

Government Failing Itself

The PDB has around 10 billion Taka bill to be realised from its clients. The biggest of the clients called DESA, the Dhaka Electric Supply Authority owes 6.70 billions to the PDB. Autonomous and semi autonomous bodies and private consumers make up the rest of the 10-billion bill.

This is absolutely unacceptable. How can government agencies default on payments for things consumed? How can government now demand that the private consumers pay up in time on pain of being disconnected? No less serious is the problem that the unrealised bills do impede growth of the producing companies, the PDB in the present case. Bangladesh can hardly afford a shrinking PDB with our society's demand for power galloping past all sensible projection. With only a part of the outstanding bills PDB says it could build a 200mw plant, plugging significantly our present power gap.

Same is the story with the telephone. Government agencies and righteous leaders of the governments past and present owe tens of crores of Taka to the T&T Board. There are other areas where government set-ups do not pay up satisfactory for the goods and services received and used. Defaulting is a kind of crime and aberration that exacts more and more price from the society or the people in general as it goes down the line infecting ever new areas. The worst possible crime that could be conceived is for the government to lead in this rotting game. Now what must be done to prevent government agencies from indulging in this killing act? Perhaps for a start it should do well to say, religiously that it is not DESA who is defaulting, but the government indeed. All of such failings must be held against the government so that the government is forced to mend the holes.

It is for the government now to see that none of its agencies fail anymore in making due payments. But what will happen then to the tens of billions of Taka the public sector corporations owe to the banks? It could come to such a pass only as both government itself and the nation at large had never so far regarded government as a going business which must not run at a loss beyond some limit. The governments so far were unaccountable — as unaccountable as DESA or the so many others seemingly continue to be. If its agencies continue in their waywardness it is the government as a whole who will undergo punishment, inexorably.

Technical Education

A discussion meeting on mid level technical education held jointly by the CPD and Institute of Diploma Engineers has drawn our attention to an area of darkness in the candid picture of our labour force.

Evidently, the governmental policy plagued with a pathetic myopia in visualising the necessity of technical education is at fault. Investment in technical education which constituted 14% of the budgetary allocation in the education sector until 1988, dwindled to an appalling less than two per cent in 1996. While most countries, not only the developed ones but those emerging economic forces of the region like Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia have, over the years, invested significantly much to the growth of their economies, all that we have managed for our professed worries over stagnation in economy is to ignore the importance of technical education.

To turn our labour force into a real advantage by making it technically educated and equipped and also to hitch our economic wagon to stars of the new millennium, the government needs to take a few measures immediately. It should raise the budgetary allocation in this fund substantially for refurbishing the logistical upgradation of the few centres for technical education which are there. A long term plan, ideally a five-year plan should be drafted to raise, almost double the number of technical education centres in the country. These more direct modes of addressing this ailing sector have to be backed by a viably structured credit line that will make micro entrepreneurs out of the technically educated labours. Because it is neither possible nor advisable for the government to take up the responsibility of providing employment for a growing number of technically educated labours. Apart from contributing to the economy by being soaked by investment projects from abroad they, with capital provided initially in the form of credit, can launch projects of their own which irrespective of their smallness, should be deemed, in the long run, as a growth factor in a big way.

Come Rain, Come Repair

It is a perennial problem for the denizens of Dhaka. To be put through the hoop by the authorities who as if observing an inviolable urban ritual go about or rather, are rather reminded of the necessity of repairing the city roads invariably at about this time of the year. Together with the poor drainage system, this routine surgery of the city anatomy, specially at the areas burdened with the heaviest traffic, not only cause an enormous, apparently avoidable nuisance for people but also pave the way for an unconscionable amount of silent economic loss annually.

Apparently this flurry of activity that we see in the name of repair has got more to do with budgetary justification than real attempt to give city's navigability a boost. To our understanding, a section of inefficient and dishonest elements in this agency of the government who have the habit of making merry at the tax payers' cost, idle their time away rest of the year only to come up with a display in the rainy season when the calculations of utilising the allocation for the fiscal year begin.

