

PM's Japan Trip

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's six-day trip to Japan resonated with Tokyo's understanding of our project priorities set under a new leadership that is old enough to have already revealed its seriousness of purpose in terms of national development efforts. On her return from a visit which stood out for its duration and the agenda-packed itinerary, the PM has succinctly summed up the purposes of her trip as attracting a higher dose of investment including increased assistance to some specific projects. This logically required getting over odd spins the relationship had taken for a couple of years or so. The cold feet the bilateral dealings had got has no doubt warmed up through this visit and Tokyo came to feel the importance we attach to her as a stepping-stone to receiving greater donor or World Bank assistance.

Yet it is the Japanese vibrations as a past-master in development financing that the PM and the members of her entourage heard during their visit which we must now analyse and grasp in order to invigorate our ties with that friendly country since the days of our Liberation War.

We are not yet aware of the degree to which the Japanese concerns were addressed during the visit, but can safely assume that some assurances have been given on them. It is essential that we prove true to our words. The Japanese are adept in conveying that a spurt in investment hinges upon how the projects they have already substantially put their money in fared. They make no bones about our infrastructural deficiencies, hair-splitting by their standards being the power failures that occur frequently, not even sparing the EPZ. Bangladesh does theoretically appear on the Japanese investment map, but how can they possibly take a plunge when our local entrepreneurs are shying away from new investment due to the erratic electric supplies? So, what the Japanese are saying are basically our own concern and should be addressed accordingly.

Some countries have a way of communicating more by what they choose not to say rather than what they say. Japan must be the foremost among them having a great sense of courtesy, both controlled and spontaneous, which is her hall-mark.

It is the field situation that we must now be focused upon for a radical improvement in it. Let the PM's visit to Japan set a new tone and temper to our ties with that country.

Buriganga Diminished

A picture carried in this newspaper yesterday showed enclosures made of bamboos have encroached upon the river Buriganga far enough to have left a very narrow strip in the middle for navigation. The bamboo enclosures may be temporary but soon they are likely to be turned into permanent obstructions through earth-filling and human settlements in the form of slums. By the look of the encroachment one gets the impression that there is hardly any government in the country. How else unscrupulous and land-grabbing people dare commit such a crime of monumental proportion? After all, the Buriganga is the lifeline of Dhaka city and reducing the river in any way is equivalent to reducing the metropolis.

We understand the encroachers are more concerned about their immediate profit and have no idea of the geomorphology of the place or of the devastating consequence of their criminal act. But what about the concerned department or authorities? How can they allow this unabated encroachment deemed to be environmentally unsustainable for the city? It is not that the problem has been brought to the fore for the first time. The Department of Environment has warned of the various consequences of both neglect of and encroachment upon the river. We would like to know how the land-grabbers can still go on with their ill design even after such a strong warning and desperate call to save the river.

Both legal actions and a save-the-river campaign are needed urgently. Those who have built unauthorised structures on the river or are intending to do so should be made to face the law without delay. At the same time we need to impress upon the would-be encroachers that harming the river or reducing its size would put at risk the city and its citizens' existence. Then, of course, we would suggest that a policy on the river's recuperation be framed by the government keeping an eye on the future.

PM Must Act

Dhaka university authorities have taken a number of measures to keep at bay the non-student outside intruders from residential halls. In most cases the steps have proved quite effective. Strict enforcement of not all these measures is however to the liking of the leading student fronts. A case in point is the development at the university's Jagannath Hall. Here the student front of the ruling party has decided to go on an agitation campaign against the hall's provost if their demands for relaxing the tight measures are not accepted within a given time.

Clearly the protest by the student front is not consistent with the professed attitude of the prime minister who happens to be the president of its parent organisation, the Awami League. The necessity for reinforcing security at the residential halls by freeing the campus of outside elements who vibrate the educational environment of the campus was strongly felt by the authorities. There is no complaint that they are being partial or unjust in treating the different student organisations. Then why not vindicate it through a case-specific intervention?

We feel the prime minister should respond quickly and stand by the hall authorities who are under tremendous pressure to give in to the irrational and partisan demands of the student front. She must spell out her condemnation of the unseemly demands if she wants to help the DU authorities in their campaign for mopping up terrorism from the campus.

