

Let the Railways Live

The train collision at Singair in Jessore must not be taken as a tragedy in isolation. It is symptomatic of a general decline in Bangladesh of a pervasive and powerful maker and sustainer of modern civilisation — namely Railway.

Successive governments, in both colonial East Pakistan and independent Bangladesh, had all a hand in the interminable process of strangulation of an infrastructure that took a century to build.

By comprehensive development we mean something dovetailed into the total picture of movement of people and goods of this nation. Each mode of transportation must be organised as complementary to another while retaining their competitiveness.

This criminal failure of responsibility is writ large on the thousands of shacks which encroach upon the tracks in the suburbs and the bazars that straddle yards and approaches to them.

We demand — we mean this impolite verb — that a commission be set up soon overlorded and including all relevant ministries and departments, answerable directly to the Prime Minister, to rescussitate the railways.

De-mining the World

Alfred Bernhard Nobel's bequest has had a stirring vindication last Friday when this year's Nobel peace prize went equally to the US-based International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and its moving force of a coordinator Jody Williams.

While welcoming this prestigious international recognition of a vision for the total elimination of landmines and the good work done in this behalf by the likes of Jody Williams and the late Princess Diana to get the warring leaderships 'sensitised' over the issue, we notice the crusade still has some critical distance to cover before de-mining the world.

By choosing the US-based ICBL and its coordinator as the joint awardee, the Nobel Committee has put a powerful message across to the Clinton government that it better sign a mine-banning treaty it had virtually turned its back to — in September.

Disturbing Report

In the three months from July to September '97, there occurred 218 cases of rape, 44 incidents of acid-throwing and 39 cases of dowry-related deaths. These are among other statistics published by the Co-ordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) that directly show how violence against women continue unabated in our country.

Poverty lies at the root of this problem. But hardly can all the blame be put at its door. A strong case lies against many of our social norms and attitude to which we still prefer to cling in the name of tradition. Let it be said, loud and clear, that not all traditions are worth keeping, just as all modern norms are not worth adopting.

How is Bangladesh Rated Abroad?

False issuing of certificates of origin causing the European countries' cancellation of GSP facilities, which have been wisely withdrawn by the government, and attacks on RMG factories by workers leading to disruption of export orders.

THE way the politics and economics of the country has been, and still is being, run, raises the question in the minds of its well-wishers and sympathisers whether the country is not consciously or unconsciously downgrading its own rating abroad.

What Factors Contribute to Such Ratings?

For the purpose of trade, lending and investment, the outside world will rate a country on the basis of both political and financial risks. It goes without saying that no matter how profitable trade or investment prospects may look like, if the political situation is unstable, no investor or trader would like to deal with that country.

Political Assessment of the Country

Politically, even if one ignores the sad history of the first two decades which were

marked by bloodshed and military dictatorships, the management of politics by the two popularly elected democratic governments since 1991 do not provide a very optimistic scenario. The period from March, 1994 to June, 1996, was a period of extreme political turmoil marked by 170 days of hartal, killing of more than 90 persons, burning of about 2000 automobiles and other vehicles, destruction of important government establishments, anarchy on the streets and in the government offices etc.

However, what looks dangerous is the gradual shortening of the number of years that an elected government can run the affairs of the country during its tenure of five years. The BNP government could run the administration without much troubles only for three years. But this government may not have even three peaceful years before it faces a prolonged street agitation of 1994-96-style and an administrative paralysis.

decade or so, one can see that the country will be in a continuously chaotic state unless either the shanty dawns on the politicians or military interventions take place or a third effective political force emerges on the political scene. Military takeover has to be ruled out because it will not have the blessings of the foreign donors and it may face bigger trouble at home.

Does End Justify the Means?

From the nature of all the political turmoils and violence as well as the increasingly uncontrollable law and order situation of the country, one is tempted to raise an age-old moral question. Politicians seem to think that getting into, and staying in, power by any means is acceptable.