Worse, often these repair projects, like the box culvert at Green Road, are kept unfinished for an inexplicably long period of time. As sufferers, we demand this mockery of routine repair which for all practical purposes literally opens the Pandora's box be stopped in the first place and finished within the earliest possible time when undertaken at all.

Memorable Win, Applicable Lesson

Being more than a mere celebration, the memorable win should shower enormous impact on our national thinking. Like the cricket team, the politicians of Bangladesh should mould their performances in a manner that would endear them to an ever increasing audience.

THE eternal moment in the world of our cricket at long last landed. The people of this country craved for such an event for a pretty long time. The coagulated emotions of the people burst into joy with the receipt of the pulse-stopping lastball victory news against Kenya. While the earlier successive failures enduringly wined the people, the present success would go a long way in healing the wounds. Nothing succeeds like a success!

One can, possibly, recollect only two such occasions when the ebullient people of this country was found to rise on their feet to tell something: 'We have won! Long Live Bangladesh!'. These are, for example, the day when the country liberated (16 December, 1971) and the day the last run came from a leg-by to reap home the ICC trophy to Bangladesh. On both these occasions, the whole nation was united by grubbing up the weeds of narrow political differences and, thus, manuring a sense of unison in thoughts and in jubilation. Our martyrs gifted us a homeland to live independently, and after 25 years their boys showed us ways to live with dignity and direction.

Both dignity and directions are very scarce essence in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, we feel dignified by this glorious win. The cricket world all over now knows that there is a country called Bangladesh — riddled with political turmoils and economic hardships — albeit that can equally compete in

the arena to take its due share. The grievous grubby image that we ourselves helped to create over the years is, to a great extent, reduced by the act of our heroes. The boys or Bangladesh snatched victory from those or other countries whose per capita income and economic health is few times heavier than that of ours.

But what is the sense of direction that the victory figures at? It is the quality of the captain and the manful management. The twins can easily take a ship — traversing a trek — to

enormous impact on our national thinking. Like the cricket team, the politicians of Bangladesh should mould their performances in a manner that would endear them to an ever increasing audience.

The awakening should dawn on us as soon as possible. First, we are capable of competing in the world match and seize victory. We do have capabilities but, more often than not, those potentials are submerged by the heinous campaign of a 'small' and 'infant' euphoria. But when time asks us to do, as it did in

the fundamental issue. Specifically, (a) the Cricket Stadium that honourable PM promised to present should be built as early as possible; (b) nationwide talent hunt should begin and these young talents should be trained by internationally famous coaches and (c) all facilities should be extended to the present cricket team so that they can improve their performance in the future.

The recent victory should indicate the potentiality that our people are endowed with but which, unfortunately, lack proper utilisation due to mismanagement and improper use of resources. If adequate resources for human development could be ensured by diverting resources from unproductive sectors, the society could crawl few steps ahead. Also, right persons should be placed at right points. The victory of our cricket team owes much to the existing qualified BCCB team. In other spheres also, qualified persons should be searched and valued.

Bangladesh is a small country where cricket is being played and appreciated by a relatively small segment of the population. The recent performance of our team, perhaps, leads to reject some of our misplaced notions that a small country is always disadvantaged in the arena of international competition. Clink good leadership, required resources and manful management, you clinch a victory unheard and unseen.

1971, we can do the undoable. Second, it is not always the lack of resources or per capita income come perse that deters us from being champion. They are essential but do not ensure everything. Third, the main task should be to transform the meager resources into proper investment on people by using the resources most judiciously. The leadership should be gallant with concrete goals, imagination and the commitment to lift a team (a nation) out of enduring successive failures of the past.

