

Medical Frauds

Physicians and surgeons hold such power over human individuals in certain situations as can be simply called godly. On them depends the individual's well-being and a chance to continue in life rather than be gobbled up by death — at least that is the way the patients and their people feel. And governments and societies also see these modern healers in no lesser light. Who, what kind of a man or woman, governments can trust their citizens' lives and the loving parents and spouses their dearest ones' destiny to? There must be people excelling all others in knowledge and expertise and skill. But these acquisitions must come compounded with honesty and a sense of mission and dedication. It is insistence on quality and honesty that sets medical education and profession apart from all others.

The government and its concerned agencies do not seem to know for sure the number of medical colleges operating in the country. Days back, a national daily named as many as eleven medical colleges out of which only two were recognised by the government and the Medical Council. What about the rest? The rest has been taking students to capacity and charging as much as Tk 3.5 lakh for admission only; monthly tuition fees not less than Tk 2000 per mensem. Who is going to guarantee the quality of education in these set-ups? If not the Medical Council, who? In the absence of that, these are medical frauds operating in a grand way under the very nose of an endlessly benign government. Cheating students and their parents and grooming cheats that would feed on society at large!

It is no wonder that the Rajshahi Medical College has been paralysed by an internee strike on the seventh day yesterday there was no sign of the college's recovering from it. Nothing academic or professional was involved in the strike action. The government and the Medical Council have completely failed to establish that a medical college or its hospital is not just any other institution. Perhaps it is they who do not understand this. Or the ICU in a newly founded heart hospital wouldn't have become a fish market in its very first month.

Benazir's Plight

However unpopular and corrupt, Benazir's was an elected government. In democracy, if a government turns out to be totally inept, then it is the voters who have the right to punish it by defeating it out in the next election. How can the signature of one person, the President, count for more than millions of voters who elected the government. So, as firm believers in democracy, we cannot in any way accept the arbitrary way in which Benazir's government has been thrown out.

Benazir's government probably got what it deserved. As one opposition politician remarked, "She was running the country like a witch". In fact, political observers say that her arrogance and attitude that she was 'born' to rule Pakistan really did her in. Immediately after getting elected, she started persecuting the opposition, including piling up corruption charges against them. It was reported that against the former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, Benazir had filed more than one hundred corruption cases. She was using the judiciary to carry out her will. What damaged her most was the public suspicion that PM's husband, Asif Zardari, was deeply involved in corruption. Benazir, instead of reining him in, made him the minister for investment. This broke the proverbial camel's back and many supporters of Benazir's government began to move away from her.

Why did Benazir make the same mistakes that she did the first time? Why should issues of corruption, misuse of power, nepotism, personal aggrandisement, etc., arise against a democratically elected leader? The answer regrettably is that in countries like ours, democracy often is a tool our leaders use to realise their undemocratic aims. For them rhetorics of democracy is meant only to persuade the people and not to impact on their own behaviour. Unfortunately for Pakistan, both her father and Benazir herself always took the people's verdict as vindication of their 'birth right' to rule and not as right of the people to choose their own leaders. Their arrogance has brought another setback for democracy in Pakistan.

We hope that the caretaker government stands firm in holding fresh elections within the stipulated time and in a free and fair manner. We also hope that no encumbrances are put on the way of Benazir and the PPP to participate in it. Democracy must not be tampered with at any cost.

Strange Indeed

Has the componental reality of our health sector reached the stage of saturation? The unabated flow of patients going abroad for better treatment and care do not really suggest that. Also, any fact finding survey would reveal it anytime that Bangladesh is one of those countries where the ratio between patient and medicare representative is alarmingly tilted to the former. Yet, we have to try to sink into our consciousness the reality that more than five thousand skilled and senior nurses are jobless at present.

