

SAARC meet

Our most important message to the SAARC conference of ministers for information is as simple as it is straightforward — change ministries of information from instruments of controlling and coercing the media and using state owned radio and TV as party propaganda outlets, and transform them into genuine instruments of informing the public. You can and you must do so because all of you are representatives of democratic governments. We must move away from the past mindset of controlling the media and move into the new era of working with the free media to push forward the development agenda of our respective countries. After decades of traumatic experiences with military and quasi-military dictatorships of one kind or the other, all major SAARC countries are now well on their way to stable democratic system of governance. Therefore, our expectation from this meeting is indeed very high. We want this meeting to push forward the democratic agenda of South Asia, and what better way of doing it than by giving more freedom to the media of our respective countries?

Yes, we happily acknowledge that much has changed in the media scene of South Asia. But that remains confined to the print media. Much more needs to be done, and done urgently. While our region can justifiably take pride in the current level of freedom enjoyed by the print media, at the same time it has quite a bit to be ashamed of at the state of radio and TV which remains in a pitiable condition. We would like to see a clear direction from this ministerial meeting towards granting autonomy to the audio-visual media in all the member countries.

We also strongly suggest that steps be taken to facilitate travel by journalists in each other's countries. Measures should be taken to ensure freer circulation of our newspapers and magazines in member countries for which a special postal rate could be put into place according to Unesco Convention in this regard.

Above all we want a strong endorsement from this meeting that SAARC governments will never again take recourse to censorship, banning newspapers and journals, harassing journalists for political reasons and using government advertisement to promote party interest. We know we are asking for too much. But too much only in terms of our mindset. Actually too little in terms of where the world has gone and where democracy beckons us to go.

Shooting Spree on Campus

How utterly shameful! A senior student of the highest seat of country's education teasing a female admission seeker triggering a Wild West gunfight show at the Dhaka University campus that left one killed and two hospitalised. How many more fathoms down will this legacy of BCL (Bangladesh Chhatra League) and JCD (Jatiyatibadi Chhatra Dal) feud take our educational institutions?

Condemnable as it is, we don't understand how the teasing incident, even after reckoning the loco-foco nature of people, particularly the student community, could lead to such an infinitely more fatal gang battle of sorts. It is sheer luck that the casualty list did not grow longer. Given the demonstration of arms and ammunition, that was very much on the cards.

The prolonged exhibition of firepower between the rival student fronts and the subsequent hall capturing act by the BCL go to show the incident was actually an excuse to justify their raison d'être. And why not? They have guns. On top of that they have the blessings of those who shape the future of country's people.

In the heat of the moment it was pretty natural of the teased girl's humiliated brother to seek retaliatory measure. But how could an altercation or a likely brawl followed by the intervention of law enforcing agency dissipate into a fatal shooting war? Apparently, neither police nor the student leaders who were around the spot react quickly and effectively enough.

If the authorities feel police must stay on the campus, they must see to it police is able to exercise its power of enforcing law without any obstruction and immediately. Having said that, we feel no amount of effective policing can bring back normalcy in the campuses until politicians in this country decide to call it a day in their suicidal game of engaging the students in the party war. This paper has always tried to drive home the message — but the ruling party has not woken up to its responsibility. No wonder the opposition has not. But how long can this continue?

A Dream Come True

A dream came true when the Jatiya Sangsad on Wednesday passed the Folk Arts and Crafts Foundation Bill. Zainul Abedin in his last years was literally obsessed with this dream of setting up a house that would celebrate, conserve and cultivate the genuine Bangla folk arts and crafts. So much so that his own creativity was said to have suffered for that in a big bad way. That was the problem with the great man. His post-partition half-life was first occupied by the travails of realising his first dream — founding the Dhaka Institute of Arts and Crafts. With that well on its way, Zainul became excessively involved in seeing his second dream come true. Zainul the great painter, never in these years allowed himself time to make his mark on the subcontinent and indeed on the world. The Folk Art Museum at Sonargaon, his dream-child, is bidding its time, none too impressively, since 1975. Before the passage of the bill, the Sonargaon thing was not worth the great painter's dream and the price he paid for it. What will it be after the nation has recognised it by law as one of the national institutions?

