

Silver Jubilee: Let's Ponder and Wonder!

On this month of silver jubilee, let us not celebrate (because we have very little to do so) but take a vow and say: dear martyrs and friends, we are sorry that we dropped your dreams. But we do promise to pick them up and make sincere efforts to materialise them by the next 25 years.

Spirit of Independence

Thursday was a day of expressing right sentiments and right resolves touching upon the governance of this land. This went capably well with the celebration of the silver jubilee of independence picking up pace. While a two-day seminar of experts recommended a national commission for rightsizing the government through reforms and also other radical measures and Finance Minister Kibria accepted those all as having great potential for translation into reality.

Hasina on her own said the DCs and other public servants were employees of the republic and not of the government — any government. As such they should not from now on exert to beef up attendance at the ruling party's or the Prime Minister's public meetings. She assured them they would not face any problem in the discharge of their duties from the politicians. If there was any they were free to seek and get rectification. And she called upon the DCs to go after the terrorist criminals without caring for the culprits' connections.

Deputy Commissioners are the field level arms of the government and the latter must depend on the DCs for the execution of its decisions and programmes. Hasina asked them to telephone her directly if they were stuck up.

All this gains in relevance against a recent observation that the government was going fast with its decision making but implementation of the decisions was as sluggish as ever. It has been right to tip up the field-level executives. Now it remains to tidy up the areas of government that the PM lives surrounded by — the desk people.

At the end of the day Hasina is going to get a brief on the ERD-World Bank seminar on governmental reforms from Kibria. The reforms are geared to making the government smaller — which the PM has already pledged to chisel into — and more efficient which the PM must take pains to shape into.

Perhaps it is the spirit of the day that is making this time simply bristle with ideas. The task will be to properly sift them and get the core things among them translated into reality.

Sliding Saga

The stormbound capital market of the country passed the most bearish week in the recent times last Thursday. The unabated down trend, that has really taken aback the traders following a spell of illogical and general skyrocketing of share prices is likely to hold further, as many experts are of the opinion that from an astronomical height of 3647, the market index has to come down to 1500 before showing any sign of steadiness.

The situation was so bad on the bourse floor that companies whose scripts were expected to woo traders following the recent incentive announcements and the mandatory relaxation of the circuit breaker for three days, also got acquainted with hitherto unknown phenomenon of nosedive in interest and price. Daunted by this new pattern of reversal amidst a generally dismal atmosphere, some companies have even been forced to postpone the dates of such commercial practices like book closure and incentive announcement. Even investors who are seeking exit from the market do not have a way out. The lower limit of circuit breaker is apparently proving the spanner in the works there.

Ascent or descent may be the essence of any bourse but the stalemate and the apparent lack of coordination between the government watchdog Securities Exchange Commission and the Dhaka Stock Exchange is fuelling fear and frustration instead of diffusing them.

Observers have suggested a few steps immediately to get rid of the stasis now plaguing the market. Among them notable are: inclusion of private sector representatives with capital market experience in the SEC, rise in the number of government nominated members as well as FBCI and similar other business organisation nominees on the board of council of DSE, streamlining of the DSE administration in a manner so that no broker can influence it.

While the market can wait for some more time to be through with its phase of corrections, the gathering clouds of frustration and anger because of the reign of paralysis among the market forces and a lack of transparency, need to be taken on by the authorities in a more forthright manner. Because, despite government's repeated commitment to the cause of small investors' interest, signs of encouragement are yet to be seen. The bewilderment due to the strengthening proclivity of the bourses to go into hibernation, if allowed to hold, will actually contribute to the imminence of crash, something which will serve, neither the people nor the government.

Think Nationally

Agriculture, Food, Relief and Disaster Management Minister Mottia Chowdhury's recent criticism of country's technocrats had a ring of realistic relevance than utopian ineffectuality or sentimentalism. The focal point of her reservation was our general inclination to fall for donors' advice without any prior and proper evaluation of them vis-a-vis national interest. The citing of embankment projects and their adverse effect was only the symbolic representation of a reality that has long been reigning in our country.

As a developing country with various economic constraints, we do need foreign aid but the discretion for using them must originate from the viewpoint of national interest.

