

Chaotic Schooling

The government's attempt to finalise a code of regulations for kindergarten and English-medium schools is yet to have met with success.

Now how does this exercise by schools relate to the introduction of a code of regulations? The draft code of regulations is supposed to go through revisions and reviews in light of the objective situation prevailing in the area.

Something of a racket is going on in the name of English medium education and this is indefensible. If any quarter tries to defend the malpractices and aberrations in this particular train of education, the reputed kindergarten and English-medium schools which have essentially filled a void tend to get a share of the bad name.

Growth Prospect

The Bangladesh Economic Association seminar on Present Policy Framework and Future Challenges which concluded on Saturday provided a glimpse of the Fifth Five Year Plan through the courtesy of the State Minister for Planning Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir.

The brief preview was followed by valuable observations from top economists of the country which can be broadly summed up as a strategy for sustainable growth with distributive justice.

The broad features of the Five Year Plan, due sometime next July as revealed by the State Minister for Planning are: (a) a consistent annual growth rate of seven per cent made possible by a progressive increase in the rate of investment from the present 18 to 22 per cent;

It will not be a cakewalk to the crucial four per cent increase in the investment rate given the apparent inelasticity in the sphere of internal revenue collection and a meagre inflow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) despite an attractive incentives package.

Professor Rehman Sobhan's emphasis on good governance to prevent financial liberalisation and reform measures from 'backfiring' and the investment incentives and lendings by the banks from being 'misappropriated' has a moral that we cannot miss.

Professor Anisur Rahman's stress on participatory development and an equity principle to make sure the outcome of growth is shared by many rather than a select few helps round off a recipe we need for poverty alleviation.

In the ultimate analysis, politics has to be economy-friendly.

Hackles Up

Here is the worst-case syndrome of a default sub culture: non payment of backlog bills for as essential a service as the supply of oxygen and nitrous oxide by BOC, Bangladesh to government hospitals.

Foremost on the defaulters' list being the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases, Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital and Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, they have provoked BOC, BD into warning that the life line to them would be cut off by June 10 if they failed to pay up by then.

All of them must start scrounging for money to clear their dues with a share-holders' company that cannot press the humanitarian consideration too far under the circumstances without affecting its business interest. Government also lost in terms of corporate taxes.

The recurring expenditure is supposed to have been provided for in the health sector budget. Are we to believe that the hospitals diverted funds from under the relevant head to utilise these under a different head of expenditure? This sometimes happens in government organisations but one is appalled that this might have been the case in regard to such a life-saving utility service.

We urge the health ministry to go into the whole episode and let the public know how and why the hospitals ran into such huge arrears of the order of Tk four crore.

Meanwhile, let there be no rupture in the services, something which can and should be ensured by rescheduling the payment of arrears.

Democratic Governance and the Challenge for Economic Management

by Wahiduddin Mahmud

Despite considerable success in domestic resource mobilisation, the envisaged acceleration in economic growth has not taken place mainly because of a feebly response of private sector investment.

In most part of the developing world, the introduction of market-oriented liberalising policy reforms since the 1980s has been accompanied by political liberalisation and a transition to democracy.

Contrary to popular expectation, economic problems have not constituted the most salient issues in our political debates and discourses. This is a serious limitation for the democratic system to be conducive to good economic management.

The beginning of the 1990s in Bangladesh saw the transition to parliamentary democracy along with the strengthening of economic policy reforms. Despite considerable success in domestic resource mobilisation, the envisaged acceleration in economic growth has not taken place mainly because of a feebly response of private sector investment.

However, with economic liberalisation and increased reliance on private investment and export, the economy is now

more susceptible than ever before to a climate of political uncertainty and unrest. Our political leaders must find mechanisms within the democratic system for limiting the degree of political conflict and for building a reservoir of political tolerance to draw upon.

Contrary to popular expectation, economic problems have not constituted the most salient issues in our political debates and discourses. This is a serious limitation for the democratic system to be conducive to good economic management.