The report carried in a leading Bengali daily yesterday brought to light a frustratingly long history of suffering for a group of sisters bound in a uniquely sacred pledge of providing cordial and efficient care to the sufferers. Absence of a proper system in the management sector of nursing service has led to the suspension of appointment of senior staff nurses since 1990, the source of the present predicament. One reason for the state of systemlessness is the want of a sound government policy regarding management in this service. Apparently, the service is understaffed and disorganized at the higher tier. If there were right number of people at the right places the tale of joblessness would not perhaps emerge because that would have ensured regular promotion for the deserving candidates and the sudden stasis which has seemingly led to this crisis could have been averted, even if partially.

It is an irony that while there is a global demand for skilled nurses, our country and people have the misfortune of getting to know the unfortunate story of 5500 skilled nurses being jobless. Strange indeed!

Competitive Strategy and Competition in an Open Economy

The competition in an open economy tends to become unjust and unequal. In real life economy, competition is always imperfect since in every situation, there cannot be millions of producers and consumers so that each one of them has only marginal influence over prices received or paid in the open market.

After the end of the cold war, the global economy has opened up all around. Excluding North Korea, perhaps there is no other country which remains isolated from the rest of the world. Open economy inevitably calls for competitive markets. However, to what extent the competition is just and equal — it is always a fair competition?

I was on a visit to a road development project in an Asian country east of Bangladesh. At lunch time, I saw the bulldozer operator eating lunch consisting of canned sardine, bread and a bottle of Coca Cola. The country does not can any fish although it is a coastal state nor does it produce any wheat for the bread. It is not a food deficit country. Rice and dry fish are the standard lunch time menu for working people out in the field. The high import content of the lunch time menu is quite obvious. Since it is an open economy, consumer has the right to prefer imported canned sardine instead of local dry fish, bread from imported wheat and not rice, while the invasion of Coca Cola, a culture by itself, is all quite well known all over the world. However, the question remains of the fairness of the competition. On one side are the giant corporations like Burnle Bee canning tuna and sardine all over the world. Continental Grains controlling with few others the entire global market for grains and the Coca Cola corporation; and on the other side are the poor paddy farmers and coastal fishermen. The competition can never be fair.

The giant department stores and supermarkets are now spreading all across the developing world. What would then happen to the neighbourhood stores or the traditional market places where there are some time a thousand small shops. The vendors on the pavements may also go out of business. Similarly, the fast food chains like Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken are making serious inroads into the traditional eating places throughout the developing world. This is the result of competition in an open economy: one giant will be responsible for the death of a thousand small and micro

business enterprises. The economists will say that this is development; it is matter of economies of scale, that is, bigger the size, cheaper it is in terms of cost per unit of the product or service.

It may however be noted that the small business enterprises or even the small producers of rice or fish do survive in a highly competitive environment — they fiercely compete against each other and are quite efficient. In fact, death of a thousand vendors due to the emergence of a single giant tends to negate competition by bringing about monopoly or monopolistic conditions into the market. But it is an age of open economy. Therefore, we have to accept the end of small business as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of economic modernization. Is this correct?

The competition in an open economy tends to become unjust and unequal. In real life economy, competition is always imperfect since in every situation, there cannot be millions of producers and consumers so that each one of them has only marginal influence over prices received or paid in the open market. However, in the example I quoted above, domestic markets for buying and selling of rice and fish, two basic consumer goods, are highly competitive, which are then vitiated by the open economy and the entry of global corporations. This is because their products for the market are highly differentiated, packed and served in such manners that consumers' preference are immediately heightened. The small producers are not in a position to compete, given their lack of organisation and therefore absence of any significant market influence. On the other hand, consumers' preference are immediately drawn away from traditional foods, primarily due to strong international demonstration effects which are intensified constantly through media and international television.

