

For Monitored Education

It is gratifying to see education get the highest allocation in the national budget. To release the potential of a 120-million population unit, largely homogeneous in language and culture and living closely in a compact area, nothing can beat education as the catalytic agent.

A 45-billion taka annual expense account is a staggering thing, by any standard. Most of it, up to 80 per cent may be, goes into salaries of mostly teachers whose performance is the least monitored of all professional work.

The government has been foolishly taking the responsibility of more and more teachers and more and more schools — much more than it has the capacity for monitoring. And it has hardly cared to increase its monitoring capacity.

Because of the big budget, education managers or government personnel connected with education live an easy enviable life and so do the educational construction contractors.

Quantity for too long has been the concern. Now we must start insisting on quality. Extension without quality is a dangerous thing in education.

Boost to Women's Rights

The High Court in a landmark ruling last week on a writ petition filed by Nari Progoti Sangstha on behalf of Ayesha Akhtar questioned the legalities of 'safe custody' under which she had been detained in Dhaka Central Jail.

These are highly pertinent questions agitating the minds of the people everytime they hear the news of any custodial death, repression or torturous detention for months on end.

That's why we have been vociferously in favour of a surge in public interest and human rights litigations. While gratefully acknowledging the services of the legal aid groups we put out an impassioned call to them to be still more dynamic in assisting more victims to seek justice.

The completely obsolete anti-vagrancy law under which girls and boys are taken into custody and put through abuses must be struck out of the book.

Parks in Peril

City's hundred odd children's parks are fighting for life. A report published in a national daily yesterday made almost a case-by-case study of affliction of these lovely little sylvan spots for the youngsters.

None of the parks can probably beat Osmani Uddyan. It has become a full time hunting ground for the prostitutes and muggers. People walking through it are not safe even at day-time as both their peace and purse run the risk of being robbed.

Dhaka is notorious for the want of parks which are known as the lungs of a city. But what have the authorities done to maintain the few that are there? It has been alleged and it is pretty obvious also that without the connivance of officials in the City Corporation people would have not dared indulge either in illegal occupancy or antisocial activities.

Salvaging Our Railway: More than Just Nostalgia

NOT long ago, there was a time when our somnolent countryside used to be awakened by the sharp shrill whistling of railway engine as its locomotives moved in their own rhythms.

The railway however always had certain mystique about it and a travel by train had been dream cherished by millions when it was first inducted to the subcontinent's transportation system more than a century ago.

It is not only because the railway has failed in its competition with other means of transportation, the prime mover itself has gone into steep decline for years. Apart from official neglect and a purposelessness on the part of the government as regards this great inheritance from the British.

Railway's inherent safety which was traditionally safeguarded for many years is now tampered with growing number of accidents. Its maintenance is in a sorry state with railway's fabulous workshops at Paharati and Syedpur going down in efficiency.

The corruption, inefficiency and mismanagement have crept into the vitals of this public sector network which over its 2700-kilometre stretch connects all major cities, ports as well as destinations in the nook and corner of the country.

Nowadays the pet answer to any problem involving management is privatisation. It is not necessarily wrong but sweeping at times. Can a concern of the complexity and vastness of Bangladesh Railway be privatised? Is that managerial skill and entrepreneurship available in our country at this stage?

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But our railway has not always been like this. Before independence, it was relatively profitable, well managed public sector enterprise. Still earlier when it was set up as East Bengal Railway in a difficult deltaic terrain of what is Bangladesh today the motive was profit.

Nevertheless, our railway sustained its most devastating blow during the War of Liberation when hundreds of railway bridges were destroyed, a large number of railway stations damaged and many miles of railway tracks removed or stolen.

have arrived when even the government does not find it cost effective to invest any more in this losing concern. It also cannot think of a suitable disposal of this huge outfit.