Prospects of Growth in Agriculture Sector

At present we are putting all our eggs in the same basket. So crop failures from natural disasters would tend to be too many. In case of a diversified agriculture, we will be creating lot of safety valves. We will be able to minimize the effects of disasters...

GROWTH in agriculture does not mean expanding food grain production, in particular paddy. We do not live by bread or rice alone. In fact paddy and all other crops together account for only a part of agriculture. Crop, livestock including poultry, fishery and forestry — all together constitute the agriculture sector. The prospects of growth should be sought in all these segments. The recent growth performance of the agriculture sector was due to unprecedented harvest of consecutive two paddy crops and wheat. It was a weather dependent phenomenon and not likely to recur again. We should aim at much more sustainable patterns of growth and for this purpose, the sub-sectors of agriculture cannot be isolated and their growth prospects determined on a stand alone basis.

Crops constitute the overwhelming component of agriculture and livestock, including poultry, must be fed from the produce of the field. Silted water bodies, former habitat of fish, are being converted into crop lands, while both fish and crops compete for limited water supplies during dry season. In the fast growing shrimp farms of coastal areas, there is a direct competition between paddy land and salt water beds. A large part of fuel wood and timber originate from homestead lands — not forest. There is a significant degree of integration among these sectors.

It has recently been asserted in the columns of The Daily Star that growth in agriculture should be sought from non-crop agriculture which happens to be the most dynamic segment of that sector. It is not correct. Given the integrated nature of agriculture, neither expanding food grain production alone nor growth in non-crop agriculture only is sustainable.

In a land-short country like Bangladesh, we have to seek an integrated growth strategy for agriculture where crop sector would play the leading role but not necessarily fulfill both required and sufficient condition for sustainable growth of the sector. The design of that strategy is the concern of my column today.

So far, agricultural growth in Bangladesh has largely been computed by expanding paddy and wheat production. There has been significant gains in output of rice in particular. However, paddy and wheat are relatively low value crops. The best yield of paddy at 5 tons per hectare would ensure a gross return of Tk. 21,250/hectare at the current farm-gate price of Tk. 160 per maund. If the same land had grown vegetables, such returns would have been at least two to three times more. Unfortunately, such substitution is not feasible at all seasons and in all types of land.

The strategy should therefore be to maximize paddy production during Aman season since flood plains in monsoon can hardly produce anything else. During the post Aman period, emphasis should shift to horticulture, oilseeds, feed and fodder. Multiplying relatively high lands should be devoted to year-round fruit, vegetable, feed and fodder cultivation where flood is not a problem. In the flood plains, cultivation of feed/fodder and oilseeds immediately after Aman harvest may be encouraged. This would lead to rapid expansion of livestock including poultry sub-sector. In deeply flooded areas, where the season may be too short for a dry season crop, integrated paddy-fish farming may be encouraged and the gross value of fish would tend to far outweigh the value of low yielding paddy.

Another key aspect is to concentrate on the value of output per unit of time and not land. Triple cropping, wherever feasible, should be encouraged. At least there should be two crops every year. Multiple relay cropping can further intensify agricultural production. In China, mushroom nurtured in sugar cane fields adds significantly to farmers' income. In Thailand, low lands, producing deep water paddy, are converted into alternate highland, constructed as ridges for horticulture, and fish ponds.

Increased productivity is the key to growth in agriculture. So far, we are aware of only high yielding varieties of paddy, wheat and potato.

Through tissue culture, yields can be rapidly augmented by proper selection and nurture of quality planting materials. There is hardly any homestead in Bangladesh without mango, jackfruit or other fruit trees. Most of them yield very poor quality fruits except in selected well known growing areas. Through tissue culture, if large scale production of homestead planting materials is undertaken, then value of production of non-cereal farm products, from homestead lands alone, can increase rapidly. At the same time, tissue culture should become a big time business with annual turnover of few hundred crore taka.

Fresh water aquaculture on an intensive scale has hardly made any dent so far. The existence of vast water bodies have remained underutilized. We depend on nature for the fish we find — ultimately on our plates. It need not be so. Like crops, fishes can be grown on an annual cycle yielding profitable returns to farmers as well as a sizable portion for each and every stomach of this land. Forest lands are also underutilized. In fact, in many forest areas, there is only shrubs and bushes. Agro-forestry is now an established farming practice which can minimize illegal cutting of trees and create forest wealth on a vastly expanded scale.