Thus, to sustain the gained glory, we need to do more than mere celebrations and address

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

shore. The most persistent question is: if with all the surrounding odds our boys could clinch a victory of immense prestige and pride then why can't we witness the same back home, we mean, in the sphere of economics, politics, society and in some other fronts? Why do we continue to be down the ditch all the time? It is, perhaps, simply because we had been running short of a qualified coach and had been shy of a manful management at the helm of our national affairs. We think, being more than a mere celebration of Kital Kelab happenings in Kuala Lumpur, the memorable win should shower



Economic Cooperation Among SAARC Countries: SAPTA and Beyond

by Munim Kumar Barai

It was a chance occasion to be present at a seminar on 'Economic Cooperation Among the SAARC Countries: Challenges for the Second Decade' held under the aegis of the SAARC Centre of Andhra University in Visakhapatnam on 24-26 March, 1997. The location of the Centre is an excellent one. On two sides of the Centre, the Bay of Bengal is nearly at a stone's throw away. The waves of the Bay could be seen, the witness at the wind could be felt. Far right to the South Indian Navy PNS Gazai just has emerged from the Bay itself. The very shape of the hill resembles an upside dolphin from nose to tail, so the name is. There is a natural berth, so Visakhapatnam has become an important sea-port since the ancient days of the Indian civilisation. Moreover, Visakhapatnam has something to remember with the liberation war of Bangladesh. In December 1971, the sole submarine of the Pakistan Navy PNS Gazai was torpedoed here when it was waiting in the sea-lane to ambush the Indian submarines expected to come out from the naval base. Visakhapatnam houses the Headquarters of the Eastern Command of the Indian Navy.

Now, seeing the scholars

Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) by four SAARC members under a new organisational framework has generated much debate and has caused an intellectual polarisation particularly in Bangladesh. So the seminar on the mentioned theme at this juncture carries significance in the sense that the venue saw an assembly of established experts in the field of economics, sociology, science as well as political science. Though there were differences of opinions on different issues, on one point there was an absolute unison among the intellectuals — South Asia needs SAARC and a better economic cooperation among the regional members is also the need of the time. SAPTA or SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area) can ensure that. In this article I would like to concentrate on the issue of desirability of SAPTA or SAFTA in the regional context. The issue of SAFTA will be dealt in a separate article altogether as it appears from the writings in different dailies and weeklies that our intellectual society has got divided predominantly by their political affiliations. So the notion of objectivity, the essential element of any impartial assessment, has thus become the

Lanka (112 products), Bhutan (47 products) and Maldives (8 products) in order. The largest number of products conceded concessions have been in favour of Pakistan (646 products) followed by Bangladesh (600 products), India (474 products) and so on. It is to be noted that while Bangladesh has offered concessions on 222 tariff lines to India, it has received concessions on 513 tariff lines in return from India. Pakistan has offered us concessions only on 26 tariff lines. Now, once the customs notification giving effect to the SAPTA-II negotiations is there trade flows among the SAARC countries is bound to increase in the near future. What should not be missed here is that Bangladesh has received the maximum by offering the minimum in return and the favour has mainly come from India. So the present phase of chronic trade imbalance with India is likely to reduce once the SAPTA-II and the future offerings could be utilised in our favour.

SAFTA

So far the functioning of SAPTA as a beginner has remained on the right track. And as the economic and trading ac-

tor alone could result in a 20 per cent lower volume of trade in South Asia by the year 2015. Another survey initiated by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) suggested that intra-regional trade in South Asia has the potential to rise to \$17 billion (the current level is only about \$4.5 billion) by 2015 if the countries of the region cooperate. In land transport, communication network and transit facilities. The survey has also estimated that if Bangladesh is allowed unhindered cargo movement by India through its territories to Nepal, the country's export to the Himalayan Kingdom alone could increase by \$50 to \$100 million a year. So SAPTA holds a promise of trade-led regional prosperity where Bangladesh has to gain more than to lose in the long run.