Governments, as a rule, do feel like fish out of water when accosted by such projects. But accept it or not, the Art Institute was translated into reality by the dreamer himself. Who will give the right shape to Sonargaon and blow life into it, now that Zainul is long gone? Governments have a way of placing such institutions and their chiefs far down the hierarchy so that the ministers with their secretaries of different levels can treat those chiefs as their errand boys and their institutions as decoration pieces for diverting their minds. Unless this changes and the chiefs of national institutions are treated at least at par if not above the secretary level, there is little chance Sonargaon will ever become anything beyond a picnic spot for the politicians and the bureaucrats.

Health and Wealth in Rural Areas

More than a third of rural households in a year face economic crisis due to ill health of inmates. To meet these expenses, 40 per cent of rural people either dissave or dispose of assets including productive ones.

PER capita income, as the sole indicator of economic development, has long outlived its utility and paved ways for indicators such as quality of life to have a say on development. Health — a sign of productivity and physical well-being — thus became an important constituent of poverty. Quality of life apart, good health tends to carry considerable instrumental value for development. For example, while possession of good health or improvement in health sets preconditions for development, poor health constrains productivity, contains income growth and, in consequence, imposes heavy penalties on households in terms of extra budgetary costs relating to health hazards. Traditional notions assign critical importance to explaining variations in health status but a predictable relationship between them is difficult to discern. The social and cultural divisions pertaining to societies may result in differential health status — given same level of per capita income — and thus deny the causal relationship between health and per capita income.

In a recent research work on "Health Dimensions of Poverty", Dr Sharifa Begum of BIDS portrayed statistics relating to health status in rural Bangladesh. The author drew upon a household survey of 62 villages in 1995 and dealt with morbidity (not mortality) — illness, disability, handicap, and other parameters dictating the critical dimensions of health.

To start with, the author delineates prevailing morbidity into three groups: (1) acute illness of the household members during one month preceding the date of enumeration; (2) the recurrent or repeated illness of the members; and (3) major illness suffered by the members during last one year.

The information thus collected allow us to examine the rural morbidity situation from three perspectives, namely, the burden of acute illness that the society bears during a specified short period of time, the burden in terms of repeated sickness largely on a continuous basis suggesting a bottomline of morbidity burdens and lately, on the major illness bearing special significance to rural people.

According to the findings of the survey, in 1995 the proportion of sick household members in rural areas (the overall morbidity rate) stood at 12.5 per cent. One-third of them (4.6 per cent) fall sick frequently. Nine per cent of the rural people remain morbid or sick largely on a continuous basis. The survey

found that only four per cent of rural people, annually, suffered from major illnesses.

A U-shaped relationship between morbidity and age had been found. For example, the morbidity rate of the elderly people aged 60+ is about 24 per cent and that of children under 5 is 22 per cent. "According to age-pattern of illness, the morbidity risk of the rural people starts declining after age 5 and the process continues up to age

among the extreme poor. The morbidity rate for acute illness is about 15 per cent. This compares with 12 and 11.6 per cent, respectively, for moderate and non-poor. "It is apparent from these rates that the moderate poor and non-poor category face almost similar risks from diseases while extreme poor for whom body fitness is their main economic asset, are far worse than them. However, the lack of difference in morbidity

reporting could result in. Interestingly, rural males are found to be somewhat relatively disadvantaged compared to their counterparts, in the early ages of life up to 14 and in the elderly ages 60+. In between, that is ages 15-59, the situation is just reverse to put male in advantageous position. Health status of women get worst at the ages of 30-44 — possibly due to reproductive cycle.

All said, the rate of morbidity in rural areas seem to have fallen over the years — and the benefits of improvement in morbidity were distributed across the board. Such improvements could be added to improved public health condition, improvement in water and sanitation.

What types of disease rural people suffer from? The dominant disease — not much different from the past — are cholera and dysentery (21 per cent) and cold cough, viral fever and fever of unknown nature (41 per cent). These two types together account for two-thirds of acute illnesses suffered by rural population while one-tenth of illness appear to spring from malaria, typhoid, measles, chickenpox etc.

