

Substantive Talks on CHT

That the arrival of PCJSS (Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity) leaders in Dhaka for negotiations with the National Committee on Chittagong Hill Tracts has been seen as a major political breakthrough is not for nothing. This meeting is expected to build on the outcomes of the last two meetings. If the progress made at those meetings is any guide, there is every reason to be optimistic about a comprehensive solution to the Chittagong Hill Tracts problem. What is reassuring is the fact that both the National Committee on CHT and the Parishad have indicated their readiness to carry forward the negotiations until a solution is found. One blemish though is the refusal by the two BNP MPs on the National Committee so far to join the negotiations.

This is a mistake. Now that the indications are becoming ever clearer about reaching an agreement on the long vexing problem in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the absence of two members of the opposition BNP from the deliberations will not only deprive the meeting of their useful inputs but also give the impression that the largest opposition party in our political history deliberately wants no part in the whole process. An important issue such as this should have received utmost attention from all quarters irrespective of party leanings. Here is one issue that needs to be approached beyond party politics. It would have been nice to hear from those two members on the National Committee about their position on the issue.

Notwithstanding that dampener, things are moving at a satisfactory pace. By the time this leader gets printed, the PCJSS and the National Committee should have made some progress on the agenda on the table, which constitutes the core of the ethnic people's demands. The most important and radical of them is the devolution of power or limited autonomy for the Hill Tracts region. Our ethnic minority deserves no less. If we take note of the government's other major plan for decentralisation of administration through creation of a four-tier local government, then this delegation of power — as much as possible — within the constitutional framework of Bangladesh will only enrich our polity. If this issue can be adequately addressed, other points may not prove too contentious to overcome.

Give Rajuk a Hand

Quite clearly a homing-in on the city's traffic congestion problem is taking place. Overhead bridges and passes are coming slowly up, even though fly-overs of the kind that one sees in the South East Asian capitals, and nearer home in New Delhi, remain a distant dream given the penetrative inhibition through our sky-line. At the eye level, we seem to be fast waking up to the reality of the physical constraint the city faces in the east-west direction to grow. It is only in the north-south direction that we have had any scope to expand our roads and other structures. This unidirectional topography of the city has been the basic structural cause for the sardine-packed traffic.

So, our option is to have as many by-passes as we can afford space-wise helping to relax the loads on arterial and semi-arterial thoroughfares. There are already far too many transports for the existing road mileage in the metropolis to accommodate, so that link roads offer the only structural solution to traffic congestion. Besides, we need creating avenues for introducing a mass transport system preferably with trolley buses as in South East Asia.

Against this background, we fully endorse the nine city road projects Rajuk has been working at and urge their early implementation without hindrance from any quarter whatsoever. All heads must be put together to sort out the land acquisition problems in the same manner as when Panthopath was being laid across. Granted that as many as nine spacious roads are now involved instead of just one as in the case of Panthopath, but it is the same principle of government's determination that is the ace in the hole here. But the losers of land must not be denied compensation in monetary slabs that conform to the market prices.

Expensive 'Trash'

An archaeological survey report costing Tk 30 lakh in fees paid to a group of apparently push-overs has been rejected out of hand by an 'evaluation commission' of the Directorate of Archaeology. The non-professional go-getters who had jacks in the cultural ministry to have procured the job in early 1995, mind you, got the work order from the same directorate of archaeology which is now throwing them flat out on the mat.

That is as much of a point to note as is the ironic circumstance in which the same cultural ministry that had put pressure on the archaeology directorate to favour those amateurs with the work is now asking it to explain why was money paid for such a gibberish of a report.

The rejected survey report had to do with the identification of shrouded historical relics in Kusthia, Khulna and Barisal districts. The basic question is, why the assignment had to be given to non-specialist novices against the best judgment of the archaeologists of the directorate who had in the very first place resisted it in writing. That should help us zero in on the person or persons who were hell-bent to patronise some people most brazenly. Let there be an investigation to fix the responsibility for it, so that recurrence of such a waste of public money can be averted.

