

CNG Exacerbation

It has been about a month since we last dwelt on this issue in this particular column. The suffering of the CNG users which of course dates back to a much longer time, has not been alleviated since then.

This is difficult to understand. Exasperated as we are like the CNG users, we ask the government why it is dragging foot over something that has such strong incentives on economic and environmental grounds.

We had hinted earlier that the possibility of some foul play within the establishment cannot be ruled out. This sensible attempt for a switch to environmental consciousness in our fuel culture should not be music to many ears simply because a massive vested interest group has formed around petroleum fuel.

Mr. Khan should make it a point of personal pride and efficiency to make sure that this CNG problem is solved sooner than later. There is no way the CNG users can be allowed to regress on their laudable habitual shift.

Competition at Doorstep

A national telecommunications policy is round the corner. Its draft has been already finalised and is likely to be placed before the next cabinet meeting. The broad outlines of it, as revealed in a Daily Star front-page report on Thursday, speak of increasing the number of telephone lines from 5 to 13 lakhs in two years, expanded privatisation of the network and creation of competitive environment within the private sector for better services.

As many as seven private companies have been already licensed to operate in this massively modernising sector world wide.

This is understandably a precursor for a total involvement of the private sector in all spheres of infrastructure development after the year 2010. Till then the government will remain as the major player in the telecommunications sector. The policy which is on the anvil vows to create a competitive environment in the telecommunications field.

Now it is Kosovo

The initial reaction of the international community to Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic's massacre of ethnic Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo has not left much to be desired. In terms of expression of outrage and contemplation of actions against the gory violation of human rights both the contact group on former Yugoslavia comprising Britain, the USA, Russia, France, Germany and Italy and the UN Security Council have proved strikingly pro-active.

Subject to a deadline for good behaviour, we are all for a re-imposition of the arms embargo and sanctions on Serbia which had courted all of these earlier on after its diabolic role in the Croatia and Bosnian wars. Thousands were killed or otherwise brutalised in those racial annihilations which remain a blot on world's conscience.

Telecommunication is the Answer

To the poor or the rich, telephone is no more a luxury item. In fact, it's a necessity to grapple with socio economic problems.

It is being increasingly recognized that a key component in the infrastructure of economic development is telecommunication. Yet, surprisingly, the sector remains as the most neglected infrastructure component in many of the developing countries, including Bangladesh.

A distributor of industrial spare parts and machinery in Nairobi got additional lines installed to his office. Immediately after, his business shot up by 35 per cent and thus allowed him to hire six new employees and add three light trucks to his company's fleet.

After a rural automatic digital exchange was installed in a town, a bank manager in a small town of India could easily contact a potential depositor living 60 kilometres away. Had the manager failed to rapidly contact the depositor, the deposit would be sent to another bank.

In Sri Lanka, introduction of telephone service to several towns and villages enabled small farmers to obtain, among other things, current and direct information about wholesale and retail prices of fruits, coconuts and other produce in Colombo, the capital city.

A small grocer in Rosario, Uruguay, was able to serve a large clientele beyond his immediate neighbourhood mainly because residential telephones were available locally.

A ministry of communication survey showed that public call office in rural areas of Korea averaged 85 local and 160 long-distance calls per month and that the calls helped remove feelings of isolation.

In a similar vein, the authors documented a number of cases in respect of transport efficiency adducible principally to the availability of telephone service. Take the following example. Brazil has a national

fleet of over 180,000 trucks that usually have to cover long distances often through rural remote areas with no telephone service. The drivers found several days passed before they could contact a mechanic in the event of a breakdown. This posed major security risk in addition to slowing down deliveries. With the availability of a very high frequency, manually switched radio-telephone system, the trucks and their drivers got new lease of life fol-

lowing quick contact with company headquarters. In Sri Lanka, a survey of 176 new telephone subscribers (77 business and 99 residential) in the country found that almost 70 per cent increased the number of contacts they had with other people after getting their phones and nearly half increased their volume of sales.