Conclusions

Dynamism is an essential element of every superior system. Without that any system becomes obsolete and irrelevant in a very short span of time. SAPTA cannot be an exception. So any suggestion like Bangladesh should stay with SAPTA as far as it has gone and should not waste its energy and effort in promoting SAFTA is absurd, if not ridiculous. Sim-

When there was a feeling that SAARC has ultimately got a new push by SAPTA, a new challenge seems to have emerged in the scene. The creation of the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) by four SAARC members under a new organisational framework has generated much debate...

from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan as well as from Nepal and Sri Lanka at the same venue was somehow pleasing in the sense that SAARC has created a platform (SAARC Centre) where the academics and experts from the member nations can assemble, freely talk and exchange views to give ideas and strategies for furthering the process of cooperation among the South Asian countries in the areas of trade, technology and joint ventures. The challenges, of course, are many to achieve the goals, but they are not invariable.

The Challenges

In fact, from the very inception of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in December 1985, the organisation was never challenge-free. Even before its creation, the idea of a regional organisation in South Asia faced state level cold shouldering or opposition. However, the spirit of 'collective self-reliance' ultimately prevailed over the wishes of the so-called nationalist (please read isolationist) forces and SAARC was created. But soon it was realised that the forum, particularly during Summits in different capitals of the member countries, had become a platform of 'talk shows' of the highest of the hierarchy of power who only made promises to forget them very soon. Moreover, a process of politicisation of the organisation was on, though it was supposed to be kept apolitical as per the Article of the SAARC Charter.

The biggest challenge SAARC has been facing from the very beginning is the rivalry of the two bitter neighbours of South Asia, viz. India and Pakistan. But the developments in the international arena in the 1990s have given a new lease of life to SAARC and the organisation has been strengthened through the implementation of SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) in December 1995, exactly a decade after SAARC came into force.

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first causality with regard to the assessment of SAGQ.

SAPTA

SAPTA is the first real step to advance economic cooperation among the SAARC countries. Under the SAPTA framework, product-wise tariff concessions have to be negotiated amongst the member countries on a step by step basis. The agreement, inter alia, also provides that concessions offered to non-LDC members are to be multilateralised amongst all SAPTA members and those offered to least developed countries (LDCs) are to be multilateralised amongst the SAPTA LDC members. An Inter-Government Group (IGG) has been set up to negotiate the trade concessions to be offered by the participating countries.

The First Round of negotiations ended in April 1995 and SAPTA came into force in December 1995 with a total of 226 items for which tariff concessions ranging from 10 to 100 per cent of the applied (most favoured nation or MFN) tariffs were offered. But the rest of the items for tariff concessions brings out two limitations. First, the lines offered by each country constitute a small fraction of its import basket. And secondly, the lines have little trade content and hence carry little trade weight in the total structure of trade compositions of the SAARC countries. This might be due to the fact that the negotiators at the First Round did not adopt any trade coverage criterion nor did they address the more intractable non-tariff measures. As the statistics of intra-SAARC trade for 1996 are yet to be published so the real impact of SAPTA in the first year can not be assessed right now. But going by the general trend, the impact is expected to be marginal in the very first year of its operation.

In the Second Round of negotiations (also known as SAPTA-II) of the IGG as many as 2013 products have been offered for tariff concessions of which 764 have been offered exclusively in favour of the LDC. India has offered the maximum number of concessions (numbering 911 products) followed by Pakistan (386 products), Nepal (277 products), Sri

activities among the SAARC countries get momentum in the near future, the logical upgradation of SAPTA would be to create a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) by the SAARC countries. That what has been decided upon, SAPTA is likely to be transformed into SAFTA by the end of the century or latest by 2005. Theoretically, SAFTA will ensure the free movement of goods, services and investment among the member countries. So SAFTA is expected to usher a new era of economic cooperation across the border in the South Asian region, if it is implemented as per the schedule.

But the realisation of the goals of SAFTA will not be an easy task. Setting goals and translating those goals into reality are two different matters, particularly the execution phase of any project demands more attention though chalking out an attainable plan is equally important for the success of any project. The success of SAFTA requires tariff concessions and reduction of the average tariff level, dismantling of various non-tariff barriers, relaxing the norms regarding the origin of products (under SAPTA any product should have at least 40 per cent local content to be considered for tariff concessions), extending MFN clause to all the member countries and of course the greatest non-economic factor, viz. political will. At present there are over 5,000 tariff lines in the international harmonised code of commodity classification which are being traded among the SAARC countries. So the member countries are required to add on an average 1,250 products every year if they want to reach the goal of SAFTA at the earliest.