Experience of District Development Conference

It was a heart-warming experience for me to see that leaders of all the political parties and professional groups focused their mind on the development needs of the district rather than on attacking each other on issues far removed from their day to day life. The sooner we are able to move away from sterile political confrontation to cooperation in developing the country, the better for all of us, writes **Shah A M S Kibria**

There is a vast literature on the process of economic development. Development planning, according to a widely shared theory, must begin at the grassroots level. The people, according to this view, must be involved in the planning process. They must participate in planning. They must own the development. However, though there have been numerous seminars in Bangladesh and elsewhere about the validity and usefulness of this and other theories, in practice very little has changed. At least in Bangladesh the process remains virtually unchanged since the late seventies. Advice from the World Bank and donors has led to some refinement of the planning process but in practice we have had a highly centralised planning system in operation. Can we really change the system? And is it really worthwhile or necessary to make the effort to change the system?

I reflected on the simplest way to consult and involve the people in the planning process. There must be hundreds of ways in which the people would participate in planning the development of their own area. I would not like to attribute special wisdom to any particular approach. One could begin with the village or union or thana or the district, I chose the district. So far I have held three district development conferences — in Gopalganj, Habiganj and Shariatpur. The experience of these three conferences has been so rewarding and encouraging that I feel I ought to share this experience with the members of the public.

Local level developments in the country have not always followed rational planning or method. A macro plan conceived and implemented by the central government may benefit a particular district or thana but either for shortage of funds or other reasons many areas are left out of the project. The "glass ceilings" are often the influence of the local minister or the MP or an otherwise influential person who makes sure that the road goes by the side of his own village or the school is located near his family home or at least his own thana or union is the beneficiary of the project. In other words, influence-peddling and 'raddi' have become an integral part of the development scene. In a strange sort of way, a new meaning to the term 'favouritism' has been added to the selective approach to local development. Who the districts have been denied their rightful share of development because of political reasons. Governments are known to have punished particular areas for not voting for the party in power. Equally important, in my view, is the belief that even local level developments such as village or union level roads must be part of a national project and resource allocation has to be made from the central government and implemented through centrally directed and controlled consultants. Highly paid consultants, both local and foreign, are engaged to supervise the implementation. The local people and their leaders have little say in these matters. They are mere spectators. All they can do is to make desperate enquiries through influential friends in Dhaka to ascertain if the project is getting the funds or if the file is moving.

The experience gained from the three district conferences held so far has clearly proved the need for consultation with the local people. The interest and enthusiasm in the planning process was just overwhelming. Let me list the salient features of the three conferences. First, the conference was fully non-partisan. Though it was sponsored by me, (partly in my capacity as the vice-chairman

of the Planning Commission), the deputy commissioner of the district acted as the convener. The members of parliament of the districts played an important leadership role in the conference. Leaders of all the political parties were invited and it was a pleasant surprise to see that most of them including opposition political parties attended the conference. The representatives of professional groups, chamber of commerce, bar council, press club, NGOs, women's representatives as well as distinguished local personalities were invited. The response in all the three districts was excellent. The keen interest taken by the assembled leaders convinced me that it was a big mistake to leave the people out of the planning process. Leaders of Jatiya Party, Jamaat, Communist Party attended and participated in the deliberations. Even BNP leaders attended and addressed the meeting at Gopalganj. Obviously no one wants to be left out of a conference whose agenda is the development of the district. The Minister for Water Resources and Flood Control Mr Abdur Razzak and the State Minister for Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives Syed Abul Husain attended the conferences in Gopalganj and Shariatpur. Both of them hail from the greater Faridpur area and have deep knowledge of the development needs and problems of the region.

