

Power Failure

The recently sacked energy minister must have found it hard to suppress his smile last Thursday. Obviously he was not enjoying some sort of vicarious pleasure while the whole country suffered from power failure. Nevertheless the energy black-out proved, as nothing could have proven more forcefully, that technical things like power supply cannot be controlled by administrative fiat or deployment of the armed forces.

Thursday's power failure occurred at 10 am in the morning. Till late night nobody could tell the nation what probably had happened. Responses to all questions were shelved on an inquiry committee's work to come out, God only knows when. We recall a similar nationwide blow out last year whose inquiry report is yet to come before the public.

Our first suggestion is that, do not waste valuable time and energy on the sabotage theory. If there has been any sabotage it occurred over the last two years when vital decisions were shelved, postponed or put through numerous bureaucratic maze leading to loss of valuable time.

Our second suggestion is that the government should immediately remove the smokes that seem to cloud the whole energy scene and bring about more clarity, transparency and accountability into the whole process. Let the nation know the extent of our problem, the options that we have, the cost and the time required for each of the options and then let us decide on a course of action through widespread debate.

Tilottama Indeed

It is an all-round betrayal. In the cities of the developed nations suburbia has come to mean clean air, cosy and generous housing, a quiet ambience. And security. Around Dhaka only slums are rising. No roads and sewers, no open space, and strewn all over is mean dingy housing. Whatever the situation in the inner-city area, the fringes are fast turning into stinking cesspools devoid of culture and civilisation and even the rudiments of what sustained the life that is now gone out — inter-person decency.

Can a town grow on air? Or for that matter, on greed and foolishness or total disregard for the neighbour? Or in the absence of townplanning? The government has of course a townplanning wing but these fringes skirting Dhaka are no beneficiaries to the existence of that. It is RAJUK that vets all building plans from these areas. And the approval is not difficult to procure, what with some extra money or as a matter of course. The question is how does RAJUK approve any building in the fringes in the absence of any total planning of the whole area? This is wrong and must stop forthwith.

The problem goes deep and back to the metropolitan Dhaka Development Plan, said to have been completed in 1996 and yet 26 of its segments but two still waiting for the DAP or Detailed Area Planning. Completion of the DAP for the whole DMDP area may take another ten to twelve years. So what would the owners of property on the fringes do? How is RAJUK to approve a building without an area plan? Most of their approved buildings run the risk of being built on projected roads and parks and schools and markets. The entire eastern swath, from Tongi Bridge to Demra is being allowed to degenerate with unplanned structures in the most anarchic fashion.

Saddest is the tale of the Keraniganj Thana. Just across the Buriganga, it was a virtual virgin country with a terrific cultural past. With imagination and vision, this vast low-lying area between the Buriganga and the Dhaleswari could literally be turned into a Venice. Thanks to successive governments and RAJUK in its many versions and all the abortive master plans there an inferno keeps on shaping.

If there is a government there, it must wake up to what is happening to the capital city and its future.

Embezzlement Spree

We are outraged. Barely a month has gone since the detection of misappropriation in the branch of a city bank, another account defalcation case has been unearthed. This time at the Baitul Mokarram branch of Sonali Bank, right under the nose of the House Building Finance Corporation whose 4.2 crore Taka — money repaid by the borrowers — were embezzled, thanks to the moral bankruptcy of the responsible bank employees and the abysmally low level of our clients' information on country's banking system.

The message a bank account misappropriation is frightening. It is like police turning thieves. When law enforcers violate law, people on whom public trust is pinned on are found wanting in their duty, a society is believed to be on its last legs. Are we close to our destruction?

Certainly there is no point in crying over stricter laws. Laws we have in plenty. But what has come to plague our society is the want of their strict enforcement. A criminal under one regime transforms into a law abiding citizen during the other. This has stopped the society from attaining a talent for natural moral revulsion to crime. And bankruptcy of the leaders has effectively destroyed any chance of the society being up in arms against the process of criminalisation.

This embezzlement spree in the banks is a clear pointer to the state of our banking system. In all likelihood the two cases unearthed so far are the tip of the iceberg. There may be a mindbogglingly long list of defalcation whaling under it. We strongly feel the government should immediately do something to restore people's faith in the banking system which has literally gone to dogs in this country.

The Emergence of BJP

The Vajpayee led Coalition Government's priorities in our bilateral relations are not yet known. However the unilateral assertions on the theme of the so-called "illegal immigrants" cannot of course be acceptable to Bangladesh.

