

Saving Jute & its Grower

Disaster has struck the jute grower. Danger bells are ringing for the national economy. The reason is, paradoxically, a bumper production of jute. Add to it the traditional bane of lack of holding power of the jute farmer. In many areas the price offered for a maund is less than Tk 140. Production cost for the same weight of jute has been at least Tk 340. The farmer must be saved from the ruination this will mean for him unless the situation is corrected in a matter of days. If peasants suffer there is no way for Bangladesh not to.

The Prime Minister took no time to appreciate the grave situation and act. A high-powered committee met on Sunday to moot ways to remedy the slump, ensure just price and infuse strength into the market. As a first measure towards those ends the BJMC was directed immediately to commence buying jute directly from the growers. The purchase programme would need enough funds to be able to stabilise the market above the bottom price. That flow of necessary funds has been promised.

However correct the decisions may be — the present ones are indeed so — treating the market to health would greatly depend on the purchase operations which must be within the reach of the individual growers and at the same time be transacted with absolute fairness and efficiency. To ensure this, high-level district committees would be formed. Prime Minister Hasina, presiding over the meet, directed the authorities "to accelerate the process of jute sector reforms and infrastructural development of jute management at grassroots level."

The evil consequences of a glut at the growers' level can only be obviated by large new foreign off-takes or innovation of radical uses embraced by manufacturers at home. The meeting was told of a Russian offer to buy jute and jute goods worth 15 to 20 million dollars.

These are all to the good. But in spite of such and a myriad other corrective measures taken from time to time over the past so many decades, jute has steadily been dwindling as an earner for the nation as well for the individual grower. That was a result of our jute and jute goods occupying a dangerously decreasing area in world trading. Of the many profitable uses jute was to be put, as again touted for decades on end, none has so far proved a success story. The latest in the line has been the chimera of paper from green jute. What ever has happened to that? A clear elaborate idea is overdue.

Exasperated, we ask the government, without polythene embankments, why aren't you banning polythene bags here and now? What is holding you? Khaleda Zia's reprise to the polythene lobby is nearing the end or is already over. For jute's sake, for this nation's sake ban the dangerous bags without wasting anymore time. That would surely allow jute a much-needed breathing space.

Biman's Socks are Loose

Biman's maintenance laxity has hit a new nadir in public perception after Sunday's dreadful touchdown of its F-28 aircraft at the ZIA from Calcutta without a functioning wheel. Whatever maybe the sophisticated explanation of the debacle in avionics parlance, the fact of the matter is the thud without an appropriate landing gear was a close shave with fatality for the 85 lives on board. If a thirty-minute flight could be so horrifically mishandled one, wouldn't be amiss to raise several questions about the longer international flights Biman Bangladesh Airlines operate globally on a daily basis.

The customer reactions, let's face it, have been from mixed to adverse about punctuality, in-flight service and conditions of the toilets. In spite of these drawbacks Biman has been making some business on the international routes. But if the operational security status, both in flight and on-ground is allowed to decline any further, then we are afraid Biman could face a clientele exodus on a scale hitherto unprojected.

Biman is a loser in domestic operations, but makes profit on the international circuit. We can assure them that they could easily be losers in both the sectors if the number of 'averted mishaps' keeps increasing and there is a providential ring to Biman's reliance rating.

There are national flag-carriers galore, and the aviation technology has reached such a state of anti-accident perfection today that any airlines lagging behind in the technical aspects of functioning stand no chance in this super-competitive jet-set age.

It is time, therefore, that Biman tidied up its maintenance mess accumulated over the years through persistent laxity, lack of supervision, and inventory updating, not necessarily of high-cost items. With many of its engineers in service since the Pakistan days, the task of streamlining the technical aspects of Biman, Bangladesh Airlines hardly looks formidable.

Those Manholes

Dhaka, aesthetically the city of mosques, has also become, in a strange mixture of opposites, a city of open manholes and festering scar-marks. On a sunny day, these are less hazardous malcontents gaping over the underground storm sewers, except for some absent-minded passers-by occasionally tripping over or almost falling into them, or vehicles bumping maddeningly along these undulating stretches.

In the rainy days, of course, they are invisible accident-traps where automobiles skid into only to be lifted with a herculean effort as the traffic congestion gets worse. And, as the users of three-wheelers, both manual and mechanised, will vouchsafe what a bodily jerk, including the head-bashing, one gets on a scooter, during the rides through bumpy roads.

The booby-traps in knee-deep waters literally turn into cesspools that are a veritable danger to public health. Some known spots in the city wear a slightly improved look after down-pour these days without being quite as water-logged as before — thanks to some drainage improvisation. Replication is advised.

As for the lidless manholes we want a survey made by road inspectors to determine their exact number. Then they must find stealth-proof ways to cover them up undetectably but workably.