An interesting example is the present market price of atta and majda in Bangladesh. Never in the history of the country, price of wheat was more than rice, as it is today. As the basic cereal, what was always considered inferior to rice and used to be consumed more only in case of scarcity of rice due to domestic production shortfall. But after years of consumption, various products manufactured from flour, its status as an inferior cereal has changed. But its import benefits the multinational grain companies and the present price of wheat compared to rice also imply that multinationals are benefiting at the cost of small rice producers of Bangladesh. I am not arguing against

the high cost sunset industries of the developed economies and our garment manufacturers do not have easy access to their markets at all times. Open economies often have lots of closed segments which are cleverly done by experts on the subjects.

Even if the market is competitive, the nature of that competition should be taken into account for manufacturers of Bangladesh. These days, competition in the ready-made garments market ultimately boils down to a battle between brand names. Bangladesh today exports over a billion dollars worth of garments. However, those garments would not get sold unless and until proper brand names are attached. It

bigwigs? This is the heart of the competitive strategy that we have to evolve through painstaking efforts and significant government support. It would not come in a day but our long-run objective should be to work towards the vertical integration from manufacturing to sale points of the big western markets. For example, Aarong and Grameen are already big names and we should think of a competitive strategy whereby we can sell Grameen check shirts or Aarong silk, if necessary directly through our own stores in London or New York. Similarly, Apex shoes should be assisted by the government to promote their own brand names as well.

A simplistic view of competition will always restrain our emergence as a newly industrialising country. Our labour is cheap and therefore we concentrate on manufacturing of simple fabrication type of industries for export — this is the current thesis of development. This will not go very far since cheap labour is the most significant indicator of our poverty and therefore to remain competitive, our labour must always remain cheap. We will continue to remain poor — from very poor to not being so poor and that's it. Competition is never perfect any where in the world. It tends to be monopolistic in most cases and quite often, oligopoly becomes the norm when multinationals dominate the international market. There is an inherent process of inequality at work in an open economy which is free to competition and not to fair competition only. At the same time it is difficult to identify fairness in open competition without restraining economic growth, and therefore, it is reasonable to leave it to the fate of market forces. However, there is a case for reconciling poverty alleviation and consequences of unrestrained competition.

We are already so poor. We must continuously struggle through our own competitive strategy in order to bring about competition with a human face.



Window on Asia

Shahid Latif

multinational companies. We must welcome foreign investment and the case in favour of an open economy is irrefutable. However, it will bring in open competition and would tend to be unjust and unequal. There must be ways and means to safeguard the interests of small farmers and fishermen in particular if not for the small domestic producers (for example, weavers) of all types in general. In the developed market economies such small producers in particular, farmers are highly organised as special interest groups and they do bring in a great deal of political pressures in order to protect their own interests against the onslaught of open economy and therefore imports of competing products. Agriculture protection has survived in spite of all the clamour for a protection-free international trade environment. Not only that, all sorts of non-tariff barriers are innovated in order to protect

has to be a Benetton T-shirt or Levi's jeans for finding a place in the department stores. Just a shirt made in Bangladesh is worth very little — it must be an Arrow shirt for good money. It is necessary to realise that the value added is primarily secured by the well known corporations with their famous brand names. What our garment makers get is worth a penny only for cutting and making. When a ready-made shirt leaves the shore line of Bangladesh it may be worth five US dollars only. When it reaches Oxford Street, London, its value would be at least two to three times more. This is the reality of competition. The poor will always be paid at his poverty ridden standards and the rich will always realize their handsome returns.

How do our manufacturers of garments, shoes, toys and other labour intensive products without well-known brand names compete with the corporate

multinational companies?

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India-Bangladesh Relations: Prospect for a Breakthrough

Now sooner had the new government in Bangladesh assumed power than there were optimism all around that the hitherto strained India-Bangladesh relations will be on the mend. It was more so because India which was watching the whole developments in Bangladesh very carefully lost no time in sending a high level envoy to Bangladesh in the person of its Foreign Secretary Salman Haider who carried a personal letter for the newly elected Prime Minister of India Devi Gowda. Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan also paid a return visit to Delhi in the first week of August and held bilateral discussion on various issues. And then the high profile four-day visit of the Indian Foreign Minister I K Gujral to Bangladesh seemed to be even more welcoming and significant. It may be mentioned here that this was the first high-level meeting between the two countries at political level since new governments took over in both Dhaka and New Delhi.