The second salient feature was the presence of senior officials from Dhaka and the divisional headquarters. Of course, officials at the district level were all there but it is the presence of the senior officials of the rank of chief engineer/director from Dhaka which made a big difference in

giving the conference a sense of urgency and importance. The officials did not speak at the conference; they were there to listen to the local leaders. It was felt that the bureaucracy must be sensitised about the public perceptions on the development process. They must understand the priority assigned by the local people to various development plans and projects. I was struck by the intensity of the emotion when the leaders narrated and listed their problems. Local level roads and small irrigation canals and dams seem to be on the top of the agenda everywhere.

The approach was remarkably practical and down to earth. Schools and electricity were close third on the list. It was found that while some union may have several high schools others did not have a single one. The conference laid down some basic guide lines. For example, it was generally agreed that roads linking district headquarters with the thana headquarter and the thana town with the union centres deserved the highest priority. Next in priority would be roads linking the union centres and thana towns with river ports and village markets. Similarly, schools and colleges should follow a rational pattern so that fair and as far as possible, equal opportunity should be provided to the people of the area concerned. Discrimination, for whatever reason, promotes discontent and frustration. Senior officials can avoid such situations if they maintain much closer links with the local leaders than is the case at present. In the absence of the district and thana level local government there is no local forum where the people's grievances can be ventilated. In a way, the conference

acted as a significant step forward in reducing the gap between the bureaucracy and the local public leaders. Once the local government institutions are in place, such ad hoc conferences may not be necessary. But let me not make premature judgement in the matter.

The third feature of the conference was the smooth and rather quick preparation of the plan document. The deputy commissioner, with the support and cooperation of the various departmental heads and the local leaders quickly put together a summary of the discussions. They incorporated a large number of micro projects on the basis of recommendations made by the thana nirbahi officers, union council chairmen and the local elite. The document that reached my hand within five weeks was an impressive one. It is going to be extremely valuable in guiding the development activities in the district in the next five years. I am aware of the perspective plan of the last government. I appreciate the effort made by Mr Abdul Moen Khan but I must add that a fifteen or twenty-year plan does not create much interest among the local people. It seems like a wish-list, an academic exercise. The people of the locality want something to be done within a year or two to resolve their problems. What is going to happen after fifteen years appears to them like a fairy tale. Of course, the common sense to understand that all their difficulties cannot be resolved in a year. I explained the government's budgetary limitations and they appreciated the point. When I said that we will try to implement these plans over the next five years, they understood and appreciated. Of course, people's pa-

tience is not limitless and there is a point beyond which they will lose confidence in these plans. This is why I feel that a perspective plan may be useful in some respects but its usefulness as a micro-planning technique is very limited.

The micro projects, if implemented within a reasonable time, will make a big difference in the quality of the people's life. These projects will certainly not solve the basic problems of social or physical infrastructures or deal with macro-level irrigation projects. Development of sectors such as power, gas, ports, railways, national highways are essential to accelerate the growth rate of the economy. But the micro-projects, if implemented in the next few years, will make a big difference in the day to day life of the common people. The participants at the conference were thrilled not only at the prospect of early implementation of these favourite local projects but because people in authority were actually taking notice of the projects and were, in fact, talking about them in the context of a district development plan.

It is too early to make an evaluation of these district development conferences. Unless we are able to devise a practical method for the quick implementation of these micro-projects in a phased manner, the initial enthusiasm may begin to wane. But it was a heart-warming experience for me to see that leaders of all the political parties and professional groups focused their mind on the development needs of the district rather than on attacking each other on issues far removed from their day to day life. The sooner we are able to move away from sterile political confrontation to cooperation in developing the country, the better for all of us, indeed, from what I saw in the three districts, this is what the people really want.

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Glass Ceilings Inhibit Growth

by KB Ahmed

The primary and fundamental structure of any free society is the Local Government... There is no alternative to the functions of the Local Government if democracy or free-society is to be sustained, developed and secured.