IN the Indian general elections of 1984 the BJP was able to secure only two seats in the Lok Sabha. It was regarded as politically "untouchable" by the secular parties and looked down by them with a dismissiveness not unmixt with contempt. It was viewed as a North Indian, Hindi belt, reactionary caste Hindu party of limited geographical and ideological appeal. However, since then by its progressive success in the four successive general elections, demonstrating an impressive geographical, linguistic and caste spread, the party has indeed confounded its critics. At the same time it has raised questions as to the future direction of politics in India.

Since its defeat in the Vote of Confidence in 1996 the BJP behaved with remarkable self assurance and went into the last elections with a number of cleverly crafted political moves and alliances. In spite of the "Sonia factor", BJP was able to improve upon its position in the last election and together with its allies came respectively close to an overall majority. In the name of stability and ability it attracted the support of the burgeoning Indian Hindu middle class and entrepreneurs and was able to garner the support of a quarter of Indian voters. It also showed that it was a quick learner and for the first time in its history, with remarkable guile and agility, made pre-emptive alliances with a number of regional parties, beating, as it were, its major opponents at their own game. It kept, what its opponents suspect, a feigned distance from the members of its "joint family", viz., aggressive Hindu organisations like the RSS and the Bajrang Dal, to pacify the moderates among its supporters and moved swiftly in the game of post-poll give and take. These moves not only stood it in good stead at the elections but also helped it win the confidence vote with support from unlikely quarters like the Telegu Desam of Andhra Pradesh and the National Congress of Kashmir. Soon after the elections, it drew up an agreed document entitled the "National Agenda for Governance" with its coalition partners, leaving out of its content "Hindutva" questions like the construction of the Ram Temple, Common Civil Code and the scrapping of Article 370 concerning the special status of Kashmir.

However, the fact remains that though compromising its stance, when it came to retaining or capturing power, the BJP has not in fact abandoned its policies outlined in its election manifesto. Indeed, holding aloft its "Hindutva" banner, it emerged out of the last two general elections as the single largest party in the parliament. Half a century ago, this would have been unthinkable in Jawaharlal Nehru and Abul Kalam Azad's secular India, when in the former's words, with the "stroke of midnight" of August 15, 1947, India awoke to "life and freedom". The BJP's 1998 Election Manifesto inter alia states "The BJP is convinced that Hindutva has immense potentiality to re-energize this nation and strengthen and discipline it to undertake the arduous task of nation building".

Unlike his two predecessors Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee is therefore not just a Coalition Prime Minister thrown up by the arithmetic and acceptability of a coalition partnership. The BJP, in reality, represents a new trend in Indian politics that is quite different in emphasis and character from that of the Congress and the United Front. A quarter of the Indian voters has voted for the BJP and ever since 1984 the curve of its political fortune has steadily climbed upward. It is therefore unrealistic to assume that the BJP's popularity has peaked. With the growing support that the "Hindutva" slogan has already attracted, it does not seem beyond them to one day form the government on their own. If and when that day dawns, it will be interesting to see whether the BJP remains uncompromising in pursuing its declared internal and external policies.

In this country our basic concern is our bilateral relations with India. The period of the two successive United Front governments saw a remarkable improvement in our relationship. The signing of the Ganges Water Treaty and the return of the Chakma refugees removed the two major irritants in our relations and we seemed poised to enter a constructive and mutually beneficial phase of economic and commercial interactions. The "National Agenda for Governance" sealed, signed and delivered by the coalition partners of the Vajpayee Government is stronger on generalities than on specifics. It is silent on "Hindutva" related matters like the construction of a Ram temple and the like. This is perhaps to be expected of a coalition of disparate elements. On foreign relations it has only a brief paragraph that says that the coalition partners will "strive to secure for India a place, role and position in the global arena consistent with our size and capability and promote peaceful relationship with all neighbours on a reciprocal basis". This is too general a statement for any detailed comment.

But what with the exchange of warm messages between Prime Minister Vajpayee and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the former's appreciative comments in the Lok Sabha about Prime Minister Gajral's achievements in the field of regional policies, one hopes that the present Indian Coalition Government will adhere to the outgoing government's positive approach towards Bangladesh. Besides, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee has had an impressive track record as the Foreign Minister of the Janata Government in the late seventies. He was able to establish good working relationship with India's neighbours and it is then that India signed a Ganges water sharing treaty with Bangladesh.

