

Protectors Turn Poachers

We welcome the tightening of the noose around the loan defaulting thirty-five bank directors who had taken loans from banks other than their own. The total amount involved is a whopping Tk 96 crore. They are on notice served by the lending banks to repay the outstanding amount in two months' time. Their failure to do will attract the stipulation of clause 17 of the amended Bank Company Act whereby they are to lose the directorship of their own banks.

Some directors being defaulters in their own banks have played football with the depositors' trust in the banks they held the reins of. As if that was not enough of a denudation of public trust in the banking system, another set of directors came into the scene scratching each other's back, taking loans from each other's banks and dodging repayments — all in a seeming brotherhood of self-promotion.

These protectors-turned-predators brought bad name to the whole banking system, bled it white, set in full motion white collar thievery of a default culture and stabbed in the back of sustainable growth or poverty alleviation, so to speak. The word went abuzz in certain circles: "open a bank, take a loan you needn't repay so easily, be rich overnight and on you go to splurge as a mark of your new pedigree."

Bangladesh Bank, the central bank of the country, must be credited with having chastened the stubborn resistance put up by vested quarters to the drive for accountability launched quite some time ago in the banking sector. BB's persistent, courageous and single-minded devotion to its professional agenda is worthy of commendation. The uncovering of banking scandals, regardless of names involved, has sensitised people about the merit of being even-handed in the pursuit of default cases.

But the crusade has only about made a good start and this is when it stands in dire need of backing from the Finance Minister and, crucially, from the Prime Minister herself. The full weight of the government's will must be available behind the task. And there is no reason why the exertion will peter out half-way through. For what makes us sit up and take note of is that bad loans and debts have been the single most devastating factor behind the tumble taken by the Southeast Asian Tiger economies. Let's heed the message.

Question of a Million Acre

There are 2000 acres of khas land in Dhaka city alone. And 1500 acres of these are under illegal possession. The situation would not be substantially different in the matter of the million acre khas land over the whole country. The government is moving to identify and recover these.

Khas land, as everyone knows, is state property, managed and supervised by government on behalf of the state. In a situation of bad, inept governance, the khas land positively looks an ownerless and abandoned property. Little wonder people from all around would covet and capture it, unchallenged by the true right holder. The state, the owner, is not only thinner than an absentee landlord, it is also far more vulnerable than individuals. The first fear is of the custodian or the government abusing its charge — which is not unfamiliar. Secondly, the government can be manipulated into remaining ever absent and making no claim at all, not to speak of putting the land to the nation's use.

Knowing not what to make of the one million acre khas arable land the successive governments had thought up of leasing these to landless peasants. Although this very plainly speaks of more than purely altruistic persuasion, it is a good thought. This has been going on for quite some years but still there is hardly any reassuring picture of such created villages anywhere. There is another problem with using up or giving away all of government's land. Transferred to private ownership, these land pieces would all be put to some profitable purpose. The country may then be left with no open space, spelling an ecological disaster.

The previous governments have, it seems, given away land more for effect than anything else. Otherwise they would have gone first to identifying all the state land and then to recover the same from unlawful occupants. We appreciate the present government's initiative to assert its title to such land and then to go for what can be done with this in some ecologically sound way.

Birth of a Beacon

One hundred and seventeen years ago on this date, little and a lot more little known Pairabanda of Rangpur underwent an exceptional maieutic experience. Among many other arrivals on the day it recorded the birth of Begum Rokeya. It would be confining this remarkable lady in the narrow frame of religion to describe her any more as a trail-blazing figure or an inspiring instance for Muslim women of her time who were literally wallowing in illiteracy, ignorance, conservatism and exploitation. The truth is Begum Rokeya was and continues to be a source of inspiration for all women irrespective of class, creed and religion.

