

Behind the Ferry Woes

In view of the highly congestive cross-river contingency arising out of rapid shoaling in the Padma-Jamuna channels two competing agenda apparently stare the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) in the face. This is the impression one gathers from what the BIWTA chairman had to say to our reporter's recital of complaints made by ferry users about the inconveniencing factors in the Aricha ghat area. He said and we quote: "improving the existing facilities at the ghat comes second on our agenda. First, we must keep the ferry channels operational..." Money being the key consideration it has to be prudently used.

Well, we don't think that the two agenda militate against one another; actually they should be mutually inclusive in BIWTA's perception of things or prescription for tiding over the interlocking difficulties. When the extremely poor navigability of the channels has caused the congestion in the ghat areas to grow into insufferable proportions, the bull obviously has to be taken by its two horns, not one. And, there is a sinning element to the shape of things prevailing if one were to take into account the abysmal river-dredging failure or inadequacy whichever expression you choose to use depending upon the intensity of your annoyance.

River-training is a matter that had better not been left to adhocism of the crisis management type, it ought to have been a planned affair undertaken earlier in the season with an unfruffled mind. Of course, the entire navigability question is linked to augmentation of the river flows but look at the way the large JMB project dredger of the latest vintage that was commandeered to excavate the river-beds in the Aricha-Natakholra channel could not simply make it to the spots because of shallow waters en route. If the whole operation was planned earlier, the chances of success would have been that much better. Then consider the fact that the small fleet of dredgers hardly ever work full capacity as one or the other has gone out of water.

There may be big money involved in digging up the shoals now. But is there any serious physical or monetary obstacle to improving the basic amenities at the ghats and broadening the approach road to the pontoons by removing the unauthorised rows of shops. Surely not. So, let's see some action there, here and now.

Quake Preparedness, Please

There was a time earthquakes were as unfamiliar in Bangladesh as the appearance of comets. Old people here can hardly remember any tremor powerful enough to linger in the memory because of its devastation. In fearsome contrast to that at least three quakes jolted this land during the current year with the Chittagong one taking a toll of public and private property and quite a number of lives, with some being buried alive.

From housing to roads and town planning, nothing in our construction and community layout activities we had ever thought of keeping the quake factor in consideration. Now, all of a sudden, we are being told to expect the quakes to hit us with increasing frequency as well as intensity since we are technically placed on a very quake-prone zone. Can nature be so unfair to us as suddenly mount such a campaign? Or is it that we have failed to take a timely note of our physical, geomorphological facts? Earthquake will continue to be unpredictable into much of the next century. So preparedness must be materialised to minimise the impact of quakes as much as possible with the existing knowledge of planning and building for earthquakes. Town planning, city development, construction of roads and buildings must now incorporate the quake factor. And people must be motivated not to scare but to face the disaster with knowledge and compassion, logic and co-operation.

We know there will ever be more pressing problems before the society than preparing for quakes. But one must heed what experts have said on Wednesday at the Disaster Forum Seminar. They as good as gazed into a quake of the century to hit Bangladesh any day in the next few years. So it will be foolish to treat the thing as something remotely possible and push aside the question of quake preparedness.

Winter Treads in, Truly

Winter this year had been on the threshold for quite some time waiting for a ritualistic introduction into our experience. An ashen sky for a couple of days followed by intemperate drizzle in the second week of December played the role of winter's handmaid perfectly. And we are well and truly in for a few days of pleasant chill, a weak but very welcome sun, fleeting daytime and perhaps a chockful of disruptive and agitational programmes by the political parties.

Winter in Bangladesh is generally a savoury urban experience. But not so much in the rural areas particularly in the northern parts of the country where the nip in the air could be too strong for the poor, unaccommodated. Already a Bengali newspaper has reported four deaths.

The killer edge of winter has more or less been blunted in Bangladesh ever since the market of second hand warm clothes became an annual mercantile feature here. But still death due to cold is yet to become a tale of the past. A little touch of humanity and social responsibility can make a lot of difference. We urge the students who are in line of an imminent winter vacation and voluntary service organisations like Scouts and Guides to use their enthusiasm, resourcefulness and mobility to provide succour to the poor people.

Winter may not be a source of plenteous gastronomic pleasure as it once was and the chill may be a source of great affliction for the underprivileged members of the society but a proper winter is all we look forward to in this age of environmental concern over global warming.

The vision — pondered long So plausible becomes That esteem the fiction — real The Real — fictitious seems — Emily Dickinson.

