

A Looming Disaster

There has been a stream of alarming reports recently in the national press of arsenic pollution of ground water in many south-western districts. This has led to largescale poisoning cases in the affected areas. On Wednesday a presentation was made on the threat at the GSS. Case studies of twenty patients of arsenic poisoning, mainly from Pabna and Bagerhat, showed widespread skin lesions specially on the palms and a quick run to skin cancer and death. The question was how many patients do these 20 represent? What is the size of the threat?

It was found that all in the family of every afflicted person were also ill due to arsenic poisoning. And there are cases of entire villages suffering the similar disease. Could it be that these 20 represented 2 or 20 thousand or even 20 lakh doomed persons? The experts said it was, till now, a population of 15 million that stood threatened. That's a looming national disaster.

The problem now was to get tens of millions unlearn the tubewell motivation they had imbibed through the best part of the century. For in the affected areas it was ground water up to a depth of 200 feet that was polluted by arsenic. And where would the endangered population go giving up their tubewells? Back to untreated surface water which could be equally or more dangerous? A recourse to deep tubewells has been made sporadically by PHE, so far the best of our service agencies. This is paying good result but a wholesale switchover to deep tubewells, even if achievable, is far from advisable. So?

Sealing of particularly noxious tubewells has been done in certain areas without telling the people what to do to get safe water. For the moment the best that can be done by people in the interior using shallow tubewell water is to resort to overnight sedimentation before using the water.

But how does one know if their tubewell is producing arsenic water or not? There is no way practically, at least for now before any user falls a victim. Up until now treatment of such chronic cases of arsenic poisoning seemed outside of the knowledge and power of about the whole of our medical profession. Simple identification or diagnosis is yet to be grasped by physicians in general.

We are no alarmists after Jeremiah. But what is already here of it, looks like snowballing any day into a national disaster, hard to contain and defeat. A successful counter to it must have a precise idea of the source of this spread of arsenic through subterranean water. And both we and experts in West Bengal which is a pray to the same scourge, are in complete darkness about this.

It cannot be said that the government has been properly seized of the nature and size of the challenge. It is high time that government, the Health Ministry specially, woke up to the danger before it is too late.

Timely Emphasis

So what has been felt for long has finally been expressed. A just-released World Bank report has termed the judicial system in Bangladesh as being unable to cope with needs of the citizens. The novelty about the latest utterance on the inadequacy of our judicial system is that it is based on a thorough study with special emphasis and focus on problematic areas.

Our laws are extremely outdated because most of them were made in the colonial days. No matter how ludicrous they sound and how much potential of tragic consequences they carry within them, hardly any steps have been taken so far to update them and make them effective. Despite the tall talks and speeches we have heard on democracy and the right of people as its life-force by the leaders of different parties from time to time, the cultivation of passivity in the judicial sector goes to tell how uncommitted and unfeeling the politicians have been over the years. Apart from cumbersome procedures and the inability of the superior judiciary to monitor court facilities, the other significant aspect the report dealt with is the lack of well-trained judges and law officers.

Really, the scarcity of judges and efficient officers is one of the major drawbacks of our judicial system. The prospect for an improvement in the situation can be bright only when there are enough institutions to impart legal training in the country. The few institutions we have are not equipped sufficiently to contribute effectively in ameliorating the situation.

The antique look of our judicial system is not only a source of suffering to our citizens alone but it is also a deterrent to growth in our economy. It has given birth to a culture and environment that are not at all conducive to transactional efficiency, a fact that discourages local and foreign investors. The minister for law and justice appears pretty switched on about the reforms required to clear the Augean stable. We hope he would match his words with some prompt actions.

Expedite Police Reform

What happened to an anesthetised 17-year old Seema throughout Wednesday night in Rauzan police station is not only another case of female repression but also a gross violation of human rights. We speak of barbarism on women in times of war but what have we got to say about this kind of beastliness to a free citizen of an independent country by some of its own law enforcers? One can be as much stupefied as Seema was when that poor girl was asked to recount the tale of her terrible sufferings on the fateful night. The society owes Seema an answer.

