka Barrage was commissioned in April, 1975 for a period of 41 days from 21st April to 31st May for test running. India started unilateral withdrawal of Ganges water at Farakka from June, 1975 and continued to unilateral withdraw water of the Ganges in 1975, 1976 and 1977. The Ganges water agreement was signed in November 1977 for five years followed by a MOU for two years in 1982. India refused further extension of MOU in 1984. Another MOU was signed in 1985 for a period of three years. Since 1988 there is no agreement on sharing of the Ganges water at Farakka.

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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.

Requisition of vehicles

Sir, Why should I be forced by the government to sell off my microbus?

From time to time many readers of your newspaper have vented out their very strong feelings against the government-sponsored requisitions of private vehicles, specially trucks, buses and microbuses, and have described their ordeals in detail. I do not want to go into those details although I am an equal sufferer and have faced this agonising humiliation at least half a dozen times over the last one year or so when my private microbus was requisitioned on the streets without even informing me. I do however want to pose a question to the well-informed citizens of this country — specially our lawyers some of whom command international repute and respect, and I will greatly appreciate receiving an answer and a legal opinion from them through the courtesy of your columns if they can spare the time to help a citizen who has been agonisingly made to suffer on this account.

I was greatly relieved and encouraged from the categorical and unambiguous statement made by the hon'ble Home Minister during his first press briefing held on 08 July '96 that "henceforth no private vehicles would be requisitioned by the police and a government circular would be issued to the departments concerned in this respect." But the letter written by Mr M A Azim and published in the newspaper 'The Bangladesh Times' on 07 August '96 (one month after the press briefing), describing the ordeal that he recently faced with the requisition of his microbus, has given me a jolt and I have been forced to write this letter. It is very clear that the position remains unchanged with no improvement or consideration — even by the new administration.

Under what law does the government enforce it? I am sure that the relevant law, in whatever original or amended or adopted shape or manner it might be, must have been framed a considerable number of years ago in completely different political and social situations. Is that piece of law, which the government very shamelessly uses whenever it wants, still valid? Why should the private vehicle owners,

who are diligently and regularly paying all due taxes including road taxes and ancillary charges, be forced to undergo this humiliation, curtailment of their fundamental rights under the country's constitution, and suffering at the whims of the members of the traffic police whose salaries are paid by us?

I very firmly believe that this law needs a serious review and its efficacy, applicability and necessity re-established — if necessary by seeking the help of our prepared judiciary. I am therefore prepared to file a writ against the government if any lawyer-citizen of the country is prepared to assist and guide me. Will a conscientious lawyer please respond to my request through your columns?

M M Ahmed
18, Malibagh, Dhaka

Traffic Jam

Sir, May I take this opportunity to congratulate Mr Akbar Ali, an Africanwala for his thought-provoking and pragmatic suggestions on roads and congestion — popularly known as traffic jam, published in your opinion column on 26 July '96.

I would like to emphasise on these points the construction of overbridges, introduction of underground tube trains, construction of circular trains around Dhaka city, construction of a separate four-lane rickshaw lane by the side of the roads, (ii) construct multi-storied car parks, (iii) prohibit parking of cars in 2/3 rows in the commercial areas, (iv) one row parking of cars may be allowed in the commercial areas on payment of tolls as done in New Market, (v) city corporation may divide the road zones and lease out those to educated unemployed youths of the area for the purpose of earning and maintaining traffic discipline, (vi) all future buildings in the commercial/residential areas must make their own parking arrangements — none to be allowed to use roads for parking of cars

Now I would like to add a few more suggestions to ease the traffic jams on Dhaka roads: i) earmark separate bus stops for buses of corporations, commercial banks, insurance companies who occupy half of the roads, (ii) construct multi-storied car parks, (iii) prohibit parking of cars in 2/3 rows in the commercial areas, (iv) one row parking of cars may be allowed in the commercial areas on payment of tolls as done in New Market, (v) city corporation may divide the road zones and lease out those to educated unemployed youths of the area for the purpose of earning and maintaining traffic discipline, (vi) all future buildings in the commercial/residential areas must make their own parking arrangements — none to be allowed to use roads for parking of cars

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buses/trucks, and via RAJUK may enact necessary laws to compel the owners of the multi-storied commercial buildings to convert their ground floors as parking places.

At the corporations, chambers of commerce and industries must take practical measures in this respect. I am optimistic that the above measures will find public approval and the relevant authorities will get an impetus to act with speed and courage. We have wasted 25 years of our national life, and now, it is time for action.

Azhar-ul-Islam,
Rajbarbagh, Dhaka

Bangabandhu and Agriculture

Sir, The LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Zillur Rahman while addressing a seminar 'Bangabandhu O Krishi' (Agriculture and Bangabandhu) organised on the occasion of the National Mourning Day by the Chhatra League unit of Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI) disclosed that the government of Sheikh Hasina had arranged subsidy to the farmers to the tune of Tk 100 crore endowment in the current national budget with a view to achieving self-reliance in food. Rahman who is also the Deputy Leader in the Parliament said that the government is formulating a national programme with the highest priority to agriculture in the line with Bangabandhu's dream of a Sonar Bangla.

Before starting of the function, the minister while talking informally with the teachers and the principal of BAI, enquired about various aspects of BAI. He gave patient hearing to the teachers when they informed that the minister about some long standing problems of the institute. He assured them that appropriate steps will be taken by the government for solving the problems of BAI. The minister advised the teachers to discharge their duties with total dedication.