One further lesson should be drawn from the experiences of 1994-96 political turmoil. That is the deep involvement of foreigners like the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth as well as the heads of important foreign missions in Dhaka in the internal political affairs of the country.

Coming back to the main theme, one should add the current state of law and order situation. The rapidly deteriorating law and order situation, criminal offenses, road accidents, widespread terrorism in the main cities, shopping areas, highways and bus terminals, and raping and killing of innocent girls in custody indicate where the country is heading for.

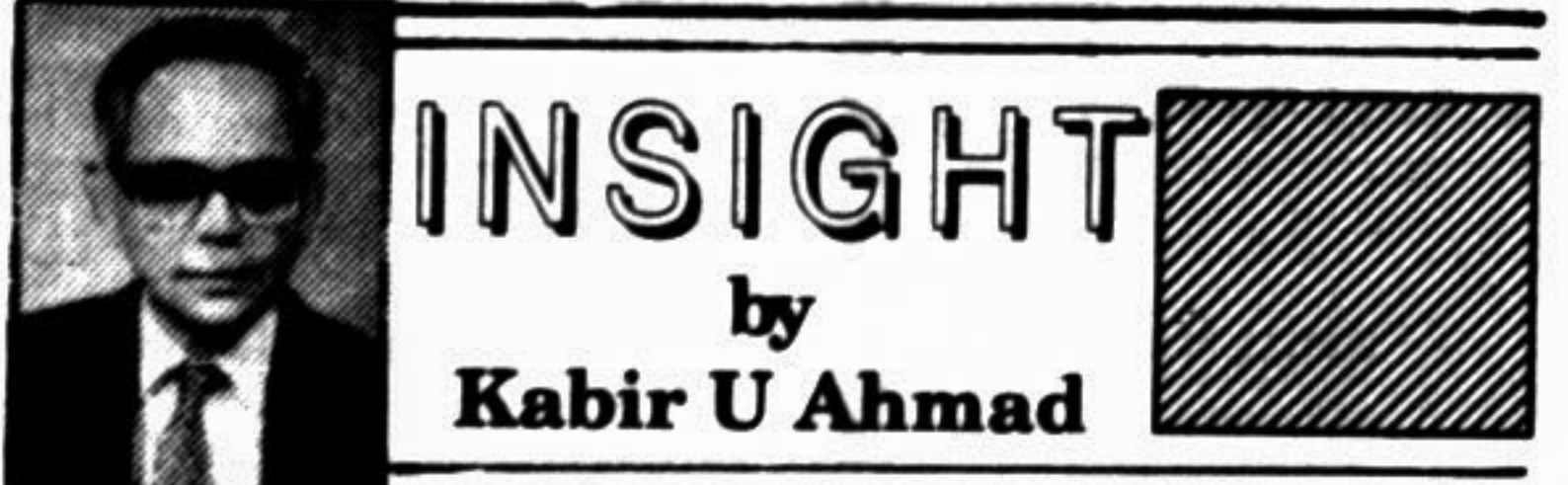
strike and paralyse the administration, industrial workers attack and vandalise the employees' offices whereby industries are closed down. Who would say that it is a civilised and law abiding society? Who would say that there exists a business friendly environment?

Financial Assessment of the Country

On the financial or economic side, government expenditures have been increasing rapidly while the revenue collection targets are falling behind. As a result, government

borrowing from the banking sector has been very heavy. Due to the government's, especially the Bangladesh Bank's, drive for realisation of the overdue loans, which is certainly commendable, commercial banks substantially reduced a lot of industrial lending. Because of lack of bank loans, a lot of industries came to a grinding halt.

Further, there is a need for strengthening the direct tax collecting machinery and control of corruption in all tax collecting agencies. There is a need for decontrolling most of the monopoly structures in the economic activities of the government with a view to promoting the incentive structure of the private sector. The government has to withdraw from all commercial and economic activities.