Yasmeen of Dinajpur, Seema of Rauzan and a great number of "unreported" victims of the predatory instinct have earned the police a bad name, something it must try and erase now with a total devotion to the task of winning the confidence of the people, especially the womenfolk.

The Home Ministry should not only ensure a proper probe into Wednesday night's incident so that those criminals in uniform are given exemplary punishment but it should also do something immediately to reform the law enforcing agency. Something is fundamentally wrong with our police. It is not lack of motivation due to low pay or for that matter their numerical inadequacy, it is a frightening absence of moral obligation, restraint and social commitment.

Few Dots from Development Debates

Development is not only a matter to be judged only by end states. The freedom to choose among commodity bundles or different options should constitute an important component of well-being.

THERE was a time when economic growth and economic development were synonymously used and per capita income used to be the sole determinant of both. The folly was found soon. Paul Streeten, the world-famous economist, cites few of the many examples as to why per capita income failed to fare as an indicator of development. Life expectancy in Sri Lanka is reported to be 71 years although this war-ravaged country's per capita income is only \$ 500. This can be compared with South Africa's life expectancy of 55 years and a per capita income of \$ 2,010. Sri Lanka's per capita income is 15 times lower than Saudi Arabia's but her literacy rate is much ahead of that in Saudi Arabia. A child born in Harlem in New York City has a lower life expectancy than one born in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries of the world. A child born in the capital city of the richest country of the world — district of Columbia — has a lower life expectancy than one born in Sri Lanka — a country still bracketed as underdeveloped. Paul Streeten argues that there are many other similar discrepancies, even though the correlation between economic and human indicators is quite high for all countries.

thinkers and practitioners turned their back from GNP per capita and began to look for newer ones which could truly reflect people's development. "Thinking about poverty has evolved from economic growth as the performance criterion to employment, income distribution, the informal sector and via basic needs to human development." The Basic Needs Approach called for an inclusion of items, in establishing a criterion, that tend to serve human basic needs. These items are, for example, food, shelter, cloth, health etc. The experiment went on for a pretty long time when it was discovered that some of the interpretations of the approach, allegedly, ran in terms of commodity bundles or specific needs satisfaction. The past thoughts on development are also alleged to have got lost in the intricacies of means and lost sight of the end. Amartya Sen travelled further. He appeared to reckon development, as Paul Streeten says, in terms of "capabilities" and functionings rather than satisfaction, happiness or commodities. Sen tends to believe that it is

not commodities per se but also their characteristics which consumers value. Thus Sen draws attention on analysis of characteristics of the consumers e.g. whether they are capable of making use of commodities. Take the case of food. Food has different significance

scribes that development is not only a matter to be judged only by end states. The freedom to choose among commodity bundles or different options should constitute an important component of well-being. A given commodity bundle has a different significance to the con-

choice should not be given that much of emphasis and that poverty should be observed in terms of achievements. From that view point, the monk, Gandhi and the pauper — all three — are deprived.

Should development aim at happiness? Paul argues that happiness, as experienced by the individual, is not what human development can aim or is mainly about. Happiness is difficult to be delivered by the government. Again a person may be miserably poor but may appear to be contented. Paul cites a case from Anita Brookner's novel where a woman is found to be so modest that she did not even presume to be unhappy. Women in India and Bangladesh report much less being ill than their male counterparts.

