

Wise Up in Time

Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory and Chittagong Steel Mills, the two major state owned enterprises lying frozen for quite some time now, have become the latest targets of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)'s critical scrutiny. A seminar was organised by the Centre marking the disclosure of the finding of a recent study on the dead duo.

Speakers at Thursday's seminar, an interesting medley of representatives of the present and past governments among other men in the know, seemed to have agreed to the solution of their immediate privatisation.

Although the private sector capacity for the ownership of such major projects is something yet to be tested for any robust optimism at this stage, the option looks infinitely better than further emaciation of national economy through their continued affliction in the public sector.

The brain storming session featuring men associated with the projects at different times radiated candour and the much-desired decency as manifested in Tofael Ahmed's praise of the previous government for their timely shut-down. However, one could not help noticing a buck passing tendency in most of them, especially those involved with the project right from the beginning.

Why did not they take the trouble of convincing the then governments about the inherent flaws of the plans? If they had problems in having way with their good offices, they could have pursued with their reservations through the media. After all, it was national economy that was at stake.

No matter what the 'inseparable elements' of these projects have to offer in their moral defence today, the fact remains that Bangladesh would have been richer for their timely opposition to projects that were not viable and destined to be doomed. Either they lacked in farsightedness and vision which actually makes a sad commentary on their competence or, the more sinister possibility is, they purposely fell for discrediting a government of the past.

Nevertheless, such open, intense and technical discussions are necessary sources of wisdom however belated the may look. While thanking CPD for throwing a shaft of light into the heart of darkness in our industrial sector, we hope, consensus among political parties deemed as *sine qua non* for the transference of the dead units to the private sector, will not be long in coming.

In for Another Tragedy?

This is about a residential hall of students on the campus of one of our better backed-up universities. And quite unbelievably so. Many of the hall's rooms have long been locked and no new students have been taken in to fill these in the 96-97 session. Reason: these rooms are no longer habitable. What about the whole structure? Well, the engineering department of the university had recommended the demolition of the whole hall building some eighteen months back. But Fazilatunnessa Hall for women students of the Jahangirnagar University limps on with a possible repetition of the Jagnan Hall tragedy haunting it.

The situation is so bad that panicking by the plasters constantly coming off the ceilings and the hall verandah subsiding to form an eerily undulating floor-level, students are choosing to stay away with relatives, in open contravention of this university's spirit as well as practice. Those having no such option open to them are staying in their halls but with a sense of living with death.

All this and much more should be known to whom the facility belongs — namely, the university. And the sufferers know of the dangers to their peril. There is no reason why the whole university shouldn't know the facts of the Fazilatunnessa Hall, or for that matter, many parents of the JNU students. On the one hand this spreading knowledge of a residence of women students being forced to live a nightmare is not being able to unmake the bad reality by even an inch, on the other this is not going to earn a good name for the university. The university must move fast to abandon the building according to the urging of the engineers.

There were many compulsions to found and run a university on a perfectly residential basis at the time JNU came into being. A need to organise higher education far away from the din and bustle and, more, the turmoil of political conflicts and violence, was felt by all and sundry. From the beginning, as such, JNU had been somewhat different. Let this difference be reflected in the quality of education imparted there and the intellectual ambience that should be there — and not in the per-pupil subsidy figures and in the death traps like Fazilatunnessa Hall.

This Can't Go On

Health hazards due to criminal apathy stemming from hotel owners' greed for profit seem to have increased alarmingly. According to a report published in a Bengali newspaper recently 98% of the hotels and restaurants in the capital serve not only sub-standard, adulterated food but also drinking water, literally infested with germs and bacteria. This explains the marked increase in the pattern of certain diseases like typhoid, paratyphoid, dysentery, cholera and jaundice of late.