THERE was an inscription hanging on the wall of Victor Hugo's room when he died in Paris in 1885. It said, "I represent a party which does not yet exist: the party of revolution, civilisation. This party will make the twentieth century. There will issue from it first the United States of Europe, then the United States of the World." The new world envisaged by Hugo is democratic, not monarchic, free not feudal; revolutionary, not traditional. It proclaims liberation from religious, cultural and class oppression and for that matter, any kind of discrimination, be it race, colour, creed or gender. Here the free spirit of mankind at length throws its last fetters off. Cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities are all there. Cures differ from each other in the same way, as people construct the world differently, determining by their imagination how they dress, cook, draw and what they believe. "The dress of a woman in Lhasa/In its place/Is an invisible element of that place/made visible." But human spirit, when freed and unfettered moves easily between diverse cultures and different landscapes. Then the rich diversity melds into the embroidered quilt of the universe and all our times — past, present or future — merge into the spirit's hour. It is this dialectic that provides a mutual modification between the part and the whole, the identity and the world.

Metaphysical musings aside, what Hugo contemplated in the late nineteenth century is becoming a reality as the countdown for the new millennium begins. The Berlin Wall has fallen down and the nation-states of Europe are virtually borderless. Geographical boundaries of various countries are no doubt there. But people and ideas travel freely, so also the polyglot voices and visions of European art and culture. As freedom of transactions between and among the nation-states expand, a common European market takes shape.

The world, no doubt, remains divided. There are strifes and conflicts, aggression and resistance. But the complex web of information superhighway is spinning rapidly its linkages. The world today is distasteful and information of what is happening anywhere on the

Voices and Vision

By the year 2020, the country will be led to establish global links in a wide range of manufactured products in a more open trade regime. The immediate task therefore is to strengthen technological linkages and to develop appropriate technological institutions that foster the absorption, adaptation and diffusion of technology.

planet is almost instantaneous. No mediation by wise leaders or for that matter, any intermediary is required. As for the global production process and the economy, any state, big or small must either be a competent stake-holder or left behind. Monopolistic greed is there, so also the danger of hegemony by the rich and the powerful. But enlightened corporate interest requires that the entrants in the world marketplace continue to expand. Even more powerful is the countervailing awareness of public interest and social responsibility — a civic consensus all over the world about equal opportunity and fair exchange.

In the context of this global ambience, there has been a qualitative transformation of the concepts of democratic governance in a civil society. The essence of democracy is in participation by the broad spectrum of citizenry. A centralised structure of governance, more often than not, is based on the edicts of the few belonging to the magic circle of oligarchy. Democracy, as practiced by the ancient Greeks in their city states on the other hand, provide both space to and immediacy for broad-based participation. Hence communitarian governance which is both responsive and accountable to the needs and aspirations of a community, is more relevant for weaving a cohesive social fabric rather than pious sermons from the hill-top of a distant centre.

In a similar vein, the government provides an enabling umbrella for free and fair economic transactions without unnecessary control or stifling regulations. Market, a much maligned word, does have imperfections, and laissez-faire is no panacea for correcting the imperfections. But imperfect as it is the market provides a better mechanism for information processing and response to the discrete pieces of data thus produced, rather than a huge central organisation which moves in its own ponderous pace. Further, political boundaries of a state and the boundary of a market may not coincide. A market may go beyond the boundaries of a state and connect regions in several states. If consumer welfare is the motto, complementarity and competitiveness go hand-in-hand. Any

regulation, if required, is for reducing distortions and bringing the economy closer to such normative structure. Is this an idealised scenario? A play of fantasy? Perhaps yes, but no social transformation has as yet taken place without an element of Utopia. And in the global context, this flight of imagination could be the birthing ground for a more meaningful reality. The final poem, Wallace Stevens writes, "Will be the poem of fact in the language of fact. But it will be the poem of fact not realised before."



Do I Dare! A Z M Obaidullah Khan

perhaps, is more cost-effective than constant work-stoppages in the scramble for self-aggrandizing power. Taken to the extreme, a national election every two years can be visualized, so that public interest is not sacrificed at the altar of vested interest. That is how Professor Yunus feels, and I agree.