All the above mentioned facts (not fictions!) led development thinkers to land on an index called Human Development Index (HDI) — a brainchild of the UNO. The index incorporates three basic variables: GDP per head, life expectancy and literacy. In the life expectancy category infant and child mortality is included.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



to different persons and the differentiation hinges on human characteristics. If a consumer is healthy, food helps to meet his basic needs. But if the same consumer has parasites in stomach, the same food helps to meet the basic needs of the worms rather than that of the consumer. Likewise, the impact of food as a basic necessity would also depend on age, sex, pregnancy/lactation, education etc.

sumer according to whether she has other options, though she does not exercise them or whether that same bundle is the only one available. There is a difference between a starving pauper, a fasting monk and Gandhi on hunger strike which is not reflected in the low calorie intake of all three. Both the monk and Gandhi have capabilities to choose between options but only starving pauper lacks capability. Critics, of course, argue that freedom of

The Ganges Water Issue : Transparency Needed

by Amjad Hossain Khan

The quantum of the water has to be decided at the highest political level. India must agree for replacement works like construction of barrages on the Ganges and Brahmaputra for utilisation of the water resources to be shared on a permanent basis.

BANGLADESH has suffered a lot since 1975 and later on under the Ganges Agreement of 1977 when they sacrificed 40 per cent of the water of the Ganges at Farakka for India use.

India was not happy with the water sharing agreement from the very beginning. That was the reason they did not agree on long term sharing of the Ganges water while discussing the sharing arrangement in 1982. After the expiry of Ganges Water Agreement of 1977, India re-named it as Memorandum of Understanding for a period of two years only and deleting the 80 per cent guarantee clause which assured Bangladesh their share in case of low flow of the Ganges. Subsequently, the MOU was renewed for three years which expired in 1988. There was no agreement in 1984. India made it clear that they would not renew the MOU unless Bangladesh agreed to discuss the link canal issue proposed by India.

During the period between 1980 to 1986, series of meetings were held by the two sides at highest political level, minister level and secretary level. Assurances were given by the Prime Minister of India time and again for a solution of the Ganges water problem. But due to lack of political will of India no progress was made on this issue.

With the change of governments in Bangladesh and India in 1996, the issue has become live again. The new government of Bangladesh gave highest priority for permanent status of the Ganges water before the next dry season.

The new government in India expressed India's political will to resolve the issue also before the next dry season which starts from 1st January, 1997.

Hundred and twenty million people of Bangladesh suffered a lot for the last 25 years for lack of adequate dry season flows in the Ganges and other common rivers. The northern and south western region of Bangladesh suffered much due to desertification in the north and salinity intrusion in the south west. The economy of Bangladesh has suffered tremendously.

Since early August, 1996, the water issue has become important when Indian Foreign Secretary came to Bangladesh to hand over a letter from the Indian Prime Minister. The Indian Prime Minister hinted at summit level meeting to resolve the water sharing issue. He also expressed India's keen interest to settle all outstanding issues in the shortest possible time (The Daily Star, 8 August, 1996).

The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh in a press conference has said that Bangladesh has initiated a dialogue with India on the whole gamut of bilateral relations but made it clear that water issue would not be linked with any other issues including the transit. (The Independent 18 August, 1996) The Foreign Minister also

said that Bangladesh is firm to resolve the Ganges water sharing issue with India before the next dry season (The Daily Star, 18 August, 1996).

The Water Resources Minister while addressing a seminar on water sharing said: "We would like to give a clear message to the international community that firstly, we want a permanent solution and we want it immediately."

"Secondly, we want our just share and thirdly, we call upon the Government and people of India that we seek their cooperation to resolve the issue in a friendly manner." (The Daily Star, 11 August 1996)

The Indian Foreign Minister Mr I K Gujral came to Dhaka on 6 September, 1996 and had formal discussions on the bilateral issues between the two countries.

The Ganges water sharing issue was discussed in particular. Addressing a press conference before his departure, Mr Gujral said "The water sharing issue has been discussed to the satisfaction of Bangladesh. I am accepting in principle Bangladesh's position in this matter."

Mr Abdus Samad Azad, Bangladesh Foreign Minister, in the same press conference said "Highest priority has been given to resolving water sharing problem and it would be worked out before the onset of the coming dry season." (The Daily Star, 8 September, 1996).

On the specific issue on the quantity of water for Bangladesh, the Indian Foreign Minister said that a mechanism will be set in motion to work out the details.