But in the long run it is not Vajpayee the man but the emergence of BJP the political party and the ramification of its policies, that matters. An individual, wise and moderate as Atal Behari Vajpayee apparently is, can temporarily smoothen the rough regional and bilateral edges of the declared policies of a political party, but cannot forever control their thrusts. It is in this light that one has to examine the relevant parts of the BJP manifesto concerning its relations with Bangladesh.

Curiously the BJP in its manifesto has picked up an issue concerning the so-called "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh into India. According to its 1998 manifesto this is a problem, "the Congress and the United Front Governments, for their narrow and selfish reasons have been deliberately negligent of". It does not however elaborate as to what those "narrow and selfish" reasons are. The manifesto also puts the figure of these so-called "illegal immigrants" at 1.7 crore. It says that these figures are "officially ascertained", but does not say how this unilaterally determined figure was arrived at.

One may, to catch the nuances of the contents of the 1996 and the 1998 manifestos in relation to the so-called "illegal immigrants", review its relevant portions. The 1996 manifesto says: "In our relations with Bangladesh, illegal immigrants into India from that country have proved a major irritant. This issue has cast its shadow on our bilateral ties and needs to be resolved early."

The 1996 manifesto also dealt with the same issue separately under the somewhat dramatic heading, "Illegal Immigration: Demographic Invasion — A threat to our security". It said, — "We believe that illegal immigrants from our neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh, have an unsettling effect on our demography. Given the sheer dimension of numbers — there are as many as 1.7 crore illegal immigrants, the bulk of them Bangladeshis, living in various parts of the country — the illegal immigrant is not only transforming the geography but the sociology, the economy, and indeed even the politics of this country. India is facing an explosive issue."

If our demographic balance is allowed to be disturbed by inept policies and political considerations, various demographic entities are bound to come in conflict, thus adversely affecting our security and environment. The invasion of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has led to an alarming growth in a section of the population in our North East, in Assam, in West Bengal, parts of Bihar and Delhi. In certain areas a section of the population has grown by almost 100%."

The BJP proposes to: 1) Complete barbed wire fencing along the India-Bangladesh border, beginning with the plains, to prevent infiltration.

2) Detect illegal immigrants, delete their names from voter lists and arrange for their deportation without any further delay.

3) Declare all property deals between Indians and illegal immigrants as null and void.

4) Amend immigration rules and other laws to impose stringent checks on illegal entry into India.

5) And expedite the issuance of identity cards to all citizens of the country."

In contrast the BJP manifesto 1998 under the heading "Foreign Policy — Protecting India's National Interest" states as follows: "To reinforce the improving relations with Bangladesh, we however continue to view with concern the unabated illegal infiltration into India from that country, and will seek the active participation of the Bangladesh authorities in curbing this."

While discussing illegal infiltration it says — "The total number of illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh is officially ascertained at over 1.7 crore. The adverse impact of this on our economy and social and political order poses problems of great magnitude. This cannot be allowed to continue. Our government will: 1) take more stringent measures to intercept illegal infiltrators and turn them back. Fencing of the border, wherever possible will be urgently taken up. Border patrol will be intensified.

2) initiate steps to detect illegal infiltrators and delete their names from electoral rolls;

3) maintain a national register of citizens."

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Interestingly BJP's figure of illegal immigrants of 1.7 crore for 1996 remains the same in 1998; although unlike 1996 they maintain this time that all these immigrants come from Bangladesh. In 1996 it was their stand that they came from neighbouring countries, the bulk of it being from Bangladesh.

The Vajpayee led Coalition Government's priorities in our bilateral relations are not yet known. However the unilateral assertions on the theme of the so-called "illegal immigrants" cannot of course be acceptable to Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh share a long common border and a thousand years of history, throughout which people have moved from one part to another. The movement has not been in one direction. Even the other day there were news reports of thousands of Mizos having come over from India to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. Any bilateral discussion on the so-called "illegal immigrants" will have to be on a mutually agreed upon definition and proper identification of the "illegal immigrants". Talks about barbed wire fences and the pushing back of people are not only anachronistic but are also unacceptable.