More topically speaking, embankment projects as the only measures to curb the severity of floods, has a tradition of ready approval from local authorities. The host of other problems ranging from the obvious minimisation of land to the displacement of certain communities so vitally involved with our economy had always run the risk of being swept under the carpet so easily.

On the other hand, dredging has always been projected as a quixotic project for enhancing navigability and curbing the severity of flood. The fact that dredging does not always need to be done on a grand scale and small dredging projects are more suitable in the Bangladeshi context, never had a good look or consideration. It all stemmed from the sad failure to think freely in the light of national context. One hopes the Minister's utterance inspires all concerned to be more nationally focused than before.

THE month of December is the month of victory day. On the 16th of December, 1971, as may be recalled, the occupation army of Pakistan was forced to a surrender and Bangladesh was liberated. Incidentally, Bangladesh crosses 25 years in this December and the whole nation is poised to celebrating the silver jubilee of independence. Various organizations have chalked out different programmes to make the show meaningful and worthwhile. We would like to share the sentiments of people in this month and would just remind a difference: all wars are not liberation wars, only a few of them are and Bengalees fought a war of liberation. The ramifications and gravity of our silver jubilee thus stand with a different taste and flavour than many others elsewhere.

But we strongly feel that mere celebrations are not all that the silver jubilee should aim to be. That we fought and won a liberation struggle is just one side of the coin. The other part is the commitments, wishes and zeal that drove us to take up the guns to fight and those need to be reckoned with clearly. Thus highlighting the success stories in war sectors or reminiscence of those horrible days and nights might tell the half of the whole episode. We also need to evaluate the performances (of ours) in the fulfilment of our commitments — the commitments on which three million people got brutally slaughtered by the Pakistani forces and a few more millions lost much of their lives. Why did we fight for a separate homeland?

There were a panoply of reasons but summarily those can be placed as follows: we fought because (a) we wanted that people's representatives should rule a country. This implied further that democratic institutions should be developed from the local level to the centre; (b) it was directly desired that, as opposed to the controlled freedom of press in Pakistani era the emerging country Bangladesh would have full freedom of press and media; (c) we relished that Bengalee would be our state language and our cultural heritage should be upheld in right earnest; (d) we would take up pragmatic socio-economic policies and programmes so that the people of this country could eke out a relatively better standard of living, and level of poverty would go down. Economic

growth with social justice (later enshrined as socialism in the constitution) happened to be the principal motto that propelled the wheels of our liberation struggle. In fact, as said before, there were a volley of other factors that ignited all of us to join the liberation war but a few of them have been submitted to carry on with the discussions further.

Let us now try to examine our performances in respect of the standards set by the martyrs. A success would imply that we duly honoured our heroes of the liberation struggle while a failure would testify that we had in fact betrayed with their sacrifices. Anyway, let us involve ourselves in stock-taking. During the 23 years of the partnership with the then Pakistan, we were ruled by military dictators almost for the whole period. Democracy was made Greek to us and democratic institutions were booted down. Civil and military bureaucracy dominated the governance. In the post-independence era, elected people's representatives voted through adult franchise ruled us for only eight years or so. That is, only for one-third of the period of our nationhood, we were lucky to have had governments that came to power through ballots. For more than three-fourths of the total period, military or quasi military rulers ruled us. Some of them had organized general elections but those were of Ayub Khan variety. Even to day, we have an elected government at the centre but local government bodies are yet to see the light of autonomy, democracy and people's participation. We, therefore, miserably failed to materialise the very first motto of our independence. Close at heel was the issue of freedom of press and electronic media. Since democracy and press freedom go hand in hand, needless to mention here perhaps, that the press freedom had been desired at the same time. As of today, we can only boast of the degree of freedom of the press, but as far as electronic media is concerned, we are still in the old days.

In papers, Bengalee is our state language. But the language as a medium of instructions in higher education is yet to get a good start. Over the years, suc-

cessive governments did very little to allocate required funds so that Bengalee text books at the tertiary and university levels could be made easily available. For example to cite just a case, there is no standard text book on economics that could be recommended for university graduates or for Masters. More acute is the case with science and research books. It is as if we fought with Pakistanis to speak in Bengali only and not to read or write in Bengalee. The hopes and aspirations of the martyrs of language and liberation movements were, thus, dashed to the ground.