Once the full range of policy options becomes public knowledge, political parties will see it in their interest to take a more moderate position, unless of course party behaviour is guided more by ideologies, emotions and prejudices than by the goal of gaining popularity among the electorate.

he will lose customer to the other.) By the same logic, will our two major parties be drawn together on issues of critical national interest?

The presence of a well-informed voting public is also a safeguard against the adoption of populist policies without regard to the needs of long-run economic growth. Political parties know by experience that periods of slow economic growth do not necessarily result in a collapse of an elected government, but short-run sharp shocks are destabilising.

There is always a temptation for the government to use economic policy instruments for political ends. How far such a propensity would compromise the quality of economic management will depend on the nature of the political support bases of the ruling regime.

There is of course only a thin line between the use of economic decision-making power for political ends and for personal material gains. In mature democracies, there are institutional, legal and moral restraints on the self-seeking behaviour of politicians and bureaucrats. An absence of such restraints in many developing countries can seriously undermine the government's integrity and its capacity for economic management.

One such institutional arrangement in parliamentary democracy is provided by the public accounts committee of the parliament. Unfortunately, such a committee has not functioned in Bangladesh with any degree of effectiveness. But even if the committee were made active, it would have to depend on government audit reports that refer to financial irregularities committed 5 to 8 years back, given the current state of the public auditing system.

A striking feature of Bangladesh's experience of economic reforms so far is that much of these reforms could be implemented without serious political resistance. These reforms were mostly in the nature of getting prices right, such as the withdrawal or reduction of agricultural input subsidies, abolition of urban food rationing and reduction of indus-

trial protection through import liberalisation. Similar reforms in other developing countries have often met with violent civil unrest and political upheavals. Although we have had our fair share of periodic episodes of political agitation and unrest, the underlying reasons in most cases were not primarily of economic nature.

The reforms that have so far been ineffective or have been delayed in Bangladesh are mostly of institutional nature, such as administrative, legal and financial sector reforms as well as privatisation-cum-reforms of state-owned enterprises. It is true that these reforms are administratively more difficult to implement compared to price reforms, but the real reason for resistance to such reforms perhaps lies elsewhere.

Even a more sinister aspect of the political-economic nexus can be seen in the growth of illegal financial extortions and terrorism under political patronage. We cannot expect the free-market reforms to produce results unless we can literally free our market places from the

clutches of illegal toll-collectors. Once it was thought that economic liberalisation through the removal of direct government controls (such as import-licensing) would do away with rent-seeking and illegal income generation.

Today, illegal toll collection perhaps accounts for a much larger proportion of our GDP compared to rent-seeking incomes that were previously generated by government controls through permits and licenses. One could perhaps conclude that if there is a political demand for illegal incomes, economic reforms alone can hardly be a remedy. That is why economic reforms need to be accompanied by complementary improvements in the political environment.

Just as the quality of democratic process impacts on economic performance, so also vice versa. Even if lack of economic growth does not usually result in a collapse of elected governments, it can still profoundly affect the quality and context of the political process. A general erosion of faith in the democratic governments to manage the economy increases political cynicism and appeal of authoritarian solution to crisis. However, the principal danger to democratic consolidation at the present time is less likely to be a reversion to authoritarian rule than a decay of state institutions and in the capacity of groups within civil society to engage in sustained and constructive collective action.

Let us hope that our civil society will be capable of undertaking such collective action towards improving the quality of democratic governance.

This write-up was delivered at the inauguration of a seminar organised by the Bangladesh Economic Association on May 29, 1997.

More Holidays, Bangladeshi Way of Meeting Millennial Challenges

by Chandra Shekhar Das

The picture is diametrically opposite when it comes to our work ethic. In the part of the world where the Spanish expression hasta manana (come tomorrow) applies more than the Spaniards, the renewed experiment appears a problematic cross between political expediency and shortsightedness.

So we go western. Two holidays a week. By one leap of governmental whim we land in a calendar that from now on will have 104 holidays a year—just double of the previous 52 days. Add to these reinforcement of no-work days, the usual quota of commemorative and festival holidays and we are going to have some 130 days carved out from a total of 365 days.