That brings me to the role of the government in governance vis-a-vis the economy. That I believe, will be, essentially, a facilitator of private enterprise and an arbiter between private interests on the one hand and public interest on the other. State-operated enterprises will be divested to the private entrepreneurs except in nationally agreed upon strategic sectors. Financial intermediation will be transparent and if I may plagiarise from my friend Mughith, default culture will be severely dealt with. That culture, I am afraid, is more the result of a collusion between politico-bureaucratic institutions and the privileged few, rather than of the proverbial avarice of the corporate sector. Only thus, through freedom of transactions, import and export, and of course, a facilitat-

ing legal framework, the country will be incorporated into the globalized production process. Again, the future industrial society in Bangladesh is a leap forward into the future. It will be a knowledge intensive production and service complex of skilled people working in small units and linked in an integrated production process. The dynamics of the outward looking technologies will be in electronics and computer chips, cybernetics and information bank. In this effort, as Dr. Iqbal Mahmud points out:

"Government institutions and private enterprises have to join hands in technology search, assessment, negotiation and design. The political leadership must realize what the future portends for us in the next century without development of human capital. Higher technological literacy, not to speak of general literacy, is a sine qua non for a developed society capable of exploring the frontiers of science and technology. If the human capital building institutions remain in a state of total disarray no amount of technology import will help us in reaping the benefit from the great leap forward in human knowledge."

Nobel laureate Professor Abdus Salam says that "Science and technology are cyclical. They are a shared heritage of all mankind." But we can have a share in the dividend only if appropriate investments are made by us. The revolution in information is already on rapid development and proliferation of computers is evident everywhere. For bridging the information gap CD-ROM technologies are drastically cutting the need for large investment in libraries and documentation centres.

back to my earlier proposition of transcending the borders, if not for an European Common Market, or its like, but for our own interest. Again, I quote an erudite friend of mine, Dr. Kamal Hossain: "The prospects for Bangladesh need to be visualized not in isolation but in the context of widening options and expanding opportunities within a framework of regional and sub-regional cooperation."

Geographical realities, resource endowments and manifest complementarities point to significant benefits which could result for all the partners from a sub-regional framework of cooperation in the north-eastern sub-region of South Asia comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and north eastern areas of India. A multimodal transport system built around the deep water ports could be developed in Bangladesh for the benefit of all. A coordinated approach to the harnessing of renewable and non-renewable sources of energy — hydro-electric potential of Bhutan and Nepal, the natural gas of Bangladesh, the coal in north-eastern India — points to the need for cooperation water resources of the major river basins in the sub-region call for shared use which is ecologically sound and optimises benefits for the people. A shared commitment to sustainable development for the peoples of the sub-region — children women and men would stimulate innovative strategies for development of human resources and new technologies and patterns of trade."

In the end I would say, a liberal and pluralistic social order is on the cards. Politically it means a system characterized by what German philosopher Habermas calls "communicative rationality", or creating public fora for discussions, contestation, debate and consensus. A liberal social order is to my mind the prerequisite for broad-based participation in such debates. That and only that will lead the civil society to self-organisation and thus self-realization.

Perhaps, it is a dream, but that is a poetic license: "I reckon — when I count it all — First poets — then the Sun — Then Summer — Then the Heavens of God — And then — the list is done — But looking back — First so seems To comprehend the Whole — The others look a needless show — poets All — So I write — poets All — (Emily Dickinson).

The World of the Cushy Consultant

Ma does not know this, of course, (and I won't tell her if you don't), but you know what they say, don't you. They say that consultants have a unique role model. They say that the world's very first consultant found its calling in Paradise, aka the Garden of Eden, where Life began.

I tell her not to worry but you know what mothers are like. She firmly believes that anyone without a regular job eventually starves to death.

"Consultant? Does that mean that you get a regular salary?" she asks, suspiciously.

"Ma, consultants don't get salaries. They get a consultancy fee."

"Is your fee more or less than a regular salary?" she asks, sharply.

I explain to her, patiently, that since I don't get paid a salary, how can I compare my consultancy fee with a salary that I don't get. Listen ma, stop worrying, I'm okay, I will survive.

"Your father's always had a regular job. Why can't they offer you a regular job, just like everyone else?" she insists.

I might explain that in my mother's vocabulary 'everyone' means people she approves of. Mother approves of everyone who works regular hours, at a regular job, for a regular income. She does not approve of people who run the risk of eventually starving to death.

"You've always had a job. All those years in Dubai. And even when you were studying in Canada," she reminds me. "So why not here? Why do you have to be a consultant now?"