What made her so exceptional? Perhaps her steadfast negation of all kinds of dogmas. It probably started with her elder sister Karimunnesa's urge for not giving up Bengali language and literature. It was indeed a matter of effort for a young Muslim woman in those days. But this single otherwise insignificant incident did not only shape the future of an autodidact nonpareil but also charted the course of an inimitable figure with a liberated soul. Begum Rokeya's whole life has been a study in absorbing the spirit of Bengali culture. This is where comes the wonderful chemistry of her being: that in her wondrous allegiance and undying devotion to a particular culture she could remain so open and modern. Knowledge gave her the freedom of mind, the urge to seek novelty. No wonder Begum Rokeya was among the first women from this subcontinent to have the experience of air ride.

Begum Rokeya was not a mere iconoclast or a pathfinder in the realm of women's education. She was a litterateur extraordinary. Not just the works in Bengali, her lone venture in English — 'Sultana's Dream' is rated highly for the sweep of her imagination as well as for her command over the English language.

A Billion Dollar Bridge on the River Jamuna

The bridge should be ready for official inauguration by PM Sheikh Hasina by the end of June. According to some newspaper reports, the date could well be the 23 June, the second anniversary of the formation of her government and that should make for a happy anniversary!



Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury

expressed on July 11, 1966, in the then East Pakistan Assembly resolution, moved by the Muslim League government of the day. It said, somewhat laconically, "this Assembly is of the opinion that a bridge be constructed over the river Jamuna, connecting Bahadurabad with Fulchhari and thereby also connecting the northern part of the province with the eastern part of the province." Admittedly neither our political aspirations nor the judgment of the planners of the bridge has followed the 'letter' of the resolution. For that 'province' is now a country and the bridge will connect not just two points on the map, but will also strengthen the ethos and unity of a long suffering nation.

The first vehicle should roll over the bridge sometime next March and Abdul Muyeed Choudhury, the Executive Director of the Jamuna Bridge Authority (JMB), and his colleagues, are now counting days to set foot on the west bank, walking down the bridge. It is difficult not to get caught up by their well-earned enthusiasm. The bridge should be ready for official inauguration by PM Sheikh Hasina by the end of June. According to some newspaper reports, the date could well be the 23 June, the second anniversary of the formation of her government and that should make for a happy anniversary!

Yet the bridge project can claim the distinction of having received, over the years, multi-partisan support in its fruition, a rare experience in this country, where non-cooperation is the hallmark of political behaviour. As if as an exception proving the rule, successive governments have attached priority and have worked hard and well, in the realisation of a long-cherished dream, that one may say, was legislatively first

building of a bridge over the Jamuna river, which will help integrate the economy of Bangladesh. The two Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction that the feasibility study was being carried out by the Japanese side.

Bangabandhu's cruel assassination put the clock back and seven years later it fell on General Ershad's government to pursue the project, which it did vigorously. The acquisition of land, a difficult task in overpopulated Bangladesh was taken up then and the Jamuna Surcharge Tax, through which the people of this country participated directly in the project contributing about 500 crore taka, was levied at that time.

The democratically elected BNP government of Begum Zia followed up the matter in right earnest and Saifur Rahman, Begum Zia's persuasive finance minister was able to line up foreign funds (World Bank/IDA, Government of Japan/OECF and Asian Development Bank, 200 million dollar each) for the project, at a time when the immediate fate of which seemed to be hanging in the balance for the lack of adequate funding. Sheikh Hasina's government has continued with the construction of the bridge with grit and determination and thus the society should be complete by the first half of the next year.

The length of the 4.8 kilometre bridge has not posed any hitherto unknown engineering problems, for there are, at this moment, about a dozen bridges in the world of that length and more. But the taming of the Jamuna, at once mighty yet fickle-minded about sticking to its chartered course, has been an engineering nightmare. This must be the only bridge project in the world, on which as much money have been spent on river training as has been on the construction of the bridge itself. The bridge, which has a design life of a hundred years and built to withstand the worst recorded Bangladeshi floods and Japanese earthquakes, will truly be multipurpose, having a four lane motorway, a mixed

gauge railway line and power gas transmission and telecommunications lines. The bridge should be immensely credit-worthy and according to a conservative JMB Tolls Study, based on the anticipated daily traffic demand, and on its earnings as a facility provider for railway, power, gas and telecommunications, it should not only merrily pay off all its foreign debts with interest by the year 2033, but also earn an impressive net income.

