The Baily Star Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka Monday, June 15, 1998

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. Specially when half of that population unit is still illiterate and education is less than skin-deep in pass-outs from colleges and universities.

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. We absolutely don't know what are we paying for. While the allocation has been increasing by leaps and bounds, quality of education has been falling in an inverse proportion. Inexorably.

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. We do not know for sure if all the primaries and schools and colleges that get the government dole, indeed exist. We know even less if even half of the teachers on the government's direct and indirect pay-roll take their scheduled classes. When at the apex, the universities, to wit, with things supremely monitorable because of a small base, regular classes cannot be ensured, at the most anarchic level — the intermediate — things should better be left to imag-

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. As education, in the last analysis, is nobody's business, they and the teachers are not required to justify their receipts by sincere industry. The generosity of the allocation is welcome but the giver, in this case, must satisfy itself that it does not degenerate to squandering.

Quantity for too long has been the concern. Now we must start insisting on quality. Extension without quality is a dangerous thing in education. The theme of educational programmes and campaigns and indeed all routine arrangements like classroom exercises and lectures, should be quality. Education is nothing if not a way, the best way to human quality. And to ensure quality in teaching and imbibing, the emphasis should now be on monitoring. Monitoring for quality, that should be the slogan from now on.

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. The rule demanded satisfaction on three points from the government: (a) whether laws of the land allow anyone to be detained in jail by any Magistrate or any authority under 'the guise of judicial safe custody'; (b) whether the practice of safe custody was not violative of the Jail Code; and (c) whether an investigating officer is empowered to pray before the court to put a 'victim girl' in jail 'in the guise of safe custody.

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. Now the High Court has acted, given out its mind on a cause celebre on being approached — and that is the important thing to take note of. The court has to be taken recourse to whenever there is any impingement on fundamental rights. That is how a civil society flourishes. All the volumes of printed words or seminarial articulation of human rights violations and injustices are of little avail till the court is moved with writ petitions for a judicial intervention in appropriate cases.

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. For our part we shall lend them a hand in sensitising the vulnerable groups about their legal rights and how best to protect these against onslaughts from all around.

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. Most of these vacant spaces are now occupied by drug addicts, muggers, illegal slum dwellers and floating prostitutes. And the authorities in city corporation have not a care in the world

about this general disorder.

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. Muktangan, another little relief of green, has been an ironic reversal of what it means in English free zone with the rent-a-car drivers having turned it into a little corner of their reign. It is the same story everywhere: either it is the case of unwanted presences and illegal establishments or sheer neglect. Children have no places to go to loosen their limbs or fill their lungs with some oxygen that has got much less share of noxious fumes.

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. Now this has become the hallmark of the City Corporation. Earlier we had been introduced to other forms of indiscretion by the City Corporation — building market-places in open spaces being the most recent one which came to a halt only after constant criticism by the press. We are absolutely appalled by the insensitivity of the City Corporation. We demand that the original character and functions of the parks be restored on a doublequick basis.

Salvaging Our Railway: More than Just Nostalgia

Nowadays the pet answer to any problem involving management is privatisation. It is not necessarily wrong

TOT 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. It pierced through verdant fields cutting across numerous rivers and rivulets and whisking past clusters of hamlets perched on to the horizons. Those sounds and sights are no more there. They are swallowed up by myriad changes taking place around us. Or we do not have that sensitive mind able to spot

them as before. 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. I remember its surreal experience as a boy and the excitement of watching the countryside roll by. This simple pleasure, like so much else, seems to be over for ever. Our moribund railway can hardly revive those dreams!

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 regard this great inheritance from the British the system is top heavy and overstaffed with professionalism reduced to nil. The results are obvious. The monolith outfit has been in red for years. Only last year its drainage has been to the tune of 100 crore

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 Pahartali and Syedpur going down in efficiency. During early '60s we used to have even the components of artillery guns manufactured from their excellent craftsmen.