Yet with nearly 500 railway destinations, 284 diesel locomotives, 1,397 passenger coaches, 16,255 goods wagon Bangladesh Railway carries more than 100,000 passengers and nearly 9,000 tonnes of freight a day even now. It still remains the cheapest and safest mode of transportation.

has a workforce of over 40,000 employees. At partition it came on the plateau and we have not been able to add even a single kilometre to its track. What do we do now with this great national asset? Is it destined to doom with our pathological negligence and indecision?

An institution like Railway is a civilisational landmark for any country and cannot be just wished away as a matter of whim or caprice. In the long march of civilisation certain things come to stay and once installed they cannot be done away with. In case of railway, there are other imperatives

which do not allow it to be discarded as a system of transportation even in a high-tech world where a plethora of more comfortable and time saving transports may be available.

According to a Japanese study, a private van consumes twenty times as much fuel in carrying one ton of cargo over one kilometre as a goods train; as a large commercial truck five times as much. Travelling by car is nearly eight times as hazardous as train travel.

What is however of overarching importance has been the consideration of congestion and pollution caused by motor vehicles. As a consequence, several countries are now attempting to curb and discourage road transports. In the face of alarming degradation of ecology in term of poisonous gas emission people are finding railway to be the most environment-friendly mode of transport.

It is not thus surprising that the Europeans, Americans and Japanese are now reviving their

railways once thought to be the antique with the advent of modern road vehicles and commercial jet aircraft. Not only those countries are reinvesting in the railway, it is also being modernised. Many European and Japanese trains now whisk along at a speed exceeding 150 mph.

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While railway has to maintain its infrastructure at its own the road transports which move on infrastructure provided by the government can easily beat the railway in competition. Privatisation or otherwise should be considered only after these problems of railways are addressed in due earnestness.

PERSPECTIVES by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

Charity Stops at Home

The decision to return loans by the Sharif family clears the way to take action against all bank defaulters. For too long this country has been at the mercy of these white-collared upper class elite who made loan defaulting into an art.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

overloaded with enormous debt portfolios and as such were in a precarious state till Messrs Shaoukat Tareen, Zubayr Soomro and Mohammad Mian Soomro took over the worst affected i.e. HBL, UBL and NBP respectively.

This nation owes a debt to people like the three Presidents aforementioned for not flinching in their task despite personal threats of very grievous nature. The Governor State Bank (SBB), Dr. Muhammad Yaqub must be congratulated for his steadfastness and resolve in the face of grave provocation.

The decision to return loans by the Sharif family clears the way to take action against all bank defaulters. For too long this country has been at the mercy of these white-collared upper class elite who made loan defaulting into an art.

There is an unholy nexus between loan defaulters and tax dodgers that may be peculiar to Pakistan, an alliance of evil intent formed by those who have no scruples about robbing the national exchequer even during a crisis.

live beyond their means but by socially and economically boycotting those who are known tax dodgers. The land reforms announced by the PM was very much overdue, particularly in Sindh where successive reforms have been frustrated by a small group of landowners who because of their holdings command inordinate political influence over the course of life in this country.

If there is a will there is a way to document those who make up the economy, with documentation revenue collection will increase manifold. The PM has a good man in the person of Mr. Muinuddin Khan, Chairman, CBR, he should now give him a totally free hand to go after tax defaulters and evaders on a bi-partisan basis without any prompting from government.

or rural. We remain an agribased economy for the time being and we cannot kill the goose that lays golden eggs i.e. rice and wheat. This has been a significant step and one that required great political courage given that maximum legislators are landowners or (created by the British) feudal gentry.

No decision was more courageous for the PM than spelling out his resolve to go ahead with the Kalabagh Dam. This is vital for Pakistan as without it there is every likelihood of widespread desertification. Moreover it provides cheap hydel power which, when the electricity comes on stream will be at about the right time.

In the general stores I visit regularly in the bazaar, I find that the percentage of imported consumer goods is increasing rapidly every couple of months. Elsewhere, it will be noticed that small shops, including new ones, in the 'posh' shopping complexes, carry a majority of imported items.