Let's travel back in time about this revisionist theory of holidays. Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the former head of the state, was the first to give us the taste of novelty in this area. In the course of his campaign for erasing the stigma of a usurper of power and ingratiating himself to the majority Muslims of the country and the Islamic world, he first revoked Sunday as the weekly holiday.

Over an era, people in this country had their lifestyle tuned and adjusted to the revised concept of holiday quite happily. Initially, there were some murmur of protests though from some quarters par-

ticularly those who are in international business and the dyed in the wool secularists. But then majority of the people seemed to have liked the idea and the few muffled voices of resentment were quickly drowned.

The issue came alive few months ago as Awami League, back to state power after 21 years through elections under yet another caretaker government, was trying to come to terms with the challenges of a fragile democracy and fished economy. A delegation of the leading business leaders urged the government to reinstate Sunday as the day of weekly holiday in order to give a boost to international business.

It required no political analyst to tell that the Awami League government just could not afford to revert to the more traditional idea of holiday by scrapping Friday as a holiday. Over the years, Awami League's opposition has succeeded in sinking the impression in people's mind that the party is not a friend of Islam, if not exactly its enemy. And with a campaign of often unqualified and unscrupulous criticism about its alleged promotion of Indian interests going on and opposition BNP waiting in all preparedness to pounce on any opportunity to cash in on, the AL government was highly unlikely to change the history of holidays.

But it has. It has revived a failed experiment though. But to what effect? There is no way this decision can be justified as simple transition to the western culture of five days a week.

West's is a completely different work ethic and culture. People in Europe and America make optimal use of their working hours and both deserve and utilise two weekly holidays in Saturday and Sunday. The Latin dictum *laborare est orare* (work is prayer) fits them like a glove.

The picture is diametrically opposite when it comes to our work ethic. In the part of the world where the Spanish expression *hasta manana* (come tomorrow) applies more than the Spaniards, the renewed experiment appears a problematic cross between political expediency and shortsightedness. In all likelihood, this will lead to huge pilferage of working hours of the government employees most of whom are based in the rural areas. Holidays on Friday and Saturday will mean the offices will be virtually empty by Thursday noon and not refilled before well into Sunday noon as the employees will scuttle out and trudge look before and after observing two holidays respectively. This is inevitable and one wonders how the government will get rid of a culture so in-veterate in its servants.

The five-day week culture is bound to have its expansive adverse effect on industry, commerce and economics of the country. Perhaps, the worst hit area will be the export-oriented industry. By having holidays on Friday and Saturday, Bangladesh will actually be cut off from the international business world for four days. Take North America for instance. When offices will be about to close here in Bangladesh, they will be about to open in the US and Canada. Then comes an uninterrupted break of 48 hours. When Bangladesh wakes up on Sunday, the world across the Atlantic is holidaying in full swing and it is not before Tuesday that we actually start busi-

ness with the world. So internationally, we can communicate with the world for only three days on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

The impact of this new holiday will be disastrous in the health care sector. Majority of the doctors who were already a rare sight in the government hospitals in the six-day week format will now be simply invisible. With two government approved holidays, the *gods-damn-to-ethics* elements among the doctors, will go about their private practice with all the enthusiasm in the world and consequently with increased indifference to the treatment seekers at the hospitals. One shudders to think the increase in the sufferings of the underprivileged section among the patients.

The logic aired by the government for the two-day weekly holidays is essentially quixotic and ludicrous. It said the raise in the quota of weekly holidays will give boost to social and familial reasons. Has anybody ever heard of a complaint regarding the paucity of time for social or familial interaction? Not that one can think of in this country.

Then comes the question of avoiding expenditure in the service sector. Two no-work days, it is argued, would mean significant cut in the use of power gas and other sources of energy. This is again a poor solution to the purpose of cost-cutting. It is not only a compromise on the idea of good governance but a defeat in the professed crusade against corruption. Every year people die in plane crashes but can man reject aviation as a mode of communication on that ground?

Then the environment logic does not hold water too. In the previous six-day week format working people used to start for their working places at different times. Government offices

started at 8-30, banks half an hour later and private businesses generally from ten. Now that all timings have been streamlined, the transport system in the city is bound to experience a huge pressure because of the simultaneous quest for availing transports by various professional groups. This automatically will lead to a rise in the number of vehicles on the streets and perhaps, also a marking up in the transport fare.