The corruption, inefficiency

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? be restored. A stage seems to have arrived when even the

and mismanagement have eaten 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. Travelling without ticket and carrying freight without payment is an accepted norm. The corrupt staff allow the practice at the cost of standard of services which has miserably deteriorated. The theft and pilferage have eroded much of its potentials. The successive governments appear to have sustained it with subsidy only as an agency for job creation without paying much attention to the improvement of its aging infrastructure. So, the organisation remained under-invested in real term.

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. It provided cheap and convenient carriage for the growing produces from East Bengal and Assam, notably jute, tea and timber. An extensive connection for carrying passengers came only as a byproduct. Both the purposes for this network brought enormous revenue to the colonial ruler in spite of its huge investment.

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. As a result, the railway was divided into hundreds of pieces. Although these pieces were put together after the war, our railway could never be quite the same again; neither its moral and prestige could again

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. Bangladesh Railway has been the biggest "zeminder" of this country with huge acreage of lands under its jurisdiction. It

has a workforce of over 40,000

employees. At partition it came

on the platter and we have not

been able to add even a single

kilometre to its track. What do

we do now with this great na-

tional asset? Is it destined to

doom with our pathological

negligence and indecision?

What would we do then with its

thousands of kilometres of

railway track, locomotive fleets

and thousands of tonnage of

iron wheelers even if there will

be greedy bidders for its lucra-

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

tive lands?

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. Because the rail is ten-fifteen times more economical on fuel consumption for the same payload than road vehicles and air transportation. Till now it is

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 haz-

since this safety statistics are

based on the conditions of ad-

'vanced societies, the road jour-

lethal in our country.

ney is likely to be even more

ching importance has been the

consideration of congestion

and pollution caused by motor

vehicles. As a consequence, sev-

eral countries are now attempt-

ing to curb and discourage road

transports. In the face of alarm-

ing degradation of ecology in

term of poisonous gas emission

people are finding railway to be

the most environment-friendly

mode of transport. The big lo-

comotives are also capable of

releasing much of the pressures

What is however of overar-

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. Japan is said to be currently testing a magnetically levitated train that can also the safest mode of transhurtle along at a 350 mph. The present trend in reviving railway is obviously forcing more and more people in the ad-

vanced countries to use trains which are now very fast and re-We have really no option other than getting along with the global trend. We have got to salvage our railway from ruins. But how? Here one needs an expert and not a layman like me. PERSPECTIVES Yet, a few scattered thoughts are woven out with the hope that all or some of them may one day stirrup an expert to come out by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz with a total prescription for the revival of our moribund railway system. There has already been an informative and interesting report on the recovery of ardous as train travel. However,

> in Dhaka-Narayanganj route which is found encouraging. 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? Moreover, Bangladesh Railway is an integrated system at a national level with also a defence orientation. Can it be

the railway in The Daily Star

on 12 May 1998. According to

the report, the cure for the mal-

ady of our railway lies in pri-

vatisation. It quotes the exam-

ple of privatisation experiment

private investors? Giving a few routes on con-

given piecemeal to a number of

tract to some individuals and some responsibility of repair to a private firm on the basis of some time-frame is one thing and handing over the ownership of the system with its assets and liabilities to private hands is another. To whomsoever it is given the central responsibility of it as a national institution has to be vested in someone. Has that exercise been carried out ever? Or the talk of privatisation is just one of those ploys to silence the critics on the hard issues of railway administration? In our neighbourhood the Indian railway. the third largest in the world, is still a revenue-earning state enterprise.

While privatisation lobby may go ahead with their wellthought arguments it may be pertinent to focus, in brief, on some of the railway's internal

Our railway made a poor start after independence but its conditions exacerbated ever since it was placed under bureaucratic control. The wrong priority accorded to passenger services has robbed the railway of much of its revenue because it is the goods service which earned money for the railway. Too many passenger trains were started for political reasons depriving railway's capacity for operating revenue earning goods train. Also an indiscriminate recruitment based on political considerations as well as the heavy concession to the students, armed forces, newsmen, etc have all contributed to the railway's bankruptcy.