But polluted water is not the lone source of worry for public health. Food stuffs, especially meat items served in most hotels are in horrifyingly objectionable state. Some hoteliers reportedly, serve meat of dead or sick poultry. At some places they are charging for mutton when they are actually serving beef. This is not merely a question of tampering with health norms but also religious stipulations. For all practical purposes, the poor customers are paying only to buy diseases. Apparently, these restaurateurs have formed a racket with the grocers and quiet runs the business.

To its credit, the Environment Directorate has, through constant monitoring, proved it beyond doubt that it is not through ignorance but by choice that almost all the hoteliers are cashing on the absence of consumer awareness. But then the buck cannot stop with the Directorate's simple confession of not having the law enforcing right against the culprits.

We expect the government to do something immediately about setting a minimum standard about the food and drink served in the hotels and also empowering its concerned agency with the right to enforce the law and bring to book those not complying with it.

Bangladesh: The Chime of Challenges

The future challenges of Bangladesh are lying within our national boundary and among ourselves. The sooner we realize our pitfalls and rectify, the better we enter into the global market.

BALGLADESH Economic Association (BEA) recently organised a two-day seminar on "Current Policy Framework and Future Challenges". Inaugurated by the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the seminar was also addressed by the Finance Minister S A M S Kibria and State Minister for Planning Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir. The theme of the seminar was timely and is in tune with the on-going economic and political paradigms of Bangladesh.

What is the economic policy framework that is in existence in Bangladesh now? To put it simply, the current policy framework hovers around a free market economy with deregulation, privatization and trade liberalization to follow the suit. To the detractors of Awami League, of course, such a switch-over is considered as a drastic drift from its stances in 1970s. But it could, perhaps, be said that Awami League has leaned to the realities by accepting the changes in the global economy since then. The PM and her cabinet colleagues also presented to the seminar a short resume of their government's perspective policies and performance. It appears that the government is geared to face the challenges of globalisation and committed to ease the constraints bedeviling the free play of market forces.

Given the fact that Bangladesh has to 'adore' a free market paradigm and integrate itself with the global economy, what challenges await her and how to tackle them? The challenges emanate from growing competition in the production of goods and services, both inside and outside. The mind setting should therefore be: every penny has to be earned through raising productivity and opti-

mal allocation of resources and none is going to give anything. Consumers always intend to maximize their surplus by purchasing cheaper goods, notwithstanding the sources of origin of the products.

To many of us, the challenge is not worth pursuing since we are destined to lose because of our existing underdevelopment.

The 'horror' stories make the feeling even stronger. For example, if Bangladesh economy continues to grow at the annual average growth rate of the last decade or so, it would require 50 years to reach Thailand's present status and 75 years to be at par with today's Korea. Thus, given the mileage to be covered up, one might find it worthwhile not to run or walk at all, come what may! It may be mentioned here that Bangladesh (and for that matter the whole South Asia) slipped behind Korea, Taiwan and Singapore only during the last three decades. For example, during 1960s, the per capita income difference between Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan) and Korea was not as sharp as it emerges today. During the last three decades, reportedly Bangladesh's per capita income grew by less than three times as compared to Thailand's 25 times and Korea's 50 times. Thus, it was during the last three decades that we became laggards and they became leaders. The most pertinent question is: is there any short-cut and short-circuit ways of catching up with the Jones? Possibly yes.

Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya of BIDS (secretary of BEA) provided some historical anecdotes of growth rates of different

countries which, if taken seriously, might go a long way in healing our depressed dispositions. From 1780, it took United Kingdom 58 years to double their per capita income. Since 1839, the USA did the same in 47 years and Japan doubled its per capita income by 38 years (since 1885). Whereas, remarkably, Korea doubled its per capita income within 11 years and most recently China by less than 10 years! Unbelievable performance indeed! But

It was possible for two sim-

ilarities to eradicate mass illiteracy. About 29 million children of Bangladesh are out of primary school at the moment. Two-thirds of all under-five deaths are attributed to malnutrition — and half of the infants are born underweight. And lastly, there is only one doctor for 12,500 people of this country. With such a fragile human resource base, realities might betray our dreams of becoming competitive in the world.