Consultants are big people, ma. Important people. If you call yourself a consultant, you're telling people that you are doing something important

and serious, something of real consequence, as opposed to working at a job which any old person can do.

"If that's the case, and consultants are so important, why don't they get paid like other people?" she persists.

I don't know ma. Consultants are different, I guess. Consultants are people who tell you what to do, but never have to do it themselves.

Okay, the whole thing is something of a rip-off, this I admit. Consultants exist everywhere, of course. But here in Bangladesh, the consultancy business is not merely a niche sector in the market, but a market in itself. Consultants thrive in this country because when you are as poor as Bangladesh, you need people to help you become less poor. This makes poverty a kind of business.

Indeed, it makes it a big business. (This also means that most people have to remain poor, so that a few people can help them become less poor.)

If that doesn't make much sense, ma, don't worry. Believe me, it all works out beautifully and everyone lives happily ever after. Especially the consultants.

"So who is poor and who is rich?" she asks. "Are consultants the poor people or the rich people?"

Ma, consultants are never poor. I mean, the very idea is revolting. How can you ask the poor to suggest how to improve their own lot? Imagine the arrogance.

The poor ordinary person, like the rickshaw-walla for instance, will never be asked if he wants to drive a rickshaw into Motijheel or not. No, a high-powered Task Force will be set up to decide the fate of the ordinary

guy who pulls the rickshaw, as well as the fate of all those who might depend on his income.

In exactly the same way, the pedestrians who walk the streets of Dhaka will never be asked if they feel a road should be built in their faces. Or if roads should be built at all. Might sidewalks be a better idea? Heaven forbid that anyone should ask pedestrians if we need sidewalks in the city. Or zebra crossings. Or traffic lights. Or overhead bridges.

Likewise, the sweepers who sweep the muck off the streets of

our city will never be asked what is wrong with our garbage collection and disposal system. Why we end up with clogged drains and polluted dung heaps and rotting mounds of organic and inorganic waste, all mixed up together.

The principle is simple: Why waste time asking ordinary people how they feel about their own ordinary lives?

No, the way the poverty business works is by involving lots of 'experts', also known as 'consultants'. These people are usually very intelligent people who spend their lives giving advice. They know how to hold seminars, lots and lots of seminars, in which they make sure that lots of important people, including other 'consultants' present lots and lots of papers. Then, just to make sure that no one thinks all they do is yapping, they also hold workshops in which they ensure that what they have yapped about in their seminars has been 'disseminated' among people

who have not been yapping in the seminars. Naturally, everyone gets a nice fee for making all these things happen, not least of which is the fee which is given to the consultants who are consulted at various stages of the business.

"So consultants can be paid well even if they are not paid regularly. Like business people?" mother interjects. (I tell you, this lady I call ma is one sharp cookie.)

Well, ma, consultants are like business people in the sense that they work on projects. They don't necessarily have regular jobs, complete with allowances, retirement benefits and security of tenure — like bureaucrats, for instance.

But consultants are not really business people either, ma. Consultants don't ever risk their own money, business people often do. Indeed, consultants take very few risks. Consultants collect their fee, even if the project doesn't work. You see, the poverty business is such that it is very difficult to know when a project works — or doesn't work.

"So consultants are okay then. They take no risks, and get paid well. Very well?"

You've just about summed it up, ma. (I told you, she's sharp.) "You don't want me to speak to someone about giving you a

nice job, then?" she continues, smiling broadly with relief.

No, ma, please don't. I've always worked at these really ordinary jobs. I've been a reporter, a sub-editor, a news writer, a news anchor, an associate producer, a managing editor, a features editor, an editorial writer. And also, briefly, a teacher, secretary, library assistant, telephone operator. I've worked in the media most of my life.

For me, coming home and discovering the limitless world of the cushy consultant in Bangladesh has been like entering Paradise.

And why not. Nothing wrong with a spot of consulting to establish yourself as an important person in Bangladesh. And in the process, earn a tidy little consultancy fee... as well. (Happy, ma?)

Ma does not know this, of course, (and I won't tell her if you don't), but you know what they say, don't you. They say that consultants have a unique role model. They say that the world's very first consultant found its calling in Paradise, aka the Garden of Eden, where Life began.

No, the world's first consultant wasn't a man. She was a woman. Remember that slithering slimy thing with the fangs which draped itself around a tree and said if you want my advice, just grab that apple, lady. Well, as they also say, the rest is history.

To the Editor...