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 railway are addressed in due earnestness, disparities between the rail and road transportations removed and the outfit weeded of its corrupt, inefficient and self-serving

on national highways and urmarch of civilisation certain ban centres. things come to stay and once It is not thus surprising that installed they cannot be done the Europeans, Americans and away with. In case of railway, Japanese are now reviving their there are other imperatives

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.

Charity Stops at Home

IAN Nawaz Sharif reached new heights on **↓ ▼ ⊥** Thursday evening, a level not easily attained by mere mortals. In his speech to the nation, the PM touched a number of major issues but nothing was more meaningful than his decision to put all the industrial assets of the Sharif family on the block in order to pay off all and any outstanding loans. These loans were his Achilles Heel because it restrained proceedings against others and though it was known far and wide that his family was thrust into an untenable financial situation by unending persecution at the hands of the Bhutto/Zardari combine.

public perception was still

uneasy about the re-scheduling

of debts when he came back to

power.

Whatever may be the quantum or percentage of loans, the very fact that the Sharif family bit the bullet shows a positive commitment to the country, a level of sacrifice seen in Pakistan only intermittently and occasionally, mostly by the Armed Forces on the battlefield. While skeptics abound who question whether the process of loan adjustment against asset disposal will be transparent, the PM seems to be clearly sincere about his intentions. rendering a personal sacrifice above and beyond the call of duty. A quick cursory survey of the populace shows that they believe him in much more numbers that those who doubt that this "cleansing" process

will take place. 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. They specialised in making their industries sick by taking easy loans, mainly without adequate collateral. The net result is that every one of the Nationalised Commercial Banks (NCBs) are

overloaded with enormous debt portfolios and as such were in a precarious state till Messrs Shaukat Tareen, Zubyr Soomro and Mohammedmian Soomro took over the worst affected i.e. HBL, UBL and NBP respectively. The turnaround within the year has been nothing short of amazing. I must mention here Rashid Khan of HBL, a truly outstanding executive, an innocent who has become a victim of circumstances because of the machinations of past masters of intrigue and deception. The litmus test of the success of these bankers has been that the bankers who had brought the bank to this state. including some PML worthies like HBL former President Agha Fasihuddin, are now lobbying hard to come back so that they can be on the gravy train again.

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 (SBP), Dr. Muhammad Yaqub must be congratulated for his steadfastness and resolve in the face of grave provocation, this measure to go after loan defaulters all guns blazing is what this country needed most to rejuvenate the economy. The Governor SBP has been a consistent though circumspect advocate that this country's credibility will go nowhere while loan defaulters keep on living off the fat of the land, the PM's action vindicates his stance and clears the deck to go after these crooks. Unless loan defaulters are brought to book and dealt with harshly, this culture of not returning loans will persist. They must be rooted out with a vengeance lest one day the streets take over and we have a revolution in the real sense of

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

There is an unholy nexus be-

tween 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, or should I say particularly during a crisis. For too long these tax evaders have been getting away with the murder of Pakistan's economy At the tail end it is the poor people of this country who have been beggared beyond description. What does any poor person want more than his basic needs and yet he has to watch a few select elite lead a life of luxury while his children have little to eat, scant shelter and clothing, precious little water and only apologies for a sewerage system for medicine, education and transportation. To beat it all. the PM's own basic constituency, businessmen and traders, violently protests General Sales Tax (GST) at the retail stage but the PM has gone and

enforced it. 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. In this the general public can be of great help not

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. By reserving almost 1.2 million acres and distributing it among Haris and other landless not only will the poor and disadvantaged get a chance in life but they will make this land fertile, something that the absentee "Jagirdar" was not bothered about. While I am against taxing agriculture income per se. I feel all income must be taxed equitably whether urban

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 coura-

geous 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. The only people viscerally opposed to it are the ANP and that too not on sound technical grounds but political ones. They have only become a nuisance value because PML made a strategic blunder in giving them their own Provincial seats, Mian Nawaz Sharif's sincerity here was unfortunately misplaced. He should call a Joint Sitting of Parliament and have the construction of Kalabagh Dam signed into an article of law.