However, despite greater benefits accruing to rural poor in the wake of improved health condition and falling morbidity rate, government's efforts at delivering health care services

still trail behind expectations. About 88 per cent of health care lies in the private sector and a meagre 12 per cent in the public sector. The share of public sector is less than what it was in 1984 (20 per cent) and in 1987 (12.5 per cent). More disconcertingly, the share of quality treatment of the rural people dwindled from 36.2 per cent in 1984 to 34.5 per cent in 1995. "This decline is entirely due to the failure of government sector in delivering health care services to the rural people. Hence despite proclaimed emphasis and improvements of health care delivery network in the country, particularly in rural areas, the rural people have not benefited in reality for quality treatments."

The research report by Dr Sharifa Begum also shed light on health related expenses by households. On average, rural people spend Tk 342 for treatment of acute illness, Tk 2680 for major illness and Tk 83 per month for treatment of repeated illness. Taking together, health related expenses account for an average of 15 per cent of total household expenditure while the maximum burden is on the poorest at 25 per cent. More than a third of the households in a year face economic crisis due to ill health. To meet these expenses, 40 per cent of rural people either dissave or dispose of assets including productive ones. Again, 55 per cent of major illnesses is treated by taking resort to the same practice. Wealth is not there for health in rural areas.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

29 and then takes an upward trend. From age 30, the morbidity risk increases monotonously with an amelioration after age 59. If repeated illness among rural people could be pitted against age, a critical aspect of rural illness comes into sharp focus: an inverted J-shaped relationship mounting risks follow in elder ages than in early ages.

Desaggregated into economic conditions, the findings tend to show that sickness and economic condition in rural areas "predictably" pursue an inverse relationship. For example,

risk between the moderate poor and non-poor tends to indicate that the non-food physical environment still may be the dominant determinant of health status in rural areas."

Gender wise, the morbidity rate for acute illness among male-female is very close (12 vs 13 per cent). However, male-female difference gets sharper in the case of repeated illness (11 vs 8 per cent). One needs to be very cautious in interpreting data on male-female illness. It is because the household head — mostly a male — talks about female health and hence under-

Toward Reconciling Economics and Ecology

by Sarwat Chowdhury

Ecological economics attempts to answer such complex issues with strict emphasis on limits to population growth as well as limits to ever-increasing consumption, and levels of inequality.

Improvement would be achieved individually and collectively. However, the ideals of economics in the later years, somehow strayed from the goals of achieving collective moral progress, and became fixated on the idea of individual material pursuits.

Such belief in individual materialism was further strengthened by the idea that, with scientific and technological progress, human beings will eventually be able to control the nature and all its forces. Imbedded in this thought process was the idea that if we were to become the master of nature, we would not have to be responsible for the long-term consequences of our actions. However, failed development models in various parts of the world have repeatedly shown that the world is much more complex and uncertain than once thought. As the popular phrase goes: often "nature finds a way" to break the laws established by human beings.

There are numerous real life examples in today's world that indicate that the traditional "trickle down" theory does not work any more. The emphasis needs to shift from growing to redistributing.

To be fair, most scientists no longer think that all of the mysteries of the earth can be bound by some laws, or can be brought under complete human control. However, it seems that

economics and its sub-field environmental economics are still being influenced largely by such belief systems. To clarify: the term ecological economics is separate from environmental economics (a sub-discipline of mainstream economics concerned with environmental problems).

Environmentalists are often attacked as pessimists. The Club of Rome in 1972 published "Limits to Growth" where our future was predicted to be very bleak as natural resources would run out soon. However since then, there has been a major shift in the idea of limit. In ecological economics, this shift is explained by the distinction between source and sink.

Source limits, the original emphasis of the Club of Rome can be subject to substitution, and can be controlled by markets and prices. However, sink limits often involve common property (e.g. land fill sites for garbage and toxic materials, CO2 emissions) which cannot be controlled by markets.

It seems that we need to be clear about some other terms as well. Proponents of mainstream economics often use the words "growth" and "development" interchangeably. There also seems to be some confusion about the term "want" (includes objects we can live without) and "need" (includes objects we cannot live without). The model of ecological economics attacks the conventional idea that

"more is always better", and instead emphasises the measurement of how well our basic needs are satisfied rather than how much is available for our consumption.

Another way to look at the issue would be to emphasise quality over quantity. After all, the basic necessities of life are finite, and the same in all cultures. If we look at economics as means to an end where the end is to satisfy our basic need then the reliance on the conventional belief of "infinite wants", and therefore the desire to produce maximum output becomes inconsequential.