With the liberation of the country, only half of the political freedom can, possibly, be said to have been accomplished. The other half should emerge only when we have a sustained democratic set-up from top to bottom. What about performances in the economic front? After

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



all, at the end of the day, it is the economic emancipation that would reign high. Had we been economically better off in the pre-independence era, we would possibly not so strongly wanted to part with our partner. It was hoped that in the post-independence Bangladesh, people would be better off. As Dr. Azizur Rahman Khan put it, "by implication, independence was expected to lead higher growth and greater well being than would have been possible with continued partnership with Pakistan."

Available evidences tend to suggest that Bangladesh has achieved a faster rate of growth in GDP in the post-independence era than during its performance as a wing of Pakistan. Between 1975-1993, Bangladesh witnessed a growth rate of 4.3 per cent per annum as compared to a growth rate of 3.2 per cent between 1950-1970. The per capita GDP is also said to have been faster than the pre-independence growth rate. The average living standard of the people of Bangladesh has there-

fore grown at a much faster rate during the period since independence than it did during the period of partnership with Pakistan.

It may be mentioned here that performance indicators have both absolute and relative dimensions. In absolute terms, as far as economic growth rate is concerned, we have ample scope to be happy in this month of silver jubilee. But in relative terms, we have very little to eulogize with. Because, the per capita income difference between Bangladesh and India or between Bangladesh and Pakistan widened over the years implying that the growth rates in other countries were much higher than ours. So we continue to be the poorest!

There could be, in evidence, some structural changes in the economy over the period 1971-1996. The contribution of agriculture to GDP drastically declined to account for barely one-third of our GDP. The fall in the share of agriculture to GDP could be a good news had the resources been shifted to relatively more productive and dynamic sectors. Unfortunately that did not seem to have happened. The share of construction, public administration and services — in the form of traditional types of services — hiked over the years. The dynamic modern manufacturing sector tilted very little towards growth. By and large, we had experienced almost no growth whatsoever over the last 25 years in sectors that tend to propel growth further but witnessed growth that tend to displace slower growth. Just think of the public services. One could argue that one of the poorest and the smallest countries of the world has one of the richest and the largest public services.

There have been very little attempts to trim the size down. Various commissions have been constituted but their recommendations could not see the light of the day. About the incidence of poverty, conclusive evidences are scarce while conflicting evidences are in abundance. Notwithstanding the accuracy of statistics so far used, it suffices to say that more than half of the population still groan under poverty. And the magnitude of improvements that are being quoted by some studies tend to show that Bangladesh would, perhaps, need to cross four more silver jubilees to celebrate a no poverty situation. In other words, we could make very little dent to the poverty syndrome.

Bangladesh, possibly, performed better in terms of population growth and population control over the whole period since independence. Total fertility rate is estimated to have gone down from seven in 1970 to 4.3 in early 1990s. Average age of marriage for women, reportedly, increased by 1.8 per cent from 15.9 years in 1974 to 18.8 years in early 1990s. It is also reported that 40 per cent of the women in child-bearing age are using contraceptives. These records are praiseworthy given the persuasiveness of population pressures but the demographic tradition still trails behind that of West Bengal.

During the period 1965-70 gross investment amounted to an average of 11.6 per cent of GDP of which 8.4 per cent originated from domestic savings and 3.2 per cent from net capital inflow. In the early 1990s, the figures were 12.8, 6.5 and 2.2 per cent, respectively. However, the good news is that the contribution of workers remittance to GDP has been increasing since independence and now constitutes 5.4 per cent of GDP. The rate of investment that we are faced with appears much lower than that prevailing in neighbouring countries. Economists argue that to make a dent to poverty Bangladesh needs to attain a sustained growth rate of seven per cent per annum and that possibly requires an investment rate of 21-25 per cent per annum.