Feasibility studies of the project had indeed shown a healthy rate of return varying from 22 per cent estimated by Bangladeshi economists to 14.85 per cent of the World Bank. But the project's justifications lie much above any quantifiable economic gain. This bridge, connecting the two parts of the country, will bring about an attitudinal change in its people, the impact of which is impossible to measure statistically. Infact the surprising thing is that the bridge has taken so long in materialising. But then one had to patiently wait and convince the lenders, who understandably judge the usefulness of a project and the borrowers repayment capacity, not by their psyche alone.

Before the partition of the subcontinent, the area that constitutes Bangladesh was merely hinterland for the metropolis of the region that was Calcutta and for the industries that lay around it. This description was more applicable to the north-eastern chunk of the present Bangladesh for which, 1947 changed it all. The supply line of its agricultural and aquatic produce got interrupted on the western side by the line politically drawn, and on the East, which then was not much of a market anyway, lay as it had for centuries, the broad expanse of the Jamuna river. As a result, the area that now constitutes North Bengal of Bangladesh suffered a great deal. The Bangabandhu bridge should revitalise North Bengal's moribund agriculture and fisheries. The bridge will also help in facilitating the availability and in increasing the farmers' affordability of the

agriculture and fishery inputs and provide a wider market and better price for the produce. Transmitted gas will make the setting up of industries in North Bengal easier and on extraction, the expected hard rock, limestone and coal deposits of North Bengal could be transported quickly into this part to the country.

The ministries and other government agencies of the capital city of Dhaka, for whatever they are worth, will be within the striking distance of North Bengal and more importantly the head offices of major business organisations as well. With the bridge functioning, we would have hopefully seen the last of the misery and chaos of the Aricha ghat. The bridge will help in the mental integration of the people of this country as much as it will its economy. It will increase the mobility of goods and people with the attendant socio-economic benefits, not only within the country but also in the region, including India, Nepal and Bhutan.

Non-mechanised vehicles cannot ply either on the access road or on the bridge. In other words, proper highway code has to be formulated and applied there. Evidently regular bus services have to be introduced to serve the people living along the 32 kilometer of the access road. Unlike through traffic crossing — the toll paying bridge — the buses will only serve the area short of the bridge on both sides. The JMB will do well to draw up rules and regulations for the operation and management of the bridge and to impress upon the Home Ministry to create a special Highway Patrol Police Squad that will enforce proper traffic rules and discipline along the bridge and the connecting roads. Bangladesh has no experience of organisation and maintenance of highways and should therefore learn how to go about it, preferably from countries with situations similar to ours.

I was in Pakistan recently where they have just completed a billion-dollar highway connecting Islamabad with Lahore as a part of an ambitious project of connecting Pakistan's major cities. Our situation, though not exactly identical, is in some areas quite similar. I was told that they have raised special highway squads to police these roads, framed proper highway traffic rules, and trained up special personnel for this task. In Lahore I heard fears expressed about corruption creeping into their highway maintenance system. Based on our experience of bureaucracy in our country, one would rather have corrupt but trained personnel than corrupt and untrained ones! But then there we must, and in time, so that the joy of having a billion-dollar bridge does not turn sour.

To the Editor

Peace Treaty and BNP's reaction

Sir, After 24 years of bloodshed, mistrust and arms revolt the long-awaited Chittagong Hill Tracts peace agreement was signed on 2nd December 1997 between the AL government and PCJSS. All the previous governments had bickered over the conflict and their policy had vacillated between diplomacy and threats. The military solution in the crisis that was nourished and nurtured by the erstwhile military and quasi-military rulers of Bangladesh over the last two decades or so, was replaced by political solution. It is once again proved that any unresolved issue need to be solved discussion and mutual trust and not by brow-beating. This has been well-proved most recently in Pakistan. The British government realized that they cannot aggravate Ira's bloody movement by all their might. So, they also preferred negotiating table. The Bangladesh Army, safeguard of the nation, also opined that they are not interested to prolong their stay in CHT.