Moreover, 40 per cent increased their profits or incomes, about 33 per cent increased the regional extent of their business and a little over 10 per cent increased the variety of their business. In Tanzania, the ministry of agriculture, responsible for project implementation, saves a lot of time and vis-

medical care, rapidly. Before this service was available, snakebite victims often died before help could arrive. Recently, a man bitten by a cobra was saved because the doctor was quickly contacted by phone.

In Peru, health workers in a small village now easily consult their doctors for advice and transmit the message to their patients. Telecommunication boosted the morale and confidence of isolated health workers.

The above mentioned benefits of a developed telecommunication system are just tip of iceberg. The book, as mentioned earlier, contains a panoply of case studies to establish the need and urgency of the avail-

ability of telephone network through nook and corner of a country. We strongly feel that in Bangladesh, with one of the lowest telephone density in the world, such benefits could be generated via establishment of a sound mechanism of telephone communication. Mentionably, in a recent article in this column, the author mentioned few of the benefits that the Grameen Telephone system in some villages has embarked upon to bestow. The recent policy of the government is to liberalize the communication network with an invitation to the private sector to participate. No doubt that the minister for telecommunication M Nasim has appreciatively been pursuing his efforts to correct the ills bedeviling the sector, and putting his best to widen the network. Unfortunately, there seems to be psychological problem on the part of the state to come into competition with private sector. There is also allegedly, no playing level field. More biting efforts are needed on this score.

Despite participation by the private sector, the fact remains that the government needs to invest much more heavily in the telecommunication sector. Growing investment from government side is premised on the notion that the basic fixed lines should lie with the government. Government should do well by incorporating BTB, issuing bonds so that resources could be generated from within rather than hunting for outside. There

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

longer considered as a suspicious exercise. People read books — all sorts of printed materials, on the beach, in the park, and while travelling to work in public transport. Public libraries are being inaugurated all over Spain. Books are having print-runs of hundreds of thousands of copies instead of five or ten thousand as it used to happen before. The Socialist Government before and the Conservative Government now have adopted the policy of allocating greater proportion of public resources to education and culture.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Cultural Developments in Modern Spain

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

It would be unfair to assume that Spanish culture took a long "siesta" during these thirty-nine years (from the beginning of the civil war in 1936 to the death of Franco in 1975). It was kept awake and vigorous by the activities of the artists, philosophers and musicians who had left Spain during the civil war and refused to come back until Franco was dead.

As we have mentioned before, Franco died on November, 20th, 1975. For the first time after the civil war, in April 1976, a regional newspaper (Aw) was published in the Catalan language. The wind of change had started blowing. In May 1976 something of enormous significance, both from political and cultural points of view took place in Spain, that was the publication of the left-leaning daily newspaper called El Pais. In 1977, democracy was formally reintroduced in Spain and the stage was set for a cultural resurgence. And it was, as if to celebrate the beginning of this new era that in October 1977, the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize for literature to the Spanish poet Vicente Alexandre.

Looking back, I now realize that the immediate post-Franco era was a period of considerable confusion, disorientation and excesses. The people were jubilant about their new-found freedom, about their tremendous explosion of cultural activities, albeit some of them were perhaps too daring and provocative. Yet there was a pervasive sense of insecurity everywhere. The people were not sure of the future of democ-

There were others like the poets Luis Cernuda and Jorge Guillen, the composer Rodrigo (concerto de Aranjuez), the artists Joan Miró Tapias, Gordillo and Millares, the

sculptor Chillida, the movie-makers Berlanga, Bardem and Saura, the poet Damaso Alonso and the novelist Camilo Jose Cela (Nobel prize winner), who played a kind of cultural hide-and-seek game with the Franco establishment, worked relentlessly and produced great works of art, literature and music. They tried their best to avoid direct confrontation with the establishment. Some of them even worked from within the power structure.

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There were demonstrations, strikes and political assassinations. This period of confusion, fears, excesses and doubts ended in 1981, when Colonel Tajero's coup failed to drum up any effective support among the people. All doubts about the future of democracy disappeared and there was a confident mood everywhere about the political stability in the country.