The politicians are normally very vocal about democracy and people's rights and privileges when they are out of power. The bureaucrats normally become serious about accountability when they retire from their positions. While in power politicians and bureaucrats alike virtually build glass-ceiling to inhibit an attempt of alleviating the sufferings of the people they are oath-bound either to represent or to serve. This has been a phenomenon experienced in most of the LDCs, but in Bangladesh this has manifested in a very acute form, which has rather developed into a cultural identification with historical consistency.

Bangladesh's history is breathtakingly exciting and contradicts almost all norms of human behaviour. It is, I am sure, to the philosophers and to the social scientist a challenging study in determining the cause for such conflicts as it is experienced in Bangladesh.

The vast majority of our people are pro-tradition, pro-life and pro-future. The recurrence of natural disasters and political turmoils could not deter these people from living. Their resilience outmatched the technology of the West. However, they suffer mercilessly under the hands of their 'public servants' of all sorts. And one of the creative techniques of the 'public servants' to inhibit growth and development is by building 'glass-ceilings'. Recently an international understanding has been reached to encourage private investments in the areas where previously public (State) intervention was essential, as the public resources became scarce and competence in functioning in those areas had come to have eroded due to the growth of vested interests and grafts. The multilateral institutions took the initiatives and recommended broad-reforms-package to the governments in preparation for building free-market structures. Governments in their turn publicly acknowledged the need and the purpose of the reforms and put public on notice that those reforms were forthcoming. All these began in 1980 and came to pass in 1996; and only incoherent and inconsistent utterances and acknowledgments by the func-

tionaries continued to test the patience and wisdom of the public.

To be specific, one could take the case of the Capital Market. Technology may have given a new facade to the Capital Market, but as a structure it is as old as Industrial Revolution. The East India Companies of England, France, Holland all had to get access to the capital markets while the Crown granted only the 'franchise'. Capital Market by definition is a market arranged and managed by the private investors. Private investors take the risk, expect dividend and acquire wealth. The Crown (the State) had the hands, most of collecting rent (taxes). The Crown offered protection against intervention of the pirates and of other Crowns (State). In modern times the State offers not only the protection against others States, it also provides threshold against sub-human living conditions. This enlarged the function of the State to establish equity in the society and to free the society from any risk that may be encountered individually and/or collectively. The State then found a moral function in imposing so called common value and common tradition over its citizens. As the State operates differently at different hands, most times State threatens the imaginative and creative functioning of the citizens. The people who endure the experience of managing the statecraft in such condition end up becoming psychotic, megalomaniac and vicious. They normally do not have any capacity left to participate in bringing about any reform to redefine the State.

The core problem in Bangladesh had been, since its liberation and particularly after adopting the Free Market concept, that the Corps de Retired Bureaucrats undertook the responsibility of restructuring and made the right mess of it. In recent years, with no vision or experience the politicians, due to lack of experience and perhaps intellect, ruefully got carried away and initiated

the policies for reform without understanding them and without making any attempt to learn the function, purpose and consequential structures of the Capital Market existing in rudimentary form since colonial time. The governments in Bangladesh upgraded the functions of those institutions repeating the pattern from the Industrial Markets. The Central Bank was ordered to reorientate its perception. Stock Exchange was revamped and expanded. Securities and Exchange Commission took the charge of monitoring the financial activities, mythical non-banking financial institutions were introduced, business leaders were ordered to wear double-breast suits in hot summer and join the publicized meetings with the functionaries and government kept waiting for dollar bills to flow from New York, Tokyo and, from anywhere.

