

National Water Policy

Bangladesh is a classic case of puzzling realities. None other illustrates it better than its water management sector. The whole country grovels under acute crisis of water during the dry season. From urban necessity of potable water to agricultural need every sphere of life gets caught in a welter of problems spawning from the scarcity of water.

Come the rainy season, the same water transforms into a national curse as the turbid rivers and waterways send the excess flow of water on the lands by their sides causing untold enormous damage of human and agricultural resources. This has been a regular feature of our national history. Of late, the waning flow of the Ganges has given a new dimension to the water related problems.

No matter how quick and precise we are in giving the reasons for the ever increasing tally of water related problems, the most astonishing absence at the core of this issue is a national water policy. It is really mind-boggling to know that a country like Bangladesh, so inseparably and existentially linked with water does not have a national water policy. How strange!

There is, however, one body named National Water Council. Formed during the regime of Ershad, it was restructured later with Begum Khaleda Zia as its chairperson. Its objective was to form a policy to ensure the proper management of country's water resources along with the excess supply during the rainy season. The council was supposed to hold a meeting after every three months to pursue its objective. Though numerous meetings were held during BNP's five-year rule, National Water Council remained a cruel study in negligence.

The Water Resources Minister of the present government is reported to have recently alluded to the necessity of a national water policy. But he linked it with the expected breakthrough in the Indo-Bangladesh talks on the disputed water issues.

Experts are, however, of the opinion that the initiative for a national water policy need not be necessarily connected with the Farakka problem. The alarming rate at which underground level of water is going down and other resources of water are falling short meeting the demand of a growing population, the necessity of national water policy, it looks like cannot wait any longer. Go for it now.

More Transparency

It was good to see Bangladesh Bank act quickly and decisively in dealing with the revelation of one of its official being involved in an unwarranted and mysterious act of power exercise. The Assistant Director who had earlier given one of the commercial banks a directive for the compilation of the list of clients who were ministers of the past government including their relatives, patrons and even supporters, has been given just deserts. The authority, according to the reports, has suspended the aberrant banker.

Though the concerned authorities wasted no time in tackling the situation competently, a word of caution still needs to be aired. They say habits die hard. In the fearful recurring pattern of Bangladesh political reality, the proverb should be observed in an altered form: scars of experience die hard. Indeed so. The creation of a highly undesirable and unnecessary political controversy at the BIRDEM is not a memory of too long ago to flash across one's mind in this respect. Appalled, we saw how more-Catholic-than-the Pope attitude led to the vitiation of the atmosphere of a public place. More often than not, excessive zeal to prove allegiance leads to acts of subversion wittingly or unwittingly.

Chances are there that over enthusiastic but potentially subversive elements within the government may have been behind this latest discovery of glitch in such an important institution, no matter how individual and apolitical it may be made to look now. Though stray and small, incidents like these serve as eye openers to the provocative possibilities of using the public institutions for persecuting political opponents. On the other hand, they do world of undeserved harm to the government which may be dangerously unaware of its unintended involvement and the process of depreciation of its credential owing to the reclaim arising out of these evil influences.

What looms large as a brooding shadow on one's mind following this revelation, is the exposed and unguarded state of that part of the bureaucracy which is far and away from the centre. We do not know how much vulnerable is it to the explored and unexplored possibilities of similar sinister acts. To avoid further deterioration in the political milieu, to ensure a semblance of unanimity, above all to usher in an era of good governance, transparency in the operation of all government agencies should be ensured so that their underpinnings are not open to doubt and threat.

Wanted Breathing Spaces

The universities of the nation are zones out of the operation of the laws of the land — something we had in the British times called excluded areas. It seems there is a serious contender for that rare honour — in Gulshan. This is a park — three acres of once-open space on which some 20 lakh taka was spent for developing into what its name once implied — a tree-lined and shaded area out of vehicular access and meant to be used by children and old people as also by young people and working men and men — for good time and good air. But, as reported by The Daily Star, this place could never have the chance to become a park — although DCC papers designate it as such. Some 500 families have taken possession of the place and built shacks and tenements on it. Every passing day the population bulges, thanks to the local mastan-lords who make the allotments.

The Taltala Gulshan Park is not a unique case of an aborted city garden. The city, is a park-poor place. Parks are breathing lungs of a city both physically and in human terms. But the few that are there — on paper and in reality — have been taken over by unauthorised people for more useful purposes than standing like egregious fools inside a 20 lakh taka a katha prime city zones. The useful activity includes mugging, prostituting and pimping.

The whole city lacks a spot where the soul could have a moment of bliss. Some spot out of the reach of the mechanical ear-splitting noise. The DCC and the government too must put its feet down and vacate the place of squatters and develop it into a proper park — otherwise the outcome will be injurious to governance and rule of law, not to say anything of the health of the city.