The most laudable achievements have been in the realm of our export sector. Merchandise exports as a proportion of GDP has increased from 2.4 per cent in 1975 to about 10 per cent in 1990s. The contribution of RMG

rose from an insignificant level in the second half of the 1970s to account for more than half of the total exports in 1990s. There has also been some rise in share of income elastic export commodity over the years. However, the export sector of Bangladesh is allegedly looked on to concentration, both geographic and commodities. In the immediate post-independence era, only jute and jute goods emerged as the major earners of our foreign exchange but now it is replaced by RMG. Diversification of exports is yet to take place in a large scale.

The good news mentioned above to the export sector should also be available for the development of social sector in Bangladesh. People's awareness, literacy rates and school enrollments seemed to have gone up marginally. Over the last couple of years, the government has been allocating more resources to this sector.

Finally, we progressed, allegedly, very little on our way towards achieving a society that respects law and order of the land. The power of muscle seems to have outpaced that of the brain. The influences of the guns and the goons, especially in campuses seem to have increased.

The aim of this note was to highlight a few of the major achievements and failures in our socio-economic fronts. A gleam at the records would, perhaps, clearly forestall the premise that we miserably failed to materialize the commitments to the people, to the martyrs and to the world at large. After 25 years of our independence, we are being rated as one of the poorest (with a per capita income of \$ 230), under developed and the most 'underdog' in the world's league table of socio-economic performance. We are just crawling at an age when we were supposed to run fast, crying over the past follies when the future needs to be built in harmony, chewing the causes that we cursed before independence. There is no shade of doubt that, by and large, we have betrayed with the blood of our martyrs and we seem to continue to do that.

On this month of silver jubilee, let us not celebrate (because we have very little to do so) but take a vow and say: dear martyrs and friends, we are sorry that we dropped your dreams. But we do promise to pick them up and make sincere efforts to materialise them by the next 25 years. Liberation war never ends, it's a continuous process.

Seizing an Opportunity for Good Governance

To maintain law and order is the responsibility of the government, so is quick dispensation of justice ... People's expectations are known to the government, and those can be materialised only through good governance ... That is the need of the hour, writes Muhammad Quamrul Islam

IF we look around, we tend to understand that only economic development can ensure political stability and make sovereignty impregnable. Examples set by Korea, Taiwan and Singapore are to be felt by heart by the authorities concerned in government and politics; not to replicate the same, but to use as reference in our current national and global context. The independent existence of those countries would have been disturbed, if they could not attain the status of economic tigers. Again, the question of political stability in Malaysia and Indonesia were closely related to their respective economic growth. It is reported that the governments of these countries never compromised with anti-development activities of any sort.

In variety of ways, ideas hindering development, and activities thereof, come out in public. One such retrograde thought is communalism. If communal harmony is lost, social unrest would increase, and law and order deteriorate. As a result, the production of goods and services would slow down, even fall back. Over here, we may draw the instances of Malaysia and Indonesia. In both the countries Muslim population is in majority. But the governments of these two countries have ensured full political and economic rights to Chinese origin who are minority. For the sake of communal harmony, peace and development. To ensure this, governments there had to suppress communal instigation and pressure, unleashed by vested quarters, occasionally, with

iron-hand. But, this is yet to happen in our country. Often it is felt that our politics has not reached the non-communal plane, and self-seekers in communal garb are standing in the way of development. Another extremely adverse factor is the politicisation of government and semi-government organisations, which virtually call a halt to development. By politicisation it is meant that preference or patronisation is given to party workers, followers and/or supporters, in matters of appointments, promotions, transfers or in providing other privileges in those organisations. One essential ingredient of economic development is to increase the productivity of each organisation of the government, simply because macroeconomic management of the country is within the jurisdiction of the government. Government builds socio-economic infrastructures and runs some key industries and service organisations. As such, the necessity of placing experienced and honest personnel in all those organisations can hardly be over-emphasised. But, when politicisation is opted for, political purpose, experience and honesty are not considered first; people of less calibre, even deemed unfit, get placed in those high positions. Consequently, one vital pre-condition for development is violated, which lays the basis for corruption, manipulation and other vices. We have seen various such instances, as also reported in the press, during the previous regimes.