The Water Resources Minister expressed his hope that an agreement on water sharing problem will be signed before December before the beginning of the dry season (The Independent, 8 September, 1996).

Bangladesh and India have agreed to set up an Expert Committee as an institutional mechanism to devise a modality to reach an agreement on the sharing of the Ganges water issue before the next lean period (The Independent, 9 September, 1996).

Mr I K Gujral was very happy about his talks with Bangladesh on all issues. Replying to a question he said that he is hopeful of an accord on water sharing "even before the next dry season" (The Daily Star, 10 September, 1996).

A few hours after his return from China trip with Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Mr Abdus Samad Azad dashed to Calcutta on 17 September, 1996 to discuss with the West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu on water sharing.

Normally in such sensitive issue like water sharing discussions are held partly in formal

meetings and mostly in informal meetings. Before the visit of the Indian Foreign Minister to Dhaka the present government assured the country that water sharing agreement will be done before the next dry season. The people have not questioned the sincerity of the government in solving the knotty problem. But the people do expect that in discussing the water sharing problem of the Ganges, Bangladesh interest should not be sacrificed.

A few questions came up recently when conflicting news were coming on Indian and local news media about the Ganges water sharing issue. Let us examine these issues.

1. Both sides agreed for a permanent sharing of the Ganges water before next dry season.

2. An Expert Committee headed by Additional Foreign Secretary of the two countries was formed.

3. The mandate of the Expert Committee was not formally decided and issued.

4. Indian Foreign Minister indicated three issues for the Expert Committee: a) To determine the exact quantity of Ganges water available at Farakka during the dry season. b) To determine the actual requirement of Bangladesh. c) To find out the ground reality in both the countries.

5. Bangladesh Foreign Minister did not comment on these issues. He said that the Expert Committee will discuss the modality and recommend their views on sharing.

6. Mr Abdus Samad Azad, Bangladesh Foreign Minister, left for Calcutta to discuss the water issue with Mr Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal.

7. Quoting Mr Jyoti Basu, BBC reported from Calcutta that "he felt Bangladesh would require more water during lean season. But at the same time he would require more water to keep the navigability of the Calcutta Port".

8. Akashbani Calcutta in a new bulletin on 18.9.96 quoting Mr Jyoti Basu said that there had been difference of opinion about the quantity of water at Farakka which has created some problems in working out the sharing agreement. He said that West Bengal could not continue with Bangladesh on the quantity of flow which was being demanded by Bangladesh.

9. Addressing a press conference in Dhaka on 21-9-96, the Foreign Minister said that "Bangladesh is in accord with quantity of water and you will know it in due course".

10. The Foreign Minister said that Bangladesh would hold talks with Nepal and Bhutan, if necessary, to resolve the water sharing problem and joint management of water resources of the region.

11. The Bangladesh Expert Team left for New Delhi on 26 September, 1996. The Expert Team will prepare ground work for a new agreement on the sharing of the Ganges water, by synchronizing the difference in data on the flow of the Ganges during the dry season.

12. Mr Jyoti Basu talking to BBC on 27.9.96 has expressed his willingness to give Bangladesh "a little more water" but also underlined the problem of his state. Regarding the water sharing issue he said "it might take a little more time".

13. Mr Jyoti Basu also said to BBC that "there is no need for a five-year agreement. Let us see if we can give them a little more water for two years". He also said that a committee has been formed to assess Bangladesh's requirement of water.

It appears from the above that all is not going smoothly as hoped by Bangladesh. During the earlier negotiations on water sharing and subsequent agreements in 1975, 1977, 1982 and 1985, the withdrawal of water of the Ganges at Farakka was for Bangladesh and West

Bengal which was obviously meant for improving the navigability of Calcutta Port. Later on it was found that West Bengal needs water for irrigation mostly as flushing the water for Hooghly did not improve navigability.