The government's commitment

to eradicating illiteracy by 2000 and health for all doorsteps and by (ii) allowing foreign investments that help inflow of new technologies. Korea's experience should clearly be interpreted: protection was given to selected industries which portrayed potentialities of gaining international market. Inefficient industries got no public sector help.

Another important factor that goes to elevate competitive edge is the availability of physical infrastructure. The status of telecommunication, transport and electricity determines the capacities of economies to integrate themselves into the world market. For example, the completion of the Jamuna Bridge could turn the whole economy into a vibrant one and if along with it utility services pick up, there should be lesser problems in experiencing a growth rate of, say, 6.7 per cent. The utilities need to be removed from the bondage of the public sector.

If Bangladesh aims to double its per capita income within a short space of time then, needless to mention perhaps, there should be a bulge in investments (both domestic and foreign) in the economy. It is, perhaps, a futile exercise to cry for more investment without creating the climate for investment. Suppose, an investor visits Bangladesh to test the feasibility of his project. What does he observe? Sitting in the plane, he looks through the window and finds people cutting grasses and grazing cattle beside the run-way! Next he queues in the immigration and finds airport officials busy in checking out their relatives. He gets out and is given an awful reception by

the rowdy crowd awaiting outside. He tries to contact relevant persons but to his utter dismay, finds the telephone out of order! He visits Bol and observes load shedding! He decides to visit, say, Khulna but fails because or harts. Should that gentleman decide to invest few million dollars here?

These lead to the issue of good governance. Professor Wahiduddin Mahmood, the president of BEA, rightly continues hammer on this point. Establishment of good governance requires three preconditions: (a) establishment of rule of law — property rights, upgrading judicial system; (b) de-politicization of administration; (c) close monitoring of the operation of market so that none can manipulate the market conditions in his favour, and also (d) tough administration with stable decisions; (e) frequent dialogues with opposition political parties (within and outside parliament) on major issues with a view to reaching consensus and (f) devolving powers to local level institutions by making them alive. Participation of people in economic spheres should be ensured through revitalized local government institutions.

We are happy to note that few of the above mentioned pre-conditions are already in the agenda to be filled in, few are to take off the ground. In all, time is the binding constraint for us and we should spare no moment to put them in practice. Debates are good but prolonged debates on the same issues are debilitating too. The future challenges of Bangladesh are lying within our national boundary and among ourselves. The sooner we realize our pitfalls and rectify, the better we enter into the global market. Globalisation is just a wake up call!

ple reasons: 'perceptions were pragmatic and policies were right. The heroes' heavily invested in human capacity building and thus helped human capital formation. Labour was turned into capital to substitute scarce natural capital. And especially in Korea, it was not through massively subsidized university or higher education but by the spread of basic and technical education. In fact, basic and technical education used to claim the largest chunk of education budget. That is, perhaps, why Koreans tend to displace anyone anywhere as far as skills of workers are concerned.

Where are we now? Two-thirds of all our adults are illiterate despite the commitments by successive govern-

ments to eradicate mass illiteracy. About 29 million children of Bangladesh are out of primary school at the moment. Two-thirds of all under-five deaths are attributed to malnutrition — and half of the infants are born underweight. And lastly, there is only one doctor for 12,500 people of this country. With such a fragile human resource base, realities might betray our dreams of becoming competitive in the world.

The availability of technology is the right answer to the question of cutting short the long distance. The urgency of the need for a technological breakthrough can hardly be felt in a protected economy since profit is, to an extent, determined by the level of protection rather than by the efficiency of production. A relatively open economy brings technology to the forefront by (i) allowing competitive commodities at the

Politics of Political Party

After watching party elections of Congress in the different states, I can say the species called ordinary party worker is extinct. Money and criminals have taken over at most places. Bogus membership has made a mockery of elections. None has the courage or authority to verify them, apart from voicing allegations, which have been numerous this time.