There is a factor of efficiency and capability in running business, trade, commerce and industry. It varies from person to person — as to aptitude, tradition, experience and training, etc. If the right type of entrepreneurs or businessmen are not chosen, and/or are deprived of the right-type facilities, then the development will be understandably thwarted. In the past, as allegations go, politicisation grew such persons as suddenly became businessmen, contractors and industrialists selling favour-earned licences and permits to earn easy money or managing to get huge loans from banks against not so strict collateral. They did not produce goods and services; thereby 'oppressive burden' is borne by the society, for their illegal gains. Examples are many, one need not show them, they are visible and felt.

What is evident from various types of politicisation is that it not only retards growth, but also finally fails to protect the regime itself. One lesson, perhaps, is June 12 parliamentary election, Now Awami League, which vociferated against BNP on the politicisation issue to

earn support of the people, should hardly forget that. How could allegations of partisanship be levelled against AL government for appointments made in the universities, banking, and other sectors, so far? It is also reported in the press that some allegedly political appointees of previous BNP regime are quite in comfortable positions by establishing connections with influential quarters of present AL government. It seems government is paying no heed to such reports, appearing in a section of the press.

However, the generation which has crossed 55 years of age, and seen how some officials remain favourites to all regimes so much so that one given retirement by the earlier regime gets reinstated by the successive one. Of course, we can not blame only the political leadership for all that; such incumbents are equally adept in the reciprocal technique — sycophancy and manipulation of relationships for personal gains. But, no economy can prosper, unless the ruling party leaders come out of personal likes and dislikes and uphold rule of law, making equal access to all. We hope Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will give serious thought to it, to avoid repetition of the faults of past regimes.

To maintain law and order is the responsibility of the government, so is quick dispensation of justice. Frequently, an impression is created by the selfish influential quarters that honest and capable persons are not available, except those chosen by them (even if their integrity is questionable). But, this is far from truth and reality. As a matter of fact, good persons abhor flattery and publicity, to attract the attention of powerful few. In course of discussion with a reputed retired member of civil service, it is learnt that in the past there was a procedure to keep lists of good and bad persons at the different levels of government. He referred to the maintenance of VCNB (village council note book) at thana level up to 70s, covering all areas of the country. He was of the opinion that previous practice be revived updated and further augmented by intelligence services, i.e. DGFI and NSI, now available in our independent republic, to prepare such list for information of all quarters concerned. If this service is provided by 'disciplined force', within the meaning of the Constitution of the Republic, then there would be no difficulty in getting names of good persons for different positions in the interest of the country. We feel that the government may appreciate this idea and take necessary action to prepare a list of good persons taking note of honesty, intelligence

and integrity. In this computer-age, such a task can be easily handled with speed and proficiency.

In the second session of the 7th parliament, indemnity (Repeal) Bill 1996 was passed on November 12, 1996, facilitating the trial of the killers of Bangladeshu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others. Now, the law will take its own course. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, along with her 52-member entourage, attended the World Food Summit (13-17 November 1996) in Rome; and, also to invite Italian investors. People are waiting to see the actual results. However, sad experiences of seeing big delegations going abroad without bringing corresponding benefits to the commonman, during the last two decades, cannot make people hopeful. It is now for the Prime Minister's entourage, to prove otherwise, by their follow up actions, generating confidence in the minds of the general people.

Simultaneously, field-level efforts need to be made, to increase production and to provide two square meals a day to the poor, ensuring security to all and providing them equal access to opportunities. People's expectations are known to the government; and those can be materialised only through good governance. With the repeal of black laws, an indemnity was one, the government of Sheikh Hasina can take firm steps to promote welfare of the people in general. That's the need of the hour.

The writer is an economist and advocate. Bangladesh Supreme Court

To the Editor...

Suhrawardi Udyan — "Cut down the trees!"

Sir, Many writers in this column are expressing their opinions on the subject. Some are recommending that the trees should be cut down and the field be reverted back to its pre-1975 state of an open space, so as to allow political parties to hold public meetings.

This suggestion is not only unwise, it is a ridiculous one. How could one suggest to cut down so many trees when the country is campaigning for tree-planting? For the concentration of population we have in the metropolises, our number of parks are too inadequate and so are the number of trees, to absorb all the carbon dioxide we emit.

It is real funny to suggest that we should cut down such a large patch of green spot in the city to pave way for political parties to hold their meetings. One wonders at the level of thinking to suggest recommendations keeping in view as if the nation exists for the political parties and not other way round.