The BJP manifesto raises certain vital questions. If pursued, what kind of impact, "Hindutva" related issues like the construction of the Rama temple will have on the secular perception of the people of Bangladesh? How will it influence those in this country who, like the BJP also try to make a virtue out of religious fundamentalism in politics. What will be Bangladesh's reaction at being fenced in or in confronting pushed back multitudes that it does not recognize as its nationals? What will happen to the ethos of regional development that so happily seemed to have been gaining ground? Do we at the threshold of the twenty-first century go back to the bitter, divisive and barren communal politics of the first half of the century? One only hopes that these nightmarish fears will never come to pass.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak Dhaka

What Economics is Not About!

Economics text books are not about the poor, the women and the human beings. They are, if ever referred to, subjects to serve the prince, the entrepreneur. So, right framework with right conceptualisation is needed.

WILFULLY or not, students of economics tend to fall a victim to the wiles of some "unscrupulous" concepts used in economics text books. The disconcerting episode is that those concepts that we come across in economics text books, do have a perceptible influence in creating our mind-sets which are instrumental inputs in creating the world. In our student life, we were warned by some of our esteemed teachers (e.g. Dr Abu Mahmood, Akhlaqur Rahman (late) and Anisur Rahman) about the futility of such concepts and also they used to advise us to learn about different paths for growth and development than those that are written by western authors driven by conventional wisdom.

In a recent seminar on "Structural Adjustment and Beyond", jointly organised by the Bangladesh Economic Association and Internet Economic Association in Dhaka, economics as a discipline came under heavy attack. And that was fired by Dr Mohammed Yunus, the Grameen Bank wizard. For most of the woes of the present day world e.g. poverty, unemployment, corruption etc., Yunus fiercely blamed the teachings of economics as espoused in conventional text books. "For one thing, seeds of poverty are planted firmly in the pages of economics text books," Yunus added. Let us pick up some of the pockets he saw as the villain of peace.

First, the creative aspects of human beings were mercilessly ignored by economics. All human beings are put under the category called "labour" and the way economics tends to treat labour is akin to the way draught animals are treated. "They have no creativity, no ambition, no sense of sacrifice, pride or accomplishment, worst of all they have no gender." The failure of economics as a social science mainly springs from its inability to incorporate the difference between man and woman in them, the basic institutions they hail from, the family they were reared up in etc.

Yes, economics values creativity but at the same breath assumes that creativity could be displayed by only a few of the many called "entrepreneurs". The princes of economics seem to be those rare species called entrepreneurs and royalties in terms of incentives, regulations, patronisation always are meant for the royal princes of economics. The society has to serve the princes, all human beings are born to salute them. Such a notion of economics is not merely placed in the pages of text books rather, on an empirical plane, "it has influenced the design of institutions, framing of legislations and policies and shaping politics. Because of this misconstrued vision of the human beings, wage employment emerged as the only legitimate source of employment". Had we walked or run with the premise that all human beings are potential entrepreneurs, we could have possibly crossed much more miles than we have so far.

Economics text books would then force us to follow the other route to development to create a living for everyone, rather than lining up everyone to serve a few. Second, since wage-employment became the only "logical source of employment", "self employment" category of employment — its sources, finance, ramifications — was dashed to the sideline. It is as if self-employment is not employment at all (there is no white collar status, no wage, no pension in self-employment). Yunus argues that "if economics could imagine human beings with more options than the labour has, it would have created a theory of self-employment which would have made it easy to address the issues of poverty, development, family, population

bring people to the box of economics — the box of the credit to serve. Credit — the powerful input to create economic and social power — and the institutions to deliver such inputs is another area where economics failed to realise the realities. "This institution by deciding that it can do business only with rich, literally has created financial apartheid. When it announced that the poor are not creditworthy, it was almost pronouncing death sentence on the poor for no fault of their own. Economics went along with it."

Marketplace is generally dubbed as a place for the rich, greedy and entrepreneurs. But social goals can be a powerful substitute of those to drive them out from the market place. For that to happen, what is directly needed is social consciousness driven enterprises, not greed-propelled ones. Why not encourage socially motivated people to come play in the marketplace? It would not, perhaps, be an exaggeration to say that had there been a level playing field, the guardians of greed would surrender to the socially motivated workers and entrepreneurs. Economics needs to revisit its theory of market to find that it is not an "exclusive play ground" for blood hunters. Challenge awaits the good people to be in the market.

Economics text books thus are not about the poor, the women and the human beings. They are, if ever referred to, subjects to serve the prince, the entrepreneur. So, right framework with right conceptualisation is needed. Once that happens, there is no reason why a person should remain poor. Poverty should be a matter which will find its place in the poverty museum. It will be a part of history of human indifference to their fellow human beings and human arrogance about their so-called knowledge. The sooner we can write new economics text-books, the closer will be the day where we will have a poverty-free world.