Bangladesh's total population, although growing at a declining rate, would be reaching a staggering 62 million by 2015. In order to be so called self-sufficient, production of paddy and wheat should double within the next 20 years. Given our famine prone anxiety to produce enough cereal, our agriculture programme have always remained heavily biased in favour of foodgrains alone. The consumption driven target of foodgrain production in the year 2015 will be 40 and 2.75 million tons of paddy and wheat respectively. At the attainable yield level of 5 tons per hectare, it should be possible to harvest the required quantity of grains from the limited but highly productive arable lands of Bangladesh. But in a regime of free trade — is it necessary to do?

Instead we should concentrate our efforts on a highly diversified agriculture where we may not be producing enough rice but there be more milk, fruit, vegetable, fish and poultry meat in the market. The shortfall in rice can be met through imports. An acre under vegetable if exported can earn enough dollars to import rice which would have taken 3 to 4 acres of our scarce land to produce. Land is the most limited factor of production in Bangladesh today. The gross value of production from the limited factor should be maximized. Therefore to continue our focus on rice and rice only is bad economics. It stands to no logic. The prospects of growth in agriculture is intimately connected with diversification of agriculture and focus on those items of farming where the returns are high — in fact much higher than paddy or wheat.

Let us not be scared of a famine unnecessarily. Only by exporting flowers, we can meet the cereal shortfall in future years. The great advantage of this strategy will be considerably higher levels of income and employment — than otherwise what would be the case from the traditional cereal based strategy. Non-cereal crops, livestock and poultry and fishing require a great deal more of processing — leading to the growth of various agro-processing industries. If it is not cereal, then the potential of value added in between the farm commodities and the final consumer product is fairly big. Inevitably, there will be more income and employment.

Finally, at present we are putting all our eggs in the same basket. So crop failures from natural disasters would tend to be too many. In case of a diversified agriculture, we will be creating lot of safety valves. We will be able to minimize the effects of disasters at the national level.

Prospects of growth in agriculture are not limited. A sustainable growth rate of 3 to 4 per cent is feasible provided we learn to think differently. We must undo what we thought to be the best in the past.

Recast Bureaucratic Leviathan or Risk Failure of Everything Else

Success of any effort for the nation's rapid economic, social and political progress would heavily depend on how soon and how effectively a modernised, pro-market, and pro-democracy public service will replace the existing bureaucratic leviathan.

REFORMING the country's administrative system remains a daunting task — mainly because it has a nasty habit of surviving as it is. While everything else changes around it — or around the world — the public service obstinately resists any effort to change its wasteful, unaccountable and unresponsive character. As a result, a captive nation has been paying dearly — for decades — in terms of lost freedom, weaker political institutions, and above all, in terms of unrealised economic goals and standard of living.

Although neither ordinary citizens nor the business community — not to mention of foreign investors — have implausible confidence in the honesty, integrity, or work ethic of the country's million-man civil bureaucracy, it continues to grow in size and narcissism, frustrating the nation's prospect for higher economic growth or decent living standard. In last 25 years, its size jumped from less than 500 thousand to more than a million, registering a compound growth rate of 3.56 per cent a year, far exceeding the country's population growth rate.

Much of the growth took place between 1988 and 1994 — when the size of the cadre services increased by a compound growth rate of 6.5 per cent. That means, the total number of officials belonging to cadre services increased by about 50 per cent in a matter of six years. During the same period, the number of departments and directorates of the government increased from 199 to 221. Bangladesh Secretariat is now swamped by 558 deputy secretaries, and 298 joint secretaries. Thanks to mass promotions and indiscriminate upgradations of posts, reports suggest that the number of joint secretaries may soon stand at 518.

The formal cost for keeping such a bureaucratic leviathan running appears to be about 15 per cent of this nation's gross domestic product (GDP). Unfortunately, the exact cost of the bureaucracy — that will include, among others, missed opportunities for economic growth, unchecked abuse of human rights, and ever-widening net of corruption and rent-seeking — would million of dollars. What is more striking is that while the nation spends at least one-seventh of its GDP for its up keeping, the administrative system of the country contributes only about 2.5 per cent to its GDP.