Small-Scale Industries: The Attitude Must Change

by Dr Momtaz Uddin Ahmed

In Bangladesh's socio-economic realities, the SSIs have to be relied upon as integral components of our future industrialisation endeavours.

Of late, researching and/or writing on small-scale industries (SSIs) seems to have become unfashionable in Bangladesh. The two successive IRBD reviews brought out by CPD in 1996 and 1997 did not say a word on the sector. The National Budget 1996-97 came so heavy on the sector that it seemed to have declared war against the small producers. Some of the revenue measures proposed in the Budget, such as extension of the VAT net to cover electrical and electronic products, small service providers and small and cottage industries will adversely affect the small producers, manufacturers and service providers. The ambivalence towards development of small industries in Bangladesh becomes abundantly clear from almost benign neglect shown towards the sector in the recently launched Draft Fifth Five Year Plan (1997-2002). Any casual reader would be surprised to note that the planners have relegated the SSIs sector to a subsidiary status in the Plan document. Though careful appreciation of the potential roles of the sector in Bangladesh's industrial development and a concrete policy statement along with details on the strategies and programmes to implement it should have been contained in a separate chapter of the Plan, only a few disjointed paragraphs have been put in place in a rather non-professional manner.

But can this wilful neglect underline heralding of the 'dooms day' for the SSIs? Perhaps not. In contrast to the apparently step-motherly attitude displayed to the SSIs, these in-

dustries are recently being accorded far greater importance and attention than ever before even in the developed countries. A new generation of small firms, characterized by 'flexible specialization', has demonstrated their economic and political strength not in the peripheral activities but in the engine room of high capitalism both in times of easy growth and in times of crisis. The relative decline of Fordist mass production and expansion of activities based on less rigid and more flexible and adaptable structures has facilitated the growth of technologically advanced SSIs. The resurgence of SSIs in the developed countries has coincided with the concept of 'flexible specialization' which is used to capture a new type of industrial organization that can cope with the increasing innovation and flexibility requirement. New computer-based technology, increasing market segmentation, in the consumer markets and in large enterprises demand etc. have widened the spaces in which small enterprises can operate efficiently. These new varieties of SSIs can be either independent producers or subcontractors to large firms or a conglomerate of small firms cooperating with each other in production, marketing and distribution.

It is this resurgence of SSIs

which should also be instrumental in changing the orthodox views of many researchers

and development practitioners towards economic significance of these industries, especially in the developing countries. The point being made here is that the naive traditional approach of perceiving the SSIs as a residual to capitalist development must be changed. Most studies of SSIs in developing countries generally apply the narrow micro-economic focus on factor utilisation in the individual small enterprise. According to this view the small enterprise is regarded more efficient in the LDCs for being more intensive in the use of labour which is more abundant instead of scarce capital. Even where this view is proved empirically correct, it leaves the basic reason for the large firms' superiority, i.e. exploitation of scale economies. But the later view is also now being challenged by the flexible specialization paradigm. It is argued by many experts (i.e. Sabel, 1986) that the SSIs can be equally efficient if these enterprises can exploit external economies and adjust faster to changing circumstances.

The global experience of industrial development provides us with plenty of evidence that niches for small-scale industries constantly emerge as the industrial production structure transforms, while other niches disappear during the process. The SSIs have thus become the principal sources of new business creation in all economic systems. Emergence of these in-

dustries, particularly as 'venture businesses' in the modern high-risk, high-technology and knowledge-intensive fields is constantly creating the base for the growth sectors of the future and ensuring thereby the rise of the 'birth-right' economy.

Indeed, the SSIs in Bangladesh have been no exceptions to this trend. In numerical terms, there is a superabundance of SSIs in the total industrial structure of Bangladesh. Around 60 per cent of the net additions to new industrial enterprises in Bangladesh comes from the SSIs. According to latest BSCIC surveys of small and cottage industries, there are over 38 thousand small and 0.4 million cottage industries which together contribute to over 70 per cent of total industrial employment and nearly 50 per cent of value added.

Ironically, no accurate national level estimates of the growth and contributions of these industries is available in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, various segmented evidence generated through donor sponsored sample surveys conducted at different periods of time confirm that the SSIs have better records of growth than their large counterparts which they achieved without much of policy support received from the Government. On the contrary, there have always been many intended and/or unintended biases in the overall macro poli-

cies against the SSIs. Many developing countries including Bangladesh have pursued the strategy of accelerated industrialisation based on large-scale enterprises and capital intensity. Investment incentives, credit policies, trade regulations, licensing etc. have generally favoured the establishment and growth of large firms and discriminated, although in many cases inadvertently, against small firms, impeding competition and innovation.