The next government under the presidency of Ziaur Rahman raised the issue before multilateral fora including the UN. In 1977, the Zia government was able to obtain from Desai government in India a renewable short term agreement with a minimum guarantee of lean season discharge for Bangladesh.

The India-Bangladesh relations which started on a highly euphoric tone began the slide down even during the lifetime of Sheikh Mujib. After his assassination in 1975 and the downfall of his government (which was friendly to India for obvious reasons) relations between the two countries took a nosedive. It was anything but warm. Thereafter the love and hate relationship between India and Bangladesh have only added bitterness. Over the years they have seen each other with suspicion and mistrust and failed to resolve any of the outstanding issues existing between them.

Out of the many issues hampering the relations between the two countries, water issue is the most crucial. To recapitulate, the then Awami League government

agreement on water sharing in the Ganges is expected before the next lean season. But the difficulties in reaching an agreement on water sharing seem to be formidable.

Another issue in Indo-Bangladesh relation is the question of the renewal of the controversial 25 years Treaty of Peace and Friendship which is due to expire on March 19, 1997. Many in Bangladesh have questioned its utility. The new Prime Minister of Bangladesh has said that she will not renew the treaty and her Foreign Minister has declared that they would treat the water issue on top of everything and safeguard Bangladesh's interests. But before Salman Haider's visit to Bangladesh, the Foreign Minister of India I K Gujral revealed to the newsmen in Delhi that Bangladesh wanted a re-assessment of the treaty. However, Bangladesh Foreign Office has denied this. And although Salman Haider said that the issue was not raised at all during his visit, BBC speculated that the extension of the treaty in some other form may have been on the card. Even some quarters in Bangladesh also believe this. But it is unlikely that India will press for renewal when Bangladesh does not want it.

Moreover, there are other more substantive issues to raise and attend to.

The other vexed issue making the relationship between the two governments worse is the issue of trade imbalance. It may be mentioned here that India is exporting goods worth Rs 3,000 crore whereas import-

ing goods only worth Rs 100 crore. Furthermore, India's imposition of countervailing tax on imports speaks about the regrettable trade affair between the two countries. Bangladesh has been ceaselessly arguing for measures to reduce the yawning trade gap between Bangladesh and India. But it seems that India was not paying any heed. Only recently, however, India has offered tariff reduction on 14 items. It is also reported that Indian Commerce Minister would lead a business delegation to Bangladesh shortly to address this problem.

The change of guard in both the countries is seen as a positive development towards improving relations between the two countries. To what extent such optimism will be borne out by reality is the question. Ever since India seemed to have linked the issue of transit with the problem of sharing the Ganges flow, the complexity of the problem rather has become even more intricate. By itself, the water issue is sufficiently knotty because of India's reported offer of only 2200-2500 cusecs of water. Although transit is officially not linked, the issue is near the surface of India-Bangladesh relations. Moreover, the transit facility is an infrastructure and an economic matter that needs to be addressed taking into consideration Bangladesh's transit to Nepal, Bhutan and other countries through India. As such, the issue should be totally delinked and discussed only on its own merits. What India needs to understand is that an adequate share of the Ganges

water is not a mere political issue for Bangladesh, but quite literally an issue of life and death for millions of its citizens. A reasonable agreement on the amount of water to be discharged for almost 30-day lean period is not an uphill task for India. A settlement can definitely change the entire complexion of Bangladesh public opinion to the benefit of India.

Although this has already been a good start and both India and Bangladesh need rapprochement and conciliation, this is in no way a guarantor of success that will really be a breakthrough in the relationship between the two countries. There are a number of issues which have to be handled seriously but there is always a risk in tackling too many issues simultaneously.