THE stakes must be high. Otherwise, it is difficult to comprehend that the election of party president has generated both in Congress and the Janata Dal. It is true that the president allots tickets to the party candidates. But where is the fire? I do not see the polls round the corner, as Bhartiya Janata Party president L K Advani does.

In fact, both Congress and the Janata Dal would do their best to avoid an early poll. They know — if the recent by-elections are an indication — that they will lose the most. What is happening in the two parties has little to do with election. Nor are they posturing themselves for it. They are simply caught in the gale of groupism. It is a battle to prove supremacy, who in the party has a bigger clout.

Laalo Prasad Yadav of Janata Dal had yet another reason: he wanted to divert attention from his involvement in the Rs 950-crore cattle fodder scam. He worked himself into control of the party. But after a time he realised that he could not do so unless he seized it. Hence the bid to become the party president.

Whatever the calculations of different leaders in the two parties, they have damaged themselves as well as their organisations. Groupism has pulverised Congress and the Janata Dal to such an extent that it is difficult to pick up the pieces. Even when there is an effort to close the ranks, the bitterness among them is so much that they will work against their opponent in the party in the next election. The charges the leaders of the two parties have traded and the methods they have used during electioneering must have disillusioned even the most loyal party worker, not to speak of others.

Of what use is the party ticket if the voters are disgusted? The party president has none. The Janata Dal has none.

Laalo Prasad Yadav has reduced it to an organisation, which respects nobody, follows nobody. The prime minister should have a final say, as has been the case in Congress. But the manner in which party working president Sharad Yadav stalled him from introducing the wom-

an's Reservation Bill in the Lok Sabha shows that the party knows no institution, much less respect. The ultimate loss is that of the Janata Dal.

If one were to recall examples of leadership in Congress, Mrs Indira Gandhi realised quite early in her political career that she must combine the offices of Congress president and prime minister. She did not want to have two centres of power. However, she had to split the party in 1969 to achieve her end. Rajiv Gandhi, riding on the sympathy wave in the wake of his mother's assassination, had no problem. Narasimha Rao graduated the other way round. He became the Congress president first. The position helped him make the prime minister. Both Sitaram Kesari and Sharad Pawar are traversing the same path. But when the chips are down, they will at least accept the supremacy of the party.

The Janata Dal, if it is to survive as a party, must do the same. It will have to discipline the state leaders. Already con-

fined to Bihar, Karnataka and, to some extent, Orissa, it cannot afford to lose the limited base further. If there is to be a split, let it be now. Were the party to retrieve the principles of morality and methods, as laid down by Jayaprakash Narayan, a Gandhite, it would still emerge

quite right in demanding his resignation. Laalo will always rock the party. This is a good opportunity to bring back former Karnataka chief minister Ramakrishna Hegde, who is instrumental in the defeat of Janata Dal candidates in the Gondwana in the state.

If we are talking about lead-

ership, the organisational elec-

tions do not throw it up. They

are only an exercise which the

political parties go over periodically.

They get importance when a party is divided. In Nehru's days, it happened once

when he wanted J B Kripalani

as the Congress president and

Sardar Patel favoured Purshot-

am Das Tandon. Earlier, Ma-

hatma Gandhi also tried his

best to keep Subhas Chandra

Bose from the office of Congress

president. But he was elected de-

spite Gandhiji. However, Bose

preferred to resign.

Against this background,

Laalo Prasad Yadav becomes

dispensable. He, with his image

cannot fit into the Janata Dal.

Railway minister Ram Vilas

Paswan, also from Bihar, is

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One Congress chief minister told me the other day that none had any illusion about elections. 'But we see to it that we do not interfere in each other's territory.'

The cadre-based organisa-

tions like the BJP and the two