One of the first signs of this new confident mood was the Movida Madrileña. Soon there were movidas in all the major towns and cities of Spain. Now, what is la Movida? What does it mean? Well, it is very difficult to translate the word "la movida". The literal translation of the movida Madrileña is the "Madrid scene" or the "Madrid activity". Actually, it is an attitude, a feeling, a spirit which arose among the young and which denoted freedom and like the swinging London of the '60s was congenial to a burst of artistic activity. The Spaniards, after more than four decades, could taste, feel, look, read, hear, and experiment new things without any fear. The two great taboos of sex and politics had disappeared.

Movie-maker Almodover is a product of this movement. Although he has earned international fame, his movies are popular with only an elitist group in Spain. This is also true of Jose Luis Garcia, who won an Oscar (the only Spanish motion-picture director ever to win an Oscar) in 1983, for his movie, Volver a Empezar. Both Garcia and Almodover are still very active and are producing films of great depth and vision. The names of Carlos Saura, Manuel Gutierrez, Aragon, Fer-

nando Trueba, Mario Camus and Pilar Miró (who died only a few days ago of a heart attack) must be mentioned as the great movie-makers of the post-Franco era.

Playwrights Antonio Bueero Vallejo, Jose Sanchis Siniestra and novelists Antonio Gala, Manuel Vazquez Montalban and Pedro Reverte have become enormously successful. Almudena Grandes, Javier Marias and Antonio Muñoz Molina belong to the more recent literary movement called "la nueva narrativa Española." There are many more narrators, novelists, essayists, playwrights and poets who have come to the fore in the post-Franco period. What is even more important is that there has been a fundamental change in the society in general. I remember, when I came to Madrid from Karachi in 1970, I found that except the intellectual elite of the right and the left, ordinary people did not read newspapers, books or serious periodicals. At most, they read sports magazines and tabloids. There were few public libraries. As you know, in England and the US, even small communities have public libraries. Under the Franco regime, reading was not encouraged. The dictatorship feared that if the masses were allowed to read, write and listen to foreign broadcasts, the pillars of the establishment would be shaken.

That attitude has changed completely. Reading is no

longer considered as a suspicious exercise. People read books — all sorts of printed materials, on the beach, in the park, and while travelling to work in public transport. Public libraries are being inaugurated all over Spain. Books are having print-runs of hundreds of thousands of copies instead of five or ten thousand as it used to happen before. The Socialist Government before and the Conservative Government now have adopted the policy of allocating greater proportion of public resources to education and culture.

New art galleries have been added (the Reina Sofia Centre, the Thyssen Collection at the Vallehermoso Palace) to the already famous Prado Museum to make Madrid as one of the most important centres of art in the world. In this connection, I should mention that the Guggenheim Museum has just been opened in Bilbao. In 1984, a new and purpose-built concert-hall and only a few days ago, the Teatro Real (an opera-house) were inaugurated.

This short piece does not allow me to write in detail on the developments in the Regional cultures (Catalan, Basque or Andalusian) except perhaps to mention that in the post-Franco era, there has been a great resurgence in all sorts of cultural activities (vernacular, popular and elitist) in these regions because under the strong central government of the Franco regime, the very idea of having autonomous regions or regional cultures was considered subversive.

In conclusion, we may say that men and women of post-Franco Spain are eagerly experimenting with cultural activities of all nature — some serious others probably somewhat frivolous — from which the new cultural patterns for the twenty-first century will evolve.

A Husnain

As a newspaper reader I appreciate the policy of the Prime Minister meeting the editors at periodical intervals. I also agree with the comment of Mr Mahfuz Anam (DS, Feb 26) that the editors did not bother to do their homework before going to the meet. Both the parties meet in public interest, but it was in short supply!

I wanted to read about some of the 'hot', topical national issues, some of which are noted below. The government is dilly dallying in announcing firm practical campaigns to combat the daily huge traffic jams in the major cities, and the avoidable deaths and maiming of persons due to serious highway accidents as a result of rash driving (first human factor, then technical, followed by judgement. Highway monitoring by the traffic police is practically absent. How is it that the drivers rarely die or suffer serious injuries is a mystery which even the government can not solve or speak about!