Just how bad is the service standard of the bureaucracy in this country? Take a few examples. According to a recent World Bank Report, an overwhelming majority of the masses are dissatisfied with the state or quality of public services in almost all sectors — ranging from education to health, agricultural loan to electricity supply, and export licensing to custom clearance. Thanks to widespread illiteracy and lack of knowledge of their rights as citizens — ordinary people simply have no expectation of assistance or cooperation, or even polite behaviour, from government officials. Indeed, most individuals get somewhat bewildered when government officials don't arbitrarily delay or obstruct.

The business community of the country has identified the bureaucracy — on many occasions and in many episodes — as the number one enemy of private sector-led economic growth. No wonder, in November 1996, Berlin-based Transparency International ranked Bangladesh as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, where corrupt practices dominate business dealings.

To most foreign investors, the country's fragile political stability is no more the most important problem for investing in Bangladesh. As Forest Cookson, President of American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh, pointed out recently, foreign investors are more concerned with "the administrative culture" of the country that is more likely to create obstacles than promote conducive investment climate to facilitate the nation's economic growth.

Now the question is, if the overall circumstances around the bureaucratic leviathan is so

dark and disappointing, if it is so widely considered to be unresponsive, unaccountable, wasteful, and abusive — how can it survive so long without a mass upheaval? Especially in a society that claims its allegiance to market economic principles and democratic values? How a poor nation can spend at least one seventh of its GDP for such a perennially unproductive or counter-productive agency for so many years? More importantly, if the country's public service is playing such a detrimental role to the nation's progress, how come no major political party has taken up this as a serious national issue?

No doubt, answers to all these questions would remain distant cry for the nation for a long long time — thanks to underdeveloped informational, educational and statistical base of the country. Although the wait is not yet over, a recent publication of the World Bank — titled Government that Works: Reforming the Public Sector — appears to have come up with some preliminary clues to this kind of thorny issues.

The Report, first of all, discovered the most obvious. It found that an overwhelming majority of the masses in the country are dissatisfied with the state or quality of public services. But, according to the Report, such a widespread exasperation of the people with inefficient government machinery has not yet been translated into public protest because of a plethora of reasons.

First and foremost, the Report suggests, is fear of the raw power of the state. Consumers and citizens are too scared to complain as there is little redress if the monopoly provider harasses. Second, many people have turned to alternative services, notably the private sector and NGOs. Therefore, they care little whether the government is responsive or not. The deterioration of universities, for example, may only be of limited personal concern for those who have the option of sending their children to educational institutions abroad.

Third, many people feel that even if there is waste, all this is being wasted is aid — which comes free. According to the Report, they are not aware that an increasing proportion of state spending is now coming from domestic resources. Fourth, there is a sense of fatalism about the prospects of improving the performance of government. An overwhelming majority of the people believe that they cannot effect meaningful changes in government behaviour.

Above all, the Report suggests, people in Bangladesh are acutely aware of their vulnerability to the whims and caprices of civil servants — the penalty for a complaint can be disconnected phone line, excessive billing, even harassment by local police. They know that there is little chance of redressing bureaucratic injustices through existing legal or administrative procedures in the country. Therefore, most ordinary people, although they are the real owners of the country, are practically transformed into passive on-lookers.

Quite clearly the administrative system of the country is almost absolutely inappropriate for modern needs — it is unquestionably out of joint with the needs of a market-oriented and democracy-driven society. The situation, therefore, demands a determined initiative by a responsible government to revamp the administrative system encompassing its personnel, structures, functions and behaviours. Nothing less than a quantum leap is needed in efficiency and effectiveness of the public service.

Success of any effort for the nation's rapid economic, social and political progress would heavily depend on how soon and how effectively a modernised, pro-market, and pro-democracy public service will replace the existing bureaucratic leviathan. No doubt, the recently appointed Administrative Reform Commission, under the leadership of Kazi Fazlur Rahman, has mountains to move, oceans to cross, and bridges to build, if it is serious about overhauling the country's public administration system.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif



by CAF Dowlah



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To the Editor...

Wimbledon coverage

Sir, I thank The Daily Star for the excellent coverage on this year's Wimbledon tennis tournament. Last year also the DS had done the same commendable job.