Railway: Skating on Thin Ice, How Long?

by Chandra Shekhar Das

Today realism begs to dawn on that hangover of unconcerned romanticism. The shuddering mishap at Hili that killed about thirty people not long ago, followed by the recent and more central one at Khilkhet, has left all sentient people convinced that railway is no longer the idea of movement on a chartered course, slouchingly but safely.

DEATH is still taking its toll, albeit in a tricky way. Reports of Saturday's train accident victims succumbing to their injuries are serving as ready reminders of death lurking in the sleepy steel. Perhaps, it is only serving the cause of a grim memory. Beyond that lies a tomorrow shrouded in as much uncertainty and indifference as is the today of railway in Bangladesh.

Notwithstanding, the stone age reality in the sector of mass commutation of people and goods, railway in Bangladesh has managed to live an uncritical life as a delightful diversion from other modes of transport and savoury memory. Perhaps, the general backwardness of this region in the context of industrial advancement in the subcontinent has allowed railway to thrive on romantic associations of travels through nature and all that. More people with the privilege of being under the railway network were in the habit of pulling legs of those living in the trackless zones of the country. Few seemed to have given thought to the fact that while romanticism reigned too long in railway of this part, rest of the world, depending on realism, went out keep pace with changing times.

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Tacky tracks bedeviled further by tacker management, have become powerful patterns of peril. And this is far from being an overnight reality. More than five hundred people have already become the martyrs of mechanical mishap mainly stemming from mismanagement in the last eleven years or so. Yet, a consciousness based on transparency and accountability has not emerged. Things have been allowed to slide from bad to worse as nobody's business. Although calling quits is not a solution to any problem, the courage to shoulder moral responsibility as exemplified, for an instance, by Lal Bahadur Shastri after an accident during his tenure as the railway minis-

ter of India, is an unexplored possibility as is the attempt to civilise, let alone modernise railway.

The present crisis in railway, according to the insiders flows from the fountainhead. Stasis at the policy-making level of problem backlog. Although a rail authority comprising the Finance Secretary, representatives of ERD, and FBCCI among others and the Communications Minister at the head has replaced the previous rail board since 1995, no improvement has been registered.

Unconfirmed allegations suggest regular meetings of the authority, so vital for decision of the policy makers, do not take place due to the want of quorum, a tell-tale sign of apathy of the very people who matter.

While the authority is reported to have done hardly anything visible for the improvement of a system on the verge of

collapse, its formation has rendered a very important bureaucratic slot completely functionless. In 1982 the government split the whole rail administration in two zones — east and west, under two general managers. A DG, mostly railway secretaries was centrally located to coordinate the functions of the two GMs. However, in the present set up of bureaucracy the DG has been left with no job worth mentioning.

Many feel, the reign of complete unconcern in the railway sector is an outcome of unequal competition. The accent of the different donor agencies to expand and bolster the road transport system has turned the railway as the step child of the government. Ten thousand out of its 56 thousand workforce, retrenched through golden handshake in accordance with an Asian Development Bank (ADB) recommendation, comprised mostly skilled employees of the technical area. The clerical population of the workforce which dodged the option

of golden handshake for its own petty interest and together with unofficial freeze on fresh and effective recruitment in the vacant areas, this vicious and apparently inveterate cycle has been sapping the life blood of a moribund system.

With an unskilled workforce not reinforced since 1989, the railway has already got involved in nearly three thousand accidents of varying magnitudes in the last ten years. Although eight enquiry committees were set up to probe into the mishaps in this period of time, all of them as the aftermath transpired, suffered the similar fate of lying in the cold storage.

In living on the legacy though not trying to preserve it, Bangladesh railway has set a record of sort. Only four miles of new railway track first in 1984, after independence was laid from Daulatdia to Goulanda.

In the twenty five years of country's independence, quite a few branch lines have become

derelict. The number of diminishing railway station stands at 470 only in the context of whole railway track across the country. In most places the maintenance status is woefully short of the standard. Shingles are non-existent at some places while it is the sleepers at others. Fraught with risks, the parallel lines are providing passage for the plying of the trains. When accidents take place and furore is raised Taka 5000 — a Pakistani provision for compensation — is doled out to the family members of the victim.

Although adaptation in a world perennially on course of innovative evolution is synonymous with progress, primitivism cannot be wiped out as a way of life. But what for? Obviously for the less demand it makes on tranquillity and caution for survival. But primitivism has given great fillip to perilous prospects in Bangladesh. Once a dump-yard of indiscriminate recruitment of the non Bengali population in the pre-independence state, thanks to the discriminatory policies of the Pakistani rulers, Bangladesh railway today has turned into a virtual laboratory of ineptitude, insecurity and uncertainty and the saddest part of it all is that there is no hint of change in the stifling situation.