If the government was so concerned about environment it could have declared a day as an auto-rickshaw holiday or some other means by which the two-stroke engines, notorious for air pollution could be put off the roads. For all practical purposes, the new holiday pattern will add a new dimension to

traffic congestion in the cities and consequently do a world of good to the cause of air pollution.

Also the new office timing will put the working parents at a distinct disadvantage. Fathers or mothers who previously could drop their children to the schools and pick them up on their way back will have to think anew.

Worst of all, the decision has been taken in a manner that is completely contrary to the norms of democracy. No one knows of any elaborate participatory discussion on the issue prior to the announcement which for its sheer suddenness and 'strangularity' sounds like a firm of a potentate from the older days. People, for whom all the political parties claim to be working day and night in this country have been shabbily treated by this decision. This goes to show how both government and opposition from time to time, indulge in practices that defeat the cause of democracy.

OPINION

DCC: Quiet Efficacy

Chuckles

I like the way the Dhaka City Corporation works — quietly and unobtrusively. There is a lesson here for our extrovert and noisy politicians, who, sometimes, create more problems than they solve, resolve, or revolve.

The time bomb is ticking away over the metropolis' pollution, noise, and traffic jams. In the DCC's offices it is all quiet on all fronts. Have we learned the mystique of resignation to one's fate or responsibility? The Mayor is keeping a low profile — a difficult art to cultivate in the local environment of oneupmanship.

The city's problems have now infected the city's river also. The Buriganga now smells; and is drying up. It looks slim, but ugly, thanks to industrial and sewerage cosmetics offered as bonus gifts to the flowing waters fast slowing down.

Land, water, air, and body, all sectors are now covered. One cheer for the comprehensive-ness of the coverage. Our Administration (in the Eden Buildings Secretariat) have sway in all areas, but can hardly provide the infrastructure to dispose of some extra tons of garbage, to build some diversion roads, and arrest the rural-urban migration to magnetic Dhaka.

The enticing message of the city fathers is ignored. Come and take it. We have nothing to hide. Take your pick from the roads, the underground system, the river, and the air. We do offer close encounters to provide social warmth, but some mistrust it as encounters of the dubious kind. We welcome you with the flickering lights (the negative minds classify it as load-shedding or blackouts).

It would be an unkind cut to find fault with the city fathers. Perhaps they are overwhelmed with the magnitude of the task imposed upon them by ten million rigid and floating souls. DCC is exclusive in one respect: its monopoly is not being contested. There should be some competition, just to please one's ego. There is no jealousy or envy at DCC's jurisdiction over a huge empire.

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You need not go to the wet bazaars. Everything is available right on the footpaths — the shops come to the car windows. Our rickshaw density is the highest in the world, as is our population density, approaching 1000 per sq km.

Our Mayor holds an unenviable job. He is a modest person, rarely seen on television, or talking to the reporters. Like him, we are also practising the philosophy of the stoic. The city's problems have outgrown many 5-Year Plans. The macro perspective Delegation of experts and donor agencies come and go, and local visitors to Dhaka come, and stay.

The options available to DCC are severely limited, for humanitarian reasons. The drivers have to drive, and the hawkers have to hawk. The waters have to flow, but the citizens have the inalienable right to block it, because the drains are not covered, and the dustbins always overflow. The footpaths, in our democratic zeal, are now put to multipurpose uses, too numerous to enumerate. The buses cannot come near the bus-stands, and the passengers cannot come near the buses. We do not have hartal processions every day.

Dhaka is busy, sinking slowly, as we are pumping out too much water through the surplus deep tube wells. May be that is why Dhaka recently experienced a mild earth tremor, if not quake. We have to become shock-proof in several areas, including the stock market, the loan defaulters, and light-no-light. The capital's skyline is changing faster than the population growth rate(?), as there is a premium on the available horizontal space. It has to be conceded that the DCC's problems are not worse than some of the problems of the nation.