For the tennis lovers it is always a great entertainment to watch the matches on the TV. But to read the beautiful description of the matches despatched from Wimbledon, written with the usual candour, is yet another kind of pleasure.

Let me congratulate the DS and Mr Tawfiq Aziz Khan for the excellent job.

Ahmed Raihan
Baro Moghbazar, Dhaka

Sir, Though I am not a great tennis fan, the despatches of Tawfiq Aziz Khan from Wimbledon have made me to wait every morning, these days for The Daily Star, sports page with fresh eagerness.

All the kudos to The Daily Star for presenting us a very wonderful and engaging coverage of Wimbledon.

Siddiq Khan
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Metered taxi service

Sir, Since the 1950s I have ventilating in these columns for the introduction of metered taxi service, starting with metropolis Dhaka. So far none of the succeeding regimes have made any clear and positive public statement on this simple policy issue. For mysterious reasons not clear to the public. Security risk? What is it that standing in the way?

Today, in 1997, the need for this public service is obvious. This business will not fail, as the circulation of cash is much higher than even two years ago. The main reason could be the strong vested interest controlling the powerful government, with the only difference that the former appears to be more powerful than the "powerful" government. Why the politicians are not relevant when they harangue the public on so many topics day after day?

What this anti-public lobby is controlling? There are two areas of operation: private cars are hired out to the tourists and

visitors via BPC and the starred hotels; and the 3-wheeler autorickshaws which number several thousand. The rent-a-car service may continue on contract basis, but in addition to the metered taxi service for the passengers on the road.

The government order will not be complicated. Just announce a deadline for the phased operation; and facilitate the import of the fare meters (not a hi-tech tool; TCB may import if the private sector adopts a go-slow policy). Ban import of any vehicle or chassis without arrangement for fitting meter locally.

Once, I remember, a consignment of taxis (4-wheel saloon cars) were imported, but after some time, these were disposed off for private use. Prosecute all vehicles after the deadline — no extensions or exemptions. Where there is will, there is a way. AL should deal with this long-pending issue as ferociously as it deals with BNP.

Why cannot the government make up its mind? Why there is communication gap between the Authority and the vehicle owners' unions or apex bodies? With meter, there will be more passengers. The unions may face the TV camera and explain their stand to the viewers. The issue should not be closed or suspended until settled — without meter, no taxi can play.

One more tip: no politics please. The Prime Minister doesn't have to be approached on this simple, low-level issue?

A Husnain
Dhaka

Never on time

Sir, Consequent upon closure of all government offices and public sector corporations, banks, post offices and telegraph offices continuously for two days in a week on the one hand and eight days weekly holidays in a month on the other hand, various works and functions, money transaction, delivery of letters and correspondence, trade and commerce have been greatly hampered and affected and the economic activities of the country have become sluggish.

We observe that most of the government servants and sector corporation employees working

in Dhaka leave for their homes in rural areas on every Thursday morning after putting their initials on attendance registers. They return to their places of duties on Sunday afternoon and they again put their initials on the attendance registers to prove that they have attended offices after enjoying two-day weekly holiday. Outside Dhaka most of the employees do not attend office before 10 am and after launch hours which they take at their homes. Some back to office at before 3pm or 4pm and again leave office early before office hours.

We wonder for whose pleasure or service one-day weekly holiday and office timings have been changed all of a sudden? Is it an outright decision of some of our top bureaucrats for their benefit or it is a decision of our political party in power to allure the government servants to meet their (party in power) own ends?

We would request our MPs to kindly debate the pros and cons of 2-days weekly holiday and new office timings and to arrive at a consensus.

O H Kabir
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Parliament proceedings

Sir, After assumption of power, Awami League has taken initiative to broadcast and telecast the Parliament proceedings live which has been widely appreciated by the public. It is true that the people want to know what the representatives of the people are doing in this regard.

But hardly anybody has thought about the bad effects of live broadcast of the proceedings. Everyone should remember that the Parliament is neither a debating centre nor a venue of public meeting. Rather it is a place where people's interest should be discussed, problems should be diagnosed and possible corrective measures should be taken by the representatives of the people. In this regard, threadbare discussion on every aspect of the people's interests is necessary without becoming excited and losing temper.