In case of Bangladesh, the

last nail in the coffin has been

hammered by introducing the

structural adjustment measures

which have put the SSIs to face

a much stiffer competitive en-

vironment without having ade-

quate time to prepare them-

selves. Many of the trade and

financial reform measures

have gone against the sector as

a result of withdrawal of some

of the previously granted con-

cessions and sudden opening of

the domestic market to import

competition.

In summing up, I would like to add that in Bangladesh's socio-economic realities, the SSIs have to be relied upon as integral components of our future industrialisation endeavours. The researchers, planners and policy makers in Bangladesh need to practise pragmatism while trying to assess the worth of the SSIs in our economic system. In order to ensure best possible utilisation of our scarce resources attempts should be made to promote the dynamic elements within the small-scale sector based on their prospects for survival and growth in both domestic and international markets. Most importantly, these industries should not be left to the fringe of government policies and support programmes and made to suffer from discriminatory treatment. Instead, necessary policy support should be provided to complement their autonomous capacity to grow and enable them to contribute to the development of an industrial society.

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LETTER FROM AMERICA

Reader's Digest Picks on Bangladesh

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

In the first article of its August 1997 issue, by someone called Ralph Kinney Bennett, entitled, "The Global War on Christians", the "Reader's Digest" says: "In Bangladesh, when Marzina Begum and her family would not celebrate a Muslim holiday, the villagers beat her husband, breaking his leg."

The article begins with: "In China's Henan Province, 36-year-old Zhang Xiuju was dragged from her home one night by the police. When the police returned her lifeless, battered body, they claimed Xiuju had died accidentally when she jumped from a car."

"In Pakistan, Munir Kho-
ker was wounded by a gun shot when he tried to stop the destruction of a Christian cemetery by Muslim mobs."

You haven't heard of these people. They are but drops of water in a vast sea of victims — men, women and children who have been tortured, imprisoned and executed. Their crime? They are Christians." The article extensively quotes two books, written by Christian Right activists, Nina Shea and Paul Marshall.

The article labels Muslim militants and Communist oppressors, in that order, as the most implacable foes of Christians. It paints the map of all the countries in the world that persecutes Christians most severely in red — Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, North Korea, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria and Cuba. Notice that all but four countries named are Muslim. Bangladesh did not make it as a red spot on the map presumably because the map featured only countries with over 100,000 Christians.

It is a fairly good bet that neither Ms. Shea nor Mr. Marshall visited Bangladesh to find things out for themselves. Nevertheless, they had no qualms about printing what they wanted to hear. The reason why

Horowitz's self-righteousness must be: 'baloney'! When the holocaust of the Bosnian Muslims was taking place right in heart of Europe only two years ago, Mr. Horowitz, or fellow Zionists, A. M. Rosenthal of the New York Times, Steve Emerson of anti-Islam television, US senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Representative Frank Wolf of Virginia were nowhere to be found!

The truth lies elsewhere. Some staunch supporters of Israel believe that what is good for the Muslims, is bad for Israel. Right after seven Muslim-majority states emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union, in 1991, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States made a speech in New York expressing concern. He asked for joint western action to contain these nascent states just freezing them from the shackles of Communism. The same reasoning prevented the Zionists from condemning the annihilation of Muslims in Bosnia.

The ardent hope of many Zionists was that Islam would replace Communism as the West's new enemy. When that did not happen, at least to the extent they hoped, they went after creative ways of fostering hostility between Muslims and Christians. "Persecution of Christians by Muslims" seemed to fit the bill. After all, how can the westerners, Christians down to a man, woman and child, be not upset at the ill treatment of their co-religionists by the Muslims?

On the other hand, if Mr. Bennett has blown "Bangladesh's Christian persecution" theory way out of proportion, then perhaps Bangladeshis could return the favour by canceling their subscription to the "Reader's Digest", as a token of protest. It will not make much dent into the Digest's 27 million monthly subscription figure, or their monumental profits, but it will get their attention!

The article also features the activities of Zionist Michael Horowitz. To the question why a Jew is so interested in saving Christians, Mr. Horowitz says: "It may be easier for me to see the parallel between what is happening to Christian communities today and what happened to my people during much of Europe's history."

The only response to Mr.

The Zionists know that in the holy Quran Allah (SWT) says that among the people of the book (Jews and Christians), Muslims can expect better collaboration with the Christians. Some Jews want to prevent that at all cost. If the Jews are so eager to court the enmity of the world's Muslims, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy!

(For the record, let me also condemn unequivocally the terrorist act perpetrated by two suicide bombers in Jerusalem that killed fifteen Israelis. If the Palestinians are going to get their statehood, one hopes it will not be stained by the blood of innocent Israeli men, women and children.)