Such ideas were familiar to an early economist named John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Mill argued for a stationary state economy where "a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement". Mill's writings on the stationary state have not received much attention by modern-day economists. Contrary to classical economists, the neo-classical economists adopt the view that qualitative conditions such as technology, tastes, distribution of income are "given", therefore the physical quantities (production of goods and use of resources) must adjust through the process of growth.

However, if we take the physical parameters as given, and concentrate on non-physical

qualitative conditions such as distribution of income and lifestyle of people, the resulting system would be much more harmonious to our physical reality. Dr. Herman Daly, considered the founder of ecological economics, has expanded on Mill's idea of a steady-state economy.

According to Dr. Daly, in such an economy, flows of resources in production and of pollutants back to the nature are maintained at a steady level. Therefore, the overall aim is to achieve sustainable development, which seeks qualitative improvement over quantitative growth so that we do not exceed the carrying capacity of the earth.

The environmental movement in the United States sometimes is divided on such sensitive issues such as population growth and immigration. For example, the environmental organisation Sierra Club,

which has 65 chapters in the US and Canada, is now trying to decide whether to oppose immigration as an organisation policy (the argument is, immigrants form the majority group that are contributing to population growth in the United States, and therefore exerting continuous pressure on the environment of this country). Interestingly, John Muir, who founded Sierra Club in 1892, was himself an immigrant from Scotland.

Ecological economics attempts to answer such complex issues with strict emphasis on limits to population growth as well as limits to ever-increasing consumption, and levels of inequality. As the developed countries shift their emphasis from quantitative growth to qualitative development, more resources will become available for the "needed growth" of the developing countries (since developed countries no longer need growth). Essentially, this model emphasises redistribution of wealth from the rich, and advocates the policy of enabling the poorer nations get access to the remaining natural resource base of the earth.

OPINION

SAARC Information Ministers Conference and Related Issues

Mansoor Mamoon

Technological innovation and its successful application has revolutionised the media and has made information the most sought after product of the world over. But South Asia as a whole is yet to tune in with this global trend. The acronym called SAARC comprising India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and

building, replacing suspicion by trust, rivalry by amity and hatred by friendship.

SAARC was born on the basis of consensus among the member-countries to achieve all these and much more. Since its founding in 1985, SAARC has come a long way but it is still far from regional cohesion or what is called confidence building. Till now there has not been any meaningful attempt to trickle down the spirit of SAARC at the grassroots. In other words, the basics has largely remained neglected. The basics calls for greater people contact on South Asian plank so as to make regionalism truly meaningful.

Against this backdrop, the first ever SAARC Information Ministers Conference assumes added importance. When globalisation is the universally accepted doctrine, South Asia, as a whole, is still living in the self-built cocoon of isolation from each other and the current trend of free flow of information among the countries of the region remains abruptly obstructed. Such a situation of utter isolation from one another, a Robinson Crusoe-like posture, is impossible to imagine at the advent of 21st century. But it is a truism in the context of South Asian context.

This is why giving transit facilities by one country to the other raises the hullabaloo of sell out of national interest. SAARC Information Ministers should give a serious thought to this lacunae and disinformation being dish out by the interested quarters.

SAARC countries should come closer to one another and forge a close-knit family imbued with the common aspiration to come out of the morass of underdevelopment and poverty. The media can play the role of catalyst in the framing of such mental make up. It has the proven potentials and capacity to achieve this.

Let the information Ministers of SAARC countries make the sky and air of their countries wide open and allow their people to inhale fresh breath; with a new South Asian identity ready to love and respect one another and appreciate one another's problems. Let media play the role that they should have played much earlier.

The writer is a SAARC gold medalist and former research scholar on ASEAN and its relevance to SAARC. ISEAS Singapore.

To the Editor...

Traffic and time

Sir, Can we visualise what kind of problem Dhaka will face after 10 years?

It's very frequent that nobody wants to go to Motijheel as they say Motijheel has become a 'no-movement' area due to the traffic hazard. If the reporting time at Motijheel is 11.00am then someone has to start from his house at 9:00am, and this two hours is wasted in the traffic jam — sometimes even more.