Balochistan has almost no reason to be aggrieved and Sindh's fears are largely misplaced. However there is a danger here being avidly formed by Ms Benazir that anything anti-Benazir is anti-Sindh and PML is anti-Sindh because of the Bhuttos. This perception must be corrected and it is high time that the Information Ministry stopped propping up Liaquat Ali Jatoi as CM. Pakistan's economy and future are inextricably linked with a successful completion of the Kalabagh Dam, the PM has done well in speaking his resolve firmly.

There were many other points in his speech annunciating the national agenda but the focus of issues vital were on the aforementioned. The PM has opened up quite a few fronts with deeply entrenched, well connected vested interests who are motivated by their own selves alone, paying no heed to national causes. We cannot let the PM fight this battle alone otherwise he will become history before we have even begun. All of us who can, must pull together and shield the PM from the attacks that will come, domestically and externally. The PM has shown the way by a remarkable performance, inculcating a sacrifice unheard of in this land. He has shown that charity stops at home.

OPINION

Monitoring System for Consumers

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. In one such shop selling stationery goods, there was not a single local item, on the plea that the customers preferred imported goods! What is perplexing is that many of these items are non-essential, or local substitutes of good quality are available.

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. There is an indifference about "Buy Local Products". Malaysia has learnt the lesson after a decade of high living. There is a lot of money in our 'easy-earning sector', and such affluent consumers can set the wrong trends in consumer behaviour pat-

terns. 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 cot tage industry-type bakeries turn out lakhs of packets of a great variety of biscuits for the informal market at popular prices. As for the imported juices, the major percentage of the contents is water, adding to the weight, volume, and the freight charges from thousands of miles away, such as Indone-

sia. As for imports from the

A Husnain SAARC region, only one big neighbour has made its presence felt here. Such distortions are noticeable to the market observers. Consumer think-tanks will be a rarity in Dhaka, without institutional support and neutral subsidies, supplemented by various assistance programmes under the UN sys-

> 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 production cost is low in Bangladesh, and it would be lower if the systems losses were reduced through enhancement of manufacturing and marketing skills. "Foreign is better" is an attitude of the mind, and cannot be applied in

While officially the export statistics are publicised with a great deal of fanfare, the import review and analysis data is practically absent in the media. especially on consumer goods. Also the public is not enlightened on the monitoring systems in operation in the formal public sector and about the private monitoring agencies such as the trade and commerce apex bodies. What is gleaned from the papers from time to time are the grievances of the manufacturing sector on the anomalies of tariffs and duties on the import of industrial raw materials, adversely affecting the competitiveness of the local finished

products. The ordinary shoppers must know how the administration is interested in the consumers. The price of large fish is higher than the price of meat or beef, and the retail price of the latter per kg is the same as in 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 (onion, salt). Who are monitoring on behalf of the government the various markets (including the house rents)?

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

Who are noticing? Keep the consumers happy.

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 (Pathedine?) before the Dhaka Medical Col-

lege/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).

This is rank governance, adversely reflecting the image of the regime. But this is a typical example of the lack of sense of duty of the vigilance teams in almost all the sectors (adulteration of food stuff, traffic violations, approval of wrong architectural designs, illegal electric connections, ghost bills, smoking vehicles, evasion of VAT, etc).

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

A Zabr

Dhaka

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 That's why the index fluctuates according to the day to day information 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. Again when he raises the rate of interest, bear pokes his nose into Wall Street Sluggish reform and high level ministry scandals in Japan has kept the Nikkei average done.

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 helmsmanship that makes the bear rampant. He has failed to present a pleasant future scenario before the signed investors. His quick-fix panacea in form of the net system turned out to be a flasco.

Shafiqur Rahman 1/6, Lalmatia, Dhaka

Importing docs is not the solution

only by indicating those who

Sir, In his '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 puplation of Bangladesh by reducing it to 12 million for is it printing mis-

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 politi-

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.

Aator Aali USA