Now we hear that several thousand double decker buses would be released in Dhaka city. Where is the road space? And how the traffic congestion would be eliminated and controlled? The administration and the DCC are shy talking about the problem created by thousands of rickshaws and unlicensed vehicles. Why the issue is being kept pending, when the Farakka and CHT deals could be rushed through without consensus? With such behaviour pattern, the authority cannot possibly get the benefit of the doubt.

The other mystery is that

To the Editor...

Education vs job market

Sir, In Bangladesh, education is very far from job market. The courses that are taught in the acadmic life of a student do not give any benefit for getting a job.

For example, a student of commerce discipline will have to learn in his/her Honours Banking, Taxation, Company Law, Cost Accounting, Management and Accounting, which are directly related with the activities of banking sector. But for getting a job here a student will have to face examinations in respect of General Knowledge, Bengali, English Language and Literature, General Maths etc.

Why? Sheikh Shajahan Dhaka University

A wake-up call for BUET

Sir, As an alumnus I am saddened by the recent developments in BUET campus. I can not understand how an authority of BUET stature becomes so resolute to carry out something that is not even recommended, let alone be required, by schools like MIT. What are we trying to realize by making Physics a background requirement in Department of Architecture when emphasis is required in revising the entire curriculum of more technology oriented Department of EEE?

Architects require a sensitivity to beauty. They also need to understand the complex relationship between people and their surroundings. Architects learn their required basic and advanced scientific and technical frameworks while in school for five undergraduate years! Architects visualize a design, and Structural Engineers materialize that. It defeats the very purpose of the establishment of Department of Architecture if we want them to be Structural Engineers!

What is of utmost urgency is BUET's complete overhauling of its BSEE programme to make it on a par with the modern high tech world. BSEE graduates of BUET usually experience difficulties in Quantum Mechanics, Semiconductor Process and Device Fundamentals, VLSI Circuits and Design, Digital Signal Processing, etc. not because of their inadequate Mathematics preparation, but because of their unfamiliarity with the fundamentals and/or on-hand experiences. Instead of those required basics they learn Fluid Mechanics, Strength of Materials, etc. which does not help any BSEE graduate to excel further in their education or in their carrier. BUET should concentrate more on this aspect rather than introducing undue emphasis on something that is not absolutely necessary.

It really hurts to see how time, energy and money are being spent on an unnecessary move when a move is long overdue elsewhere! My beloved BUET, please wake up and act.

Mohammad Bari, Arlington, Texas. e-mail: mbari@lssem.com

Removing rickshaws

Sir, My attention has been drawn to a news item under the caption 'Hanif seeks help to stop movement of illegal rickshaws', published on Mar 3, 1998. We understand that Mayor Hanif anxiously wants the illegal rickshaws to stop plying for freeing the city roads from traffic jam and for this purpose he seeks help and cooperation of all concerned.

We are well aware of the fact that the core problem of illegal rickshaw is its hundreds of thousands of rickshaw-pullers. Say, there are three lakhs of illegal rickshaws in the city. As it is not possible physically to ply rickshaw whole day for a person, he plies it half-day. As such there are six lakh of rickshaw-pullers who are involved with illegal rickshaws for maintaining their families. Here we have to keep it in mind that these rickshaw-pullers' families are extremely poor living below poverty line. They cannot be pushed back to their rural abodes where from they have come in the city as destitute for the reasons beyond their reach and control.

To my mind, a safety net should be created for them before the withdrawal of illegal rickshaws from the city. Otherwise, a lot of serious problems including law and order situation will arise in the civic life.

Mahbub Ali 41, Abdul Hadi Lane, Dhaka

Where is neutral government?

Sir, After liberation, every government has done some good and bad activities. But what we see is that a government voted to power, it blames to the previous government for everything.

This is exactly what is going on now. Its this a sign of neutrality? Md Nurul Islam Lecturer in Kalkiokir College, Gazipur