One of the problems in inter-state relations in South Asia — India-Bangladesh relation no exception — is that politicians and men of public affairs play to the popular psyche. They raise optimism because people like to hear it. But the optimism soon gives way to frustration. People are not made aware of the real difficulties on the ground. Had this been done, perhaps the policy makers would have got the right type of popular backing in their foreign policy pursuits, not the type of pulls and pressures to which such pursuits are now subjected. India-Bangladesh relations are no exception to this constraint.

At the bilateral plane, what is needed is demonstration of goodwill and transparency on

the part of the big neighbour. With New Delhi lies the initiative, even if one would talk of the changed circumstances in which the constituent states have become salient. In tune with the global economic relations, perhaps it is in the interest of Bangladesh that it thinks differently and joins the mainstream of new global and regional economic trends. But in anticipation, there should also be some credibility and transparency which have been miserably lacking over the last more than two decades. It is in this context that declaratory goodwill for Bangladesh needs to be matched with some concrete evidence.

Actually what is needed in the relationship between the two countries is not only a 'breakthrough' but a viable breakthrough that will endure. After all, a certain element of equitable and structured relationship has now cropped up. Also, the significance of Bangladesh has gone up in the changed global, regional and subregional context. Bangladesh has gained significance globally because of its market, investment and geopolitical location. In its urge for economic power to back up its global political aspiration, India has no alternative than to be integrated with the merging Asia-Pacific region including South East Asia. Under such circumstances, Bangladesh's importance could hardly be overlooked. Not only that but even to address the insurgency and cross border migration problems, India cannot help but to take Bangladesh into account. Opening up to Bangladesh will definitely be to the advantage of India itself.

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To the Editor...

Premier services!

Sir, As a suffering resident of cancerous Dhaka city, I am rather provoked by the catchy headline in *The Daily Star* of Nov 12, "Premier bus service in the then Awami League go-

vernment in 1975 signed an interim agreement allowing India to test the feeder canal for the period between 21 April and 31 May with discharges varying from 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs. The agreement concerned only the test run of the feeder canal and not the commissioning of the barrage. But India continued withdrawing water unilaterally even beyond the period specified in the interim agreement of May 1975 to the great detriment of ecology and water level of the Ganges basin in Bangladesh.

The next government under the presidency of Ziaur Rahman raised the issue before multilateral fora including the UN. In 1977, the Zia government was able to obtain from Desai government in India a renewable short term agreement with a minimum guarantee of lean season discharge for Bangladesh.

During the Ershad regime first the minimum guarantee clause and then the short-term agreement itself got lapsed and Bangladesh had been entirely at the mercy of Indian authorities for residual discharges at Farakka point during the lean season, leading to desertification in the northern region of the country, saline invasion and silt concentration in south western moribund delta. The issue was again raised in the UN General Assembly by the BNP government two years back.

And now with the Awami League coming to power many tend to believe that there is a bright possibility of a fresh long term agreement between India and Bangladesh. An

does not work here; hence it is under continuous modification. But rigid, alien 'democracy' is being imported from affluent countries. How to fit a square peg into a round hole?

The pedestrian overbridge crossings look like a waste of time and money. First try wide zebra crossings. Be strict.

Introduce 3/4-wheeler metered taxi service. The pressure on cycle rickshaws will be reduced by at least 25 per cent (cheaper fare, no haggling). Ban non-metered taxis. Why could we not have taxi meters for decades? Smash the back-door vested groups. Where is the transparency? Tall-talks and wrong planning will not reduce the congestion.

Open the municipal conservation services to the private sector, under strict service regulations. We have millions of unemployed to hire the conservancy vehicles (as BRTC is doing now in the case of renting out buses on contract basis).

A premier parliament on which the benefit of the doubt could be bestowed. Make it a workable and transparent institution.

Open more diversion roads. Where is the Dhaka City Road Dispersal Plan 1997-2001 (first phase)? If Kuala Lumpur can solve the problem, why can't we?

A premier Traffic Police organisation, adequate and modernised.

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