Everyone has the right to criticise but to criticise merely for criticism's sake would be harmful for the country on such a issue of common national interest and as in the past the BNP and its allies got into the habit of creating issues out of this agreement as they did when Awami League expeditiously signed the thorny Ganges water sharing agreement with India. BNP's misleading statements such as selling the country to India would not be ossified into rigid dogma. Conscious citizens would not make hash of it. Their concern should be based on facts not on whims or simple oratory. The 'ammunition' has become blunt due to excessive use of it.

I urge upon BNP hierarchy not to march the ill-fated country and its people into a bloody cul-de-sac for out of arrogance. Your thoughtful decision and action will not only make us respectful in the eyes of outside world but would also make you part of our national history.

Mohammad Kutubuddin Agrabard, Chittagong

Root of all evils

Sir, Our society is now in a vice-like grip of lies. It has become part of our nature and dominates every sphere of our life. Almost each and every one of us is an expert and practiced liar. Even a little child's life starts with a lie when his parents lie about his or her age to secure admission in school; job-seekers also lie about their age and experiences, employees lie to their boss about hundreds of things that they should or shouldn't have done. Household employees are the most expert liars as they cover all their misdeeds with just a lie. In fact, lie is one thing which can cover any crime committed from theft to murder. Do it and just tell a lie, and you are as innocent as anybody else. Who can prove you to be a liar?

That is why our Prophet (SM) had said that "it is the root of all evils." For if you cannot lie you will not do any evil as you will not be able to hide it with a white lie. In fact, all religions have condemned lies. But this is one act everybody loves to be expert in, even for fun's sake e.g., boasting about oneself or giving a false picture of something by a pack of lies.

In our country, it has become such a social evil that one just

doesn't know who is telling the truth, for most people lie most of the times. Sometimes one gets so fed up with lies that one wishes there was some indication that a person is lying. Then at least the other person can remain alert or on guard. Like Pinocchio, whose nose used to get longer every time he lied oh, what a wonderful indicator. How fantastic, if this happened to real people too every time they lied!

The society would have been a far better place to live in, then.

Dr Sabrina Rashid
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

'Motijheel to be Made Rickshaw-free'

Sir, My Nani would have made a quick response to that, "Na rahegi baas, na baigti baasur!" If someone had said, "car-free," the idea may not have been as brilliant, but it would at least have been more original, and have a lesser possibility of a premature death. The pundits must have dreamt that Motijheel has become a pedestrians' paradise, or we have reached the ultimate in economy and democracy; where everyone has a car or the bari saabs are giving rides to all, in their bari saabs.

The traffic problem should be tackled sensibly and with sensitivity, with an eye on effectiveness, fairness, and acceptability; and for the convenience of the majority, if not for all. It should not be directed towards appeasing the pampered minority, most of whom draw their salary from the taxpayers' money and ride in cars bought with the same.

Thoughtful and meticulous exercise on the text of the accord, makes it appear that the agreement has a blend of some perplexing and controversial issues that have some levers to give rise to some questions.

The realm of jurisdiction between the clauses of the agreement and the existence of present administrative and other legal arrangements, possibly stoned paradoxically in some cases.

The first controversial point as we see in the text of the agreement and that has enabled the PCJSS to have an authority to represent the inhabitants of the CHT. Do the both sides claim that the all inhabitants of CHT consider PCJSS as their sole authority to represent in signing such an accord? We all know that the CHT comprising three districts has a blend of both tribal and non-tribal inhabitants with different political and other organisational affiliations. Apart from the non-tribal activities, there are some other organisations like Pahari Gana Parishad (PGP) and Pahari Chatra Parishad (Pro-Sanchoy) who got split from the

OPINION

Some Questions on CHT Peace Agreement

Md Shaikhul Islam

CHT-related problems have been a source of national hypertension since early 70's, several efforts have been made by successive governments to solve those problems. But unfortunately we were not able to get the solution. We all have come to know the text of CHT peace accord signed on December 2. It is indeed a matter of great appreciation for the Awami League government that at last, it has been able to come up with an agreement irrespective of its contents and future successful implementation status. But despite the agreement's dormant potentials, it has some areas which leave further thoughts.

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