It is interesting to note that the issue of navigability of Hooghly has again come up during the recent discussion. The statement of Chief Minister of West Bengal that they can give a little more water to Bangladesh in the dry season is surprising.

Mr Basu's comment about the period of agreement came as a surprise to one and all in the country. It clearly indicates that instead of a permanent water sharing agreement, Bangladesh is going to have a short term sharing agreement for 2 to 5 years.

Bangladesh Foreign Minister and the Foreign Office were tight-lipped on the issue. Mr Basu's statement in BBC has embarrassed the Foreign Minister. He could have been more diplomatic in his statement.

Why the discussion on permanent water sharing has been

OPINION

Parliamentary Etiquette and Other Number One Problems

Abdul Kader

What is a culture? Perhaps, the shortest definition of culture is: "the way of life of a people." As a people or nation, certainly we have a way of life, that is culture. But what it looks like? Does it look like the one that the people had recently seen on the floor of the parliament where a member uttered filthy words, unworthy to be uttered in civil societies, against the most respected Speaker of the House, who is no less a person than the former United Nations General Assembly President Mr Humayun Rasheed Choudhury? Etiquette or manners, whether inside the parliament or outside, may be described as "a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use." One can surmise that the "now-famous" MP who used abusive language against a gentle man par excellence does not, perhaps, generally use forks while eating the guaranteed Dal-Bhat-Machhi!

No, the above-mentioned definition of etiquette or manners may be too difficult to understand by those who do not bother for parliamentary etiquette. Rather, they have proved themselves, as seen on the television screen, to be no less 'fresher' than their equals in other underdeveloped countries. To drive home a point a man can certainly take the liberty of making different postures and gestures before his audience. But the way some of our MPs did it in the parliament at the cost of Tk 15,000 per minute annoyed the taxpayers. However, while attacking the opponents some members did not use such vulgar words as reportedly used in Bihar State Assembly (India) where agitated members attack mothers and sisters of fellow members without least hesitation.

The shameful incident that occurred on the floor of the august House and witnessed by the whole nation did not only cast an indirect aspersion on our national manners but also exposed many other shortcomings of the whole country. Besides, the member who violated parliamentary norms by using someone else's microphone, betrayed his ignorance of the conventional rules of personal behaviour in polite society, or, "the order of procedure established by custom in a parliament" which is given as the meaning of 'etiquette' as one would find in any dictionary of authority.

But why are we witnessing such erosion of human values in our society? Certainly there are historical and social reasons. To discern some of those reasons one has to do some rigorous digging of the past social order of our country. What was the educational status of our society in early 30s or mid-40s when some sorts of a nationhood was in the making for us? No doubt, the society has undergone many undesirable changes during nearly one quarter of a century of 'fake democracy'.

Today we are proud that our Fourth Estate has come of age and taking full advantage of its maturity it has lavishly doled out valuable spaces (The Daily Star deserves special mention) for guiding the nation towards its cherished goal. Innumerable writings and suggestions put forward by the press have, very clearly, shown the path to tread on for the just solution of the national problems. Though an absurdity, I feel inclined to say that if nothing is written in next one decade, any democratic government worth its name which cares for minimum transparency can easily guide the nation merely acting on those writings and suggestions.

But where are those vanishing breeds of bureaucrats who can work round-the-clock for the welfare of the nation? A scholarly and patriotic bureaucracy is an asset for good governance. Surrounded by turncoats and part-timers no government can steer the nation to its goal. Some sense of frustrations are seen in certain credulous and short-sighted quarters who do not find any 'tangible changes' even after 100-day rule of Awami League government! Do they know how many years it took for the anti-peopleocracy is an asset for good governance. Surrounded by turncoats and part-timers no government can steer the nation to its goal. Some sense of frustrations are seen in certain credulous and short-sighted quarters who do not find any 'tangible changes' even after 100-day rule of Awami League government! Do they know how many years it took for the anti-peopleocracy is an asset for good governance. Surrounded by turncoats and part-timers no government can steer the nation to its goal. 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