But what do we listen on the radio and watch on the TV? Almost all the members of parliament are talking by raising their index finger with loud voice — sometimes even as if they are speaking at a public meeting. It is practised so as, perhaps most of them keep in their mind that their speeches are being broadcast and/or telecast live.

So I think the decision of live broadcasting and telecasting the Parliament proceedings should be reconsidered without making further delay.

Md Mokheer Rahman Tarun
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"We Fail to Understand"

Sir, On June 28, 1997 The Daily Star published a letter from Mr O H Kabir of Wari, Dhaka, under the caption "We fail to understand" wherein the writer mentioned many problems which are bedeviling our social and national life. The problems include law and order, inefficiency and corruption in government offices and organisations, loan default, delay in administration of justice, etc., all matters within the control of man, and floods, cyclones, tidal bores, etc., matters outside his control. Mr Kabir is bewildered and appalled that these problems are afflicting us and wanted to convey that he did not understand that why these problems are here.

I believe he with all his erudition and experience has the capability within himself to understand why these problems are bedeviling us. This letter is a humble attempt on my part to assist him.

We seem to have forgotten the purpose of human life on the earth. Human qualities such as truth, honesty, gratefulness, kindness, tolerance, sacrifice, mercy, modesty, patience, dignity, conscience, etc., have disappeared from our life, and their places have been taken over by falsehood, dishonesty, greed, selfishness, jealousy, hatred, boasting, arrogance, impudence, cruelty, passions, etc. We ignore our traditional values and consider them as outdated. Our development is measured only by the amount of money that one earns. Evidently, we have lost our

orientation and character. Our educational institutions these days produce graduates or masters of sciences, social sciences, arts, commerce, etc., but they do not produce men of character. The matters of character building are taught or supposed to be taught only in some obscure institutions called schools of religious instructions which are usually looked down upon as institutions of communal education. There is now even a move to abolish them. As a result, most of our people who go to schools and complete their education. All right, but they do not acquire wisdom — the capability to distinguish between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, fair and unfair, proper and improper, honesty and dishonesty, hypocrisy and faithfulness, good conduct and bad conduct, etc. To most the sole purpose of human life is to live it up. So the tendency is to make hay while the sun shines. They cry hoarse when things go against their personal or group interests. In such a situation, what can we expect except chaos and disorder around us?

The root cause of all our social and national problems is bad education. As we sow, so shall we reap.

Mohammad Yusuf
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Speed breakers

Sir, People often scratch each other's back for mutual pleasure and/or convenience. But some engineers and contractors are reported to be scratching each other's belly for similar reasons! An ordinary man wouldn't mind it because it does not affect him much. But the real problem arises when these engineers and contractors jointly decide to scratch the bellies of private cars. Now wait a minute, I am referring to so-called speed breakers or speed bumps. Do those have to be so high and so steep?

If the idea is to prevent accident, then I am afraid statistics show otherwise — because accidents mostly take place at those spots. However, if the idea is to obtain pure sadistic pleasure while watching private cars struggle to cross such an obstacle almost at zero speed and yet

scratch the bellies and breaking tail pipes, then the idea is successful.

A private car owner who has travelled only once from Dhaka to Aricha knows it very well. One can only hope that some day some body would care to do some thing about it.

Syed Farhad Roomy
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There're reasons to believe...

Sir, It has been recognised that the presence of arsenic salts in the ground water is a matter of major concern in many districts of West Bengal and Bangladesh. This concern has been expressed periodically by the media but there has been no follow-up in the sense that we are unable to know who are the research workers or teams independently working on the problem. There are reasons to believe that there are separate groups of investigators working on the problem. There are reasons to believe that there are separate groups of investigators working on the problem and there is a need to assess their recommendations under field conditions. In the absence of above mechanisms there would be a possibility that impression would gain ground that only one group of research worker is genuinely concerned towards the issue of no consequence. This could mean that scientific data which could otherwise be useful would never be put on test.

In view of above the Government of West Bengal or WHO may urgently set up an independent testing facility that would examine the veracity of claim by different research teams. This independent facility is not available at present and independent research worker teams making significant progress towards a solution of problem feel frustrated that their work cannot be objectively evaluated. It is urged that name of organisations working on this problem be listed and their recommendations objectively evaluated.

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