The natural question which arises is why valuable foreign exchange is being wasted in this manner, even keeping in view the WTO background of free global trade. For example, how many Bangladeshi items are available in Calcutta compared to a very large variety of Indian goods available in the Dhaka market?

The government has to think seriously about information, orientation, and awareness programmes for the consumers, judging by the spurt in shopping centres and the almost unrestricted flow of foreign goods into the shelves of even the grocery shops. These campaigns may be initiated directly and through the local NGOs. The Chamber bodies can also play a vital contributory role in building up consumer tastes and preferences.

Take the case of biscuits and fruit drinks. The market is flooded with imported brands. Some of our brands are of export quality. Hundreds of cottage industry-type bakeries turn out lakhs of packets of a great variety of biscuits for the informal market at popular prices.

Malaysia, where the standard of living and the purchasing power are tens of times higher! Some agencies have to explain such gross disparities.

Another weakness is lack of strong consumer protection bodies or mechanisms, giving the sellers an unfair advantage in a market where supply is usually less than demand; or due to unfair marketing practices (hoarding, black-marketing); although some local sectors are saturated or oversaturated such as toilet products, edible oil. The weakness of the official price monitoring system was recently exposed (online).

Monitoring System for Consumers

The import patterns have to be monitored by expert teams and the public informed about the implications. A well-informed public opinion indirectly provides a supporting base to the regime, and deters unwholesome manipulations affecting the consumers.

The traditional type of governance is now becoming more market-oriented, and it is learning to do business as a facilitator, although some issues are highly technical, such as the production-sharing contracts with the foreign gas companies and private generation of electricity. The legal and administrative reforms cannot keep in tune with the changing market and social environment.

In developing countries, the administration is more busy monitoring the 'big fish', to bother about the small fries. But the latter are in the majority — and unpredictable. Protecting the consumers provides a protective shield in the corridors of power. The proverbial industrious ants are slogging away.

To the Editor...

Drug addicts Sir, Star Photographer Anisur Rahman deserves an award for the photograph of a drug addict self-injecting himself with a drug (Rathedine?) before the Dhaka Medical College/Hospital complex.

On the other hand, the government 'celebrated' with the higher ups, the Anti-Drug Day, preceded with dozen of seminars and workshops on controlling drug addiction. There are several official ongoing projects on drug addiction as a social menace. This photograph was not taken at a secret den, but in full public view — only the prosecuting authority is blind and absent (active only on paper and in the media).

What the ministers say at the public meetings? We have heard them all. Empty drums sound much.

The complaining captain Sir, In free market economy, the stock exchange of a country is a mirror of the country's financial state. The mechanism behind the seemingly volatile index is simply the state of confidence of the shareholders upon the future of the economy.

When Mohathir Mohammad violently castigates foreign investors, the index declines. When Alan Greenspan of America reveals rosy employment figures the Dow Jones index surges.

Our finance minister blames everybody and everything except himself for our moribund exchange (DS 28.4.98). He doesn't seem to realise that it is the crisis in confidence of his helmanship that makes the bear rampant. He has failed to present a pleasant future scenario before the signed investors.

Importing docs is not the solution Sir, In my 'Opinion' (30.05.98) Md Azizul Karim is trying to solve the problem of health care in Bangladesh by one stroke as he solved the problem of population of Bangladesh by reducing it to 12 million (or is it printing mistake?)

The problem of health care is complex and importing doctors is most certainly not the solution. In fact, we have enough qualified doctors in Bangladesh and we are not able to employ them. They are as good as any other doctor in the world. The proof is there to see. They are employed in almost every country in the world.

The problems he outlines, like shortage of medicine etc., are not going to be solved by importing doctors. We need a clear health policy and political will.

The health care should be for everybody, not only for people who live in town or in village or selected few who can have the luxury of going to the neighbouring counties or far a field.

A Zabr Dhaka

Shafiqur Rahman 1/6, Lalnata, Dhaka

Aator Aali USA