But fattening of the concession list alone might come to little help to increase the trade flows if the transport and communication networks are not equally matched for the flows. Upgradation of existing ones and construction of new road, rail and port facilities between intra and inter-states of SAARC region then become a must. A study by Arif Waqif of Hyderabad Administrative Staff College estimates that lack of required transport sec-

ply SAPTA cannot stay where it is now and Bangladesh cannot freeze its future trade promotion activities under SAPTA or SAFTA where Bangladesh can only improve its trade position. There is no point in arguing that Bangladesh must tag its future only with South Asia. But our total trade orientation to the west is going to face a serious threat in the near future which the shortsighted people are not seeing. This is because of the fact that by 2005 when the whole western markets be open to free competition, we will have to face steep competition from many other developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In that future context we are going to lose all Generalised Special Preferences (GSP) including quotas under new WTO arrangement. So we cannot close our door to explore economic opportunities with the South Asian countries. SAPTA or SAFTA is the vehicle for that exploration.

To the Editor...

Debate on investment of untaxed money

Sir, I am surprised to read in the papers that Finance Minister SAMS Kibria, while addressing the 16th annual general meeting of the Bangladesh Tax Lawyers Association, stressed that there was no need for debate regarding the morality of investing untaxed money. He also said that the source of the money would not be questioned. Does that mean a 'mastaan' or a kidnapper can now invest the money that he forcefully took from thousands of innocent citizens and not worry about it? And again, does it mean he (the mastaan) would not have to pay any tax either? In a few years, the 'mastaan' or kidnapper can become a respected industrialist of our community!

This arises a question in my mind: who is the Finance Minister representing? Is it the ordinary public who voted his party to power or is it the rich industrialists who only think about maximising their gains? I do not understand why the Fi-

Dhaka Day by Day

The Joys of Winning

by Anindita Sarkar



Celebrating victory.

— Star photo

Clinching the ICC trophy and earning a berth in the World Cup was indeed a momentous occasion for Bangladesh. The whole nation erupted in joy and spontaneous celebration. Cricket has become the buzz word. In the week preceding the victory you could see small clusters of people holding a frenzied discussion and you knew they were talking about the game and the nation's prospect — will they or won't they? In fact most people then had acquired a postural defect holding a transistor (it has resurfaced mysteriously from near oblivion) pressed to the ear and going about their work. And on that day work had to take a back seat — deadlines were forgotten, soles were incidental to cricket loving shopkeepers and bosses had assumed a benign attitude for the day. Raucous cheering and loud bursts of clapping greeted the fall of each Kenyan wicket. In fact the emotional bonding was evident from the running commentary that had become ever so poignant with each approaching day!

And with the winning shot there was no holding back. Pent up tension of such a close finish, the joy of winning and having made it to the international

scene found spontaneous/tumultuous expression on the streets. Victory processions, big and small, were out almost instantly. Rickshaws were virtually hijacked and jubilant fans were pulling on them. The rickshawpullers did not seem to mind one bit. Car loads of people, some on the top while others with half their bodies sticking out of the windows tooted their horns. Youths with sunglasses, bandanas and painted chests roared on their motor bikes at breakneck speed. Flags and impromptu banners (branches broken from the nearest tree) were all over the place. Everyone chanted only one word — 'Bangladesh, Bangladesh'. Though colours and crackers were banned, none of it could dampen the spirit of celebration.

The sight of people distributing sweets to complete strangers was heartening indeed. The whole nation had come together as one. Many saw it as the second best thing to have happened after liberation. Yet others saw it as a wonderful opportunity of celebrating a long holiday with Pahela Baishakh the next day and Eid just round the corner.

