

Matter of Emphasis

One may be somewhat pleasantly surprised but will hardly be elated over the findings of a review made recently of the performance of our manufacturing sector between 1990 and 1996. The update sponsored by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and prepared by Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya of the BIDS shows that the industrial sector grew at an average annual rate of 6.86 per cent during said period. This bettered the average figure of 5.97 per cent per annum recorded over the whole decade between 1985-86 and 1990-96.

The modest industrial growth in the past six years which had actually peaked in 1992-93 with a rate of 9.1 per cent was notably achieved amidst the indecision-ridden political turmoil which followed that "best year".

So, the first lesson to draw here is that we should never again allow political uncertainties to snowball in a way that hinders industrial growth or, for that matter, the economic development of the country. The appeal is to both the ruling party and the opposition to see in this the wisdom of a bipartisan understanding on how to keep the productive sectors going under all circumstances.

The industrial indebtedness grew over the period and that is another headache we must attend to for the sake of growth without liabilities. It is a contradiction in terms that growth has to be propped up by bank-rolling and bad lending.

On the positive side, we have had the increases in the industrial use of electricity and in the consumption of gas in the manufacturing processes making possible that modest overall growth of the manufacturing sector.

Despite a nearly one-sided attention paid to the organised industrial sector its contribution to the GDP is yet to outstrip that of the largely unorganised industrial sector comprising cottage and the whole lot of other micro-productive units.

For an all-round economic development of the country with poverty alleviation and social justice as our principal concerns we need to encourage small-scale undertakings on a top priority basis. That, for sure, is the golden path to take.

Security for Water Transport

In a riverine country with a long coastline, the need for river police and coast guards can hardly be overemphasised. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recognised this dire necessity while addressing a review meeting at the Bholi Circuit House on Wednesday relating to law and order and development initiatives in the Barisal division. River transports still carry the major share of the country's passengers and goods traffic. Add to this deep sea fishing that has grown in recent years, bolstered by the availability of the mechanised boats and trawlers. The technical innovation and improvement brought about in fishing and the preservation facilities have turned marine fishing into an industry located along the coastal belts.

The expansion of inland trade and economic activities on river routes have not, however, been matched by the strengthening of security for them. Similarly, the coast guards are no match for the pirates who swoop from time to time on trawlers engaged in sea fishing or on boats operating in the Sunderbans for commercial purposes. The pirates have virtually established an unchallenged reign of terror in the coastal areas to the country's south. Piracy there has to be dealt a blow soon if we want to see our sea fishing flourishing into a sustainable industry. The coast guards and river police together can protect the vital economic interests of the country.

So the stake is more than what is usually thought of. Not only do we need to raise the forces but also the quality of their service through providing better training, equipment and fast-moving vessels to them.

At times the coast guards would be required to carry on rescue operations in challenging situations. Unless specially trained for that job, they would fail to perform. That aspect should also be taken into account, particularly when our coastal areas are often visited by natural calamities.

Arsenic Threat

The presence of arsenic in tubewell water in a village in Pabna has led to the death of 11 persons and illness for 100 others. This is an extremely alarming situation. We knew from earlier reports that not just one or two villages are affected by an unacceptably high level of arsenic pollution of water but a long stretch of our bordering villages with India has fallen prey to arsenic.

Once or twice the government made a half-hearted attempt to assess the situation, as if the problem will pass off if it is overlooked. Now the news of death caused by water contaminated with arsenic, and that too, in a northern district of Bangladesh is bound to create panic among our people.

So we suggest that an expert team or teams with proper equipment to examine arsenic level in water be rushed to the areas affected or suspected to be so. They will make sure that people do not drink water containing arsenic and at the same time declare where water is safe to drink or use for other purposes. In this regard, West Bengal's experience can be useful to us. How did the government there tackle the problem with the assistance of the WHO? We must need to know how water is freed of arsenic contents.

In the meantime the incident in Pabna should form part of an intense public information campaign so that no further death occurs.

A Visit of Immense Significance

After 14 years of fierce debate between India and Nepal over sharing their common river waters, the two countries are close at last to reaching an agreement made so much the easier by a consensus forged lately between the Congress party and the Communists in Nepal. We better take a leaf out of their book.

INDIAN External Affairs Minister I K Guzal arrives here at a propitious moment. The conventional rhetoric between Dhaka and New Delhi is ebbing to a virtual retreat, gradually but markedly giving way to a healthy bilateral resolve to substantiate their hitherto ill-fated relations. With such a vantage-point emerging in the philosophical outlook of the two countries, Guzal's four-day trip to Dhaka seems bound for a pride of place in the whole new process of rebuilding the bilateral ties launched with the change of governments in the two countries.

Significantly, the delegation which the Indian External Affairs Minister is leading in Dhaka includes two important

figures in Dhaka and South Block in Dhaka and South Block in Dhaka.

In fact, if one were to identify the distances they have covered so far in fine-tuning their approaches to certain hitherto intractable problems, one could hardly resist marveling at the speed of ground-work done.

The Ganges Water sharing question has been de-linked from the augmentation issue, so that the Ganges-Brahmaputra link canal proposal by India stands dropped. The bracketing of the Ganges with other common rivers has also been dispensed with. It is only after the question of permanent sharing of the Ganges has been resolved that the issue of other rivers will be taken up.

49.5 kilometers of the land boundary hangs fire. West Bengal is keen on early demarcation of the border and the Indian government which is yet to ratify the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement through its Parliament seems willing to be doing it but after the border demarcation work is completed.

The outcome of the Guzal visit is most likely to be the establishment of a mechanism to discuss substantive issues in a result-oriented manner. As for the central issue of arriving at an agreement on the sharing of the lean season water of the Ganges there is bound to be some horse-trading on the quantum of water to be released to Bangladesh during the dry season. The Gordian Knot can only be untied at the high-



Time and Tide

Shah Husain Imam

personalities of the Track II diplomacy — I K Guzal himself and Somnath Chatterjee, the parliamentary leader of the CPM with West Bengal government's representation etched on the composition of the delegation.

The non-government second track initiative launched by eminent personages from both India and Bangladesh has already favourably impacted inter-governmentally through their interactions backed by issue-based expertise, research and insights. During his 1994 visit to Dhaka I K Guzal had expressed his highly positive views on trade imbalance and the water sharing issue. He also referred to the transit question, albeit without being remotely imposing on it in his characteristically suave manner.

The forward footholds reached on some of the outstanding issues of considerable concern to both governments must be matters of considerable satisfaction to the Foreign of

Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan came back from a Delhi visit recently with a clear impression of an all-party consensus in Bangladesh, especially over the urgency to get the Ganges water sharing issue out of the way for the sake of addressing other issues.

There can be multi-track discussion on all the other issues raised by India such as transit, alleged North-East cross-border activities, etc. but without any prejudice to the most vital question of reaching an agreement on the lean season sharing of the Ganges water on a permanent basis.

On tariff reduction, India wants to effect it under the SAFTA but we are seeking bilateral concessions which are likely to be accorded to India in the near future.

Decision on a number of enclaves other than Berubari, Dhamagram and Angarpata remains pending under the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974. In other words, demarcation of

est political level. The all-party consensus in India should ideally be reciprocated by an all-party consensus in Bangladesh, especially over the water issue. Although it may not be an absolute necessity in matters of inter-governmental negotiations, yet this is what a good functioning democracy should be all about.

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