INSIGHT by Kabir U Ahmad

Return of BJP to Power in UP: A Threat to Indian Political Fabric?

by Zaglul A Chowdhury

Indian politicians will do well if they take greater care to face the BJP threats more seriously since the party is capable of turning things upside down.

Between the Hindus and the Muslims, could occur at a time when the Congress government was at the helm in the South Bloc remains a matter of discussions with varying interpretations even in India itself. Certainly, this occurrence went against the Congress as far as its Muslim vote-bank is concerned in the last general elections.

importance not only for the interest of secular India but also for Indian image abroad. This feeling has haunted the party for long and it gave vent to its sentiments in the Calcutta gathering of the organisation. After all, the Congress cannot afford to be seen as a party turning a blind eye to the minority sensitivities.

During the good days, two leaders had come together to win state polls in UP and formed the government inflicting defeats to Congress, Janata Dal and the BJP but they later parted ways and not surprisingly, are now bitter rivals. When Kanshi Ram's party and BJP formed the state government early this year with the secular UP government at New Delhi, obviously federal government's ties with the state authority were not good and moreover, Mulayam Singh Yadav being a key figure in the central government, the relationship turned worse.

Most of the major political parties in India are secular and prime minister Gujral and others are well-known for this outlook. But BJP is a strong force in India and Indian politicians will do well if they take greater care to face the BJP threats more seriously since the party is capable of turning things upside down. The comeback of BJP to power in UP should not be allowed by the secular forces in India to whip up communal sentiments. The UP should and Congress leaders are well aware of this and, hopefully, they can combat the BJP threats by drawing a pragmatic political strategy.

To the Editor...

BTW — A rolling stone. Sir, Ever since the decision for two-day weekly holiday was taken by the present government, I had always a confusion in my mind that how long it would have remained in force. However being a banker I welcome this decision which Bangladesh bank who was given the liberty to fix timing for the scheduled banks decided to keep the banks closed for two days a week in accordance with the decision.

replied 'Yes, yes I have my husband, I have my son. I have my daughter and also a newly-born grand-daughter, still I am an orphan'. The passers-by again said, 'You have all kith and kins around you, then why are you carrying the label of orphanage?'

decades or years to enjoy 'telephone on demand' service; and why this waiting period cannot be shortened in these days of open marketing and competition? This go-slow policy is not at all clear.

on political 'isms', but in practice it is hopelessly inefficient. The systems loss in the power sector is another nightmare. RAJUK is a white elephant. The DCC has collapsed, like the DSE. The financial market is not at all healthy, led by the loan defaulters. The new export-oriented factories are being destroyed by hired hoodlums — and the authorities are not even reactive! The CBAs are running parallel administrations and the authorities are abetting! Is this the image of the public service by those voted into power? The credibility and the image are deteriorating fast. The public won't stand it much longer.

Telephone on demand and other woes

Sir, Some government agencies doing business (not essential) are too slow, year after year, in meeting the demand of some service, such as a new telephone connection. The ministry concerned (not BTB operators) may inform the public has to wait for how many

Garuda

Sir, The air-crash that occurred in Indonesia has unfortunately killed 234 people. The aircraft belonged to Garuda, the national airlines of Indonesia.

Orphan

Sir, An aged woman perhaps in her 50s was crying in the street and shouting: 'I am an orphan. I am an orphan'. When asked by the passers-by, why was she an orphan has she not anybody to look after her, she

the humdrum, have remained relatively small. There is, of course, the gas sector which has attracted large foreign investments for attractive terms.

Some Concluding Remarks

What should be done? Politically there is a need for drastic change of attitudes of the major political parties towards each other as well as in their basic philosophy. Instead of mutual hatred and belligerency, there should be some degree of cooperation between the two major political parties in respect of running the administration as well as some common economic and political strategies which are accepted by both.

Further, there is a need for strengthening the direct tax collecting machinery and control of corruption in all tax collecting agencies. There is a need for decontrolling most of the monopoly structures in the economic activities of the government with a view to promoting the incentive structure of the private sector. The government has to withdraw from all commercial and economic activities.