The US State Department's recent report chronicling the worldwide persecution of Christians is disturbing. Does the report imply that the non-Christians do not suffer persecution, or, that even if they do, it is not as important? Such one-dimensional expression of outrage lacks a moral component.

Granted, minority Christians have been the recipient of hostile denunciations in certain countries. On the other hand, in some other countries, such as Bosnia, the Christians have been the perpetrators. In spite of Ms. Shea and Messrs. Marshall and Horowitz's attempts to the contrary, followers of no one religion can claim the moral high ground exclusively, when it comes to persecuting religious minorities.

Christianity is not an endangered faith. By all account, the world's major religion is flourishing. Therefore, the State Department's selective concern for Christianity is akin to documenting crimes committed solely against the majority whites in America. In the guise of protecting the Christians, the State Department report, and the anti-Muslim Specter-Wolf bill before the US Congress, smacks of promoting Christianity worldwide!

Once my husband told me

that there is no 'chore' (thief) in Mymensingh. I was surprised! Then he said: "There my be 'choors' (thieves) in Mymensingh though". I laughed. As a matter of fact, people of different districts of Bangladesh have different distinctive practice while pronouncing words which they cannot avoid or do not avoid while speaking. I remember, when I was a student of Dhaka University, a student leader told someone who went to meet him: "Come in, come in. Why are you 'feeling' (peeping) have a cup (cup) of tea with me." That dialogue became very popular and a source of enjoyment for us. Then again there is a story I heard in London. A man went to a banker asking for loan to buy a car. The banker asked: "What type of car do you want to buy?" They man said: "bolbo" (mean's I will tell). The banker again asked and the man repeated "bolbo, bolbo". Then suddenly, the banker understood. The word was 'Volvo'.

It happens when a letter or word is pronounced in a different way it should be used. It happens due to many reasons. In my opinion, the main reason of mispronunciation is: habit. First somebody learns it from her/his surroundings, or from school and then it becomes a habit which afterwards cannot be changed or corrected. Sometimes many people do not care enough to correct their pronunciation. I have heard many educated people, well placed in the society, to pronounce 'g' and 'j' as 'z', like, 'intelligent' as 'intellizent', 'object' as 'objekt', 'much' as 'muss', ISc, BSc as 'Eche Eche'.

It does not really matter so long we can understand what one wants to say (although it irritates), but it becomes difficult to understand when the meaning changes for mispronunciation, like 'estate', for 'state', 'reason for region', 'joo for 'zoo' etc. The contention of my writing is that many of us are oblivious of our pronunciation of English and even of Bangla. Since childhood, especially when somebody is educated in the rural areas of Bangladesh, people pick up the wrong pronunciations without knowing

the correct ones.

It is understood that the teachers are not particular to make the pronunciation correct for the students or for themselves. Many people may argue saying: "what does it matter? This is not our own language". But in my opinion, it matters. For a little mistake in Arabic pronunciation, for example, the meaning completely changes. If we mispronounce while reading the Holy Quran, without knowing we may change the meaning of Quranic verses. To learn and to speak perfectly in any language should be regarded as a credit.

It matters a lot for a speaker or a teacher because by speaking perfectly one can influence and inspire more. I remember in our university days, we never absented ourselves from the classes taken by Prof Mozaffar Ahmed Chowdhury, Dr Hasan Imam or Dr Jotirmoy Guha Thakurta and others who spoke good English and Bengali.

I can still hear their voices in my memory. We always enjoy the speech given by someone who speaks fluently and pronounces the language correctly, either in English or in Bengali. But one can do it automatically. One has to acquire — to learn one has to be taught. For that teachers are to be responsible and careful. Percents are to be particular in their own pronunciations. Television and radio have a role to play also in this respect.

Many a times, I have heard my grandson mispronouncing Bengali words. When admonished, he says: "But I have heard it in a TV drama!" He is right. In TV dramas, we hear a typical pronunciation, vocabulary and intonation from the dialogue coming from the mouth of people serving in the house or people coming from villages. The children pick it up easily and like to repeat.

Anyway, we cannot prevent anybody speaking in their own way and in their own style, but we can always advise the next generation to avoid mispronunciation. They should always try to learn and speak perfectly, whether in Bengali or in English. Nothing is better than perfection.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Rockin' the Boat

THE news that President and Mrs Clinton were returning to Martha's Vineyard has caused a stir throughout the island. It isn't because we are unused to presidents coming and going, but everyone is asking the same question: "How did he get a ferry ticket?"

You have to understand that the only way to bring a car onto Martha's Vineyard is by ferry, and it's impossible to get a ferry reservation this late in the season. You're not even allowed to park in New Bedford in hopes that someone with a ticket got stuck in a traffic jam in New Jersey.

Everybody has a theory on how the president secured his reservation.

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