We are greatly encouraged to find that the government is taking pragmatic projects to bring about rapid changes and development in all the sectors of agriculture. We firmly hope that Bangladesh will soon be made a truly happy and prosperous society.

M. Zahidul Haque
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"Get-a-Word"

Sir, I fully endorse the opinion expressed in your esteemed paper by two gentlemen under the above headline. I think it is a very exciting and intelligent pastime. Apart from gaining knowledge in English, there is a financial

gain also to the winners as well as to the sponsoring newspaper by increasing its sales.

In fact it was with one of the handsome first prizes won by me from the GET-A-WORD competition of erstwhile Morning News of Dhaka that I was able to purchase a residential plot of land in the city. I hope, you will consider sponsoring a "GET-A-WORD" section in your paper soon.

Akhtar Uddin
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The Prime Minister

Sir, I have due respect to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's steps to eliminate caste, stop oppression on women, and then inviting opposition political parties to come forward to unitedly build the country. In fact, Hasina's above propagation did work splendidly to take Awami League through the 1996 general elections. But my confusion is: how can a person with such sincere and true patriotic ideas could support and indulge a violent and aggressive politics for over a decade? Did she ever realise that the deadly non-cooperation, specially the port-boycott was costing the country dearly for which the country would have to suffer for years together? Had Hasina played cool and worked her brains to overthrow Ershad peacefully and direct the movement against BNP government in a way consistent with her ideology, it would certainly have saved us from a lot of sufferings.

We hope, she will be able to shun crime and safeguard our womenfolk from hardship, though, there is little she can do to recover the huge losses and damages.

A citizen
Dhaka

The government and the main opposition

Sir, After the en masse resignation of the opposition MPs from the Parliament in December '94, we saw that the then opposition party had the vision and finally started a movement to dethrone the BNP government from power. Out of several ones, the political motive of the then opposition were (Before 15.2.96): To establish the fact that the BNP government rigged votes in the Magura by-election.

To regain the voting right throughout the country which was lost only in Magura as was alleged by the opposition. Lastly to succeed in causing the final fall of BNP government by any means.

All the aspirations were fulfilled. Even success was attained to enthrone itself (the

then opposition) in power. Now, the party in power is talking about a national consensus government and has allowed MPs from other small parties to share power to govern the country. They are also inviting the BNP — the biggest opposition party — to join the AL government.

It is most interesting that yesterday whom we, pulled down from the chair, today we are offering them to share power for governance! It is only 2 months after the BNP government was beaten. That fallen party is again being invited to join the present government. From where did we get the trust and confidence that the BNP is so good?

Besides, we the general people, do not want the BNP instead of being in opposition for the people's interest, share power with present government. If they do so they run the risk of a possible rejection by the people. Some of the future whose clear verdict was to see BNP as the opposition. Apart from this being an opposition party in the Parliament, if it joins the government led by the rival party, the identity of BNP as an independent party is sure to be lost. We have seen this happening the care of JP, the second largest opposition party in the Parliament.

So let's BNP run themselves as an independent opposition party and act as the spokesman of the people in the Parliament.

Nur Hossain
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Honest living

Sir, Traveling in a car on a rickshaw if you stop near the traffic lights at the corner of Sheraton Hotel in the evening, you will see quite a few small boys and girls selling flowers. Now, they may look like beggars and some might mistake them to be go. But in fact, they are not beggars. Some of these boys and girls have chosen selling flowers as their own way to earn their living instead of doing that by begging. A few days ago I asked a small boy of 6 or 7, why he was selling flowers while his friend just a few feet away was begging. In reply he said, "Because my father had taught me not to beg for living and I want to make an honest living." As he could not find any other job due to his illness, selling flowers in the streets became his only option. He probably makes the same amount of money as his friend who begs does.

At the Ramna Park, sometimes I have seen some children picking flowers, most probably for selling in the streets. Deprived of education and basic needs of life, these

children have found their own honest way to earn a living. If such children can understand the significance of an honest living and sacrifice the easy way of begging, then we should help them and be hopeful that one day the rest of this nation would also have confidence and believe in an honest living.

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Dhaka-1217

Food colours

Sir, Colour is a vital constituent of food. It is one of the first characteristics perceived by the senses and is indispensable to the modern-day consumer as a means for the rapid identification and ultimate acceptance of the food. Almost all foods have an associated colour acceptable to the consumer on the basis of social, geographical, ethnic and historical backgrounds. From a modern food manufacturing viewpoint, colour additives are indispensable.

Colour additives for food represent a unique and special category of food additives. They have historically been considered so in legislation and regulation. The certified colour additives are synthetic manufactured to meet strict government specification, while the uncertified colours are usually naturally derived substances. Both groups are strictly controlled in most countries by regulatory statutes the knowledge of which is indispensable to food processors.

Various types of coloured foods are available in our country. Ice-creams, snacks, dairy products, bakery goods, coloured liquid foods and sweets are most common in village markets and also in towns. Thousands of people are eating all these everyday. Most of the food processors may not using safe colour additives. Some foods seem to be very unusual in colour and may be dangerous for health. Because there are many colour organic chemicals which are carcinogenic, mutagenic and teratogenic in nature. Very few people are considering the impact of colour chemicals on health. Colour concentration is another important factor for health. In most cases, high concentrations of colours are used.

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