The euphoria has just been contained but only till the next time perhaps.

OPINION

ICC Trophy: A Life-giving Tonic

Md Asheq Ullah (Kayesh)

At long last things did turn out the way it should have been. Yes, finally Bangladesh has made it gloriously and gallantly. It has lifted the coveted ICC trophy and that again as unbeaten one among all the contenders. It's a wonderful moment, a moment worth relishing and cherishing.

It is relishing because the crowning success has made us feel immensely proud of our own country. Entire nation, irrespective of cast, creed and colour or even political affiliations, burst into jubilation and felt a strong sense of belonging and attachment. Excepting sixteenth of December 1971, never before in our twenty-five years of zigzag history we experienced such a rewarding and refreshing moment. In fact, successive wins against each and every team in ICC tournament have acted as a life-giving tonic for all of us.

It has been equally cherishing because Bangladesh is now an inseparable part of the next World Cup cricket. The very feeling that our country will encounter the cricket giants in a grand competition like World Cup in 1999 is a constant source of pleasure, a kind of pleasure that doesn't die down. Hats off to our cricketers and cricket organisers.

So far so good. All said and done but the task ahead appears to be quite stupendous. The new-found status of our cricket has made the job of our Cricket Control Board as well as the cricketers certainly difficult. With the level of expectation already skyrocketed, it remains to be seen by the people both at home and abroad how the history of our cricket will unfold in the coming days. While

many of genuine cricket enthusiasts tend to think that our cricket has really come of age, the pessimists and the cynics have started their usual chorus: the honeymoon will soon be over; bursting bubble will soon fizzle out; euphoria will soon evaporate etc., etc.

Against these discordant note the optimists have only one straight answer: to hold a lofty position is no one's exclusive preserve or monopoly; there is no shortcut way to achieve glory except timely perseverance; honest, hard and disciplined work never go unrewarded.

While it is true that the positive attitude followed by positive actions ultimately brings lot of dividends, at the same time we should not overlook the hard and bitter facts. Name, fame, glory can be earned but it is not so easy to retain it. So bigger challenges are lying ahead. It is hoped that BCCB will soon come up with a pragmatic and perspective plan based on all available inputs and resources and go all out to implement that plan with a missionary zeal. Any kind of misplanning or mismanagement will simply be expensive. It will not only shatter our cherished expectation but also degrade our image as a promising cricket nation. We may not always be able to earn success but we can certainly settle for dignified defeat. Dignified defeat, not a humiliating one, keeps the hope alive. We feel that the BCCB and the cricketers themselves are quite alive to their impending task.

Let's hope for the best. God-speed to our cricket.

The writer is an ex-national hockey player.

Finance Minister should seek suggestions on this matter from the FBCCI, a body that includes some people we think to be corrupted. Even Bangladesh Bank Governor in a recent speech said that Tk 5000 crore outstanding bank loan was being held by only 156 defaulters, who are mostly industrialists. Is it not natural that they would only try to protect their own interests?

There is only one way to improve the economy of a country that is by providing incentives to the honest tax-paying citizens, while punishing the dishonest ones.

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The myth of the reduced telephone rates

Sir, The BTTB, in its various printed literature (e.g. Telephone Guide, Instruction Manual etc) urges the subscribers to

utilise certain days (e.g. public and weekly holidays) and certain hours (e.g. 10 am to 6 am) of the day to avail of the facility of reduced tariff.

Ever since my telephone went digital (thanks to BTTB) in January '96, I, obviously, have made so many phone calls on those days and at those hours, but have never received any bills showing any such reduced rates. All these monthly bills contain total number of calls multiplied by a flat i.e., usual rate of Tk 1.70 per call. So?

Does the BTTB publish hoaxes? Or, shall I borrow Molla Nasiruddin's quip about the cat and the meat? If my bills included all the calls I made, where are the calls I made on those days and at those hours? And if my bills included all the calls I made, where are the promised reduced rates for the calls I made on those days and at those hours?

Could anybody enlighten me?

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