This is the first of a series of papers presented in the recently concluded seminar on Structural Adjustment and Beyond. The writer would attempt to present to the readers some other aspects discussed in that conference in his next write-ups.

Dr Nurul Islam Sarker

and bias towards the minority, and of limitations and restrictions to free uses of his citizenship rights and liberties etc. I personally feel very sorry for this state of his mind. But at the same time shall request him to calm down and control his exaggerated and vigorous words in order to hold and kindly take off his hat. Ideally like that of mine to the Home Ministry as long as it protects all of us from any racial conspiracy and safeguards our individual, social and spiritual lives as well. Mr Sarker as a man of liberal heart and sensible mind you might have agreed that to bring the non-believers and the enemies of God back under the Divine Faith is something definitely holy. But converting a person with definite culture and religion of his own by using power, sword, diplomacy, supremacy or by financial incentives in the name of poverty alleviation, education, health care and upgrading of life is surely a heinous act, if not

criminal. No sensible and fair person can be a part of such foul play except a fanatic. Because the fanatics never respect the sentiments of others and always like to see people around them speaking, eating, dressing and thinking like them only. This is certainly a perverted form of human mentality. Mr Sarker, you might have observed that almost all religions on earth are more or less passing through a difficult time now. Earthly values are prevailing on spiritual ones and this is spreading like cancers. In this context every person in religion has a special task to protect FIRST his own community from further moral and spiritual damage than to EXPAND the size and number of the community. So, Mr Sarker please don't be upset to find yourself in a "microscopic" community here in this country WHEREAS the "macroscopic" sizes of the Christian communities are at real stake in the west now. Mr Sarker the Christian missionaries and other voluntary organizations have so much to do with their fellow people now.

Churches and NGOs

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and gender. It could have enriched itself with other socially powerful theories of credit, banking and entitlement."

The poor got the poorest treatment from economics text books. The failure lay in the incompetence of those text books in understanding the poor. "Poverty is not created by the poor, it is created by the theoretical framework that we work with, institution that we built and policies that we pursued and the norms that we created. Economics had chance to reflect on the poverty of an individual person. Because it never had an individual human being in its mind. All it had in mind was a labour."

Unsung and unheard though by economics text books, there appears to be a pervasive presence of a living through self-employment worldwide. There is no theoretical analysis built around such a flourishing activity and around which the poor mostly hover. Economics gives a glimpse at it under the aegis of "informal sector", and tend to curse it as a symptom of primitiveness of an economy. The creativity of the people is reflected through the presence of informal sector where people create their own livelihood, own enterprise. But unfortunately, such creativity and energy of people have very little space in the voluminous text books of economics. In fact, no attempt is made by economics to enter people's boxes. What economics attempts to do is to

bring people to the box of economics — the box of the credit to serve. Credit — the powerful input to create economic and social power — and the institutions to deliver such inputs is another area where economics failed to realise the realities. "This institution by deciding that it can do business only with rich, literally has created financial apartheid. When it announced that the poor are not creditworthy, it was almost pronouncing death sentence on the poor for no fault of their own. Economics went along with it."

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Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury



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To The Editor...

Songs of Kalu Shah

Sir, The people of our country are fond of songs. Specially folk spiritual songs are their favourite ones. A few spiritual song-composers of our country composed songs for their disciple or devotees and they had not thought that in future those will be evaluated by researchers and they would be treated as spiritual poets.

Hazrat Syed Kalu Shah (1810-1905) was one of them whose many spiritual songs had been lost. A great saint of Sauria under Manikganj was a spiritual leader and composer of more than two thousands spiritual songs but his major contribution had been lost for want of proper nursing. Therefore I request the Folklore Academy, Bangla Academy etc., to take up necessary steps in this regard.

Makraj Khan Sauria, Manikganj

But how does that affect us, directly? Prices of essentials have hiked beyond commoners' reach. Prices of fertilisers are still high, export of jute has gone down, there is still a huge demand for gas and electricity — so where is the progress? Sometimes foreign policies and international affairs should be given less priority than the welfare of the country and people.

Price hike

Sir, We were told and time again in the last election that if Awami League was voted to power then the price of fertiliser would fall. Rice and other essentials would follow the same suit, they promised. Therefore Awami League was given a chance to rule the country

Masroor Ahmed Deepak Dhaka