These institutions however had the misfortune to be handed over to the Corps de Retired Bureaucrats and with their conceited smug, they apparently succeed in destroying the purpose of functioning of those institutions. This performance could be viewed as naïveté or incompetence or a deliberate attempt to subvert the intent of a political decision. If subversion is the motive reason, the glass-ceilings were the only effective technique one should focus on. The Central Bank with its full authority given to it allowed the so-called private banks to fail dismally while those banks operated under grand illusion of emassing wealth. The owners believably had little track record of successfully managing anything, the managers were apparently the spill-over from the failed nationalized banking sector and the then autocratic government added the extra incentive of currency devaluation and defaulting. The results is, by some estimate about Tk 4700 millions siphoned out from the banking system. Multilateral lenders' estimate will supposedly be much higher. In any

normal State some one should be made to pay for all this mischief. But here in Bangladesh multilateral lenders proposed a reform package in the financial sector (FSRP) by which all these crimes will be forgotten and millions of dollars in additional funding will be made available in the name of reform.

A new initiative has been taken by the multilateral lenders to offer again millions of dollars, and \$300 million has already been allocated according to a recent press release, to fund a Private Sector Infrastructure Development Programme (PSIDP), by which a company is proposed to be established in Bangladesh to finance private sector entrepreneurs who will claim to set up projects that will have infrastructural relevance. Further the multilateral institutions will assure to enhance the level of their allocation to \$1 billion in next six years! Do they really want to invite in the private entrepreneurs in public works? If so, why do they need to set up a company which will eventually be run by the Corps de Retired Bureaucrats or current bureaucrats. How does a private entrepreneur utilize this source without kick-backs, over invoicing and mismanagement? Who will establish the credibility of the entrepreneurs? Who will keep a tall on these and share risk of investment? Have we not seen the performance of BSRs and IDB over the last 25 years? Why is it not possible to choose relatively successful banks to channel these funds through their clients? They can share the risk with the multilateral lenders which is more than the bureaucrats will offer. Is it possible that a Glass-Ceiling in the form of PSIDP has been introduced to camouflage public borrowing limits?

Another case should be studied is the case of restructuring of Local Governments. Any State where it is claimed to have some semblance of democracy or decency, one would

find Local Government structures managed by the elected representatives of the citizens without restriction from the imposing bureaucracy. Freedom must transcend through all levels of citizens of a free State.

The primary and fundamental structure of any free society is the Local Government. The citizens make their own choice of their future, development and sustain the social, political, and cultural traditions through their participation in the Local Government. The Local Government in all free society become functionally responsible for local development, education, health, culture, investment, resource development and maintenance of peace. There is no alternative to

these functions of the Local Government if democracy or free-society is to be sustained, developed and secured. Those who are in the habit of propagating gradual implementation of the function of Local Government or doubting the ability of citizens, are self-deceiving and conceited proclaimers. For years this issue has been seemingly beyond the grasp of the politicians. They perhaps neither understand nor do they appreciate, that their freedom is better protected by the free citizens rather than the vested groups of rent seekers. Democracy will be better protected if it is spread all over the country than restricting it in one square mile around the Parliament.

Bangladesh needs a new movement for democracy, a new leadership from the raw crop of Bangladeshis who will never shy away from their responsibility, nor hesitate to show their courage to defend the rights of their fellow citizens.

OPINION

Population Council's Visit to the PM

Farida Akhter

I was reading the news on the visit of the delegation of the Population Council to the Prime Minister of the Government of Bangladesh. It was on 18th January, 1997. The delegation was quite big comprising of 14 members led by its President Margaret Catley-Carlson and members of the Board of Trustees. The New York-based private international organization is primarily engaged in promoting contraceptives and carrying out experimental studies on women in Bangladesh. It is interesting to find that they thanked our Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina for her support to the empowerment of women. What does that mean? Isn't it quite natural that a Prime Minister of a country would do that?

Population Council was established in 1952 by John D Rockefeller III and is mostly engaged in establishing and experimenting population control programmes in virtually all the countries they are located. In India and Indonesia the population programmes are "famous" for the force of their operations. In Bangladesh, Population Council is more known for the controversial trial of Norplant, a long-term sub-dermal method for women.