It is quite agreeable that political parties are creating nuisance by holding meetings on the streets making the lives of city dwellers hell. However, a pragmatic solution to holding public meetings could be the following:

a) The parties may hold meetings inside the stadiums and auditoriums on payment.

b) The government should allow multiple number of TV channels in the private sector so that the parties would be able to buy time and propagate their policies and programmes through TV channels which is the norm of today's civilised world. In this way the viewpoint of the parties would reach not only to the limited audience present at the meeting, but to all intending viewers all over the country.

Nurul Bashar Khilgao, Dhaka

'Unaware of the danger'

Sir, I would like to focus on two different news headlines: First — a high-rise building collapsed in Dhaka on Oct 28, 1996, after a sudden apparently without any reason (Dated Oct 29, 1996, The Daily Star).

Second — Most residential buildings in Central Asia's cap-

ital cities are so poorly constructed that they could collapse in a severe earthquake, a seismic expert said on Oct 28, 1996, reports AP (Dated Oct 30, The Daily Star).

No matter how well a concrete structure is designed but most of its success lies on the people who do the job in the field. And as serious negligence is prevailing in the concrete-related work in our country, where most structures are concrete-based, Bangladesh is no exception than Central Asia — and 'Cairo incident' could easily be repeated anywhere in our country.

Negligence develops from ignorance. Being unaware due to proper knowledge, one might dig his own grave. But the situation is bad and getting worse day by day.

In recent tests (compressive strength test of concrete cylinder), it has been found that other things remaining the same, concrete with low quality cement showed half the strength of the concrete with high quality cement. Usually high quality cementing materials are costlier and home-made.

But brand name is not all, because cement loses its strength due to various reasons,

notably for long storage, weather condition etc. So it would be best to test the cement before important job like roof slab casting. Even for unimportant job one can check by throwing a handful of cement on a bucketful of water, the particles should float for some time before they sink.

Another thing one should try to ensure which is very rare in our country that water should be added by weight of cement, that is a fixed water-cement ratio by weight. This is so important because concrete strength falls remarkably with rise in water. While placing concrete please check that it is thoroughly compacted as concrete strength rises remarkably with density (in concrete test it was found that 10 per cent void containing concrete got half strength of fully compacted concrete.)

If you are using khoa (brick particle) in concrete, be sure to test that the brick (from which khoa will be made) has the compressive strength larger than the required concrete strength.

These tests mentioned here require a few hundred taka and a few days to spend but might save you from possible disasters. For instance, we have en-

countered with such test result (compressive st. of concrete cylinder) that showed only on an average 1250 psi (pounds per sq inch) which was needed to be at least 2,800 psi in the particular case. Please do think about these facts if you are somehow engaged with concrete-making or spending your hard-earned money to make a thing to be proud of, not a disaster-prone one.

May the Bestower help us all. Enamur Rahim Latifeg Student of Civil Engg. BUET, Dhaka

PM's bold move

Sir, I have gone through the commentary by Mr. Mahfuz Anam published on Nov 25, 1996 under the caption 'PM's bold move'. Now for the first time the way Mr. Anam has written to invite the President to probe the allegations of the opposition BNP independently is bold and laudable — I didn't understand. The allegations of the BNP relate to repression on its workers especially police harassment.

In this connection, I like to say that the President is not a person but an institution. He cannot constitutionally take

any action to probe the allegations of the BNP and to mediate a solution to return them to the Parliament. One cannot deny the fact that the President is a former chief justice and is honoured by all quarters. But that does not mean that he can do anything unconstitutionally. There is no provision in the Constitution that the President can take such action as per suggestion of the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister knows it very well. Her proposal on own volition in this regard is a diplomatic adroitness.

Somebody will definitely say that though there is no provision in the Constitution yet what will be the harm to take such action by the President for the interest of the country? Yes, I do not disagree with them. But some parliamentary procedures are needed to make any new provision in the Constitution and it requires time. One should realise the situation.

However, Mr. Anam's suggestions in respect of two other demands of BNP are praiseworthy. If the government will do the needful to implement the suggestions without further delay. Sakabuddin Chowdhury North Mashehar, Narayanganj