If the rickshaws could be stopped for entering some specific areas, e.g. Motijheel, Dilkusha, Purana Paltan, DIT Avenue and some part of Fakir-e-pool, then traffic could be controlled to an extent.

The trucks should be allowed ply the city roads only between 2100 hrs and 7000 hrs for loading or unloading. This system is very much executed in our neighbouring country. By doing this we can also utilise our valuable time more effectively.

It is my request to all the agencies concerned not to sit on the traffic problem.

Syed Shabbir Ahmed
Pisciculture Housing Society
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Is it justified?

Sir, In a white posh marble mansion was born a boy. The moment the boy was delivered, several cars soon made their way into the mansion with cakes, gold rings to congratulate.

Opposite to the mansion, a boy was born in a thatched house. The moment the poor soul was delivered, it was his mother, in wound, alone to kiss and welcome.

In course of time both the boys grew up. The rich boy had the entire world at his feet! He did what he wanted to do. The rich boy was considered as a gentleman and a nice person, in spite of many wrongs he had committed but the poor one had to sweat and struggle for three square meals a day.

When they both died, it was again the scores of big cars and hundreds who cared and many artificial mourners for the la-

ish funeral. On the other hand, the poor man's body was carried on a pushcart, accompanied by two or three mourners of his kind.

The mortal remain of the rich soul is preserved in marble concrete, while the poor soul's mortal remain was in no time dugged out for someone of his fate!

K Vigar Moinuddin
Dhaka

At last, the good news

Sir, What a delightful piece of news to read in the DS (2nd April) titled "Biman to be withdrawn from domestic routes", which I believe is long overdue. The Tourism Minister should be given a congratulatory note for proposing such an obvious point though very late indeed. Biman has been a loosing concern from the very beginning. Whenever the topic of privatisation came up the authorities and staff threatened to strike. I admit that there will be less corruption under a private administration, but the quality of the airlines, services and staff would improve a great deal too. We already have 3 private airlines which are functioning more than adequately. Because of Biman these private airlines weren't allowed to operate on proper airports where they themselves operated but gave them some very unimportant and unprofitable routes to cover. I can't wait to see the international flights of Biman axed as well and privatising the entire airlines. Some reputable foreign airlines have been privatised and they are doing far well too. Until that happens we will continue to see not so adequate services, planes falling off the skies and repairs for life.

In every union 1-2 Block Supervisors are posted who are supposed to train and demonstrate modern practices in raising crops to the farmers. But it is alleged that most of the BSS are not available at their place of posting.

Due to cumbersome procedure in securing loan from the government banks farmers are compelled to lend money from village Mohajans at an exorbitant rate of interest.

M A Jull
372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

Crimes on the rise

Sir, It looks like no one is taking any responsibility for the mounting incidence of crimes. How come the law enforcers are taking these things lightly? Is it because they think they are beyond any criticism?

In a civil society, democratic country they should know, none is beyond law and even the magistrates and this judges could be tried when found doing

Masroor Ahmed Deepak
Dhaka

Woes of the farmers

Sir, As the backbone of country's agriculture, the farmers feed the country's 120 million people by producing all types of food crops. But with the passing of time most of the

wrong.

It is time we revise the laws to make them more stringent not only with respect to the offenders but also the abettors, the enforcers of law who are also no angels and have failed to prove, beyond doubt, in upholding society's interest which and only which they are supposed to do.

F Ahmed
Minto Road, Dhaka

Re-consider the holidays

Sir, There have been colossal, dreadful and appalling increase in the sufferings, difficulties and hardships of the people due to closure of government offices, banks, courts, post offices, hospitals and public sector corporations on Fridays and Saturdays.

There are horrendous traffic jams on the public roads and rush of people on Thursdays and Sundays. The standard of services and efficiency have come down to the lowest ebb in all government offices, banks, post offices, hospitals and public sector corporations and commitment of lapses, negligence of duties and errors continue everywhere unabated at an alarming rate without any accountability and transparency.

The tax payers are being deprived of their civil and human rights and essential services and their sufferings know no bounds. It appears that there is no authority in the country to look into the public, general or common weal and woes of the people.

We would request our Prime Minister and MPs in the Jatiya Sangsad to look into the matter, examine the merits and demerits and to do away with the two-day government holiday in the interest of public service.

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