We do give freely to the air we breathe. It comes back, not to us, but into us, through our noses. DCC, we gently avoid poking its nose into others' affairs. That may be right for the morals, but not for the lungs (lucky, the heart does not have to breathe!). Can someone discover 'Dhaka cholesterol'?

If I were the Mayor of Dhaka, I could hardly have done better than what the Mayor is grappling with. Our sincerest sympathies, but certainly not condemnation.

To the Editor...

Negotiation at CU

Sir, We have been passing a critical time at the CU. Nobody knows when this will end. I have every doubt in the ongoing so-called negotiation. I want to be clear to my conscience, although I know this writing will bring nothing. As a regular reader of your commentaries on vital national issues, I earnestly request you to let the nation know about what has been going on inside the Chittagong University campus uninterruptedly.

A Concerned Citizen Chittagong.

Bangladesh and AP

Sir, I congratulate The Daily Star for publishing Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed's opinion in its issue of 26th May. Dr. Ahmed has rightly pointed out that The Associated Press seems to have very strangely gone on a vendetta against Bangladesh, as is obvious by its action of sending a picture from Bangladesh to a newspaper in the States, of Bangladeshis burning American and Israeli flags. Naturally, this picture prompted a vicious attack on Bangladesh in an American newspaper. The Ministry of Information should positively look into the activities of the representative of AP

in Bangladesh, who have reasons to believe is definitely on an agenda of his/her own in maligning Bangladesh.

Dr. Ahmed rightly points out that the common man in Bangladesh (and quite a few educated ones too, I think) do not even know what the Israeli flag looks like. So, for a bunch of Mullahs to be pictured burning Israeli and American flags not only seems farfetched but certainly orchestrated. AP should be asked where and when they pictured this incident and who took the picture. It is about time the negative activities of (non-Bengalis) in this country is stopped and the credibility of foreign nationals working against the welfare of the country, investigated.

Nasrin Akhtar Mirpur, Dhaka

Crime and punishment

Sir, We all have been observing with profound dismay that since independence, various heinous crimes such as murders, acid-throwing on the girls and the women, and rapes, decoities, hijackings, child-lifting, women trafficking, smuggling, garbing of other's properties, especially of government properties, cheating in the name of employment abroad, leakage of question papers,

forgery of certificates, especially of academic certificates, etc. had increased alarmingly. Though the successive governments tried to control the above crimes by amending the existing laws, but those have not been proved successful.

Besides, the present legal system is such that the offenders of the above crimes very often get bail and become more ferocious against the persons who lodge complaint. As a result in most cases, the people do not like to report to the police stations. So the offenders of the above crimes should be made non-bailable.

It is heartening to note that the present government is quite aware of the situation and has also constituted a Law Commission to reform the age-old outdated laws. In view of the above, we strongly feel that it will not be possible to control the above crimes unless deterrent punishment like death sentence is imposed. At the same time provision should be made for speedy trial of the cases fixing the maximum time for each case. As the saying goes, justice delayed is justice denied.

It may be mentioned that immediately after the revolution in the Soviet Russia, many people in the joyous mood began to travel by train without tickets. When this was reported to Lenin, he immediately ordered for shooting the ticketless

passengers. Only few shots were needed, and stopped travelling without tickets forever.

Ali Askar Bhuiyan 58/19 A, North Mugda, Dhaka

What is CEC's fault?

Sir, A recent article on 27/4/97 really shocked me and I felt that an article which goes in favour of a particular political party (without proper investigation) should not be encouraged. Let me try to give certain points on the CEC's fault.

1) Mr Abu Hena wanted nomination as an MP from Awami League which is well-known to everyone, he is a blind supporter of AL, therefore how can a person like him maintain his neutrality?

2) How can a person in his right mind agree that within a span of three months people in Laximpur constituency, where by-elections were held, suddenly started hating Khaleda Zia from where she won with a huge margin.

3) It is true that CEC cannot alone give verdict to the pending cases but we want to know what is the fate of these pending cases and what is our learned CEC doing about it? Why is there an election tribunal when in true sense it is nothing but a showroom.

Anwarul Iqbal Mohammod, Dhaka.