The Birth of Muslim League

The separatist policy of the British began to have its effect. But probably the main factor was that Indian nationalism had a Hinduised look because the majority of the freedom fighters were Hindus.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldeep Nayar writes from New Delhi

were in touch with them. Even otherwise, the two communities tended to react jointly when it came to the British, the third party.

Against this background, the Muslim League was constituted on December 30, 1906, at Dhaka. Two reasons were advanced for its establishment. One, it will 'foster a sense of loyalty to the British government among the Muslims of India.' Two, it would advance the claims of Muslims against Hindus and other communities in respect of service under the crown.

The leaders of Muslim League were opposed to political independence, the demand raised by Congress. They described the party as the 'disloyal organisation of rebels.' They felt that if they joined any movement of Congress, the British would not support their claims for special treatment in education and service.

Whatever else might have been the effect of the League's creation, it set most Muslims thinking that their interests were not the same as those of Muslims. From then onwards, there could be a Hindu-Muslim alliance but not a united national movement. And when the communal electorates were introduced in 1909, the fusion of the two communities became still more difficult.

Otherwise too, the Muslims had not forgotten the days when they had ruled India for 800 years. And they realized how different they were.

Jinnah, who joined the League spoke more or less the same language as that of Congress. He was considered the best ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity. And he had the League bury its differences with their 'Hindu friends' in a conference in Bombay on December 30, 1915, in the presence of the

three Congress leaders — Dr Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi.

A few months later, in April 1916, Jinnah had a joint committee of Congress and the Muslim League constituted to discuss 'the irreducible minimum' of reforms they should demand from the government. He appealed to the Hindus to go on record as agreeing to the Muslims' demand for separate electorates to win their 'confidence and trust.'

Till then Congress had not accepted communal electorates formally. Almost as if he was not himself convinced of the merits of his demand, Jinnah rationalized: 'The demand for separate electorates is not a matter of policy but a matter of necessity to the Muslims who require to be roused from the coma and torpor into which they have fallen for so long.'

Soon after, Congress responded to Jinnah's appeal and agreed to 'guarantee in certain provinces in which the Muslims were minority a proportion of seats in the future legislative councils in excess of the number they could otherwise hope to win.' This was the Lucknow Pact, and this may well have sown the seed of the two-nation theory.

The atmosphere of amity generated by the Lucknow Pact, however, did not last long. In 1918, there were widespread riots between the Hindus and the Muslims. The gap between the two communities widened. Gandhi temporarily retrieved the situation by forging Hindu-Muslim unity over the Khilafat movement (1920), which was aimed at forcing the British to maintain the authority of the Caliphate in Turkey. However, Jinnah found himself on the opposite side during the Khilafat movement. He was unhappy to see politics 'intertwined with religion.'

Jinnah had not yet reached the point of no return. And there flickered some hope of unity when in 1928 Congress drafted a constitution for India, known as the Nehru Report (named after Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal's father, who was the drafting committee's chairman).

Declaring that the Muslims' fear of Hindu domination was illogical, the report rejected separate electorates and weightage for minorities but favoured reservation of seats for Muslims at the Centre and in the provinces in which they were in a minority.

The 14-point programme was too bitter a pill for Congress to swallow: it stuck to the Nehru Report. The two sides began drifting apart. If the minorities felt insecure, Jinnah warned, the inevitable result would be 'revolution and civil war.' Thirty-eight years later, the subcontinent of India was torn by something like that.

Jinnah's forebodings did not deter the Congress party from intensifying its campaign for independence. Scores of Muslims joined the freedom movement and came to be known as Nationalist Muslims. But the majority of them kept aloof. There were numerous reasons: Gandhi's emphasis on the worship of the cow, which the Muslims ate; the fear that their historical and religious culture would be submerged in a Hindu-majority Congress party.

The gap between the development of the Hindus who had taken advantage of English education and Western thought, and of the Muslims who had not widened. The separatist policy of the British began to have its effect. But probably the main factor was that Indian nationalism had a Hinduised look because the majority of the freedom fighters were Hindus.

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.

What is a "Bir Uttom" worth?

Sir, I refer to the letter in your daily "What is a Bir Uttom medal worth?" on September 15, '96.

The is very painful when you read the plight of a Freedom Fighter, as explained. However, the lady writer should know the philosophy of our country and politicians, including the party which gave leadership in the Liberation War. "Beat the drums of Liberation War, but never glorify the Freedom Fighters or their achievements."

She should not feel so bad, at least Lt Col Qazi Nooruzzaman was awarded a CMH treatment, there are so many ex-military FFs who are not allowed this facility.

Sister, this is our unfortunate destiny.

Rashidi

House 17, Road 23,

Sector 4, Uttara