I thank the Prime Minister for making some very sensible comments to the delegates of the Population Council. She said: "The job of Population Council is not only to reduce population but also to improve quality of people's life". By saying that, she stressed on education and creation of job opportunities.

On the other hand, the issues raised by the Population Council had very little to do with improving quality of life of the people. Those were mostly with research activities undertaken by the Council including technical assistance provided to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on recruitment of female as family planning field

workers. The family planning field workers are always women. What's new about the Population Council proposal to the Ministry? They briefed the Prime Minister about testing of alternative FP-MCH service delivery models, particularly cluster visitation and merging satellite clinics with EPI. The models suggested are primarily those of the ICDDR, B, specially the MCH-FP extension project at Mirsarai, Chittagong.

This is a concern to me as an activist in this field because we have found gross violations of human rights and ethical principles in the research works conducted so far, specially the ones related to clinical contraceptive methods such as Depo-Provera and Norplant. UBING, along with other Health activists and women's organisations, has raised these concerns in the past with evidences of the violations caused to the women under trial. We have raised the issue to the previous governments and to the donors as well.

These issues are well documented. I want to draw the attention of the Prime Minister to this particular aspect. I think ICDDR, B — which is supposed to deal with diarrhoeal diseases — has focused unnecessarily on contraceptive distribution services and research. Moreover, ICDDR, B itself has been alleged to have violated the principles of Declaration of Helsinki in relation to using human subjects for trials.

I think we should stress more on developing a health policy, which will ensure proper utilisation of our health and family planning infrastructure, human-power, drugs and medicines, equipment and also, will provide a clear direction also caused to the women in terms of healthcare services in order to improve the quality of people's life, healthcare is essential. May I draw the attention of our Prime Minister on this aspect?

To the Editor...

"Trouble at the DMCH"

Sir, In the editorial captioned "Trouble at the DMCH" on December 25, 1996 the DS has condemned an incident — an altercation between the director and a sweeper — which is ugly and regrettable.

But there is another aspect of the incident. Why will a sweeper go to the Director, the top man of the organisation, for redressing any of his grievances? The Director is not his controlling officer and there must be many intermediate supervisors, who could meet up any grievances of such an employee. Nowadays, it has become made customary by subordinate staff to run straight to the top man for anything, though he may not be at all concerned to petty problems. This practice is now rampant in all public organisations

and always the last man in the chain is affected.

This clearly indicates the indiscipline among the staff. When will it return to our public organisations?

A Citizen
Ashuganj

Paying wards and healthcare

Sir, As far as I know, there are two systems of ward functioning in papers at government-run hospitals in the country. But regrettably, 'paying ward' system is not maintained in many hospitals. For example, there is no paying ward in our Sirajganj General Hospital. I think it is necessary that paying wards in all the general hospitals be brought in operation for better healthcare. At least some tin-shed buildings

can be constructed.

And I request the government to fix a rate for all categories of operation fees as well as visiting fees of doctors-out-duty in paying wards. Attending doctors and staff may be paid 50 per cent of those fees. The private practices of the government doctors should be stopped to ensure proper health services to the common people from the hospitals.

Saiful Islam
Rajman, Ullapara
Sirajganj

Why buy? Sell.....

Sir, We accorded a red-carpet welcome to Prime Minister John Major in Dhaka a few days ago which marked a new chapter in the relations between Britain and Bangladesh. During his visit, our government has signed an agree-

ment with multinational group of companies from the UK, USA and the Netherlands to explore and exploit our natural gas in the coastal belt. It involves a foreign investment of 197 million US dollars in Bangladesh.

Under the term of the agreement, Bangladesh will purchase 160 million cft of gas when commercial production will start at the Sanggu field in Block-16 in the Bay of Bengal, 35 km off the Chittagong Port.

What we fail to understand is that why should we purchase 160 million cubic feet of our own gas from the multinational companies instead of selling the same to them?

We would be grateful if the authorities concerned kindly clarify the matter.

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