Tribute to Khan Ata

Sir, I would like to pay my heartfelt tribute to the departed soul of Khan Ataur Rahman who left us recently. The cultural arena and the film industry of Bangladesh will suffer a setback with the demise of Khan Ata. He was present in all the cultural arenas nearly for five decades.

Khan Ata was a nationalist and a patriot as depicted in his portrayal of his role in Nawab Serajuddowla or in the creation of the movie Abaar Tora Manush Ho. The melodious tunes composed by him for film songs will always be cherished by us.

The joy, sorrow and happiness of life which he went through have been reflected in all his compositions and portrayals. We await release of his latest movie Ekhono Anek Raat. May Allah rest his soul in peace.

Adib Reza Faribagh House Dhaka-1000.

Electricity required

Sir, The contribution of electricity to our modern life is endless. But it is a matter of great regret that we, the dwellers of Paul Para belonging to Chak Radha Kania village under Fulbaria PS in My-

mensingh district, despite being the inhabitants of the 20th century till now are destitute of electricity. Our adjoining villages have been supplied with electricity. Even Ahmaddapur, an adjacent para only 100 yards away from Paul Para of our village, in the meantime has been provided with electricity. But our Paul Para has not yet been supplied with electricity.

So till now, we are living in an opaque age. For the privatisation of electricity people residing in our Paul Para do not venture to launch electricity-conducted works. For instance, the establishment of rice mill, flour mill, shallow machine etc. We do not know the cause behind not to supply electricity in our Paul Para. Though we directly communicated with the authorities concerned, our effort became in efficacious as they did not respond to our appeal.

Debashish Paul On behalf of the people of Paul Para Village Chak Radha Kania PO Baruka Bazar-2216 PS Fulbaria, Dist. Mymensingh.

A tragic loss

Sir, Please allow us to share, through your esteem daily, loss and pain suffered by Dr. Mohiuddin Farooque's family and friends at his untimely death.

This is nature's one of those cruelties which is very hard to accept. Dr. Mohiuddin Farooque, to us, was Farooque Bhai, whom we knew in Dhaka University's law department. He was a friendly soul all through. Even from abroad, we considered ourselves privileged to have known the person, who brought environmental issues at the forefront in such a short period by setting up Bangladesh Environmental Lawyer's Association (BELA) and him becoming a petitioner in number of landmark cases.

We believe, the only fitting tribute to Dr. Mohiuddin Farooque will be carry forward his mission through BELA and make Bangladesh, a better place to live in, which he, so tragically, could not achieve.

Ahmed Zauddin Zulekha Parveen (By e-mail), Brussels, Belgium

The Subcontinental Triangle

Sir, The article under the above title by Mr. Arshad-Uz Zaman in the DS of 30 November, 1997 has given us some serious points to ponder regarding male/female leadership in the three countries of this sub-

continent. As long as lust for power among the political leaders, there is no hope of common good in this part of the world.

In Bangladesh, Pakistan and India the trend of monopoly in politics is the threat to peace and progress in this region now. If the will of the people is reflected on the streets with violence under the umbrella of the political parties, the democratic culture will have a serious setback. Unfortunate killing, violence and unholy alliances among political parties are going on unabated without taking into account the needs of the common people.

It is good to remember that human resources are more important than that of information technology or the Internet and material progress. We urge upon the politicians the need to balance between their thoughts and action, between concept and completion, and between government and the opposition.

Abul Ashraf Noor Uttara, Dhaka

Spare the highways

Sir, It is observed that the culture of highway barricade is going on the full-swing by all concerned whoever think they will draw the attention of the concerned and acquire some laurel.

Even under normal circumstances travelling in so-called highways are not safe because of multifarious reasons. As a result of which we see occasional painful news of death on highways due to road accidents. Highway is the place where from even drying of paddy to holding of market, hats-bazars, meeting, processions etc., causes congestion and delay movement of vehicles and adds to it the unwarranted phenomenon of blockade of highways by the various interested/pressure groups at their whims and ego. When people take journey by road transport for travelling, there exists already number of adversities. This blockade of highways adds and multiplies their miseries. When we every body in this country whatever we are doing claim to be done in the greater interest of the people but when thousands of travellers on road for whom the road has been constructed i.e., movement of passengers and vehicles the miseries they suffer for such road blockade, how can such act be justified?

It is a fervent appeal to all concerned to spare the highways from the programme of all political/social activities and ensure unhindered movement on the highways.

A K Khan Sumbagh, Dhaka.